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DISCUSSION



## Doing Film Feminisms in the Age of Popular Feminism: A Roundtable Convened by Claire Perkins and Jodi Brooks

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### ABSTRACT

In a move that has now been thoroughly documented, the Anglophone West of the past decade or so has become an environment in which feminism is *popular*. Film and television, and the discourses around them, have been central to this development, with productions from *Eternals* (Chloé Zhao, 2021) to *Fleabag* (2016–2019) to *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023) prompting an infoglut of commentary that foregrounds and debates the feminist credentials of a wave of new media content that centres women as both characters and creators. But what does it mean to label this content ‘feminist’? Focusing on screen culture and education, the short reflections in this forum consider the tensions of this moment from a variety of perspectives – teaching, screen production, criticism, history and the academy.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Doing Film Feminisms in the Age of Popular Feminism

*Claire Perkins*

In a move that has now been thoroughly documented, the Anglophone West of the past decade or so has become an environment in which feminism is *popular* (Banet-Weiser 2018; Gill 2016; McRobbie 2020). Film and television, and the discourses around them, have been central to this development, with productions from *Eternals* (Chloé Zhao, 2021) to *Fleabag* (2016–2019) to *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023) prompting an infoglut of commentary that foregrounds and debates the feminist credentials of a wave of new media content that centres women as both characters and creators. As Jana Cattien has warned, though, there are many reasons to be suspicious of the ease with which contemporary cultural products are labelled ‘feminist’. She argues that when the term is used as a descriptive category – a genre – it empties both the texts in question and feminism itself of critical potential: “‘feminism’, *qua* genre, cannot transform itself in and through a

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critical relationship with socio-cultural phenomena if these phenomena have already been labelled “feminist” in advance’ (Cattien 2019, 324).

Cattien’s point is useful for exploring the idea of popular feminism as a set of knowledges that can be mastered; that one can be *certain* of. Her argument unfolds through an exploration of contemporary television series that, although markedly different in style, content and focus, are unified under the description ‘feminist’ for a thematic focus on women’s oppression – broadly imagined. Drawing on Wendy Brown, Cattien highlights a contradiction in the way feminism is here imagined. In order to unify across a diverse range of socio-cultural phenomena, the term becomes a broad, fixed category rather than a form of active theory: ‘for feminist to be “timely” ... it has to accept an already reified representation of the current moment; it can only ever belatedly respond to whichever themes have already been approved of by the present’ (327).

The contradiction described here emphasises the power and influence that contemporary popular screen culture holds in shaping understandings of what it means to be a feminist. The ‘approved’ themes of the present that feminism-as-genre relies upon are strikingly broad. The ‘golden age’ of female-centred television (Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016; Perkins and Schreiber 2019) celebrates volume and visibility over specific issues and questions, contributing to an environment where, as Rosalind Gill has observed, ‘just about *anything* in the mainstream media universe can be (re)signified as “feminist”’ (2016, 619). In this way, conceiving of feminism as a genre consolidates the impression that it’s possible to claim (and promote) a singular, correct feminist identity but – simultaneously – that this identity can be oddly *contentless*, ‘unencumbered by the need to have a position on anything’ (618). This understanding glosses over the significance of uneven social and cultural visibilities, as well as the need to distinguish between different kinds of feminist expression.

Focusing on screen culture and education, the short reflections in this forum consider the effects and consequences of this moment from a variety of perspectives – teaching (Janice Loreck), screen production (Pearl Tan), classification (Jessica Ford), history (Rebecca Sheehan) and the academy (Jodi Brooks). All contemplate how feminism-as-genre sits with long standing understandings of film feminisms – or cinefeminism – as theories and practices of questioning and disruption: as ‘a philosophy and as a form of activism that works in multiple and complex ways within modes of representation and expression’ (Mulvey and Rogers 2015, 11). Interrogating the feminism of popular culture has always been a signature pursuit of research into gender and media, but what is at stake in this specifically contemporary development? What does this style of classification obscure from decades of cine-feminist scholarship and, conversely, what might the popular discourse throw up that historical screen feminisms cannot account for? How do we critique the discourse while still acknowledging the progressive possibilities of a resurgent feminist conversation that centres on media, and thereby avoid gatekeeping feminist politics and knowledges? Most urgently, how do we produce research, teach students and develop screen content for institutions and individuals that have internalised these systems of classification and this desire for certainty? (Figure 1).

