Notes on the Perfect

Angela McRobbie

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NOTES ON THE PERFECT
Competitive Femininity in Neoliberal Times

Angela McRobbie

Abstract This article argues that at a point in time when feminism (in a variety of its forms) has re-entered political culture and civil society, there is, as though to hold this threat of new feminism at bay, an amplification of control of women, mostly by corporeal means, so as to ensure the maintenance of existing power relations. However the importance of ensuring male dominance is carefully disguised through the dispositif which takes the form of feminine self-regulation. The ‘perfect’ emerges as a horizon of expectation, through which young women are persuaded to seek self-definition. Feminism, at the same time, is made compatible with an individualising project and is also made to fit with the idea of competition. With competition as a key component of contemporary neoliberalism, (pace Foucault) the article construes the violent underpinnings of the perfect, arguing that it acts to stifle the possibility of an expansive feminist movement. It recaptures dissenting voices by legitimating and giving space in popular culture to a relatively manicured and celebrity-driven idea of imperfection or ‘failure’.

The Realm of the Perfect

Let me open this discussion with three illuminating moments from contemporary cultural life. The first of these is a news item noting how in the weeks before her death from a heroin overdose in April 2014, Peaches Geldof had been contributing a column in a women’s magazine extolling the joys of the perfect domestic idyll—or the ‘good life’ as Lauren Berlant (2011) would put it—which she had created with her husband and two small babies. In fact, this wealthy young socialite mother of two, having as a child witnessed the death of her own mother, had suffered years of depression and in the months before her death had been attending a methadone clinic. Her addiction problems, which remained well hidden from the otherwise relentless public gaze, prompted no hesitation and no stepping back from presenting herself as a role model mother, an advocate for overcoming life’s difficulties and achieving ‘the perfect’ (Figure 1). Or perhaps the lifeline offered by the illusion of the perfect life was, for Geldof, an example of Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’ (2011)? I will return to this concept later in the article. The second moment occurred some months prior to this in January 2014 when former British pop star turned actor and model, Sophie Ellis-Bextor, wrote an article for the Guardian entering into debates about the harmful culture of sexualisation as it impinges on girls’ and young women’s lives. In a first person format, Ellis-Bextor—with breathtaking disregard for feminism—wrote that she was glad she had two sons as she would have found the burden of dealing with girls and the pressures on them to achieve the perfect body image very hard to manage (Ellis-Bextor 2014). And then pursuing this trope of the perfect as a...
leitmotif for contemporary femininity, the third moment was the reporting in the UK’s Daily Mail of the headmistress of a high achieving girls’ school warning about how dangerous it was for girls to embrace the idea that they could somehow achieve perfection in their lives (Clark 2014). In effect she was registering that the notion of ‘perfection’ had entered into the common currency of contemporary femininity.

