

Gender, sex, and power in the postfeminist romantic comedy

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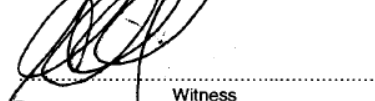
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This thesis argues that the Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 constitute a new cycle in the genre, the postfeminist cycle, in which feminism is “‘taken into account’ but only to be shown to be no longer necessary” (McRobbie 2004, p. 255). Drawing on accounts and analyses of postfeminism by McRobbie (2004, 2009) and Gill (2007), and on applications of these analyses to popular culture by Negra (2004, 2008, 2009) and Tasker and Negra (2007), I argue that the romantic comedies released during this period represent gender, sex, and power in a manner consistent with – and informed by – postfeminist approaches to these themes. I do this by conducting close readings (case studies) of three films, selected from a representative sample of thirty, and examining how these three films screen postfeminist ideas about gender (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall* [Stoller 2008]), sex (*Friends With Benefits* [Gluck 2011]), and power (*The Ugly Truth* [Luketic 2009]). Following analyses of the Hollywood romantic comedy by Jeffers McDonald (2007) and Grindon (2011), I demonstrate how these movies form a new and heretofore minimally examined cycle which is shaped not only by what Gill (2007) terms the “postfeminist sensibility” in the United States, but by the history of the genre, that is, in response to previous cycles. In each of the three case studies in this thesis, I place the films in question in generic context, and in extra-cinematic context, demonstrating how the films are informed by – and in turn contribute to – larger cultural discourses about: the effect of feminism on masculinity (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*), “hook up culture” (*Friends With Benefits*), and women’s professional authority and economic independence (*The Ugly Truth*). Taken together, I conclude, these three films demonstrate that the Hollywood romantic comedy has become yet another popular culture site in which postfeminist ideas are represented, and I consider the political and cultural ramifications of the entrenchment of these ideas in the sole movie genre that is made primarily for and about women.

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GENDER, SEX, AND POWER IN THE POSTFEMINIST ROMANTIC COMEDY

Chloe Sarah Angyal

A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy


The University of New South Wales

School of the Arts and Media
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

June 2014

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that the Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 constitute a new cycle in the genre, the postfeminist cycle, in which feminism is “‘taken into account’ but only to be shown to be no longer necessary” (McRobbie 2004, p. 255). Drawing on accounts and analyses of postfeminism by McRobbie (2004, 2009) and Gill (2007), and on applications of these analyses to popular culture by Negra (2004, 2008, 2009) and Tasker and Negra (2007), I argue that the romantic comedies released during this period represent gender, sex, and power in a manner consistent with – and informed by – postfeminist approaches to these themes. I do this by conducting close readings (case studies) of three films, selected from a representative sample of thirty, and examining how these three films screen postfeminist ideas about gender (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall* [Stoller 2008]), sex (*Friends With Benefits* [Gluck 2011]), and power (*The Ugly Truth* [Luketic 2009]). Following analyses of the Hollywood romantic comedy by Jeffers McDonald (2007) and Grindon (2011), I demonstrate how these movies form a new and heretofore minimally examined cycle which is shaped not only by what Gill (2007) terms the “postfeminist sensibility” in the United States, but by the history of the genre, that is, in response to previous cycles. In each of the three case studies in this thesis, I place the films in question in generic context, and in extra-cinematic context, demonstrating how the films are informed by – and in turn contribute to – larger cultural discourses about: the effect of feminism on masculinity (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*), “hook up culture” (*Friends With Benefits*), and women’s professional authority and economic independence (*The Ugly Truth*). Taken together, I conclude, these three films demonstrate that the Hollywood romantic comedy has become yet another popular culture site in which postfeminist ideas are represented, and I consider the political and cultural ramifications of the entrenchment of these ideas in the sole movie genre that is made primarily for and about women.

DEDICATION

Usually, when I don't immediately succeed at something, I give up. Failure terrifies me. My sister isn't like that. When she doesn't immediately succeed at something, she just keeps working at it until she masters it. The process of writing a dissertation involves no immediate success, and an awful lot of failure – and the temptation to give up was, at times, enormous. In those moments, I tried to be more like my big sister, who isn't afraid of failure, or hard work, or anything except insects of every kind. I love you,
Claire Brooksley.

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PREFACE

“If you want to win a man over, it’s called a blow job. And don’t forget to swallow.” – *The Ugly Truth* (Luketic 2009).

So says Mike, the blustering, misogynistic relationship advisor played by Gerard Butler in *The Ugly Truth*. Mike is the host of a one-man low-budget television show, where he dispenses wisdom about men, women, relationships, love, and sex. “Men are simple. We cannot be trained,” he says, addressing his women viewers. “If you want to be a lonely hag, keep reading those [self-help] books. But if you want a relationship, it’s called a Stairmaster. Get on it and get skinny.” By the end of *The Ugly Truth*, the heroine, Abby (Katherine Heigl), a driven, uptight, and unlucky-in-love career woman, has discovered that Mike – though his advice on winning a man’s attention does prove accurate – is secretly a lovely man, who doesn’t really believe most of what he tells his viewers, and she has fallen in love with him. *The Ugly Truth* was poorly received by many feminist commentators online (The Feminist Texican 2009, Unapologetically Female 2009). “This is a movie for women who hate women,” wrote Sady Doyle, a columnist for the website of *The Guardian* (2009).

In 2010, the year after *The Ugly Truth* was released, I embarked on a year-long writing project at Feministing.com, the feminist blog where I was at the time a contributor and am now Senior Editor. In the wake of *The Ugly Truth*, I had become particularly interested in romantic comedies, and my assignment in this project was to watch every romantic comedy that was released in theatres that year and review them. Titles included *Sex and the City 2* (King 2010), *The Back Up Plan* (Poul 2010), and *She’s Out of My League* (Field Smith 2010). My reviews largely focused on the films’ depictions of gender, on the messages they conveyed about love and sex, on their racial and ethnic diversity (or lack thereof), and whether or not the films passed the Bechdel Test (“Bechdel Test Movie List”) for the representation of women on screen – that is, if they featured more than one named woman character, and whether those characters talked to each other about something “besides a man” (Angyal 2010b). By the end of the

project, I had decided to re-write my thesis proposal: I wanted to study romantic comedies. I wanted to know more about the history of the genre, about how it had changed over time, and most of all, I wanted to understand why contemporary romantic comedies seemed so hostile to feminism. *The Ugly Truth* was not the only offender in this regard: *The Proposal* (Fletcher 2009) also released in 2009, also features a driven, uptight, unlucky-in-love career woman protagonist, Margaret. Margaret's professional fate (and right to continue living in the United States) is placed in the hands of her younger male subordinate: in one scene, he orders her to get down on her knees in the middle of a crowded city footpath and beg him to help her. At the end of this movie, too, the career woman has fallen in love with the man who literally brought her to her knees – and it is his love that allows her to stay in the country and continue doing her work. Like Abby, whose professional success is enhanced when Mike's show is incorporated into her programme, resulting in a ratings boost, Margaret is permitted professional success and authority, but only after she cedes control of her personal life to a man.

In embarking on this research, I wanted to understand how the genre in its contemporary iteration represented gender, sex, and power. Beyond this, I wanted to explore how those depictions came to be: what larger, extra-cinematic phenomena influenced this crop of romantic comedies that seemed to simultaneously embrace and undermine feminist ideas? Many scholars of the genre (Grindon 2011, Jeffers McDonald 2007, Mortimer 2010) agree that the Hollywood romantic comedy can be divided chronologically into a number of cycles, such as the screwball cycle, the sex comedy cycle, the nervous romance cycle, and what Jeffers McDonald (2007) terms the neo-traditional cycle – although, as I explore in Chapter 1, Grindon argues for the existence of “clusters” within and around those cycles (p. 25). Grindon defines a cycle as “a series of similar films produced during a limited period of time, often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow” (p. 25). As I argue in this thesis, the Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 have been influenced by the postfeminist moment in which they were made and of which they are a part – what Gill (2007) calls the “postfeminist sensibility,” particularly as it manifests in the United States – and this crop of movies constitutes a new and heretofore minimally examined cycle in the genre: the postfeminist cycle. In

demonstrating the existence of this new cycle, and in examining how the films that comprise it are shaped by postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power, I am in dialogue with and extend scholarly inquiry into postfeminist popular culture, and into the romantic comedy.

In the Introduction that follows, I outline the various interpretations of postfeminism and of postfeminist popular culture, and argue that postfeminism represents, as McRobbie (2004) terms it, “the undoing of feminism with some subtlety” (p. 257). My research here, and my praxis as a feminist who inhabits spaces of popular commentary, supports that analysis, and contributes to my very real concerns about the entrenchment and the effects of postfeminism, of a conception of gender, sex, and power that views gender inequality as a problem that was solved long ago, of feminism as no longer necessary, and of individual actions and consumption as the best expression of women’s increasing power. My fear, bluntly put, is that postfeminism, and particularly postfeminist popular culture, will be the slow, seemingly light-hearted, and largely imperceptible undoing of feminism, and that it will constitute one element that slows, stops, and reverses momentum toward gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I explain my conceptual approach to the analysis of contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies, elucidating the conceptual framework of postfeminism, locating my research at the intersection of several disciplines, accounting for the exclusion of reception studies from my analytical approach, and outlining my research questions. I conclude this chapter with a brief outline of subsequent chapters.

Postfeminism: A conceptual framework

This thesis posits that the Hollywood romantic comedies made between 2005 and 2011 constitute a new cycle in the genre: the postfeminist romantic comedy. In this section of the Introduction, I demonstrate why understanding these films as postfeminist narratives is instructive and beneficial to an understanding of the genre, and of postfeminist popular culture, explore the contested terrain that is postfeminism, and explain how postfeminist ideas about gender, sex and power are represented in American popular cultural texts.

As McRobbie (2004) defines it, postfeminism “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (p. 255). In postfeminist popular cultural texts, feminism is depicted as having “intervened to constrain... conventional desires. It is then, a relief to escape this censorious politics and freely enjoy that which has been disapproved of. Thus feminism is invoked in order that it is relegated to the past” (p. 262). The result of this representation of feminism and of women’s true desires, then, the result of this representation of equality as a *fait accompli*, is not a deepening and furthering of that equality, but the “undoing of feminism with some subtlety” (p. 257). Tasker and Negra (2007), who apply this conception to American popular culture, understand postfeminist popular culture as defined by contradiction: it is that which “has just about forgotten about feminism despite constant, generally negative invocations of (often anonymous) feminists” (p. 2). Applying these conceptions of postfeminist popular culture to the Hollywood romantic comedies I analyse here, I came to understand those films – which, like *The Ugly*

Truth and *The Proposal*, at once embrace and undermine feminism – as postfeminist narratives. I further explore this tension, what Tasker and Negra term a “double discourse” (p. 8), but before proceeding, I will address the debate over what postfeminism is and what it does, and locate my own understanding and analysis of the phenomenon within that debate.

Postfeminism as contested terrain

Postfeminism is a vexing subject that inspires debate among scholars; as Genz and Brabon (2009) observe, it “is a concept fraught with contradictions.... Loathed by some and celebrated by others” (p. 1). Among feminist scholars, there is no consensus even on the question of hyphenation: McRobbie uses a hyphen, while Tasker and Negra eschew it, as do Genz and Brabon, the latter doing so:

... in order to avoid any predetermined readings of the term that imply a semantic rift between feminism and postfeminism, instantly casting the latter as a negation and sabotage of the other. Also, by forgoing the hyphen, we seek to credit and endow postfeminism with a certain cultural independence that acknowledges its existence as a conceptual entity in its own right (p. 3).

I follow Tasker and Negra in forgoing hyphenation, although like those scholars, I do – as I explore later – argue that postfeminism is a negation or sabotage of the gains of feminism. As Faludi (2006) argues, “post-feminism is the backlash. Any movement or philosophy which defines itself as post whatever came before it is bound to be reactive. In most cases it is also reactionary” (p. 15). However, as Genz and Brabon note, “regardless of our spelling, it is not so much the hyphen as the prefix itself that has been the focus of critical investigations” (p. 3); such is the case here.

Beyond hyphenation, the debate over what postfeminism is, how and why it arose, and whether or not it is cause for feminist concern, is an ongoing one among feminist scholars. Taylor (2012) argues that “postfeminism, rather than a simple backlash, signals how feminism is being reworked and renegotiated in media culture, often in politically troublesome ways” (p. 3), and McRobbie (2009) similarly views

postfeminism as a complexification of backlash (p. 255), building here on the backlash thesis put forth by Faludi. That is, for McRobbie, postfeminism is an attempt to undo the gains of feminism, though this attempt is subtle, “at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively ‘progressive’ and proudly backward” (p. 12). It is a “sophisticated anti-feminism” (p. 179) that arose in response to “the prospect of women becoming less dependent on men as a result of participation in work and with the possible de-stabilisation of gender hierarchy which might ensue” (p. 62), and has become a recurring feature of the landscapes of both popular and political culture. Under postfeminism, gender equality is characterised as a *fait accompli*: feminism has succeeded completely, and is therefore now install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed unnecessary. While postfeminism takes into account some of the gains of feminism – it “emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment,” write Genz and Brabon, summarising McRobbie’s position (p. 2) – it redefines women’s rights and equality “in terms of a liberal individualist politics that centres on lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures” (p. 16). Tasker and Negra (2007) similarly observe that postfeminism “works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer” (p. 2). While superficially upholding the principles of gender equality, McRobbie argues, postfeminism denigrates the figure of the feminist (p. 179) and allows for the resurgence of “old-fashioned” sexism or anti-feminism, often with a guise or protective gloss of irony; as Negra (2009) describes it, this often appears as “an aggressive (re)codification of female types” (p. 10) As part of a larger postfeminist attempt “to bind together an idea of female strength and power with a femininity characterized by passivity and dependence” (Tasker 2011, p. 74), “in gestures that often tout the ‘freedom’ from political correctness, postfeminist culture revives the ‘truths’ about femininity that circulated in earlier eras – women are bitches, goldiggers, ‘dumb blondes,’ spinsters, shrews, and sluts” (Negra p. 10). Tasker offers the example of the Disney film *Enchanted* (Lima 2007), which “offers gestures towards feminism while making full use of conservative gender stereotypes, such as the girl-woman, sexually pure princess,

frustrated professional woman, and wicked stepmother” (p. 70). Additionally, in spite of her new rights, postfeminism’s “new female subject is... called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom” (McRobbie p. 260). In this way, postfeminism presents itself as an appealing correction to the purported excesses of the supposedly censorious, overly politically-correct feminism of the past, and “performs as if it is commonsensical and presents itself as pleasingly modern in contrast to a ‘shrill’ feminism” (Negra p. 2). Following McRobbie, I argue that postfeminism is hostile to continuing feminist progress and to the sustenance of what gains feminists have secured, and, as such, is cause for feminist concern.

These conceptions of postfeminism are questioned and contradicted by feminist scholars who view the phenomenon as less threatening and, indeed, more welcome than do McRobbie, Taylor, Tasker, Negra, and Faludi. For example, McRobbie (2004) understands postfeminism as:

... an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined.... Through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intentioned response to feminism (p. 256).

Gerhard (2005), on the other hand, prefers to see it as “a re-negotiation of antifeminist and feminist thought in and through popular representations of women” (p. 41). This re-negotiation, Gerhard writes, often results in the exploration of new possibilities available to women – for example, the possibility that women can “have sex like men,” the premise on which the global popular cultural phenomenon *Sex and the City* (King 1999) was based, which also asserts the notion that despite feminist claims to the contrary, some gendered and essentialist “realities” are incontrovertible. In *Sex and the City*, women, though they are able to “have sex like men,” all but universally desire love, commitment, marriage, and monogamy. *Sex and the City*, Gerhard writes, “reproduces the psychological essentialism so prominent in postfeminist representations while also celebrating women” (p. 41). Robinson (2011) conceptualizes postfeminism as “part of the continuing transformation of feminism, rather than as backlash against it... and a way of thinking through the imbrications of feminism with mainstream culture” (p. 114). In this view,

postfeminism does not represent a threat to feminism, but rather a continuation and complication of feminist ideas.

For Brooks (1997), too, rather than representing the undoing of feminism, “the concept of ‘post’ implies a process of ongoing transformation and change” (p. 1). In this view, postfeminism “challenges some of the assumptions made by second-wave feminism, such as its claims to universalism and also its racism and heterosexism” (Robinson p. 114). Gerhard, Robinson, and Brooks do not share the interpretation proposed by McRobbie, Taylor, Faludi, Tasker, and Negra, which, Robinson writes, “paints postfeminism in negative terms, defining it as anti-feminist or suggesting that postfeminism implies the depoliticisation, death or undoing of feminism” (p. 113). Indeed, Genz and Brabon argue that understanding postfeminism as “an unfaithful reproduction of feminism” (p. 6) or, as McRobbie (2004 p. 258) describes it, “a ritualistic denunciation” of feminism,

...is problematic for a number of reasons: it presupposes a distinction between a more ‘authentic’ and unadulterated feminism on the one and a suspect, usually commercialized postfeminism on the other; it adopts a one-dimensional reading of the ‘post’ – and by implication of ‘post-ing’ of feminism – as ‘anti’-feminism; it glosses over some of the overlaps and contradictions that mark postfeminist contexts, thereby foreclosing the interpretative possibilities of postfeminism (Genz and Brabon, p. 6).

Gerhard, Brooks, Robinson, and Genz and Brabon, then, take a more optimistic view of the intentions and impact of postfeminism than do McRobbie and others, and understand it as in dialogue with feminism, rather than as an effort to undermine and undo feminism. Where McRobbie and others, notably Faludi (2006), argue that postfeminism is a response to feminist victories of the 1970s and 1980s, Gerhard and others understand it as a response to the shortcomings of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, and thus as a welcome complication of feminism, not a contradiction. Accounting for the debated nature of postfeminism, Genz and Brabon argue that “postfeminism’s plurality and ‘impurity’ is symptomatic of a contradiction-prone late modernity and a changed social/cultural environment characterised by a complex discursive and contextual interactions” (p. 6). Regardless of the source of the contestation, postfeminism

has been and continues to be contested terrain, requiring any use of the term to be thoroughly clarified and located within that debate.

Alternatives to postfeminism: neo-feminism

There are numerous frameworks through which the romantic comedies I address here as postfeminist might be analysed. These include gender mainstreaming and third-wave feminism, both of which are refuted by McRobbie (2009). Gender mainstreaming holds that feminist ideas have become accepted and fully integrated into governmental and other institutions to the extent that the “rowdy and activist” (McRobbie p. 152) feminist movement of the past is now obsolete. Arguing that there are now a sufficient number of women working in these institutions – for example, the United Kingdom’s Labour Party or the government of the European Union – Walby (2002) “endorses a kind of mature feminist professionalism working comfortably inside the institutions of the state” (McRobbie p. 155). Like McRobbie, who asks, “but how can we be so sure that the feminist professionals in whom she suggests we must have trust, remain so trustworthy?” (p. 155), my research does not support Walby’s arguments: the presence of women does not guarantee the primacy of feminist ideas, as demonstrated by *The Ugly Truth*, which was written by three women screenwriters, and *The Proposal*, which was directed by a woman. Similarly, my analysis here corroborates McRobbie’s assessment of third-wave feminism, particularly as articulated by Baumgardner and Richards (2004); McRobbie argues that third-wave feminism itself engages in anti-feminist arguments (p. 137), and “tells us little about what social or political forces [it] is actually organising itself around apart from an older generation of feminists” (p. 157). My own research supports McRobbie’s argument that third-wave feminism’s focus on the individual renders it “ill-equipped to deal with war, with militarism, with ‘resurgent patriarchy’ with questions of cultural difference, with race and ethnicity” (p. 158) – that is, with the central collective questions of feminism. By far the most compelling alternative to the framework of postfeminism is that of neo-feminism, developed by Radner (2011).

Radner examines many of the same popular culture texts, and especially many of the same films that are often invoked by feminists making a case for a particular conception of postfeminism: the *Sex and the City* movies, the *Bridget Jones's Diary* canon (Fielding 1996, Maguire 2001, Kidron 2004), *Legally Blonde* (Luketic 2001), and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* (Herman-Wurmfeld 2003). However, Radner rejects the framework of postfeminism in any incarnation, and instead argues that these films are symptomatic of neo-feminism. For Radner, this framework provides advantages over that of postfeminism in any of its various conceptions:

The notion of neo-feminism assists in explaining the difficulties that contemporary feminist thought encounters in its attempts to understand contemporary feminine culture... While there are elements in contemporary culture that might be understood as a backlash against feminism, girly films, as an expression of neo-feminism, do not situate themselves against feminism; rather, they are indifferent to the kind of social and political concerns that set feminists apart from the general group of female strivers seeking to achieve the ideals of neo-liberalism (p. 191).

Radner argues that the elements of postfeminist popular culture that disquiet McRobbie, Tasker and Negra, and others, have not appeared in response to feminism's successes or its failures, but rather, as a result of neo-feminism, itself a part of the larger phenomenon of neoliberalism. Radner argues that "neo-feminism and neoliberalism are inextricably linked in terms of producing a subject who may disassociate herself from traditional notions of the patriarchy and the family, but who remains convinced that her identity is largely defined in terms of her intimate relations with others" (p. 197). For Radner, neo-feminist popular culture is not a consequence of feminism; rather, "current feminine culture is intrinsically linked to the dominance of neo-liberalism" (p. 191); neo-feminism developed alongside feminism, parallel to it, and has come to supersede it. As such,

the development of the girly films and feminine popular culture more broadly indicates that a dominant neo-feminist tendency, inaugurated by figures such as [founding editor of *Cosmopolitan* magazine] Helen Gurley Brown in the 1960s, has incorporated aspects and dimensions of second-wave feminism, in particular certain rhetorical devices, to the extent that

these are consonant with its own goal – that of the advancement of the individual feminine subject in her “pursuit of happiness” as a specifically American entitlement (p. 191).

Radner’s description of the popular culture that she calls neo-feminist is not dissimilar to that of scholars (Gill 2007, McRobbie 2009) who view it as postfeminist; the difference is in her diagnosis. Radner, in dialogue with Gill (2007), sketches the terrain of “current feminine culture” and notes that, like Gill, she observes that it is marked by:

an obsessional preoccupation with the body; the emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline; women presented as active and desiring subjects; a focus on individualism and empowerment; the dominance of the makeover paradigm; the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; an emphasis on commodification and the commodification of difference; irony and knowingness (Radner p.191).

Radner does not differ with Gill’s description of the persistence and dominance of these elements (many of which are similarly catalogued by McRobbie and Tasker and Negra, and claimed by these scholars as evidence and effects of postfeminism) in contemporary popular culture; she acknowledges that what Gill identifies as the “postfeminist sensibility” of these texts is real. Nor does she disagree with McRobbie’s assessment that there exists a new “feminine condition,” one characterized by eating disorders and substance abuse, accounts of which “the media circulate alongside the very images that support these pathologies” (p. 194). However, Radner accounts for these elements of what McRobbie and Gill call postfeminism by locating them in the larger phenomenon of neoliberalism, viewing neo-feminism as “a dimension of neoliberalism” (p. 194). Where McRobbie attributes the rise of postfeminism to the loss of cultural and social support for collectivism (and also, as I explore later in this chapter, as inextricably connected to neoliberalism), and particularly collective feminist action, Radner argues that “we cannot describe as a ‘loss’ something that was never there from the beginning,” and observes that:

... by thinking in terms of loss, feminists avoid the crucial question... which concerns the reasons for why and how the perspectives advocated in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* came to

dominate the public imagination, to the extent of seemingly rendering irrelevant feminist analysis as inaugurated by the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (p. 194-5).

There are, then, multiple lenses through which to view contemporary popular culture texts, and contemporary “feminine culture,” of which Hollywood romantic comedies are a part.

Selecting a conceptual framework for this thesis

In this thesis, I adopt a framework of postfeminism that hews closely to that of McRobbie, and implement it in a manner that follows Tasker and Negra. I do so in large part because McRobbie’s account of the effects of postfeminism on public perceptions of feminism, and of feminists, closely matches my own experience of feminist praxis and is supported by my research here – and because Gerhard’s, Robinson’s, and Brooks’ more hopeful accounts of the intent and impact of postfeminism underestimate the deep American cultural and political investment in gender hierarchy as argued by Kimmel and Aronson (2001), and Faludi (2006).

Furthermore, while there is indeed an ongoing or continuing transformation occurring in American feminism, it is happening, in my view, in spite of and not because of postfeminism. The same can be said of the challenging of assumptions made by second-wave feminism; it is occurring in spite of, not because of, postfeminism. Additionally, Radner’s framework of neo-feminism does not take into account the clear and pervasive hostility to feminism found in contemporary popular culture (as in *Legally Blonde*, in which feminism is represented by the hostile, judgmental lesbian law student who insists on renaming one semester an “ovester” in the name of equal representation). Finally, McRobbie’s description of how the “postfeminist masquerade” is deployed in contemporary popular culture is particularly compelling, made more so by the integration of the double bind of subjectivity, and is supported by my own findings in this thesis.

That I adopt this interpretation of postfeminism and apply this framework to my academic work is in part a result of my experience as a feminist blogger for *Feministing.com*. In that role, I experience firsthand the simultaneous celebration of and renunciation of feminism that McRobbie describes; it manifests both in responses from readers in *Feministing*'s target audience and from the site's detractors. I experience these not as a transformation of feminism, or as "a well-informed and even well-intentioned response to feminism" (McRobbie 2009, p. 256), but as hostility to feminism that is often expressed as hostility toward individual feminists. My colleagues who do work as "public feminists" (Sterling 2013) have had similar experiences, in which postfeminism manifests as backlash rather than as transformation. Our experiences suggest that, in their more hopeful casting of postfeminism as a phenomenon that poses little threat to the advances of feminism, Gerhard, Robinson, Brooks, and Genz and Brabon underestimate the tenor of this hostility and the investment in gender hierarchy by which it is animated.

Radner's framework of neo-feminism, though it fills some gaps left by McRobbie's conception of postfeminism, does not take into account the considerable hostility to feminism embedded in postfeminist popular culture. She argues that, because of its inextricable connection with neoliberalism, the neo-feminism expressed in the "girly" films she analyses does not "situate [itself] against feminism" but is "indifferent to the social and political concerns" of feminism (p. 192). My analysis of *The Ugly Truth*, with its general hostility to women and its particular hostility to a woman who conform to popular media's image of a stereotypical feminist, and of *The Proposal*, a movie in which the financially-self-sufficient, professionally ambitious woman protagonist is repeatedly humiliated by her male subordinate, suggests that, far from being indifferent to feminism, contemporary "girly" films are hostile to feminism and to women in general. After viewing thirty contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies, the sample size for this thesis, patterns began to emerge that make the conceptualization of these films as "indifferent" to feminism untenable. As Tasker and Negra (2007) note, "feminist activism has long met with strategies of resistance, negotiation, and containment," (p. 11). But in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, there is simply too much animosity toward feminism, too much of what Negra calls the

“re-activating previously problematized stereotypes of femininity” (p. 107), and too many postfeminist love stories that end precisely as pre-feminist and antifeminist love stories do. As Negra (2008) writes, women in these romantic comedies are granted choices that reflect the influence of feminism on these stories and on the culture in which they were made, but “the choices postfeminism urges upon women are usually traditional ones” (p. 7). Again, one such “happy” ending might support Radner’s interpretation of postfeminist popular culture. Thirty of them, however, suggest that postfeminism is far more hostile and threatening to feminism than Radner allows. However, the findings of my research do support Radner’s argument that “many feminist critiques of contemporary culture tend to underline its conflicted nature, producing an ambivalent and unresolved analysis that can neither reject nor affirm contemporary popular feminine culture, nor decipher its relations with feminism” (p. 192) and I attempt not to produce yet another ambivalent and unresolved analysis in this thesis.

Finally, McRobbie’s invocation of the postfeminist masquerade makes her conception of postfeminism more compelling than other interpretations of the phenomenon. Drawing on Lacan (2002) in her use of the Symbolic, and on Butler (1990, 1994, 2000, 2004), Doane (1982), and Riviere (1929/1986) in their use of the masquerade, McRobbie (2008) convincingly argues that postfeminism is a response to women’s increased financial independence – an attempt to compel women to “choose” that which is no longer economically necessary, and to thus participate in the perpetuation of traditional gender hierarchy. The double bind of subjectivity, as developed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), is essential to the postfeminist masquerade, which McRobbie describes as “a highly self-conscious means by which young women are encouraged to collude with the re-stabilisation of gender norms so as to undo the gains of feminism, and disassociate themselves with this now discredited political identity” (p. 64), and which manifests in popular culture’s emphasis on fashion, makeup, and dieting, an emphasis that she labels a “new regime of self-perfectibility (i.e. self-completion)” (p. 63). As I explore in this thesis, the postfeminist masquerade – the “ironic, quasi-feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity” (p. 65) in order to “secure, once again, the existence of patriarchal law

and masculine hegemony” (p. 65) – is also at work in the narratives of contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies. As McRobbie allows, “there are many variants of the post-feminist masquerade... but in essence it comprises a re-ordering of femininity so that old-fashioned styles... which signal submission to some invisible authority or to an opaque set of instructions, are re-instated” (p. 66). Far from participating in the transformation of feminism, the postfeminist masquerade is a mechanism by which the progress of feminism is staunched, eroded, and reversed.

For McRobbie, the postfeminist masquerade is “a direct response” to feminist theorizing (p. 64), but it is also borne of the need to mitigate the effects of women’s increasing economic power, particularly in the West – McRobbie is writing largely about British culture – and in the United States:

Confronted with the prospect of women becoming less dependent on men as a result of participation in work and with the possible de-stabilisation of gender hierarchy which might ensue, so it becomes all the more important for the Symbolic to re-secure the terms of heterosexual desire. Great effort is invested in this task of maintaining and consolidating masculine hegemony for the very reason that there are forces that appear to threaten its dominance. Thus the paraphernalia of marriage culture assumes such visibility within popular culture at the very moment that its necessity is being put in question. If for women in the West survival itself, and the well-being of children, no longer rests on the finding of a male partner who will be a breadwinner, then the cultural significance of marriage is much reduced... For younger women without children this degree of independence introduces a new tension into the field of dominant heterosexuality. This is a case of what is no longer economically central becoming, for this very reason, culturally necessary. Such a scenario also gives rise to a veritable minefield of sexual antagonisms, on the basis that women are no longer intelligible primarily in terms of their exchange in the marriage market. And the social anxieties that arise as a result of this have repercussions right across the cultural field (p. 62).

One of the sites on the cultural field in which there are such repercussions is the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, where the postfeminist masquerade manifests in various ways. In the three movies I examine closely in this thesis (in my three case studies), the pursuit of power in the form of economic independence is represented as corrosive to femininity and to masculinity, and as a result to women’s

happiness and men's (as in *The Ugly Truth* and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*). In *Friends With Benefits*, characters are permitted to explore alternatives to gender hierarchy and specifically to marriage – as McRobbie notes, the Symbolic permits the presence of “a feminist n as it adjusts to ward off the threat of feminism” (p. 64) – but these alternatives are represented as ultimately unsustainable and undesirable compared to the genre's traditional “happy ending” – marriage, and the re-stabilisation and maintenance of gender hierarchy.

McRobbie emphasizes the importance of self-surveillance and self-regulation to the postfeminist masquerade. Writing about the role of the postfeminist masquerade in shaping young women's application of beauty products and consumption of cosmetic services, McRobbie notes the extreme attention to detail required by the masquerade, observing that “no aspect of physical appearance can be left unattended to. The post-feminist masquerade functions with this microscopic attention to detail” (p. 66). Importantly, however, this gendered self-regulation or policing is experienced by many women as a choice. “The hyper-femininity of the masquerade which would seemingly re-locate women back inside the terms of traditional gender hierarchies... does not in fact mean entrapment (as feminists would once have seen it) since it is now a matter of choice rather than obligation” (pp. 65-6). Here McRobbie invokes Foucault's double bind of subjectivity, emphasizing how postfeminism compels women to participate in the maintenance of a gender hierarchy by which they are disadvantaged. Genz and Brabon, writing about the increasing rate of cosmetic surgery in the United Kingdom, make a similar argument; for them, the postfeminist woman who “chooses” to undergo this surgery “is involved in working with and against the power structures inherent within subjectivity as she becomes object (of the heterosexual male gaze) and subject (to a ‘new’ self).” For Genz and Brabon, as for McRobbie, “postfeminism and the postfeminist woman must be understood within this context of the double bind of subjectivity. This concept of normalisation can be employed to explain the paradoxical position of the postfeminist woman's use of the technology of cosmetic surgery” (p. 150-151). Just as postfeminist popular culture depicts young women “choosing” the same romantic resolutions as those that were forced on them in pre-feminist popular

culture, the postfeminist masquerade encourages young women to “choose” to style themselves – through makeup, surgery, and fashion – with the same or even greater attention to detail and feminine presentation as was required of them before feminism granted them alternative modes of appearance.

As McRobbie notes, the postfeminist masquerade operates across the cultural field, and Negra observes it operating beyond the adoption of the “retro” fashion styles and intense beauty practices that McRobbie addresses in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009). Writing about postfeminist culture more broadly, Negra also observes the double bind of subjectivity at work in the aforementioned “(re)codification of female types” (p. 10) and terms like “bitch,” “slut,” “whore,” and “golddigger.” The “postfeminist twist” here, Negra observes, is that women are now encouraged to use these terms to describe other women, and themselves, “in a display of their political and rhetorical ‘freedom’” (2009 p. 10). As McRobbie observes, postfeminism requires the participation of women, and under postfeminism, internalized sexism is the price that women must pay to continue enjoying the freedoms won for them by those repellent and wrongheaded second-wave feminists. “It is a mark of the cultural intelligibility of young women who renounce or disavow the need for a new sexual politics,” McRobbie argues. “...to this extent, young women have been expected to become both quiet and quiescent” (p. 180). In this way, women are encouraged to participate in postfeminism, and therefore, in the undoing of feminism – and in this framework then, it may be considered unsurprising that *The Ugly Truth* was written by three women screenwriters.

McRobbie emphasizes that though the postfeminist masquerade developed as a response to the de-stabilisation of gender hierarchy, women may perform it because they are seeking to navigate resistance to feminism. For McRobbie, the postfeminist masquerade may serve as a tool that women may use to navigate hostility to feminist progress, particularly in the professional environment where women, much like the career women characters in the romantic comedies I analyse here, have made enormous professional inroads and now wield some power as a result. These women, McRobbie writes,

have become aware that their coming forward and competing on the labour market with men as their equals has certain repercussions. They are nervous because they are still unused to power, it ill-befits them, they are inexperienced, they cannot afford for it to be relaxed or casual, they are anxious it will make them unfeminine. There is not so much fear, as recognition that this appropriation of power which they have found themselves assuming, impacts on their negotiation of heterosexuality and potentially detracts from their desirability. The post-feminist (anti-feminist) masquerade comes to the young women's rescue, a throwback from the past... to help her navigate the terrain of hegemonic masculinity without jeopardising her sexual identity, which, because she is actually and legitimately inside the institutional world of work, from which she was once barred or had only limited access to, can become a site of vulnerability... (p. 66-67).

According to McRobbie, the postfeminist masquerade begins as a reaction to women's increased economic power, but functions to serve the interests of the larger gender power structure – and compels women themselves to participate or collude in reinforcing that structure. My analysis in this thesis supports this incorporation of the postfeminist masquerade and the integration of the double bind of subjectivity into McRobbie's account of how postfeminism functions, making this account the most compelling of the various understandings of postfeminism elucidated in the debate over the phenomenon. As I demonstrate in my three case studies, it is instructive to observe the performance of the postfeminist masquerade by characters in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, and to explore how the narratives of these movies deploy the postfeminist masquerade to mitigate the effects of their characters' economic and professional power on the larger power structure of the gender hierarchy.

Postfeminism and neoliberalism

Any understanding of postfeminism and how it shapes and is represented in popular culture requires an understanding of neoliberalism. Like Gill & Scharff (2011), I understand neoliberalism as “a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” (p. 5). Gill and Scharff observe that neoliberalism emerged in the United States under the administration of Ronald Reagan (who served as

President from 1980 to 1988) and under the United Kingdom's concurrent Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (who held the position from 1979 to 1990), and "expanded its economic reach globally through international organisations such as the IMF, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank" (p. 5). Tyler (2011) notes the contradictions of neoliberalism, observing that while "it is packaged as concerned with individual freedom, choice, democracy and personal responsibility" (p. 22), in reality, it "is a class-based economic project that systematically strips assets from the poor (including welfare provisions) and concentrates wealth within a tiny global elite (individuals and corporations)" (p. 22). Emphasizing the importance and universal applicability of the free market, and the attendant centrality of consumption, neoliberalism "sees market exchange as an ethic in itself, capable as acting as a guide to all human action, and it holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" (Gill and Scharff, p. 5), making the decreasing role of public institutions and the rise of individual solutions to cultural and structural problems, rather than collective ones, appear commonsensical and desirable.

Gill and Scharff make a compelling case for the similarities between postfeminism and neoliberalism, and indeed, for the former's reliance on the latter:

Both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves. Secondly, it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely-choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism (p. 7).

Taylor (2012), describes the relationship between postfeminist rhetoric and neoliberal rhetoric as "symbiotic" (p. 3), and argues that postfeminism "is in effect neoliberalism gendered feminine and articulated to feminist-inspired discourses of autonomy, freedom, and choice for women" (p. 15), and Sherman (2011) theorizes that this symbiosis results in "neoliberal femininity": "a type of ambitious, middle-class femininity, oriented to success in both the public and private spheres" (p. 80). Radner (2011), who argues that the United States is living not through a postfeminist moment, but rather, a neo-

feminist one, nonetheless identifies many similarities between the women-directed popular culture of what she calls neo-feminism and what Gill and Scharff, McRobbie, and others including myself call postfeminism. Radner notes the “obsessional preoccupation” with the body and the emphasis on surveillance and monitoring of the body, the “dominance” of the makeover narrative, the notable sexualisation of culture and the depiction of women as sexually “active and desiring” subjects, the use of irony, the emphasis on “individualism and empowerment,” the reassertion and commodification of gender essentialism, and, finally, “the articulation or entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas” (p. 191). Radner argues that these elements, which are especially evident in contemporary “girly” movies, many of which are romantic comedies, occur in concert with – and arguably as a result of – neoliberalism, which she calls “the prevailing ethos of the late twentieth century, with which [neo-feminism] is eminently compatible” (p. 2). For McRobbie, Radner, and Gill and Scharff, then, the representation of gender, sex, and power that dominates “girly” movies and Hollywood romantic comedies, whether one defines it as neo-feminist or postfeminist, is inextricably linked to the neoliberalism that these scholars argue dominates the political and cultural lives of Americans and inhabitants of other Western cultures during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

Gill and Scharff also argue that postfeminism is inextricably related to neoliberalism, and that the neoliberal sensibility that has come to dominate American culture (and, as noted above, the cultures of the United Kingdom, with an increasingly global reach) is necessary to the mobilization of many elements of postfeminism. This argument is supported by my research here. “Postfeminism,” as Gill and Scharff argue, “is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas” (p. 7). Though, like McRobbie, I argue that postfeminism is a response to the threat that feminism has posed and continues to pose to gender hierarchy, my analysis here supports the argument that it is a response made possible by the rise of neoliberalism.

The role of neoliberalism in shaping postfeminist popular culture is evident, and frequently explored, in analyses of the rise of the now extremely popular makeover show (Moseley 2000, Brunsdon

2003, McRobbie 2009, Tincknell 2011). Gill and Scharff suggest that neoliberalism “is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects” (p. 7), because the self-surveillance, self-management, self-discipline demanded by neoliberalism is so often demanded more of women than it is of men. Indeed, makeover programmes¹, numerous in the United States and the United Kingdom partly as a result of media deregulation under neoliberalism, target women almost exclusively (one obvious but rare exception being *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* [Collins & Metzler 2003-7]). Tincknell argues that “the profoundly toxic character of neoliberalism’s recuperation of feminism has rarely been more powerfully articulated than in the television genre that promises to make women look better while making us feel worse” (p. 83). The makeover show (the most commonly explored exemplars of which are *Ten Years Younger* [Maverick Television 2004-], *What Not to Wear* [BBC 2001-7], and *Extreme Makeover* [Schultz 2002-7]), has “helped renew the hegemony of beauty culture as the apex of femininity at a historical juncture when women (in parts of Western society at least) are ostensibly more economically independent, socially engaged and politically visible than ever before” (p. 83). Though Tincknell acknowledges that this renewed hegemony comes as a result of women’s perceived increased power, it also owes its dominance to “neoliberal government policies on media ownership and regulation” (p. 83), and to neoliberalism’s emphasis on consumption and individualism.

As Tincknell notes, “the makeover show offers its viewers the promise that physical and spiritual renewal are both necessary to femininity and wholly dependent on appropriate forms of consumption in a world in which consumer culture looks like rescue if there’s nothing else on offer” (p. 85). In addition to demonstrating the need to adhere to strict beauty norms, makeover shows depict this adherence as a route to “empowerment” and “self-esteem,” – those “faux-feminist” (McRobbie 2009, p. 135) watchwords of a commodified, commercialized interpretation of feminism that represents little threat to gender hierarchy.

¹ Taylor (2012) notes that the makeover paradigm does not merely apply to the literal makeover – that is, the dramatic changing of physical appearance and presentation presented in makeover television programming. Postfeminist popular culture often combines the denigration of single women with the depiction of those women being changed or made over, Taylor argues, writing that, “a key way in which to discredit singleness is to insist that the single woman be made over into something else” (p. 15). Furthermore, this social transformation often depends on a physical one, as in *The Ugly Truth*, in which Mike takes Abby shopping for more conventionally feminine clothes that he claims will make her more attractive to men.

In the makeover programme, postfeminist and neoliberal ideas are mobilized, as the willing participant and the viewer are told that the former must be denigrated and physically – often surgically – altered, for her own good and for the good of society. The shows, like so much neoliberal and postfeminist culture, pay lip service to women’s individuality and agency, while “naturaliz[ing] a highly gendered division of power... in which male experts reconstruct, Frankenstein-like, the body of the woman” (Tincknell p. 91) and foreground “the male gaze as the measure of female self-worth” (p. 91). These shows also mobilise the class antagonism central to neoliberalism, “in the forms of aggressive words and disparaging gestures and expressions between women, and by impeccably middle-class women, who serve as models, against poor and unattractive working-class women, in a way which would have been unacceptable until recently” (p. 129). Presenting radical surgery and new (and more expensive) forms of consumption as the route to self-worth and membership in the middle or upper-middle class, the makeover show “never directly addresses the social forces that might produce abjection, nor the issue of single or divorced women’s poverty... To do so would disrupt the preferred narrative of individual moral dissipation and introduce some uncomfortable issues around economic and social inequalities” (pp. 90-91). Instead, these postfeminist texts, aided by the ideological foundation laid by neoliberalism, presents “self-esteem” as women’s ultimate goal, a goal unachievable without youth, conventional physical beauty, and attendant male attention and approval – which are in turn impossible without participation in consumer culture.

As McRobbie observes, “these programmes constitute a new and expansive form of gender power which oversees and takes charge of an economically necessary movement of women, by utilizing a faux-feminist language of ‘empowerment of women’ so as to defuse, refuse and disavow the likelihood of a new solidaristic vocabulary” (p. 135) or, indeed, the use of the old one, which, as postfeminism insists, is no longer necessary. And, by encouraging the made-over women to scrutinise their bodies and their beauty and fashion choices, these shows reinforce the postfeminist emphasis on self-surveillance and “self-policing” identified by McRobbie (p. 63), while also allowing for the repeated performance of the postfeminist masquerade, in which, as explored above, young women are impelled to collude in the re-

stabilisation of gender hierarchy, and reinforce what McRobbie calls the “new regime of self-perfectibility (i.e. self-completion)” (p. 63). The makeover show, like the romantic comedies from the cycle I examine here, is a prime example of postfeminism in popular culture, and of the complementary relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism.

As other scholars (Gill 2011, Harvey and Gill 2011, McRobbie 2009, Tyler 2011) have noted, postfeminism and neoliberalism work hand in hand in other popular culture texts, as in the “celebratory commercial values associated with the Spice Girls” (McRobbie 2009, p. 158), “a pro-feminist femininity-focused repertoire” that “plays directly into the hands of corporate consumer culture eager to tap into this market on the basis of young women’s rising incomes” (p. 158). Gill (2011) notes that this neoliberal blending of feminism and capitalism has global economic and education policy implications, pointing to a collaboration between Nike, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and UNICEF, that “[promotes] a notion of ‘girl power’ borrowed directly” from the Spice Girls (p. 6). Other scholars have noted this complementary relationship between postfeminism and neoliberalism in women-directed popular culture; Tyler (2011) observes “a particular neoliberal amalgam of maternity and femininity” in the increased visibility of and sexualisation of pregnant women in contemporary popular culture. Harvey and Gill (2011) note neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualism expressed in the form of self-help books and television programmes – which offer individual solutions to larger structural and cultural problems – and argue that this individualism, consumerism and sexualisation can be clearly seen in the English lifestyle reality television show *The Sex Inspectors* (Channel 4 2004-). This show and those like it demand the creation of a “modern postfeminist subject” (p. 56), who “is incited to be compulsorily sexy and always ‘up for it’, and is interpellated through discourses in which sex is work that requires constant labour and reskilling (as well as a budget capable of stretching to a wardrobe full of sexy outfits and drawers studded with sexy toys)” (p. 56), a subject whose creation can be aided through consuming self-help products like the show itself. Press (2011), analysing university students’ reactions to the show *America’s Next Top Model* (Banks 2003-), argues that “according to the logic of this show, the way out a poor or working-

class background would be to change your hair, or effect other bodily transformations, most involving some kind of consumption activity” (p. 125), a worldview that combines neoliberal views of economic inequality with postfeminist ideas about women’s bodies as the ideal source of women’s “empowerment.”

In the postfeminist cycle of the genre, the Hollywood romantic comedy demonstrates how postfeminism and neoliberalism work in concert, with the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and consumption reinforcing postfeminism’s emphasis on these as a route to creating a socially acceptable form of femininity and to resolving the women-specific problems facing the heroines. In *What Happens In Vegas* (Vaughn 2008), Joy (Cameron Diaz) derives no emotional satisfaction from her lucrative work on the trading floor: work which, the movie implies, renders her unattractively competitive and emotionally distant. This problem is resolved when Joy wins the lottery, a solution that allows her to leave her unsatisfying job, thereby rendering her an attractive candidate for a long-term romantic relationship while still allowing her to continue participating in consumer culture. In *He’s Just Not That Into You* (Kwapis 2009), an ensemble romantic comedy, three of the women characters are seen at work, denoting their ability to participate in consumer culture (one of the characters is in the process of renovating her already impressive house). Even within the office they share, these women rarely discuss their work, talking instead about their romantic relationships (*He’s Just Not That Into You*, it bears noting, is based on a romance self-help book, further demonstrating the neoliberal commitment to individualism over collective action).

Kaklamanidou (2013) explores the role of neoliberalism in shaping the “new millennium” Hollywood romantic comedy, arguing that the genre’s depictions of gender, sex, and power by turns are informed by, reinforce, and resist the neoliberal sensitivity that marks the cultural and political context in which they were produced. Kaklamanidou views the genre “as part of an ongoing dialogue regarding romantic and/or sexual relationships, adding therefore significant insight into the world of gender politics (p. 2),” citing as an example the influence of “dramatic” consequences of neoliberalism – an “increase in unemployment, decrease in paid employment, deterioration of health care and loss of benefits” (p. 6) – on

the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy's representations of masculinity. She argues that the new millennium romantic comedy, though it often features a "conservative" narrative conclusion – for example, films in the "baby obsessed" cluster that includes *Baby Mama* (McCullers 2008) and *The Back Up Plan* end with the formation of nuclear families rather than the continuation of single motherhood (p. 108) – they also feature characters whose lives have been influenced by recent "real life" economic booms and bubbles, and speak to genuine extra-cinematic frustrations with the failure of neoliberally-inclined governments to adjust to the rising numbers of mothers in the labour force.

The three romantic comedies I consider in depth in this thesis constitute narrative representations of neoliberalism: in *The Ugly Truth* and *Friends With Benefits*, the heroines are employed in lucrative positions that, in addition to granting them financial independence and, to some extent, professional authority and power, allow them access to an upper middle class lifestyle marked by consumption. In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the heroine's job, while stable and respectable, is not particularly lucrative (she wears apparently inexpensive clothes and drives a visibly old car), and is portrayed as a placeholder of sorts – she explains that she dropped out of university to move to Hawaii with her then-boyfriend, fell into her job as a hotel receptionist, and liked the work, so decided to stay. By the end of the movie, she has decided to resume her studies, a move that will, presumably, put her back on the path to a more high-powered and lucrative career, which will mark her entrance into a class of women who can participate in consumer culture in the manner usually seen in romantic comedy heroines. All three movies present individualistic solutions to structural problems, contradicting the core feminist tenet that such problems are best improved with collective action toward collective solutions. In *The Ugly Truth*, Abby conquers the widespread sexist aversion to women who wield professional power, who are deemed in American culture to be "too controlling" when she meets and begins a romantic relationship with Mike, who, it is implied, is the one man alive who is not threatened by her power. *Friends With Benefits* critiques the strictures of traditional heterosexual romantic relationships, but instead of presenting Jamie and Dylan's resistance to these relationships as ideological or as political objections to the dominant cultural norms

around romantic relationships, the movie presents them as personal: Dylan is “emotionally unavailable” and Jamie is “emotionally damaged.” The solution presented by the movie is similarly personal, rather than political: rather than a culture-wide redefinition of how to form and maintain a romantic relationship, or even of the necessity of such a relationship in assuring one’s happiness, the solution in *Friends With Benefits* is simply for Dylan and Jamie to overcome their personal fears of emotional intimacy so that they can form a traditional long-term monogamous relationship that will presumably result in marriage. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* presents the problem of vulnerable masculinity and of men who are struggling to keep pace with their professionally successful and powerful women peers. Instead of critiquing dominant ideals of American masculinity and femininity as the cause of young men’s malaise, the movie depicts the conflict as a purely personal one between Peter and Sarah, rather than a political, structural, and cultural one.