## Feminist Certainties in the Classroom

### Janice Loreck

If television critics are ossifying feminism into a genre rather than a hermeneutic device – branding the word ‘feminist’ onto works as diverse as *Alias Grace* (CBC, 2017), *Tuca & Bertie*



**Figure 1.** *Barbie* has made Greta Gerwig the highest grossing female director all time. Advertising for *Barbie* in Times Square, New York, Saturday 8 July 2023. Credit: Richard Levine / Alamy.

(Netflix, 2019) and *I May Destroy You* (HBO, 2020) – such a tendency will likely find its way into the classroom and have implications for how feminist criticism is taught. It is not uncommon for students, or indeed their tutors, to ask whether a text is ‘feminist’ or not. A colleague recently invited me to deliver a guest lecture on Kimberly Peirce’s adaptation of *Carrie* (2013), a narrative that has long intrigued scholars for its complicated depiction of monstrous femininity (Clover 1992; Creed 1993; Paszkiewicz 2018). In anticipation of discussion, my colleague posted a focus question to the students: ‘What constitutes a feminist film?’. No doubt her intention was to complicate the idea of ‘a feminist film’ by asking the students to define it. Yet the framing of the question shows a dominance of the notion of feminism as a genre rather than a critical methodology. Indeed, students have asked me similar questions about texts as diverse as *Captain Marvel* (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019), *Revenge* (Coralie Fargeat, 2017) and *Viva* (Anna Biller, 2007).

That students and teachers should ask whether a text is ‘feminist’ or not is especially unsurprising given that fan communities have enthusiastically transformed feminism into a reading strategy with a stable meaning. As I have previously argued, feminist criticism has grown into an increasingly prominent method for enjoying popular media rather than, as Laura Mulvey famously said, a strategy of anti-pleasure (Loreck 2018). And indeed, a cursory look online reveals that ‘feminism’ is now a source of ‘fun’. Numerous reading communities have formed around a type of feminist exegetical practice, producing memes on *Married at First Sight* (Nine Network, 2015 –), video blogs on the legacy of *Beyond Good and Evil* (Ubisoft, 2003), ‘feminist’ Ryan Gosling, and funny recaps of *The Bachelor* (Network 10, 2013 –). Some of the most prominent critical foci in the reading

community are: whether a text passes the Bechdel Test, whether women are 'objectified', whether queer characters, women, transgender characters or people of colour are 'punished' through negative narrative outcomes, whether the depiction of sexual violence is 'necessary', and so on. Such questions echo the approaches pioneered by cinefeminists such as Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell in the 1970s, focusing on the ideological implications of endlessly repeated negative stereotypes. Mulvey's theories of the voyeuristic male gaze appear too, albeit stripped of their psychoanalytic underpinnings. By repeatedly drawing on these concepts and measurements, the act of transforming feminism into a reading strategy for pleasure, in-group jokes and memes involves enshrining a relatively stable set of terms of reference.

This transformation of feminism as a critical reading method or practice to an understanding of feminism as either a fixed reading strategy that identifies predetermined markers or as a fixed genre defined by a set of agreed traits has potential implications for students' expectations of their lecturers. The good news is that feminism is now 'fun' and students may not have the same resistance that they might have had to feminist theory in the past. Yet participating in the online feminist reading community, as role modelled by both critics and consumers, involves having a fixed understanding of 'feminism *qua* genre' if participants are to know what they can celebrate and what they can ridicule or condemn. Blogs, tweets and think-pieces on feminist topics are numerous, and they are filled with affect: joyous approval, passionate outrage and hearty ridicule. The performance of these affects requires certainty, whereas feminist exegesis in the academy requires acceptance of polysemy, dominant and resistant readings, and ambiguity. Anecdotally, students tell me in their end-of-semester self-reflections that they feel inadequate when they are not as certain in their thoughts as other, more outspoken students. Such uncertainty is not compatible with the feminist reading community's strategies of performative affect and assuredness. Added to this is the long-standing difficulty of uniting feminist academic criticism with political action. Lynn A. Higgins calls this 'the dilemma of the critic caught between the postmodern text and the feminist interpretation' (2010, 25) – the desire to acknowledge, even embrace, ambiguous polysemy while also seeking certainty about a text's ideology and, therefore, its instrumentality in relation to women's real-world struggles.