The idea of the perfect is both part of female ‘common sense’, something now expected of what Harris (2004) refers to as the ‘can-do’ girl, and also something potentially dangerous, a mechanism unleashing new waves of self-harm. Does this association with the so-called ‘can do’ girl mean that the perfect is a middle-class disease, something only linked with already existing and potentially realisable aspiration? Or is the point that its dissemination follows different pathways according to the socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of its female subjects? This would be to say that the perfection dispositif proliferates, modulates and flows, assuming different shape and form as it envelops its female subjects. The idea that I will be exploring in this article is that the perfect comes into being when, after a long period of castigation and disavowal, feminism somehow makes a comeback. By this, I mean that feminism once again has a presence across the quality and popular media, and similarly in political culture and in civil society. No longer does it seem like a hopeless case to take action against sexual harassment in the workplace, no longer does the bifurcation of children’s goods in department stores along the lines of princess girls and pirate boys go uncontested, no longer is the topless ‘Page Three Girl’ simply a part of the culture which generations of younger women simply need to get used to. What then is the cost of feminism’s seemingly rehabilitation or at least acknowledgement of its existence once again? Could an answer to this lie in the attempt to attach something of feminism to an ethos of competitive individualism? In an earlier essay I considered the emergence of neoliberal feminism in the context of maternity and family life (McRobbie 2013). I continue this line of thinking here, but in this article I am focusing on the more explicitly punitive dimensions. In particular, I focus on the ways in which even though this feminist presence modifies some aspects of the patriarchal retrenchment I referred to in The Aftermath of Feminism (2008), this is offset by the renewed emphasis on individualisation and on the equating of female success with the illusion of control, with the idea of ‘the perfect’. It seems then there is a battle to ensure that the new popular feminism which emerges or which holds sway is one which discards the older, welfarist and collectivist feminism of the past, in favour of individualistic striving. The perfect may well mark out the time and space dimensions of this struggle. In what follows I tentatively explore a terrain of suffering, indeed of death, which has become a space of everyday femininity, almost something to be expected. I locate this suffering as part of the apparatus of the perfect. In the back of my mind is the anguish of parents and families who have lost their teenage and even pre-teenage daughters through suicide and whose deaths when reported in the press describe how the girl in question had been told by fellow pupils that she was fat or ugly (the accompanying photograph invariably shows a lovely, healthy-looking young woman). Or the coverage describes how the girl had been bullied online for some breach of teenage female etiquette, such as stealing another girl’s boyfriend or for having had sex and then been called a ‘slag’ by her classmates. For the girl in question to be so unable to fight back and protect herself from injurious comments—and for a life to be lost for such trivial reasons—surely requires some sustained consideration on the part of feminist academics. I put myself here in the position of a mother whose grief must be so unbearable. How can she make sense of a child’s suicide
under conditions such as these? How can she come to terms with losing a daughter seemingly because she had been told by friends online that she was ugly, fat, red-haired or unattractive, or indeed too attractive, too beautiful? The idea of being virtually tortured to death by a group of classmates of a similar age is indeed a difficult, if not impossible, thing for parents to comprehend. Is the inability of the girl to withstand such abuse a mental health issue? Is it aggravated by the social media world within which children now grow up? Is it that the compulsion to post a constant flow of enhanced and self-enhancing images to websites—displaying a virtual ‘good life’, typically parties, holidays or weddings—induces new and as yet unclear gender dynamics of psychic fragility. To be ‘liked’ supposes the potential to be ‘disliked’, just as approval runs the risk of disapproval. The seemingly fun, globally popular and friend-oriented nature of Facebook disguises its capacity for gender re-traditionalisation in the form of women being ‘looked at’ as John

FIGURE 1
Berger (1972) once put it. Second wave feminists interrupted the Miss World Beauty Pageant in London in 1972. Is the Facebook world a subtle version of the same pageant-like phenomenon? After all, one of the most frequently posted images is that of the young woman in a bikini. Is the rhetoric of the image not one that requests a response (positive or negative) from its viewers? At any rate, a key issue for feminism would be to attempt to understand the consequences for girls and young women of this heightened visibility which they themselves so actively promulgate. Can a mother whose daughter has died through this kind of online bullying seek justice? Can she pursue her daughter’s tormentors through the courts? Is it that in contemporary neoliberal times normative violence reaches down into the playground, and that we have become tolerant of or blind to the kind of everyday aggression which Butler (1997a) has written about as ‘hate speech’?

‘Heightened Demands of Bodily Capacity’