Though an understanding of the relationship between neoliberalism and postfeminism is essential to my argument, my focus is on how postfeminist ideas shape and are represented in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. Any discussion of this, however, must take in the role that the neoliberal sensibility plays in shaping the postfeminist one, with particular regard to how both involve the reinterpretation of feminism as, if not already victorious and therefore unnecessary, then as an individual and highly personal project, devoid of and separate from collective feminist political action, a way to achieve “empowerment,” and that positions financial independence not as a source of political power but as a route to further consumption, and, through that consumption, the performance of middle-class femininity. This understanding of postfeminism and neoliberalism as working in concert, the former dependent on the latter for the ideological groundwork laid by neoliberalism, is one I share with McRobbie and Gill and Scharff, among others. It is with this understanding of neoliberalism, and its complementary relationship with postfeminism, that I approach the analysis of contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies and how they are shaped by and represent postfeminist ideas.

Postfeminism and irony

As Gill (2007) notes, no discussion of postfeminism is complete without noting the central role of irony and knowingness in postfeminist popular culture (p. 268). Tasker (2011) argues that “irony has to do with doubleness, layers of meaning, which are even more pronounced in a recycled image culture” (p. 73). Indeed, irony is crucial to the postfeminist cycle of the Hollywood romantic comedy, and as such, in my discussion of *The Ugly Truth*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, and *Friends With Benefits*, I will explore its role in these movies in some depth.

Tasker argues that, because postfeminist discourse “is both highly knowing about sex and gender (both cognizant of sexism and knowing with respect to sexual innuendo) and deeply invested in conventional modes of femininity, it is perhaps unsurprising that postfeminist media culture is intensely ironic in tone” (p. 68). However, Gill, like McRobbie, argues that this irony serves a specific function: it inoculates or insulates postfeminist popular culture from accusations of sexism or anti-feminism. “In postfeminist media culture irony has become a way of ‘having it both ways,’” Gill writes, “of expressing sexist, homophobic, or otherwise unpalatable sentiments in an ironized form, while claiming this was not actually ‘meant’” (pp. 266-267). This serves as an inoculation against feminist critique, and, when such critique arises, it is easily deflected with allusions to the stereotype of the “humourless feminist.” Writing about men’s magazines (“lad mags”), Gill notes that the pre-emptive irony is not particularly subtle – “frequently, criticisms are pre-empted by comments which suggest that the article’s writer is expecting ‘blundering rants’ from the ‘council of women’, etc.” (p. 258) – but that its impact on feminist critique is both intentional and effective. Such pre-emptive irony makes feminist critique very difficult, “and this, it would seem, is precisely what is intended” (p. 268): to attempt critique is to confirm the stereotype of the censorious, humourless feminist, while to allow the remark to pass without critique is to suggest one’s acceptance.

Similarly, McRobbie (2004) views irony as one method by which postfeminism is “undoing feminism with some subtlety” (p. 32), in that it acknowledges the existence of feminist critiques while

dismissing them as out-dated and overly protective or censorious of women who, now that they are liberated from “old-fashioned” sexism, are free to choose engage in the very same behaviours once expected of them – which now, because it is purportedly freely chosen, is depicted as a feminist act. Indeed, as Banet-Weiser (2007) argues, contemporary popular culture, and advertising in particular, suggests “that the ‘problem’ of objectification of women’s bodies is one of history; women ‘get it’ about objectification, and because of this understanding it is acceptable – indeed, even ironically empowering – to objectify women’s bodies in the most blatantly demeaning ways (p. 211). Discussing a billboard advertisement for Wonderbra and a television ad for Citroën, the latter of which involves a striptease by supermodel Claudia Schiffer, McRobbie notes that the advertisement is sexist, but that the sexism is supposed to be interpreted as intentional, self-conscious and ironic:

This ad appears to suggest that, yes, this is a self-consciously ‘sexist ad.’ Feminist critiques of it are deliberately evoked. Feminism is ‘taken into account’ but only to be shown to be no longer necessary... She seems to be doing it out of choice and for her own enjoyment... Once again the shadow of disapproval is evoked (the striptease as a site of female exploitation) only to be instantly dismissed as belonging to the past, to a time when feminists used to object to such imagery. To make such an objection nowadays would run the risk of ridicule. Objection is preempted with irony (p. 33).

As Gill observes, this pre-emption makes feminist critique particularly challenging: the creators, it is implied, “know better,” as do the consumers, and if everyone involved understands that this sexism is not to be taken seriously as “real” sexism, feminists should find no objection with it.

McRobbie also notes that the form of irony seen in the Citroën advertisement depends on another tenet of postfeminism: the inadequacies and follies of political correctness, particularly feminist political correctness, in the face of incontrovertible gender essentialism. In this view, feminism seeks to deny certain inalienable truths about men and women, and, in doing so, makes both men and women miserable (witness the many unhappy career women littering the landscape of postfeminist popular culture), and denies women the “girly” pleasures they enjoyed before feminism. As McRobbie (2009) writes of the *Bridget Jones’s Diary* movies, “feminism, it seems, robbed women of their most treasured pleasures, i.e.

romance, gossip, and obsessive concerns about how to catch a husband.... It is as though this is the vengeance of the younger generation who had to put up with being chided by feminist teachers and academics at university for wanting the wrong things” (p. 21). These “wrong things,” texts like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* imply, are in fact the right things, the things women and men cannot help but want: “Everyone, and especially young people, can give a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, the [Citroën] ad seems to suggest, it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at the bodies of beautiful women” (McRobbie 2009, p. 17). Though Bridget, like many postfeminist romantic comedy heroines, knows she ought to know better and want differently, she cannot help herself. In its playful, winking rehabilitation of “old-fashioned” stereotypes about men and women, this postfeminist irony sets itself against political correctness, and against what McRobbie terms “the seemingly tyrannical regime of feminist puritanism” (p. 33). All three of the movies I consider in depth in this thesis make use of pre-emptive irony, with *The Ugly Truth* in particular depicting the folly of feminist political correctness and the triumph of “old-fashioned” gender norms.

“Ironic” postfeminist sexism is often combined with nostalgia, another comment element of postfeminist popular culture, to further insulate or inoculate from feminist critique and enable the rehabilitation of sexism that would otherwise be unacceptable to contemporary audiences. Gill, discussing analyses of postfeminism by Whelehan (2000) and Williamson (2003), notes that “the use of retro-imagery and nostalgia is a key device in the construction of contemporary sexism. Referencing a previous era becomes an important way of suggesting that the sexism is safely sealed in the past, whilst constructing scenarios that would garner criticism if they were represented as contemporary” (p. 267). This often entails the “aggressive (re)codification of female types” that Negra describes (2009 p. 10), as is certainly the case in *The Ugly Truth*. Postfeminist nostalgic sexism takes other forms in this new genre cycle, however: in *Friends With Benefits*, the heroine yearns for a fairy tale love story, turning to *Pretty Woman*’s (Marshall 1991) late-twentieth century appropriation of Cinderella, as well as to other fairy tale iconography to describe her ideal romantic relationship. This postfeminist use of irony and nostalgia coincides with generic traits: as Jeffers McDonald notes, the romantic comedy, as a genre, has “an

inclination toward self-reflexivity and quotation” (p. 2). As a result, some contemporary romantic comedies harken back to older films in the genre as a matter of generic convention, but, as in the case of *The Ugly Truth*’s reference to *When Harry Met Sally...*’s (Reiner 1989) diner scene, these self-references or quotations also serve a postfeminist purpose.

The effect of irony on the possibility of feminist critique – the ability to say something while, as Gill notes, still being able to claim that one does not really mean it – is compounded when it occurs in the romantic comedy. As Jeffers McDonald (2007) has noted, the genre is already considered trifling and “unserious,” a perception that makes feminist critique (or indeed, academic critique of any kind) a challenge. When romantic comedies couch their sexism and their anti-feminism in irony, as so many romantic comedies in the postfeminist cycle do, feminist critique becomes still more difficult.

However, the use of irony is an important element in each of the three films I consider in depth here. In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, most of the main characters are employed in the entertainment industry, and specifically in television: the movie repeatedly pokes fun at the tropes of television detective procedural shows and at the vapidness of the entertainment industry more broadly. This self-reflexivity and self-awareness flatters the viewer by appearing to conspiratorially offer her an insider’s view, and also allows the movie to distance itself from *that* kind of popular culture, thereby making it seem more authentic. *Friends With Benefits* critiques the clichés of the Hollywood romantic comedy and while itself in many generic clichés – including some of those it criticizes. *The Ugly Truth* employs the gloss of irony to resist the purported strictures of political awareness, and to rehabilitate the kind of “old-school” sexism, and particularly gender essentialism, that, the film implies, out-dated feminists might condemn as sexist. In the postfeminist cycle of the Hollywood romantic comedy, as in much of postfeminist popular culture, irony plays an important role in the gradual, pleasurable, and profitable undoing of feminism.

Locating the postfeminist romantic comedy in postfeminist popular culture

Having established that McRobbie's interpretation of postfeminism – its provenance, function, and effects – is the most suitable to apply to the most recent cycle of Hollywood romantic comedies, I next briefly explore the landscape of postfeminist culture, and of postfeminist popular culture in particular, in order to locate my research within feminist analysis of how postfeminism manifests in contemporary popular culture.

Postfeminist ideas are found in public and academic debates far afield from popular culture. Pedwell (2011), exploring the role of postfeminist ideas in debates about “veiling” by Muslim women in Western countries, explores the limits of cross-cultural analogies that compare headscarves and veils to “Western” makeup. Tyler (2011) examines the proliferation of pregnancy not only in popular culture, arts, and literature, but also in “politics, consumer culture and ‘everyday life’” (p. 21). Pointing to American and French politics, to the examples of French Justice Minister Rachida Dati, United States Republics vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, and First Lady Michelle Obama, Tyler argues that “maternity has never been so visible, so talked about, so public and so deeply incoherent” (p. 22). Attwood (2011), examining online sexual activity and reactions to it, outlines the “potential plurality of meanings” of online sexual activity (p. 205). Currie, Kelly, and Pomerantz (2011) explore the use of postfeminist ideas in the construction of “skater girlhood” among adolescent girls in Vancouver. Gill and Scharff (2011), writing largely about Europe, demonstrate how postfeminist ideas shape domestic and foreign policy, noting that they fuel:

...a celebratory rhetoric in regard to the high levels of sexual visibility and the seeming enjoyment factor accruing to women in Western capitalism, as the fruits of secular modernity and the benevolent state, as though to say to those of us living in the West, that we should remind ourselves of 'how lucky we are'... The UK government during the Blair years offered itself as the preferred agency for delivering women's rights, such that self-organized feminism might wither away. In France we see the Sarkozy government in effect become the champion of women's freedoms directly at the expense of migrant communities, already marginalized and suffering from poverty and from being targets for endemic racism (p. xii).

Postfeminism, as McRobbie suggests, manifests in political and popular culture, and in a range of popular culture sites. Beyond popular culture, the extent to which postfeminism has become entrenched, to form a postfeminist sensibility – as Gill (2007) argues, especially around ideas about gender, sex, and power – have been analysed at length. Coppock, Hayden, and Richter (1995), accounting for the arrival of postfeminism in political life and popular culture, explain that:

'Post-feminism' happened without warning. It seemed to arrive from nowhere. One minute there were feminisms, identified by their diverse political standpoints and their contrasting campaign strategies, the next... it was all over. Features writers, arts broadcasters, television presenters, their subjects ranging from work to play, from fashion to music, grabbed the concept as one of common-sense.... Whatever was meant by 'post-feminism', whatever was being claimed for the concept, one thing was certain – it had arrived (p. 3).

Coppock et al (1995), writing about the United Kingdom, go on to explore the discrepancy between claims that gender equality has been achieved in that society and the reality that sex discrimination and gender inequality continue to exist in the workplace and in intimate relationships. “The advances that have been made are important,” they conclude, “but their proclamation as a new dawn for women, representing an era of ‘post-feminism’, is both unsustainable and premature” (p. 105). Sperling and Owen (2000) also point to the workforce for evidence of the extent to which the postfeminist sensibility has taken hold in this cultural moment. Noting that postfeminism is an idea “that has been bandied about as a result of the measurable increase of women's visibility in the public sphere” (p. 1), Sperling and Owen outline the numerous ways in which women continue to be disadvantaged in the labour market, and conclude that “we have yet to reach a state of ‘post-feminism’, a concept presumably intended by its proponents to indicate achievement of nirvana in terms of equality” (p. 12). Gill (2011) describes “the invalidation and annihilation of any language for talking about structural inequalities” (p. 63), and Gill and Scharff (2011), accounting for the resistance, until recently, of postfeminist ideas to analysis, invoke what McRobbie (2004) terms a “double entanglement” – the “co-existence of neo-conservative values in relations to gender, sexuality and family life, with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and

diversity in regard to domestic, sexual and kinship relations” (p. 256) – and demonstrate the ways in which that double entanglement plays out beyond popular culture:

Maybe the reason for this was a ‘double entanglement’, a seemingly progressive push-forward factor which has seen gay and lesbian partnerships recognized and legitimated and girls and young women being provided with new avenues and opportunities for achievement in education and employment and with sexual freedoms in leisure. At the same time, indeed as part of this same package, modes of patriarchal retrenchment have been digging in, as these conditions of freedom are tied to conditions of social conservatism, consumerism and hostility to feminism in any of its old or newer forms (p. xi).

There are, then, numerous sites in which to observe the expression and representation of postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power. In this thesis, however, I focus on how postfeminism shapes popular culture, especially American popular culture.

My focus on the Hollywood romantic comedy necessitates a focus on American culture. These texts are exported around the world, and as such are made with an international audience in mind. However, exploring how the export of American popular culture shapes the construction of that popular culture is beyond the scope of this thesis. Because of my focus on American popular culture and on the larger American culture in which it was made and released, the work of Tasker and Negra – who apply McRobbie’s interpretation of postfeminism to American popular culture – is invaluable here. McRobbie, for the most part, considers texts that are British in origin, though postfeminism manifests in similar ways in the two cultures; as Tasker and Negra observe, it is “a pervasive phenomenon of both British and American popular culture, often marked by a high degree of discursive harmony evidenced in such ‘transit’ texts as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Sex and the City*, *I Don’t Know How She Does It* [Pearson 2002], *Bergdorf Blondes* [Sykes 2004], and *What Not to Wear*” (2007 p. 13). The postfeminism addressed in Tasker and Negra’s work – and particularly in Negra’s – has a distinctly American flavour, and though it is “politically ambidextrous in some contexts,” Negra writes, “the majority of its fictions seem to operate in support of a larger political trend toward the undoing of US democracy and the suppression of the kind

of vibrant, full, and questing subjectivities that a healthy democracy both fosters and draws upon” (p. 4).

All the romantic comedies in my sample are set in the United States, meaning that though there are inevitably non-American companies and individuals involved in their production, and though they are viewed outside America, they are positioned as distinctly American stories.

Postfeminism appears in many sites in American popular culture: in television (*Mad Men* [Weiner 2007-], *Last Man Standing* [Burditt 2011], *New Girl* [Meriwether 2011-], music (Katy Perry, Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus), and movies outside of the romantic comedy genre (*Legally Blonde*, *The Avengers* [Whedon 2012]), and, as Tincknell, Moseley, and others note, in reality television. The series *Sex and the City* and the two subsequent *Sex and the City* movies have been the subject of a great deal scholarly inquiry, much of which focuses on the representation of postfeminist ideas in those texts (Arthurs 2003, Brunsdon 2005, Negra 2004). As I explore in my literature review, however, there are few analyses of American popular culture that focus solely on Hollywood romantic comedies as postfeminist narratives as I do here. In this thesis, I address several elements of American postfeminist popular culture narratives – the depiction of professional work and its attendant power as detrimental to women’s health, happiness, and romantic/sexual appeal; the representation of young men as struggling to achieve adulthood and a particular version of American manhood, and the depiction of women’s power as a partial cause of that struggle; and the representation of casual sex as an unsustainable resistance to heterosexual marriage – as they appear in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies. To do this, I draw on McRobbie’s interpretation of postfeminism, and particularly on her understanding of how women’s increased professional opportunities and consequent earning capacity has prompted the development of new efforts to compel those same women to express that power in ways that reinforce traditional gender hierarchy, thereby neutralizing the threat that increased gender equity in the United States poses to that hierarchy. As McRobbie (2008) notes in her analysis of the irony with which the postfeminist masquerade is performed (p. 65), postfeminist texts are insulated from and resist scholarly interrogation and rigorous popular analysis. This is particularly true of Hollywood romantic comedies,

which, as Jeffers McDonald (2007) observes, are often deemed too frivolous and unserious to merit either (p. 2).

McRobbie's less optimistic interpretation of postfeminism, not as a transformation of feminism or an amelioration of the flaws of second-wave feminism but as a concerted effort to mitigate the harm that feminism has done and may still do to traditional gender hierarchy, is one that I share. In this view, postfeminism views feminism as a threat, albeit a threat to be minimised through the incorporation into the mainstream of just enough feminism to placate a new generation of viewers who are able to recognise, and object to, overt and non-ironic sexism. As Tasker (2011) observes, "perhaps, most of all, postfeminism registers its discursive presence in romantic comedy, a genre whose narrative structure is premised on an antagonistic relationship between a man and a woman who will ultimately form a couple" (p. 69). The question of how contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies depict gender, sex, and power, then, is one of great import: it would be unwise indeed to let postfeminist depictions of gender, sexism, and power, in a genre that often goes uninterrogated, proliferate unexamined.

Though I am not the first to coin the term "postfeminist romantic comedy," nor the first to identify the cycle, this thesis represents the first broad and deep exploration of this new cycle. Thompson (2013) uses the term "postfeminist romantic comedy" in her analysis of films such as *Knocked Up* (Apatow 2007), *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (Apatow 2005), *I Love You Man* (Hamburg 2009), *The Break-Up* (Reed 2006), *You, Me and Dupree* (Russo & Russo 2006). Though Thompson uses the term, she does not explicitly define it; reading her valuable analysis of these films, it is evident that by the term she refers to romantic comedies that are produced within – and that are therefore influenced by and contribute to – a postfeminist sensibility. However, Thompson does not explore the landscape of the postfeminist romantic comedy broadly, focusing instead on what she calls "romantic sex comedies" (p. 152), films that build on the foundations laid by the first cycle of sex comedies (produced in the 1950s and 1960s) and that focus largely on "anxieties... over single and coupled masculinities" (p. 152). In so doing, Thompson addresses "the ways in which postfeminist Hollywood cinema tracks transformations in the role of men through formations that hold continuities with hegemonic, and even archaic, depictions of masculinity alongside

‘new’ emergent masculine images, emphases and values” (pp. 150-51). Bowler (2013) also uses the term “postfeminist romantic comedy,” and explores the landscape of the new cycle, particularly with regard to its treatment of sexual activity. Bowler observes that:

...beyond the arguably pro-sisterhood teen chick flick, throughout its many different cycles (screwball, sex comedies, and nervous romances), the romantic comedy has had a characteristically fraught relationship with feminism and feminist sexual politics, never more so than in the cycle of films that date from the late 1960s-1970s, a trend which can be repeating itself in postfeminist romantic comedy today (p. 185).

Bowler’s analysis focuses on *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (Ficarra & Requa 2011), *What’s Your Number?* (Mylod 2011), and *Friends With Benefits*, postfeminist romantic comedies that, like the romantic sex comedies discussed by Thompson, emphasize sex, place too great an emphasis on narratives about men to be classified as “chick flicks.” In these movies, Bowler argues, “traditional romantic conventions of the 1980s and 1990s have been replaced by the, often voyeuristic, foregrounding of recreational sex, bodily presentation and the discussion of the sexual subjectivity and femininity of women” (p. 188). Focusing her analysis on the postfeminist romantic comedy’s depiction of sex, Bowler concludes that the central conflict in this new cycle – “postfeminist romantic comedy’s own conflict with feminism” (p. 201) – is in fact “a conflict with female sexual agency which is not directed towards the heterosexual union” (p. 201) and that this conflict accounts for the uniformity of “happy endings” in postfeminist romantic comedies that place extramarital and extra-romantic relationship sexual activity at the centre of the narrative, as *Friends With Benefits* does. In postfeminist romantic comedies, Bowler argues:

... while heterosexual activity and desire are lauded... female agency is not. Kept in check by the ultimately sexual conservatism of a postfeminism that redirects its energy towards the maintenance of patriarchal hegemonic social and cultural practices, feminism is arguably utilized in the maturation of the backlash and the creation of the feminist apologist (p. 201).

Thus, though Thompson and Bowler both use the term “postfeminist romantic comedy,” and though Bowler’s analysis maps the landscape of the postfeminist romantic comedy with a particular focus on the genre’s representations of sex and of women’s sexual agency, this thesis is the first to provide an

extensive analysis of this new cycle, and the first to consider the landscape of the postfeminist romantic comedy – and its representations of gender, sex, and power – in a manner that provides a broad and representative analysis.

Interdisciplinary approach

My work here sits at the intersection of several disciplines; film studies, gender studies, and media studies. In this, I follow McRobbie, who, in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), takes an interdisciplinary approach to postfeminist popular culture, describing it as “an attempt to make an intervention which crosses the borders of a range of academic disciplines, gender studies, cultural and media studies, with the aim of animating further debate about the future of feminism” (p. 151). The intersection of these disciplines, as implemented here, can best be classified as cultural studies.

Cultural studies is by nature interdisciplinary, though, as Turner (2012) argues, it is no longer (and perhaps never was) an “undiscipline,” in that it has become institutionalised, having existed long enough for one to examine its history, as Hartley (2003) does. As Hartley (2011) observes, the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies results in “weaknesses and threats as well as strengths and opportunities” (p. 17). Hartley notes the “intractable problems of method” (p. 17) that arise as the result of borrowing – or as Turner terms it, “raiding” (p. 25) – from a range of disciplines, and Turner notes the difficulties, particularly in teaching the practice of cultural studies, that interdisciplinarity can create. However, as Turner notes, interdisciplinarity is “fundamental” to cultural studies (p. 49); he argues that “interdisciplinary fields have proven that they are able to respond more productively to the emergence of new theoretical problematics, such as culture or gender, that are not easily contained within any one of the existing disciplines” (p. 49). For my work here, interdisciplinarity represents a strength and an opportunity; the project of demonstrating how the contemporary romantic comedy brings to celluloid life postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power, and of placing this generic cycle in the context of the history of the genre, is well served by an interdisciplinary approach that combines or “cross-fertilises”

(Hartley 2003, p. 123) from multiple disciplines. Indeed, if the history of cultural studies is, as Hartley argues, “a history of ideas about culture, power, difference and identity” (p. 13), cultural studies, with its fundamental interdisciplinarity, is ideal for an examination of representations of gender, sex, and power in the postfeminist romantic comedy.

In addition to its interdisciplinarity, cultural studies’ history positions it as particularly well equipped for this endeavour. As Hartley (2003) demonstrates, cultural studies arose in response to shifting political realities in the post-war period, an era marked by “unprecedented personal freedoms and affluence at least in the developed world, new opportunities in education and cultural expression, and expanded horizons of experience for young people, women, gays and lesbians, people of colour, and many other social groups and identities” (pp. 2-3) but also by the insecurities stoked by the Cold War nuclear arms race, and the realisation that, despite the “wonderful promises of the modern era – progress, science, truth, reason, plenty, comfort, security... no one was innocent, progress created its own terrorists” (p. 2). Cultural studies, Hartley argues, emerged as part of an effort to make sense of this contradiction. Several decades later, that contradiction persists, shaped now by new political realities (the American-led global “war on terror” in the post-September 11 era and the global financial crisis, to name just two examples) and by new advances for women, gays and lesbians, and people of colour – and new attempts to staunch, undermine, or roll back that progress, of which postfeminism is one example. Cultural studies, developed with the aim of elucidating (and influencing) such tensions and contradictions, is ideal for a project like mine.

Furthermore, cultural studies and feminism are and have been interconnected in significant ways. At its inception, cultural studies was informed by feminism, as “within any given topic feminism would inform cultural studies, drawing on specific theorists appropriate to the analysis at hand” (Hartley p. 125). Hartley points to the “shared (and borrowed)” intellectual common ground between feminism and cultural studies, “from their interest in private life and the power relations established herein, to questions of

identity and sexuality – and the power relations associated with those” (p. 125).² My work here is located on the common intellectual ground, where the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies allows for borrowing from numerous other disciplines.

An additional advantage of cultural studies, for the purposes of this thesis, is its commitment to intervention and political change. As Turner writes, “among the things that are distinctive about the cultural studies version of an interdisciplinary project... is the explicitness with which it has outlined its objective as both critical and political... the end point of its practice is to understand and inform social and political change” (2012 p. 41). Cultural studies, in addition to being interdisciplinary, is an “intervention analysis” (Hartley 2003, p. 121), that aims not only to describe a state of cultural affairs, but “to critique of the society of which these activities were both symptom and stage, with a view to reform, revolution or replacement” (p. 121). Though committed to academic rigour – to the collection of representative data and the thoughtful interpretation thereof – I do not pretend to be disinterested in the outcome of the feminist project. As do McRobbie, Tasker and Negra, and Gill, I argue that the intent and effect of postfeminism has been and will continue to be the undermining and undoing of feminist progress – an outcome that, like McRobbie, Tasker and Negra, and Gill, I hope to prevent. In demonstrating how the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy screens postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power, my aim, in part, is to contribute to those prevention efforts.

Analytical approach: on the exclusion of reception studies

An examination of how postfeminist romantic comedies are received by audiences is beyond the scope of this project. Reception studies is a valuable component of several of the disciplines that inform my work here, and provides crucial insights into how audiences and texts interact to make meaning. As Staiger (2005) notes, reception studies asks “What kinds of meanings does a text have? For whom? In what

² Additionally, like feminism, cultural studies has been influenced in recent years by the rise of neoliberalism. As Turner notes, neoliberalism threatens to “put a stake through the heart of the whole cultural studies enterprise” (p. 166); as I argue throughout this thesis, postfeminism, which relies on the ideological groundwork laid by neoliberalism, poses a similar threat to what might be called the feminist enterprise. And, like feminism, cultural studies is threatened, Turner argues, by “the view that the important battles have been won” (p. 45); indeed, this is one of the central tenets of postfeminism.

circumstances? With what changes over time? And do these meanings have any effects? Cognitive? Social? Political?” (p. 2). These questions are clearly of value to an examination of how the postfeminist cycle of romantic comedies functions to bring postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power to celluloid life. Ang’s argument, that “a critical theoretical and analytical engagement with audiences... can highlight and illuminate some of the consequences of what some have called ‘the condition of postmodernity’” (1996 p. 1) can be applied to audiences of postfeminist popular culture. Answering Staiger’s questions in a generalizable way, however, represents a considerable research project in its own right, because as Hayward (2006) observes, “there is not a ‘female’ or ‘male’ spectator but different socio-cultural individuals all busy producing reality as the film rolls by. Age, gender, race, class, sexuality affect reception and meaning production” (p. 145). Brunsdon (1997) considers the implications of this nearly infinite variety within reality production as it applies to postfeminist popular culture, citing Vidmar-Horvat’s (1997) research on Slovenian viewers of *Ally McBeal* (Kelley 1997-2002) as evidence that “even if postfeminist TV dramas circulate on a global market, the meanings of postfeminism depend on the wider social and political context in which the programmes are viewed” (p. 3). This, too, applies to audiences of postfeminist romantic comedies; these movies are viewed around the world and the reception and interpretation of their postfeminist depictions of gender, sex, and power will depend on the various social-cultural and political contexts in which they are viewed – and, as Staiger notes, this reception will change over time. However, making generalizable claims about how audiences understand these texts is beyond the scope of this thesis. My goal here is to extend scholarly inquiry by arguing for the existence of a heretofore minimally examined cycle, the postfeminist cycle. Addressing the myriad questions of audience reception represents a subsequent component of an investigation of the postfeminist cycle; a component that cannot commence until the cycle has been properly identified and placed in generic and historical context, as I do here.

While my project does not include any lengthy discussion of the reception of postfeminist romantic comedies, at various junctures it is necessary for me to refer to – or make inferences about – preferred and likely readings of these films. For any media text, there are multiple possible readings,

because, as Hayward observes, "audiences are multiplicitous" (p. 145). For the purposes of this thesis, the two most relevant readings are the preferred and the oppositional. A preferred reading of a filmic text "is one in which the spectator takes up the intended meaning, finding it relatively easy to align with the messages and attitudes of those who have created the text" (Nelmes p. 161), where an oppositional reading "rejects this intended response" (p. 161). In the case of the postfeminist cycle, a preferred reading is one that accepts that claim, implicit in these movies, that postfeminist romantic comedies represent an embrace of and simultaneous moving beyond feminism, to new and more "commonsensical" (Negra 2009, p. 2) feminism. One oppositional reading is one that instead interprets these films as hostile to feminism and invested in undermining feminist progress. Though Nelmes suggests that because each audience member "comes to a film with our own personal 'formation' – the result of all our life experiences" (p. 160), there exist as many readings of a text as there are audience members (p. 160). As I demonstrate in this thesis, there are more readings of a text than there are audience members, since each spectator can engage in multiple readings. Indeed, a considerable component of my project here is to demonstrate how the preferred reading of postfeminist texts serves to undermine the progress of feminism – an exercise that necessarily involves multiple readings of the texts in question. That is, interpreting the romantic comedies I address in this thesis as hostile to feminism, as I do here, requires engagement in at least two readings, the preferred and oppositional.

An examination of how audiences of postfeminist romantic comedies participate in the creation of the meaning of those films, and of the effects of those meanings, be they cognitive, social, political or otherwise, would be a valuable contribution to scholarly inquiry into Hollywood romantic comedies, postfeminist popular culture, and the postfeminist cycle. Because the function of this thesis is to demonstrate the existence of the postfeminist cycle, and account for its development, rather than to examine its effects on viewers, I do not engage in reception studies in this research. At various junctures in this thesis, it is necessary for me to refer to preferred and likely readings of these films – that is, readings that accept the claim that postfeminism represents a new and "pleasingly modern" or "commonsensical" (Negra 2009, p. 2) form of feminism. This is the extent to which I invoke reception,

however; though the application of reception studies to the postfeminist cycle would surely be a valuable addition to academic inquiry on the topic, such an investigation is beyond the scope of this project.

Research questions

The central research question that I address in this thesis is: *how do Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 represent gender, sex, and power, and how is that representation shaped by the postfeminist sensibility that marks this cultural moment in the United States?* In order to answer this overarching question, as a result of my reading I formulated three subsidiary research questions, each of which I address in a separate case study in the latter half of this thesis. The first of these concerns the postfeminist cycle's representation of unwed career women, and how that representation is informed by postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and, particularly, power. In addressing this question, I consider the genre's prior depictions of unwed career women as a way of addressing and undermining women's increasing power in the public sphere, and, in considering the postfeminist iteration of the genre's approach to power as it is wielded by women, analyse *The Ugly Truth*'s depiction of an unwed career woman. The second subsidiary research question concerns the cycle's portrayal of masculinity, and how that representation is shaped by postfeminist notions about sex, power, and particularly, gender. To answer this question, I place the postfeminist cycle's emphasis on the male body, and particularly on male nudity, in generic context, examining the rise of "Hollywood lowbrow" (Jeffers McDonald 2009a, p. 149) and the trend toward the "homme-com" (p. 147). In analysing the postfeminist cycle's depiction of masculinity, I focus in particular on *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, which features the only instance of full frontal male nudity in the sample of thirty films I consider in this thesis, demonstrating how the film's use of nudity brings to celluloid life postfeminist ideas about imperilled masculinity in the face of ascendant femininity. My third and final subsidiary research question concerns the postfeminist cycle's representation of sex – specifically, casual sex – and how that representation is informed by postfeminist notions about gender, power, and particularly, sex. To answer this question, I place the cycle's narrative preoccupation with casual sex in generic context,

examining how previous cycles, especially the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s, have handled the depiction of pre-marital sex. I then focus on one of the two postfeminist romantic comedies in my representative sample that places a casual sex relationship at its narrative centre, *Friends With Benefits*, and demonstrate how that film screens postfeminist ideas about casual sex.

Chapter outlines

As noted above, in this thesis, I address a central research question: how do Hollywood romantic comedies represent gender, sex, and power between 2005 and 2011, and how is that representation shaped by what Gill (2007) terms the “postfeminist sensibility” that marks this cultural moment in the United States? In Chapter 1, I discuss the literature on Hollywood romantic comedies, and particularly on depictions of gender, sex, and power in the genre, in order to identify the gap that my work here fills. In this chapter, I also discuss the literature on genre and on genre cycles in order to demonstrate how the movies I address in this thesis form the heretofore minimally examined cycle, the postfeminist cycle. As I demonstrate in this chapter, there is limited scholarly inquiry into Hollywood romantic comedies released after 2005, and there exists no scholarly inquiry that focuses entirely on the romantic comedy that interprets these movies as postfeminist narratives.

In Chapter 2, I account for the methods I implemented to answer my research question, addressing first the decision to implement multiple research methods (methodological triangulation). I discuss the advantages and drawbacks of each of the methods I implemented: the formation of a representative sample, narrative textual analysis and case studies. In Chapter 3, I acknowledge that although the postfeminism that marks this cultural moment is a powerful force in shaping the romantic comedies released during this period, the history of the genre also plays an important role in influencing contemporary films. As such, the function of this chapter is to place the postfeminist cycle in historic and generic context. In this chapter, I focus on the two cycles that bear the most notable thematic resemblance to the postfeminist cycle: the screwball cycle and the neo-traditional cycle, exploring how these two prior cycles have influenced the current one. The following three chapters are my case studies, each focused on

a different theme, and exploring the representation of that theme through a separate film: gender and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*; sex and *Friends With Benefits*; power and *The Ugly Truth*. Each case study begins with a brief summary of the plot of its respective movie, then places the film in extra-cinematic context. For example, in my third case study, I explore the heated public debate around “hook up culture” that occurred in the years immediately preceding the release of *Friends With Benefits*, which is about casual sex – before demonstrating how the film in question functions as a postfeminist narrative. In the final chapter, my Conclusion, before discussing some avenues for further research that are suggested by my work here, I show how my research addresses my research questions and represents an original contribution to scholarship on postfeminism and on romantic comedies – that, taken together as representatives of the postfeminist cycle, these three films demonstrate the extent to which postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power have come to dominate the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, supporting my central claim in this thesis that these films constitute a new and heretofore minimally explored cycle in the genre, the postfeminist cycle.

Chapter 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to review the existing literature on romantic comedies and to locate the gaps therein, in order to position my own research and analysis within romantic comedy scholarship. I begin by clarifying my use of the term “Hollywood romantic comedy,” and by outlining the various subplots within and cycles of the genre throughout its history. Next, I review the relevant literature on gender, sex, and power in romantic comedies, and conclude by identifying the gaps in the literature that my own work here serves to fill.

Defining romantic comedy: generic boundaries, subplots, and cycles

Though the Hollywood film industry is barely a century old, the romantic comedy has existed for centuries. Some of Western literature’s most celebrated wordsmiths – Shakespeare, Austen, Wilde – wrote romantic comedies. Many of the narrative elements and preoccupations found in those works – sparring couples, mistaken identities, and the never-smooth course of true love – are also found in modern Hollywood romantic comedies. In the early years of the Hollywood film industry and in the earliest years of the sound era in the United States, many of the first stories told in this new medium included romance, comedy, or both. Indeed, as Deleyto (2009) observes, the narrative conventions central to romantic comedy also feature in films of other genres, including the western; similarly, the contemporary romantic comedy is infiltrated by the conventions of other genres, including action (*This Means War* [McGinty Nichol 2012], *The Bounty Hunter* [Tennant 2010]) and zombie/action movies (*Dead Bodies* [Levine 2013]). In this thesis, however, I focus on the Hollywood romantic comedy genre, and do not address how other genres adopt or adapt the conventions central to romantic comedy. In order to do this, I will next define the parameters of the genre.

Generic boundaries

Romantic comedy as we know it today is often neatly summarized in one sentence: “Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back” (hence the title of Jeffers McDonald’s book, *Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*

[2007]), though in reality romantic comedies often deviate from this simple template. Determining which films should be classified as romantic comedies and which should not is at times challenging, since, as Henderson (1978) notes, “all Hollywood films (except some war films) have romance and all have comedy” (p. 312). Henderson sketches the vast expanse of the romantic comedy, “a genre, a family of genres (marriage, manners, screwball), a category of production and marketing, a category of analysis, a realm of specialties (Ernst Lubitsch, Gregory La Cava), a notion,” and declares definition to be “difficult or impossible” (p. 12). Deleyto warns that though marking out generic boundaries for the romantic comedy is possible, it is inadvisable, as it perpetuates the elements of the romantic comedy that scholars find most problematic. As Jeffers McDonald (2009b) writes of Deleyto’s objections to the narrow generic boundaries so often drawn around the romantic comedy:

When writers believe that films ‘belong’ to specific genres, Deleyto writes, this reveals their anxieties about border patrolling, and their fears about (a taken-for-granted) purity becoming tainted. What seems a common-sense and commonplace term indicative of familial relations between texts actually hides deep if unconscious investments in a rigid system of classification (p. 163).

In the case of romantic comedies, Deleyto argues, this investment in a rigid system ensures that the genre will continue to decline in quality in the very way that Jeffers McDonald (2007) laments – as she notes, even the term “rom com,” which is shorthand that is “popularly used on both sides of the Atlantic” is “pejorative” and “suggests adherence to a slick formula” (p. 113). Jeffers McDonald (2009b) approves Deleyto’s critique, and though she concludes her book by “repining that, by contrast with its genuinely comical forebears, the contemporary romcom is unfunny and liable to render the whole genre moribund,” Jeffers McDonald assents that Deleyto’s critique of “the small size of [her] catchment pool” is justified (p. 163). Jeffers McDonald acknowledges that this small pool is the cause of her “disillusionment with contemporary products” (p. 163). Deleyto’s radical proposal to transform the definition and uses of genre would also redefine the boundaries of the romantic comedy, and “were I to employ the wider and more generous classification he proposes,” Jeffers McDonald assents, “many of my objections to the contemporary genre would disappear” (p. 163).

Though I recognise the value in Deleyto's call for "a more ample reading of the romantic comedy" (Jeffers McDonald 2009b, p. 164), I regard the setting of generic boundaries as necessary to my work here. Mortimer (2010), noting the drawbacks of drawing these boundaries, point to a problem that is common in discussions of Hollywood romantic comedies: the sense that the genre, having experienced a "golden age," has since declined (p. 133). And, as Cook (2007) writes:

Work on individual genres sooner or later comes up against the problem of where one genre stops and another begins... The danger here is that the 'provisional notion' crystallizes around certain films or a certain period of genre production as a prescriptive 'essence'. Earlier developments then become an 'evolution' towards a 'classic' moment and later deviations constitute decline or decadence (p. 254).

In order to prevent this narrative of rise and fall, Alloway (1971) conceptualises genres as a series of cycles or other subgroups. "Rather than attempting definitive accounts of particular genres or genre films, [Alloway] writes about 'cycles, runs or sets', so drawing attention to the shifts and differences that constitute 'internal successive modifications' of forms (Cook p. 235). As I note in the previous chapter, this conceptualisation is one that is embraced by many scholars of romantic comedies – and, given my goal here of demonstrating the existence of a new cycle, it is one that I embrace as well. Hence, while I recognise the drawbacks to which Deleyto points, particularly in the case of romantic comedies, the key texts on romantic comedies, with which I am in dialogue here, are invested in the setting of generic boundaries. Scholars of the genre differ on where those boundaries lie, but unlike Deleyto, those with whom I engage here believe that these boundaries do and should exist. So too do I.

Those scholars of the genre who acknowledge the need for a confined "catchment pool," as Jeffers McDonald terms it, have defined romantic comedy in a number of ways. This thesis employs Jeffers McDonald's succinct definition, as well as a more elaborate one laid out by Rubinfeld (2001). Rubinfeld defines a romantic comedy as "a Hollywood movie that essentially focuses on romance and comedy with its romantic elements outweighing its comedic elements" (p. 70), while Jeffers McDonald defines a romantic comedy as "a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which

portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion” (p. 9). Rubinfeld, who goes on to specify that the love story is at the centre of the romantic comedy narrative, writes that,

...at a minimum, this entails: 1) a chance meeting between a hero and a heroine who together represent a potential heterosexual couple; 2) internal or external obstacles to the recognition, declaration, and legitimation of their mutual love; 3) the overcoming of these obstacles; and 4) a happy ending depicting a wedding or promise of a wedding (p. 70).

For the purposes of my analysis, these two definitions of the boundaries of the genre are the most suitable, Jeffers McDonald’s for its concision and Rubinfeld’s for its level of detail.

Within the genre of romantic comedy, then, there exists the Hollywood romantic comedy, that is, “a Hollywood movie that essentially focuses on romance and comedy with its romantic elements outweighing its comedic elements” (p. 70). According to Grindon (2011), the romantic comedy's master plot, “the series of typical events linked into a causal progression that establishes the conventions of a particular genre's story by dramatizing the conflicts at the foundation of the genre” (p. 8), is a basic model that requires ten “moves”: Unfulfilled desire, the meeting, fun together, obstacles arise, the journey, new conflicts, the choice, crisis, epiphany, and finally, resolution (pp. 9-10). As Grindon notes, “individual films will select from, vary, or add to the routine formula” (p. 8), and “the model is broad enough to display an outline of the romantic comedy plot while allowing for enormous flexibility” (p. 11). However, this master plot serves as the genre's central narrative framework. Within that framework, there may exist or common variations to the master plot that constitute subplots.

Romantic comedy subplots

Within each romantic comedy there are subplots; as I note above, not every movie belonging to the genre adheres to the cliché of “boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl.” Glitre (2006) and Rubinfeld both attempt to classify the numerous variations of the romantic comedy plotline. According to Glitre, there

are four Hollywood romantic comedy plots. The first is the “Cinderella” plot, which “has become a standard feature of teen romantic comedy, and often also involves the ‘magical’ transformation of the heroine” – the transformation of the hero, the “Cinderella” plot, is “still surprisingly rare,” Glitre observes (p. 19). Next, the “odd couple” plot, which “combines internal and external conflicts, raising issues around social conformity, particularly in relation to hierarchies of class or (more recently) racial difference” (p. 19). There is the “comedy of remarriage,” which involves the reunion of a couple (p. 19). The most common subplot, however, according to Glitre, is the “battle of the sexes” plot, which she summarizes as follows: “the hero and heroine are in competition, initially disliking or even hating each other, but move from antagonism to compromise, often through a process of reversal” (p. 19). This plot, as Glitre notes, is a familiar one in Western storytelling – it is the story of Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (Shakespeare, 1623), of Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* (Shakespeare, 1600), and of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen, 1813) – and, Glitre observes, it “invariably raises questions around gender and equality” (p. 19). The sample I consider in this thesis contains several “battle of the sexes” plots: *What Happens in Vegas* (Vaughn 2008), *The Proposal* (Fletcher 2009), *Life As We Know It* (Berlanti 2010), and *The Ugly Truth*.

Rubinfeld also identifies four distinct subplots within the genre of the Hollywood romantic comedy, though he draws generic boundaries that are slightly different from those drawn by Glitre. According to Rubinfeld, the four most common subplots are the pursuit subplot, the broken-hearted redemption subplot, the cold-hearted redemption subplot and the foil subplot. The pursuit subplot involves “a ‘spirit of conquest’ in which a hero is attracted to a heroine; courts her; encounters resistance; and, being a ‘real man,’ refuses to take ‘no’ for an answer. Ultimately, the hero woos her, wows her, and wins her” (p. 4). The broken-hearted redemption subplot involves a lonely hero and the one heroine who can heal his wounds (p. 27), while the cold-hearted redemption subplot involves a hardened, heartless hero and the one woman who can unlock his capacity to love: the heroine (p. 26). Again, these subplots are not always strictly adhered to, and are sometimes modified or combined. In contemporary romantic comedies, for example, *The Ugly Truth*, one often finds the gender roles in the cold-hearted redemption

subplot reversed; it is the woman whose cold heart (usually frozen by misguided feminist ideas) must be thawed by the man (*The Proposal*, *Just Like Heaven* [Waters 2005]). Both redemption subplots, Rubinfield argues, enforce a particular view of masculinity and femininity that Rubinfield claims can be summarized as “Males need females. Females need to be needed” (p. 26). Finally, Rubinfield observes, there is the foil subplot, which can also be broken down into four distinct categories: the prick foil subplot, the dweeb foil subplot, the bitch foil subplot, and the temptress foil subplot. “In the first two variations – the prick foil plot and the dweeb foil plot,” he writes, “the heroine has to choose between two men who love her or profess to love her.” (p. 33). Modern examples of the prick foil subplot appear in *No Strings Attached* (Reitman 2011), *Friends With Benefits*, and *She’s Out of My League* (Field Smith 2010), and *There’s Something About Mary* (Farrelly & Farrelly 1998) contains both a prick foil subplot and a dweeb foil subplot. In the second two variations – the bitch foil subplot and the temptress foil subplot – the hero, likewise, must choose between two women who love him or claim to love him (p. 33). *Something Borrowed* (Snyder 2011) includes a bitch foil subplot, and *Just Go With It* (Dugan 2011) a temptress foil subplot. As Mortimer notes, these subplots are comfortingly familiar to Western audiences, even to casual observers who are not versed in the taxonomy of the genre: despite the occasional modification, these subplots are predictable and consistent. This is one function of genre: as noted above, the narrative imperative of the Hollywood romantic comedy is to bring the central couple together in a romantic union by the end of the film.

Indeed, this union is a requirement of the generic definition provided by Rubinfield, who makes no room in his definition of a romantic comedy for narratives that do not end “happily,” that is, with the central couple united either in marriage or in a relationship that will presumably result in marriage. Some, notably MacDowell (2011) have explored the variations that exist in the Hollywood “happy ending,” and have questioned who is left “happy” in such an ending – the characters, or the audience, or both, and feminist film scholars (Byars 1991, Landy 1991) have debated interpretations of the happy ending in melodrama and other “feminine” film genres. Jeffers McDonald’s definition allows that the romantic

comedy only “almost always” involves a “successful conclusion” (p. 9), thereby leaving room for romantic comedies like *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (Hogan 1997) – although, as Ingraham (1999) notes, *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, though it does not end “happily” for the female protagonist (played by Julia Roberts), does end in a way that reinforces the importance of heterosexual marriage, monogamy, and traditional gender roles. “Ideologically, this film conveys the message that even though [the love interest] finds the professional, ambitious career woman attractive and compelling, his interest in her will succumb to the desire for a woman who adheres to the heterogender codes of femininity, placing his needs above her own” (p. 139). However, Rubinfeld’s definition also leaves no space for the two movies in my sample that do not conclude with a “happy ending,” *The Break-Up* (Reed, 2006), *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (Ficarra & Requa 2011). *The Break-Up* and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* are undoubtedly romantic comedies, despite conclusions that are not explicitly “happy.” These movies are rare exceptions, however, and regardless of the subplots they feature, outside of the nervous romance cycle (which dominated the genre in the 1970s and is best exemplified by the Woody Allen-directed romantic comedies *Annie Hall* [1977] and *Manhattan* [1979]), Hollywood romantic comedies do nearly always end with the central couple united.

At several junctures in this thesis, I describe the movies I address in my case studies as concluding “happily,” by which I mean with the central couple united, a conclusion that each of these narratives emphasizes is a “successful” outcome, about which the couple in question (and, it is implied, the viewer) should be happy. Almost every movie in the postfeminist cycle concludes in a way that adheres to the generic conventions that have been in place since the earliest days of the Hollywood romantic comedy: with the central couple united and presumably soon to be married, in compliance, as Ingraham writes, “with tradition, patriarchy, and the heterogendered social order” (p. 137). Though Ingraham’s analysis raises the question of whether all romantic comedies that end with marriage (or presumed eventual marriage) are endorsing patriarchy – is heterosexual marriage inherently patriarchal? – that question is beyond the scope of this thesis. In my analysis here, I argue that adhering to the generic

convention of the “happy ending” is one way in which gender hierarchy is re-stabilised in the movies of the postfeminist cycle.

Despite its narrative consistency over time – despite the staying power of the sparring couple, mistaken identities, and the “happy ending,” and of the various romantic comedy subplots – the Hollywood romantic comedy has changed, repeatedly, since the inception of Hollywood cinema. As I explore in the next section, scholars of Hollywood romantic comedy generally agree that the genre has included several cycles, of which certain movies are emblematic.

Hollywood romantic comedy cycles

Most scholars of the genre agree that the Hollywood romantic comedy can be divided into a number of cycles: the screwball cycle, the sex comedy cycle, the nervous romance cycle, and the neo-traditional cycle. According to Grindon, “a cycle is a series of similar films produced during a limited period of time, often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow” (p. 25). Few scholars have addressed the movies released after 2005 in depth, and few have addressed those movies using the conceptual framework of postfeminism. Though Jeffers McDonald includes some of these recent movies in what she terms the neo-traditional cycle, and Grindon places them in the “grotesque and ambivalent” cycle (p. 26), my argument here is that they belong to the heretofore largely unexamined postfeminist cycle.

Grindon is one of the few scholars who go beyond the widely accepted accounts of the history of the genre, which divide it only into cycles. He outlines a more detailed taxonomy, identifying not only cycles, but also several clusters – clusters, he asserts, occur when “genre films fail to generate a coherent model or common motifs among productions from the same period” (p. 25) – in addition to the cycles that are widely agreed upon in the extant literature on the genre. The nine cycles and clusters Grindon identifies are: the transition to sound cluster (1930-1933), the screwball cycle (1934-1942), the World War II cluster (1942-1946), the post-war cluster (1947-1953), the comedies of seduction cycle (1953-

1966), the transition through the counter-culture cluster (1967-1976), the nervous romance cycle (1977-1987), the reaffirmation of romance cycle (1986-1996), and the grotesque and ambivalent cycle (1997-2011) (pp. 25-6). Throughout each cycle, the master plot persists, and each cycle also includes movies that feature the abovementioned foil and Cinderella subplots, or other various subplots. However, different subplots dominate in each cycle. In the screwball and reaffirmation of romance cycles, for example “comedies of remarriage” (Cavell 1981) are dominant subplots, examples of which are *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940) and *The Awful Truth* (McCarey 1937). In the neo-traditional cycle, bitch foil and prick foil subplots are common. All these movies are romantic comedies, but depending on which cycle they belong to, and which subplot they employ, they emphasise or add different elements of the master plot and deemphasize or exclude other elements. The postfeminist cycle features many different subplots, and the sample I have selected includes the prick foil plot, bitch foil plot, battle of the sexes plot, and the cold-hearted redemption plot.