Hence the conundrum in today's classrooms is in many regards a recent iteration of an established problem for feminist critics, albeit occurring within a context where feminist memes, think-pieces and reading communities abound on the internet. Helping students grow tolerant of polysemy is therefore important. So too is prompting students to reflect on their investments in feminist exegesis, asking them why they are so desirous of certainty about a text's feminism. After all, the practice of labelling films as feminist establishes a hierarchical power relationship of mastery of viewer over text (Loreck 2018). Criticism is an act of 'dominating the object', to use Ien Ang's words (1985, 98), and highlighting the pleasure of such dominance is a useful self-reflective practice. Lastly, we can remember that not all texts are conceived to fit the feminist genre Jana Cattien describes as a feature of the contemporary TV landscape (2019). Neither feminism or cinema can benefit from an ossified, simplified feminism – neither as a genre or a fixed reading strategy. It might be fun for a while, offering a pleasurable dominance of a text or participation in feminist online culture. However, it is also limiting and, quite literally, silencing in the classroom (Figure 2).





**Figure 2.** Anna Biller's films are among examples that provoke discussion about whether they are 'feminist'. Samantha Robinson in *The Love Witch* (2016), directed by Anna Biller. Credit: Anna Biller Productions / Album /Alamy.

## Funding Feminism: Generic Feminism and the Screen Industry

### *Pearl Tan*

In the Australian screen industry, I see creatives frequently being asked what the relevance of their work is. Key-creatives (writers, producers and directors) are asked by funders, distributors and sales agents to describe who the target audience of their story is and what the relevance of the story is to that audience. All creatives, whether they are a head of a department on set or in post-production, a dedicated crew member or actor sign on to a project because they believe in the relevance of the project.

A cynic could argue that this is an economically driven question – funders are looking for clear traditional or innovative pathways to market in order to prove a business case for the product. As a non-cynic, I believe most people in the industry are fellow non-cynics and believe that when we are asked to state the relevance of our stories, we are all trying to understand and articulate the heart of the cultural relevance and timing of the story to society at large. In order to create, we must believe that our stories are important and make a difference in some way (be it social justice, light entertainment or

something in between). I see this as the space where the pop-culturalisation of theoretical words begins.

In recent years we've seen an increase in demand for more diverse content in Hollywood (e.g. Hunt and Ramón 2020b; 2020a). There has also been a push for more female representation overseas (e.g. Geena Davis Institute) and in Australia, through the screen agencies, such as Screen Australia's Gender Matters programs (Screen Australia 2017). The increased focus on diversity and female representation both in front of and behind the scenes has meant that specific pools of funding and opportunities have been made available for female-led and female-focused stories. For practitioners, regardless of their gender, securing this funding means proving that their work is attuned to the need to serve female screen content creators and a female audience. In this context, when practitioners hear theoretical words, such as feminism and intersectionality, their eyes can light up in delight! What intellectual and novel ways to describe the work that they're doing! Which funder could argue against a feminist or intersectional piece of work? What was deemed overly political or niche in the past is suddenly the key to specific pools of funding. A self-proclaiming of one's own work as 'feminist' or 'intersectional' suddenly becomes a way to hotwire the piece of work as relevant, locally and internationally.

However, at times, the practitioner's understanding of feminism (or intersectionality or any other theoretical buzzword) comes from reading a handful of ten-word summaries on Instagram (perhaps I am more cynical than I presented in the previous paragraph). The rich discourse around these terms and associated theories are reduced to a pop-culture sugar hit of wokeness.

Following this through the industry, should the work receive funding, this self-proclamation of feminist work may wind its way through the production process. At the production and post-production stage, the feminist label may manifest in a practical way. The term in this context may act as a trigger to counter unconscious bias by prompting questions such as: How many female identifying heads of departments do we have? Are our female characters rich and complex? Does the screen language we're using counter the male gaze? While the understanding of feminism may be slight, it is still operating at a level which may affect staffing and creative choices.

Once the screen content is distributed, if the feminist tag is still attached to the project, the number of stakeholders will expand to include every single audience member with a social media platform alongside more typically credentialled critics. Here we loop back to the relevance of the story and bring in feminism-as-genre. Is the story considered feminist because it's an easy way to argue the story as relevant to our times? Is it described as feminist because it makes the product attractive to female identifying audience members? Were women at the helm of this project? If the answer to any these of these questions is affirmative, then does the content fall into feminism-as-genre? What even is the feminist genre, and can it be defined in a way that is meaningful to practitioners and audiences alike? Or is feminism-as-genre reductionist to the point that 'feminist' should only be used as an adjective to other existing genres?

There are screen practitioners who will use feminism-as-genre to brand their work regardless of how screen studies researchers define the term. They will contribute to the pop-culturalisation of feminism-as-genre regardless of whether their intentions are mainly commercial, or if they have any interest in more robust scholarly discussions. As we find ourselves fighting for more women to be key creatives behind the scenes, I

find myself wondering if the broad brushstrokes of pop-culture, while problematic, can still be useful to increase the number of women across key positions in the screen industry. While feminism as a label may create more fixed meanings by becoming a genre, genres also shift over time – and makers will continue to respond to this as it evolves. If feminism-as-genre can work to shift the dial towards more female voices both in front and behind the camera, over time, this blunt tool could still be advantageous to storytellers and storytelling at large.

