

New Media and Post-feminist Critical Pathways

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Women on *Grey's Anatomy* or in *The Devil Wears Prada* seem to “have it all”— they have looks, brains, and (thanks to second-wave feminism) access to public world opportunities. While these characters fret about relationships or raises, postfeminist femininity at first seems as fun as teetering around New York in mile-high heels. And yet, the woman on *Sex and the City* conceals the work required by women who negotiate the conflicts and contradictions that structure post-feminist femininity. Anyone who thinks walking in Manolos is “easy” is probably fooling herself as much as the viewer of *Sex and the City* who thinks that Carrie can afford \$800 shoes on her journalist salary. These carefree images of postfeminist femininity ignore the labor required to produce and maintain mainstream “success.” How women negotiate public and private worlds is a central form of “work” in the postfeminist context; increasingly there is less time for more work.

With the idea of “work” in mind, I would like us to consider how new media research can contribute to our understanding of the production of postfeminist femininity. By turning our attention to new media sources, we can find texts that highlight the work required to negotiate postfeminist contradictions. While the flashy drama of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* has captured our attention, postfeminist identities circulate in a variety of online resources that illustrate tensions in women’s everyday lives. As viewers/scholars we can participate in the cultural studies tradition of actively “producing” counter-hegemonic readings of the postfeminist high-heeled subject, but we can also shift our focus and find online resources that don’t just hide but rather revel in “work.”

Specifically, it appears as if women increasingly find pleasure in the production of commodities they might otherwise buy. I would like us to turn to websites associated with commercial lifestyle television shows like *Knitty Gritty* (<http://www.hgtv.com/knitty-gritty/show/index.html>) and independently produced websites like *Threadbanger* (<http://www.threadbanger.com/>) and podcasts like *Let’s Knit2gether* (<http://letsknit2gether.com/>) to consider how these online resources turn labor into fun. They are pedagogical resources for the at-home-crafter, offering written, audio and video lessons on everything from “casting on” to hemming jeans. They circulate presentations of private labor, and offer viewers opportunities to consume and/or mimic acts of production. They undermine the binary logic reproduced by hegemonic postfeminist culture, blending public and private spheres, and acts of production and consumption.

Sites like *Threadbanger* highlight how middle-upper class postfeminist taste is defined by self-conscious appropriation of a past that excluded women from the workshop and tied women to the never-ending rhythms of housework. These sites instruct viewers how to make items that often have a retro- 1950s-1960s aesthetic; for example, projects include pop-art style aprons and jewelry. This nostalgic aesthetic speaks to a dissatisfaction with the rhythms of contemporary life; these websites appeal to a

postfeminist audience by combining leisure and labor in a way that is pleurably inefficient and counteracts everyday time stresses.

These sites speak of and to a taste culture that opposes the mass-produced nature of everyday life. The videos capitalize on new-media interactivity by encouraging viewers to mimic online lessons. Viewers can pause and rewind the instructions, returning again and again to each step, in effect creating their own narratives about textile production. These videos encourage interactivity that prompts us to consider how this kind of “producer” subject targeted by these sites is different than the “consumer” subject who is often the object of postfeminist scholarship.

These websites exemplify trends in media convergence; in particular, they are either directly affiliated with television programs (*Knitty Gritty*) or directly reference the relationship between “new” and “old” technologies (the *Let’s Knit2gether* logo is a television set with knitting needles in place of antenna). They turn crafts, a form of domestic/women’s work into leisure, breaking crafts projects down into a series of pleurably orderly tasks. In a context in which work is often elided, websites like these that depict work as something to-be-reveled-in speak to contemporary desires. Here, work itself, inefficient work at that, is embraced for its creative potential.

These sites highlight how as we choose our “preferred objects of study” we cannot ignore how postfeminist ideology is reproduced in everyday media. These websites strike me as politically ambivalent and they introduce questions about how women negotiate postfeminist tensions. Do these sites offer opportunities for a non-commercial exploration of self through the production of craft? Or, do they reify pre-feminist definitions of femininity as defined by domesticity and the “neverending” project of housework? Do they make textile production a noble and creative act? Or, do they obscure less privileged laborers, the working-class women who do not have the privilege to “choose” to work for fun and whose labor is rendered invisible by commodity fetishism? Websites like these may help us answer these and other questions about postfeminist culture.