Though Grindon’s analysis divides the genre into clusters as well as cycles, most scholars of the genre (Mortimer, Jeffers McDonald, Glitre) divide it simply into cycles. The first of these, chronologically, is the screwball cycle, which began with *It Happened One Night*, directed by Frank Capra (1934), and is exemplified by *His Girl Friday* and *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks 1938). The second is the sex comedy cycle, which began in the late 1950s and lasted until the mid-1960s. The movies *Pillow Talk* (Gordon 1959) and *Lover Come Back* (Mann 1961), both of which starred Doris Day and Rock Hudson, are prime examples of the sex comedy cycle. The sex comedy cycle, Evans and Deleyto (1998) write, “appear[ed] at a time of unprecedented open discussions of sexual matters in the USA and one in which marriage [was] increasingly perceived as a repressive institution, but the comedies themselves, for all the tensions and aggressiveness (usually directed at ‘independent’ women of the Doris Day type), stick firmly to the traditional happy ending in which marriage is still perceived as the best solution” (p. 6). Next came the nervous romances, a cycle virtually created and certainly symbolized by writer-director-actor Woody Allen. The nervous romance cycle began in the early 1970s and is exemplified by movies like

Annie Hall (Allen 1977) and *Manhattan* (Allen 1979). As McCabe (2009) writes, “these films emerged from, and reproduced new gendered ideals of, a post-feminist, post-sexual revolution, post-counterculture world that endorsed non-monogamous and non-heterosexual choices and lifestyles” (p. 161). Finally, there came the cycle that began in the late 1980s, which, as previously mentioned, has been termed by Jeffers McDonald the “neo-traditional” cycle (p. 86). The movie that exemplifies the neo-traditional cycle is *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990) the highest grossing romantic comedy of the twentieth century (p. 16); other movies in that cycle include *Moonstruck* (Jewison 1987), *Working Girl* (Nichols 1989), and *When Harry Met Sally....* (Reiner 1989). In the following section, I outline extant analyses of the Hollywood romantic comedy’s representations of gender, sex, and power, and identify the gaps in knowledge that this thesis serves to fill.

Extant analyses of romantic comedies

Though the Hollywood romantic comedy is fertile ground for scholarly analysis, particularly at the intersection of media studies, gender studies, and film studies at which my analysis sits, there has been little academic examination of the genre from this intersectional vantage point. There also exists a gap in scholarship concerning contemporary romantic comedies, with most recent extensive academic analyses stopping short at 2005, thereby leaving a gap of nearly a decade’s worth of films. My thesis seeks to fill both these gaps by addressing depictions of gender, sex, and power in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies, beginning with those released in 2005, and by doing so from that aforementioned intersection of disciplines.

There are a number of valuable works that address depictions of gender, sex, and power in Hollywood romantic comedies (Kendall 1990, Harvey 1987), but the relative lack of recent analyses of this topic means that Hollywood romantic comedies of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century have been minimally addressed (Jeffers McDonald 2007, Mortimer 2010, Kaklamanidou 2013). Most extensive studies focus on the “golden age” of romantic comedies: the screwball cycle of the 1930s and 1940s. For example, Kendall’s *The Runaway Bride* (2002) examines the romantic comedy of the 1930s,

and concludes that these movies represented a turning point in the portrayals of women in film. “The thirties romantic comedy stars – Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Myrna Loy, Katharine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, Jean Arthur, Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne – stood for, and still stand for... a vibrant strength of character,” Kendall writes (p. 5). Before the 1930s, she explains, young actresses had been limited to playing doomed tragic heroines. Romantic comedy heroines, however, “look as stylish on the screen as the other movie stars, but they act more untragically sure of themselves. Their thirties roles assigned them this assurance, along with eccentricity, stubbornness and wit” (p. 5). Despite this loosening of constraints, Kendall notes, the strictures placed on these fictional characters were still rather rigid. Though they were now granted more self-confidence and intelligence, romantic comedy heroines were still expected to adhere to dominant norms of femininity in two very significant ways: they had to be heterosexual, and they had to get married (p. 8). Given my goal of demonstrating how contemporary romantic comedies screen postfeminist ideas gender, sex, and power, the screwball cycle, whose movies were considerably influenced by the Motion Picture Production Code (also known as “the Hays Code,” for chief censor Will H. Hays) and by the Great Depression, the screwball comedy is of particular relevance to my analysis. As such, I discuss it in some detail in Chapter 3.

The phenomenon to which Kendall points, the self-confident and self-sufficient woman who is nonetheless expected to adhere to dominant norms of femininity by marrying at the end of the movie, is explored at length by Harvey (1987), who dubbed it “the problem of the unwed woman” (though these characters were inevitably paired in a generically required “happy ending,” Haskell [1987] notes, “whatever the endings that were forced on” the characters played by actresses like Hepburn and Lombard, “the images we retain of them are not those of subjugation or humiliation; rather, we remember their intermediate victories, we retain images of intelligence and personal style and forcefulness” [p. 31]). In *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood, from Lubitsch to Sturges*, Harvey analyses the Hollywood romantic comedies made between the 1930s and late 1950s, and observes that as early as the 1930s, romantic comedies focused on a theme that looms large in romantic comedies of the early twenty-first century: the “problem” of the highly eligible but unwed woman. In movie after movie – *Love Parade* (Lubitsch 1929),

Monte Carlo (Lubitsch 1930), *The Smiling Lieutenant* (Lubitsch 1931) – Harvey notes, this theme was central. As I explore in my first case study, this theme defines the postfeminist cycle’s representations of career women, who are depicted as having been rendered unhealthy, unhappy, and unlovable by professional success.

Extant analyses of contemporary romantic comedies

Though most explorations of the romantic comedy’s depictions of gender, sex, and power examine the genre in its earlier incarnations, the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy has not gone entirely unexamined. In *Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy in the 1980s and 1990s* (1998) Evans and Deleyto survey the history of the genre and its modern incarnations, and determine that the Hollywood romantic comedy is “an artistic tradition which embodies a very specific and relatively unchanged view of love, sexuality and marriage, a view which was already being put into circulation four hundred years ago” (p. 3). Similarly, in *Romantic Comedy* (2010), Mortimer (who considers contemporary films as well as older ones) observes that the central themes of romantic comedy are eternal, and that therefore, while the genre has changed over time, the “blueprint” remains the same. Romantic comedy continues to thrive today, Mortimer argues, because audiences still enjoy that blueprint: they “want to see the same characters, the same situations, the same narrative trajectory, the same settings and dialogue, with new stars that speak to new generations, yet tell the same story” (p. 1). Though Henderson’s 1978 claim that romantic comedies were “impossible” has been repeatedly disproven, outside academia the death of the Hollywood romantic comedy – or at least, the dearth of “quality” romantic comedies (Negra 2004) – has been announced many times (Bracken 2011, Brodesser-Akner 2011, Hornaday 2013).

For Grindon (2011), who also considers contemporary and older romantic comedies, at the centre of every romantic comedy narrative lies one question: will the hero and heroine be united by the end? Grindon notes that this question, like all the other questions and conflicts raised by the genre, is treated lightly. “The movie assumes a self-deprecating stance which signals the audience to relax and have fun,

for nothing serious will disturb their pleasure” (p. 2). This stance is somewhat deceptive, though, Grindon notes, as it “allows comic artists to influence their audience while the viewers take little notice of the work’s persuasive power” (p. 3). Though the tone of the genre is light, however, Grindon notes that the romantic comedy addresses high-stakes conflicts with serious implications. The most notable of these, for him, are “those between parents and children, those between courting men and women, and those internal to each of the lovers” (p. 3). Of these conflicts, the second is the most relevant to my research, and Grindon argues that while the conclusion to a centuries-old text about this conflict, like *The Taming of the Shrew*, might strike contemporary audiences as offensive, “the contest, resistance, and compromise between men and women remain central to the romantic comedy” (p. 5). This conflict, though it appears in some form in nearly every subplot in the genre, is particularly relevant to the “battle of the sexes” subplot identified by Glitre, and, as such, to *The Ugly Truth*, which is the focus of my first case study.

In *Bound to Bond: Gender, Genre, and The Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, Rubinfeld (2001) analyses the modern Hollywood romantic comedy (from the late 1980s to the end of the century) and notes the problematic way that those wildly successful movies depicted women and gender. “From blockbusters to bombs,” he explains, “the early 1980s would mark the return of the Hollywood romantic comedy key kiss and happy ending” (p. 144). In 1987, more Hollywood romantic comedies were released in theatres than in any previous year, a record that would not be equalled until 1998, and in 1999 alone, there were fifteen Hollywood romantic comedies that sold upward of 3.398 million tickets domestically (p. xiii). Six of the ten top-grossing romantic comedies since 1978 were released between 2000 and 2010 (*Box Office Mojo*). The Hollywood romantic comedy experienced a notable resurgence in the early 1980s, and the boom continued for two decades. However, as Rubinfeld notes, accompanying this resurgence was, “the start of a generic backlash – a mean streak against women that, while not infiltrating all 1980s and 1990s Hollywood romantic comedies, runs through all too many of them” (p. 144).

Jeffers McDonald examines depictions of gender, sex, and power in the contemporary Hollywood rom com, as well as exploring the genre’s depiction of race and sexual orientation, observes the same

“mean streak” to which Rubinfeld refers, and, terms the romantic comedies of the 1990s and the new millennium “neo-traditional” romantic comedies. Jeffers McDonald sees these recent romantic comedies as culturally regressive compared to the romantic comedies made in the 1980s and 1970s, offering as an example of this regression the distinct lack of sex in many of them. “The current form of romantic comedy greatly de-emphasizes sexuality... Neo-traditional rom coms have to work hard to find ways to explain why sex is not happening for its main couple, unless they are teenagers,” Jeffers McDonald observes of romantic comedies made at the end of the twentieth and very beginning of the twenty-first century (p. 97). In this way, she posits, romantic comedies made in 2000 or 2005 are similar to the screwball comedies made under the Motion Picture Production Code, which prohibited the depiction or the explicit discussion of sex on screen. It is important to note that the films to which Jeffers McDonald is referring are now at least five and in some instances ten or more years old, and that the landscape of the romantic comedy genre has significantly changed in the years since those films were made. My thesis presents a more up-to-date analysis than that which is offered by Jeffers McDonald, or, indeed, by any recent extensive scholarly work with the exception of Kaklamanidou’s (2013).

Kaklamanidou examines romantic comedies released between 2000 and 2010, demonstrating the relationship between the neoliberal political climate in the United States and the romantic comedies made during that period. Kaklamanidou outlines “how the neoliberal climate of the decade influences the politics and ideology produced by the film themselves” (p. 2) and how those movies contribute to the formation of what Geraghty (2011) calls “our own personal narratives” (p. 8). In her analysis of *Date Night* (Levy 2010) and *Knight and Day* (Mangold 2010), for example, Kaklamanidou examines “if and how the active-male/passive-female dichotomy is transformed, the several instances of male objectification and the subtle comments on American political corruption, as well as the nation’s sovereign inclinations” (p. 13). In this sense, Kaklamanidou’s project bears some similarity to my own – as I note in the previous chapter, postfeminism and neoliberalism are inextricably linked. However, my central focus here the former, not the latter, and, unlike Kaklamanidou, I do not broach the impact of romantic comedy narratives on viewers’ attitudes and behaviours.

Kaklamanidou (2013) accepts the cycle model proposed by Alloway (1971) and sorts the romantic comedies of the first decade of the 21st century into several cycles: the battle of the sexes cycle, the career woman cycle, the hybrid fantasy cycle, the action cycle, the teen cycle, the “cougar” and “troubled marriage” cycles, the “baby-crazed” cycle, and the “man-com” cycle (pp. 13-14). She also examines the state of independent romantic comedy during this time period, and “the other” in the romantic comedy, by which she means performers of colour (for example, Will Smith and Jennifer Lopez) who are associated with “a genre which is still dominated by white, heterosexual heroines and heroes” (p. 14). Kaklamanidou’s analysis, like my own, demonstrates “what Hollywood romantic narratives have to ‘say’ about gender politics and identities” (p. 2), and focuses on how those narratives “echo, support, promote, and/or subvert the American social climate” (p. 2) regarding romantic relationships and in particular working women and the institution of marriage. However, Kaklamanidou takes in themes that are not my major concern and which I therefore do not address in depth: “the wedding industry, male and female friendships, children and sexuality in maturity” (p. 2). Although she notes the presence of postfeminist ideas as a part of the neoliberal political climate in the United States, does not use postfeminism as her primary conceptual framework, as my analysis does. She also considers a larger time frame – a decade, where I limit my frame to six years – and, as a result, hers is a larger sample or corpus – 162 movies instead of 30. Finally, where I focus at length on three movies, and on how those movies are emblematic of a cycle that screens postfeminist ideas, Kaklamanidou addresses more than a dozen movies, necessitating a less detailed analysis than I am able to provide of my three case study films.

Johnson and Holmes (2009) examine a representative sample of forty contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies and find that depictions of romantic relationships in this genre are often contradictory, if not in their portrayals of gender equality, then in their depictions of, for example, marriage as both highly desirable and deeply unpleasant. Johnson and Holmes analyse the messages conveyed by these movies because of the potential for such messages to shape the way adolescents view and behave in

romantic relationships (p. 352), a concern this thesis does not share, although their findings nonetheless add insight to the field. While new romantic relationships were depicted as sources of happiness – “characters were shown to be visibly happier when in a relationship or excited at the prospect of a new relationship forming,” they observe (p. 363) – marriage, the presumably desired and presumed result of those new relationships, was depicted as making characters miserable. In these movies, marriages lack the physical affection and emotional closeness that are present in new relationships. “Of the incidents of affection coded, a vast minority occurred between married couples,” Johnson and Holmes write, “and most were limited to gestures such as brief kisses or standing with an arm around one another” (p. 362). Additionally, many of those instances of demonstrated affection “were interspersed with episodes of arguing” (p. 362). Often, in these movies, unmarried characters experience what Johnson and Holmes call “love epiphanies,” the sudden realization that they are in love with another character (p. 363). But when a character is married, the manner in which he or she speaks about their partner is different. “The nature of the discussion appeared to change when it was a married character speaking of his or her spouse, such as in *Forces of Nature* (Hughes 1999), where a character tells his grandson that he was never attracted to his wife, that he stayed with her through fear, and that marriage ‘is a prison’” (p. 363). Romantic relationships, “were shown to be at once highly desirable and highly undesirable” (p. 366), Johnson and Holmes found. Similarly, there were contradictions within the relationships depicted on screen: though characters “placed importance on and prioritized partners” and “often made great efforts with romantic gestures,” they were also shown “to neglect their relationships, deceive their partners,” and to be unfaithful (p. 366).

Johnson and Holmes identify other contradictory messages in the romantic comedies released between 1995 and 2005, particularly with regard to fidelity in romantic relationships. Some of these movies contain “contradictions that could be found in the undesirable behaviours themselves” (p. 367). Johnson and Holmes offer the example of *The Wedding Planner* (Shankman 2001), in which “a female character confides in a male character about a painful past experience of her ex-fiancé being unfaithful to

her” (p. 367). But, as the authors also note, that female character is employed by that male character to plan his wedding – to someone else. They are having “an emotional affair” (p. 367). “The character’s described experience of infidelity is painted in a negative light,” but “the present behaviour is simply two people falling in love” (p. 367). Though marriage is presented as the marker of a “happy ending” for the central couple, and while the central narrative drive of the genre is to unite the central couple in marriage (or presumed marriage), then, it is also depicted as unpleasant, and those characters who seek to escape from it are depicted as engaging in reasonable or even laudable behaviour.

Johnson and Homes note that such depictions of romantic relationships are in keeping with previous findings on “romantic media,” of which the romantic comedy is certainly one kind, which indicate that the narratives about gender, sex, and power emphasize the idea that “men and women are different, that neither can change themselves or their relationship, that sex must be perfect, and that a partner should intuitively understand their needs” (p. 355). However, they point to a gap in research into the “romantic content of films” (p. 355), noting that while “several content analyses have been carried out investigating the nature and frequency of sexual encounters” in media, there is very little scholarship of this kind that includes romantic encounters as well as sexual ones. Additionally, “of the two content analyses found examining the romantic content of films... neither looked at a romantic genre-specific sample” (p. 355). Evidently, there exists a dearth of analysis of non-sexual encounters specifically in romantic comedies, and though Johnson and Holmes’s findings are valuable to my research project, their research stops short of the most recent crop of Hollywood romantic comedies, stopping in 2005. There is, therefore, a gap of almost a decade’s worth of movies, a void that this thesis works to fill.

Conclusion

Most scholarly analyses of the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy have thus far neglected to examine the genre from the vantage point of the intersection of film studies, gender studies, and media

studies, at which my thesis sits. Furthermore, the bulk of academic analyses of the Hollywood romantic comedy are concerned with the “golden era” of genre – the screwball cycle of the 1930s and 1940s – and few analyses that examine latter cycles consider movies released after 2005 (Grindon, Kaklamanidou, Mortimer), leaving a gap of almost a decade and dozens of films. This is not to suggest that these analyses of earlier cycles are not valuable; on the contrary, they are invaluable to an understanding of the contemporary romantic comedy, which is shaped not only by extra-cinematic forces, but by the history of the genre and, as such, are essential to my task in Chapter 3, wherein I place the postfeminist cycle in generic and historic context. In this thesis, I fill this gap in research, thereby extending scholarly inquiry into the Hollywood romantic comedy, postfeminism, and postfeminist popular culture in particular. In the chapters that follow, I answer the question of how the Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 represent gender, sex, and power, and how that representation is shaped by – and contributes to – what Gill (2007) terms the “postfeminist sensibility” that marks this cultural moment in the United States. In the next chapter, my methodology, I account for my selection of the various research methods I employed to answer this research question.

Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I discuss the methods I employ to answer my overarching research question: *How do Hollywood romantic comedies represent gender, sex, and power between 2005 and 2011, and how is that representation shaped by the postfeminist sensibility that marks this cultural moment in the United States?* As a result of reviewing the literature, I also formulated three subsidiary research questions to guide me toward an answer to that overarching question:

- How does the postfeminist cycle represent unwed career women, how is that representation informed by postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and, particularly, power?
- How do movies in the postfeminist cycle portray masculinity, and how is that representation shaped by postfeminist notions about sex, power, and particularly, gender?
- How does the postfeminist cycle depict sex – specifically, casual sex – and how is that representation informed by postfeminist notions about gender, power, and, particularly, sex?

I then answer those three subsidiary questions through the creation of a representative sample, and through narrative textual analysis in three case studies that address one movie apiece. By implementing these methods to answer my three subsidiary research questions, I demonstrate how the postfeminist sensibility, with its attendant postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power, shape the depictions of those same themes in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. Finally, in so doing, I make the case that these movies constitute a new cycle in the genre, the postfeminist cycle.

My research methods follow and extend the methods used by those scholars whose work most informs my own. As demonstrated in the Introduction, my definition and understanding of postfeminism and of postfeminist narratives follows that of McRobbie, and my application of those understandings to American popular culture follows that of Tasker and Negra. Fittingly, my use of narrative textual analysis follows the precedents set by McRobbie and Tasker and Negra in their analyses of romantic comedies, and my use of case studies follows the precedent set by Deleyto and Grindon. However, in order to make generalizable claims about the state of the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, I first created a representative sample of films to analyse, a strategy that Johnson and Holmes (2009) employ. In this

chapter, I explain my rationale for selecting multiple research strategies; I then present my rationale for each of the strategies I selected and address the advantages and limitations of each, proceeding in the order in which I used them. I begin with the selection of a representative sample. Before doing so, I account for my decision to implement multiple research methods.

Implementing multiple research methods

In my decision to use multiple research methods, I follow Jane (2011), whose analysis of popular discourse about cheerleaders in media, particularly in online spaces, combines a multidisciplinary conceptual framework with a methodology that is largely qualitative and that employs textual analysis and case studies. This triangulation of methods – as Weerakoddy (2009) explains, the term “is borrowed from navigation and surveying, where a given position of interest or place is located using two other fixed points of location, positioned in a visualized ‘triangle’” (p. 34) – is one of several forms of triangulation. Methodological triangulation, as Denzin and Lincoln (2003) demonstrate, is a strategy that “adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (p. 8). Flick (1998) argues that triangulation may also “increase the expressiveness of the data gathered” (p. 140), can “increas[e] the likelihood that credible results will be produced” (p. 232), and “may also enable the opening up of new fields of knowledge” (p. 51). Stake (2003) adds that utilizing multiple methods can “reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation” (p. 148) and “helps to identify different realities” (Stake 2005, p. 454). As with conceptual triangulation, in methodological triangulation, “different methodological perspectives complement each other in the study of an issue and this is conceived as the complementary compensation of the weaknesses and blind spots of each single method” (Flick p. 259).³ In my case, using multiple

³ An alternative to triangulation is crystallization, as developed by Richardson (2003). Richardson proposes “that the central imaginary for ‘validity’ for postmodernist texts is not the triangle – a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach” (p. 517). Janesick (2003) corroborates the need for this expansion or deconstruction of triangulation and the possibility of absolute validity implied therein, writing that “the image of the crystal replaces that of the land surveyor and the triangle. We move on from plane geography to the new physics” (p. 67). Crystallization calls for a postmodern approach – “we feel how there is no single truth, we see how texts validate themselves” (p. 67) – to postmodern texts, and Janesick

methods permits complexity, richness and depth, while also, as a result of the use of representative sampling, allowing me combine that depth with the ability to generalize my observations about three movies to approximately half a decade's worth of Hollywood films. Given the multidisciplinary conceptual framework of my research, which sits at the intersection of multiple scholarly traditions (media studies, film studies, and gender studies), a multimethod methodological approach is appropriate, and, indeed, allows for the evasion of the pitfalls and "blind spots" of each of the individual methods I implement here.

As noted above, my use of a multimethod approach follows Jane, whose overall methodology is rooted in what Rayner et al (2004) call the media studies "cornerstone" of textual analysis (p. 9), and follows McKee (2003) in employing, "qualitative tools such as the analysis of interpretative texts... to construct a case based on 'likely' readings" (Jane, p. 20). My work is rooted in that same cornerstone, and, like Jane's, implements that approach in multiple ways. The bulk of analysis in this thesis is textual analysis, and is therefore, like Jane's work, qualitative. Jane implements "a broad survey and analysis" (p.21), without "confining [her]self to a detailed examination of a single text, a small number of texts or even a particular genre of texts" (p. 21), and, acknowledging the potential limitations of employing only one methodological approach, Jane also uses case studies, "which permit analysis with a more narrow focus" (p. 21). Following Jane, I also make use of case studies, and in doing so, avoid the pitfalls of confining myself to a single text, focusing instead on three (though I do, as noted above, confine myself to a single genre, and within that genre, to a narrow time frame). In direct relation to exploring how the ideas inherent to the postfeminist sensibility shape and are represented in the postfeminist cycle of romantic comedies there are several such pitfalls. The first is the danger of taking one text as representative of the cycle, and by so doing developing a warped understanding of how the cycle represents gender, sex, and power. The choice to analyse only one text carries the risk of failing to observe certain elements of the postfeminist cycle's depiction of gender, sex, and power. For example,

argues that "crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic" (p. 67).

focusing solely on *The Ugly Truth* would largely preclude me from observing many aspects of the postfeminist cycle's depictions of contemporary masculinity – a pitfall avoided by analysing *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. By the same token, focusing solely on *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* would largely preclude me from observing the cycle's hostile representation of unmarried career women, which is observable in *The Ugly Truth*. In order to avoid this pitfall, I first create a representative sample of texts and select from that sample three texts, rather than just one.

My work, like Jane's, implements a broad survey in the form of an overview of the history of the depiction of gender, sex, and power in the Hollywood romantic comedy (Chapter 3). I then narrow my focus in several ways, first by restricting my analysis to a six-year time period, and then by interrogating three distinct but by no means discrete themes – in the form of three individual texts – in close detail (my case studies). Jane acknowledges the risk of “eliciting the criticism that [she has] failed to interrogate any individual text in sufficient detail” (p. 21), just as I acknowledge the risk of eliciting the criticism that I focused too narrowly on texts that are not representative of the genre more broadly. For me, as for Jane, employing multiple methodological tools – triangulation, which “helps increase the validity and reliability of the data collected in a research project... [and] allows for better descriptions, explanations, understandings, interpretations, controls and critiques of research findings” (Weerakoddy p. 34) – mitigates those risks, while ensuring that my analysis is complex, rich, deep, as well as sufficiently representative to permit generalisations about the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy.

Representative sample selection

Having established my overarching research question, I next created a representative yet manageable sample of Hollywood romantic comedies, the analysis of which would allow me to generate new knowledge about the genre. In this section, I explain how and why I created that sample, and outline the advantages and limitations of my sampling method, and of those sampling methods I chose not to use.

My primary goal in creating a representative sample from which to make claims about the state of the genre, and my aim in instituting a systematic means of determining which movies to analyse, is to

ensure generalizability. While my conceptual framework follows McRobbie, and my application of that framework to contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies follows Tasker and Negra, my aim in this thesis is to ensure that my survey – that is, my viewing – of the genre and the conclusions I draw from that survey are in fact representative of the genre during the time period I have chosen to study. Other analyses of romantic comedies do not make use of a systematic sampling method. McRobbie (2009), does not employ these methods, nor does Tasker and Negra (2007), Radner (2011) or any of the other extensive scholarly analyses of the genre – those by Grindon (2011), Abbott and Jermyn (2009), Reichert and Dempsey (2000), and Deleyto (2011). In using a systematic sampling method, I follow Johnson and Holmes (2009), who examine romantic comedies, and Cowan and O'Brien (1990), Lauzen and Dozier (2005), and Welsh (2010), who examine “slasher” movies. By selecting a representative sample of movies, these scholars present a representative understanding of the landscape of their respective genres. Though there is little precedent for implementing these strategies for the analysis of romantic comedies Johnson and Holmes demonstrate that they are easily adapted to other film genres, and to the romantic comedy specifically. By combining them with the narrative textual analysis employed by McRobbie, Tasker, and Negra, as well as Radner, my project here achieves an analysis of the state of the genre that is both representative and deep.

As stated in my literature review, there is relatively little scholarly analysis of movies in the genre released after 2005, and in seeking to fill that gap in research, I decided to analyse the romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011, my chosen end date being the year in which I began my research. Approximately a dozen of these movies screened in wide release in the United States every year during this period; this created a large sample that I later found necessary to cull in the interests of manageability and precision. In determining which movies would qualify for inclusion in my sample, I relied on the website Box Office Mojo, the rankings site associated with the Internet Movie Database (*IMDb.com*). In this, I followed Johnson and Holmes (2009). In their research on the “messages” conveyed by those films to adolescent viewers, and how those messages might shape viewers’ expectations of their own romantic relationships, Johnson and Holmes use a list of the 200 top-grossing romantic comedies according to Box

Office Mojo in order to form a corpus. They exclude from their sample movies that were not available in their DVD region, movies that were set in the past (i.e. *Pride and Prejudice* [Wright 2005]), and movies that were not rated by the British Board of Film Classification as being appropriate for younger audiences. Finally, they exclude movies that were not made by one of the “Big Six” movie studios (p. 356). The result is a sample of 40 films.

There is ample precedent in film analyses, for constructing a representative sample in this and in similar fashions. Other researchers have used similar methods to obtain a representative sample when conducting content analysis. Cowan and O’Brien (1990), for example, rely on the catalogues of five local video rental shops. From a selection of 100 movies in these catalogues, Cowan and O’Brien then randomly select 56. Welsh (2010) combine random sampling with systematic searching of the Internet Movie Database to create the sample of “slasher” movies for analysis. Examining the gender double standard for the representation of ageing in popular films, Lauzen and Dozier use *Variety* magazine’s list of the 100 top-grossing films for a given year, and exclude from their sample those movies that were not available for DVD or VHS rental. Dempsey and Reichert, analysing the portrayal of marital sex in Hollywood movies across all genres, use the 25 highest grossing movie rentals in a given year, noting that by 2000, “gross revenue from movie rentals now exceed[ed] that of theatrical movie admissions” (p. 25). While these scholars’ methods are similar to those used by Johnson and Holmes, Johnson and Holmes’ method had already been implemented with success in an analysis of Hollywood romantic comedies and was therefore the most appropriate of these to employ for my project, though, as I explain below, I adapted it in several ways.

Following Johnson and Holmes, who used box office receipts as an indicator of a movie’s wide viewership, and thereby of popular appeal, I selected the movies for my sample from Box Office Mojo’s ranked lists romantic comedies, which permit for ranking by various metrics (e.g. lifetime gross, opening weekend gross, opening cinemas, lifetime cinemas). In order to make observations and generalisations about the state of the genre, I determined that it was appropriate to analyse those movies that are viewed by the most people, reasoning that those films are most representative of viewers’ experiences of the

genre in its current state – and of producers’ understandings of viewers’ preferences. However, Johnson and Holmes’s model, specifically their definition of “successful,” required some modification before I created the sample I use here. Though I also used Box Office Mojo, it was not appropriate to use a list that was ranked by lifetime grosses, for several reasons. First, in order to take into account the effects of inflation and the considerable flux of the movie industry – for example, the rising costs of movie tickets (Block 2012, Lieberman 2012, Rooney 2010), the influence of home viewing and “streaming,” and the increasingly widespread and common practice of movie piracy (Bilton 2012, Cohen 2013, Strauss 2013) – I chose to rank the movies labelled by Box Office Mojo as “romantic comedies” by the number of cinemas which the movies were shown over the course of their cinema releases (lifetime cinemas). This figure is a measure of the predicted popularity of a movie, a distributor’s estimation of how many viewers will want to watch it, and therefore better takes into account the forces that shape the trajectory of a film once it is released, as well as any increased distribution that occurs if a film proves to be unexpectedly popular. Merely ranking by lifetime gross ignores the role of distribution and marketing in a film’s success, while a lifetime cinemas figure indicates what the expectations were for a film’s success, while also taking into account inflation and the various shifts in the economics of film distribution and home viewing. For example, this strategy would allow a comparison of *Valentine’s Day* (Marshall 2011), which opened in 2011 in 3665 theatres and had a lifetime gross of US\$110, 485,654, with *There’s Something About Mary* (Farrelly and Farrelly 1998), which opened in 1997 in 2555 theatres and had a lifetime gross of US\$176, 484,651. Additionally, my modification of Johnson and Holmes’s method circumvents the question of whether to include or exclude movies based on their production by one of the large studios and ensures that all the movies in the sample can accurately be described as “Hollywood romantic comedies,” that is, movies made by or distributed under the auspices of a major studio, rather than independently made ones.

Next, in keeping with my chosen six-year time span of 2005-2011, I excluded any romantic comedies that were not released during this period. As previously stated, there is limited scholarly analysis of the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy generally, and very few analyses that examine

movies released after 2005 (Kaklamanidou's work was published in 2013, as I was conducting my own analysis), and similarly, there is a limited body of literature that examines the function of contemporary romantic comedies as postfeminist narratives whose analyses include movies released after 2005. By excluding from my sample movies made outside of this period, I am able to enter into dialogue with existing scholarship while also contributing new knowledge.

Unlike Johnson and Holmes, who write about the effects of romantic comedy viewing on teenage audiences and therefore exclude from their sample films rated for adult consumption, I decided that the film ratings assigned by the Motion Picture Association of America (e.g. PG, PG-13, R) were irrelevant to this project. This proved a wise decision; had I excluded R-rated movies from my sample, I would not have been able to observe one of the most interesting new narrative trends, the rise in the incidence of substantial male nudity. Though it was for Johnson and Holmes, DVD region was not a restriction for me, and though Johnson and Holmes chose to exclude period films, because there were no period films in my newly whittled down group, it was not necessary to decide whether or not to exclude any such movies. I then reduced the sample further, to the top 30. This was done in the interest of manageability: though the precedent set by Johnson and Holmes calls for a larger sample, with just one researcher and with limited time to conduct data collection, I determined that a sample size of 30 films was appropriate: it was large enough to be representative, but not too large for one person to view and thoroughly analyse it in the time available. Though a sample size of 30 is small compared to other similar analyses, the disparity is not so large as to undermine the rigour of my project, especially given the narrow time frame I analyse. Coyne, Callister and Robinson's content analysis (2010) uses a sample of 90 movies over 3 decades, or 30 films per decade. Beeman (2007) uses a sample of 40 movies released over a 21-year time frame, and Powers, Rothman, and Rothman (1993) analyse 100 titles released over 40 years, with an average of 25 films per decade. In this context, my sample of 30 films released in a 6-year period is in keeping with other analyses, and certainly sufficient in size. My selected sample of 30 films appears below.

Representative sample of Hollywood romantic comedies, 2005-2011

Rank	Title	Lifetime theatres	Year released
1	<i>Valentine's Day</i>	3665	2010
2	<i>Hitch</i>	3575	2005
3	<i>Just Go With It</i>	3548	2011
4	<i>New Year's Eve</i>	3505	2011
5	<i>Sex and the City 2</i>	3445	2010
6	<i>Sex and the City</i>	3325	2008
7	<i>The Back-Up Plan</i>	3280	2010
8	<i>What Happens in Vegas</i>	3255	2008
9	<i>The Heartbreak Kid</i>	3233	2007
10	<i>Failure to Launch</i>	3203	2006
11	<i>He's Just Not That Into You</i>	3175	2009
12	<i>The Proposal</i>	3158	2009
13	<i>Life As We Know It</i>	3146	2010
14	<i>The Break-Up</i>	3146	2006
15	<i>Fool's Gold</i>	3125	2008
16	<i>No Strings Attached</i>	3050	2011
17	<i>Going the Distance</i>	3030	2010
18	<i>Crazy, Stupid, Love</i>	3020	2011
19	<i>Larry Crowne</i>	2976	2011
20	<i>Knocked Up</i>	2975	2007
21	<i>The Ugly Truth</i>	2975	2009
22	<i>Easy A</i>	2974	2010
23	<i>She's Out of My League</i>	2958	2010
24	<i>It's Complicated</i>	2955	2009
25	<i>Music and Lyrics</i>	2955	2007
26	<i>Friends With Benefits</i>	2926	2011
27	<i>Something Borrowed</i>	2904	2011
28	<i>Forgetting Sarah Marshall</i>	2872	2008
29	<i>Made of Honour</i>	2816	2008
30	<i>Did You Hear About the Morgans?</i>	2718	2009

Source: Box Office Mojo.

Narrative textual analysis

I developed the research questions I address in this thesis after I constructed a representative sample and sketched the thematic landscape of the genre in a broad and representative way. After constructing my representative sample of films, I watched each movie twice (in some instances more than twice), keeping detailed notes in order to observe recurring or notable themes and narratives. Once I had done this, in keeping with my research goals of providing an analysis of contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies

that is at once representative and deep, it was necessary to explore those themes in a deeper and more detailed way in order to demonstrate the relationship between the romantic comedy's representation of, for example, casual sex, and extra-cinematic debates in the popular press, around "hook up culture" (this forms the basis of my third case study, which focuses on *Friends With Benefits*). In this section, I provide my rationale for using this method and explore the advantages and limitations of employing it.

In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of this research, I engage, at various junctures, in multiple kinds of textual analysis. As Mills (2009) notes, textual analysis is a contested method within film studies (p. 60), with some "rejecting virtually all textual analysis and discussion of aesthetics" (p. 61) in favour of an emphasis on context (Miller 2001, Hansen 1999). Like Mills, I am of the view that "the analysis of the film text does not have to exclude the wider context" (p. 61), and concur with Mills in her assertion that "the micro-analysis of the film text leads to the macro-analysis of cinema as a social, economic and political institution" (p. 62). Mills makes the distinction between the "textual analysis" and "close readings" (p. 62), describing the latter as one that excludes neither a film's aesthetics nor its place "outside the frame" (p. 63), where the former addresses only a film's "formal properties" (p. 60). Given the research question at the core of this thesis – one that necessitates the consideration of film aesthetics and narrative, as well as of cinema as an institution – Mills might term my overall project here "close reading," however, following Jane and Weerakoddy, I use "textual analysis" to describe my approach to the analysis of how the films in my sample represent gender, sex, and power. Though the primary form of textual analysis I employ is narrative analysis, as described by Weerakkody (p. 250), I also make use of discourse analysis, (p. 250), critical analysis (p. 251), and normative analysis (pp. 251-252). I implement the method of narrative textual analysis throughout this thesis, but it is particularly central to my case studies of individual films.

In the study of romantic comedies, there is considerable precedent for approaching the texts in this way. For Deleyto, whose work I explore in more depth later in this chapter, narrative conventions, more than tone, setting, or any other element, are what define a romantic comedy. This is, he argues, what gives the genre a "secret life" within Westerns, thrillers, and movies from other seemingly distinct genres

(p. 6). For Grindon, plot and convention are also central, and he outlines the major narrative elements – master plot and masquerade, for example – that define a romantic comedy (p. 23). Radner’s (2011) work on “neo-feminist cinema,” which takes in “chick flicks,” an umbrella term under which most romantic comedies fit (though not the romantic comedies that place male characters at the centre of the narrative, or as Jeffers McDonald [2009a] has termed them, “homme-coms”) employs narrative analysis as its main method. Though Radner often addresses filmic techniques, and particularly *mise en scène*, she emphasises the plots of the movies she analyses, an approach that is not unique to the study of film. The advantage of this approach is that it allows for comparison of films over time, regardless of changes in filmmaking techniques. Approaching movies predominantly as narratives, rather than focusing on formal filmic techniques, allows a scholar to compare, for example, the 1930s classic romantic comedy *It Happened One Night* (Capra 1934) with *Sex and The City 2* (King 2010), a prime example given that the latter repeatedly references the former. Radner also combines narrative analysis with elements of star theory to explore the relationship between the stories told within movies and how those stories inform or are informed by film-external media narratives about the actors and actresses who perform those stories. Kaklamanidou, like Radner (2011), focuses specifically on Jennifer Lopez, as well as on Will Smith. Kaklamanidou argues that the success of these two actors in the romantic comedy genre “constitutes the proof of how stardom can transcend racial, ethnic and/or gender barriers through careful media construction of the star’s image” (p. 14), and that Smith and Lopez “are examples of the neoliberal discourse of colour blindness which is inaccurately considered as the only way to completely eradicate racism” (p. 14). In this respect, Kaklamanidou’s approach is closer to Radner’s than to my own in its inclusion of star studies, as well as in its consideration of the place of race and ethnicity in the romantic comedy.

My project eschews those elements of star theory that Radner includes, focusing instead on the interaction between film narratives and postfeminist ideas about the themes explored in those narratives, borrowing this, too, from McRobbie and Tasker and Negra. These scholars, whose use of the conceptual

framework of postfeminism offer valuable models for this thesis, also use narrative textual analysis to demonstrate how postfeminist ideas are advanced by contemporary romantic comedies made about and for women. My research employs that same approach, examining plot devices and tropes, dialogue, and overarching narratives to understand the depictions of gender, sex, and power in the genre generally and in three movies in particular. In the case studies that form the bulk of the second half of this thesis, I conduct textual analyses of the texts to demonstrate the depictions of gender, sex, and power, and the relationship between those depictions and extra-cinematic debates – which are informed by and contribute to the postfeminist sensibility – about those same themes.

Following McRobbie, Tasker and Negra, and Radner, I employ narrative analysis as one of several methods I utilize to answer my research questions. Specifically, in answering the three subsidiary research questions that were generated by the selection of a representative sample and the broad survey of dominant and academically interesting or previously unexplored narrative elements and themes, I use narrative analysis of three movies and examine how those narratives screen postfeminist ideas. I do this in my case studies, a method that constitutes the third of the three methods I use in my research.

Case study

The second half of this thesis comprises three case studies that enable me to explore in depth how three movies in the postfeminist cycle of Hollywood romantic comedy screen postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power. The purpose of my three case studies is to isolate and elucidate the representation of each of those themes (though, as I note in each case study, they overlap in important ways), as depicted in a representative text, and to analyse that text in detail and depth. In the study of media texts generally, and in the study of romantic comedies specifically, there is considerable precedent for this strategy. In this section, I explore the value and limitations of this method. Then, I explain my rationale for selecting the three films – and their corresponding parallel cultural preoccupations – that I address in the case studies.

The values and limitations of use of case study

The decision to use case studies as a major component of my research is supported by Yin's (2003) observation that the case study is best suited to research that asks the question "how?" or "why?" (p. 5), and that case study has a "distinct advantage" "when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). Given that my aim here is to demonstrate how the postfeminist sensibility informs the Hollywood romantic comedy – which in turn contributes to the postfeminist sensibility – the case study is an ideal research strategy. As Yin notes, a case study is "an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 13), and is an especially useful research method in situations where "the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). It is, therefore, well suited to my research aims in this thesis.

Yin also notes that the case study "relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion," and that as a result, it "benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis" (pp. 13-14). As Weerakkody explains, case studies can be both qualitative and quantitative in nature (p. 229). Following Weerakkody, the case studies in my thesis use "just one or a few cases, instances or 'objects of interest' to analyse a complex, contemporary phenomenon within specific limits of time and space, and [examine] it from various viewpoints to understand the multiple realities or diverse perspectives of the informants or research participants" (p. 228).

My decision to implement case studies to demonstrate the relationship between romantic comedies and the postfeminist sensibility is appropriate because, as Weerakkody notes, "the phenomenon examined in a case study generally has a large number of factors or independent variables, but not information available about the interactions between them or their relationships to the dependent variables. These interactions and relationships are examined within the real-life context or specific circumstances of the phenomenon" (p. 228). The three case studies that I conduct here are descriptive case studies, which "describe what was observed, in detail and in depth, within its context" (p. 231), and

in which I conduct the narrative textual analysis outlined earlier in this chapter. Yin warns that “theory development as a part of the design phase is essential” (p. 28). By adopting the conceptual framework of postfeminism, before I began conducting my case studies, I fulfilled this requirement; indeed, Yin allows that “for some topics, existing works may provide a rich theoretical framework for designing a specific case study” (p. 29), as is the case for my research.

There is some precedent for the use of case study among the scholars whose conceptual framework and methodological strategies inform my own. Though Jane describes her own research as “broad” (p. 21), she also, as discussed earlier, makes use of case studies. Jane includes four case studies, designed to demonstrate a deep and narrow understanding of certain elements of the issues at hand, in addition to her broad survey. Though Jane's research is far afield from mine where subject matter is concerned, it is nonetheless valuable for my purposes. Among scholars of romantic comedies, however, there is little precedent for the use of case studies, with the exception of Deleyto and Grindon. In adopting this research method, I aim to ensure that my contribution to the study of this genre is systematic and generalizable. Several scholars of the genre have adopted research models that resemble case studies: Deleyto, for example, focuses on one film per chapter as a means of demonstrating the ways that movies not generally included in the genre of romantic comedy do, in fact, make use of the conventions and narratives associated with that genre. He does not call them case studies – and indeed, they do not fulfil several of the requirements of case studies delineated by Yin – but Deleyto uses this strategy to enable a deep analysis of those movies (much of it narrative analysis, as is my own). Grindon, in his exploration of how the conventions of the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy have evolved over the last half-century, employs a similar strategy, addressing one movie per chapter, a model I follow and extend in this project. Though neither of these scholars provides a rationale for their methodological choices, both Deleyto and Grindon offer an instructive model for the use of case studies as a strategy that, when deployed in a systematic manner and combined with textual analysis, permit deep and detailed exploration of movies from this particular genre.

The goal of my analysis is to demonstrate a representative, broad, and deep understanding of the relationship between Hollywood romantic comedies and the postfeminist sensibility. To this end, I use multiple case studies, a strategy supported by Yin (2003). Yin suggests two or more case studies (p. 52), advising that “even if you can only do a ‘two-case’ study, your chances of doing a good case study will be better than using a single-case design. Single-case designs are vulnerable if only because,” they involve putting “all your eggs in one basket” (p. 53). Daymon and Holloway (2002) advise against conducting more than four case studies, warning that when a researcher attempts to study more than four cases, “the overall analysis will be diluted” (p. 119). My decision to conduct three case studies falls neatly between the recommendations made by Yin and Daymon and Holloway. Yin advises that “the simplest multiple-case design would be the selection of two or more cases that are believed to be literal replications, such as a set of cases with exemplary outcomes in relation to some evaluation theory” (p. 52) and this is precisely what my design entails. The three subsidiary research questions that guide the latter half of my thesis were developed after I viewed each of the movies in the representative sample, and they are designed to answer the overarching research question outlined in the Introduction. That survey of the narrative landscape of the genre yielded data that suggested to new and ongoing thematic concerns in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy; in deciding which films to select for the case studies, I chose the three cases that I determined, based on my viewing, best represent those thematic concerns.

Though each of these case studies performs the same broad function, in that it answers a subsidiary research question, each also contributes to the larger goal of answering my overarching research question about how the genre depicts gender, sex, and power during the time period in question. As such, each case study addresses a different movie, though each does so in more or less the same fashion. The purpose of the case studies, taken together, is to explain how shifts and continuities in the thematic concerns of the genre were shaped by larger cultural conversations, and to explain how each movie contributes to the dominance of postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power in Hollywood romantic comedies between 2005 and 2011.

I recognize the potential limitations of using case studies, the foremost of which is highlighted by Weerakkody: “The main disadvantages of the case study method relate to their lack of generalizability” (p. 244). However, by creating a representative sample of movies before choosing which narrative preoccupations or themes, and therefore which movies, to address in my case studies, I have combined several research methods in a manner designed to that mitigate this limitation. Because the case studies were chosen after I constructed a representative sample from which to select three films for further analysis, any observations made in my case studies apply beyond the movies addressed in those chapters. Yin (2003) also notes the potential lack of generalizability, and advises conducting multiple case studies to guard against this outcome:

Even with two cases, you have the possibility of direct replication.... If under these varied circumstances you still can arrive at common conclusions from both cases, they will have immeasurably expanded the external generalizability of your findings, again compared to those from a single case alone” (p. 53).

By conducting three case studies, I have attempted to mitigate the risk of making claims that are not generalizable. This commitment to generalizability, as I explain earlier in this chapter, is my chief modification of and improvement on the methodologies of other scholars’ approaches to Hollywood romantic comedies.

Case selection

My viewing of the representative sample revealed multiple academically interesting narrative elements in the postfeminist cycle, all of which would serve as fertile ground for inquiry. Each of them suggests a relationship between the Hollywood romantic comedy and postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – informed by, reinforced by, and contributing to a postfeminist sensibility – and would therefore have served the overarching research goals of my thesis. However, it was not possible to address all of them in this project; in the interests of ensuring that my analysis is of an appropriate depth and level of detail, and heeding Daymon and Holloway’s warnings that too many case studies can “dilute” one’s overall analysis (p. 119), I chose to select and focus on three. As outlined in the Introduction, two of these

themes – the increase in the amount of substantial male nudity, and casual sex – are, if not novel and unique to the postfeminist cycle, hallmarks of this new cycle and are rare in other cycles. The third – the “problem” of the unwed woman, as Harvey (1987) termed it, and particularly of the unwed career woman – is one that has obvious roots in the screwball and neo-traditional cycles. In this section, I briefly outline how I chose my three case studies, each of which is focused on either gender, sex, or power (though, as I explore in each case study, these are interrelated in significant ways), and each of which explores the representation of postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, or power through analysis of one film per case study.

The Ugly Truth and power

My first case study examines *The Ugly Truth*'s depiction of the unwed career woman in order to address the postfeminist cycle's representation of power. The film's portrayal of Abby (Katherine Heigl) as a woman rendered unhappy, unhealthy, and unlovable by her professional success, and the way that her professional power and bodily autonomy are repeatedly undermined, are in keeping with what Harvey (1987) terms the romantic comedy's concern about the “problem” of the unwed career woman; as I demonstrate in Chapter 1, the genre has a documented, decades-long preoccupation with “taming” powerful women. Seven movies in my sample depict a woman's unwed status as problematic (*The Proposal*, *The Ugly Truth*, *Valentine's Day*, *New Year's Eve*, *What Happens in Vegas*, *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Life As We Know It*) and six of these suggest that the undesirable marital status of the woman in question is the result of her professional ambition and success. In many of those cases, the women in question are either employed in traditionally male-dominated industries (stock brokerage in *What Happens in Vegas*; television production in *The Ugly Truth*; book editing in *The Proposal*; an unspecified but evidently time-consuming and lucrative corporate position in *Valentine's Day*) or hold positions that grant them authority and power over others (as in *The Ugly Truth*, *New Year's Eve*, and *The Proposal*). The preponderance of movies that featured or were centred on problematically unwed career women

suggests the value of an analysis of how postfeminist romantic comedies are informed by and represent the postfeminist sensibility.

Several movies in my sample would have served as instructive examples of the postfeminist cycle's representation of power as it relates to unwed career women. For example, one career woman in the sample, *What Happens in Vegas*'s Joy (Cameron Diaz), works on a Wall Street trading floor in a position that requires her to be aggressive, competitive, bold, ambitious, and highly analytical. Joy realizes over the course of the movie that she hates her work and would rather not work at all than continue working in her competitive, sought after, and highly paid position in the finance industry, a position she has worked long and hard to secure. *What Happens in Vegas* is a telling example of how extra-cinematic media coverage about highly educated American women "opting out" of their careers in traditionally male-dominated fields, and about women "burning out" and retreating to a more traditionally feminine, domestic lifestyle (Belkin 2003, Leonhardt 2009, Stone 2007, Fondas 2013) shapes the depictions of women working in male-dominated fields in the contemporary romantic comedy. However, the ubiquity of postfeminist popular culture narratives that are aimed at women and include this "retreatist posture" has already been explored by Negra (2004), who observes that "discourses of ideal femininity clearly tilting away from the professional path, retreatism has become a recognizable narrative trope. Accordingly, both film and television have incorporated fantasies of hometown return" (p. 5); Tasker (2011), writing about *Enchanted*, observes that the heroine's romantic rival, an ambitious professional woman, longs for a "fairy tale" conclusion so much that she retreats into a world of animation to secure it (p. 72). Of the remaining films in the sample, *The Ugly Truth* provided the most instructive example of how the genre has been shaped by the postfeminist sensibility. As I explore in my first case study, *The Ugly Truth*'s narrative is one in which Abby's professional authority and control over her own body are repeatedly undermined and gender hierarchy is re-stabilised, making it an ideal film through which to examine the postfeminist cycle's representation of power.

Forgetting Sarah Marshall and gender

My second case study addresses the postfeminist cycle's representation of gender – and specifically, of masculinity – by examining *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*'s use of extreme male nudity. In my viewing of the films in my representative sample, I observed that a notable number of them featured substantial male nudity, and that this was particularly remarkable in films released after 2008. In five movies in the sample, the male lead appears in a state of near total undress. In *Going the Distance*, *Friends With Benefits*, *No Strings Attached*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, the audience sees the lead man entirely naked but for his genitals, and in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, leading man Jason Segel appears in full frontal nudity on two separate occasions. In several of these movies, I argue, the function of the male nudity is not to sexualise the man in question, but to render him vulnerable: he is not nude, but naked. This raises interesting questions about the cycle's depiction of masculinity, and comports with the postfeminist notion of masculinity in crisis as a result of the taken for granted success – and, in some cases, overreach – of feminism.