## Spectacular Feminist Television

*Jessica Ford*

The cultural visibility of feminist politics has increased in the last decade, as Rosalind Gill notes: '[w]here a few years ago it sometimes felt difficult to make *any* feminist arguments "stick" in the media, today it seems as if *everything* is a feminist issue. Feminism has a new luminosity in popular culture.' (2016, 614, original emphasis) This sheen is particularly prevalent in US media commentary on contemporary TV, which has a critical desire to deem women-centric TV 'feminist.' Over the last decade, a range of journalists have asserted the alleged 'feminism' of the US television landscape, proclaiming that we are witnessing a 'new feminist bent in mainstream discourse on women on television' (Blay 2015). *The Guardian* journalist Yomi Adegoke declared: 'We're in a golden age of feminist TV' (2019), while *Slate's* Inkoo Kang contends that television is '*the* medium for pop cultural feminist expression' (2019, original emphasis). This critical desire to deem certain television series 'feminist' in expression, intent, and perspective, plays a key role in determining what series are perceived as 'feminist' on television and defining the terrain where feminism circulates on TV.

I look to *both* television criticism *and* scholarly analysis to consider this issue, as the role of feminist criticism is not just to evaluate the feminist credentials of particular series, but to determine how feminist discourses operate and are rendered legible or illegible. The question of what makes TV 'feminist' has long been of concern to television studies scholars (See D'Acci 1994; Mellencamp 1992; Spigel 1992), who have examined how 'Feminist TV' is both an industrial category created by TV producers and distributors and a theoretical category curated by feminist television scholars. More recently, Jana Cattien (2019) has tackled this question in light of the recent resurgence of female visibility in Anglophone US-centric TV, making the most significant intervention in recent years into how we understand the function of both feminism and feminist criticism on TV. Characterising this contemporary environment as one where "'feminism" is a ubiquitous signifier', Cattien argues that reading texts such as *Alias Grace* (Netflix 2017) as straightforwardly feminist (as many journalists and critics have done) precludes 'an alternative reading in which *Alias Grace* emerges as a critique of "feminism" itself' (2019, 322). Broadly speaking, feminism on TV is read through authorship, funding and issues, meaning creators deemed 'feminist' make feminist TV (see Tina Fey, Lena Dunham, Jenji Kohan), well-funded shows by and about women are seen as an investment in women and thus a feminist act (see *Orange is the New Black* [Netflix 2013-2019], *The Handmaid's Tale* [Hulu 2017-present], *Killing Eve* [BBC America 2018-2022]), and series that tackle issues of women's oppression, trauma, and abuse are understood as redressing a



media silence (see *Big Little Lies* [HBO 2017–2019], *Sharp Objects* [HBO 2018], *The Morning Show* [Apple TV 2019–present]). For Cattien (and the journalists she cites) these textual and extratextual components mean that in the current moment ‘feminist TV’ operates as a genre (2019, 324). However, I propose that what Cattien identifies as “‘feminism’, *qua* genre’, is women-centric spectacle (2019, 324 original emphasis). This relies on Jorie Lagerwey, Julia Leyda and Diane Negra’s characterisation of women-centred television as having an:

awareness of a new economic and cultural regime, a tendency to take as a given the fact that women’s working lives entail a struggle with openly corrupt and structurally racist capitalist practices, and the co-presentation of female empowerment with acquiescence to the structural status quo. (2016)

Each of these attributes can be read as ‘feminist’ and are often rendered through spectacle.

The television series that Cattien cites as part of the current ‘feminist TV’ genre – *Big Little Lies*, *Godless* (Netflix 2017), *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *Alias Grace* – rely on eye-catching, extravagant and ‘cinematic’ spectacle. Martin Rubin describes spectacle as:

a sense of gratuitousness, of uselessness, or extravagance, of rampant excess, of over-indulgence, of flaunting, of conspicuousness consumption, of display for the sake of display, of element calling attention to themselves rather than serving a higher, all-encompassing concept of narrative. (1993, 41)

The ‘feminism’ of what is recognised as feminist TV, lies in speeches or monologues that feel gratuitous in their direct address. For instance, *Parks and Recreation* (NBC 2009–2015), *Scandal* (ABC 2012–2018), *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *The Morning Show* (Apple TV 2019–present) have each been circulated and accepted as ‘feminist’ and they each feature a lead character who is known for taking the metaphorical (and at times literal) microphone to rail against patriarchy or voice their perspective. These speeches, amongst many other moments, are pinned, retweeted, and shared on social media as inspiring and tantalising examples of feminist consciousness raising.