For almost three decades now sociological attention has been paid to the body and the way in which corporeality has in effect become a defining feature of post-industrial society. As Jasbir Puar has written contemporary neoliberalism makes ‘heightened demands of bodily capacity’ (2012, 149). Where miners once found their bodies and their health ruined by the manual labour they performed over a lifetime, now younger working class men, black and white, without qualifications seem only to have their toned and worked out bodies to offer on the labour market as personal trainers, gym instructors or security guards. In the same manner, the young working class women who in the past worked in garment factories, leaning over sewing machines and damaging their eyesight as well as their backs, are now much more likely to be training as beauty therapists, nail technicians or as personal assistants, all of which require high levels of investment in the self, in ‘grooming’ and in appearances. Are we witnessing in this transition different modalities of what, to quote Berlant once again, could be described as ‘slow deaths’ (Berlant 2011)? Both Berlant and Puar stress the harms done to those voiceless populations at the bottom of the social scale, such that the level of anxiety expressed by the more privileged, in Puar’s case the ‘it gets better’ voice of conservative and conformist gay America, has to be sharply differentiated in order to be seen for what it is. Puar pitches teenage gay suicide against the slow death which capitalism normatively imposes on the powerless or ‘surplus’ poor of post-coloniality. While Berlant in a similar vein decries the ethos of aspiration and of hard work which inaugurates poor disenfranchised migrant people into the values of the now unrealisable American Dream, ‘cruel optimism’ indeed. But I wish to make the case for the punitive dynamics of slow death across these social and ethnic divisions. Can we not focus on the category of women, or in this case young women, while heeding the deep and pervasive inequalities of class and ethnicity? If the mass of seemingly middle-class young woman, part of what Agamben (as quoted in Berlant 2011) labels the ‘planetary petty bourgeoisie’, is called upon by the proliferation of guides, manuals and self-help devices at their disposal, to constantly improve themselves and manage a self which is in itself a dangerous fiction, are we not, as social scientists, duty-bound to explore how this requirement could be one among many ways of reducing their potential for social critique and political mobilisation? Only by doing this can we grapple with the forces which undo possible solidarities and which hinder the acting upon the seemingly new constraints of gender.
Being slim and remaining so has tradable value in a job market and economy where all such personal properties are subject to calculation. To gain weight is to ‘let oneself down’, to risk social disapprobation, to lose status and self-respect. In such a milieu the young woman is involved in a constant ‘battle’ to ensure that her body does not suddenly deteriorate. There is no shortage of reminders, particularly in the form of the Daily Mail Online Femail celebrity photographs which dissect these body-states by the hour, indeed by the minute, thus reflecting the inescapable temporality of attention. Young women under the spotlight. How am I looking today? How are my knees, my breasts, my buttocks, etc.? Some sociologists such as Bauman (2000) suggest that in a much more individualised society, the body is taxed with the burden of acting as its own social structure, as forms of social collectivity and communality fade. Can we surmise that one aspect of conservative ‘gender re-traditionalisation’ (Adkins 2002) takes the form of conflating an unviable notion of self-hood with an equally unviable corporeality?

Foucault (2008) remains one of the most influential social theorists of corporeality for his analysis of how the body is the subject of address within the field of biopolitics. Contemporary power works through the body, circling round it, often in enticing ways, offering an illusion of control, a promise of sexual pleasure, a promise of longevity to those who undertake the required amount of personal maintenance and so on. Foucault also pinpoints the extent to which competition is a defining feature of the rise of neoliberal society, and one of the key unasked questions within the recent debates on feminism and neoliberalism is how competition operates in gender-specific ways? (Indeed the idea of competition which Foucault so emphasises in his lectures on neoliberalism remains one of the more neglected aspects of his work.) My tentative answer to this question is that the idea of ‘the perfect’ emerges as a highly hetero-normative vector of competition for young women today, now that feminism is once again a recognised force for tackling gender inequality. Paradoxically it even finds ways of endorsing a kind of solidaristic competitiveness, for example, in the writing and activity of Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg (Sandberg 2013). We can take part in a ‘lean in’ circle, to share the tips about how to make it to the top, while also enjoying motherhood and domesticity. The young women who are the subjects of these addresses to compete to be perfect can offset this demand with the knowledge that a feminism of sorts is there to support their ambitions. A new feminism functions as a port of call for women who become aware of blatant gender inequities in their lives. At the same time feminism can be made entirely compatible with the search for the ‘good life’. What then are the parameters of female competition? There is of course the idea of career success. The perfect relies, however, most fully on restoring traditional femininity, which means that female competition is inscribed within specific horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, family and home, motherhood and maternity. Reduced to journalistic clichés, this comes to be known as ‘having it all’. The perfect thus comes to stand for the relationship between successful domesticity and successful sexuality. The extent to which feminism of sorts has entered into this terrain is marked by the seeming seriousness with which such a goal is to be pursued, on a par with taking an exam. In seeking this degree of excellence in life the young woman is therefore doing herself proud. She comes to embody the success of women today, those who like Sandberg are willing to speak out and acknowledge the forces of sexism which still have to be overcome. This constellation of domestic excellence also works as a standard-bearer such that the new arrangements of queer familialism will also hopefully fall into line.
This argument about the perfect necessarily requires that I revise, comment upon and update some of the ideas and concepts at the heart of two chapters in The Aftermath of Feminism (McRobbie 2008). One of these chapters, in a Foucauldian vein, dealt with how young women had become favoured subjects for governmental attention (or ‘spaces of attention’). This attention was predicated upon a number of clauses or conditions, which hinged upon their willing abandonment of a renewed feminism, and its attendant collectivities, in exchange for access to a wider field of meritocratic opportunities. These opportunities included chances to achieve at school and university, to enter the labour market and earn an independent living, which in turn permitted unprecedented access to consumer culture (symbolised in the booming fashion sector, the world of H&M) and some nominal degree of equal participation in civil society. There were two figures which embodied these accumulated forces as they came to be transformed into cultural artefacts, or highly stylised modalities of commercial femininity. These were commercial because they were created by and promoted within the popular landscape of media and visual culture and hence commoditised. However, they were also part of a larger project of biopolitical power, on the basis that everyday practices of government, by means of a kind of delegation, shaped, informed and guided so much that happened within this popular sphere of visual governmentality. The two figures that emerged from these intertwined processes were the ‘post-feminist masquerade’ and the ‘phallic girl’.