There are multiple movies that might have served to illuminate the relationship between increased male nudity on screen and the postfeminist notion that, as a result of the success of feminism, women are now the dominant gender while masculinity is imperilled. For example, *She's Out of My League* contains male nudity, the effect of which is to make the man in question appear unattractive and vulnerable, rather than attractive and virile. In the scene in question, the camera lingers on the character's buttocks as his friend shaves his genital area. The protagonist, Kirk (Jay Baruchel), is preparing for a tryst with his very attractive new girlfriend, and is attempting to make himself as physically attractive as possible; the gap between Kirk's perceived physical appeal and hers being, as the title of the movie suggests, a central plot concern. *Going the Distance* contains a similar scene, in which the male lead, Garrett (Justin Long), visits a spray-tanning salon in an effort to make himself more physically attractive to his sexual partner. He is naked in this scene, with his hands barely covering his crotch, and the camera captures all of his body except for his genitalia. *Going the Distance* does not emphasise the same supposed disparities in physical

appeal in the way that *She's Out of My League* does – the audience is left to assume that Garrett and Erin (Drew Barrymore) are well matched in this regard. However, *Going the Distance* does feature a gender nudity gap: while the most revealing shots of Long show him completely nude and entirely exposed but for his well-placed hands, the most revealing shots of Barrymore show her in a bra and pants, or in the shower but only visible from the her upper chest upward. After consideration and reflection, I chose *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, which is what Weerakkody calls an “extreme case” (p. 235). I chose *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* not only because it contains the most substantial male nudity of all the movies in question, but also because it uses that nudity to convey disparities between the male protagonist Peter (Jason Segel) and his eponymous ex-girlfriend (Kristen Bell) – between her public prominence and success as an actress and his relative obscurity as a composer for her television show, and between her Hollywood good looks and fitness and his “average” appearance. Despite the fact that *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is the most extreme example of substantial male nudity, and is as such an outlier (though its extreme male nudity is matched by *Knocked Up*'s extreme female nudity), it was for multiple reasons the best choice for an examination of how the postfeminist cycle, informed by the postfeminist sensibility that marks this cultural moment in the United States, uses extreme male nudity to reinforce postfeminist ideas about the effect of feminism on American masculinity.

Friends With Benefits and sex

My third and final case study considers *Friends With Benefits* as a means to address the postfeminist cycle's depiction of sex – specifically, casual sex. Though several movies in my sample feature sex outside committed romantic relationships (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Going the Distance*, *Made of Honour*), two movies in my sample (*No Strings Attached* and *Friends With Benefits*) explore the casual sex relationship or “hook up” arrangement. In each movie, the central couple have been platonic friends for some time, and agree to have sex with each other casually – that is, exclusively, but with the promise

not to form a romantic emotional attachment. As the female protagonist in *Friends With Benefits* (Jamie, played by Mila Kunis) describes it: “No emotions. Just sex. Whatever happens, we stay friends.” In both movies, this arrangement functions for a brief period until one member of the couple becomes emotionally attached, and the pair concludes that they cannot continue sleeping together without becoming romantically involved. At the conclusion of each movie, the couple is united in a long-term romantic relationship, in the generically requisite “successful conclusion” or “happy ending” as outlined by Jeffers McDonald (2007) and Rubinfeld (2001).

Of the two films that place the “hook up” relationship at the centre of their narrative, *Friends With Benefits* is a richer source of information about how this cycle of romantic comedies represents postfeminist ideas about sex; how these films serve to take feminism – in this case, feminist ideas about women’s sexual desire and the limitations of permanent romantic relationships – into account in order to undermine it. Both movies are informed by the extra-cinematic debates over “hook up culture” that attracted a good deal of media attention in the United States in the years preceding the films’ release. However, *Friends With Benefits* bears other marks of the postfeminist sensibility, most notably in its use of self-reflexivity and irony, and its explicit rejection of second-wave feminism, symbolised by Jamie’s mother. *Friends With Benefits* demonstrates a self-awareness that *No Strings Attached* does not; the former is aware of itself as belonging to the romantic comedy genre, repeatedly making reference to the conventions of the genre, and includes a fictional meta-romantic comedy that informs Jamie’s views of dating and her dating behaviour. For these reasons, of the two “hook up” movies, *Friends With Benefits* was the more compelling choice for a case study.

Just as there are multiple entry points for an analysis of the relationship between the postfeminist sensibility, and the representation of postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, there are multiple elements of those depictions on which a doctoral thesis could focus, and multiple films that such an analysis could examine. The decision to focus on these three narrative elements – the “problem” of the unwed career woman, the use of male nudity, and the portrayal

of casual sex – and these three films, is in keeping with my goal of filling gaps in existing scholarship.

With the exception of Kaklamanidou (2013), who examines *The Ugly Truth*, none of the films I analyse here have been subjected to extensive scholarly examination.

Conclusion

To summarise, in this research, which follows scholars whose work sits at the intersection of several disciplinary approaches to the analysis of Hollywood romantic comedies, including media studies, film studies, and gender studies – an interdisciplinary approach best characterised as cultural studies – I use multiple research methods and analytical strategies to best answer my research questions. By using sampling and broad and comprehensive survey, and then deep and detailed analysis of three chosen themes and their relationships to the postfeminist sensibility, I implement and modify the most effective methods from a range of scholars who have studied Hollywood romantic comedies, combining their methods to conduct the most representative, broad, and deep analysis possible. While my course of action in choosing research methods and analytical strategies differs from each of the researchers whose work my research follows, adapts, and extends, those alterations or exclusions have been made with the goal of maximizing the accuracy, relevance, and generalizability of my own research.

In the following chapter, I outline the relationships between that cycle and the two cycles it most resembles, the screwball and the neo-traditional cycles, and place the postfeminist cycle in generic context, demonstrating that while extra-cinematic debates play a considerable role in shaping the narrative preoccupations of generic cycles, so too does the history of the genre.

Chapter 3: THE POSTFEMINIST CYCLE IN GENERIC CONTEXT

In this chapter, I explore the role of the history of the Hollywood romantic comedy in shaping the postfeminist cycle. As Jeffers McDonald (2007) notes, the genre has a tendency to “self-reflexivity and quotation” (p. 2) – as is evident in *The Ugly Truth*’s reference to *When Harry Met Sally...* and in *Friends With Benefits*’s reference to *The Ugly Truth* – and, as Grindon (2011) defines it, a cycle is “often sparked by a benchmark hit that is imitated, refined, or resisted by those that follow” (p. 25). As such, any understanding of the postfeminist cycle requires an understanding of the cycles that preceded it. The history of the genre, as I discussed earlier, in the literature review, is generally divided into cycles: the screwball cycle (mid-1930s to early 1940s), the comedies of seduction, also known as the sex comedy cycle (early 1950s to mid-1960s), the nervous romance cycle (late 1970s to late 1980s), the reaffirmation of romance cycle, also known as the neo-traditional cycle (mid-1980s to mid-1990s) (Grindon pp. 25-6). My argument in this thesis is that contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies are shaped by a postfeminist sensibility. However, as I demonstrate in this chapter, it is also essential to take into account the influence of previous cycles of the genre in shaping the current one. I focus here on the two cycles to which the postfeminist cycle, with its emphasis on the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy in the face of threats from feminism – in the form of professionally powerful women, purportedly imperilled masculinity, and apparent shifts in sexual behaviours among young American women – bear the most narrative resemblance. The first of these is the screwball cycle, the first major cycle in the genre, which laid the narrative foundations and established many of the generic conventions to which contemporary romantic comedies still adhere, and whose influence is particularly evident in its depiction of the “problem” of the unwed career woman. The second is the neo-traditional cycle, which immediately preceded the postfeminist cycle; the postfeminist cycle can be understood in part as a reaction to the neo-traditional cycle, particularly, as I explore my third case study chapter, in its depictions of sex.

The screwball cycle

I begin my examination of the development and the narrative landscape of the first cycle in the genre by accounting for the role of the Motion Picture Production Code (hereafter referred to simply as the Production Code or The Code), focusing on the effect that it had on the cycle's depiction of gender, sex, and power. Next, I place accounts of that role in dialogue with other common explanations, in particular, those that largely credit the Great Depression with shaping the screwball cycle's depiction of gender, sex, and power. Then, I discuss the similarities between the screwball cycle and the postfeminist cycle, and the influence of the former on the latter.

The Motion Picture Production Code

The Production Code, a set of guidelines to which most studios agreed to adhere, was adopted by the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association in 1930 and was revoked in 1968. A detailed analysis of the Production Code lies outside the scope of this thesis, except insofar as it influenced the origins and development of the romantic comedy and, in particular, the screwball cycle which emerged in the 1930s at the same time as the Production Code. The Code was instituted in response to the political pressure that began to build in the early 1920s, for some form of censorship over Hollywood movies; in 1921 alone, the United States Congress considered more than one hundred film censorship laws. The decision to create and enforce a code was in part a response to public perceptions of the film industry, and to parochial censorship efforts. It was:

... the result of a nationwide backlash – an outraged reaction to a Hollywood that by 1922 had come to seem like a moral quagmire, even by the bathtub-gin-and-speakeasy standards of the Roaring '20s. Silent-film comic Fatty Arbuckle charged with manslaughter in the death of an actress; a bisexual director found murdered; movie stars dying of drug overdoses – small wonder the nation's religious leaders were forming local censorship boards and chopping up movies every which way to suit the standards of their communities (Mondello 2008).

The Code was a set of guidelines to which most studios agreed to adhere. As Doherty recounts, it was written by Father Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest, and by Martin Quigley, “a prominent Roman Catholic layman and editor of the influential exhibitors’ journal *Motion Picture Herald*”(p. 6). The code of standards was guided by three “general principles”: First, that “no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.” Second, “correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.” Finally, “law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.” Hays submitted the full Code to the major Hollywood studios, who agreed in March 1930 to adhere to it.

The provisions with which the major studios agreed to comply included categories marked, “Don’ts” and “Be Carefuls.” The “Don’ts” list included murder, drug trade and ridicule of the clergy. More importantly for the romantic comedy, the “Don’ts” list prohibited “any licentious or suggestive nudity – in fact or in silhouette,” “any inference of sex perversion,” “miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races)” and “sex hygiene and venereal diseases.” The “Be Carefuls” list was vaguer: “And be it further resolved,” read the document produced by the studios and approved by the Federal Trade Commission, “that special care be exercised in the manner in which the following subjects are treated, to the end that vulgarity and suggestiveness may be eliminated and that good taste may be emphasized.” Those subjects included “the sale of women, or of a woman selling her virtue,” “first-night scenes,” and “man and woman in bed together,” “the institution of marriage,” and “excessive or lustful kissing.” Pre-marital and extra-marital sex could not be depicted in a positive light. Sex of any kind could not be explicitly depicted. Furthermore, “the sanctity of marriage and the home had to be upheld” and “unnecessary scenes of passion” were forbidden (Hayes, ProductionCode.com).

As Glitre (2006) recounts, the studios were eager to adhere to these guidelines if it meant avoiding government intervention and official censorship, which it did; the studios’ adherence to the Code was a form of self-censorship, and the Production Code was never enforced by any state or federal

government. “Rather than face federal censorship, the studios willingly signed up to a system of self-regulation,” Glitre writes in *States of the Union*, “because this allowed them to maintain ultimate control of production and exhibition (p. 20). In 1930, the full Code was published in *Variety* magazine, but it was not until 1934 that enforcement began in earnest. As Hayes notes, from 1930 to mid-1934, numerous movies were released did not conform to the requirements of the Production Code without incurring penalty or remedial action (Hayes, ProductionCode.com), and as Doherty recounts, during “that four-year interval marks a fascinating and anomalous passage in American motion picture history... the Code commandments were violated with impunity and inventiveness” (p. 2). By 1934, however, “studios found themselves fighting a three-front war against church, state, and social science” (Doherty p. 8) and once the Production Code Administration (PCA) began enforcing the Code in July of 1934, a film would not be permitted release without a seal of approval from the PCA:

... the Production Code was voluntary for film companies, who figured it was a nifty way to avoid government censorship. But it was mandatory for filmmakers, if they wanted their films to play in American theatres. And filmmakers didn't much care who was doing the censoring if their scripts were getting watered down (Mondello 2008).

Though it was nicknamed for Hays, it was under Joseph Breen that the PCA would conduct its most vehement enforcement of the Production Code. Breen helmed the PCA for twenty years, beginning in 1934, and as Doherty recounts, he “enforced the Code commandments with a potent mix of missionary zeal and administrative tenacity” (p. 9). The Hays Office had the power to change scripts and cut scenes in post-production, and to refuse to allow a film’s release outright. Adherence to the Code was, technically speaking, on a voluntary basis, but as Kendall (1990) notes, a studio would be fined \$25, 000 for releasing a movie without the PCA’s seal of approval (p. 64). Because of the financial threat posed by failure to abide by the Production Code – the risk that an entire film be financed and produced but then be deemed ineligible for theatrical release – studios and individual directors and producers had no choice but to adhere.

Gender, sex, and power in the screwball cycle

The Production Code's prohibition on the explicit depiction of sex would have a considerable impact on the Hollywood romantic comedy, a genre that required the representation, in some form, of sex and of sexuality. Kendall argues that the Production Code had little to do with the genre's depiction of gender, sex, and power during this era, writing that it "cannot be called a major factor... Romantic comedy was already launched before the Breen office came into existence... This was the feeling of their generation. No censor had to tell them to do it" (p. 64). However, other scholars of the genre (Glitre 2006, Grindon 2011) argue otherwise. Because romantic comedies were now prohibited from depicting sex, including intense kissing, screenwriters and directors were forced to find creative avenues for communicating sexual attraction, tension and activity between the central couple. Under the era's stricter enforcement of The Code, as Grindon notes, the screwball film, with its bickering, bantering, and sometimes physically violent couples, flourished (p. 34). The screwball cycle's handling of sex was oblique, its treatment of gender a mix of equality and conservatism, and its depiction of female power unflattering of those women who possessed it. Glitre argues that the ways that sex and love were represented in screwball comedies were a direct result of the institution of the Production Code:

Most importantly, the patriarchal 'Victorian' marriage was seen as outmoded: it was sexually repressed, rooted in gender inequality, tied down with responsibility, and absolutely no fun. The screwball relationship is rooted in having fun (which, by the power of the Production Code, also means sex), with the couple eschewing family responsibilities to behave like children (in screwball, 'babies' are leopards and dogs). This kind of fun is specifically formulated in terms of revitalizing marriage (pp. 48-9).

Though the screwball cycle "revitalized" marriage, it did not use sex to do so – at least, not explicitly. Under the Production Code, banter and physicality became the new modes by which to express sexual tension and attraction, as well as a readily-understood metaphor for sexual compatibility and activity. As Mortimer puts it, "the screwball comedy avoided explicit sexual content, yet sex remained the 'elephant in the corner,' as its unspoken presence loomed in the playing out of desires and relationships" (p. 14).

Because the screwball couple could not have sex, or have much sexual contact of any kind, for that matter, Haskell (1987) writes, “love [was] consummated in gags” (p. 127).

While gags were one way to allude to sex, so too was light violence. Although the central couples in the films of the screwball cycle were prohibited by the Production Code from having sex or kissing “lustfully,” they were not prohibited from inflicting minor violence and injury on each other. Jeffers McDonald (2007) observes that movies like *Twentieth Century* (Hawks 1934), propose that “people in love will do everything they can to torment each other” (p. 20). This theme becomes a “very noticeable” one in the screwball comedy, although, as Jeffers McDonald notes, this violence “is rarely enacted with much potential for real physical injury” (p. 20). She also notes that the screwball comedy, as a “sub-genre” or cycle, emphasized “fast-flung insults and violence, either threatened or carried out, as a main trope” (p. 20). Haskell argues that these verbal skirmishes – “verbal jousting,” as Grindon calls it (p. 35) – and opportunities for physical but non-sexual contact were outlets, or euphemisms, for suppressed sexuality (p. 123), and Grindon observes that “the wordplay sparks a current of erotic energy” (p. 35).

In the foreword to Sikov’s book *Screwball: Hollywood’s Madcap Romantic Comedies* (1989), Haskell argues that the screwball comedy was borne of a North American inability to express romantic emotions in a straightforward, affectionate manner. The screwball comedy, with its couples who drive each other mad only to discover (or re-discover) by the end of the movie that they are madly in love – or, as Sikov puts it, couples for whom “hatred is no reason to give up on a relationship” (p. 15) – reflects the ways that Americans in the 1930s and 1940s felt comfortable expressing love, Haskell argues. “In the relaxation of inhibitions through violence,” she observes, “passion was translated into physical antagonism, a peculiarly American form of expressing love in a country where civilized courtship is often construed as deceptive and insincere” (p. 13). Indeed, Jeffers McDonald adds that the screwball comedy, unable to turn verbal sparring into sexual contact, “sustains the discord, using the energy of the couple’s friction to move the narrative forward” (p. 20). In the screwball comedy, just as banter and barbs served as euphemisms for sexual attraction and compatibility, physical contact in the form of light violence served as an alternative to sexual contact.

The Code, Haskell argues, shaped the depictions of gender, sex, and power, in another important way: it fundamentally changed the way female sexuality was depicted on screen. Before enforcement of the Code began in 1934, she writes, “women were conceived of as having sexual desire without being freaks, villains, or even necessarily Europeans – an attitude surprising to those of us nurtured on the movies of any other period” (p. 91). Women in pre-Code movies were allowed to initiate sex, and pursue men, “even to embody certain ‘male’ characteristics without being stigmatized as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘predatory’” (p. 91). Much of this would soon become taboo, particularly these representations of women’s sexual appetites and activities. Before the Code, women’s sexuality was “unabashedly front and centre, and if a man allowed himself to be victimized by a woman’s sex, it was probably through some long-standing misapprehension of his own nature” (p. 91). Indeed, as Doherty (1999) notes, in the years before the institution of the Production Code,

For every working girl on the receiving end of an unwelcome sexual advance from a lecherous male employer, another was taking matters, and men, into her own hands. In distaff versions of the rake’s progress, women of loose morals and mercenary motives prospered in stories of vice rewarded (p. 131).

Under the Code, very little sexuality, male or female, was front and centre – and if women victimised men with their sex, the Production Code stipulated that both parties would be punished for their transgressions. Women of loose morals no longer prospered, and vice was certainly not rewarded. The Code changed the course of history for the Hollywood romantic comedy. As a result of the Code, depictions of gender, sex, and power – of women’s sexuality and of ideal romantic and sexual relationships – were curtailed and constrained, a change that would impact the genre for years to come. The result was a particular version of on-screen romance, one in which sex was muted, abstractly expressed, or entirely absent, and in which traditional gender roles were upheld and romanticised.

As part of this sanitizing, de-sexualizing project, the Production Code also changed the face, and the character, of the romantic comedy heroine. Haskell notes the marked difference between pre-

Production Code actresses – Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, and Jean Harlow – and those who rose to prominence under the Production Code – Katharine Hepburn, Jean Arthur, Rosalind Russell, and “most of the professional and working-class heroines” (p. 92). Before the implementation of the Code, heroines were sultry, seductive and unabashedly sexual. Under the Code, they had to find other outlets for their energy. Banter and physical conflict with men were among them, but so too were professional ambition and other forms of physical activity, like athletics. In this climate, Garbo, Dietrich and West could not flourish, but actresses like Hepburn and Russell would become inextricably linked, in the public imagination, with their fast-talking, physically active heroines. “The paradox,” Haskell concludes, “is unavoidable: while the Hays Office, having assumed the mantle of our national superego, suppressed the salutary impulse of female sexuality, it was also largely responsible for the emergence of the driving, hyperactive woman, a heroine more congenial to current tastes than her sultrier sisters” (p. 92). That driving and hyperactive woman was ideally equipped for the verbal sparring and jousting that was required of screwball heroines and that served as generic shorthand for sexual desire and compatibility.

Haskell argues that the screwball cycle, despite of – or, indeed, because of – the restrictions of the Production Code, granted greater freedoms to its female characters, placing its romantic couples on apparently even footing. In order to make the “battle of the sexes” a fair fight, Haskell argues, women in screwball comedies were frequently portrayed as men’s equals. In some instances, this was achieved through class differences – making the woman wealthier than the man, as in *It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*, and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940): “Enhanced by independent wealth,” Haskell writes, these women “can talk to men and give as good as they get” (p. 12). Even where wealth was not used to level the gender playing field, “the movies seemed to be saying that because men are secure, women can outsmart them without unsexing them,” Haskell observes, “and because women are secure, they can act smart without fearing reprisals, or the loss of femininity” (p. 129). Haskell argues that that security was “largely mythic” given the economic and political realities of the era, “but the breezy confidence was a compensation for a powerlessness that afflicted society as a whole. It was not a male impotence for which they would have to compensate by reducing the status of women” (p. 130). That

breezy confidence, borne in part of the strictures of the Code, meant that romantic comedy couples of the nineteen thirties and forties were often free to explore the possibility of increased gender equality.

Grindon argues that the screwball movies “recognised the equality of men and women in love rather than relegating them to separate spheres” (p. 36). This subversion of social expectations was central to the screwball movie’s conflict and its resolution, Grindon writes:

The weaker sex moved beyond the restrictions of the domestic, and the man strode into the world with a woman at his side. Female independence, and the couple’s mutual interests and shared activities, welded the partnership into an emotional union that diminished restrictive gender roles. Both the man and the woman recognized in the beloved a screwball liberation that together, and only as a couple, they could realize (p. 37).

However, analysing the violence in the screwball cycle, Sikov notes that it is gendered, in that it occurs as a response to the equality that women enjoy as a result of their even economic footing. Grindon corroborates this account, arguing that the screwball heroine is quite independent, be it independently wealthy or merely mouthy and bold, but that “the heroine’s relative independence is countered all too often by punishing, resentful heroes whose punching fists, spanking palms, and generally threatening mouths serve as the forces of masculine reaction” (p. 29). The physical violence in the screwball cycle, then, was a way to both express and police or punish women’s increasing gender equality; “flirtation,” Grindon observes, “arose from the mutual hostility of the couple driven by the struggle of the woman for greater social autonomy” (p. 34). Grindon argues that “the battle of the sexes highlighted gender as the conflict central to the cycle” (p. 34). Though depictions of gender, sex, and power in the movies in the screwball cycle restricted the freedom of female characters in some ways, they increased it in others; however, the hostility to women’s equality, to women who “give as good as they get,” in Haskell’s phrasing, are central to the narratives of the screwball cycle.

Accounting for the screwball cycle: cultural context and the Production Code

As Glitre notes, the screwball cycle emphasized fun (p. 48), and though some scholars (Kendall 1990, Mortimer 2009) argue this emphasis came about as a reaction to the grim national mood during the Great

Depression, others (Grindon 2011, Sikov 1989) argue that the Production Code had a far greater influence on the genre, and on the creation of the screwball cycle, than did the sociocultural or political climate.

Kendall argues that the Great Depression accounts for the fun-focused and escapist tone of the cycle. The Depression had left many Americans out of work and starving, Kendall explains, as well as questioning the stability of the American dream and the very idea of American capitalism. Romantic comedies of that era, then, Kendall believes, “responded to their audiences’ loss of faith by making a virtue of personality traits usually thought of as feminine – a moral subtlety, an unashamed belief in the validity of emotions” (pp. xiv-xv). Kendall argues that screwball heroines were shaped by the off-screen reality of the Depression and the consequent grim national mood of Depression-era America:

This genre used the heroine to articulate the good impulses at the bottom of the American soul, and it used the heroine’s romance with a charming but psychologically underdeveloped young man to dramatize a rapprochement between the good and the more negligent impulses. Put another way, Depression romantic comedies responded to their audiences’ loss of faith by making a virtue of personality traits usually thought of as feminine – a moral subtlety, an unashamed belief in the validity of emotions (xiv-xv).

Grindon observes that the movies of the screwball cycle “expressed an optimism associated with Franklin Roosevelt’s energetic New Deal” (p. 32), and reflected the impact of the new U.S. President’s “rall[ying] the nation behind a series of federal programs trying to revive the national economy” (p. 32). Grindon explains that in spite of – or perhaps because of – the Great Depression, optimism was common in the screwball comedy. However, the Depression nonetheless influenced interactions between the central couple:

The screwball comedies were set in Depression America and portrayed the economic distress marking the 1930s. They featured characters like [*It Happened One Night*’s] Peter Warne, who had just been fired, or others like [*Twentieth Century*’s] Oscar Jaffe, threatened with bankruptcy. But these familiar challenges were portrayed in a spirit of comic fun and with a belief that the crisis would be mastered (p. 32).

Mortimer also argues that extra-cinematic forces played a significant role in the development of the screwball cycle and of its major narrative preoccupations. “The outbreak of war resulted in a gradual

shifting of emphasis as the screwball comedy evolved to reflect the times,” Mortimer writes (p. 12). Because Hollywood tends to lag slightly behind current events and cultural changes, “tending to take time to catch up in representing wider concerns in its output,” production and release of screwball movies continued into the Depression (p. 12). “Screwball comedies continued to deal with the glamour and shenanigans of the American upper classes into the 1940s,” Mortimer explains. However, “with the outbreak of the Second World War, with America joining the hostilities in 1941, the themes and narratives shifted, reflecting a concern with the new gender politics stemming from the movement of women out of the home and into work” (p. 13). This resulted, Mortimer argues, in the rise of another element common in the screwball cycle, the heroine as a working woman. The rise of the working woman demonstrates the influence of economic and political reality on Hollywood’s depictions of gender, class, and the intersections thereof. As the global economy crumbled and millions of Americans found themselves out of work and on breadlines, and then, as American women entered the wartime labour force en masse, Mortimer explains, audiences could hardly be expected to sympathize with heiresses and independently wealthy heroines who did not work for a living. With the economic climate influencing audience reception of leading ladies of leisure, the romantic comedy once again adapted.

Sikov (1989) however, disagrees with these accounts of the screwball cycle, arguing that the institution of the Production Code had an equal or greater influence on the development of the cycle. Sikov counters what he calls the standard analysis, which holds that screwball comedies were escapist fantasies that grew out of the audience’s need to escape the grim reality of the Great Depression:

It's certainly true that comedies can take your mind off trouble, but there is really no evidence that Depression audiences liked comedies and musicals more than melodramas, historical dramas, or horror films. All kinds of movies were popular during the thirties. If audiences were simply paying for a means of escape, they were escaping frequently into a world in which mobsters gunned each other down (*Scarface*, [Hawks] 1932), gigantic apes terrorized Manhattan (*King Kong*, [Cooper & Schoedsack] 1933), and neurotic women ruined their lives (*Stella Dallas*, [Vidor] 1937)... *Wee Willie Winkie* ([Ford] 1937) was a huge hit, but so was *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* ([Dieterle] 1939) (p. 16).

Sikov argues that while the economic concerns of the Great Depression certainly shaped the narratives and tone of the screwball comedies, they were not the only, or even the most powerful, forces at work. “Despite the fact that most screwball heroes and heroines either have, acquire, or simply witness the effects of a lot of cash at some point,” Sikov writes, “screwball comedies usually have as much to do with sex (or its absence) as with money” (p. 19). It was the Production Code, as much as the Depression, Sikov argues, that shaped the screwball comedy and in particular shaped the ways that men and women related to one another on screen: “If screwball comedy has to be traced to a single real-world event” – and Sikov expresses doubt that such an attribution is advisable – “that event would be the establishment in 1934 of the now infamous Production Code” (p. 20). Indeed, the screwball comedy, Sikov writes, is built around one rule – “hatred is no reason to give up on a relationship” (p. 15) – and builds toward one central, “implicit but ultimate goal” (p. 32), which was “to have sex – legal, off-screen, code-sanctioned sex” (p. 32). Thus, he argues, while the desire to distract and entertain downtrodden and economically distressed Depression-era audiences surely played a role in shaping the screwball comedy, the Code had an equal if not greater influence on the narratives told in those movies, and particularly on their representations of gender, sex, and power.

As these accounts suggest, scholars differ in their explanations of the most powerful force in shaping the narratives of screwball cycle and the ways in which the movies in that cycle conveyed those narratives. While Kendall, Mortimer, and Grindon argue that the screwball cycle was influenced most by the sociocultural climate in which it was produced, and particularly by dominant attitudes about class, gender, and work, and the economic reality of the Great Depression. Sikov, by contrast, argues that the cycle’s narrative preoccupations and representations of gender, sex, and power were shaped by overt policies requiring the depiction of gender, sex, and power in very restrictive ways and necessitating the creation of euphemisms and metaphors for sex and sexuality.

The screwball and the postfeminist cycles

Though scholars disagree on how best to account for the narrative preoccupations of the screwball cycle, and for its depictions of gender, sex, and power, it is evident that the screwball cycle influenced subsequent cycles in the genre, including the postfeminist cycle. As Grindon observes, “the screwball continues to exert an influence on Hollywood romantic comedy to this day” (p. 38). In the postfeminist cycle, romantic comedies feature many of the same narrative preoccupations that characterize the screwball cycle, including the “battle of the sexes” subplot (*The Ugly Truth*, *The Proposal*), the violence between the lovers (*The Bounty Hunter*, *What Happens in Vegas*), and the reunion of estranged lovers (*Sex and the City*, *Did You Hear About the Morgans?*). The screwball cycle clearly laid these narrative foundations, and the perception of the screwball cycle as a “golden age” of the genre contributes to the durability of these narratives in the genre in its contemporary state. Similarly, some romantic comedies in the postfeminist cycle are explicitly marketed as heirs to the legacy of the screwball cycle: one DVD case for *The Ugly Truth* quotes a review that calls the movie “a sassy screwball comedy.”

While the postfeminist sensibility – and particularly, dominant postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – shape the depiction of gender, sex, and power in postfeminist cycle, so too do the preceding cycles in the genre. As Grindon argues, a cycle often forms in response or in resistance to preceding cycles (p. 25), and as Jeffers McDonald (2007) notes, the Hollywood romantic comedy is frequently self-reflexive (p. 2), resulting in subsequent and contemporary romantic comedies making frequent reference to previous romantic comedies. This is especially true of the screwball cycle, which marks the beginning of the Hollywood romantic comedy genre, and laid the narrative foundations of the genre for subsequent cycles. Though in my third case study I briefly explore how the sex comedy cycle and the nervous romance cycle inform the postfeminist cycle’s depictions of sex, the other cycle that requires particular attention in an examination of the postfeminist romantic comedy is that which immediately preceded the postfeminist cycle, the neo-traditional cycle, so named by Jeffers McDonald. In the next section, I analyse depictions of gender, sex, and power in the movies of the neo-traditional cycle, and demonstrate how that cycle influenced the one that immediately followed it.

The neo-traditional cycle

The neo-traditional cycle, which Jeffers McDonald marks as beginning at the end of the 1980s and persisting until well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, spans, as she notes, “three American presidencies and their various, varying historical and social contexts, including the full emergence of the AIDS crisis, the reassertion of ‘family values,’ the rise of the religious right and a corresponding emphasis on sexual caution, monogamy and abstinence” (p. 88). Grindon expands on this subject, arguing that the neo-traditional cycle’s “more conservative approach to intimate relations on screen parallels the broader social trends shaping American life” (p. 58). Grindon, like Jeffers McDonald, points to the AIDS crisis, as well as to the rise of US President Ronald Reagan, the fall of the Soviet Union, and a rising divorce rate in the United States, which, after rising throughout the twentieth century, plateaued in 1980 and began to fall, continuing that trajectory for the next twenty-five years (p. 58).

This cultural and social context, as I explore below, shaped the depiction of gender, sex, and power in the neo-traditional cycle – which in turn influenced the depiction of those themes in the postfeminist cycle. Jeffers McDonald argues that the neo-traditional cycle represents a return to many of the characteristics of the screwball cycle after approximately a decade of “radical” or “nervous” romances that questioned the relevance of the “happy ending,” and, indeed, led to questions about the possibility of the genre’s survival (Henderson 1978). The neo-traditional cycle is “a backlash against the ideologies of the radical film alongside a maintenance of its visual surfaces” (Jeffers McDonald p. 91). Jeffers McDonald observes that because it does not engage in “a forward development or evolution of a previous form” (p. 86), the neo-traditional cycle defies the usual pattern of cycles in this genre:

While each manifestation inflected the conventions of the previous group in a pursuit of its own preoccupations, the neo-traditional romantic comedy does not take up and twist the concerns of the previous sub-genre’s films: it instead acts as if movies like *The Graduate* [Nichols 1967] and *Annie Hall* never existed. The neo-traditional romantic comedy elects to ignore that films have ended with the lovers apart, or together but possibly only temporarily (p. 86).

As Jeffers McDonald explains, the neo-traditional cycle breaks with tradition in another significant way: its length. It is “not so much a significant sub-genre as the dominant current form of the genre. It has defied the roughly decade-long supremacy which each of the other types of romantic comedy enjoyed, having been the major form for nearly twenty years” (p. 86), Jeffers McDonald wrote of this cycle in 2007, though Grindon disagrees with this demarcation, and argues that the neo-traditional cycle, or as he terms it, “the reaffirmation of romance cycle” (p. 58) lasted only a decade, from 1986 until 1996. As I argue here, the neo-traditional romantic comedies constitute a cycle, albeit, as Jeffers McDonald notes, an unusually length one that exerts an enormous influence on the genre until the first decade of the twentieth century, when a new cycle – the postfeminist cycle – begins.

The neo-traditional cycle, Jeffers McDonald observes, “reasserts the old ‘boy meets, loses, regains girl’ structure, emphasizing the couple will be heterosexual, will form a lasting relationship, and that their story will end as soon as they do so” (p. 86). For nearly two decades, as Jeffers McDonald and Grindon argue, the genre’s chief project was to reiterate ideas that were dominant during the screwball and sex comedy cycles. This reiteration – which, Grindon argues, reaffirms the significance and centrality of heterosexual romance – was in part a response to the nervous romance cycle, which, as I note in the Introduction, questioned the foundational tenets of the Hollywood romantic comedy, as in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*, in which the central couple are not reunited in a generically conventional happy ending at the conclusion of the film. Relevant to my project, however, is how the neo-traditional cycle reasserts generic conventions after a decade of resistance in the form of the nervous romances. In this respect, the neo-traditional cycle bears a notable thematic resemblance to the screwball cycle and sex comedy cycle, and, as the cycle that immediately precedes the postfeminist romantic comedies, informs how gender, sex, and power are represented in this most recent cycle.

Gender, sex, and power in the neo-traditional cycle

The neo-traditional cycle, as its name suggests, has far more in common with the screwball cycle than with the cycles that immediately preceded it. This is particularly the case in its depictions of marriage, and of sex. Jeffers McDonald argues that movies in the neo-traditional cycle emphasize the union of the couple, depicting it as not only desirable, but as inevitable:

Recent films have stressed the inevitability of the successful coupling by using the word ‘wedding’ – *The Wedding Singer* [Coraci 1998], *The Wedding Planner*, *The Wedding Date* (Kilner 2005), *My Best Friend’s Wedding*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* [Zwick 2002]; by invoking a city, the prime location of love – *L. A. Story* [Jackson 1991], *Sleepless in Seattle* [Ephron 1993], *Maid in Manhattan* [Wang 2002]; or by linking a man and a woman’s name – *When Harry Met Sally...*, *Kate & Leopold* [Mangold 2001], *Alex & Emma* [Reiner 2003] (p. 90).

This emphasis on bringing the central couple together in a presumably monogamous and long-term romantic relationship that will, the movie either demonstrates or implies, result in marriage, can result in plot resolutions that feel forced. Writing about *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (Petrie 2003), Jeffers McDonald writes that the central couple, Ben and Andie, “must be seen to reconcile before the film ends... even though they have deceived each other” (p. 91), and the unconvincing and unsatisfying way in which this is achieved, she argues, is the result of the generic imperative that all couples in the neo-traditional cycle end the movie be united or reunited (one notable exception to this is *My Best Friend’s Wedding*). “The willingness to leave even a vaguely open ending,” present in the nervous romance cycle, “has totally gone; instead there must be no ambiguity about the reunion of the couple, it must be displayed, even if there remain many doubts about their real suitability together” (p. 91). Grindon concurs, writing that the neo-traditional cycle is “a reaction against the nervous romance,” and that in the neo-traditional cycle, “there is a move back to an emphasis on courtship over relationships, and the optimistic, happy ending reasserts itself with renewed conviction” (p. 58). The emphasis on (re)union, Jeffers McDonald, argues, is due in part to the resurgence of political and social conservatism that occurred in the United States during the period in which the neo-traditional cycle rose and persisted – the

emphasis on “family values,” the increasing prominence and influence of the religious right in cultural and political life, and the resulting widespread focus on abstinence, monogamy, and sexual “purity.”

In its depiction of sex, the neo-traditional cycle also represents a break from the cycles that immediately preceded it, and, in this, marks something of a return to the screwball cycle, in which, as I discuss earlier in this chapter, filmmakers necessarily went out of their way to avoid overtly depicting sex and to find covert ways to do so. “The contemporary neo-traditional romantic comedy,” Jeffers McDonald writes, “exhibits... a markedly different attitude to sex from any of its forerunners” (p. 97). In the neo-traditional cycle, Grindon observes, “so many of the revisionist qualities of the nervous romance which reflected social changes initiated in the 1960s, such as the more open and honest treatment of sex or a greater freedom, are being resisted” (p. 59). Whereas the romantic comedies of the 1970s positioned sex as “an index of individuality” (p. 97), the neo-traditional cycle “downgrades its importance” (p.97), while offering some substitutes for overt sexual activity – as Jeffers McDonald notes, these substitutes come not in the form of the banter and physical violence of the screwball cycle, but in the intense stares shared by the central couple in *Sleepless in Seattle* and the email correspondence between the central couple in *You’ve Got Mail* (Ephron 1998).

The neo-traditional cycle is characterised by this obscuring of or absence of sex, particularly for couples who are not already involved in long-term monogamous romantic relationships. The cycle “greatly de-emphasizes sexuality” (p. 97), and this de-emphasis “provides a real problem for the contemporary film since it is frequently devoted to depicting modern dating habits, which realistically must include sex” (p. 97). As a result, the movies in this cycle “have to work hard to find ways to explain why sex is not happening for its main couple, unless they are teenagers” (p. 97). The de-emphasis is part, Jeffers McDonald demonstrates, of the cycle’s “larger project of insisting that sex is meaningful only within a committed relationship” (p. 98), which is difficult to reconcile with “a surface realism about contemporary dating habits and sexual mores” (p. 98). The result of that larger project is that sex is far less common among the central couples in the movies in the neo-traditional cycle than it was in the cycles that preceded it, and in this way, the neo-traditional cycle resembles the screwball cycle, which, under the

strictures of the Production Code, left sex unseen or obliquely implied, or expressed in euphemisms and gags. In this description of *You've Got Mail*, a film from the neo-traditional cycle, the relationship between the central couple greatly resembles that of a screwball couple:

... both Kathleen and Joe have a live-in partner, but neither couple is seen ever having sex, despite bedroom scenes depicting them going to bed... whatever is happening in their overt relationships, it is clearly not as exciting as the clandestine email correspondence. No sex with Joe is thus more fulfilling for Kathleen than sex with Frank. (p. 97).

As I explore in my third case study, the postfeminist cycle's frequent and explicit depictions of sex can be understood as a reaction to the sexlessness of the neo-traditional cycle (though one hears echoes of the neo-traditional cycle when, in *Friends With Benefits*, a character tells his casual sex partner that he could accept never having sex with her again if it meant he could "have [his] best friend back").

The influence of the neo-traditional cycle on the postfeminist cycle, and the function of the latter as a response to the former, is evident in the postfeminist cycle's representation of women's professional power. The neo-traditional romantic comedy's treatment of power is noticeably hostile to women who in positions of authority, particularly in the workforce. Negra (2004), who observes that in the neo-traditional cycle, "retreatism has become a recognizable narrative trope" (p.4), also notes that movies in this cycle "have incorporated fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife or sweetheart in a hometown setting" (p. 4). She points to the romantic comedy *Sweet Home Alabama* (Tennant 2002) as an example of this trope. According to Negra, this narrative preoccupation parallels the larger cultural discourse about the effects of professional power on the women who wield it, and on the appropriate remedies for those effects: she describes the neo-traditional cycle as taking place in the context of "a culture that has visibly heightened its efforts to idealize mothering over the last decade while registering concerns about the compatibility of the 'female personality' and the corporate workplace" (p. 5). As part of this decidedly postfeminist response to the presence of women in the workforce – and in positions of power and authority in the workforce – Negra observes, neo-traditional romantic comedies contain "an emphasis on schooling women in the need to

scale back their professionalism lest they lose their femininity” (p. 6) – for example, *One Fine Day* (Hoffman 1996), *The Wedding Planner*, *Someone Like You* (Goldwyn 2001), *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie 2000), and *Six Days Seven Nights* (Reitman 1998). These “retrograde political implications,” as Grindon describes them (p. 60), are part of a larger trend designed “to counter the threat of female independence and to move women toward traditional female roles” (p. 59), and though some critics, as Grindon notes, view this trend as counteracted by more positive portrayals of women’s leadership, it is evident that “the reaffirmation of romance brings many traditional conventions back to the romantic comedy” (p. 60), in its depictions of women’s power as well as in its other depictions of gender, and of sex.

The neo-traditional cycle, in its treatment of gender, sex, and power, resembles the screwball cycle far more than it does the cycle that immediately preceded it; in the neo-traditional cycle, the desirability and inevitability of permanent romantic coupling is emphasized, as is the superiority of sex within marriage or similarly committed relationships. Though my argument in this thesis is that the postfeminist cycle is shaped by postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power, it is also informed by prior cycles. For this reason, an understanding of the influence of the neo-traditional cycle on the postfeminist cycle is essential to my analysis of how gender, sex, and power are depicted in that latter cycle.

From neo-traditional cycle to postfeminist cycle

Though different in significant ways, the neo-traditional and postfeminist cycles bear notable resemblances in their treatment of gender, sex, and power. As I explore in my first case study, the postfeminist cycle’s depiction of women who wield professional power, and particularly of unmarried career women, bears a notable resemblance to that of the neo-traditional cycle, with both cycles displaying ambivalence and often outright hostility toward women who have careers that grant them professional authority. The postfeminist cycle’s depiction of these women as emotionally stunted and

unlikeable, though it is shaped in important ways by postfeminist attitudes toward unwed career women, has its roots in the cycle that directly preceded it, and in the screwball cycle.

Just as the neo-traditional cycle does, the postfeminist cycle displays an insistence on bringing couples together in romantic unions by the end of the movie, regardless of how incompatible those couples might appear to be. In the sample of movies I examine in this thesis, there is only one movie that does not explicitly conclude with the central couple united or reunited: *The Break-Up*. Additionally, the postfeminist cycle trend of ensemble romantic comedies (*Love Actually*, *He's Just Not That Into You*, *Valentine's Day*, *New Year's Eve*) allows for the union of multiple couples in a single movie, which results in the repetition of the "happy ending" several times in one film, thereby emphasising the narrative importance of long-term heterosexual romantic relationships that, presumably, will result in marriage (only one of these movies features a gay or lesbian couple). However, despite its emphasis on the "happy ending," the postfeminist cycle, unlike the neo-traditional cycle, emphasizes sex, and particularly sex outside of committed romantic relationships. As I explore in some detail in my third case study, casual sex is a common theme in the postfeminist cycle, though this casual sex, it bears noting, often (eventually) results in a monogamous romantic relationship in these movies. The tendency to de-emphasize sex, which characterizes the movies of the neo-traditional cycle, is not a feature of the postfeminist cycle, which contains a number of "raunch" romantic comedies that include a good deal of sex outside of monogamous relationships, most notably the films of the Apatovian canon (*Knocked Up*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*). While Grindon argues that this sex is grotesque, that its power is "to humiliate, distort and infantilize" (p. 63), rather than to "bind the couple in a fruitful partnership in which self-sacrifice and tenderness elevate their union" (p. 63), he excludes from this analysis the many instances in the neo-traditional cycle in which couples have sex that serves the latter purpose, or in which couples, as Jeffers McDonald demonstrates, do not have sex at all.

Though every cycle in the Hollywood romantic comedy genre is shaped by the sociocultural climate in which it is produced, it is also essential to consider the role of previous cycles in influencing

each cycle's narrative preoccupations and, in this case, the depiction of gender, sex, and power. As I demonstrate in this thesis, the postfeminist cycle is certainly influenced by larger extra-cinematic debates about these issues. However, it would be unwise to ignore the role of the history of the genre, notably the screwball cycle and the neo-traditional cycle, in influencing the postfeminist cycle and its representations of gender, sex, and power. The screwball cycle laid a foundation, establishing many of the narrative conventions of the Hollywood romantic comedy, particularly in its portrayals of romantic and sexual interactions and the numerous metaphors and euphemisms it employed to convey the sexual tension and attraction between its heroes and heroines. The neo-traditional cycle, which after several decades of changes to the genre, marked a return to many of the screwball cycle's narrative preoccupations and portrayals of gender, sex, and power, immediately preceded the postfeminist cycle chronologically. Therefore, the history of the genre, and especially these two cycles, cannot be neglected in an analysis of the various forces that shape the postfeminist cycle's treatment of gender, sex, and power.

In the following chapters, my three case studies, I examine how three movies released between 2005 and 2011 screen postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power and, in so doing, demonstrate the existence of the new and heretofore largely unexamined cycle, the postfeminist cycle. I begin with *The Ugly Truth*, using the film to explore how the postfeminist sensibility – in addition to the history of the genre – has shaped the genre's contemporary representation of power, particularly when that power is exercised by women.

Case Study 1: *THE UGLY TRUTH*

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to address the first of my subsidiary research questions, which concerns the postfeminist cycle's depiction of unwed career women, and how that depiction is shaped by and reinforces postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and, particularly, power. In this chapter, after briefly summarizing the plot of the film, I place *The Ugly Truth*'s depiction of a single career woman in generic and historical context, and then in the context of larger cultural shifts in American women's participation in the workforce, their representation in traditionally male-dominated fields, and their increased visibility in positions of political power. I then make the case for *The Ugly Truth* as a postfeminist narrative, with particular emphasis on the film's depiction of its heroine as a woman suffering as a result of the power and control granted to her by feminism, and saved by the removal, by men, of some of that power and control, a plot resolution that restores and reinforces gender hierarchy.

Plot summary

Abby (Katherine Heigl) is the producer of a morning news programme in Sacramento, California, that, despite her competent management, is struggling to compete in the ratings race. She is single, and romantically unsuccessful, largely, the movie suggests, because she is unattractively uptight and controlling (on a first date, she arrives having thoroughly researched the man: his level of educational attainment, his criminal record, even his credit score, and, she tells him, she discovered when she ran a background check on him that he possesses nine out of the ten attributes she deems necessary in a mate). When her superiors add to her show a segment called "The Ugly Truth," hosted by the gleefully misogynistic Mike (Gerard Butler), who dispenses advice about romance, dating, and sex, that offends Abby's feminist principles, she is horrified at being forced to work with him. However, desperate to attract the attention of her new neighbour, Colin, a handsome doctor, Abby consents to let Mike coach her, applying his "Ugly Truth" method to her own life. This includes a makeover, tips from Mike on how

to flirt with and seduce men, and allowing him to “produce” her first date with Colin, during which she wears an earpiece. To her surprise, Mike’s method works: Colin is attracted to the new, less feminist and less controlling version of Abby. However, as they work together, Abby discovers that Mike is not all that he seems: his blustering misogynist persona is merely a front, and in fact, he is sensitive and committed to his role as a father figure for his nephew. Mike also develops feelings for Abby. Abby reveals her true, uptight, controlling self to Colin and breaks up with him, but is unable to stop Mike, who believes she has chosen Colin over him, from leaving the TV station for a rival channel. Finally, Mike and Abby are reunited at a hot air balloon show that her programme and his new programme are both covering, and he declares his love for her. She quibbles with one of the words he uses in his declaration, and he responds, “Shut up. Yet again I just told you I’m in love with you, and you’re standing here giving me a vocabulary lesson.” When she asks him why he is in love with her, he responds, “Beats the shit out of me, but I am.”

***The Ugly Truth* in generic context**

The Ugly Truth, in its depiction of Abby’s career as interfering with her health, happiness, and romantic prospects, is in keeping with the generic theme of “the problem of the unwed woman,” identified by Harvey (1987). As Harvey uses it, it refers to the filmic treatment in 1930s Hollywood of a woman’s single status as a situation in desperate need of rectification (p. 7); as Taylor (2012) notes, “that single women are contested figures in the Western cultural imagination is nothing new” (p. 2). In contemporary romantic comedies, the problematically unwed woman takes a variety of forms: the woman herself may be desperate to find a husband (as in *Bridget Jones’s Diary*); alternatively, her friends and loved ones are eager for her to do so (*Life As We Know It*, *What Happens in Vegas*), while she insists that she is perfectly happy alone (*Just Like Heaven*, *The Proposal*). In this latter case, she is often being disingenuous, or has failed to realize yet that subconsciously, she is unhappy without a husband – but will come to this realization by the end of the movie, and will consequently a man with whom to form a long-term,

monogamous, and presumably marriage-bound relationship. In her comprehensive analysis of the depiction of the “competing, contradictory discourse around women’s singleness in popular culture” (p. 1), in which the single woman is alternately celebrated and denigrated or pathologised, Taylor argues that “when invoked in the public sphere, the idea of singleness appears with startling regularity as a problem to be rectified” (p. 6), and, though some postfeminist romantic comedies concern themselves with the rectification of a single man (*Made of Honour* [Weiland 2008], *Failure to Launch* [Dey 2006]), “singleness as a gendered form of difference” (p. 8), one that is represented as far more problematic in its feminine form than in the masculine. “The single woman,” Taylor argues, “remains a figure of profound difference, invoked as that which women fear either remaining or becoming” (p. 23). As I argue later in this chapter, in *The Ugly Truth*, the problem of the unwed woman is deployed in service of postfeminist ideas. However, any understanding of the depiction of unwed career women in the postfeminist cycle Hollywood romantic comedies requires an understanding of Abby’s cinematic antecedents, the earliest of which, as Harvey observes, appeared in and briefly before the screwball cycle. These first cinematic appearances of the problem of the unwed woman established the generic conventions of this narrative, many of which persist in later cycles, including the postfeminist cycle.

The screwball iterations of the problem of the unwed woman, and the ways in which the depiction of unwed career women as problematic was shaped by the larger historical context in which the screwball cycle was produced. As is the case in the postfeminist cycle, early depictions of problematically unwed women were shaped by social and political changes to the role of women in American society, and attendant fears about the threat that those changes posed to gender hierarchy.