My argument privileges what is *read* as feminist not what *is* feminist, meaning that I favour television series that circulate as ‘feminist TV’, such as *Fleabag* (Prime Video 2016–2019) or *I May Destroy You* (HBO 2020), rather than evaluating their claim to feminism. Television scholar Lynne Joyrich (1996, 17, original emphasis) argues that ‘Gender is not simply a potential *subject matter* for television – it is a classificatory strategy, a structuring system, a very significant *matter for subjects* constituted through its terms of enunciation and address.’ Perhaps the same could be said of feminism. Feminism is used to stratify, categorise, and market US scripted women-centred television. But the conflation of feminism and spectacle relies on reproducing the same biases as male-centric definitions of cinematic television. As such it relies on male-centric definitions of value to legitimate its women-centric politics. While their argument is predicated on precarity rather than abundance or spectacle, this affirms Lagerwey, Leyda and Negra claim that ‘the recent recalibration of feminism’s place in popular culture is a product of the same forces at work in the operating logics of these television series’ (2016). When the mode of television most valued (at a given time) intersects with the designation of ‘feminist,’ its feminisms become legible; therefore, there is a critical tendency to deem eye-catching, extravagant moments of feminine agency, empowerment, and resistance as ‘feminist.’ In



**Figure 3.** The spectacle of *The Handmaid's Tale* translates readily to real world protest. Washington, DC, USA. 27th June, 2017. Ahead of the US Senate AHCA vote (American Health Care Act), hundreds of women dressed in distinctive red outfits inspired by *The Handmaid's Tale* gather at the Capitol Building in Washington on 27 June 2017 to protest Republican provisions related to women's healthcare, including many senators working to delay the vote on Trumpcare. Credit: B Christopher / Alamy.

other words, in the contemporary television moment, what is read as 'feminist' often relies on spectacle (Figure 3).

### A Historical View on the Limits of Feminism-As-Genre

**Rebecca J. Sheehan**

A historical case study from the 1970s illuminates some limits in defining a popular film as feminist. In the 1970s, feminist equal employment opportunity agitation helped to create new possibilities for women filmmakers. Yet only a handful of women directed Hollywood feature films, and they did so to limited success (Sheehan 2021). At that time, women filmmakers had to contend with entrenched beliefs that they were constitutionally incapable of directing critically and commercially successful films. As a result, their work opportunities were restricted, they were constrained by executives and producers during the production process, and they faced a confirmation bias in which any failure – real or perceived – was taken as proof of their female incompetence. If women directors wanted to work in Hollywood, they could not challenge this sexism either on the ground or in their films. But then, when their films were released, film critics and prominent feminists lambasted their lack of feminist content. Until recently, these competing expectations have translated into a relative historical erasure (Hunter and Shearer 2023; Montañez-Smukler 2019). These women have been excluded from dominant histories of 1970s

New Hollywood that lionise male auteurs for creatively and financially reinvigorating commercial feature films and ignore the industry's gendered structures. Their films are also absent from histories of feminist cinema because they do not meet the criteria of 'feminist.'

Elaine May and Lina Wertmüller were the two best known and critically successful female directors of the 1970s, yet feminists accused them of making grossly male-oriented films. Conflating discourses of gender and race, Marjorie Rosen labelled May a traitor to the sisterhood by describing her as an 'Uncle Tom whose feminine sensibilities are demonstrably nil' (Rosen 1973). Lina Wertmüller, the first woman to receive an Oscar nomination for directing, made films that explored the power dynamics between women and men. Although she aligned herself with feminism and was criticized for being too feminist by critics in her native Italy, some prominent American feminists called Wertmüller a 'misogynist' and 'opportunist ... cashing in on the new interest in women directors resulting from Women's Liberation' (Blumenfeld 1976; Diaconescu-Blumenfeld 1999; Klemsrud 1975).

Such criticisms ignored the ways women filmmakers had to compensate for their gender in a male-dominated industry that viewed them as biologically incompetent and associated commercial feature film success with masculinity and a 'macho style' on and off screen (Anson 1982). Even the well-received films about women were directed by men (Beck 1980; Mayne 1981; Murphy and Bentsen 1973; Rapping 1986). In this context, as actor and screenwriter Grace Zabriskie commented, women who worked in film had to act like men as a 'survival technique ... to keep their positions' (Anson). Further, it was difficult for women filmmakers to bring explicitly female content to their work or identify with feminism at all if they wanted to remain on good terms with male colleagues and patrons. Assistant director Nancy Littlefield distanced herself from feminism altogether by saying: 'The Movement antagonizes a lot of working women like myself by their condescending attitudes towards men. Their overall philosophy is too sexist, to[o] oppressive' (Bosworth 1974).

