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"You Don't Want to Be in Love... You Want to Be in Love in a Movie": Romance and Postfeminism in Contemporary Film and Television

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“You Don’t Want to Be in Love... You Want to Be in Love in a Movie”



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ROMANCE AND POSTFEMINISM IN CONTEMPORARY FILM AND TELEVISION

In the popular romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle* (Ephron, 1993), a pivotal scene in the middle of the film sums up the crux of the dilemma faced by Annie (Meg Ryan), the female protagonist. She is having difficulty making an important decision about her love life and, as she always does, turns to the classic film *An Affair to Remember* (McCarey, 1957) for guidance. As she watches the film with her best friend Becky (Rosie O'Donnell), she says, “Now those were the days when people knew how to be in love, time, distance, nothing could separate them because they knew.” In response, Becky observes, “That’s your problem, you don’t want to be in love, you want to be in love in a movie.” This

interaction between Annie and Becky is meant to elicit a sense of recognition among *Sleepless in Seattle*’s audience because the text assumes that by nature of the fact that they are watching the film, its spectators must empathize with, if not share, Annie’s desire to fall in love in a way that is completely removed from the mundane realities of everyday life. However, the text also assumes that the audience will find equally familiar Becky’s pointed critique of Annie’s misguided preoccupation.

This scene, and by extension the film, represents two perspectives on romance and romance spectatorship—one suggests that the promise of romance is a solution to life’s problems, and the other suggests the dangers inherent in such beliefs. These two attitudes, though seem-

ingly at odds with one another, coexist within *Sleepless in Seattle*'s discourse effectively. But, not surprisingly, the optimistic, idealistic attitude ultimately wins out at the end of the film when Annie finds her "movie love."

The conflicted female discourse presented in this scene illustrates how romance narrative structures in post-1980 American film and television have become sites for reflection and negotiation of contemporary women's ambivalence toward cultural and political discourses in which their personal choices are deeply entrenched. *Sleepless in Seattle*'s oscillation between revering the traditional romance narrative and explicitly questioning its viability mirrors the postfeminist era's characteristic bipolarity in which women struggle between assuming their role in the continuum of the feminist movement by seeking out and achieving personal and professional success and by retreating to a prefeminist idealization of heterosexual romance and the retrograde notions of femininity that have been traditionally associated with it. This study argues that because of its success in diluting a profound fissure in the feminist project and transforming it into a conflict between wanting to be in love in a movie and knowing better, romance narrative structures have not only seen a resurgence in fiction film and television texts but have concurrently become one of the most pervasive cultural narratives, infiltrating every media form aimed at women.

This project pairs an evaluation of the social, historical, and political milieu of the postfeminist era with close analyses of characteristics and trends in film, television, and other media romance texts from 1980 to 2005. Its emphasis is twofold: first, to show that romance is a pervasive popular culture narrative form that resurfaces and becomes more prominent during periods in which sociopolitical issues related

Michele's study is timely, lucid and compelling.

Against common assumptions, she shows how and why the romance genre—marketed to women—has become so successful at the same time that women have gained increasing independence economically. Michele shows how this independence has been represented in conflicts between domestic and professional hopes and demands. Her study unfolds clearly and engagingly, without lapsing into nostalgia for happy endings that—in memory anyway—used to be really happy. I recommend her forthcoming book to specialists and the general public alike. Michele has been an absolute pleasure to work with throughout this process, as she gradually found the core argument behind the intuition that started her on this path of research.

—Professor Janet Bergstrom

to women are in active dispute and, second, to examine how trends and tendencies in contemporary romance narratives have been instrumental in creating and perpetuating postfeminist discourses.

This study is, in part, an effort to rejuvenate the feminist inquiry into popular culture texts that began in the 1970s and 1980s on women's narratives such as the women's film, the melodrama, and the soap opera. While the political and entertainment landscape has changed dramatically, texts created for women are still in active circulation in contemporary culture and their mutation into new media forms such as reality television and Internet websites has made them more pervasive than ever. Rather than signaling a dismissal of the long history of second-wave-inspired studies that have come before, this project's basis within a postfeminist framework reflects the recognition of this changed political and cultural milieu in which the meaning of feminism has been dramatically transformed. Romance is the central point of inquiry here because, while it has always been an integral component of women's narratives, its presence and influence has increased tenfold in response to the changing social position of postfeminist women who have achieved a historically unprecedented level of professional and personal success. This study suggests that romance has emerged as the discourse through which contemporary women's ambivalence is reflected—they know that they no longer need romance or marriage for social or economic survival but they still find themselves desiring it. Romance has transcended the confines of fiction and become a cultural narrative form through which women are targeted as readers, spectators, and consumers.



Michele Schreiber (shown above left with her advisor Professor Janet Bergstrom) recently received her Ph.D. in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media.

Janet Bergstrom is a Professor in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media. Her research involves archivally based, crosscultural studies of European directors who worked in more than one national cinema, such as Jean Renoir, F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang, as well as contemporary French/Francophone directors Claire Denis and Chantal Akerman. She was also the founding co-editor of *Camera Obscura*, the innovative journal of feminist film criticism.