While contemporary romantic comedies that deal with unwed women are for the most part set in the present and in the United States, the earliest incarnations were often set in fictional European countries or in the not-too-distant past. In the 1929 Ernst Lubitsch-directed romantic comedy *The Love Parade*, for example, the unwed woman is the Queen of a fictional European kingdom, a career woman in a position typically held by men, and she is under enormous social and political pressure to marry. As

Harvey describes it:

Once upon a time – in *Love Parade* – there was a mythical kingdom called Sylvania, whose ruler, Queen Louise (Jeanette MacDonald), was not married. Nor has she ever been married (she is very young). This fact entirely preoccupies, it seems, all the people of her kingdom, from elderly cabinet ministers to children in school to the band in the palace courtyard, which plays the wedding march under her bedroom window in spite of her express prohibition against such music. What can she do? The obsession is everywhere she turns. “Don’t tell me you weren’t talking about it,” she says, opening a meeting with her cabinet. “You’re always talking about it.” Talking about what? the cabinet ministers inquire innocently – playing dumb. But she knows – we know – that they were talking about it. In Sylvania, they always are... There is no escape. Even in dreams (pp. 7-8).

Queen Louise does escape the pressure to marry, however, when she takes as her prince consort a womanizing Count (Maurice Chevalier), whom she proceeds to “emasculate” (p. 8). Louise has agreed to marry, but she has not agreed to give up her control and authority, neither in the kingdom nor in the relationship, and the Count finds this interpersonal dynamic embarrassing, and eventually, intolerable. When he threatens to leave her and return to his roguish ways as a single man in Paris, Louise finally learns the importance of being a properly feminine woman and wife, and agrees to a more conventionally gendered marriage arrangement. She “submits at last,” Harvey writes, “to his husbandly authority. ‘My king!’ she exclaims as they embrace, and reprise the title song, before fadeout” (p. 11). The message of this movie, Harvey argues, is clear: women are meant to be married. When they are not, and particularly when they choose career over marriage, they upset the natural order of things. These women must be brought to heel, a narrative that has obvious roots in Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (1623). This bringing to heel often involves the sacrifice of the problematized power, which is happily relinquished in part or in full, in favour of marriage: Queen Louise realises that marriage fulfils her in a way that career, that power and authority, never could, and as a result, hardly experiences the sacrifice as a sacrifice at all. There are exceptions to these conventions, to be sure; in the screwball comedy *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940), Hildy (Rosalind Russell) chooses her first marriage and her career over a new marriage and a life

of suburban domesticity. Her estranged ex-husband Walter (Cary Grant) goads her about the dull, career-less life that awaits her if she proceeds with her second marriage, and after a frantic but exhilarating day spent reporting on a murder case with him, Hildy is persuaded to stay in the workforce (where, it bears noting, she works under Walter). *His Girl Friday*, however, is an exception: as Glitre (2006) notes in her discussion of “the career woman comedy,” “career woman” is frequently used as a synonym for “unmarried woman” or “single woman.” In these films, career and marriage are mutually exclusive for women.

As Glitre observes, the career woman comedy’s attitude to working women, and the persistence of the depiction of unwed career women as problematic throughout the screwball cycle, from the late 1930s until several years after the end of World War II, is unsurprising given the larger cultural context in which Hollywood romantic comedies of that era were made (Glitre p. 29). These movies were “primarily concerned with the changing role of women in the public sphere – a concern that was exacerbated by the unprecedented influx of women into the labour force during the war... the career woman characterization reflects the increasingly misogynistic tenor of American culture, transforming female power into a problem” (p. 29). In the career woman comedy, this misogynistic tenor manifests in multiple ways, including, as Haskell (1987) writes, with many films depicting career women as having a “hole in the centre of their lives, an emptiness that only love could fill” (p. 144). Indeed, career woman comedies do not merely transform women’s power into a problem, they depict it as pathological.

One of the reasons the career woman is unmarried is that she is not simply busy or bossy: she is abnormal, or indeed, ill. As Glitre explains, these movies depict women with careers as sick, devoid of an essential femininity, fooling themselves by aping masculinity. “The career woman comedy psychopathologises gender essentialism: practicality is naturally masculine in a man; in a woman, it is a sign of her repressed emotions and frigidity. Masculine rationality becomes feminine irrationality” (p. 31). In the postfeminist romantic comedy, this pathologising persists. As one feminist cultural commentator argued in an article about *The Ugly Truth*: “We’re meant to believe that being smart and female has made Abby insane. Abby speaks in grammatically correct sentences, knows who Desmond

Tutu is, uses the word ‘misogynist’ and identifies the way Mike treats her as ‘sexual harassment’ (it is). Therefore, she is lonely and man-hungry and has more or less constant tantrums” (Doyle 2009). Katherine Heigl, the actress who plays Abby, states in the DVD bonus material featurette “The Truth is Ugly: Capturing the Male and Female Perspectives,” which includes interviews with the stars, screenwriters, and director, that “we decided to make Abby just on the cusp of [Obsessive Compulsive Disorder], just a really uptight chick who is super organized, super on top of things, likes that kind control in every aspect of her life, but she tries to take that professionalism and those organizational skills into dating. And it makes her a little scary.” This element of the problem of the unwed woman was, as Haskell and Glitre argue, established early in the genre’s history, as was the solution to the problem: for the woman in question to retreat from the workforce into the home as a wife and presumably, as a mother. Because for most women career women comedies and in other in films of the screwball cycle, career and marriage are almost always mutually exclusive, leaving the workforce, thereby giving up their problematic power, is often depicted as the cure for their pathology. Once they choose healthy femininity (and with it, marriage) over unhealthy career (and with it, power and authority), they are able to be happy. They choose to return to hearth and home, leaving the public sphere behind (as Negra [2004] notes, and as I explore later in this chapter, this narrative of retreatism returns in the postfeminist cycle).

A further element of the problem of the unwed woman as depicted in the Hollywood romantic comedy is the notable distinction between women who have careers and women who hold jobs. This distinction was established in the screwball cycle and continues in the postfeminist cycle. Glitre, in her discussion of the screwball cycle, notes the distinction between “career women” and “working girls” (p. 29), and observes that the former, because they pose a greater threat to gender hierarchy, are more likely to be depicted as problematic than are the latter:

The primary difference is between wage labour and a salaried profession. Working girls in romantic comedy tend to be secretaries, shop assistants and waitresses. These jobs not only lack authority and public power, they are also conventionally ‘feminine’ roles, providing support, service, food and care. Although the job titles may have changed during the war crisis, the working girl’s function as assistant remains essentially the same. Implicitly, this kind of

employment is understood as an acceptable substitute for wifely duties, and it is assumed that the job will be put aside once the girl's real work (marriage) begins (p. 29).

Career women, on the other hand, do work that grants them authority and public power, usually in conventionally "masculine" roles (the semantic distinction – "girl" versus "woman" – is telling here). In *The Love Parade*, for example, the problematically unwed woman is a Queen. Glitre addresses this distinction, noting that the career woman of the screwball cycle committed multiple transgressions of gender norms of the era:

In the career woman comedy... the heroine's career tends to take precedence over all other aspects of her life, partly because her occupation is more usually understood as "men's" work. She is the managing executive, not the secretary; the magazine editor, not the model; the political correspondent, not the gossip columnist; the doctor, not the nurse. The gender distinction is two-fold, therefore, placing the heroine in a "male" profession and giving her a position of authority (rather than a "feminine" supporting role) (p. 30).

Where working girls have jobs that substitute for or prepare them for marriage, career women do work that, these movies imply, is in direct opposition to the work they will be expected to do as wives and mothers, raising the spectre that, since career and marriage are (portrayed as) mutually exclusive, they might never take up those essential and essentially feminine positions in the home.

In the postfeminist romantic comedy, the job-career dichotomy is no longer as prevalent as it once was, but the distinction continues, albeit more subtly. For the most part, the heroines in contemporary romantic comedies are committed to their work, and whether they have jobs or careers, it is no longer all but assumed that these heroines will leave the workforce after marrying or are otherwise romantically paired with the hero. However, the working girl-career woman division persists. As Negra (2009) writes, postfeminism has divided romantic comedy heroines into two groups. The first is "women in feminine jobs (art teacher, waitress, flight attendant): ...whose work places them in a clearly subordinate role and for whom any display of ambition would be out of character" (p. 87). The heroine in this category is, Negra observes, a "sweet, decent, traditionalist whose non-threatening work status is one

of her hallmark features” (p. 87). The postfeminist romantic comedy heroine whose work is not depicted as a barrier to marriage, or presented as a symbol (or symptom) of a pathology, is employed in the “working girl”-type jobs providing the support, service, nourishment and care that Glitre describes: party planner, wedding planner, caterer, baker, children’s book store owner, pet store owner, nurse or teacher. Heroines in this group, Negra observes, are “subordinate women” (p. 88), and “are often placed to speak the truth to a man in crisis, and they are represented as in possession of a serenity and composure that is essentially feminine. Their lack of a professionally threatening career, their symbolically or literally nurturing work... combine to powerfully idealize these women on postfeminist terms” (p. 88). Most problematically unwed women characters whose work is depicted as hindering their romantic prospects fall into the second category, of those who have “careers”: lawyers, television producers, journalists or reporters, doctors, stock brokers, corporate executives, and other traditionally masculine positions that endow them with authority and public power. In *The Ugly Truth*, Abby, a television producer on a morning show that, it seems, was once “hard-hitting” (as the reference to Desmond Tutu suggests) but is no longer, is nonetheless career-oriented and ambitious, and her work requires her to manage a cast of on-air talent. Her job is a conventionally “masculine” one that grants her a good deal of power, authority, and control (she literally does much of her work in a control room), and it is only when Mike is added to the cast of the show that she begins to lose this authority.

Romantic comedies in the postfeminist cycle, in their depiction of women’s professional power and authority as problematic – as harmful to their health, happiness, and romantic prospects – belong to a long generic tradition established early in the Hollywood romantic comedy tradition, in the years before and then throughout the screwball cycle. In order to analyse how *The Ugly Truth* and other postfeminist romantic comedies depict career women, it is necessary, then, to place them in generic and historic context, as I have done here.

The problem of the unwed woman in the postfeminist cycle

Exploring the representation of the problem of the unwed woman in the postfeminist cycle enables me to place *The Ugly Truth*'s depiction of Abby's power and her desire for control in generic and historic context. As I note above, the problem of the unwed woman is by now a well-established generic trait in the Hollywood romantic comedy, and while *The Ugly Truth* is a particularly extreme example of the postfeminist cycle's problematizing of women's power, it is certainly not the only example. In this section, I briefly outline the other six instances of the problematically unwed woman that occur in my representative sample.

In my sample of thirty contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies, there are four films that centre on the problem of the unwed woman, and by extension, on the effects of professional and public power and their attendant economic independence for women, on women's health, happiness, and romantic prospects. These movies are *What Happens in Vegas*, *The Proposal*, *The Ugly Truth*, and *Life As We Know It*. One other movie, *Valentine's Day*, features two supporting characters who are problematically unwed women. As my representative sample of films suggests, in the postfeminist cycle, the harried professional woman in her mid- or late-thirties, too busy and too bossy for a boyfriend, under pressure from her relatives and friends to find a husband, sometimes watching with ill-concealed yearning as her friends and sisters marry and become mothers, is a common feature.

In *The Proposal*, Sandra Bullock plays Margaret, a high-powered book editor. Margaret is excellent at her job, but she is so abrasive and cruel that she is hated and feared by everyone with whom she works. When she arrives at work in the morning, her colleagues are warned by a company-wide instant message that pops up on every computer screen on her floor: "It's here." When she is preparing to leave her office to walk around the floor, her assistant, Andrew (Ryan Reynolds), alerts her colleagues and subordinates with another message: "The witch is on her broom." Margaret is especially awful to Andrew; she is condescending, dismissive, and utterly inconsiderate of his time, abilities, and professional ambitions. When she is threatened with deportation to Canada, having risked her American visa in order to travel abroad to secure the rights to a bestselling book, she blackmails Andrew into

marrying her so that she can stay in the United States and continue working. Her brusqueness, while it makes her good at her job, makes her repellent to men (indeed, to most human beings). Her ability to do her job and her ability to attract men, then, are mutually exclusive. The implication is that developing the skills and traits necessary for career success has cost her the chance of attracting the opposite sex: for Margaret, career and marriage appear to be mutually exclusive. Mortimer observes that “*The Proposal* and *The Ugly Truth* are similar in their representation of successful career women as damaged and dysfunctional, needing the love of a man to recover their humanity and femininity” (p. 133). Similarly, Taylor (2012) notes that in postfeminist popular culture narratives about professional women, particularly those women whose work grants them authority in the workplace, “public/professional competency equals private/personal incompetency. This idea – that women’s success in the public sphere has come at the price of the private – resurfaces throughout the texts of postfeminist media culture” (p. 14). These narratives, Taylor writes, “arguably work to manage the threat posed by the woman without a man” (p. 14); this is certainly true of *The Proposal*. Margaret is an unwed career woman, and it is a problem.

In *What Happens in Vegas*, Cameron Diaz plays Joy, a high-powered stockbroker. She is excellent at her job, but she is so uptight, so tightly wound, and such a perfectionist, that people find it difficult to be around her. In her first appearance on the screen, Joy and her fiancé (Jason Sudeikis) are leaving the house for work in the morning, and she is talking rapidly, overwhelming him with her plans. She suggests that they go out to dinner that night to discuss their upcoming wedding. “Did you just make a plan to make a plan?” he asks her. At her job on the trading floor, Joy is aggressive, competitive, and highly organized. It yields excellent results for her, professionally, at least, as not long into the movie, she is put up for a promotion. But her penchant for organization and for aggressive competition, while they make her good at her job, make her repellent to men. Her ability to do her job, and her ability to attract men, then, are mutually exclusive. As in *The Proposal*, the implication is that developing the skills and traits necessary for career success has cost the career woman the chance of attracting a husband. Joy is an unwed career woman, and it is a problem.

In *Life As We Know It*, Katherine Heigl plays Holly, a provedore who owns her own business.

Holly is single, though not for lack of trying: when we first meet her, she is on a disastrous first date with a man who arrives an hour late, fails to make dinner reservations, picks a fight with her, and arranges a tryst with another woman while still in Holly's presence. Holly is in her early thirties, and is beginning to feel social pressure to find a husband. At her goddaughter's birthday party, she is asked by a series of guests if she is in a romantic relationship. Holly replies that she is not. "Well, you've got your baking, so... there's that," says one guest pityingly, trailing off in embarrassment and excusing herself from the conversation. It is not implied that Holly's work has made her unmarriageable – the movie offers no explanation for her single status – but the fact that she is unwed is depicted as problematic nonetheless. Holly is an unwed career woman, and it is a problem, for the people around her as well as for her.

The problem of the unwed woman also appears in *Valentine's Day*, though because the film is an ensemble romantic comedy with no one central love story, the problem is not at the centre of the narrative. However, one of the narrative threads to which the most screen time is devoted is that of Reed, a florist played by Ashton Kutcher, who proposes to his girlfriend Morley (Jessica Alba) on the morning of Valentine's Day. Morley is a high-powered corporate executive of some kind (the film never indicates what it is that she does for a living, only that it requires her to wear suits and go to meetings, and that it is quite lucrative). When we first see Morley, she is asleep in bed, her Blackberry still in her hand (this is a common trope: in *The Ugly Truth*, Abby works late into the night and falls asleep in bed with her laptop next to her). At the beginning of *Valentine's Day*, Morley accepts Reed's proposal, but by the end of the movie, she has changed her mind, telling Reed that she is not ready to get married yet. "You know, the first call I made after you proposed," she tells him, by way of explanation, "was to my office, to confirm my ten o'clock meeting." Morley explains that she does not want to get married yet because she has not yet achieved the career goals she wants to reach. Work and marriage, then, are depicted as mutually exclusive, and Morley has chosen the former.

Valentine's Day features another problematically unwed career woman: Jessica Biel plays Kara, a public relations strategist whose firm represents professional athletes. She is single on Valentine's Day, a fact that makes her completely miserable. She is so unhappy that she makes herself ill by eating an entire

heart-shaped box of chocolates in one sitting. “I have my best friend, candy,” she says, predicting that she will die fat and alone, with rotten teeth. Despite the fact that she has plans to spend the night of February 14th with her friends, she concludes that the absence of a heterosexual romantic relationship renders all her other human relationships meaningless. “My closest relationship is with my Blackberry,” she says, echoing Morley’s attachment to her own mobile device. “Thank God it vibrates!” Kara is so miserable at being single that toward the end of the movie, she violently beats a heart-shaped piñata until it lies in shreds on the floor. Kara is an unwed career woman, and for her, that is the worst problem imaginable.

Repeatedly in the postfeminist cycle, unwed women with careers that grant them professional authority and financial independence are depicted as unhappy, unhealthy, and romantically imperilled: as Negra (2009) writes, “the contemporary chick flick stages the discovery over and over again that the professional life is a ‘bad bargain’ and in so doing the films simultaneously give expression to widely perceived sensibilities about the duress of the contemporary workplace and pander to hoary antifeminist notions that women’s involvement in paid labour disturbs the natural order of things” (p. 88). However, perhaps none of these postfeminist narratives inspired as much popular (that is to say, non-scholarly) feminist ire as *The Ugly Truth*. In the feminist blogosphere, post after post criticised the movie for its depiction of working women, and for its messages about what those women “really” want and need (The Feminist Texican 2009, Unapologetically Female 2009, Women’s Glib 2009). As I note in the Preface, it was *The Ugly Truth* that served as the catalyst for the journalistic project that inspired this thesis, and fired my urge to not only fill a gap in scholarship, but to better understand how and why a romantic comedy like *The Ugly Truth* came to be. Of the five movies in the sample that contained problematically unwed women, *The Ugly Truth* was the most emblematic – or perhaps the most memorably problematic – and for this reason, it is the focus of this case study.

As I demonstrate, in the previous chapter, the problem of the unwed woman is a generic feature that dates to before the screwball era, and that was repeated during that cycle with sufficient frequency as to establish certain generic patterns, many of which persist into or reappear in the postfeminist cycle. In the postfeminist cycle, as my representative sample demonstrates, the problem of the unwed woman, and

particularly the unwed career woman whose career grants her professional power and authority, features prominently. Understanding Abby's cinematic antecedents and her cinematic contemporaries contributes to an understanding of how the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy brings postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and, especially in the case of *The Ugly Truth*, power, to celluloid life. In the following section, I place *The Ugly Truth* in extra-cinematic context, exploring the social, cultural, and political context in which this movie, and the postfeminist cycle more broadly, were produced.

***The Ugly Truth* in extra-cinematic context**

I next briefly examine the larger social, cultural, and political backdrop against which these movies were produced, particularly with regard to women's participation in the workforce and their increased visibility in the public sphere and in positions of political influence. I also discuss media responses to these shifts, and place them in dialogue with scholars who argue that postfeminist popular culture arose in part as a response to said shifts and the threats they represent to gender hierarchy.

"A Woman's Nation"

In 2009, the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning Washington, D. C. think tank, released a report called *A Woman's Nation Changes Everything* (also referred to as "The Shriver Report"). The report publicised the finding that in 2009, for the first time in American history, women accounted for "half of all U.S. workers and mothers are the primary breadwinners or co-breadwinners in nearly two-thirds of American families" (p. 17). It explained that the increase in women's presence in the workforce has been dramatic; in 1967, women made up one-third of the United States workforce. And, as, the full title of the report suggests, this increased presence has significant and far-reaching implications for American economics, politics and culture:

It changes how women spend their days and has a ripple effect that reverberates throughout our nation. It fundamentally changes how we all work and live, not just women but also their families, their co-workers, their bosses, their faith institutions, and their communities. Quite

simply, women as half of all workers changes everything (p.17).

Over the course of a generation, then, opportunities and roles for many American women changed dramatically. Though the economic recovery from the 2008 global financial crisis would increase the number of American women in low wage jobs (National Women's Law Center, 2013), this trend would not begin until after the 2009 release of *The Ugly Truth*. The Shriver Report provides a concise summary of the social and cultural context in which *The Ugly Truth* and other romantic comedies in the postfeminist cycle were being produced and viewed.

In addition to unprecedented formal labour market participation by American women, the past several decades have seen an increase in the number of women in visible positions of power, particularly in American political institutions, which similarly represents a dramatic shift from 1967. The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, in particular, saw numerous high profile "firsts" in United States politics. In 1993, Janet Reno became the first woman to serve as Attorney General, and in 1997, Madeleine Albright became the first woman to serve as Secretary of State (and was followed in this role by Condoleezza Rice, and then by Hillary Rodham Clinton). In 2000, Clinton became the first former First Lady to win elected office and, after serving as a Senator for the state of New York, became the first woman to win a Presidential primary election, in 2008. In 2007, Nancy Pelosi became the first woman to be elected as Speaker of the House, and between 1994 and 2008, women's representation in both houses of US Congress rose with every electoral cycle. By 2010, America had seen both major political parties select a woman as their Vice Presidential candidate, and had seen four women serve on the United States Supreme Court, a four hundred per cent increase since Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman to be appointed to the position of Associate Justice, in 1981. In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, then, there was a range of visible powerful women in the United States, particularly in the very public and powerful sphere of politics.

Screening a woman's nation: representation and resistance

In response to these dramatic shifts, large segments of popular culture adopted the postfeminist sensibility; taking, as McRobbie argues, the feminism that facilitated this progress for women as a given, while simultaneously undermining feminist ideas. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, Hollywood romantic comedies, like other forms of American popular culture, bore the marks of the dramatic shift that occurred when millions American women departed the private sphere and arrived, en masse, in the public one, be it in quotidian workplace participation or in highly visible political roles. Douglas (2010) notes that television, in particular, provided numerous examples of women with political clout and professional heft, citing as examples of “female power” in popular culture:

... the hands-on-her-hips, don’t-even-think-about-messing-with-me Dr. Bailey on *Grey’s Anatomy* [Rhimes 2005-], or S. Epatha Merkerson as the take-no-prisoners Lieutenant Anita Van Buren on *Law & Order* [1990-2010], Agent Scully on *The X-Files* [1993-2002], Brenda Leigh Johnson as “the chief” on *The Closer* [Duff 2005-12], C.C.H. Pounder on *The Shield* [Ryan 2002-8] or even Geena Davis as the first female president on the short-lived series *Commander in Chief* [Lurie 2005-6] (p. 4).

In contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies, the widespread presence of women in the workplace and in the public sphere is also taken as a given: the lady of leisure, common in the screwball era (*It Happened One Night*, *Bringing Up Baby*), is no more, and the relatable romantic comedy heroine now works full-time (though, as Negra [2009] notes, many romantic comedy heroines are economically privileged enough to have the “choice” to retreat from the workforce as a solution their work-life balance conflict [p. 7]). This celluloid shift was certainly shaped by the new reality in the United States: the majority of adult women worked outside the home in 2011, and so too do contemporary romantic comedy heroines, with very rare exceptions.

However, as I demonstrate above, the problem of the unwed woman, the depiction of women’s increased economic and political power as problematic, persists, a result of the postfeminist sensibility that has arisen in response to the perceived and real threats that feminism poses to gender hierarchy. In popular culture beyond romantic comedies, Negra (2004) finds that in the late 1990s and in the first

decade of the twentieth century, depictions of unwed career women in popular culture have been shaped by the “rightward drift” in American culture, resulting in a fixation on solving the problem of the unwed woman, a fixation that was frequently expressed, as is often the case in postfeminism, in the language of feminism:

The standardization of formulae for depicting single femininity as a plight is further suggested by the primetime debut on ABC in June, 2006 of *How to Get the Guy* [Kim 2006] The series profiled four single women who under the direction of two “love coaches” (a journalist and a television personality) pursue dating opportunities in San Francisco... the focus is on an “empowered” response to the problem of singlehood. On ABC.com the series was described as following: “The women take hold of their own romantic destinies and declare to the world that they are ready, willing, and able to do anything and everything they have to do in order to find true love” (p. 62).

Here, the influence of the postfeminist sensibility, with its ideological foundation in neoliberalism, is clear: women are encouraged to use the self-esteem and self-confidence, and the sense of entitlement bestowed on them by feminism, for personal ends – that are also very much in keeping with traditional gender hierarchy. In scripted television and animated features, too, the problem of the unwed woman also loomed large (Dundes 2001, Kim 2001). Douglas also notes the hostility toward unmarried career women that manifested in popular culture. Though popular culture provided many examples of women with professional and political power, and insisted – wrongly, Douglas argues – that gender equality was a *fait accompli* (p. 5), while expressing hostility toward women who wield that power. “What courses through our culture,” Douglas argues, “is the belief – and fear – that once women have power, they turn into Cruella De Vil [*101 Dalmatians*, Herek 1996] or Miranda Priestly in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Frankel 2006) – evil, tyrannical, hated, unloved” (p. 22). In postfeminist popular culture, feminism has triumphed, and women now wield the same level of professional power as men do – but, these cautionary tales ask, at what cost?

In Negra’s view, American popular culture’s response, in film and television in particular, to the rise of a “woman’s nation,” was resistance, in the form of “heightened pressures to define women’s lives in terms of romance and marriage” (Negra 2004, p. 3), which she calls “the most intense cultural coercion

for women to retreat from the workplace since the post-World War II period” (p. 3) – that is, since the screwball era. As Negra and Douglas (2010) describe them, postfeminist responses to problematically unwed women bear striking resemblances to screwball cycle-era responses. Douglas notes that images of women in positions of authority in contemporary popular culture are often “omens about women in power being emotionally stunted and unnatural – the bitch – or too tied to their feelings and instincts” (p. 289), and during this period, Negra writes, women whose lives resemble those of the characters played by Katherine Heigl, Cameron Diaz, and Sandra Bullock – “well-educated professional white [women]...unencumbered by feminist dogma about [their] entitlement to non-familial personal rewards” – were encouraged to recede from professional and public life and replace paid work with domesticity “in a display of... ‘family values’” (p. 3). During this era, Negra argues, retreatism became “a recognizable narrative trope” thanks to a proliferation of celluloid “fantasies of hometown return in which a heroine gives up her life in the city to take up again the role of daughter, sister, wife or sweetheart in a hometown setting” (p. 5). These are two postfeminist responses to the problem of the unwed career woman: to portray her unwomanly and unwell; and to strip her of her power by stripping her, with her apparent eventual consent, of her career. As in the case of *The Ugly Truth*, as I demonstrate later in this chapter, another response is to strip her of control of her own body – again, with her apparent eventual or retroactive consent or enjoyment.

My purpose in examining *The Ugly Truth* against an extra-cinematic backdrop has been to place the postfeminist romantic comedy’s depiction of women in positions of professional authority in context, by examining the social, cultural, and political shifts in women’s off-screen experiences that fuelled postfeminism, which takes gender equality as a given, while also undermining it in order to reinforce gender hierarchy. In the very year that *The Ugly Truth* was released in cinemas, the United States was declared “a woman’s nation,” confirming postfeminist claims that feminism had triumphed and was therefore no longer necessary, and stoking fears about the damage already done by feminism to gender hierarchy. It also provided an ideal context for a postfeminist romantic comedy like *The Ugly Truth* –

whose depictions of a powerful woman as unhappy, unhealthy, unlovable, and ultimately enjoying being stripped of some of her power and control, are the focus of the next section of this chapter.

***The Ugly Truth* as postfeminist narrative**

In this section, I explore the various ways in which *The Ugly Truth* functions as a postfeminist narrative: by taking feminism into account only to refute it and declare it unnecessary, misguided, and damaging; by utilizing irony, nostalgia, and the “choice” implicit in McRobbie’s postfeminist masquerade to pre-empt feminist critique; and by depicting Abby as complicit in, and ultimately enjoying, her loss of authority and control – all of which permit the restoration and reinforcement of gender hierarchy by the end of the film. In particular, I focus on the scene in which Abby’s control over her own body is quite literally taken out of her hands and placed in the hands of Mike and of another male, an experience Abby finds pleasurable. This examination of *The Ugly Truth* contributes to an understanding of how the postfeminist cycle is shaped by the larger postfeminist sensibility in its depiction of gender, sex, and especially of power.

Undermining feminism in The Ugly Truth

As I note in the Introduction, McRobbie (2004) describes a postfeminist narrative as one that “positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (p. 255). This is certainly the case in *The Ugly Truth*, which undermines Abby’s feminism, depicting it as out-dated and irrelevant in the face of what it depicts as women’s full equality, and insufficient in the face of obvious essential differences between men and women.

The Ugly Truth positions Abby as a beneficiary of feminism: an upper middle class white woman who has clearly had access to a tertiary education and who, as a result, has a career that grants her financial independence, rendering marriage optional rather than economically necessary. In her position as a television producer, she possesses a good deal of professional authority – at the start of the movie, at

least. She hires, fires, and manages the on-air talent on her show and decides what content will go on air, and her colleagues appear to respect her abilities as a producer. In this regard, feminist progress is taken into account, and is positively represented, even if it will be shortly be undermined.

Abby also speaks the language of feminism; as Doyle (2009) notes, she accurately identifies Mike's treatment of her as sexual harassment, and correctly identifies his worldview as misogynistic. Yet the film depicts this feminism as out-dated and irrelevant in the face of her obvious equality: she is, after all, the boss. She has achieved equality as an individual; what need could she have for a continued collective, politicised feminist movement? Given Abby's individual success – here we see the influence of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on individual and economic gain – any further demands for such a movement, for such a feminism, would contradict the postfeminist expectation, identified by McRobbie, that the beneficiaries of feminism will “renounce or disavow the need for a new sexual politics” (2009, p. 180). Under postfeminism, these beneficiaries, as McRobbie notes, “have been expected to become both quiet and quiescent” (p. 180). In this way, *The Ugly Truth* takes Abby's individual education and career success, and her ability to wield some professional power previously reserved only for men, as evidence of the triumph of feminism, while simultaneously silencing any further feminist demands for collective action and for further movement toward gender equity.

The movie also pits Abby's feminism against gender essentialism, and eventually, she concludes that the former is insufficient in the face of the latter. The view of gender that Mike espouses on his show – “men are simple. They cannot be trained... If you want a relationship, get on the Stairmaster, and get skinny. If you want to win a man over, it's called a blow job. And don't forget to swallow” – which conceives of gender as binary, immutable, and strictly aligned with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, in which men are driven by sex and women by love, is depicted as unchanged by the purported triumph of feminism. Like the advertisements Gill (2007) analyses, which “reassure[e] viewers that inside every power-dressing feminist is a soft-hearted, incurable romantic” (p. 96), *The Ugly Truth* concedes that though feminism is a powerful force that is to be taken into account in some circumstances, it cannot change human nature. Abby, the feminist, is disgusted by Mike's misogyny, but when she

follows his dating rules, the accuracy of his worldview is confirmed: men, Abby finds, truly are won over by sex (or the promise of it) and by quiet, quiescent women who, in Colin's words, are smart, but "never criticise" and "don't try to control the situation." Though Mike proves to be an exception, in the end, to his own rules, they do apply to Colin, and to Abby's co-workers – and, the movie suggests, to all other men and women. Abby and Mike are the only exceptions; Abby's feminism cannot undo or account for the "truth" of gender essentialism, ugly though that truth might be. This is typical of postfeminist narratives, which, as Radner (2011) observes, are marked by "a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference" (p. 191). In the case of *The Ugly Truth*, Abby's feminism is no match for natural sexual difference; men are simple, and they cannot be trained. Consequently, in order to secure one, the movie suggests, women must disregard the expectations and desires with which feminism has furnished them, and perform the kind of femininity that men find attractive. In this way, *The Ugly Truth*, like many postfeminist narratives, is marked by a distinctly postfeminist view of gender as essential and immutable – and of most feminist efforts to alter gender norms as misguided and fruitless.

The postfeminist masquerade in The Ugly Truth

The Ugly Truth is a compelling example of the use of the postfeminist masquerade in the postfeminist romantic comedy. As I note in the Introduction, McRobbie (2009) applies the concept to postfeminist culture, in which, as a response to increasing financial independence for women, women are now encouraged to "choose" that which was once economically necessary for their survival. Often, McRobbie argues, this manifests as the self-conscious and self-aware, "ironic, quasi-feminist staking out of a distance in the act of taking on the garb of femininity" (p. 65). This is precisely what unfolds during the makeover sequence in *The Ugly Truth*, in which Abby, though reluctant, chooses to take Mike's advice about how to make herself attractive to Colin and, by extension, Mike tells her, to all men. Abby considers Mike's purported worldview, in which women should never criticise a man, should pretend they find men funny even when they do not, should fake orgasms, should dress in tight and revealing clothing, and should withhold sex in order to establish a long term relationship, to be out-dated and sexist, a relic of

a time before women's financial independence. Despite wielding the economic power granted to her by her career, she chooses – in a self-aware, ironic, and quasi-feminist manner – the kind of power she would be compelled to wield if she were not a financially independent career woman. A woman like Abby is “no longer,” as McRobbie argues, “intelligible primarily in terms of [her] exchange in the marriage market” (p. 62), and yet, in this postfeminist narrative, she “chooses,” at Mike's insistence, to behave as though she is. She does so primarily because her initial attempts to attract Colin, in which she implements the very traits and techniques that have made her successful in her position of professional authority, have failed: as Mike tells her when he proposes to “coach” her and make her over into the kind of woman Colin will want to date, “You've probably already done irreparable damage with your psycho aggressive control freak phone call.” In this regard, the narrative of *The Ugly Truth* can be read as an attempt to mitigate the threat raised by Abby's financial independence, not just to her own health, happiness, and romantic prospects, but to traditional patriarchal power structures, by compelling her to wield a different kind of power, one that recalls pre-feminist gender power relations.

The Ugly Truth makes further use of the postfeminist masquerade in its pre-empting of feminist critique, largely achieved by emphasising Abby's choice and her desires. This is particularly evident during the makeover sequence: Abby chooses, albeit reluctantly, to participate in Mike's makeover because she wants to be attractive to Colin, she enjoys hearing that Mike thinks she is “a very attractive woman... but totally inaccessible,” she finds pleasure and satisfaction and, indeed, a kind of power, in mastering the flirtation techniques Mike teaches her. In so doing, *The Ugly Truth* depicts Abby as willingly “collud[ing] in the re-stabilisation of gender norms” (McRobbie 2009, p. 64), a collusion that not only allows her to obtain the romantic relationship (she believes) she wants with Colin, but that serves to demonstrate, as I note in the section above, the immutability of the definitions of masculinity and femininity that feminism seeks to erode. Abby participates in Mike's makeover of her life – her clothing, her hair, her social and sexual behaviour – by choice, the movie emphasises, and always with a degree of self-consciousness and irony. Mike urges her to accept the world as it is – sexist – rather than imagining it as feminism has taught her it could be – thereby encouraging her to take into account the ways that

feminism has improved her life but not to except or agitate for an ongoing or renewed collective feminist politics (instead, in keeping with the neoliberal underpinnings of postfeminism, she should use feminism, and, sometimes, irony-cloaked collusion in pre-feminist notions of feminine power, to secure her own personal happiness). In fact, her collusion with the re-stabilisation of gender norms is central to her “happy ending” with Mike: in the very last scene of the movie, we hear Abby and Mike in bed together, and she is theatrically moaning his name in apparent ecstasy. “Oh Mike, you’re a god!” she cries. He turns the lights on and asks her, “Am I really that good, or were you faking it?” “You’ll never know,” she replies slyly, and climbs on top him as she turns off the light. Even after Mike has proved to be an exception to his own rules, Abby continue to adhere to them, not to win Mike’s affections, but because doing so grants her power over him. It is not the power she wields at the beginning of the movie – the professional authority, and the financial independence that, as McRobbie notes, so threatens gender hierarchy. Instead, Abby’s new power, the movie suggests, is drawn from her knowing, willing collusion with gender hierarchy – from her acceptance of, and strategic exploitation of, the ugly truth.

I’ll have what she’s having?

In its depiction of feminism as simultaneously triumphant, yet obsolete in the face of women’s obvious professional parity and insufficient in the face of immutable “truths” about gender, and in its use of the postfeminist masquerade, particularly in the makeover sequence, *The Ugly Truth* bears many of the marks of a postfeminist narrative. However, it is in its depiction of Abby as excessively controlling, and of the pleasure she takes in having that control wrested from her, that the film makes the most powerful case that too much power and control is bad for women, and that relinquishing that power, thereby restoring gender hierarchy, will make women and men happy. I next focus on the scene in which this approach to women’s power is conveyed the most clearly, the scene in which Abby experiences an (initially) unwanted orgasm at the hands of Mike, as she is trying to conduct a business meeting.

Abby is repeatedly described as “controlling” or as a “control freak.” As Mike puts it the first time they meet, she is “wound like a fucking top.” This kind of observation is not unusual in

contemporary romantic comedies about unwed career women which, as Negra observes, “frequently include a plot device where a kindly male boss roots for the heroine as she moves toward a change of heart in which romantic commitment will displace work. He may look on with concern at his driven employee, even compel her to take a vacation (as in *Hitch*), or simply respond with utter sympathy and understanding when she quits (*Picture Perfect* [Caron 1997], *13 Going on 30* [Winick 2004])” (2009 p. 88). In this case, however, intrinsic to Abby’s “uptight” persona is a certain sexlessness that Mike feels he must “fix” in order to make her appealing to Colin and, by extension, to all men.

Abby’s sex problem, as Mike diagnoses it, and as her behaviour confirms, stems from the fact that not that she is inadequately attracted to men, but that she does not make herself adequately sexually available to them. She feels sexual attraction to men but, being “wound” so tightly makes her sexually repellent to them. The first time she sees Colin, he is emerging from the shower wearing only a towel, and she is so distracted by the sight that she falls out of the tree she has been climbing, and must be rescued by Colin, who finds her hanging by her feet with her nightgown over her head and her underwear exposed. Her sexlessness is in part reflected in her choice of self-presentation, particularly in her choice of clothes, which Mike says is, “all about comfort and efficiency,” and which “doesn’t inspire erections.” Mike takes her shopping to buy a bra that will make her breasts “sit up and say ‘hello.’” “What are they saying now?” she asks, confused. “They’re more giving off a sort of, passing nod, rather than an actual greeting,” the woman sales assistant chimes in. The most compelling evidence that the film presents for Abby’s sexlessness however, is the fact that she does not masturbate. When Mike first alludes to the subject of masturbation, she is baffled, and when she realizes what he is talking about, she is shocked and appalled. “That is not something I do, I don’t do that, not ever!” she exclaims. “I find it impersonal,” she insists. “Oh God, Abby, what could be more personal than you flicking your bean?” He asks. When Abby protests that she does not “see [her]self that way,” Mike informs her, “Well you better start, because if you don’t want to have sex with you, why the hell would Colin?” Mike decides that in order for Abby to become the kind of woman Colin will want to date, she must masturbate. He gives her a pair of vibrating panties, with a note that reads, “This present isn’t for you. It’s for your bean.”

Abby decides to try the panties on before a date with Colin, then finds herself being ushered to a dinner with him, Mike, her superiors at the television station, and several corporate executives who are impressed by the improved ratings attributed to Mike's presence on the show and want to hear Abby's proposal for expanding Mike's "The Ugly Truth" segment. With no time to change her underwear, Abby hurriedly puts the remote control for the panties in her handbag on her way out the door. At the restaurant, the remote falls out of her handbag and finds its way into the hands of a boy who is sitting a few tables away. Just as Abby is called upon to present her plan to her professional superiors, the boy starts playing with the remote. She panics and tells Mike that she is wearing the panties and that they have been activated and, as she carries on talking to her bosses with increasing difficulty, he notices that the boy has the remote. She asks for Mike's help, encouraging him to explain the new plan so that she can excuse herself or otherwise resolve the situation, but he insists that she continue talking, and rather than take the remote from the boy, he does nothing. He sits and watches as Abby orgasms at the table.

This scene is a stark example of the wresting of control from the powerful and "controlling" career woman, and quite literally putting it in the hands of a man, an experience that the woman finds to be pleasurable. The restaurant scene is carefully constructed, though score and mise en scene, as light-hearted comedy, but the theme of men (and in this case, a boy) wresting control from a woman is no less evident for that light-heartedness. When Mike says to the station executives, "So, are you guys here to give me a raise, or what?" Abby kicks him under the table to silence him. It is her kick – her attempt to control him – that sends the remote control rolling out of her handbag and away from the table, where the boy picks it up.

Mike's role in subverting Abby's professional authority is considerable: the decision to hire him is made over her head and very much against her will, and once he arrives, she loses control of the programme. "This is my show!" she says in the control room, after her employees refuse to cut Mike off during his first appearance on the air. "Not right now it's not," two of them, both men, chorus. Mike deviates from the scripts Abby provides him, pulls stunts on live television without her permission, and of course, his misogynistic instructions to viewers advocate men having the upper hand over women in

romantic affairs. When his presence on the show leads to improved ratings, Abby loses yet more professional power: when she threatens to fire him, he responds, arrogantly, “Oh really, because I thought you were the one who was going to get fired if you don’t keep me happy.” Eventually, her professional success, once marked by having guests like the Archbishop Desmond Tutu as a guest, depends on ensuring that Mike will stay at the show, where she must provide him a platform for his contemptible views. “All her love of order and being on top of things he just throws out the window,” says Heigl in the DVD bonus material featurette. “She can’t predict what he’s going to say or what he’s going to do. She’s so good at being one step ahead, and he puts her in this position where she sort of has to put her hands up and go with the flow, and it’s actually really good for her.” Abby’s professional authority and her desire to extend that control into her personal life have become a burden, and though she is initially resistant, she eventually concedes that relinquishing that control to a man can yield personal gain for her.

In the restaurant scene, the notion of relinquishing control of not just her professional life but of her personal life and, indeed, of her own body, as being “really good for” Abby – as well as physically pleasurable – is made particularly obvious. Her initially unwanted public orgasm is at once a comeuppance for her attempt to control Mike as well as a purported solution to her “sexlessness” problem, the marker of her status as a “control freak.” This scene, even as it functions as a reference or homage to another romantic comedy, *When Harry Met Sally...*, is also a postfeminist depiction of a woman enjoying the experience of being stripped of power. Abby is stripped of control over her own body in a manner that also limits her professional power – recall that she is attempting to present a business strategy to her professional superiors in the midst of the orgasm.

For McRobbie (2009), the element of collusion, of women’s willing participation in the reinstallation of gender hierarchy, is essential to the postfeminist approach to women’s power (p. 64), and throughout *The Ugly Truth*, multiple women (the shop assistant, the beautiful but apparently dim-witted women Mike brings to dinner, the woman anchor on Abby’s show) collude with that reinstallation. Abby repeatedly colludes, particularly when she consents to Mike’s makeover of her appearance and her behaviour. In the restaurant scene, however, that collusion, and the pleasure Abby takes in it, are made

particularly obvious. Abby, after initially resisting Mike's violation of her bodily and sexual autonomy, decides to collude, granting him control – in the form of a literal remote control – over her body, a collusion that literally brings her orgasmic pleasure. Despite the fact that it could very well endanger her professional future, despite the fact that it is a flagrant violation of her sexual autonomy, what Mike does is played for laughs, and afterwards, when she discovers his role in the matter, Abby barely seems to mind. “Did you know [the boy] had [the remote] the whole time?” she asks. “Not the whole time, just some of the time. I figured I should let you finish,” he responds. “How kind,” is her sarcastic retort. Although she was initially mortified to find the panties activated, Abby is mortified no longer: she has colluded in Mike's reinstallation of gender hierarchy, and found that collusion to be a very pleasurable experience.

The vibrating panties scene brings to celluloid life an idea central to postfeminism: that power and control are bad for women, and that being “relieved” of that power and control – a process that contributes to the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy – is a pleasurable experience for them, one in which they often collude. In addition to proving correct Mike's assertion that Abby's desire to control her surroundings is a problem that must be solved and can be solved with sex, the scene functions to both punish Abby for her desire for control – over Mike, and over her own body – and to depict her as colluding with and enjoying the loss of that control.

Conclusion: Restoring gender hierarchy in *The Ugly Truth*

Ultimately, *The Ugly Truth* inoculates itself from feminist critique by depicting Mike and Abby as the exception to Mike's “ugly truth.” By the end of the movie, Abby has discovered that Mike's blustering misogyny is merely a front, a mechanism by which he copes with repeated heartbreak; he is, in fact, capable of romantic love, and wants more from his relationships with women than empty, meaningless sex. He is capable of loving Abby, although it “beats the shit out of [him]” as to why he feels this way. Mike is the sole exception to his own rules, the sole route through which Abby can find the romantic relationship she desires; all other men, the movie suggests, are like Colin, and prefer women to be quiet

and quiescent. In this way, both Mike and Abby triumph, and the movie insulates itself from feminist critique by appearing to contradict the sexism it has depicted throughout.

The purpose of this chapter has been to analyse the postfeminist romantic comedy's depiction of gender, sex, and, particularly, power, using *The Ugly Truth* and its representation of unwed career women as a case study. As I explore in the first half of this case study, the "problem" of the unwed woman is a theme with a lengthy and influential history in the genre, and as my analysis of a representative sample has demonstrated, it is one that has emerged as a particularly common theme in the postfeminist cycle. As I argue here, the depiction of unwed career women as unhealthy, unhappy, and unlovable appears in the context of, and, as McRobbie argues in her development of the postfeminist masquerade, in response to, women's perceived increased professional and political power. As women become increasingly visible in politics in the United States, and as they participate in the workforce at an unprecedentedly high rate and in an unprecedentedly high number of positions of authority, the postfeminist undermining of feminism, and in particular, its depiction of "what is no longer economically central," as McRobbie (2009) terms heterosexual marriage, as "culturally necessary" (p. 62) becomes more evident.

This undermining of feminism and reinstallation of gender hierarchy is particularly prominent in *The Ugly Truth*, which depicts feminism is simultaneously triumphant (it has neutered the male anchor on Abby's show, who is meek and emasculated, because he makes less money than his wife, with whom he co-presents the news, and it has secured for Abby her position as the producer of the show, a role once reserved only for men). Yet, feminism is also depicted as insufficient and misguided: Abby's feminism is no match for the immutability of gender, the movie suggests, and for Mike's worldview, which, ugly though it might be, is the "truth." The movie also inoculates itself against feminist critique by utilizing the distance of ironic knowingness identified by McRobbie in her development of the postfeminist masquerade: Abby's participation in Mike's makeover of her appearance and her behaviour is willing, and is portrayed as a choice from which she stands to benefit. Abby, by choosing to follow Mike's "coaching," performs the quiet, quiescent femininity that postfeminism demands of women, all the while maintaining enough knowing and ironic distance from that masquerade to insulate the movie from

feminist critique. Finally, as I demonstrate in this case study, *The Ugly Truth*'s depiction of Abby as a "control freak" who learns to take pleasure in relinquishing to men control not just over her career, but also over her body, brings to celluloid life a central point about postfeminist popular culture, and about postfeminism more broadly. In this depiction, the movie charges that wielding professional and political power is damaging to women, and to society writ large, and that while women must be punished for wielding that power, the postfeminist narrative must portray the woman as taking pleasure in relinquishing that power and in the attendant reinstallation of gender hierarchy.

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how the postfeminist sensibility shapes the postfeminist romantic comedy's representation of gender, and especially of masculinity. After placing the rise in the incidence of substantial male nudity in generic and historical context, I demonstrate how *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* uses male nudity to screen postfeminist notions about the contemporary crisis in masculinity – "the end of men," which, concurrent popular press accounts argued, had been brought about by "the rise of women."

Case Study 2: *FORGETTING SARAH MARSHALL*

Introduction

Where the previous case study explored how one postfeminist romantic comedy depicts gender, sex, and power, with a particular focus on power, in this case study I focus on how one film – *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* – depicts gender, sex, and power, with a particular focus on gender. Here, I address the second of my subsidiary research questions, which concerns the postfeminist romantic comedy's representation of masculinity, and, particularly, the notable trend of extreme male nudity in the genre between 2008 and 2011. Though much of the scholarly work on postfeminist popular culture narratives is concerned with femininity under postfeminism (including two of my own case studies in this thesis), my emphasis here is on masculinity in the postfeminist romantic comedy. As Dow (2006) argues, any discussion of postfeminist culture must include an analysis of masculinity under postfeminism. "When feminist critics buy into the notion that postfeminism really is all about women, their 'choices' and their conflicts," Dow writes, "they often neglect to consider how the shifting portrayal of postfeminist men... makes this situation possible" (p. 124). Dow warns that it is unwise to ignore "the ways that representations of postfeminist women require particular representations of postfeminist men. The traffic in postfeminist men is what makes the postfeminist fantasy work. It falls apart without them" (p. 124). This warning is particularly relevant to a genre that has seen an increase in the depiction of male nudity; Lehman (2007), who argues that eschewing academic analyses of representations of the male body serves the same function as do films in which the male body is hidden from view, suggests that "the silence surrounding the sexual representation of the male body is itself totally in the service of traditional patriarchy" (p. 5). Similarly, in Burns (2013) and Rubinfeld's (2001) analyses, romantic comedies are venues for the representation and reinforcement of masculinity as well as of femininity; Rubinfeld argues that these films "are essentially stories of masculinity and femininity with roles and rules that ensure femininity is subordinated to masculinity" (p. 39). For this reason, this case study addresses how the postfeminist

romantic comedy takes feminism into account – as McRobbie argues – and questions the cycle’s implications for depictions of men.

My argument is that *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* brings to celluloid life a central postfeminist idea about gender, which is that advances toward gender equality have had pernicious effects on American men and American masculinity. This is particularly evident in the film’s use of extreme male nudity that serves to render the naked man vulnerable. After a brief plot summary of the movie, I place *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* in generic context, exploring the rise in the incidence of substantial male nudity in the postfeminist cycle, as well as the development of a crop of films within the cycle that place men at the centre of their narratives – what Jeffers McDonald (2009) calls “homme-coms” (p. 146) – with particular regard to films directed and/or produced by Judd Apatow. I then place *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s depiction of troubled American masculinity in extra-cinematic context, with a particular focus on the notion, common in popular media in the years before and immediately after the release of the movie, that while feminism has benefited American women, particularly in allowing them access to more educational and professional opportunities, it has caused a crisis in American masculinity – what journalist Hanna Rosin (2010, 2012) termed “the end of men and the rise of women” (Rosin 2012). Finally, I make the case for *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* as a postfeminist narrative, noting, in addition to its use of male nudity to portray American masculinity as vulnerable, its depiction of its vulnerable hero as redeemed by his coupling with a woman who is less successful and ambitious than he is, a woman who exemplifies McRobbie’s “phallic girl”; and its punishment of Sarah Marshall, the representative of women’s increased professional power.