When directors Joan Darling and Jane Wagner made films about relationships that featured women, they were undermined by their male producers, dismissed by Hollywood executives for making 'women's films', and criticised by film and feminist critics for not adequately demonstrating feminine sensibilities or feminist fire. Since then, the disdain for 'women's films' has been coded into the term 'chick flick', a label given to Hollywood films made by, for, and about women, and one that has effectively ghettoised such films (Rich 1998). The label also speaks to the way that films by and about men have been naturalised as genderless – *The Godfather* and *Scarface*, for example, were not referred to as what Gloria Steinem has called 'prick flicks' (2017).

Since then, the perception of feminism has somewhat transformed. Indeed, marketing a woman filmmaker or a film as 'feminist' could now help, rather than hinder, box office success. Greta Gerwig's 2023 film *Barbie* is a striking example. As the highest grossing film of 2023, it made Gerwig the most commercially successful female director of all time (Mzimba 2023). However, the film's success does not mean that feminism is always welcome in a male-dominated commercial film industry or that films by and about women will be judged as meeting expectations of feminist representation. *Barbie* generated significant interrogations of Gerwig's own feminism, and the extent to which the film or its heroine could ever be feminist given Barbie's hegemonic femininity and the commercial machine behind the Barbie brand and the film itself.

In the 1970s and now, women who make movies do so in sexist and racist industrial and cultural contexts. We limit women when we hold them solely responsible for these structural biases and when we hold them and their output to a theoretical feminist ideal. If, as intersectional feminists, we seek to transform occupational segregation, eradicate harmful identity-based essentialism, and foster diverse representation of film creators, content, and audiences, we could instead allow for the possibility that some filmmakers might advance intersectional feminist interests through their very existence in a male- and white-dominated industry regardless of their creative output. We can interrogate how we define feminist and who is included in the circle of 'we'. We can consider whether the 'feminist' film genre is a new form of the 'chick flick' and thus a niche product that potentially circumscribes the careers of its makers. By recognizing the limitations of feminism-as-genre in an unequal world, we might avoid dooming women filmmakers to a recursive cycle of failing to meet impossible expectations.

## Cine-Feminisms in the Academy – the Incredible Shrinking Space

*Jodi Brooks*

In thinking about where feminism is situated in screen studies research and teaching today it is hard not to be struck by the seeming contradiction between the much-discussed wave of popular feminist-themed or feminist-labelled television series and films that are readily found on screen on the one hand and the shrinking place of – and for – feminist film and screen scholarship in our tertiary institutions on the other. While over the last few years there have been times where it has felt like there are not enough hours in a lifetime to keep up with the number of multi-season, feminist-themed dramas and comedies on streaming services (though perhaps that wave is already passing), I am yet to experience that sense of overwhelm when it comes to space for feminist approaches to cinema/screen culture – let alone feminist pedagogical practices – in the university (for the latter, see Bishop [2021]; Tack [2023]; Mountz et al [2015]; and Kennedy-Karpat [2022]).

This sense of a mismatch between the wealth of screen stories that seem to mark this cultural moment as one in which feminism is 'popular' and what I see as the increasing marginalisation of feminist film/screen studies in many of our film programs also tells us something about the contained and precarious place of cine-feminisms in film and media programs in the neoliberal university. While one might assume that the perceived currency of popular feminism outside the university and on-screen might lead to renewed interest and investment in feminist film scholarship and teaching in the university, this doesn't seem to have been the case. More often, these popular feminist-themed screen texts can end up serving as the primary – and often sole – engagement with feminist approaches and feminist film practices in our screen studies programs. This is in large part because, for better or worse, many of these series seem to fit the bill whenever 'gender', 'feminism', 'feminist screen studies' and 'female authorship' are bundled together as a one-week topic in a film course (as is so often the case). As 'additive' approaches to inclusion and diversity in curriculum development and program design are still often standard practice, this is probably not surprising. And this brings me to the opening questions for this multi-voiced discussion around film-feminisms in the age of popular feminism.