In The Aftermath of Feminism, I aimed to show what was at stake in the denigration of feminism, and in a later chapter I pursued this further by reflecting on the melancholic consequences of the loss of feminism to young women. Feminism (and female solidarity) was something which was known of, but had to be abandoned. Drawing on Judith Butler (1997b) I said this led to ‘illegible rage’ (McRobbie 2008, 184). At the time of writing that chapter I was perplexed and disturbed by the endless spiral of body anxiety and the seeming normalisation of girlhood eating disorders. The two things—the loss of feminism and the rising power of self-beratement, and its consequences against the physical body—seemed inextricably connected. Why had it become so commonplace for girls to say that they hated their bodies? What was it they actually hated? Of course one could look to the psychic mechanisms of self-beratement, and the stale, repetitive complaints of the super-ego as it both safeguards and manages the more servile ‘id’, but my over-riding concern was with the social repercussions, heightened by the gender dynamics of neo-liberalism, of these psychic voices (Phillips 2015). Were these preoccupations that could only have the effect of holding women back from the wider possibilities of their ‘success’ in education and in the workplace (Hark 2014). That which they were being invited to participate in was at the same time refusing them, or else introducing even more exacting terms and conditions. The post-feminist masquerade was a technology of the self, a mode of self-restraint which stopped women from challenging palpable gender inequalities, especially in the workplace. They pulled back by being overly and demonstratively feminine. The masquerade conceded ground to men, in effect disavowing this equality by signalling a need to be intelligible as an attractive, and thus intelligible, real woman. Men could be reassured and comforted that the possible competition they faced in the workplace from the successful woman was indeed an illusion. There was a form of self-restraint which stopped women from contesting an assumption about male privilege even in an environment which was premised on gender equality. So what one form of governmental activity awarded to young women as a prize for being pleasing post-feminist subjects, another form of seeming self-regulative action, cruelly deprived them of
any ability or feminist voice to challenge situations which showed explicit gender hierarchies (e.g. around pay) to be intact. Of course, it is more complicated than this. Critics could ask: which young women are indeed invited to come forward? To what extent were the ‘meritocratic opportunities’ also boundary-marking practices, ways and means of creating new, multi-layered forms of social division, or else ways of punishing failure more fully? In addition, what modes of competition were inscribed within the seemingly innocuous concept of ‘meritocracy’? Did this come to replace the panoply of provisions of the post-war welfare regime? Was meritocracy thus a substitute for social democracy (Littler 2013)?

If this was the field of argumentation for The Aftermath of Feminism, what has taken place since then that might require the thesis to be revised or updated? Ironically, there has been a blossoming of new feminisms across so many different locations, perhaps as an eventual explosion of this kind of post-feminist stranglehold. Now some years on from the gloomy prognosis of the post-feminist de-politicisation effects which I recounted, it is a very different picture which we encounter. Many new kinds of molecular radical feminism have appeared, often relying on social media as the focal point for launching their campaigns. I want to elaborate further, however, on the idea of ‘the perfect’ as a countervailing force to these radicalisms, an emerging horizon which supplants the post-feminist masquerade in an era now marked by young women’s feminist activism, while also ratcheting up the social punishment of women.