Plot summary

Peter (Jason Segel), the composer for the television programme *Crime Scene: Scene of the Crime* (which exists only within the fictional universe of the movie, but is clearly intended as a pointed parody of the *Crime Scene Investigation* franchise (Zuiker and Donahue, 2000) and other similar crime and forensics procedurals), is dating Sarah Marshall (Kristen Bell), the star of the show. Early in the movie, she

unexpectedly ends their relationship, revealing as she does so that she has been unfaithful to him and has developed feelings for another man. After his initial attempts to cope with his heartbreak fail, Peter follows the advice of his stepbrother, Brian (Bill Hader), and takes a holiday in Hawaii – only to find that Sarah is also on holiday there, and is staying in the same resort, with her new boyfriend, the rock singer Aldous Snow (Russell Brand). The hotel concierge, Rachel (Mila Kunis), takes pity on Peter and befriends him. Spending time with Rachel comforts Peter; unlike Sarah, Rachel is supportive of Peter's somewhat off-beat professional aspirations – to write and stage a musical about Dracula, with puppets. Soon, a romantic and sexual attraction sparks between them, a development that makes Sarah jealous; she then begins competing with Rachel for Peter's attention, and Aldous dumps her. Peter discovers that Sarah had been having an illicit relationship with Aldous for a year before she broke up with Peter, and enraged, he demands an explanation. Sarah explains that Peter's sadness, complacency, and inability to act on his ambitions proved too much for her, but then attempts a reconciliation. When Peter tells Rachel that he and Sarah, amid that attempted reconciliation, nearly had sex, Rachel is appalled and tells Peter that she never wants to speak to him again. He returns to California, and, inspired by Rachel's faith in his ambitions, completes his musical. Despite her stated desire to never hear from him again, Peter sends Rachel a flier advertising the show, and on opening night, she is in the audience, and they reconcile. As the credits roll, we see that Sarah, whose television show was cancelled while she was in Hawaii, now has a role on an even less credible programme.

Male nudity in the postfeminist romantic comedy

Forgetting Sarah Marshall contains two scenes that feature full frontal male nudity, and is the only movie in my representative sample in which a penis is visible. The first instance of full frontal nudity occurs when Sarah dumps Peter: he exits the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, to find her waiting for him in the living room, and when he realises that she has come to break up with him, he drops the towel in shock. He stands naked in front of her, then turns around and squats down, trying to regain his composure, so that the audience sees him naked from behind. He spends the rest of the scene naked, having refused

Sarah's entreaties to put on clothing. His penis is briefly visible at other moments throughout the scene, as when he stands up from the couch to awkwardly hug Sarah, convinced that a hug will make her change her mind. The second instance occurs at the end of the movie, in his dressing room after his performance in the puppet musical. He and Rachel have engaged in brief and awkward small-talk in the auditorium and then parted ways, but back in his dressing room, he decides to call her. At the same moment, she decides to go visit him in the dressing room, and happens upon him standing naked in the middle of the room, with the phone to his ear. In this section, I place *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*'s use of male nudity in the context of the larger trend in the postfeminist cycle between 2008 and 2011, when male nudity, largely absent from the genre before this period, became remarkably common.

Gendering nudity in the postfeminist romantic comedy

Five other movies in my representative sample feature what I will call "substantial" male nudity. In the five movies in question – *The Proposal*, *Going the Distance*, *No Strings Attached*, *Friends With Benefits*, and *Crazy, Stupid, Love* – the male lead is shown entirely naked from the back, or is shown from the front or side entirely naked but for his hands or some other small object (for example, a crumpled up t-shirt) covering his genital region. In *Friends With Benefits* and *No Strings Attached*, the camera lingers on the naked bodies, and particularly the naked buttocks, of the leading men. In *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, the man in question appears entirely naked, the audience's view of his penis blocked by another man's head. All five of the above mentioned movies were released in or after 2008; none of the substantial male nudity in the sample appears in movies released before 2008. This indicates that substantial male nudity is a new phenomenon in the genre. In romantic comedies released before 2008, male shirtlessness in romantic comedies was not uncommon. Indeed, Matthew McConaughey, the leading man in *Failure to Launch* and *Fool's Gold*, both of which are included in my representative sample, is known for his tendency to eschew shirts both off screen (Fuller 2010) and on (Movieline 2011). What my sample indicates, however, is that after 2008, a shift took place in the genre, with a series of Hollywood romantic

comedies being released in which the level of male nudity was considerably more substantial than mere shirtlessness.

Substantial nudity in the postfeminist romantic comedy is gendered, that is, there is no corresponding or comparable rise in the incidence of substantial female nudity to accompany the rise in male nudity. There are, however, three instances of substantial female nudity in my sample. In *Friends With Benefits*, Mila Kunis appears naked from behind in one scene, and *The Proposal* features a lengthy scene in which Sandra Bullock conceals her breasts and pubic area only with her own hands and arms. Similarly, *Knocked Up* contains the only other instance of full frontal nudity in the sample, in a scene in which the character played by Katherine Heigl is giving birth and the viewer sees her vagina just as the baby's head is crowning. However, these are the only instances of substantial female nudity in the sample. In the postfeminist romantic comedy, then, especially in those released after 2008, there is a notable gender disparity in substantial nudity. In *Going the Distance*, we see male lead Justin Long nearly naked, but do not see his co-star Drew Barrymore in a comparable state of undress. The same applies for *No Strings Attached*: while the viewer sees Ashton Kutcher nearly entirely nude, including a lingering shot of his buttocks, his co-star Natalie Portman is never shown in anything less than her underwear.

This uneven distribution of nudity is notable given the usual disparity in on screen nudity. In contemporary Hollywood film, women's bodies are stripped bare and sexualized much more frequently than men's, a disparity that has been discussed and debated for decades, with Laura Mulvey's widely cited essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) serving as an influential catalyst. A woman's role in film, Mulvey writes, is to be looked at. Furthermore, "going far beyond highlighting a woman's to-be-looked-at-ness, cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (p. 18). In film, women are always objects, Mulvey argues, "the image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man" (p. 18). In contemporary Hollywood movies, women on screen are far more likely to be scantily clad than men are: analysing the top grossing Hollywood films of 2009, Smith, Choueiti and Gall (2010) found that female characters were more than five times more likely to be shown in "sexy attire" – 25.8% versus 4.7% – and more than three times more likely to be shown partially naked – 23.6% versus

7.4%. The numbers for the previous year were similar, according to the same study. In 2008, female characters were more than five times more likely to wear revealing or provocative clothing than were men – 26% versus 5%. They were three times more likely to appear partially naked – 24% versus 8%.

The movies in my sample that feature substantial male nudity reverse the usual gender imbalance, offering the naked male body up to the camera's gaze, lingering on these men's bodies, or on specific body parts. As Smith et al demonstrate, it is not uncommon for the camera to linger in this way on the female body. Given this, one might reasonably expect that an increase in male nudity would be accompanied by an increase in female nudity, but in my sample that was not the case. This suggests that the rise in the incidence of substantial nudity in the postfeminist cycle is gendered. Indeed, this increase in male nudity has occurred in part as a result of the male body and male character's new "looked-at-ness"; as Burns (2013) observes, "the men in chick texts are clearly there to be looked at by women, creating a notable representation of the female gaze in contemporary popular culture" (p. 132). Burns provides as an example *The Holiday* (Meyers 2006), in which Jude Law's character is repeatedly shown being looked at by Cameron Diaz's character: the man "can be found readily on 'display' in contemporary chick flicks, as he is presented to both female characters within the text and the female audience as an 'object for consumption'... Whether for sexual objectification, romantic longing, wish fulfilment or escapism, this man is quite clearly to be looked at and consumed by women" (p. 134). In other contemporary romantic comedies, like *The Proposal* and *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (Petrie 2003), "Andrew (Ryan Reynolds) [in *The Proposal*]... is watched by various women as he runs to work, as well as by his female coffee barista, who also gives him her phone number; and Ben (Matthew McConaughey) in *How To Lose a Guy in 10 Days* is watched by a number of women as he enters his office (p. 135). As my analysis demonstrates, in the postfeminist cycle of the Hollywood romantic comedy, men more than women are increasingly likely to appear naked, suggesting that the rise in substantial male nudity does not merely represent an increasingly raunchy romantic comedy, but rather, a deliberate and novel inclusion of male nudity in the genre – an inclusion which, as I argue in this case study, serves to bring postfeminist ideas about masculinity to celluloid life. Indeed, this apparent move toward parity in the distribution of nudity

between the sexes is not, as Lehman (2007) argues, “a simple occasion for joy” (p. 251). Instead, in considering the rise in the amount of substantial male nudity in the genre, particularly when compared to female nudity, during this period, my analysis is informed by Lehman’s argument that “although Hollywood films include more full frontal female nudity than male nudity, it is important to recognize that entirely different issues are at stake” (p. 263). As a result, Lehman warns, “simple reversals never address true power imbalances; while masquerading in society as liberating activities, they reinscribe the traditional ideological imbalance in ways that seek to contain any threat posed by the new activity” (p. 6). Male nudity, as Bozzola (2001) notes, in many instances, does not necessarily serve to objectify the man in question; the naked male body may be, as Bingham (1994) describes it, “an object hiding in plain sight” (p. 149). Although the male nudity in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* emphasizes Peter’s vulnerability, it does so, as I argue here, in order to undermine feminism, not in order to endorse or bolster gender equality.

Nudity as vulnerability in the postfeminist cycle

In this case study, I argue that *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* uses Peter’s nudity as a way to convey his vulnerability, particularly when compared to his fully-dressed female co-stars. As I demonstrate, this is not the function of the male nudity in all the movies in my sample. In the movies in my sample, the instances of male nudity can be divided into two categories: the first is that which, as in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, depicts the man in question as vulnerable and floundering – naked, rather than nude. The second is that nudity that which serves to sexualize the man in question. This is in keeping with the binary developed by Lehman (2001) – later expanded to include a third category, the “melodramatic penis” (p. 236) – who argues that images of the male body and of men generally conform to “a polarity not unlike the mother/whore dichotomy which structures so many representations of women. At one pole, we have the powerful, awesome spectacle of phallic masculinity, and at the other its vulnerable, pitiable, and frequently comic collapse” (p. 26). There are multiple instances of the second, sexualized, form of nudity

in my sample: in *The Proposal*, *Going the Distance*, *Friends With Benefits*, *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, and *No Strings Attached*. In these instances, the men in question are lean, and almost all of them are very muscular (indeed, Ryan Reynolds, who plays the lead in *The Proposal*, is the star of a superhero movie franchise, and is therefore in peak – one might say superhuman – physical condition). The men in these movies are depicted as sexually desirable; most of their nudity occurs in the context of sex, or in preparation for sex that is, the movies imply, certain to happen. In *The Proposal*, the male nudity does not occur in the context of sex, but as Andrew (Ryan Reynolds) is returning from a run; the scene serves as a revelation for the heroine, Andrew's boss (a problematically unwed career woman, as discussed in the previous chapter): though she has until this moment viewed him with ambivalence, considering him an underling barely worth her notice, she realises in this moment, that he is quite physically attractive.

While there is limited scholarly analysis of the increasing incidence of male nudity in the Hollywood romantic comedy, Greven (2013), writing about popular culture more broadly, observes that there is evidence of an “inflection” of masculinity in popular culture in the first decade of the 21st century (p. 407), whereby the male body is an object of fascination. “The fetishized male body is on spectacular display in film and on television, our national theatres” (p. 407). Gill (2007) also argues that the male body has been foregrounded in popular culture, noting that,

...now men's [bodies] are taking their place alongside women's on billboards, cinema screens and magazines... it is not simply that there are more images of men circulation, but that a specific kind of representational practice has emerged for depicting the male body; namely an idealized and eroticized aesthetic showing a toned, young body (p. 97).

Greven confirms this account, describing how “the public display of male bodies has been gathering momentum since the 1980s” as “gleaming, chiselled, paradisiacal male bodies pop out of our screens, an expanse of male forms” (p. 407). Parpart (2001) similarly notes the proliferation of and fascination with naked male bodies, and argues that this “widespread rediscovery of the male body's erotic potential” (p. 167) has resulted in “more mainstream directors than ever before... finding it possible to flirt with male sexual representation, in some cases even tackling the previously taboo spectacle of full frontal nudity”

(p. 167). This new filmic fascination with men's bodies, however, and with their naked bodies in particular, is not, Greven (2013) stresses, "the whole story" (p. 407). Rather, that fascination is "not only symptomatic but also allegorical of a larger preoccupation" (p. 407) with the state of American masculinity. As I demonstrate in this chapter, the purported crisis in masculinity around "the end of men" is one such larger preoccupation.

The first form of nudity, that which serves to emphasize the vulnerability of the men in question, is the more relevant to an analysis of how postfeminist notions of gender – and particularly, about the damage that feminism does to gender hierarchy and to traditional conceptions of American masculinity – occurs in *Knocked Up*, *She's Out of My League*, and *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, in which the naked men are juxtaposed with fully dressed women or male peers. In *Knocked Up*, the beautiful female protagonist Alison (Katherine Heigl) wakes up after her one night stand with Ben (Seth Rogen) and finds him lying naked in her bed, face down with the sheet failing to hide his large, pale buttocks. She gets out of bed and looks down on him with disgust and regret. In *She's Out of My League*, the audience sees the male protagonist, Kirk (Jay Baruchel), shirtless, and also sees close ups of one of his buttock cheeks, viewed from the side. Baruchel is tall, pale,⁴ and skinny; he does not, by any means, possess the sort of superhero physique that Ryan Reynolds has in *The Proposal*. In the scene in which the nudity occurs, Kirk is preparing for a tryst with Molly (Alice Eve), the woman he is dating. His friends have urged him to trim and shave his pubic hair in preparation for the evening, and so he attempts for the first time to remove his pubic hair. Context is important here; as the title of the movie suggests, the central tension of this love

⁴ It bears mentioning that the vision of the male body that is presented as sexually desirable in these movies is also very racially specific. Though not all the men in the sample are depicted as sexually desirable, all those who are portrayed in this light are what audiences would most likely label white; this is in part a function of the fact that there is only one non-white leading man in the sample, Will Smith in *Hitch*. As Dyer (1997) has noted, "white," is certainly not a monolithic category and over time in the United States, the cultural consensus about who is white has evolved. Dyer examines the nuances embedded in that term and in that concept, exploring the relationship between whiteness and power in visual representation and film in particular. However, for the purposes of this project, it suffices to say that, regardless of any one these actors' respective individual ethnicities, the leading men referred to here would be classified by most viewers as "white," were they to be surveyed on the topic. Gill (2007) notes that this is racial bias is also visible in advertising: "Rather than a diversity of different representations of the male body, most adverts belong to a specific generic type. The models are generally white, they are young, they are muscular and slim, they are usually clean-shaven (with perhaps the exception of a little designer stubble)" (p. 98).

story is that by dominant beauty standards, Molly is gorgeous and Kirk is not. This scene, in which Kirk stands naked in front of the bathroom mirror, weedy and unsure of himself, serves to highlight that disparity. In this second category of nudity, nakedness is a symbol not of virility, but of vulnerability.

Lehman (2007) writes about this second form of male nudity in his analysis of Almodóvar's *What Have I Done To Deserve This?* (1984). Though this film is generically far afield from the Hollywood romantic comedy, Lehman's description of a sex scene that involves full frontal male nudity in which the audience sees the character's "small, flaccid penis" (p. 10) also applies to the breakup scene in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. Lehman observes that the Almodóvar scene flouts "the conventions of male nudity found in dominant cinema, photography, social pornography such as *Playgirl*, and hard-core pornography. In those forms, the explicit sexual representation of the male body involves a variety of structures that attempt to make it impressively dramatic" (p. 10). Peter's penis, however, is not impressively dramatic. The size and flaccidity of both penises "may at first appear to be a refreshing departure from the nearly compulsive need to make a powerful, phallic spectacle of the penis, but it works to reinforce that concept when we see that the man has failed to satisfy the woman" (p. 10). In Peter's case, that dissatisfaction is not sexual, as it is in the Almodóvar scene (though later, Sarah, having left Peter for the lothario rock star Aldous, complains that Peter's depression rendered him reluctant to leave the couch, which suggests that they did not spend a great deal of time together in bed). But Peter has clearly failed to satisfy Sarah – which is why she is breaking up with him.

As I demonstrate here, the substantial male nudity in the postfeminist cycle generally can be divided into two categories: that which sexualizes the men in question, portraying them as virile, and that which portrays the men in question as vulnerable. This first form of nudity, which Cohan (1993) might argue represents the culmination of developments in the representation of male body that began in the 1980s and continued in the 1990s and early years of the twenty-first century, with the rise of the "metrosexual" (p. 182) raises a host of interesting questions about what Moore (1988) calls "the possibility of an active female gaze" (p. 45). Indeed, the notion of the male body as one that can and must be constantly improved through products and the self-monitoring that accompanies a cultural fixation on

bodily appearance – as McRobbie observes, these are hallmarks of the feminine condition under postfeminism – is one that invites an examination of how neoliberalism and postfeminism have shaped the experience of contemporary American masculinity. As Miller (2001) notes:

governmentality, the refinement of human bodies as part of rationalization and utilitarianism, connects to capital accumulation in a network of power dispersed across the conditioned and consuming body. The male body references these complexities of contemporary capitalism... slowly in many cases but rapidly in others, the process of bodily commodification through niche targeting has identified men's bodies as objects of desire (pp. 244-5).

However, that question merits lengthy and in-depth discussion, which, given my focus here on the other category of nudity, that is, the nudity that serves to convey the vulnerability and lack of sexual desirability of the man in question exceeds the capacity of this case study. Therefore, in the remainder of this case study, I continue to focus on male nudity as vulnerability, and on how the rise in male nudity on romantic comedies serves postfeminism. I next place this kind of on-screen nudity, and the movies in which it occurs, in the context of a generic shift: the development of what Jeffers McDonald (2009) calls the romantic comedy “for boys” (p. 147) or “homme-com.”

From chick flicks to dick flicks: the rise of the romantic comedy “for boys”

In order to understand how *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* portrays postfeminist notions of American masculinity as endangered by the success of feminism, it is necessary to place the film in the context of the flourishing of a crop of romantic comedies that place men at their narrative centres, particularly those directed and/or produced by Judd Apatow. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, though written by Jason Segel (who also stars as Peter) and directed by Nicholas Stoller, belongs to the Apatovian canon. These movies feature a rotating cast of actors, who are frequently cast in the same productions. This group includes Segel, Seth Rogen, Jonah Hill, Paul Rudd, Jay Baruchel, and Leslie Mann (Apatow's wife). All six of those actors are in *Knocked Up*, and Segel, Rudd and Hill are in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, then, resembles, in its casting, Apatow-directed and Apatow-produced films. Indeed,

while the screenplay was written by Segel, and the movie was directed by Stoller, Apatow served as producer. In the next section, I examine the major themes, and, in particular, the depiction of American masculinity, in Apatovian romantic comedies.

The Apatovian romantic comedy

Apatovian romantic comedies (*Knocked Up*, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*), are “homme-coms” (Jeffers McDonald 2009a), which place men at the centre of their narratives, representing “a shift in the centre of gravity within the genre” (Mortimer, p. 48) – though it should be noted that there is no consensus on terminology for this trend in the genre. Where Greven (2013) uses “Beta Male romances” and Jeffers McDonald prefers “homme-coms,” Alberti (2013) classifies many of the same movies as “bromances.” Though “homme-coms” exist that are not Apatow-produced or directed (*Along Came Polly* [Hamburg 2004], *The Tao of Steve* [Goodman 2000]), Daniel Kimmel (2008) suggests that Apatow is the most successful creator thus far. Romantic comedies produced or directed by Apatow “are defined by the [arrested development] phenomenon, repositioning the genre to appeal to a broader male audience, with positive representations of male bonding and sympathetic male characters who support the hero” (Kimmel p. 48). Kimmel attributes the success of the Apatovian canon to the groundwork laid by the runaway commercial success of the Farrelly brothers’ romantic comedy *There’s Something About Mary* (1998). Jeffers McDonald (2009a) points to the repetition and predictability of the “chick flick,” characterising it as “stale” (p. 149) and suggesting that the man-centred romantic comedy, which often combines “gross-out moments” (erections, urination, masturbation) “with the romance plot of the standard rom-com” (p. 153) came about in the first decade of the twenty-first century as an attempt to “get something new” (p. 153) from the genre, and to appeal to younger audiences (p. 153). Jeffers McDonald highlights the “homme-com”’s emphasis on the body with regard to sex, observing that “the homme-com seems to share some of Hollywood Lowbrow’s insistence on the comedy derived from tumescence and engorgement, orgasm and ejaculate, and perhaps its motives can similarly be seen as intending to return to the purely physical understandings of romantic love” (p. 149), but does not explore

the “homme-com”’s use of the body in a way that de-emphasizes sex, as I do here. Beyond this new frankness about bodily functions and bodily fluids (which I explore later in this section), Apatow’s romantic comedies place a conventionally unattractive and unsuccessful man at the centre of their narratives. As Mortimer notes,

Apatow’s movies explore a common theme, seeing the underdog, the male underachiever managing to achieve credibility through partnership with beauty. The prince, in these romances, does not have the aesthetic appeal of the traditional hero, yet he is rewarded for his essential goodness with the princess. Apatow’s movies are directed more at a male audience, giving them the opportunity to identify with the flawed hero (p. 66).

Greven calls these movies “Beta Male” comedies, a group that includes other movies from the Apatovian canon, as well as *The Hangover* (Philips 2009), *Pineapple Express* (Gordon Green 2008), *I Love You, Man* (Hamburg 2009), *Role Models* (Wain 2008), and *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin 2005) (p. 405). Greven notes that the generic boundaries of the Beta Male comedy are somewhat blurred – for instance, he claims that these movies form “a new genre unto themselves” (p. 405). Terminology aside, Greven argues that “these comedies, pioneered by the wildly successful director Judd Apatow, have become, in their recurring problems and themes, the primary means whereby the contemporary – read, the latest – crisis in masculinity can be explored” (p. 405). These movies are often interpreted as evidence of “a new crisis in American masculinity” (p. 405), Greven observes, representations of actual men who “refuse to grow up, get jobs, get out of their parents’ house, get wives, get lives” (p. 405). Mortimer notes that, the male protagonists in these movies “have lost their way and need to be transformed by love into fully functioning, emotionally intelligent adults” (p. 46), and Klein (2011) describes these men as “schlemiel protagonists” (p. 13). Indeed, this theme lies “at the very heart” of the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, “especially in the male-centred comedies such as *Knocked Up* and *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. Here the central characters are in a state of arrested development, living as perpetual children, being unable to embrace adulthood” (p. 46). As Greven views them, these movies are shaped by – and are representations of – anxiety about contemporary American masculinity. For this reason, they place at their centres men

who are struggling to advance into manhood as it is traditionally defined, while the women in their lives advance swiftly and successfully into adulthood, outstripping them and – the image of the flawed underdog hero Peter standing naked and vulnerable in front of Sarah Marshall is a powerful one here – leaving them behind.

Apatow's "schlemiel protagonists"

A brief study of Peter's fellow Apatovian protagonists supports Greven's argument, as many of these "underachiever" male protagonists are indeed floundering. In *Knocked Up*, Seth Rogen plays an unemployed "stoner" who lives in a state of permanent adolescence. In *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, Steve Carrell plays a socially awkward, sexually inexperienced man who works as a salesman at an electronics store and who collects action figures. As Kimmel observes, he "lives like an overgrown twelve-year-old" (p. 234). In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter is a successful composer, but he is also a slob; in the opening sequence of the film we see him sitting on the couch in tracksuit pants eating a giant bowl of sugary cereal. When Sarah calls and asks what he is doing, he says "working," and when she asks what he is eating, he says "salad." The male protagonists in Apatow movies have often stalled in their journey from boyhood to manhood, and find themselves stuck somewhere in the middle. In some cases, this is conveyed with potent symbolism: Andy, Carrell's character in *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, lives alone and has a steady and well-paid job, but he has never had sexual intercourse with a woman, an obvious marker of maturity and masculinity. In these movies, the male protagonist is very often a perceived failure in more than one arena of his life. He is physically unattractive (*Knocked Up*), employed in an unglamorous or undesirable job (*The 40 Year Old Virgin*), or not employed at all (*Knocked Up*), or he lacks the social skills and gregariousness one expects of a leading man (*The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*). He is not alone in this failure, but finds himself surrounded by other young men who have similarly failed to live up to the socially contemporary standards of masculinity: in *Knocked Up*, Ben shares his ramshackle house with a handful of marijuana-addled male screw-ups; in *The 40 Year Old*

Virgin, Andy's co-workers at the electronics shop are comically inept at their jobs and in their romantic lives; and in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the male hotel staff and guests whom Peter befriends are all struggling to live appropriately adult lives. In this sense, Greven observes, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is about a man who is "still stuck in what the eminent sociologist and theorist of masculinity Michael Kimmel (2008) has called 'Guyland.' Guyland, as Kimmel theorizes, is a realm of retrogressive male behaviour exhibited by males who refuse to grow up, as Peter's all-day-long kid's-cereal-eating marathons suggest" (p. 413). This can also be said of the other Apatovian romantic comedy underdog heroes.

To add insult to injured masculinity, the "schlemiel protagonists" in Apatow's romantic comedies are often paired with, and thereby compared to, women who are very "together": in *Knocked Up*, Ben accidentally impregnates Alison, a highly ambitious young entertainment reporter who has just begun to carve out a place for herself in front of the camera. In *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, Andy becomes interested in Trish, a woman in her forties whose life bears many hallmarks of adulthood: she has been married, has children, and runs her own business. And in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Sarah is an established television actress, and in a flashback, we see Peter and Sarah walking the red carpet together as photographers and fans clamour for Sarah's attention as Peter stands awkwardly in the background, ignored and sometimes rudely dismissed by the photographers. Grindon (2011), borrowing from film critic David Denby (2007), describes *Knocked Up* as a "slacker striver romance," a term that is fitting for *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (and, outside the Apatovian canon but within my sample, *Failure to Launch* and *Life As We Know It*). Mortimer notes that in *Knocked Up*, "there is a shortage of responsible role models" (p. 61) for both the male and female, but Alison, at least, has a full time job, is poised for promotion as the film begins, and finds that her pregnancy improves her career prospects rather than diminishing them. If they are both struggling, Ben is struggling more. In each of these movies, the protagonist endures humiliation and sometimes heartbreak before deciding to "man up," that is, to fix whatever feature of his life that stands between him and a true adult existence.

Nudity, raunch, and masculine immaturity in Apatow's romantic comedies

Contributing to the sense of prolonged adolescence in Apatow's (anti)heroes is the notable presence in these romantic comedies of raunch, nudity, and the kind of "gross out" humour that marked the successful *There's Something About Mary* (Farrelly and Farrelly 1998). In Apatow movies, characters swear freely and frequently discuss sexual topics in coarse terms. In *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, Daniel Kimmel notes, Andy's motley crew of co-workers "do what they can to hook him up in a series of raucous scenes" (p. 234). In *Knocked Up*, Ben and his housemates are building a website designed to help visitors skip to the precise moments in movies when female nudity occurs. After watching this movie, Kimmel observes, "You left the theatre... cataloguing the bodily fluids" (p. 234). In *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, when Peter goes out to a nightclub with his stepbrother immediately after Sarah has dumped him, they have a conversation about Peter's desire to "B my L on somebody's Ts." Later, Sarah's new boyfriend Aldous explains to a conservative Christian newlywed, in very explicit detail, exactly how to bring a woman to orgasm during penetration. And, tellingly, the Apatow movies are the only ones in my sample that include shots of genitalia, either male (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*) or female (*Knocked Up*). As Jeffers McDonald (2009a) notes, the inclusion of "gross out" humour appears designed to appeal to a younger audience (p. 153), but it also serves to illustrate the immaturity of many Apatow's male protagonists.

As Greven observes, the challenge of living a true adult existence, and the sense that doing so is much harder for men than it is for women, is a recurring theme in the Apatovian canon, which includes *Funny People* (Apatow 2009), *Superbad* (Mottola 2007), *The Five Year Engagement* (Stoller 2012), and *This Is The End* (Rogen & Goldberg 2013), and which inspired a genre parody movie entitled *The 41-Year-Old Virgin Who Knocked Up Sarah Marshall and Felt Superbad About It* (Moss 2010) (it also bears noting that though the Apatovian hero exists in this state of prolonged adolescence, in my sample, the phenomenon is not unique to Apatovian characters: in *Failure to Launch*, Matthew McConaughey plays a man who still lives at home well into his thirties, much to his parents' despair. In *Life As We Know It*, Josh Duhamel plays a professionally up-and-coming man in his mid-thirties who lives a bachelor lifestyle that his friends condemn as immature). That is, just as the rise in the incidence of

nudity in my sample is gendered, so too is the anxiety about growing up in the Apatovian canon. In this branch of the “homme-com,” the protagonist’s challenge is not simply to grow up, but to “man up.”

Any understanding of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s use of nudity to convey postfeminist notions of American masculinity made vulnerable by the triumphs of feminism requires an understanding of the larger generic developments that made that movie possible. Understanding the development of the romantic comedy “for boys” and primarily about men, and particularly the Apatovian romantic comedies, which repeatedly depict young American men as floundering underdogs struggling to make sense of the adult world and struggling to transition properly from adolescence into manhood, is essential to understanding *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s engagement with these same themes.

In the Apatovian romantic comedies – a group to which *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* belongs, despite not being directed by Apatow – the male protagonist is portrayed a failure on multiple fronts: in addition to his failure to conform to dominant notions of male attractiveness, he is neither professionally successfully nor particularly ambitious, and is often immature, a trait that manifests in a lack of sexual experience or in a prurient adolescent obsession with sex. He is rarely alone in this “schlemiel” status – his friends are similarly stunted and flummoxed by the demands of adult masculinity – and he is often paired with, and thereby compared to, a physically attractive, professionally successful woman who is transitioning appropriately into adulthood.

It was in this context that *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the only movie in my sample and in the Apatovian canon to feature full frontal male nudity, was released in 2008. As I argue in this chapter, that nudity screens a central postfeminist claim about gender, sex, and power, and particularly, gender: that advances toward gender equality have left young American men struggling to keep up with their female counterparts, resulting in, as Greven terms it, a crisis in masculinity. In the next section, I explore the extra-cinematic context in which the rise in male nudity in the postfeminist cycle occurred, with particular regard to popular media coverage of one of those purported crises in masculinity, described by journalist Hanna Rosin as “the end of men.”

***Forgetting Sarah Marshall* in extra-cinematic context**

Between 2005 and 2011, popular commentators and journalists argued that, though feminism has granted women and girls educational and professional opportunities that expand the experience of femininity, this “rise of women” has left young American men unable to transition properly into adult manhood, leaving them trapped in an extended adolescence. Where *The Ugly Truth* brings to celluloid life the postfeminist claim that the feminism that has transformed America into “a woman’s nation” is harmful to femininity, turning women into unhealthy, unhappy, and unlovable career women, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* suggests that feminism places masculinity in peril. This, as I demonstrate, was a common claim in the period in which the postfeminist cycle occurred.

Masculinity in crisis in the popular press

Multiple popular books published between 2005 and 2011 proclaimed a crisis in masculinity and attributed that crisis in part to the successful feminist reimagining of femininity. These arguments, which take feminism’s triumph into account only to question the wisdom of reimagining gender roles, make the case that the success of feminism has resulted in the failure of young American men to properly transition into adult manhood. Books with titles like *The Decline of Men: How the American Male is Getting Axed, Giving Up, and Flipping off His Future* (Garcia 2008), *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (Kimmel 2008), *Save the Males: Why Men Matter, Why Women Should Care* (Parker 2008), *Manning Up: How the Rise of Women Has Turned Men into Boys* (Hymowitz 2011), *The Broken American Male and How to Fix Him* (Boteach 2008) abounded between 2005 and 2011, the period during which the postfeminist cycle flourished.⁵

⁵ This argument was far from novel: in 2000, it was advanced by Christina Hoff Sommers in the book *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*, in which the author argued that American advocates for women and girls were disregarding studies showing that boys were disadvantaged by education policies and that, while a great deal of attention was paid to boosting girls’ self-esteem and expanding girls’ educational opportunities, “in schools, boys are the gender at risk” (p. 39).

Hymowitz describes the young (or “pre-adult”) men who inspired *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s Peter as “child-men” (p. 113), and describes the child-man phenomenon as “a reaction to a widespread cultural uncertainty about men” (p. 16). That uncertainty, she argues, came about as a result of what she views as feminism’s successful transformation of young women’s lives, particularly their professional lives:

It’s been an almost universal rule of civilization that whereas girls become women simply by reaching physical maturity, boys had to pass a test. They needed to demonstrate courage, physical prowess, or mastery of the necessary skills. The goal was to prove their competence as protectors of women and children... Today, however, with women moving ahead in an advanced economy, provider husbands and fathers are now optional, and the character qualities men had needed to play their role – fortitude, stoicism, courage, fidelity – are obsolete and even a little embarrassing. This made the pre-adult man something like an actor in a drama in which he only knows what he shouldn’t say. He has to compete in a fierce job market but can’t act too bossy or self-confident. He should be sensitive but not paternalistic, smart but not cocky. To deepen his predicament, because he is single, his advisers and confidants are generally undomesticated dudes just like him. Single men have never been civilization’s most responsible actors; they continue to be more troubled and less successful than men who deliberately choose to become husbands and fathers (p. 16).

In Hymowitz’s view, the benefits granted to young women by feminism – as in so many postfeminist accounts of the effects of feminism, Hymowitz’s female subject here is, as Negra (2009) notes, “white and middle class by default” (p.2), and as Projansky (2001) has argued, in postfeminist discourse, “woman is meant to stand in for all women but does so through the lens of whiteness” (p. 74) – have made adult manhood a confusing and contradictory proposition. As a result, she argues, young men do what *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s Peter and *Knocked Up*’s Ben do (at the start of their respective films): they refuse to grow up. They remain in state of extended adolescence or “pre-adulthood,” surrounded by and supported in that arrested development by their similarly pre-adult friends. “If, without an adult male playbook, some of them live in rooms decorated with *Star Wars* posters and crushed beer cans and treat women like disposable oestrogen toys,” Hymowitz concludes, “well, we can be disgusted, but we

shouldn't be surprised" (pp. 16-17). Hymowitz's case is a decidedly postfeminist one: while taking feminism positively into account, lauding the widespread availability of birth control, increased educational and employment opportunities, and other shifts that, as McRobbie notes, have made marriage an option for women rather than an economic necessity, Hymowitz argues that feminism has had a pernicious effect on men.

The case that feminism has brought about a crisis in American masculinity was advanced in a widely-discussed (Angyal 2012, Bustillos 2012, Potts 2013) article in the American magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*, entitled "The End of Men" (Rosin 2010).⁶ The article was expanded into a book, *The End of Men and the Rise of Women*, in 2012, in which Rosin argues that changes in the American and global economy have led to "a new era" in which women have, in many ways, surpassed men. Rosin argues that the evidence of this new era can be found in shifting realities in employment and education. In the wake of the Great Recession, the result of the Global Financial Crisis, three-quarters of the jobs that were lost were in industries that are traditionally male-dominated: construction, manufacturing, and high finance (as the economic crisis deepened in 2009, neologisms like "mancecession" and "he-cession" were used in the popular press to describe a new economic reality in which men were far more likely to be laid off than were women [Rampell 2009, Martin 2009]). By contrast, Rosin argues, twelve of the fifteen job categories that were predicted to grow the most between 2012 and 2022 were "occupied primarily by women": child care, home health assistance, and accounting, for example (p. 124). The shift in the American labour force in 2009 to one that is more than one-half women was accompanied by a shift in the proportions of people obtaining higher degrees. "In the United States," Rosin (2010) writes, "for every two men who will receive a BA this year, for example, three women will do the same."

⁶ Trend stories about the crisis in American masculinity remained common after 2011: "Man Up! The traditional male is an endangered species. It's time to rethink masculinity," implored the cover of *Newsweek* in September 2010 (Romano & Dokoupil). "To survive in a hostile world, guys embrace girly jobs and dirty diapers," read the introduction of that article (p. 43). "Precarious Manhood," read a *TIME* headline a few months later, in May 2011, with the subtitle, "Masculinity, a delicate flower" (Melnick).

Rosin argues that this economic shift had major cultural and social effects, one of which is that young American men increasingly felt as though they were on a losing team. She quotes one heterosexual man in his late twenties who says that, “as a generation of educated urban men” – men like Peter in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* – “who never knew a world where our female peers didn’t outperform us in almost every meaningful category, we’re in the middle of a long uncertain process of negotiating a new maleness” (p. 58). Rosin questions him about why he is so disconcerted by the “rise of women” and the “end of men” it is supposedly causing: why is he so “haunted by the spectre of the coming gender apocalypse”? He replies that “it’s because our team is losing. All the things we need to be good at to thrive in the world we imagine existing ten or twenty or even fifty years from now are things that my female friends and competitors are better at than me. Than us” (p. 59).

The men Rosin interviews, in the midst of the negotiating a new definition of masculinity, often find themselves – by choice, or for a dearth of alternatives – in the same “pre-adulthood” or “child-manhood” observed by Hymowitz. Anxiety about these men and their failure to transition into adult manhood is visible in popular culture, Rosin argues. She notes that television shows like *Jackass* (Jonze, Knoxville & Tremaine 2000) and *Tosh.0* (Tosh 2009), and books like *I Hope They Serve Beer In Hell* (Max 2006), written by self-styled permanent adolescent Tucker Max, seem to celebrate young men in this state of arrested development, and she points to romantic comedies (including several that appear in my representative sample) and other popular culture texts that take a more ambivalent or anxious view of this “crisis” in masculinity:

For the last few years, romantic comedies, sitcoms, and advertisements have been producing endless variations on what Jessica Grose at *Slate* dubbed the “omega male,” who ranks even below the beta in the wolf pack. This often unemployed, romantically challenged loser can show up as a perpetual adolescent (like Ben Stone in *Knocked Up* and many of director Judd Apatow’s other antiheroes), a charmless misanthrope (in Noah Baumbach’s [independent romantic comedy] *Greenberg* [2010]), or a happy couch potato (in a Bud Light commercial). He can be sweet, bitter, nostalgic, or cynical, but he is haunted by the idea that he cannot figure out how to be a man. “We call each other ‘man,’” says Ben Stiller’s perpetually bitter character in *Greenberg*, “but it’s a joke. It’s like imitating other people” (p. 56).

Essential to arguments like Rosin's and Hymowitz's is the sense of a growing inequity between young men and young women. In their view, American adolescence is extended for both genders – a function of changing economic conditions – but it is longer for men than it is for women, and this disparity is in part a result of feminism. In this view, feminism has succeeded in transforming understandings and expectations of femininity, allowing young women to take advantage of unprecedented educational and employment opportunities, but it has failed to effect a similar transformation of masculinity, leaving young men suspended in a state of arrested adolescence, lacking, as Hymowitz terms it, a “playbook” for how to become adult men. The result is that, in Denby's phrase, young men are “slackers,” like *Forgetting Sarah Marshall's* Peter and *Knocked Up's* Ben, while women are increasingly “strivers,” like Sarah Marshall and *Knocked Up's* Alison (in the opening scenes of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, we watch Peter prepare for Sarah's return from work; he hastily tidies his apartment, shoving his belongings messily in the closet. He works largely from home, while Sarah works in a very public sphere, but he is not domesticated – he cannot cook, cannot clean, cannot fully adjust to the reversal of gender roles that has been pressed on him). In short, women are outstripping men, leaving them in the proverbial dust, naked and vulnerable. These postfeminist arguments reveal deep anxiety about the effect of feminism on gender hierarchy, charging that though women are empowered by feminism, that empowerment comes at a cost: the consequence of all that empowerment for women is that men are left feeling powerless.

As the prevalence of arguments like Rosin's and Hymowitz's demonstrates, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, released in 2008, was produced in a cultural context marked by anxiety about the vulnerable state of American masculinity. During this period, it was common for cultural commentators in the popular press to warn that while feminism had made it possible for young American women to strive and thrive, it had left young American men vulnerable and unable to properly transition into adult manhood – indeed, without a satisfactory definition of manhood into which they could transition. These arguments are postfeminist ones, “in which women are assumed to have achieved equality” (Gill 2007, p. 13), in which

feminism is perceived to have been so successful that girls and women are now the dominant gender, while boys and men, indeed, masculinity itself, are now imperilled. As I argue in this case study, in its use of substantial male nudity, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is shaped by – and, in turn, fuels – these postfeminist warnings about a “crisis in masculinity,” and brings to celluloid life postfeminist notions about gender, sex, power, and particularly, gender. This filmic expression of larger cultural concerns about masculinity through the male body is not without precedent, and earlier examples can be observed in other genres; the romantic comedy’s use of nudity echoes the representation of male bodies in Hollywood action movies of the 1980s, when, “as part of a widespread cultural effort to respond to perceived deteriorations of masculine forms of power” – an earlier crisis in masculinity – “Hollywood films of the 1980s... highlighted masculinity (and Reagan’s collaborative nationalism) as a violent spectacle that insisted on the external sufficiency of the male body/territory” (Jeffords 1993, p. 246). In the next section, I further make the case for *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* as a postfeminist narrative, exploring its resolution of the crisis in Peter’s masculinity; and its treatment of the successful professional woman Sarah and of the less ambitious romantic heroine Rachel.

***Forgetting Sarah Marshall* as postfeminist narrative**

Forgetting Sarah Marshall screens postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – with a particular focus on gender – in a number of ways. I begin by briefly analysing the film’s treatment of Sarah, and its deployment, in Rachel, of McRobbie’s “phallic girl” to replace Sarah as a romantic partner for Peter, one who, unlike Sarah, is complicit in the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy. I end the chapter as I began it: by discussing the film’s use of male nudity to convey the sense of male vulnerability that, in postfeminist narratives, is portrayed as the result of increased gender equality.

Punishing Sarah Marshall

One of the several ways in which *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* functions as a postfeminist narrative is in its treatment of Sarah, the ambitious and professionally successful woman who breaks the protagonist’s

heart. As the movie progresses, Sarah is depicted as increasingly unsympathetic, and her personal and professional fortunes falter; by the end of the movie, she has been rejected by both Aldous and Peter, her show has been cancelled, and she has been relegated to a programme that, the movie implies, is yet worse than her previous one. Sarah, who, when she and Peter were together, was the higher paid, more visible, and professionally more successful of the two, is brought low, while Peter triumphs. In this way, the movie, somewhat reminiscent of romantic comedies about the problem of the unwed woman – explored in my first case study – undermines Sarah’s power, and punishes her for wielding it.

Though Sarah is depicted as professionally successful, the film repeatedly pokes fun at her accomplishments, undermining her legitimacy as an actress. As previously mentioned, Sarah’s show, *Crime Scene: Scene of the Crime*, is constructed as a knowing jab at the *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)* franchise, a collection of shows with multiple iterations, including *CSI: Las Vegas* [Zuiker & Donahue 2000-], *CSI: Miami* [Donahue, Mendelsohn & Zuiker 2002-12], and *CSI: New York* [Donahue, Mendelsohn & Zuiker 2004-13], and at similar shows such as *Cold Case* [Stiehm 2003-10], *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* [Wolf 1999-]. *CSI: Las Vegas*, as Turnbull (2010) notes, was “the world’s most popular TV show in 2006 and again in 2007” (p. 821). *Crime Scene* is depicted as excessively sexualised, with one TV reporter in the movie describing Sarah’s character, Detective Maddie Stark, as a “sexy crime fighter,” and “brainy sexpot.” In the glimpses we see of Sarah’s show, she is heavily made up, and she and her fellow cast members are delivering the uninspiring script in an un compelling manner (Maddie Stark: “The victim’s penis was found behind the [air conditioning] unit.” Stark’s male partner, played by C-list celebrity Billy Baldwin: “Ouch. Can you say ‘dicksicle’?”). The major appeals of the show, the movie implies, are Sarah’s looks, and the titillation of sexualised violence. Indeed, one fan of *Crime Scene* makes this explicit when, explaining why he enjoys the show, he says, “I like how they mix the sexuality with the violence.” Later in the movie, in Sarah’s presence, both Aldous and Peter make fun of a film she made that was given a limited release and received little critical recognition. When *Crime Scene* is cancelled, Peter wryly reassures Sarah, saying, “You’ve got a long career ahead of you. You’ve still got, like, four years until you’re thirty” – that is, until she is considered too old for a film and

television career (as a postfeminist narrative, the film is marked by a notable and pervasive knowingness: it is a show business story, one that knowingly pokes fun at the vacuousness of the entertainment industry). In this way, though Sarah is initially positioned as a successful professional actress, the film repeatedly undermines her success and her abilities, implying that her stardom is tenuous, temporary, and based on her appearance rather than on her talent.

As the film progresses, Peter's emotional healing is facilitated by his interest in a new woman, Rachel, but also by his ongoing realisation that Sarah is selfish and unkind. His stepbrother describes her as "acting like a little bitch" during their relationship, and the film supports this view: Sarah cheated on Peter for over a year and lied about the length of her illicit relationship. Throughout the movie, she behaves in an increasingly unsympathetic manner: in the scenes in which she competes with Rachel for Peter's attention – as Greven (2013) describes it, "they claw at each other as catty rivals" (p. 413) – Sarah, invoking her own professional success in Hollywood, is dismissive of Rachel, saying that living in Hawaii is a choice made by people who "can't deal with the real world." Upon realising that Peter is moving on, Sarah attempts to use sex with Aldous as a way to demonstrate that she, too, has moved on. Aldous is disgusted by her excessively performative sex (she loudly fakes an orgasm, hoping that Peter and Rachel will hear her through their shared wall), and ends their relationship, later telling Peter, "How you served five years under her, I'll never know. You deserve a medal... It was like a little holiday with Hitler." Then, as Sarah is attempting to reconcile with Peter, she begins performing oral sex on him, and he is unable to achieve an erection. "What's wrong with you?" she asks, "Maybe," he replies, "the problem is that you broke my heart into a million pieces and so my cock doesn't want to be around you anymore! OK? Ever!" As Greven observes, in this scene Sarah is "verbally rebuffed in the most violent terms imaginable" (p. 413), as Peter storms away shouting "you're the goddamn Devil!" Finally, as Greven notes, "while it turns out that her cancelled TV series now has a new life, its title, 'Animal Instincts,' confirms that Sarah—linked to a psychic dog—is not only the Devil but also a real bitch" (p. 414). By the end of the movie, Sarah has been, as Greven describes it, "both humiliated and vanquished" (p. 414), rejected in both her professional and personal lives, and the power she derives from her

professional accomplishments, and from her sexual appeal (which, as the movie implies, is what accounts for her professional success) repeatedly undermined. The film's approach to Sarah, which Greven calls evidence of the "misogynistic streak" in the Beta Male films, is, I argue, in fact postfeminist, and this is particularly evident in its consistent undermining of her power, and its depiction of her as contributing to and practicing on Peter's vulnerable masculinity.

Replacing Sarah Marshall

In its positioning of Rachel as Peter's ultimate love interest, the film functions as a postfeminist narrative; Rachel is, in many respects, an ideal postfeminist heroine, a hybrid of McRobbie's (2009) "phallic girl" (p. 83) and Gill's (2007) chick lit heroine (p. 237). Where Sarah is a Hollywood starlet (of sorts), Rachel dropped out of university to follow her then-boyfriend, a professional surfer, to Hawaii. After they broke up, she stayed in Hawaii, and works as the concierge at the resort where Peter is staying. Although by the end of the movie she is planning to resume her studies, she demonstrates little professional ambition. Like the romance novel heroines Gill (2007) analyses, Rachel works in the service sector and is portrayed as less than satisfied with her job (p. 237). By pairing Peter with Rachel, then, the film restores gender hierarchy: Peter leaves a romantic relationship in which he was the professionally inferior partner and enters an implicitly permanent relationship in which he is the professionally superior partner.

Most relevant to an analysis of how *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* brings postfeminist ideas about gender to celluloid life however, is how closely Rachel resembles McRobbie's postfeminist "phallic girl." McRobbie describes this girl as,

... a young woman for whom the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures are not just made available but encouraged and also celebrated. She is being asked to concur with a definition of sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward and status. Luminosity falls on the girl who adopts the habits of masculinity including heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts in public... but without relinquishing her own desirability to men, indeed, for whom such seeming masculinity enhances her desirability (p. 84).

Rachel engages in all of the above habits, with the exception of smoking; indeed, after Peter betrays her by almost reconciling with Sarah, he attempts to prove his devotion to Rachel by removing a photo of her topless from the wall of a local bar – it was taken while she was drunk, and the bartender beats Peter up in attempting to prevent him from removing it. Rachel is a prime example of the phallic girl. McRobbie understands phallic girlhood as “a kind of strategic endowment to young women, a means of attributing to them degrees of capacity but with strict conditions which ultimately ensure gender re-stabilisation” (p. 84). One way that the phallic girl does this, McRobbie argues, is by challenging “the repudiated feminist” (p. 84). This is certainly true of Rachel, who implicitly rejects feminism, first by participating in misogyny of her own: while on a hike with Peter, she jumps off a large cliff into the water below, and as he stands on the cliff top, hesitating and afraid to jump, she yells from the water, “Come on, Peter, I can see your vagina from here!” Later, when she and Peter are feverishly embracing, drunk after a long and wine-sodden dinner with Sarah and Aldous, Peter takes care to check that Rachel is not too intoxicated to consent to sex. “Are you sure you want to do this?” he asks. “Would you stop being so damn sensitive?” she chides him, and pulls him into bed. Implicitly, she is rejecting the feminist emphasis on sexual consent, as well as displaying disdain, or at least impatience, with Peter’s attempt to ensure that he is not about to commit an act of sexual violation against her. In this way, Rachel is performing the repudiation of feminism that is required of young women in order to secure what McRobbie (2009) terms “a new sexual contract” (p. 57): as McRobbie (2004) notes, postfeminism’s “new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom” (p. 260). This is precisely what Rachel does – not only withholding critique but very explicitly being active and complicit in the restoration of gender hierarchy.

As with the movie’s treatment of the ambitious and professionally successful Sarah, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s portrayal of Rachel, who ultimately triumphs over Sarah in winning Peter’s affections – and who serves as one of several catalysts for Peter’s transition into adult manhood – screens postfeminist

notions of femininity. Professionally, Rachel is neither terribly successful nor ambitious, and as an “effortlessly beautiful” (Gill 2007, p. 239), heroine who drinks a lot, has casual sex, and implicitly and explicitly repudiates feminism, she is a prime example of McRobbie’s phallic girl.

The bro stripped bare

The role of the postfeminist sensibility in shaping contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies is evident in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s depiction of professionally accomplished and ambitious women, and in its presentation of McRobbie’s phallic girl as the ideal romantic partner for the movie’s protagonist. However, as I argue in this chapter, the postfeminist sensibility’s relationship with the postfeminist cycle is most evident in the film’s use of male nudity to portray masculinity as vulnerable and in crisis. In this section, having previously placed *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*’s use of male nudity in generic and in the extra-cinematic context of anxiety about “the end of men” as a result of “the rise of women, I examine how the movie deploys extreme male nudity to convey Peter’s vulnerability, especially compared to the fully-dressed women with whom he shares the screen.