As the framing questions for this discussion, Claire Perkins asks, 'What does this style of "feminist" classification obscure from decades of cine-feminist scholarship and,

conversely, what might the popular discourse throw up that historical screen feminisms cannot account for?' One way to answer the first question about what kinds of cine-feminist work and thought might be obscured in this current of 'feminist' classification is to think about how and where cine-feminist scholarship more broadly is being obscured in the institutional life of film and screen studies. Feminist pedagogy, like much feminist scholarship and knowledge-making, does not find a comfortable fit in the neoliberal marketisation of higher education (see Mountz et al. 2015). I would add here also that film studies – like many disciplinary fields in the humanities that prioritise critical inquiry – has not fared particularly well in the neoliberal university (see Brooks 2010). The kind of work that is often so central to and valuable for feminist screen studies teaching and that can involve a radical renewal of the classroom and who gets to not just feel included within it but also gets to shape it, are not always the kinds of practices that fit in to – or are legible to – the more tick-a-box approaches to diversity and inclusion. Here we might include the importance of thinking critically about cultural value, challenging inequity (including on screen and behind the camera, in the classroom and 'behind' the classroom), interrogating the structures of knowledge production – including feminist knowledge production – in and for feminist film and screen studies.

Where do we find and enable engagement with the rich histories and present of cine-feminist scholarship in our film and screen programs? What place does feminist film history (research and methods), feminist film theory, and feminist film practices – including work from within and outside the academy – have in the teaching, telling, and purposing of film and screen studies as a disciplinary field today? How are these areas, approaches, and debates being marginalised, mobilised, or simply omitted, in the teaching, telling, and purposing of film/screen studies as a disciplinary field? What are we to make of the fact that at the same time that cine-feminist debate is thriving in academic journals – both long established (for instance *Camera Obscura*) and more recent (for instance *Feminist Media Histories*) – and when innovative and high-quality cine-feminist research and debate is flourishing and re-fuelling online in free and open access blogs, podcasts and journals (for instance *MAI*) – that cine-feminist thought finds itself with shrinking space in the academy, at least here in Australia? Dedicated courses on feminist film and media studies are as rare as hen's teeth and while the word 'gender' might frequently be coupled with the words film, screen, or television in course titles or staff research areas in film and media programs, the words *feminist approaches* or *feminist methods* are considerably less likely to appear.

In her essay 'Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion' Linda Ahäll writes that:

feminist scholars are increasingly invited into academic spaces, while feminist knowledge is, still, too often ignored. Nonfeminist scholars seem convinced that feminist knowledge does not concern them—a feeling reproduced by a common misunderstanding that feminism is only about 'identity politics' or 'women's stuff.' This lack of engagement with feminist theory and methodologies continues despite, or perhaps as a result of, the opening up of those spaces for feminist research. Or to put it differently, the opening up of academic spaces for feminist research has not meant actual feminist change of those spaces. (2018, 37)

Ahäll's comments resonate with the experiences of many feminist screen scholars working in the university sector, and her interlinked statements – that in the academy today there is *some* room for feminist scholars but less for feminist knowledge, and



that there is *some* space for feminist research but not for making institutional spaces feminist – seem particularly apt for describing the place of feminist screen studies in the academy today. Returning to this question of the place and work of popular feminism in contemporary screen media, to be sure there is room in the academy for exploring contemporary popular screen media texts that are labelled or circulate ‘as’ feminist, but because there is less room and less opportunity for engaging with the rich terrain and histories of feminist film and screen theory and research, the critical resources and conceptual frameworks that could enrich and fuel critical engagement with and analysis of such work are diminished, and this happens frequently in our undergraduate programs.

The reasons for this are numerous and various. The increasing push for ‘career ready’ graduates and the instrumentalization of critical thinking as a career-focused learning outcome has meant that in many screen studies programs, cine-feminist research and debate is most likely going to be limited to industry analysis (for us here that all too often tends to mean simply Hollywood and Australian screen culture) and ‘topics’ that might enable a neat lining-up of learning activities, outcomes, and graduate attributes. In film and screen studies, the new modes of course ‘delivery’ have also impacted on what is *available* to teach and no less importantly, on the kinds of conversations and debates can be generated through this work (and this was happening even before found ourselves in the online-only world of Covid-lockdown teaching). As we become increasingly reliant on content that can be streamed, key screen texts in cine-feminist research, teaching and practice have become unavailable for use as they are not available on streaming services or digital archives and collections.