‘Complete Perfection’

By the perfect I mean a heightened form of self-regulation based on an aspiration to some idea of the ‘good life’. This also functions as a border-marking strategy, and a new dividing practice, since it is predicated on calculation and self-assessment against some elevated and rarely described benchmarks. The perfect replaces the idea of ‘domestic labour’ with its old feminist connotations of drudgery and monotony. It also replaces housework for similar reasons as this word still implies daily activity which is routine, unrewarding and which does not confer status on the doer. The perfect also does some putative work of social mobility, lifting women out of the reality of socio-economic relations where they may struggle to get a job and then find themselves poorly rewarded for their work. The perfect extends the notion of being ‘aspirational’ which is another word favoured by UK governments from the Blair years onwards. Indeed it is most often used in a gendered way, women are more often appealed to as ‘potentially aspirational’ because failure across this terrain is equated, as Beverley Skeggs has accurately pointed out, with failed femininity (Skeggs 1997). Various technologies bring the perfect into life, or vitalise it as an everyday form of self-measurement. How well did I do today? Did I manage to eat fewer calories? Did I eat more healthily? Did I get to the gym? Did I achieve what I aimed to achieve at work? Did I cook well after the days’ work? Did I ensure that my family returned from school and work to a well-appointed and well-regulated home? Did I maintain my good looks and my sexually attractive and well-groomed body? The constant calculations and the sense of ‘being in control’ have the effect of seemingly putting the woman in charge of her affairs. The mundane and exhausting aspects of domestic labour and childcare are somehow replaced by the fantasy pleasures of a gleaming kitchen and a landscaped garden. Does this mean that like Berlant’s good life, the perfect is a form of popular female fantasy? In
fact no, for the reasons of its obviously self-disciplining elements. It is instead a kind of neoliberal spreadsheet, a constant benchmarking of the self, a highly standardised mode of self-assessment, a calculation of one’s assets, a fear of possible losses. The perfect concurs most closely with the ‘human capital’ model referred to by Foucault, a seemingly simple concept deployed nevertheless to great effect in the writing of the Nobel prize-winning economist Gary Becker (Foucault 2008). As self-evident as this device of human capital may appear to sociologists, it has indeed held sway and entered the everyday life of populations today in the form of self-government and self-management. It has entered the heart of popular culture.7

To explore the contours of the perfect yet further, let me return again to The Aftermath of Feminism. The threads of argument that I developed there drew on material from the sociopolitical realm of the late 1990s and onwards. These included the distinctive brand of neoliberalism pioneered by the UK’s New Labour government of 1997–2007, the feminine luminosities (‘the flash, sparkle and shimmers’) of this decade, and the visibilities which produced a new kind of capacious female subject who was in turn congratulated for this success insofar as she embodied a new type of ‘good girl’. My debt to Judith Butler went beyond simply adopting some of her analysis of subject formation as articulated in The Psychic Life of Power (1997b); I had also tried to sociologise some of her psychoanalytic ideas. I had attempted to develop several points in Butler’s earlier work—especially those found in Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter (1993)—and apply these to the world of everyday heterosexual female culture. First, there was the way in which she challenged the realm of the Symbolic, defined by Lacan as the portal for normative sexual subject formation to be secured, to be in effect more open to contestation than the writing of the Lacanian feminists were able to consider. Second, with this horizon of power now less rigid than it seemed, I then argued that this dominance could be nevertheless retrieved through making concessions (and pre-emptive strikes), such as one which appeared to grant some degree of concession to feminism and to the sociopolitical currents which saw women leave the family and enter the world of work, and hence achieve a personhood as a wage earner. The power of patriarchy could be both fine-tuned and finessed by delegating authority over women to a field from which masculine domination appeared to be completely absent and instead where women self-regulated through a vocabulary of choice. Here, in the ‘fashion-beauty-complex’, a term I borrowed from Naomi Wolf (1991), the Symbolic was able to exact more intensive control over women, in particular young women. Such control could be achieved precisely through the illusion of investing in the body beautiful as a personal choice, and that such activities are pursued, not for the sake of male approval but for recognition within the terms laid out by the fashion-beauty-complex itself, and thus also for other women’s approval. The irony here is that in complying with these demands, the Lacanian requirement that women per se give visual pleasure to men, is simultaneously fulfilled. From the point of view of social domination, this is a win-win situation. Feminism secures incursions into the terrain of work and employment and a certain relaxation of domestic norms (i.e. active fatherhood and shared housework), while women themselves are self-beautifying subjects, doing it for themselves not at the behest of men. Women, therefore, only have themselves to blame if they become victim to this beauty apparatus, or indeed if they simply submit to its daily rhythms and routines. In so doing, they also more or less remove themselves from the real sites of political power and decision-making, leaving it once again free for their male counterparts to continue uninterrupted. So the Symbolic proves itself able to adapt to
emerging social conditions such as women’s desire for equality, but, paradoxically, in order to ensure the stability of ‘masculine domination’ (Bourdieu 2002).