As previously noted, there are two instances of full frontal nudity in the film, one at the beginning, and one at the end. In both scenes, Peter is completely naked in a non-sexual context, and in both instances, he finds himself naked in the presence of a fully-dressed woman. The effect in both scenes is to render Peter comically pitiable, and to emphasise that he is not in control of the situation. In the first scene, Peter is dumped by Sarah. In his horror, he drops his bath towel and brings his hands to his mouth, then turns around to compose himself; he bends over as if in physical pain and exposes his buttocks to Sarah and the viewer. He spends the rest of the scene naked, even after Sarah asks him to put clothes on. This scene, in addition to providing several shots of Peter’s penis, includes a close-up of his buttocks: in this shot, one buttock cheek takes up half the frame, and Sarah, standing on the other side of the living room and staring at Peter’s naked front, takes up the rest. The *mise en scène* emphasizes Peter’s and Sarah’s comparative size: she is petite and he is 1.93 metres tall (IMDb.com) and solidly built, but in this scene, he is emotionally and physically naked, and utterly powerless. The power imbalance between the

two is further accentuated by the fact that Sarah is fully clothed, and intent on placing as much physical distance between herself and Peter as she can, despite Peter's attempts to close the literal (and figurative) gap between them.

Lehman (2007) argues that "in a patriarchal culture, when the penis is hidden, it is centred. To show, write, or talk about the penis creates the potential to demystify it and thus decentre it" (p. 30). This is certainly true of the scene in which Sarah dumps Peter. The penis here is demystified, and made comical rather than sexual or intimidating: greeting Sarah, Peter opens his towel and says, "I got a surprise for you," shaking his hips back and forth so that his unseen penis slaps audibly against his thighs. Though Peter intends the action to be playful, and is insinuating that he would like to have sex with Sarah, she stands on the other side of the room, sexually disinterested and staring apprehensively at him as she struggles to find the words to express her desire to end the relationship. His nudity is not sexually attractive to her: when he asks if they can hold each other so that she might remember how much she loves him, she twists herself into an awkward pose to ensure that his exposed penis does not touch her clothes. The penis is thereby demystified and, indeed, stripped of its power: Peter is not nude here, but naked, and as such is left vulnerable to the emotional pain inflicted by Sarah's rejection and betrayal. Peter's nudity here is a notable and, in the genre, novel, representation of postfeminist anxiety about the corrosive effect of feminism on masculinity, and the widespread cultural anxiety about the "end of men" – the devaluing of "masculine" skills in a labour market that, Rosin (2010) argues, relies less than ever on strength and size and more than ever on supposedly feminine traits like empathy and teambuilding. Peter's visible penis, as Lehman notes, does not make him more attractive or powerful. Rather, by showing it, the film emphasizes Peter's impotence and vulnerability, particularly compared to Sarah, who, fully clothed and capable of inflicting emotional wounds on Peter, is in control of this situation.

In the second scene, this emphasis on Peter's nudity as vulnerability persists. As previously mentioned, the nudity occurs when Rachel enters Peter's dressing room unannounced and finds him standing naked with his mobile phone to his ear; he decided to call her while in the middle of changing out of his costume. This time, Peter hastens to cover his crotch with his hand, but not before Rachel and

the viewer has seen his penis. Unlike Sarah, who stands in stony, awkward silence, Rachel laughs with a mixture of amusement and pity. They talk briefly, then Rachel kisses Peter, and the camera pans to two puppets – Peter’s Dracula puppet, and the Dracula’s wife puppet, which bears an obvious resemblance to Rachel – hanging close together and facing each other. A cartoon heart forms around the puppets and the screen fades to black.

In this scene, as in the first nude scene, there is nothing intentionally sexual about Peter’s nudity, though he and Rachel kiss at the end (in fact, director Nicholas Stoller deliberately chose the shot of Peter and Rachel kissing that was the least sexually suggestive. “This is the least aggressive kiss we shot,” he says in the DVD commentary). Instead, the scene emphasises that though Peter is stumbling out of his arrested development and toward adult manhood – having recovered from the emotional trauma of being dumped by Sarah, and having realised his dream of staging his musical – he is still outstripped (or, in this case, out clothed) by the women in his life. Rachel, though she is less professionally accomplished than Sarah, and though as a phallic girl she participates in the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy, is fully clothed, and, like Sarah, fully in control of this situation. When Peter begins to apologise and profess his feelings for her, she interrupts by kissing him (this is reminiscent of the way in which she silences him as he is trying to ensure that she is sober enough to consent to sex). Just as it is Sarah’s decision, and not Peter’s, that ends the first relationship, it is Rachel’s decision that rehabilitates this second relationship.

The use of Peter’s nudity in these scenes contributes to the film’s representation of postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power, particularly, the way in which, under postfeminism, women are perceived to be the new dominant gender, with men left naked (sometimes literally) and vulnerable, and subject to women’s romantic and sexual desires. As Lehman argues, the visible penis is a demystified and decentred penis, and in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter’s decentred penis reinforces the cultural anxiety about “the end of men” – the purported end of an economic and, by extension, cultural system that centres and privileges maleness and “masculine” attributes in favour of “the rise of women.”

Restoring gender hierarchy in Forgetting Sarah Marshall

As most postfeminist narratives do, *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* concludes by restoring gender hierarchy. As I argue above, it punishes the powerful woman and elevates the phallic girl, and, as I explore in this section, by the final act, it begins to move its floundering male protagonist closer toward inhabiting the hegemonic masculinity already exemplified by his stepbrother, Brian.

Hegemonic masculinity, a term and concept coined and later reformulated by Connell (1987; 2000), accounts for the myriad but clearly hierarchical ways that masculinity is constructed in non-fictional spaces, though here I apply it to the fictional world of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*. As Gill (2007) explains, “hegemonic masculinity may not be the most common form of masculinity – in fact it is most unlikely to be because only a few men can ever achieve it – but it is dominant in the sense of being socially valued and culturally powerful” (p. 31). Kimmel (1994), who describes hegemonic masculinity as the standard that “all other men are measured against and found wanting” (Gill p. 31), quotes Goffman’s (1963) description of the ideal American man: “young, married, white, urban, Northern heterosexual, Protestant father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports” (p. 128), though Gill notes that, as Connell describes it, the current form of hegemonic masculinity hews more closely to the man Sarah cheats on Peter with, Aldous, who, despite being a rock star and not a businessman, resembles in many ways the “transnational business masculinity” Connell claims is currently most valued in the hierarchy of masculinity. Transnational business masculinity “differs from traditional bourgeois masculinity” – best exemplified in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* by Brian – “by its increasingly libertarian sexuality, with a growing tendency to commodified relations with women” (Gill p.31), and in its emphasis on profit and individualism, it fits well with the dominant neoliberal sensibility. Though Peter’s slow movement toward adult manhood more closely resembles the iteration of hegemonic masculinity described by Goffman and exemplified by Brian, the movie arguably positions Aldous as the pinnacle of manhood. Though he has participated in infidelity, he is entirely exonerated; as when Peter tells him that it is difficult to be angry with Aldous because Aldous is so cool, and they agree that Sarah is, in Aldous’s phrasing “not Hitler, but... Goebbels.” By the end of

the movie, Peter has begun to more closely resemble Goffman's iteration of hegemonic masculinity, a transition that both includes and assures his "happy ending" with Rachel.

In the final act of *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, Peter is transitioning, albeit slowly and with difficulty, into traditional bourgeois masculinity. He no longer has his job at *Crime Scene*, but he devotes himself wholeheartedly to making his dream of a Dracula puppet musical a reality. He is no longer pining for Sarah, though he regrets the way things ended with Rachel in Hawaii. In a montage that begins with him berating himself and struggling to work on his musical – when his efforts to compose stall, he pounds at the piano keys, singing "Peter you suck, Peter you suck, Peter you don't do anything of value... You're so self-loathing, go see a psychiatrist" – we watch Peter as he changes his life for the better: he starts exercising (though he still eats giant bowls of sugary cereal) and keeps composing, and then we see Rachel opening a letter from him that contains a flier advertising a performance of the musical (other "homme-coms" in my representative sample contain similar montages. *Knocked Up* contains a sequence in which we see Ben obtain for himself the practical markers of Goffman's iteration of hegemonic masculinity: steady and conventional employment, his own apartment, and more sensible lifestyle habits. He reads the parenting books Alison has bought for him, memorizing the pregnancy handbook *What to Expect When You're Expecting* [What to Expect LLC 2008] and surprising her with his detailed knowledge about childbirth. In *Failure to Launch*, Matthew McConaughey's character moves out of his parents' house, and in *Life As We Know It*, Josh Duhamel's character slowly learns the basics of parenting an infant). Peter's musical, though it is quirky to the point of weirdness, is a success on opening night; as Stoller notes in the DVD commentary, "it's not like he's won a Tony for this thing, but he made it happen." As proof of his transition to this new, more valued form of adult manhood, Peter is able to reconcile with Rachel – and that reconciliation or "happy ending" in turn facilitates further transition toward hegemonic masculinity. Though, I demonstrate above, he is still vulnerable even in his moment of romantic reconciliation with Rachel, he is far less vulnerable than he was in the first nude scene, when Sarah dumps him.

At the beginning of the movie, Peter has had his heart broken by a woman who is more professionally successful and prominent than he is, and, when compared to his stepbrother (who is married to a woman he calls “the future mother of my children”) and to Aldous, his romantic (and sexual) replacement, he is found wanting in his fulfilment of the hegemonic masculine ideal. By the end of the movie, he is still wanting in that fulfilment, but by finishing and mounting the musical, beginning to exercise, and reconciling with Rachel, he rises within the gender hierarchy, thereby reinforcing it. His reconciliation with Rachel, which the movie suggests will result in permanent coupling and marriage, serves to further re-stabilise gender hierarchy, and advances Peter’s place within it.

Forgetting Sarah Marshall bears many of the hallmarks of a postfeminist narrative. As I demonstrate in this section, the movie’s punishment of Sarah, the professionally successful ambitious woman, is one such hallmark, reminiscent of the treatment of the problematically unwed woman explored in my first case study. The movie’s depiction of Rachel, a prime example of McRobbie’s phallic girl, as a preferable romantic alternative to Sarah, is another such hallmark (as is the use of knowingness and awareness of the entertainment industry). However, it is in its depiction of masculinity as vulnerable – and of that vulnerability as a consequence of female power – that the relationship between the dominant postfeminist sensibility and the contemporary romantic comedy is most evident. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* uses Peter’s nudity to convey that vulnerability, emphasizing his impotence and powerlessness compared to his fully clothed female love interests, and depicting his naked penis as proof of his vulnerability and weakness rather than of virility and strength. This use of male nudity contributes to the portrayal of Peter as a man who is failing to fulfil the requirements of hegemonic masculinity – though, as I note here, his movement up the gender hierarchy toward more complete fulfilment of those requirements is central to resolution of the plot.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study has been to demonstrate how *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* brings postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, power – and particularly gender – to celluloid life. Where most analyses of postfeminism in romantic comedies (including two of the case studies in this thesis) focus on femininity, my focus here has been masculinity. Having observed the rise in extreme male nudity in the genre during the postfeminist cycle, my goal here is to demonstrate how *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, the only movie in my representative sample to feature full frontal male nudity, uses that nudity to convey the postfeminist notion that, due to the complete and taken-for-granted success of feminism, men are now the imperilled gender. Lehman (2007) suggests that the increasing filmic focus on men's naked bodies, and in particular the increasing number of films in which the penis is visible to the viewer “may in part be a reaction to the women's movement. At a time when women have made major in-roads upon areas of male privilege such as the workplace, politics, and the military, asserting the importance of the penis may seem to affirm the significance of the one thing women cannot have” (p. 251). Similarly, my argument here is that, though nudity renders Peter vulnerable within the narrative of the movie, this vulnerability is in the service of postfeminist ideas about the effects of feminism on masculinity and on gender hierarchy.

As I note in this chapter, the rise in the incidence of male nudity, and indeed, in romantic comedies that place men at their narrative centres, must be understood in the context of shifts taking place in the genre in the first decade of the twenty-first century. During this time, romantic comedies about men – “homme-coms” – became increasingly common, a shift made possible, as I explore in this case study, by the success of *There's Something About Mary* and of director/producer Judd Apatow. These movies blend what Jeffers McDonald (2009) calls “Hollywood Lowbrow” with the generic structure of the romantic comedy to create a crop of movies that contain humour that is raunchier and more body-focused than is typical of the genre, but as I note here, the increase in the amount of nudity in the genre during this period is gendered: men are far more likely to appear naked than are women. As I demonstrate in this case study, the increase in the amount of male nudity, and especially in nudity that serves to render the man in question vulnerable, rather than to sexualize him, must also be placed in the context of widespread

anxiety about a crisis in masculinity, “the end of men,” which numerous cultural commentators (Hymowitz, Rosin, Parker) argue has been caused by “the rise of women” – which has been made possible by the success of feminism.

Forgetting Sarah Marshall is one filmic representation of this anxiety, which it conveys through its use of male nudity. It screens other postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power, notably in its treatment of Sarah, the professionally successful woman, and its elevation of Rachel, the phallic girl, both of which serve to re-stabilise gender hierarchy at the conclusion of the film. However, it is in its use of male nudity to convey Peter’s vulnerability, and in its resolution of the plot with his movement toward more closely inhabiting hegemonic masculinity that the movie most powerfully conveys postfeminist ideas about gender – in this case, about the crisis in masculinity that, outside of cinema, was described during this time period as “the end of men.”

In the next chapter, I demonstrate how the postfeminist sensibility shapes the postfeminist romantic comedy’s representation of sex, and especially of casual sex. After placing the cycle’s emphasis on casual sex in generic and historical context, I demonstrate how *Friends With Benefits*, one of several movies in my sample with a casual sex relationship at the centre of its narrative, screens postfeminist ideas about sex, and is informed by extra-cinematic debates over the purported cultural shift among young people in the United States, away from dating relationships and toward “hook up culture.”

Case Study 3: *FRIENDS WITH BENEFITS*

Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to address the third of my subsidiary research questions, which concerns the depiction of casual sex in the postfeminist cycle of the Hollywood romantic comedy, and the role of postfeminist ideas, about gender, sex, and power, evident in extra-cinematic public debates about casual sex in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in shaping that depiction. To that end, I focus here on one of the two movies released in 2011 that concerned casual sex relationships, *Friends With Benefits*, and demonstrate how that movie brings to celluloid life postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power, with a particular focus on sex. Though another movie about casual sex, *No Strings Attached*, was released in the United States only months before *Friends With Benefits*, the latter film makes greater use of irony and knowingness, and includes an explicit rebuke of second-wave feminism and its efforts to separate sex from love. A third film, *Going the Distance*, released in 2010, is also about casual sex, but, as the title suggests, the notable challenge of the relationship in that movie is not that they are having sex outside a monogamous romantic relationship, but rather that they live on opposite sides of the country. For these reasons, I determined that an analysis of *Friends With Benefits* is more instructive to an understanding of how postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power have shaped contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies.

After a brief summary of *Friends With Benefits*, I place the movie in generic context, examining the cycle that this movie and those like it most resemble, the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as the genre's contemporary resurgence in explicit depictions of sex. I then place the movie in extra-cinematic context, exploring the widespread cultural anxiety about casual sex – or “hook up culture” – that flourished in the years preceding and contemporaneously with the postfeminist cycle. Finally, I make the case for *Friends With Benefits* as a postfeminist narrative: I examine how the movie permits casual sex as, in McRobbie's phrasing, “a feminist gesture as it adjusts to ward off the threat of feminism” (p. 64) and before concluding with the generically expected “happy ending”; I demonstrate that Jamie, the heroine (played by Mila Kunis) performs the role of McRobbie's phallic girl before conceding to gender

essentialism; I explore the movie's use of irony and knowingness; and finally, I analyse the film's rejection of "free love" feminism and the purported second-wave attempt to separate sex from love.

Plot summary

Jamie (Mila Kunis) and Dylan (Justin Timberlake) meet when Jamie, a head-hunter from New York, recruits Dylan, who runs a website in Los Angeles, for the position of Art Director at *GQ Magazine*. When Dylan accepts the job, he and Jamie become friends, and having both recently been dumped by their significant others, decide to have sex "like playing tennis" – that is, as a purely physical act, with no emotional attachment. They make the agreement, "No emotions, just sex. Whatever happens, we stay friends." They adhere to this agreement for several weeks until Jamie's mother (Patricia Clarkson), a loopy former "free love" enthusiast who does not remember the identity of Jamie's father, comments that the "friends with benefits" relationship takes Jamie off the dating market, and Jamie ends the arrangement. She begins dating Parker (Bryan Greenberg), a paediatric oncologist, telling him that she has a "five date rule," that is, she will not have sex with him until the fifth date ("It's something I saw in a movie once," she tells him; the movie in question is in fact a Hollywood romantic comedy that she knows by heart, and that Dylan has roundly mocked). On their fifth date, they sleep together, after which he loses interest in her, and the relationship ends. To console her, Dylan invites Jamie to come home to Los Angeles with him, where she meets his family and learns that his mother abandoned the family after his father (Richard Jenkins) was diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease. Dylan and Jamie have sex in Los Angeles, after which Jamie assumes they will begin a romantic relationship; Dylan tells her that he thought their night together was "just sex," and, upset, she abruptly goes back to New York. Both are saddened by the loss of the friendship, and, urged and aided by their respective parents and by one of Dylan's colleagues (Woody Harrelson), they reconcile. "I can live with never having sex with you again." Dylan tells Jamie. "It would be really hard, but I could do it. I just want my best friend back." They kiss, and as the credits roll, we see them go to a restaurant for their "first date."

***Friends With Benefits* in generic context**

First, I place *Friends With Benefits* in historic and generic context and briefly examine the cycle of the Hollywood romantic comedy it most resembles, the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s. Though *Friends With Benefits* belongs to the postfeminist cycle, its treatment of sex has important generic roots in the sex comedy cycle – just as the postfeminist cycle’s treatment of unwed career women has, as I explore in my first case study, pertinent generic roots in the screwball cycle. I then discuss the recent resurgence in the Hollywood romantic comedy of explicit depictions of sex, which, according to Jeffers McDonald (2009a) “seems to offer a conscious rebuke to the standard form of the contemporary rom-com, which has been habitually downplaying the importance of sex for over a decade now” (p. 149). As was true in my first and second case studies, any understanding of how the postfeminist cycle depicts gender, sex, and power requires an understanding of the genre’s treatment of those themes in the past, as well as of recent and contemporary shifts in the genre. I therefore discuss the historical roots of *Friends With Benefits*’ representation of gender, sex, and power – and particularly sex – and place the movie in the context of recent and contemporary developments in the genre.

The sex comedy cycle

The sex comedy cycle – Grindon (2011) terms it the “comedies of seduction cycle” – includes romantic comedies released between 1953 and 1966. Grindon points to three main creative personalities who defined the cycle: actresses Marilyn Monroe and Doris Day, and writer-director Billy Wilder (p. 46). In the sex comedy, of which *Some Like it Hot* (Wilder 1959), *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Negulesco 1953), *Pillow Talk* (Gordon 1959) and *That Touch of Mink* (Mann 1962) are emblematic, the influence of a new cultural preoccupation with sex and the effects of increasingly loose enforcement of the Production Code are evident, as “seduction replaced courtship at the centre” of the genre (Grindon, p. 46). The sex comedy resulted in the prominence of the generic archetypes of the playboy, the virgin, and the golddigger, pitting women against men in a struggle in which women withheld or traded sex for economic security, while men attempted to obtain sex without paying the prices women demanded of them –

marriage and monogamy. “The sex comedy portrayed a cynical view of courtship as seduction in which sex was a commodity to be exchanged,” Grindon writes. “The man and woman each manoeuvred for advantage. The man sought sex without any commitment, while the woman bargained for the economic security represented by marriage. The playboy and the golddigger arose as antagonists” (p. 47). In most sex comedies, the women “win.” The virgin resists sex until she has secured the commitment of the now-reformed playboy, or the golddigger convinces the millionaire to marry her, and the virgin is at last allowed to have sex. As Jeffers McDonald (2009) notes, “both male and female protagonists want sex, but women want respect too” (p. 149). This resolution is not explicitly a loss for the playboy, because he (eventually) discovers his ability to love as well as to lust: “In most of these films, the beast is tamed by the beauty and marriage affirms traditional values in spite of the absence of love until the final episodes” (Grindon p. 47). Interestingly, Grindon notes that “the sex comedy builds its plot around the prospect of sex and discusses it blatantly, but sex rarely takes place and never on screen” (p. 47). Despite the name of the cycle, and despite the importance of sex to the plot of these movies (of the three main archetypes, two – the playboy and the virgin – are defined by whether or not they have sex, and if so, how much), sex is, as it was in the screwball cycle, an entirely off-screen affair.

The sex comedies represented “a fresh screen variation on the battle of the sexes” (p. 46) in which “desire needs to be satisfied, but the opposite sex is viewed as the enemy to be conquered rather than as a prospective helpmate” (Grindon p. 47). This is not the case in the postfeminist romantic comedies that place casual sex at their narrative centres, of which *Friends With Benefits* is one. Where the sex comedies pit their characters against each other in the battle of the sexes, the characters in *Friends With Benefits* view casual sex as an escape from the battle: romantic relationships, in their view, are a power struggle between the genders (Dylan: “Why do women think the only way to get men to do what they want is to manipulate them?” Jamie: “History. Personal experience. Romantic comedies.”), but by engaging only in sex and remaining “just” friends, they can exempt themselves from that struggle. In the postfeminist cycle, unlike the sex comedy cycle, sex is highly visible. As I explore in my second case study, my case study on male nudity in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, an increase in the amount of extreme male nudity

occurred during the postfeminist cycle, and a considerable amount of that nudity – including the nudity in *Friends With Benefits* – occurred in the context of sex. Both *Friends With Benefits* and *No Strings Attached* include multiple sex montages in which the characters have sex in a variety of locations and positions; in several shots in *Friends With Benefits*, only Kunis’s genitals and breasts are concealed. This is partly a function of the elimination of the Production Code in favour of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system, as well as of altered social mores between the 1950s and 1960s and the first decade of the twenty-first century; though the depiction of sex in the postfeminist cycle has significant generic roots in the sex comedy cycle, the contemporary depiction is far more explicit than it was in the past. Like the romantic comedies of the sex comedy cycle, postfeminist romantic comedies about casual sex take place in the cultural context of widespread social anxiety about the sexual behaviour of young people, and especially of young women. In 1953, at the beginning of the sex comedy cycle, Grindon (2011) notes, “Alfred Kinsey published *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female* and received widespread media coverage. The study investigated desire among women, revealing that half those surveyed had sex outside marriage. The news shocked the culture and challenged the double standard that men should have sex before marriage but women should remain virgins” (Grindon p. 46). Similarly, as I explore later in this case study, *Friends With Benefits* must be placed in the context of cultural anxiety about “hook up culture” and its pernicious effects on young people, particularly on young women.

The sex comedy cycle ended in the mid-1960s, in part because two of its three main creative personalities were no longer making romantic comedies: Wilder transitioned into other genres, and Monroe died (Grindon, p. 50). Moreover, the cultural landscape was shifting so that sex comedies were less relevant to American audiences: Grindon attributes this to the “turmoil of the 1960s” (p. 50), as in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the ascendance of the Beatles. Grindon also points to the rise of second-wave feminism, which “questioned the value of marriage itself” (p. 50) and Jeffers McDonald attributes much of the decline of the sex comedy to changing sexual attitudes and behaviours, particularly for women: “the particular context in which the mid-century sex comedy flourished ended when the contraceptive pill became an accepted fact” (p. 55). With virginity no longer essential to a

woman's value in the marriage market, and with sex no longer carrying as great a risk of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the battle of the sexes framework of the sex comedy was no longer relevant. Despite obvious differences, the postfeminist romantic comedies about casual sex build on the generic foundations laid by the sex comedy, or comedy of seduction, of the 1950s and 1960s, and any attempt to understand the former must take into account, as I do here, the influence of the latter.

Bringing sex back

The postfeminist romantic comedy's depiction of casual sex must also be understood in the context of more recent shifts in the genre, namely, the absence of sex in the romantic comedies of the late 1980s and the 1990s, and the resurgence in bodily humour and explicit depictions of sex in the romantic comedies of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Jeffers McDonald (2009a) traces the shift in the depiction of sex in the cycles that followed the sex comedy cycle, arguing that the romantic comedies of the "radical rom-com" cycle (Grindon terms them "nervous romances") as exemplified by *Annie Hall* and *The Goodbye Girl* (Ross 1977), "constantly stress that sexual fulfilment and pleasure, long acknowledged as significant to men, are vitally important to women also" (p. 149). Jeffers McDonald argues that in the movies in the cycle that followed, the neo-traditional cycle (Grindon calls it "the reaffirmation of romance cycle"), de-emphasise sex, though they often contain allusions to the radical romantic comedies. Pointing to *Sleepless in Seattle* (Ephron 1993), and *You've Got Mail* (Ephron 1998), she argues that while the "Ephronesque form is happy to plunder the 1970s films for inspiration, its most radical difference is to have abandoned the older form's commitment to affirming the importance of sex to both genders" (p. 150). She also observes that this is not only true of films made by Ephron, but of most Hollywood romantic comedies of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, in which "if sex happens, it happens offscreen, but mostly it just does not happen" (p. 150). In this cycle, sex is avoided, or depicted as "an immature pastime, a phrase one goes through" (p. 150) and de-emphasised as "a necessary part of romance" (p. 152). And, as Grindon argues of the reaffirmation of romance/neo-traditional cycle, "so many of the revisionist qualities of the romance which reflected social changes initiated in the 1960s, such as the more

open and honest treatment of sex or a greater freedom for women, are being resisted” (p. 59). The dominance of these neo-traditional and Ephronesque iterations of the romantic comedy made possible the development of the male-centred romantic comedy or “homme-com” detailed in the previous chapter: one of the hallmarks of the movies of Apatow and other romantic comedies with male protagonists is “an eruption of extreme and unusually uncontrollable physicality in to the narrative” (p. 153), and a resulting new emphasis on sex and the body, which, in the early years of the twenty-first century, laid the generic foundation for the graphic depiction of casual sex in *Friends With Benefits*.

As Jeffers McDonald demonstrates, the development of the “homme-com,” with its emphasis on bodily fluids and bodily functions, included a shift in the depiction of sex: where the movies of the Ephronesque and neo-traditional cycles had avoided sex or depicted it obliquely, “homme-coms” are far more explicit. “Hollywood, like nature, abhors a vacuum,” Jeffers McDonald writes, and after more than a decade of “rom coms as such a sex-free zone,” (p. 152), the male-centred romantic comedy, blending gross-out humour with traditional generic structures, developed. Where romantic comedies in the previous cycle had downplayed the importance of sex, the “homme-com” borrows scatological and sexual humour from “Hollywood Lowbrow” (p. 148), insisting on “the comedy derived from tumescence and engorgement, orgasm and ejaculate” (p. 148), and prioritises “the comic potential of the body, its drives and desires” (p. 148). Grindon observes that “by the late nineties, the grotesque elements of animal comedy, the slapstick humour, focus on sex, gross physical jokes, and uninhibited vulgarity became integrated with romantic comedies” (p. 62). As a result, in these male-centred romantic comedies, sex is explicitly depicted, as in *Wedding Crashers* (Dobkin 2005), in which the two male protagonists deceive a series of women wedding guests in order to have sex with them – the women are nameless and, in the montage of a dozen of them falling backwards into bed, topless. As Bowler (2013) observes, in contemporary, and particularly in postfeminist romantic comedies, “traditional romantic conventions of the 1980s and 1990s have been replaced by the, often voyeuristic, foregrounding of recreational sex, bodily presentation and the discussion of the sexual subjectivity and femininity of women in contemporary romantic culture” (p. 188). Like Jeffers McDonald, I conclude that in the first decade of the

twenty-first century – the period preceding and concurrent with the time period spanned by the postfeminist cycle – the Hollywood romantic comedy features “evident prioritising of the importance of the bodily, and particularly the sexual, elements within romance” (p. 147). And, as I demonstrate in the previous case study, this also involved an increase in the amount of male nudity, much of which occurred in the context of sex, as in the case in *Friends With Benefits*.

The postfeminist romantic comedies that focus on casual sex, like *Friends With Benefits* (and, though it is not the focus of this case study, *No Strings Attached*), must be understood in relation to the sex comedy cycle, the cycle to which they bear the most thematic resemblance. Like *Friends With Benefits* and other casual sex movies, films in the sex comedy cycle emphasised the importance of sex to romantic relationships, even as they largely depicted women as less motivated by the desire for sex than men, and portrayed men and women as engaged in a battle of sexes in which men pursued sex without commitment and women rewarded commitment with sex. Casual sex movies, as postfeminist narratives, depict women as “active and desiring subjects” (Radner p. 191) who view sex as a source of pleasure, not as a bargaining chip with which to secure economic security. Though they are “sex comedies,” films in the sex comedy cycle rarely explicitly depict sex – it happens off screen or is presumed to occur after the credits roll; the postfeminist romantic comedies that feature casual sex, however, depict sex explicitly and often. Despite these and other important differences, any understanding of how the postfeminist cycle portrays casual sex must be placed in the context of the history of the genre, as I do here. *Friends With Benefits* and other postfeminist romantic comedies that emphasise and explicitly depict must also be understood in the context of contemporary shifts in the genre in the first decade of the twentieth century. During this period, as Jeffers McDonald observes, the romantic comedy became increasingly concerned with men, and as a result, increasingly featured sexual and scatological humour. *Friends With Benefits*, in its explicit depiction of and heavy emphasis on sex, builds on concurrent developments in the romantic comedy genre, and must be placed in the context of those generic shifts. Next, I place *Friends With Benefits*’ portrayal of casual sex in extra-cinematic context, and discuss the widespread cultural anxiety about “hook up culture” that flourished in the years preceding and concurrent with the postfeminist cycle.

***Friends With Benefits* in extra-cinematic context: “Hook up culture”**

By placing *Friends With Benefits* and its depiction of casual sex in extra-cinematic context, I show how postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – and particularly sex – shaped the portrayal of sex in the postfeminist cycle of Hollywood romantic comedies. By examining the widespread cultural anxiety about “hook up culture” in the United States, I demonstrate how *Friends With Benefits* screens that same anxiety. I begin by defining the vague and contentious term “hooking up.” I then outline the various arguments made in the American popular press in opposition to and in favour of the “casual” sexual arrangements described by that term, noting the debate’s focus on young women, and the ways in which participants in the debate – particularly those who opposed casual sex – deployed postfeminist arguments to support their case.

“Something sexual happened”

“Hooking up” is a vague term that encompasses a range of sexual activities. England and Thomas (2006) describe its use by American university students as follows: “As students use the term, a hook up implies that something sexual happened, but not necessarily that you ‘had sex,’ by which students mean sexual intercourse” (p. 72). The range of activities that can be described as “hooking up” is so wide, as one National Public Radio report on the phenomenon noted, that “it might well encompass someone’s idea of virginity” (Wilson 2009). According to England and Thomas, 34% of hook ups “involved no more than kissing and some touching that didn’t involve genitals,” 19% “involved hand stimulation of one or both person’s genitals,” 22% “involved oral sex, but not intercourse,” and 23% “involved sexual intercourse” (p. 72). Additionally, they found that “in the cases where things stopped with oral sex, 49% of the time it was mutual, but where it was not, it was much more often the young men than women receiving oral sex (37% versus 14% of the oral sex cases)” (p. 72). All these interactions were described by those who engaged in them as “hooking up.”

The relationship arrangements within which this behaviour takes place are similarly diverse, and may also all fall under the term “hooking up.” England and Thomas found that for university students, about half of hook ups started at parties, about a quarter started “when people were hanging out in the dorm,” and some started at bars (p. 71). They note that “only 14% said they didn’t know the person they hooked up with before that night, at least a little. Over half said they knew the person moderately or very well. In fact, slightly over half of those reporting on a recent hook up said they had hooked up with this same person before” (p. 71). Littleton et al (2009) state that a “friends with benefits” relationship is “a friendship that includes sexual activity,” that is, hooking up, but “no romantic attachment or commitment” (Hughes et al 2005). Interviews conducted by England and Thomas revealed that “sometimes a sequence of multiple hook ups ultimately leads to an exclusive relationship. Other times, people become what some call ‘friends with benefits’ – two people who regularly have sex together but do not define themselves as boyfriend and girlfriend” (p. 71). “Hooking up,” then, may describe one-time sexual interactions with someone one just met; one-time sexual interactions with a person one already knows; sexual interactions with the same person repeatedly in a non-exclusive fashion; or sexual interactions with the same person repeatedly in an exclusive arrangement. The last of these describes the relationship in *Friends With Benefits*.

Debating “hook up culture”

In the years preceding the release of *Friends With Benefits* in 2011, American popular media hosted an ongoing public debate about the extent to which young Americans, particularly those on university campuses, were engaging in the kind of casual sexual interactions described by the term “hooking up,” and if such a “hook up culture” represented a change, desirable or otherwise, from the ways in which young people conducted their sexual lives in the recent past. On university campuses, students who opposed the purported shift from dating to casual sex made the case for pre-marital abstinence in campus newspapers, and by founding pro-abstinence groups with the stated goal of providing an alternative to “hook up culture” and supporting those students who abstained from participating in it. In this section, I

discuss objections to “hook up culture,” then outline the various defences thereof as well as arguments disputing the claim that hooking up was a novel phenomenon.

For at least five years before the release of *Friends With Benefits*, public debate about “hook up culture” was loud and persistent, appearing in the form of numerous books, opinion columns in college newspapers, blog posts, and the formation of campus abstinence groups designed to combat “hook up culture.” Criticism of the “hook up culture” appeared in books with titles like *Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both* (Sessions Stepp 2007), *Hooked: New Science on How Casual Sex Is Affecting Our Children* (McIlhaney et al 2008), *Unprotected: A Campus Psychiatrist Reveals How Political Correctness in Her Profession Endangers Every Student* (Grossman 2006), *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus* (Bogle 2008), and *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (Shalit 2000). Objections to “hook up culture” were expressed most commonly by cultural conservatives, who claimed that the development of “hook up culture” had led to the collapse of dating culture among American university students, and that this invited myriad harms; that it increased rates of depression and sexually transmitted diseases and encouraged men to exploit and disrespect women (Sessions Stepp). Criticism of casual sex was often notably postfeminist in nature. Some who counselled young women to avoid hooking up framed the problem as one of well-intentioned feminism gone awry: the gains secured during the second-wave of feminism were welcome, except when it came to sex. In this view, women had been misled by feminism to believe that they could have sex “like men,” that is, unencumbered by emotional attachment to their sexual partners, but had found themselves emotionally and psychologically damaged by the attempt to do so (Sessions Stepp, McIlhaney et al). Other objectors simply lamented that the feminism of the 1960s and 1970s had ever been allowed to take hold at all (Shalit).

In *Unhooked*, Sessions Stepp writes about a university student named Morgan, who became depressed and began failing her classes after engaging in casual sex. Morgan “had a series of sexual

encounters, and none of them amounted to anything” (p. 3). Sessions Stepp observes that Morgan’s is not an isolated case:

Young people have virtually abandoned dating and replaced it with group get-togethers and sexual behaviours that are detached from love or commitment—and sometimes even from liking. High school and college teachers I’ve talked to, as well as researchers, remark on this: Relationships have been replaced by the casual sexual encounters known as hookups. Love, while desired by some, is being put on hold or seen as impossible; sex is becoming the primary currency of social interaction. Some girls can handle this; others, like Morgan, are exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually by it (p. 5).

Sessions Stepp’s objections to casual sex are expressed in postfeminist terms: she is concerned about the objectification of young women, and about their physical, emotional and spiritual health, and objects to the commodification of sex among young people. Here, feminism is “taken into account,” as McRobbie (2004) terms it (p. 255), in order to re-stabilise gender hierarchy – in this case, in the form of monogamous heterosexual romantic relationships that presumably will result in marriage.

The concern about hooking up and its purported pernicious effect on young people, particularly young women, permeated the campuses on which the activity was taking place. In *The Daily Princetonian*, the campus newspaper of Princeton University, in Princeton, New Jersey,⁷ one student columnist objected to the campus “hook up culture” and to the university health centre’s policy of providing free condoms to students:

One does not need a degree in public health to see the infectious threat posed by Princeton's hookup culture. The dorms and Prospect Avenue can be thoroughfares for sexually transmitted infections, or STIs. So why aren't condoms good enough? While condoms protect both sexes from the transmission of most STIs (there are some frightening exceptions), they cannot protect women from the psychological fallout of casual sex... Falling GPAs, numerous visits to the counsellors, bottle after bottle of antidepressants, alcohol abuse, leaves of absence, self-injurious behaviour and suicidal ideation can be some of the many consequences of "safer" sex (Nava 2007).

⁷ I was an undergraduate student on the campus and a guest contributor to the newspaper’s op-ed page from 2008 to 2009.

Like Sessions Stepp, Nava (a man) expressed particular concern about the effects of casual sex on young women, taking into account the feminist investment in women's equal access to education, as well as the notion that the mental health of young women is an issue that merits public attention. Also like Sessions Stepp, this columnist's desired outcome is a return to dating culture – the “relationships” model that Sessions Stepp argues has all but disappeared among young Americans – and an end to premarital sex (this columnist was a member of a campus abstinence group, discussed later in this chapter). Other student-penned campus press coverage of “hook up culture” expressed the postfeminist reinvestment in gender essentialism. In an interview with the *Yale Daily News*, the campus newspaper of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, one first year student said,

...he knows of several guys who had led girls to believe they were more interested in a real relationship than they actually were in order to prolong the hookup. On the flipside, he said girls have also been known to have sex with guys with the sole hope that it will help keep them around. But he said many hookups end the moment the girl says “I want to be exclusive” (Foxhall 2010).

This description of how “hook up culture” functions conveys the gender essentialism that characterises postfeminism, and that is assumed by Sessions Stepp, Nava, and other opponents of casual sex: that casual sex require women to suppress their true desire for a committed relationship, and that committed and monogamous relationships require men to suppress their true desire for emotionally unattached sex.

In response to the perceived dominance of “hook up culture” on their campuses, students began forming organisations that promoted sexual abstinence until marriage. In 2006, students at Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts founded the campus organization True Love Revolution, in order to “present another option to our peers regarding sex-related issues, endorsing premarital abstinence and sexual integrity, upholding the institution of marriage and the family, and advocating true feminism” (“Sexuality and Feminism”). The founders of True Love Revolution believed that the “hook up culture” at Harvard was detrimental to those who participated in it, because “sex outside of marriage often blurs the distinction between infatuation and lasting love, resulting in feelings of loss, pain and betrayal after

breakups.” In 2012, True Love Revolution was re-named the Harvard College Anscombe Society, making it one of approximately six chapters of the Anscombe Society in America. Originally founded at Princeton, the Anscombe Society was a student group that aimed to:

...promote an environment that values the crucial role the intact, stable family plays in sustaining society; the definition of marriage as the exclusive, monogamous union of a man and a woman; its role as an institution which is necessary for the healthy family, and thus for a healthy society; a conception of feminism that encourages motherhood; and a chaste lifestyle (“Sexual Ethics and Chastity”).

Sex, the Anscombe Society emphasized, “when properly understood and experienced, is unifying, beautiful, and joyful” – when experienced, that is, between a heterosexual married couple who were not having sex with anyone else, and with the distinct possibility of it resulting in parenthood.

As its advocacy of “a feminism that encourages motherhood” suggests, the Anscombe Society’s opposition to “hook up culture” relied in part on its reaffirmation of traditional gender roles. “The Anscombe Society recognizes that there are inherent physical, behavioural, emotional, and psychological differences between men and women,” their website reads (“Sexuality and Feminism”). The organisation’s official position paper on feminism expresses a belief in gender equality in spite of those inherent differences, stating that “these differences do not evidence the superiority of one sex over the other, but rather serve to show that each sex is complemented and made stronger by the presence of the other.” The Anscombe Society takes feminism into account, so as to advocate for “true feminism:”

True feminism does not embrace the idea that women should become more like men or that they abandon feminine characteristics and instincts. Nor does true feminism assert that women are superior to men. Instead, true feminism recognizes the natural characteristics, strengths, and abilities of women and seeks to affirm them in this identity. As such, women should be guaranteed equal rights and freedoms in the community as well as career opportunities that can coexist with motherhood and the unique responsibilities it entails. In contemporary society, motherhood is sometimes seen as a burden, and being a stay-at-home parent maligned as a second-class responsibility. On the contrary, we assert that motherhood is of the utmost importance – a vocation to be honoured and respected. We do not assert that every woman is

called to be a mother, just as not every man is called to be a father. Nor do we propose that every mother must stay at home full-time. We simply recognize what science and humanity demonstrate, namely that mothers and their children share a special bond and we do not believe women should have to sacrifice or deny this bond in order to be seen as equal participants in society (“Sexuality and Feminism”).

The Anscombe Society’s opposition to casual sex, then, was predicated on a commitment to reinstalling essentialist and pre-feminist notions of gender, a commitment expressed in the language of feminism. As is frequently true of postfeminist culture, this deliberate taking into account of feminism presents the Society’s “true feminism” as a modern and moderate alternative to the perceived strictures of feminism that is not “true.” That is, the Anscombe Society’s depiction of “true” feminism “performs as if it is commonsensical and presents itself as pleasingly modern in contrast to a ‘shrill’ feminism” (Negra 2009, p. 2), in order to re-stabilise gender hierarchy.

Notably, most opponents of casual sex and of the “hook up culture” they believed to be rampant on American college campuses expressed concern about the pernicious effects of casual sex on young people, but especially on young women. All the abovementioned books focus on young women, and all but one of the covers feature an image of a woman: a woman taking off her shirt, a woman whose bra is being unfastened by a pair of male hands, a woman in a black dress and high heels sitting on the ground with her head in her hands. This fixation on young women comports with McRobbie’s (2009) description of young womanhood as existing “within the realm of public debate as a topic of fascination, enthusiasm, concern, anxiety, and titillation” (p. 57). The above quoted Princeton student columnist supports his arguments in favour of sexual abstinence by claiming that the “hook up culture” is especially damaging for women, and the Anscombe society, in its position statement about feminism, focuses almost entirely on how “true feminism” defines women’s rights, needs, and desires. As Tincknell (2011) observes, “while the educational and economic achievements of young women are frequently cited as evidence of feminism’s triumph under late modernity, this progressive narrative is always accompanied by its monstrous siblings... amongst those same women” (p. 83) – Tincknell lists eating disorders and negative

body image as examples, but the depression, alcohol abuse, and suicidal behaviour of which the student columnist warns fall easily into the same category. In this view, “hook up culture” – positioned as the result of a feminism that emphasises women’s sexual freedom and pleasure, is accompanied by risk of mental, emotional, and physical harm to women that risks undoing their educational and economic achievements. McRobbie argues that in the postfeminist public debate over young women’s behaviour, “the dynamics of regulation and control are less about what young women ought not to do, and more about what they can do” (p. 57), and this is evident in discussions, on campus and off, about the effect of casual sex on young women, which wears a pseudo-feminist gloss: by engaging in this behaviour, young women are risking their ability to access the gains won for them by feminism – such as their ability to participate in academic life at an institutions that, until several decades ago, did not admit undergraduate women at all (“The History of Women at Princeton University”).

Those who participated in the public debate about casual sex in the years preceding the release of *Friends With Benefits*, and who objected to the purported rise of a “hook up culture,” did so in decidedly postfeminist terms. Engaging in casual sex, these opponents argued, was especially harmful to young women, who risked forfeiting the desirable and beneficial gains obtained for them by feminism – such as access to education and employment – by inviting the emotional and psychological damage and “spiritual exhaustion,” as Sessions Stepp puts it, that were the result – for women, though not for men – of the “hook up culture.” This opposition was expressed with the feminist concern for young women’s health and wellbeing taken into account, but the suggested route to securing that health and wellbeing was to roll back the alleged dominance of the “hook up culture,” and to return to a dating culture or “relationships” – according to Sessions Stepp – in which sex occurs only within the confines of monogamy, or to encourage abstinence until marriage (and neither sexual activity nor marriage for gays and lesbians [“Homosexuality”]) – according to the Anscombe Society. In the case of the Anscombe Society, this reinstatement of gender hierarchy was described as “true feminism,” implying, as do Sessions Stepp and Grossman, that the damaging “hook up culture” is the result of a misguided feminism or, in Grossman’s

phrasing, “political correctness.” As is often the case in postfeminism, these calls to reinstate patriarchy are presented as “commonsensical” (Negra 2009, p. 2) responses to the alleged excesses of feminism.

Defences of casual sex and hooking up came most often from cultural progressives and feminists, who argued that “hook up culture” had the potential to bring about the welcome breakdown of the dating culture whose purported loss was mourned by Sessions Stepp and other opponents of casual sex. Those participants in the public debate about “hook up culture” questioned the primacy of casual sex, arguing that college campuses were not witnessing an epidemic of casual sex, and that the practice of “hooking up” was not a marked departure from the behaviour of university students in prior decades. Finally, as I shall explore, some participants in the public debate about “hook up culture” argued that the problem, in the words of one sociologist, “isn’t too much sex, it’s bad sex” (Wade 2013), and that the solution to that problem was not a re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy, but rather a reiteration of feminist notions of women’s pleasure and of the importance of sexual consent.

To its critics, hooking up represented a shift away from the “relationships” to which Sessions Stepp refers, and lacked the clear and culturally understood rules of a dating arrangement. When dating was the norm on college campuses, “there were generally accepted rules back then about what to do and not do sexually,” Sessions Stepp writes (p. 180). Proponents of casual sex were in agreement with Sessions Stepp in this regard, but argued that the breakdown of the dating culture or “relationships” system was a welcome change. In this view, the dating culture is a system in which sex was a form of currency that women used to secure men’s time, attention, and monogamy (this characterisation, not coincidentally, calls to mind the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s). One prominent feminist blogger argued that:

In the dating era, women were able to dangle the promise of sex to get what they needed from men, which was, say it with me now, social validation.... Men therefore controlled women’s social value completely, yet again. A woman who couldn’t get dates was a common and tragic circumstances, as her social life was severely limited... your status in your community depended largely on how much attention and validation you got from men (Marcotte 2010).

The purported collapse of dating culture, in this view, replaces a system in which women are encouraged to trade the promise of sex for the ability to participate in social life: casual sex, that is, sex without dating, further breaks down the notion that a woman's value rests solely in whether or not men want to have sex with her.

In addition to disrupting this flawed dating culture, defenders of hooking up argued, casual sex allowed men and women alike to explore their sexual desires and preferences without being encumbered by the demands of long term romantic relationships. In the American edition of *The Guardian*, one feminist commentator characterised “the ‘hook-up culture is dangerous, early marriage is good’ lectures” as “part of a backlash to feminist progress” (Filipovic 2013), arguing that calls to return to dating culture and premarital abstinence were attempts to roll back said progress: “We'd be far better off encouraging women – and men – to marry later, seek out equal partnerships and treat each other with respect, regardless of our sexual choices.” Filipovic also characterised claims that women were incapable of having sex without forming emotional attachments to their partners as sexism masquerading as science (Feministe 2010). Casual sex, she argued, allowed young women to seek sexual pleasure without getting married at a young age, and made equitable romantic relationships between the genders more likely.

Elsewhere, participants in the debate over “hook up culture” argued that claims of an epidemic of casual sex, particularly on university campuses, exaggerated the reality. In a blog post entitled “The hook up culture bogeyman,” Wade (2013) argued that the prevalence of the phenomenon was overestimated. “The median number of college hookups for a graduating senior is seven,” Wade wrote. That figure “includes instances in which there was intercourse, but also times when two people just made out with their clothes on. The typical student acquires only two new sexual partners during college. Half of all hookups are with someone the person has hooked up with before. A quarter of students will be virgins when they graduate.” Put differently, she wrote, “there's no bacchanalian orgy on college campuses, so we can stop wringing our hands about that.” Elsewhere, feminist responses to the debate over casual sex noted that the phenomenon, pervasive or not, was far from novel. As one feminist commentator noted in

Salon, “the term ‘hooking up’ – meaning anything from kissing to casual sex – can be traced back to the early ’80s, but only within the past few years did the hand-wringing really begin” (Clark-Flory 2008). In this view, then, not only is casual sex not a problem of epidemic proportions; it is also not a particularly new problem. What is novel, however, are concerned and conservative responses.

Despite questioning the historical and sociological accuracy of claims that “hook up culture” was both novel and pervasive, and despite claiming that opponents of casual sex were presenting the reinstatement of gender hierarchy (in the form of dating culture, early marriage, and premarital abstinence) as the solutions to the casual sex “problem,” defences of casual sex were not unequivocal. Wade, while arguing that “hook up culture” was hardly an epidemic, argued that the problem on American university campuses, noting that the quality of sex was more to blame for the ills of the “hook up culture” than the quantity. Students were having “bad sex: unpleasurable, unwanted, unempowering, and antagonistic” (“Lecture Abstracts and Slides”). Responding to Sessions Stepp, another feminist blogger similarly claimed that “[Sessions Stepp] argues that all hookups are problematic in and of themselves, regardless of how women feel about them at the time. In other words, [Sessions] Stepp’s subjects feel unfulfilled because they’re having casual sex, not just because they’re having *bad* sex” (Friedman 2007, emphasis in original). According to Wade, “hook up culture” though it has “some interesting advantages,” also risks perpetuating gender hierarchy in the same way that dating culture does. “The solution? Not to abandon the casual hook up... but to multiply the sexual discourses on campus” (“Lecture Abstracts and Slides”). Friedman writes that “if women aren’t finding hookups sexually pleasurable (and indeed, many women go as far as to say they are emotionally damaging), then something needs to change.” In this view, casual sex could often be “bad,” in that in addition to being physically unsatisfying or emotionally damaging, it could replicate gender hierarchies similar to those created by dating culture; the solution, then, was not to reinstate dating culture, but to make casual sex an equitable arrangement for young men and women – and one of many such arrangements.