This brings me to Perkins’ second question – what might today’s popular feminist-themed or feminist labelled screen texts ‘throw up that historical screen feminisms cannot account for?’ The forms of popular feminism that are found in (or serve as a label for) a range of female-agency-focused screen media today are often characterised by the ‘fusing’ of ‘feminine rage and feminist rage’ that Lauren Berlant has discussed in her work on genres of female complaint (2008, 1). To be able to explore and understand these works in a broader history of screen texts and feminist scholarship that engage with similar questions would be ideal. Like many feminist film scholars of my generation what drew me to screen studies and film theory many decades ago was feminist film theory and the critical tools and frameworks it has created for understanding both the work and the possibilities of screen cultures. My own early interest in feminist film theory debates was ignited by feminist film scholarship on what Berlant neatly calls ‘gender-marked texts of women’s popular culture’ (2008, 5) and the classical Hollywood woman’s film in particular, with its repertoire of feminine poses coupled with promises of affective justice. Feminist film debates provided me with valuable ways of thinking about investments in screen culture, our gendered places in and through it, and the affective terrain it offered. But feminist film debates also enabled shifts in the institutions – academic, archival, screen industry – that it engaged with. More than a decade ago now Jacqueline Stewart wrote in her essay ‘The Scholars Who Sat by the Door’ that ‘Feminist film theory serves as the pioneering example within academic film studies of extending social and political activism into highly influential critical methods for exploring the ways in which films produce meaning’ (2009, 148). For this reason alone, feminist film theory – and cine-feminisms more broadly – should occupy a key place in our teaching and telling of the field.

In a recent special collection on teaching women's filmmaking, the volume's editor, Colleen B. Kennedy-Karpat, asks a question that many feminist film scholars confront regularly in teaching: 'With only limited time, only so many weeks on our course schedules, how can we leverage our curricular choices to allow for a feminist pedagogical praxis?' (2023, 5). As we navigate and push against the limitations and constraints of the neoliberalisation of higher education it is important to remember that feminist screen studies curricular choices are never simply – or only – about which screen texts to 'include,' as both the Teaching Women's Filmmaking collection (*Onscreens* 2022), Saartje Tack's recent essay on 'Teaching for Liberation' (2023) in this very journal, and the other contributor-collaborators to this conversation here make clear. Curricular choices include the scholarship that is read, the debates and conversations that are engaged with, and the questions and work that are enabled and valued in the classroom and outside it.

How might 'feminism as genre' enable 'a reconsideration of where feminism is situated in screen studies research'? In what ways can or do these 'feminism as genre' texts fuel interest in, or indicate the value of, cine-feminist research, methods, interventions, and histories, and therefore, too, the possibilities of screen studies as a disciplinary field? Reflecting on these questions has led me to think about some of the most dynamic and valuable pedagogical moments and events (what to call them?) in my teaching over the last few years. Interestingly, though perhaps not surprisingly, they have been in weeks where we have been engaging with screen texts that radically rethink a genre and the medium and platform through which they circulate. These have also been screen texts that have dynamically required us to think about how we view and discuss screen texts – temporally, spatially, and physically – in the course and that have opened and shifted spaces in the classroom, and in discussion of the discipline, that have made 'that week' *the course*. Key amongst these moments has been teaching Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (BBC One/HBO, 2020), coupled with Caetlin Benson-Allott's essay on the series ('How *I May Destroy You* Reinvents Rape Television' (2020)). I raise this here as a way of also addressing what I see as something of a limitation in accommodating too quickly this critique of feminism as genre central to Cattien's essay from which we began. I do not want to lose sight of the value of genre as a site and means for feminist critique and praxis, and here it would be interesting to set Cattien's arguments about feminism as genre alongside Kathleen McHugh's recent work (discussing some of the same television series) on female directed genre-based serial television shows that 'use genre as a feminist platform' (McHugh 2023). To be fair – and indeed this is critical to her argument – Cattien pays considerable attention to the differences between some of the series that she examines in terms of which 'speak' a readily recognised 'feminist' content and which are engaging in something more like feminist critical practice (and in this respect Cattien's critique of feminism as genre and McHugh's valuing of genre as feminist platform for feminist storytelling are perhaps not as opposed as they might first appear). But regardless of whether this wave of feminist-themed or labelled popular screen texts are seen as primarily a market category or as a more amorphous, heterogeneous, and dynamic field of movement, feminist film and screen studies – in its methods and approaches – offers the richest resources for engaging with these works and their emergence and uneven circulation.

Feminist film and screen scholarship has long played an important role in the disciplinary field. It has called for and enabled critical examination of the 'yardsticks of judgement' that underlie the dominant frameworks used to determine what constitutes authorship,

innovation, and much else, and it has challenged the forms of homocitation that can course through the field. If one of the effects of 'feminism as genre' is that it forces a reconsideration of where feminism is situated in screen studies research, the reconsideration it enables includes both obscuring and highlighting the shrinking spaces of and for cine-feminist work in the academy.

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