Butler highlights the extent to which the Symbolic must re-secure its grip over sexual life for dominant heterosexuality to remain impregnable. This is done by releasing or leasing out some of the power at its disposal. To demonstrate how this occurs in The Aftermath of Feminism, I borrowed from Butler the notion of the ‘phallic lesbian’ which I reflected on and modified, again, from the viewpoint of feminist heterosexuality. I suggested that the ‘phallic girl’ is a space for licensed sexual freedoms, reflecting something of Butler’s account of the bid for power undertaken by the butch lesbian who takes up the phallus. The phallic girl is also able to mimic male power seemingly with impunity, as, thanks to the struggles fought by feminism, she is no longer subjected within western culture to the sexual double standard. She can drink beer in excess, dance in a wildly sexual fashion, vomit on the street after a night’s debauchery and stagger home to sleep it off. A simplistic interpretation of this kind of activity would emphasise the titillation and voyeurism effect, as an endless stream of images of young women in states of undress fill the pages of newspapers and appear on TV screens across so many entertainment channels. A further level of analysis would surely point to the hidden double standard which berates such women should they fail to meet the standards for delivering the ‘visual pleasure’ of these audiences’ gazes, on the grounds of not possessing the right kind of body, i.e. old, overweight, misshapen or whatever other deviation there is to behold.

And yet there is more to this form of phallicism than even the pornographic version entailing stylised poses of ‘girl on girl’ sexuality, a spectacle of lesbianism which inverts and in many ways mocks Butler’s serious attempt to place the idea of a pleasure-seeking and pleasure-entitled butch lesbian on the sociocultural agenda. Lacan understood the lesbian as refusing to give visual pleasure to the male viewer. Here the Symbolic exacts a kind of vengeance and shows Butler what it wants by way of lesbian desire. It says ‘so there are women who only want to be with other women sexually, well then, this is how they will have to be, so that our male pleasures are not refused’. This is more or less where I left off in The Aftermath of Feminism. It is fascinating to me that in the intervening years, and within this short time span, gay and lesbian campaigners have contested the marginalisation and invisibility of queer desires, especially within this domain of popular culture and through the presence provided by social media. The phallic girl is now able to be a lesbian without the pretext of her visibility being just for men. Lesbianism can no longer be more vilified than feminism was without reprisal and angry mobilisation by gay and lesbian campaigners. Female couples with or without children litter the landscape of popular media. With the advent of gay marriage in many domains and with other forms of political recognition no longer withheld, phallic gay girls now come within the jurisdiction of the perfect. Butch, femme or otherwise, they are pulled into line as they are brought into the confines of a regime which requests of its subjects that they surrender themselves to visibility and thus to modes of public inspection (Facebook, Instagram, etc.). These processes of re-securing power’s social basis are deeply entangled and hard to decipher, but they take shape within the horizons of news and celebrity culture. For example, the top model Cara Delevingne on the one hand can post her support for National Coming Out Day, while at the same time being paid huge sums of money by fashion brand Burberry to pose semi-nude with Kate Moss in a campaign for My Burberry perfume featuring yet another reworking of the popular pornographic girl-on-girl scene.
Interestingly, already in Joan Riviere’s remarkable essay on masquerade, written in 1928, we find the theme of perfection. In regard to this essay, Judith Butler does what other feminists, notably Mary Ann Doane (1982), have done before her, which is to reflect on its import for a social understanding of gender and femininity. Butler reads Riviere’s essay to help her establish both the performative features of gender, i.e. womanliness as masquerade, and for the way in which it permits her to develop the idea of heterosexual melancholy on the basis of the ‘homosexuality of the woman in masquerade’. There is both fearfulness and anger in the female masquerade, based on an awareness that an encroachment on the terrain of male power results in sanctions and social punishment. It is Riviere herself who draws attention here to the meaning of ‘complete perfection’ (1986, 42) as the means at women’s disposal to compensate for this enforced subjugation, thus rising above it (‘damn it I will be perfect’), while at the same time seeming to abide by its demands for subservient femininity. My designation of contemporary femininity in The Aftermath of Feminism as a post-feminist masquerade saw the Symbolic hard at work enforcing compliancy as the price of achievement and female success. This time, however, it was performed with even more heightened degrees of artifice and a knowingness informed by a feminism which was simultaneously taken for granted while also disavowed. For a while this space became a familiar habitus for young women shaped by, but fearful of feminism (that it would make them unattractive to men). These young women seemed to be unnaturally eager to please, they took on board the new ‘rules’ about constantly smiling and being always girlish, and hence youthful in their bodily conduct. They were even willing to appear ‘foolish and bewildered’ (Riviere 1986, 29) to emphasise a new sense of female weakness. They were willing to buy into consumer culture in excess, so that they brandished and displayed a proliferation of bags, shoes, manicured hands, pedicured toes, jewellery, hats, pencil skirts and so on. The fashionista endeared herself to others for reason of her child-like self-proclaimed over-the-top love of shopping.