Defences of casual sex, as I demonstrate here, questioned the purported dominance of “hook up culture,” as well as the notion that hooking up was an entirely novel development, particularly on

American university campuses. Addressing objections to casual sex and calls for a return to dating culture, these defendants argued that casual sex represented a welcome shift from the culture of dating, in which women were encouraged to use the promise of sex to secure men's attention and commitment, and from the expectation to marry early. As Friedman argues, the new expectation that women will delay marriage in favour of establishing a career contributes to the appeal of casual sex and the demise of dating: "For ambitious students, the chances seem slim that a relationship can continue after graduation unless one partner (historically, the woman) makes some serious sacrifices. Today people marry later in life; the sacrifices don't seem quite as worth it when you don't expect to settle down until you're in your late 20s." Finally, defences of casual sex argue that, though the rise of "hook up culture," undoubtedly the result of the partial breakdown of gender hierarchy, has not been above critique, the response to flaws in the practice of casual sex should not be a re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy, but rather, its further disintegration.

As I demonstrate in this section, in the years immediately preceding the release of *Friends With Benefits*, casual sex of the kind depicted in that movie was the subject of vigorous public debate. Mainstream media coverage of the "hook up culture" was common in the years prior to and immediately following the release of *Friends With Benefits*. In widely-read and respected print outlets like the *New York Times* (Blow 2008) and in high-traffic online outlets like *Salon* (Hepola 2008, Clark-Flory 2010, Davies 2010, Harding 2010), and Gawker Media's *Jezebel* (Morrissey 2008, North 2010a, North 2010b), "hook up culture" proved to be a hotly disputed and eagerly discussed issue.

The debate over casual sex or "hook up culture" concerned the prevalence of casual sex, particularly on university campuses, with some disagreement over the extent to which that culture had replaced a culture of dating and when that shift occurred. Opponents of "hook up culture" advocated a return to dating culture – and in more extreme cases, to premarital abstinence – and couched that advocacy in feminist terms, arguing that participating in casual sex prevented young women from taking advantage of the new educational and employment opportunities afforded them by feminism, and

claiming that casual sex was especially pernicious for young women. In the case of the Anscombe Society, the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy was presented as “true feminism,” in which women could combine the educational and opportunities made possible by feminism, while still enacting the essentially feminine roles of motherhood and modesty. Proponents of casual sex questioned the claim that “hook up culture” had completely eradicated the practice of dating or of forming long term romantic relationships among young people, but advocated for casual sex in addition to do or over the dating culture, which, as Sessions Stepp favourably describes it, “restricted young women more than young men, by no means a fair deal, but [it] at least allowed women time and space to consider what kind of partners they wanted to love and what that love should look like” (p. 180). Defendants of casual sex argued that the problems that accompanied “hook up culture” were not the result of excessive feminism, but rather of persistent sexism.

In keeping with my larger goal of demonstrating how postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – and particularly sex – shaped the portrayal of sex in the postfeminist cycle of Hollywood romantic comedies, the function of this section has been to place *Friends With Benefits* and its depiction of casual sex in extra-cinematic context, exploring the ways in which participants in the debate over the “hook up culture” in the United States – particularly those who opposed casual sex – deployed postfeminist arguments to support their case. Next, I make the case for *Friends With Benefits* as a postfeminist narrative, exploring the use of casual sex as a “feminist gesture” (McRobbie 2008, p. 64) and the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy in the form of the film’s “happy ending”; examining the depiction of Jamie as a woman beholden to gender essentialism but resisting by performing as McRobbie’s phallic girl; examining the film’s use of knowingness and irony; and discussing the film’s explicit rejection of “free love” era feminism in favour of a more traditional – and gender hierarchical – romantic arrangement.

***Friends With Benefits* as postfeminist narrative**

First, I explore the various ways in which *Friends With Benefits* functions as a postfeminist narrative, and I begin by discussing how Jamie and Dylan are permitted to explore alternatives to gender hierarchy and

specifically to marriage – an example of how, as McRobbie argues, the Symbolic permits the presence of “a feminist gesture as it adjusts to ward off the threat of feminism” (p. 64) – and demonstrate how these alternatives are represented as ultimately unsustainable and undesirable compared to the genre’s traditional “happy ending”: marriage, and the maintenance of gender hierarchy. I next examine the movie’s portrayal of Jamie as performing the identity of McRobbie’s phallic girl (also explored in the previous chapter) to disguise the reality that she is beholden to essentially feminine desires and motivations. I then discuss the film’s use of irony and knowingness; of all the films in my representative sample, *Friends With Benefits* makes the most obvious and effective use of irony and awareness of the romantic comedy genre. Finally, I address the film’s portrayal of the young woman, Jamie, rejecting the “misguided” feminism of her mother’s generation and her adoption of a relationship model that, in keeping with generic expectations, re-stabilises gender hierarchy.

Casual sex as “feminist gesture”

As I note in my Introduction, McRobbie draws on the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic “as the source of patriarchal authority” (2009 p. 60) in her understanding of postfeminism, and posits that postfeminism is the Symbolic’s response to women’s increasing economic power: “The Symbolic,” McRobbie writes, “is faced with the problem of how to retain the dominance of phallocentrism when the logic of global capitalism is to loosen women from their prescribed roles and grant them degrees of economic independence” (p. 61). As I note in the Introduction, McRobbie argues that the Symbolic “permits the presence of a feminist gesture as it adjusts to ward off the threat of feminism” (p. 64). This, I argue, is the purpose served by the inclusion of a casual sex relationship in a Hollywood romantic comedy like *Friends With Benefits*. In permitting its characters to engage in a “friends with benefits” arrangement before concluding with those same characters committing to a monogamous romantic relationship that will presumably result in marriage, the movie allows a feminist gesture, and deflects feminist critique by positioning the shift from “friends with benefits” to long term monogamous romantic relationship as one of the characters’ choosing. Freed by feminism to sample a range of romantic and sexual relationship

formats, Jamie and Dylan have chosen the one they want most – a romantic comedy “happy ending” – which, the movie suggests, is in fact resisting the conventions of the genre and the strictures of gender hierarchy because it began in a somewhat unconventional manner.

Friends With Benefits presents Jamie and Dylan’s casual sex arrangement as remarkably different from a traditional dating or relationship arrangement – literally: the differences are remarked upon on multiple occasions. Jamie and Dylan want to have sex, without the added “complications” and “guilt” (Dylan) and “emotions” (Jamie) involved in a romantic relationship. Before they have sex for the first time, Jamie notes that, because they are only friends, she does not feel self-conscious about her body, and is therefore willing to have sex in the bedroom, where the lighting is bright and unflattering; were they in a dating relationship, she would want to have sex on the couch, where the lighting is dim and more flattering. Jamie and Dylan are explicit about their sexual desires (“My nipples are sensitive, I don’t like dirty talk,” Jamie tells Dylan as they strip off their clothes and appraise each other’s naked bodies for the first time) and, though friendly and good-humoured, do not spare each other’s feelings as they would, the movie implies, if they were in a dating relationship:

JAMIE: Your whiskers are like knives.

DYLAN: Now see, if you were my girlfriend, I couldn’t tell you to shut up right now.

JAMIE: And because you’re just my buddy, I can tell you that if you don’t start shaving up here, I’m gonna stop shaving down there.

The movie posits that the casual sex arrangement, unlike a romantic relationship, allows Jamie and Dylan to be honest about their desires and does not require them to do anything they do not want to do (for example, cuddling, or going away together for the weekend). Their relationship is sex-positive and, the movie implies, it is egalitarian, as it is based on friendship. The sex in these hook ups is not “bad,” as Wade (2013) and Friedman (2007) suggest they often are in the real world: it is not “unpleasurable, unwanted, unempowering, and antagonistic” (Wade). It is mutually pleasurable, and, by combining playful music, interspersed shots of Jamie and Dylan playing video games, and Dylan stretching his “hammies,” the movie suggests that this sex is almost a recreational sport. This is the feminist gesture –

or feminist gestures – that the movie permits before bringing its protagonists together in a generically conventional ending that allows for the re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy.

Friends With Benefits permits this feminist gesture to, as McRobbie notes “ward off the threat of feminism” (p. 64), both within and without the movie. As Bowler observes of postfeminist romantic comedies, “despite the genre’s refocusing, romantic comedy displays a perceptible sexual conservatism” (p. 199): though these films “flirt with the tropes of recreational sex, women’s libidinal desire and liberal attitudes, they herald a re-emergence of the belief in ‘soul mates,’ longevity and a committed behaviour previously rejected in the ‘nervous romances’” (p. 189). By depicting Jamie and Dylan as trying to be “friends with benefits” but finding the arrangement unsatisfactory and unworkable, and indeed, finding a traditional romantic arrangement more satisfying, the movie emphasises that they have freely chosen to enter into a conventional and Symbolic-approved (and Symbolic-reinforcing) relationship, a prime example of how the Symbolic “accommodate[s] some prior feminist demands in relation to the right or entitlement to sexual pleasure, for example challenging the old sexual double standard, so that women are no longer punished in quite the same way for pursuing sexual desires, but this right is then totally disconnected from any notion of a renewed feminism, quite the opposite” (p. 85). Quite the opposite, indeed: after their brief experiment with casual sex, Jamie and Dylan opt for a more traditional relationship model. As McRobbie observes, “this is a case of what is no longer economically central becoming... culturally necessary” (p. 62). At the end of the movie, Dylan “proposes” to Jamie, kneeling in front of her and asking, “Jamie, will you be my best friend again?” He tells her that he would choose being her friend over ever having sex with her again, but that he would prefer not to have to choose between the two. Now that he has “proposed,” and they have embraced, in generically conventional plot resolution, they embark on a romantic relationship: they leave the train station, where Dylan has staged a public grand gesture (also a generic convention), and go on their first “real” date. The movie unconvincingly suggests that because this relationship is built on friendship and began as a casual sex arrangement, Jamie and Dylan will be exempt from the downsides of a romantic relationship – the gender inequity, the “guilt” and “complications” they sought to avoid. In this sense, the Symbolic has allowed

Jamie and Dylan to stray for most of the movie from the conventional relationship path, ensuring that they are back on the straight, narrow, and gender hierarchical path by the end of the film.

“I have issues: I kind of believe in true love”

Friends With Benefits portrays its woman protagonist, Jamie, as both a phallic girl and as beholden to essential feminine truths, that is, the movie mobilizes two postfeminist conceptions of femininity by depicting Jamie as adopting a phallic girl persona to conceal her true desires for romantic “fairy tale” love.

McRobbie (2009) argues that the phallic girl “gives the impression of having won equality with men by becoming like her male counterparts” (p. 83). As I discuss in my previous case study, this may include drinking, smoking, swearing, consumption of pornography, and other “masculine” behaviour and “accoutrements” (p. 84), as well as having casual sex (p. 83). Jamie decides at the beginning of the movie to deliberately behave in a more masculine manner: “I’m just going to shut myself down emotionally,” she tells a friend after being dumped, “like George Clooney.” Throughout the movie, Jamie performs the persona of the phallic girl: she swears freely, though as Dylan notes, she blinks every time she does so, “as if your body’s rejecting the word.” Like Rachel in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (also played by Mila Kunis), she expresses impatience with Dylan’s feminist-inflected behaviours with regard to sex. While performing cunnilingus on her, Dylan stops abruptly when Jamie screams in pleasure. “Well, women start to scream, it could be misconstrued!” he says, when she demands to know why he has stopped. “Just keep going!” she reprimands him. Jamie actively avoids behaving in a “girly” manner, embracing “the capacity to become [a] phallus-bearer as a kind of licensed mimicry of [her] male counterparts” (McRobbie p. 83) granted by phallic girlhood. The most obvious evidence of her performance of phallic girlhood, is her engagement in the casual sex relationship with Dylan, in which, as I note in the section above, she is free from the expectation that she will behave like his girlfriend, nor will she do other “girly” things like worry about how her body looks or spare Dylan’s feelings when he fails to please her sexually. This is an

example of how the Symbolic permits young women to wield some masculine power in exchange for their shunning and denigration of the feminine.

In truth, as the movie reveals, Jamie's phallic girl persona is merely a performance, or, as Dylan terms it, "a front":

JAMIE: I know that I act all tough and I talk all tough, but really...

DYLAN: It's just a front to protect yourself from your own vulnerability.

Far from being "tough," Jamie is unable to escape what is portrayed as an essential feminine truth: she wants a relationship that adheres to the rules of fairy tales, or of their contemporary counterparts, Hollywood romantic comedies. Jamie enjoys romantic comedies – as I discuss later in this chapter, she wistfully but ironically wishes that her life could be like one – and has a similarly conflicted relationship with fairy tales. "I have issues," she tells Parker on their second date. "One might even call me damaged... I kind of believe in true love. Like there might actually be a Prince Charming out there waiting for me." Jamie, an exemplary postfeminist subject, knows she should know better than to enjoy romantic comedies or find fairy tales appealing, yet she cannot help herself. When her mother tells her, "your Prince Charming isn't coming to rescue you in a horse and carriage, that's not who you want. You're looking for a man to be your partner, to take on the world with," and concludes that Jamie needs to "update" her fairy tale, Jamie is conflicted. Despite her efforts to pretend otherwise – to swear even though her body "rejects the word," and to separate sex from a romantic relationship – she cannot resist the lure of the romantic comedy or the fairy tale. By the end of the movie, Dylan's friend Tommy – who tells Dylan that casual sex with Jamie will not "work" because "she's a girl, sex always means more to them... Even if they don't admit it" – has been proven accurate. Jamie's performance of phallic girlhood cannot conceal or override her essential femininity. Ultimately, Jamie sheds the phallic girl persona and surrenders to Dylan's romantic comedy-inspired grand gesture – that is, she permits herself to enjoy the pleasures of another form of femininity: a girl who "kind of believes in true love" and for whom "sex always means more." As Bowler notes, "the 'romantic' dilemma particularly affects Jamie rather than

Dylan, eliciting notions of natural sexual difference and fostering a peculiarly antiquated debate about the possibility of sex versus romance for women” (p. 197). In this way, *Friends With Benefits* screens two distinctly postfeminist visions of femininity: the phallic girl *and* the postfeminist subject who, despite having absorbed enough feminist critique to know she should know better, cannot resist the power of gender essentialism.

Friends with irony & knowingness

One of the most notable ways in which *Friends With Benefits* functions as a postfeminist narrative is its use of irony, knowingness, and self-reference. *Friends With Benefits*, the film that, of all the movies in my representative cycle, makes the most obvious and effective use of irony and self-reference, is a compelling example of popular media functioning, as Banet-Weiser (2007) observes, “as a kind of critique of mainstream culture through the strategies of irony, camp, and a kind of postmodern cynicism – but within a conventional narrative framework” (p. 211). Banet-Weiser applies this analysis to contemporary advertising, but her observation that advertising “uses this kind of self-reflexivity to both critique and ultimately sell products” (p. 211) is also applicable to *Friends With Benefits*, which self-reflexively critiques the Hollywood romantic comedy, while itself being a Hollywood romantic comedy – and adhering to the same conventional narrative framework that it criticises.

Friends With Benefits exhibits a knowingness and awareness of its genre that functions to deflect critique when the movie indulges in the very conventions and clichés it mocks. Jamie is an avid consumer of Hollywood romantic comedies: when we first meet her, she is about to watch a screening of *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990), and is anxious not to miss the beginning, when “Julia Roberts is about to put on her really tall boots.” When she and Dylan watch a romantic comedy together, she mouths along to the dialogue: she knows every line, and implements the “five date rule” from that movie in her own romantic life. Yet her relationship with the genre is conflicted. Upset at being dumped, Jamie shouts at a poster advertising the release of *The Ugly Truth* on DVD: “Shut up, Katherine Heigl, you big liar!” and tells her

friend that “we really need to stop buying into this Hollywood cliché of true love.” She is aware of the flaws in the genre, as is evident when she tells Dylan:

God, I wish my life was a movie sometimes. You know, I’d never have to worry about my hair. Or having to go to the bathroom. And then, when I’m at my lowest point, some guy would chase me down the street, pour his heart out, and we’d kiss. Happily ever after.

Dylan’s relationship with the genre is not conflicted: he is scathing in his criticism of the romantic comedy they watch together, pointing out that though it is set in New York, it is clearly filmed in Los Angeles, and mocking the movie for having bad music designed to let the viewer “know how to feel every single second” (later, *Friends With Benefits* uses non-diegetic music that noticeably resembles the tune that Dylan mockingly invents in this scene). As the credits roll in the meta-movie, Dylan complains about “this ambiguously upbeat pop song that has nothing to do with the plot that they put in at the end to try to convince you that you had a great time at this shitty movie”; as the credits roll at the end of *Friends With Benefits*, this very same song (“Hey Soul Sister,” by Train) plays. In the climactic scene in which Dylan and Jamie reconcile, he has assembled a flash mob in Grand Central Station, with the help of his colleagues, her mother, and his father (an exemplary and highly conventional romantic comedy grand gesture). As the crowd of strangers dance around them, Dylan tries to deliver a monologue much like the one Jamie mouths along to earlier in the movie, but she cannot hear him. “I didn’t really think this through!” Dylan shouts. “I guess in the movies they guy pours his heart out and they put the music in later.”

The effect of *Friends With Benefits*’ awareness of its genre, its self-reference, and its ironic critique and use of generic conventions and clichés is to wink knowingly at the viewer, and by doing so, to deflect criticism. Like the advertising Banet-Weiser examines, *Friends With Benefits* appears to be tailored to an audience “that is savvy, ‘smart,’ and generally perceived to be disaffected or cynical about culture” (p. 211). By demonstrating its awareness of the genre and of itself in this manner, *Friends With Benefits* can, as Gill (2007) notes, “have it both ways” (p. 266): it can critique the genre, while fully

participating in it, providing its audience with a romantic comedy structure, including, most notably, the climactic grand gesture and resolution, which it undercuts with commentary about how such scenes are constructed on screen, and undercutting the sentimentality of the scene by following it with the pop song Dylan mocked earlier, so as to claim that “this was not actually ‘meant’” (p. 267). Coulthard (2007) observes of postmodern action films that star women (*Charlie’s Angels* [McG 2000], the *Kill Bill* films [Tarantino 2003, 2004]) that “in framing themselves as self-referential and ironic play... [they] appear to anticipate and deflect critical engagement... It is difficult to criticise *Charlie’s Angel*’s for its presentation of idealised femininity... because both the film and their audiences are fully aware that the films exist for these purposes alone” (p. 169). In the same way, despite its critique of the Hollywood romantic comedy, *Friends With Benefits* is fully aware that it is a Hollywood romantic comedy. Bowler argues that the movie “attempts to ‘have it both ways.’ Primarily, the film showcases its postmodern and postfeminist credentials through fronting its awareness of romantic comedy as a Hollywood product” (p. 194).⁸ As a result, *Friends With Benefits* is “ironic but not necessarily disruptive” (Coulthard p. 169) of the conventions of the genre, particularly in its re-stabilisation of gender hierarchy: Jamie and Dylan, as I note above, are allowed to critique long term monogamous romantic relationships, and they are allowed to experiment with an alternative relationship format. However, as Taylor (2012) argues, “postfeminism... is by no means post-compulsory heterosexuality; indeed, the two discourses seem, in popular culture, to be entirely consistent and mutually reinforcing. That is, postfeminism (further) normalizes and universalizes heterosexual coupledness” (p. 19). Jamie and Dylan, in a generically all-but required and gender hierarchy-enforcing conclusion will, by the end of the film, commit to a long term monogamous romantic relationship.

⁸ Tasker (2011), analyzing another film that invokes fairy tales, *Enchanted*, also notes this attempt to “have it both ways” in the depiction of women’s choices and desires: “While *Enchanted* celebrates the princess as a marker of femininity, it takes care in the closing montage to signal that its protagonist has been able to turn this very identity into a source of employment with glimpses of Giselle as a businesswoman” (p. 72). Similarly, writing about the ambitious professional woman, Nancy, who is initially presented as Giselle’s romantic rival, Tasker argues, that Nancy’s departure from contemporary New York City to fictional (and animated) Andalusia, Giselle’s former home, where Nancy marries the prince once presented as Giselle’s perfect match, “suggests a fundamental dissatisfaction with contemporary gender norms, embracing instead a fantastical mode of fantasized femininity that can only be termed postfeminist” (p. 68).

Not her mother's casual sex

The fourth way in which *Friends With Benefits* brings postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power – and especially sex – to celluloid life is in its rejection of the “free love”-era feminism espoused by Jamie’s mother, Lorna. In this rejection, the film makes the case for a “commonsensical” – as Negra (2009 p.2) terms it – and “pleasingly modern” (p. 2) feminism, in contrast not to “shrill” feminism, but to a purported 1970s second wave feminism that insists on the possibility of separating sex from love. That Lorna has taken this attitude toward sex and love has had less than ideal consequences for Jamie, and in choosing a conventional romantic relationship with Dylan, Jamie attempts to find a middle ground between the perceived drudgery of relationships (the “guilt,” and “complications,” and not complaining about a partner’s body hair, for example) and the recklessness and instability of which Lorna is a walking example. That is, Jamie seeks a feminism that is a common sense alternative to Lorna’s apparent “feminist” extremism.

At the start of the movie, Jamie’s boyfriend breaks up with her; one reason that he gives is that she is “emotionally damaged.” Jamie accepts this diagnosis, and when she meets Dylan describes herself in the same terms. This emotional damage is one reason Jamie decides to forgo dating and romantic relationships, to “shut [her]self down emotionally” and only have casual sex. The movie implicitly – and, at times, explicitly – places blame for Jamie’s emotional damage on her mother, who jokes often about the identity of Jamie’s father: in part because her participation in a drug-addled “free love” lifestyle, in which, it is implied, she entirely separated sex from love, means that Lorna cannot remember who Jamie’s father is. Jamie attributes her emotional damage to her upbringing: she and Lorna relocated often because Lorna was “really good at breaking up with men. And she did it a lot.” When Jamie was a teenager, she had a small cartoon dog tattooed onto her hip: she did not have a dog, “but everyone else did and I thought having a dog might get me a normal family. Which at seventeen I desperately wanted.” Lorna’s less-than-ideal parenting and her provision of a poor role model with regard to romantic relationships, the movie demonstrates, has continued into Jamie’s adulthood. When Lorna arrives in New

York, uninvited and unexpected, and announces that she will be staying with Jamie “just for a few weeks,” she has just left another man, her fiancé, whom she denounces as “a real LOMBARD: Lots Of Money But A Real Dullard.” Later, although she promises Jamie she will spend a mother-daughter weekend together, she reneges on the promise, flying back to Cleveland to reconcile with her fiancé. “I know I haven’t been the best mother...” she starts, and Jamie sits in silence before replying, “I’m sorry, were you expecting me to jump in there?” Lorna’s redemption comes when she advises Jamie to avoid repeating her mistakes, then assists Dylan in carrying off his grand romantic gesture, which results in his reconciliation with Jamie. As Bowler argues, “Lorna is portrayed as unreliable, irresponsible and even selfish. Having relinquished her maternal responsibilities (a stable family, emotional support and fiscal responsibility) she is clearly the embodiment of ‘unruly woman’ feminism” (p. 192). Lorna is “representative of an ‘immature’ feminism which refuses to ‘act its age’” (p. 191). This representation, Bowler observes, is common in postfeminist romantic comedies, which depict a “clash” between “young women’s conflict with the surrounding aggressive sexual economy, and a tension between a notional liberation and agency (bequeathed by second-wave feminism) and the wholesale rejection of traditional and institutional hegemonic heterosexual practices (seen in the ‘nervous romances’)” (p. 191). Though Lorna is redeemed, her redemption is the result of her participation in Jamie’s formation of a relationship of the kind Lorna has studiously (and, the movie implies, recklessly) avoided; Jamie’s choices are depicted as more sensible, and more emotionally satisfying, than her mother’s.

In order to reconcile with Dylan, Jamie must overcome her aversion to romantic relationships, which is animated by her fear that she is too “emotionally damaged” to properly engage in such a relationship. When Dylan proclaims his love for her in the middle of the flash mob, Jamie expresses misgivings about entering a romantic relationship with him: “You weren’t wrong,” she says. “I am fucked up.” In ultimately choosing to commit to Dylan – her best friend, with whom she also enjoys having sex – Jamie, the postfeminist heroine, is depicted as choosing a pleasingly modern feminist middle ground: her love story with Dylan is not a fairy tale or a romantic comedy, nor does it follow Lorna’s chaotic, drug-fuelled “free love” model. She declines to repeat Lorna’s mistakes, just as postfeminism urges young

women to renounce and repudiate the purported extremes of second-wave feminism. Like many contemporary women, as Press (2011) argues, Jamie has learned and acts out “the new gendered sexual scripts of the third-wave postfeminist/neoliberal era yet hear[s] and remember[s] the echoes of the older feminist rhetoric” (p. 120). In Jamie’s case, she does not merely remember the older feminist rhetoric; she lives with it, and experiences it as a source of emotional damage. As Press observes, “the postfeminist sensibility makes young women suspicious of... second-wave critiques” (p. 118), and in *Friends With Benefits*, Jamie is suspicious of second-wave practices, as symbolized by her mother, as well as of second-wave critiques. Though her choice to enter a long term, monogamous romantic relationship that will presumably result in marriage is one that re-stabilises gender hierarchy, it is portrayed as a common sense and pleasingly modern middle ground.

In its depiction of Jamie rejecting her mother’s preferred model of relationships – casual sex and short-term, uncommitted romantic entanglements – in favour of a feminist-inflected middle ground – a long-term monogamous relationship with her best friend and former “slam piece” (as Lorna puts it) – *Friends With Benefits* brings to celluloid life the postfeminist rejection of second-wave feminist “extremism” in favour of a more “commonsensical” brand of feminism. The film portrays Jamie’s decision as one that takes into account the advantages provided by feminism while wisely avoiding the emotional damage that her mother’s feminist choices have wrought: Jamie avoids repeating the mistakes her second-wave mother has made, and by dating her best friend, she can keep his friendship, secure her own fairy tale/romantic comedy resolution and continue having the great sex that, as an active and desiring postfeminist heroine, she feels entitled to and enjoys. Jamie’s choice to commit to a romantic relationship with Dylan is one that adheres to generic convention and re-stabilises gender hierarchy, but the film, as a postfeminist narrative, portrays her choice as a thoroughly modern feminist “happy ending.”

Conclusion

In this case study I have examined the postfeminist romantic comedy's depiction of gender, sex, and power – and particularly sex – by exploring the depiction of casual sex in *Friends With Benefits*. As I demonstrate, this film's portrayal of casual sex screens postfeminist anxieties about casual sex, as well as postfeminism's reinforcement of gender hierarchy; in this, the film is informed and shaped by the extra-cinematic debates over “hook up culture” that occurred in the years directly preceding its release.

An understanding of *Friends With Benefits* and its place in the postfeminist cycle – and indeed, of the place of the postfeminist cycle in the genre – must place the film in generic and historic context. As I show, the film, and other postfeminist romantic comedies that depict casual sex, like *No Strings Attached*, bear the most thematic resemblance to the films of the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s, and these contemporary romantic comedies build on narrative and thematic foundations laid during that cycle. *No Strings Attached*, which features frank discussions of and graphic depictions of sex (including substantial male nudity, as I explore in the previous case study), must also be considered in the context of contemporary developments in the genre, namely, the genre's integration of “Hollywood Lowbrow” (Jeffers McDonald 2009a, p. 149) and its re-inclusion of sexual and bodily humour after the notable exclusion of these elements during the neo-traditional cycle. The film, as I also show, can be better understood in the context of the prominent public debate about “hook up culture” – that is, about sexual activity outside of monogamous romantic relationships – that focused on young Americans and particularly on young American women. Those who opposed the purported dominance of a “hook up culture” frequently did so in postfeminist terms, arguing for a return to dating culture, early marriage, and in some cases pre-marital abstinence – couched in feminist language and the expressed desire to protect young women's educational and employment opportunities from the purportedly pernicious effects of casual sex. Those who defended the practice of casual sex argued that what made casual sex pernicious for young women was not an excess or distortion of feminism, but rather that the “hook up culture” (such as it existed) was liable to recreate the same gendered hierarchies as the “dating culture.” In short, the problem with casual sex was not too much feminism, but not enough. As I argue here, *Friends With*

Benefits, released in 2011 after several years of public debate over “hook up culture,” was shaped by the postfeminist tone of that debate.

Friends With Benefits functions as a postfeminist narrative in multiple ways, four of which I explore in this case study. Firstly, it demonstrates the Symbolic’s permission of a feminist gesture – casual sex – before re-stabilising gender hierarchy by bringing its protagonists together in a long term, monogamous, and presumably permanent romantic relationship. Secondly, it screens two visions of postfeminist femininity: Jamie adopts the persona of McRobbie’s phallic girl, which she performs for much of the movie, before realising that she is incapable of overriding her essential feminine nature. In so doing, *Friends With Benefits* screens both the phallic girl and postfeminism’s emphasis on gender essentialism and sexualised difference. Next, the movie, more than any other in my representative sample, makes use of postfeminism’s irony, both mocking and enacting the conventions of the Hollywood romantic comedy. This self-reference and winking knowingness insulates – or attempts to insulate – the movie from feminist critique. Finally, *Friends With Benefits* is explicit in its rejection of purported second-wave feminism, which it portrays as misguided and extreme; its postfeminist heroine, Jamie, rejects her mother’s “free love” approach to relationships and chooses instead a romantic relationship with her former “friend with benefits,” a choice that, though it re-stabilises gender hierarchy (and adheres to generic conventions) is portrayed as commonsensical and pleasingly modern feminist middle ground.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis is to extend scholarly inquiry on postfeminism, particularly postfeminist popular culture, and on the Hollywood romantic comedy. By examining how postfeminism has shaped the genre, and demonstrating and accounting for the existence of a new and heretofore minimally examined cycle – the postfeminist cycle – this thesis, which sits at the intersection of multiple disciplines (in that it draws concepts and methods from gender studies, film studies, and media studies) also, fittingly, contributes to multiple disciplines. My primary research question concerns how the Hollywood romantic comedies released between 2005 and 2011 were shaped by the postfeminist sensibility that marks American culture in this historical moment. In order to address this question, I formed three subsidiary research questions, and in order to answer them, I closely examined how three films in the postfeminist cycle (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*, *Friends With Benefits*, and *The Ugly Truth*) screen postfeminist notions about gender, sex, and power. In so doing, my work here extends scholarly understanding of postfeminist popular culture, and of the Hollywood romantic comedy, thereby contributing to gender studies, film studies, media studies, three of the several disciplines that have informed my work here, which is best characterised as cultural studies.

Original contribution to scholarship

Though my interest is in how extra-cinematic forces shape the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, demonstrating this relationship requires an understanding of the history of the genre, and a placing of contemporary romantic comedies in generic context. In Chapter 3, “The Postfeminist Cycle in Generic Context,” I demonstrate that, while the postfeminist cycle’s portrayals of gender, sex, and power are shaped in important ways by extra-cinematic forces – the postfeminist sensibility that characterises this cultural moment in the United States – it is necessary to account for the influence and resonance of the two cycles to which the postfeminist cycle bears the most narrative resemblance: the screwball and the

neo-traditional cycles. In my third case study, I also briefly address the influence of the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s.

In Chapter 3, I note the role of the Motion Picture Production Code, with its prohibitions on explicit representations of sex and its new, high-strung, heroines, in shaping the screwball cycle's depictions of gender, sex, and power. I also examine the screwball cycle's ongoing influence on the contemporary romantic comedy, noting how the screwball cycle's emphasis on particular subplots – the “battle of the sexes” subplot, for example, and other narrative elements such as violence between the central couple – combine with the perception of the screwball cycle as a “golden age” in the genre to make these narrative elements particularly durable in the genre's contemporary iterations. This chapter further addresses the influence of another cycle, the neo-traditional cycle, so termed by Jeffers McDonald (2009), which began in the 1980s and spanned more than a decade, on the postfeminist cycle. The neo-traditional cycle represents a return to the conventions of the screwball cycle after several decades of departure through the sex comedy cycle and nervous romance or radical comedy cycles. Though my focus is on the influence of previous cycles in shaping the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, those cycles are themselves influenced by extra-cinematic forces. The neo-traditional cycle's heavy emphasis on reuniting the central couple at all costs is, Jeffers McDonald argues, due in part to the American political and social conservatism that marked the period in which the neo-traditional cycle rose and flourished. Accounting for this shift in the genre, Jeffers McDonald (2007) points to the extra-cinematic emphasis on “family values,” the increasing influence of the religious right in cultural and political life, and the widespread focus on abstinence, monogamy, and sexual purity (p. 58). Because the screwball cycle provides the generic foundations from which subsequent cycles depart or to which they adhere, it is essential to an understanding of the postfeminist cycle; because the neo-traditional cycle represents a contemporary return to those foundations, and because it immediately precedes the postfeminist cycle, it is similarly important. In Chapter 3, I place the postfeminist cycle in generic context, examining how the genre's past representations of gender, sex, and power shape its present, before proceeding to my central

research problem: understanding how the contemporary cycle of the genre's representation of gender, sex, and power is shaped by contemporary extra-cinematic forces, namely, the postfeminist sensibility.

In addressing my research problem, I identify three films through which to examine the postfeminist cycle's depictions of gender (*Forgetting Sarah Marshall*), sex (*Friends With Benefits*), and power (*The Ugly Truth*). As I detail in my methodology (Chapter 2), I selected these movies from a representative sample of thirty movies, assembled with the goal of making generalizable observations about the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. Though examining all thirty movies is beyond the scope of this thesis, the three films on which I focus as case studies are those which best demonstrate the postfeminist cycle's representation of gender, sex, or power. Additionally, they are films that have, until now, been subjected to minimal academic analysis. The conclusions I reach in these three case studies comport with McRobbie's analysis of postfeminist popular culture: though these films appear to embrace feminist ideas, that apparent embrace conceals the postfeminist cycle's hostility toward gender equality and its investment in arresting or rolling back feminist gains. As I note in my Introduction, while scholars such as Brooks, Genz and Brabon, Gerhard, and Robinson view postfeminist popular culture as a positive development – Brooks argues that postfeminism represents “a process of ongoing transformation and change” in feminist thinking (p. 1) – my analysis of these three films is in keeping with McRobbie's less optimistic argument that postfeminism poses a threat to feminist gains, a deliberate effort to minimise or undo the damage done by feminism to gender hierarchy. In my three case studies, I demonstrate that the films of the postfeminist cycle incorporate feminism so as to dismiss it, depicting feminism as triumphant and utterly successful, and therefore obsolete.

In my first case study, I analyse the postfeminist romantic comedy's depiction of gender, sex, and, particularly, power, using *The Ugly Truth* and its representation of unwed career women as an exemplar of this representation. I explore the use of the “problem” of the unwed woman throughout the history of the genre, and argue that in the postfeminist cycle, the “problem” of the unwed woman emerged as a particularly common theme. I argue that the cycle's representation of unwed career women as unhappy, unhealthy, and unlovable occurs in the context of perceived increases in professional

opportunities and political visibility – that is, power – for women in the United States. In this analysis, I concur with McRobbie (2009), who argues, in her development of the notion of the postfeminist masquerade, that these representations occur in response to such perceived increases in power for women. I argue that as American women participate in the labour force at an unprecedentedly high rate and in an unprecedentedly high number of positions of authority, and as they become increasingly visible in American politics, postfeminist popular culture responds by more emphatically undermining feminism and, as a corollary, by more firmly emphasising marriage, making that which is no longer “economically central” “culturally necessary” (p. 62). As I argue in my first case study, in *The Ugly Truth*, feminism is depicted as triumphant, having secured Abby a career that grants her financial independence and authority (and also renders the male anchor on her television show meek; he has been emasculated by his wife and fellow anchor, who out-earns him). Yet the movie also depicts feminism as insufficient; it cannot change the “truth” of gender essentialism, the worldview espoused by Mike in his television segment, ugly though that truth may be. As is typical of postfeminist popular culture, the film insulates itself from feminist critique in its use of ironic knowingness. In *The Ugly Truth*, the heroine willingly participates in Mike’s makeover of her appearance and behaviour, and is portrayed as benefiting from that “choice.” In choosing to adhere to Mike’s makeover regimen, Abby performs postfeminist femininity, while the film portrays her as arch and knowing enough about that performance to inoculate *The Ugly Truth* against feminist critique. Finally, in this case study, I argue that in its portrayal of its heroine as a “control freak” who literally takes pleasure in ceding to men control over her body as well as over her career, *The Ugly Truth* screens a central postfeminist notion about power and gender: that when women wield professional and political power, they do damage to themselves and to society more broadly, and that to strip them of this power and restore gender hierarchy, in addition to being, in the words of the actress who plays Abby “good for [them],” will also bring them pleasure. Women, *The Ugly Truth* charges, enjoy the reinstallation of patriarchy.

In my second case study, I argue that *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* screens postfeminist ideas about gender, and particularly about masculinity. The rise in the incidence of extreme male nudity in the Hollywood romantic comedy after 2008 suggests the need to consider how the postfeminist cycle represents masculinity, as I do here. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is the only film in my representative sample to feature full frontal male nudity; and, as I argue, the intention of this nudity is not to depict the man in question as desirable, but to render him vulnerable – he is naked rather than nude. In my second case study, I demonstrate that this nudity serves to convey the postfeminist idea that, as a result of the success of feminism, which in this movie is all but taken for granted, men and masculinity are now imperilled. The rise in the incidence of male nudity (and the rise in the number of romantic comedies with male protagonists, that is, romantic comedies that are not “chick flicks”) must be understood in the context of several changes that occurred in the genre in the early twenty-first century. During this period, the success of *There’s Something About Mary* (1998) and of director/producer Judd Apatow contributed to the rise in production of romantic comedies centred on men. These male-centred romantic comedies blend “Hollywood Lowbrow” with the generic structure of the romantic comedy, resulting in a cluster of romantic comedies that are raunchier and contain more toilet humour and bodily humour than is typically found in the genre. However, the rise in nudity in the postfeminist cycle is gendered, with men notably more likely than women to appear naked. As I demonstrate, the increase in substantial male nudity in the genre, and particularly in the rise in nudity designed to render the naked man vulnerable, should be understood in the context of widespread cultural anxiety about “the end of men” (Rosin 2010, 2012) the purported crisis in masculinity that arose as a result of “the rise of women” – which was, it was argued, made possible by the supposed and taken-for-granted success of feminism. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* is one filmic representation of that cultural anxiety, though it also screens other postfeminist positions on gender, sex, and power: its negative depiction of the professionally successful woman Sarah and its elevation of Rachel, who is an example of McRobbie’s phallic girl, are the most notable examples. The film’s resolution requires Peter to move toward hegemonic masculinity, and the film thereby charges that the solution to the extra-cinematic “end of men” crisis in masculinity is to reinstate gender hierarchy.

In my third and final case study, my focus is on sex – specifically, on the depiction of casual sex in *Friends With Benefits*. I demonstrate that the film’s portrayal of casual sex screens postfeminist anxieties about casual sex and postfeminism’s investment in re-stabilising patriarchy. I place these portrayals in the context of extra-cinematic debates over casual sex (or “hook up culture”) that occurred in the United States in the years preceding the release of *Friends With Benefits*. In order to do this, I first locate *Friends With Benefits* in generic and historic context, discussing the influence of the sex comedy cycle of the 1950s and 1960s, which laid many of the narrative and thematic foundations on which postfeminist romantic comedies about casual sex like *Friends With Benefits* build. As I do in the *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* case study, in my third case study I address the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy’s integration of “Hollywood Lowbrow,” and its re-inclusion of sexual and bodily humour after their notable exclusion from the neo-traditional cycle of the late 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. *Friends With Benefits*, I argue, is best understood in the context of extra-cinematic debates over casual sex – defined here as sexual activity outside of monogamous romantic relationships – among young Americans; the debates in question focused in particular on young women. As I discuss, opposition to casual sex or “hook up culture” was frequently expressed in quasi-feminist language and with the professed desire to protect young women’s educational and professional opportunities, themselves made possible by feminism – yet this opposition advocated as a remedy to casual sex “problem” a return to dating culture, early marriage, and in some cases pre-marital abstinence (Shalit, The Anscombe Society). Defences of casual sex held that if casual sex was pernicious to young women, as its opponents argued, this was not because casual sex represented an excess of or distortion of feminism, but rather that “hook up culture” (if it was indeed widespread) reproduced gender hierarchy just as dating culture did. In this view, the harms resulting from “hook up culture” were not due to too much feminism, but rather, not enough. As I demonstrate, *Friends With Benefits*, released in 2011 after several years of public debate over “hook up culture,” was shaped by the postfeminist tone of that debate. *Friends With Benefits* is a postfeminist narrative; in this case study, I explore four ways in which the film screens postfeminist notions about gender, power, and especially sex. First, the film’s depiction of casual sex is an example of

how, as McRobbie argues in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), the Symbolic permits a feminist gesture – in this case, a short-lived casual sex arrangement – before re-stabilising gender hierarchy, by uniting its protagonists in a long term, monogamous, heterosexual romantic relationship that is presumed to result in marriage. Second, the film provides two examples of postfeminist femininity: the female protagonist, Jamie, performs the persona of the phallic girl, before realising that her essential feminine nature – which manifests in a love for romantic comedies and a desire to find “Prince Charming” – is immutable and cannot be concealed or overridden by that performance. In this way, *Friends With Benefits* screens both the phallic girl and postfeminism’s emphasis on gender essentialism and sexualised difference. The film, more than any other in the representative sample, employs the irony central to postfeminism; it both mocks and adheres to the conventions of the Hollywood romantic comedy, and this self-reference and knowingness inoculates the film against feminist critique. Lastly, the movie explicitly rejects second-wave feminism, which it portrays as extreme and misguided. Jamie, the postfeminist heroine, rejects the “free love” approach to relationships that is practiced by her mother, and instead chooses to enter a long term monogamous romantic relationship with her former casual sex partner. This choice, though it re-stabilises gender hierarchy – and adheres to generic convention – is depicted as “commonsensical” and “pleasingly modern” (Negra 2009, p.2), a conventional and patriarchy-bolstering plot development that is portrayed as the modern feminist middle ground.

Taken together, the conclusions I reach in my three case studies demonstrate how the postfeminist sensibility that marks this cultural moment in the United States has shaped the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy’s depictions of gender, sex, and power. While the genre, in its contemporary iteration, is subject to other forces – for example, the history of the genre necessarily influences its present – my analysis here shows that the impact of postfeminist ideas on the romantic comedy has been considerable. The three movies I consider here are postfeminist narratives, and, as I demonstrate, they belong to a new cycle of romantic comedies that have been shaped by and screen postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power. These movies take feminism into account, only to dismiss it as irrelevant, out-

dated, insufficient, unnecessary, and damaging – to women’s health and happiness, to masculinity, to the children raised by feminists. These postfeminist romantic comedies appear to accept increasing gender equality while simultaneously undermining it, and in so doing, advocate the undoing of feminism, in order to mitigate or undo the damage that feminism itself has done to gender hierarchy.

Avenues for subsequent research

As I demonstrate in Chapter 1, wherein I review the literature on romantic comedies, inquiry into contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies – those released after 2005 – is limited. Similarly, though many feminist scholars (Gill, McRobbie, Negra, Tasker and Negra, and Radner) have examined postfeminist popular culture, few have focused solely on the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. The resulting gap in the literature – the dearth of research that examines how contemporary Hollywood romantic comedies screen postfeminist ideas, and places those representations in generic, historical, and sociocultural context – is one this research seeks to fill. Despite my contribution here, however, this research represents only a partial exploration of the postfeminist romantic comedy. Outside the scope of this thesis, there remain several avenues for future research that will allow for a deeper understanding of this generic cycle.

In this project, I focus on the “problem” of the unwed woman, the increase in substantial male nudity, and casual sex, but in the films in my representative sample, there are other frequently occurring narratives and themes, investigation of which would shed further light on the representation of gender, sex, and power in the postfeminist cycle. For example, in that sample, three movies – *Knocked Up*, *Life As We Know It*, *The Back-up Plan* – featured unexpected parenthood, be it through pregnancy or other means. A larger or differently constructed representative sample would include additional films that explore the theme, for example: *The Change-Up* (Dobkin 2011), *The Switch* (Gordon & Speck 2010), *Juno* (Reitman 2007), *No Reservations* (Hicks 2007), *Waitress* (Shelly 2007), and *The Holiday* (Meyers

2006). In view of the inextricable connections between feminism and reproductive rights, feminist scholars seeking to understand postfeminist popular culture would benefit from further analysis of this narrative strain in the postfeminist romantic comedy.

Similarly, in numerous films in my representative sample, I observed contradictory depictions of marriage: though marriage or presumed marriage is an essential component of the “happy ending” for the central couple, supporting characters who are married find matrimony miserable. Johnson and Holmes (2009) found, in their study of romantic comedies released between 1995 and 2005, that marriage is routinely depicted as an unpleasant state marked by monotony, sexual boredom, and emotional warfare. This is the case for films in my sample: for example, in *No Strings Attached*, when Adam (Ashton Kutcher) is unsure about the advisability of entering into a “friends with benefits” arrangement, his male friend urges him to do so, arguing that once Adam is married, he will regret missing this opportunity. “Ten years from now you're gonna be having sex with your wife,” he says. “And it's gonna be in the missionary position. And one of you is going to be asleep.” The term “emotional warfare” is not an exaggeration; in *Going the Distance*, one husband describes his married life in the language of combat. Reprimanding one unmarried man for being attentive to his girlfriend, thereby making the married men present look worse by comparison, he says of marriage, “we're in the effing trenches here, where the real hell happens... It's not about flowers and presents and showing up for the weekend.” Another husband corroborates: “And we're here every day.” Married life is similarly depicted as an unpleasant existence in *Knocked Up*. In *Knocked Up*, the woman in the central couple, Alison (Katherine Heigl), lives with her married sister Debbie (Leslie Mann), and observes her sister's simmering marital tensions and explosive arguments up close (“Marriage is like a tense, unfunny version of ‘Everybody Loves Raymond,’” says Debbie's husband [Paul Rudd], “only it doesn't last twenty-two minutes. It lasts forever”). Alison appears to relish her comparatively carefree single status, and when she and her one night stand partner Ben are attempting to have a romantic relationship during her pregnancy, she expresses a fear that they will become like her sister and brother-in-law. And yet, *Knocked Up*'s “happy ending” sees Alison and Ben

entering into a committed romantic relationship with each other, planning to move in together and raise their baby as a couple and, it is implied, as husband and wife. Subsequent research on the postfeminist cycle might investigate this contradiction, particularly in light of McRobbie's (2009) observation that under postfeminism, marriage, which is no longer an economic necessity for women, is made "culturally necessary" (p. 62). Though my analysis here supports McRobbie's argument – with the exception of *The Break Up* and *It's Complicated*, all the central couples in the movies in my representative sample are united in relationships that presumably will result in marriage – the contradictory depiction of already-married couples in the postfeminist cycle suggests that the process of making marriage culturally necessary is more complex than McRobbie allows.

Finally, subsequent analyses of the postfeminist cycle might consider the impact that viewing postfeminist romantic comedies has on audiences. Does exposure to these movies influence viewers' attitudes toward feminism or their perception of gender equity in the United States? Does watching postfeminist romantic comedies shape viewers' expectations of or behaviour in romantic and sexual relationships? As I note in the Introduction, an examination of how audiences of postfeminist romantic comedies participate in the creation of the meaning of those films, and of the effects of those meanings, be they cognitive, social, political or otherwise, would be a valuable contribution to scholarly inquiry into Hollywood romantic comedies, postfeminist popular culture, and the postfeminist cycle. Because my goal here is to identify and account for the existence of the postfeminist cycle, rather than investigate its effects, I do not engage in reception studies here; however, an investigation of the postfeminist cycle through the lens of reception studies would no doubt be an invaluable addition to scholarly literature on the topic. As the postfeminist cycle is both new and newly identified, it presents an opportunity for a great deal of further examination. However, in concluding this chapter, and indeed, this thesis, I return to the project that first sparked my academic interest in the Hollywood romantic comedy: the romantic comedy review series that I wrote for the website *Feministing* in 2010.

Conclusion

The origins of this project are in popular commentary: my academic interest in the Hollywood romantic comedy was sparked by the year-long movie review series that I wrote for Feministing, the Feministing Rom Com Review. That experience resulted in a desire to better understand the genre: its history, its themes and variations, its place in popular culture. Though in the blog post announcing the launch of the Rom Com Review series, I casually professed my love for the readers of Feministing (Angyal 2010a), a more accurate characterisation is that I felt – and still feel – dedicated to them, and to the feminist analysis of popular culture that draws them to the website.

My research here demonstrates the extent to which postfeminist ideas about gender, sex, and power have become entrenched in the Hollywood romantic comedy. Their presence is sufficient to identify a new cycle in the genre – and with the history of the genre as a guide, I suggest that this cycle will exert an influence on subsequent cycles, as the neo-traditional and screwball cycles exert influence on the postfeminist cycle. If postfeminism is, as McRobbie (2004) argues, “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined” (p. 256), if it does indeed represent an “undoing of feminism” (p. 256) – an argument my analysis supports – then this entrenchment, particularly in a genre that so often goes uninterrogated by both scholarly and popular analysis, is cause for concern for those with an interest in the ongoing project of gender equality. *The Ugly Truth*, with its remarkable hostility to feminism, its undermining (and embracing) of its heroine’s professional authority, and its literal stripping of her bodily autonomy, is a particularly egregious example of this new cycle, but it is not an isolated case. Rather, it is emblematic of a widespread shift in the genre. As a feminist student, I am deeply invested in the project of gender equality, as are the readers of the blog Feministing. As a scholar who also does popular feminist commentary, it is also extremely important that those whose exposure to feminist inquiry is entirely popular, rather than academic, have access to my findings, so that they might better understand the popular culture they consume. It was the readers of Feministing with whom this

project truly began, and it seems only fitting that they should avail themselves of the knowledge I have gained and the contributions I have made here to the growing body of scholarship on romantic comedies.

I argue that postfeminism is an attempt to ensure that “a new women’s movement will not emerge” (McRobbie 2009, p. 1), to secure “the demise of feminism, in such a way that it will never again rise from the ashes” (p. 1). My research suggests that this conflict between postfeminism and feminism has expanded to the romantic comedy front, and that postfeminism has largely won those battles. Given that the Hollywood romantic comedy is one of the few genres that tell stories with women protagonists, and given that it is one of the few genres marketed largely to women, this is cause for concern. With the romantic comedy in its arsenal, postfeminism gains a powerful weapon. The invocation of conflict here is deliberate, and appropriate: the struggle between feminism and postfeminism is real and consequential. Postfeminism is a response to genuine feminist victories: women wielding unprecedented economic and political power, exploiting heretofore unavailable educational and employment opportunities, demanding different conceptions of femininity – all of which has loosened the grip of patriarchy. Postfeminism is patriarchy’s response to the number of battles won by feminism. Postfeminism, as deployed in popular culture, is not a case of shock and awe, but rather, a campaign to win hearts and minds. It is swift, adaptable, nimble and – in the case of the romantic comedy – pleasurable, and, above all, successful.

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