The moment to which I am referring can be summed up in the little girl demeanour of the figure of Carrie Bradshaw in Home Box Office (HBO’s) long-running series Sex and the City, where the opening sequence of the show saw her dressed in a kind of ballerina tutu dress, and playing around like a pre-pubescent girl, almost falling into puddles on the street and getting splashed by passing traffic. Popstar Kylie Minogue continues to inhabit this space, again with an affected girlish style of self-presentation: always laughing, giggling and flirting. The reassuringly nostalgic dimension of the post-feminist masquerade (in showing young women to be child-like in their neediness, easily distracted, wanting a husband, desiring domesticity and a brood of children above all else) confirmed this as a moment of deep gender conservatism and retrenchment. In contrast, the idea of ‘the perfect’ suggests a more hard-edged version of masquerade, one where the awareness of female subjugation as described by Riviere is compounded, not by a repudiation of feminism but instead by its translation into an inner drive, a determination to meet a set of self-directed goals. Feminism is instrumentalised and personalised confirming the suggestion that the Symbolic exercises a degree of flexibility, an openness to change in the gender regime, all the more to tighten and re-secure its grip.

The Problem with Girls

What are the problems that arise from a quasi-feminist or a feminist-informed attempt to invert the regime of the perfect? Does this not simply bolster (while seemingly
admonishing) the power of the term of domination by standing as its other?\textsuperscript{10} Are the perfect and imperfect not mutually entangled and dependent terms? In responding to these questions, I turn now to the HBO television series \textit{Girls}. Is it enough for creator and star of \textit{Girls}, Lena Dunham to offer her character, Hannah Horvath, and Hannah’s friends as inherently imperfect and thus not only ‘real’ but also ‘endearing’? Does the imperfect become another version of its opposite, this time cloaked in the mask of self-conscious ‘youth’ or excessive girlishness? One of the defining features of \textit{Girls} is that it stands as a seemingly realist counter to the injunctions to young women in a post-feminist frame to strive for some western culture-bound notion of perfection, with a light-hearted endorsement of ‘imperfection’. There are various inversions in the genre which Dunham has crafted. There is, for example, a simple and transparent reversal of the relatively untroubled slimness and beauty of the four female friends in \textit{Sex and the City}, and again a reversal of their obliviousness to the question of money and the reality of earning a living so as to bring in enough money to live comfortably in Manhattan. And finally, there is a reversal of the \textit{Sex and the City} girls’ overall deference to men and subordination to the etiquette of dating as a prerequisite to romance followed by love and marriage.

The girls in \textit{Girls}, in contrast, constantly question all of these requirements and expectations. Dunham sees herself as a comic writer, so it is less than fair perhaps to contest the status of the series on the basis of light-heartedness or of its celebration of the trivia of everyday young women’s lives and semi-private obsessions. Dunham also locates herself within a tradition of ‘indie genre’ film-making and this, in turn, suggests a self-designated proximity to experimental media production, and indeed to the art world as it is refracted through its own concerns with feminine intimacy (Tracey Emin) and the confessional diary form (from Sophie Calle to Andrea Fraser to Dunham’s own mother, the artist Laurie Simmons). Presenting herself in the series as a hopeful young writer, Dunham is on a constant search is to unearth material from her own life from which she can craft a viable literary or media form. And because of her high degree of self-reflexivity, this too becomes a source of humour: she needs (imperfect) things to happen to have material for her work. As various feminist scholars have shown (DeCarvalho 2013; Nygaard 2013; Grdešić 2013; Bell 2013), Dunham in her personal statements and blogs as well as in her series is successfully able to pre-empt a string of criticisms by demonstrating a facility for both self-deprecation and high degrees of self-reflexivity. These comments—in keeping with the theme of imperfection—take the form of constant self-beratement. (Dunham in the character of Hannah Horvath makes a ‘statement’ that any negative ideas anyone has about her, she herself has already had.\textsuperscript{11}) One of the criticisms made by many writers, feminist or not, is that despite the prominence of the imperfect (which actually functions as the selling point and raison d’être for the programmes), the leading figure Hannah and her friends are all immensely privileged, white and middle class, and hence cushioned from any of the more obvious financial constraints experienced by the majority of the young people around them. In the first season Hannah is confronted by her parents’ decision to cut her off from the flow of funds they have been providing to her through university and since. In a context where so many jobs in the city of New York are little more than unpaid internships, Hannah fears being without this parental support since she needs the time to develop her craft as a writer.\textsuperscript{12} In UK terms, this is the equivalent of being an immensely privileged ‘trust fund child’, i.e. someone who does not need to work and who is not technically unemployed and thus reliant on state benefits or sent on welfare-to-work programmes.
We cannot pursue this trope of realism too far since it is clearly a device, deployed with some irony, and something which allows the distinctive format of the genre to work and develop its narrative logic which is also intended to be entertaining and humorous. In addition, the text (i.e. the television series) is accompanied and even supplanted by many other forms of social media, from Dunham’s autobiography, her appearance on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, her own blogs (Figure 2), her own tweets and Instagrams, and extending to the various other publicity materials associated with the programmes. The effect is that the series itself becomes just one element in a whole narrative landscape or meta-textual/inter-textual framing for the actual episodes themselves (Dunham 2014). In short, Dunham has allowed herself to become the kind of celebrity whose daily life, including outings to the local shops to buy groceries, becomes an opportunity for tabloid press photographers to take pictures which will appear hours later with editorial comments on what she is wearing and usually also on how her body is looking on that particular day.¹³ Dunham has submitted herself to the celebrity culture of tweeting to her 400,000 followers much like the popstar Lady Gaga. Like Lady Gaga, she constantly mines and popularises ideas from performance art and feminist theory. She also attempts to provide a counter to the more typical celebrity mode of perfection or, in contrast, the shameful fall from this ideal. The problem is that this seeming embracing of failure is presented and performed as part of the process of ‘growing up’ and Dunham’s favourite postures are that of a semi-rebellious teenager or indeed of a slightly sulky child. She constantly refers to her own youthfulness, which means that being in her late 20s
somehow exonerates her from those responsibilities which will inevitably come later on. What does this kind of pose mean to the young black mother of two who is also in her late 20s? Surely it shows the close proximity this white western idea of imperfection has to the perfect? They are both part of the same thing: boundary-marking practices which reinstate social divisions by means of subtle processes of ‘cliquey’ exclusion, which in this case means being able to live in a ‘hipster’ part of New York (formerly a black neighbourhood) thanks to the support of well-off parents. Dunham can afford to be imperfect at this stage in life, while still experimenting and looking for the right boyfriend. She does not at this point in time have to be as ‘driven’ in a bid to gain female control and success as her older counterparts. Dunham thus inscribes herself within, and implicitly subscribes to, those cultural norms which celebrate the seeming gains of young white womanhood, as if feminism has done its work and everything else is up to the hard work and dedicated striving of the individual girl. When questioned about the all-white cast of Girls or the superficiality of their concerns with love and sex, Dunham concedes some grounds to her critics showing at least a liberal sensitivity. But the overall ethos is that of privilege, and of the need for success as confirmation of the self. The search for a rewarding career and a boyfriend stand as precursors to perfection. Dunham opens her book, Not That Kind of a Girl (2014), which is written in the style of a teenage diary, with the words that she hates herself. She also includes later in the book long lists of what she has eaten alongside her various plans to diet. For sure her awareness of ‘imperfection’ gives her a vulnerability, even fragility, which is a source of anxiety. She refers to her medication. There is a kind of burden of female self-hood which seems to account for her self-absorption, as though this is the only way she can ‘get through’, otherwise it seems she would topple into despair or depression. In her book she goes into great detail about the therapists she has been referred to through her teenage years, making light—in Woody Allen-esque style—of their quirks and peculiarities. Overall, we could say that Dunham locates herself within a framework of painful youthful femininity, out of which she must, at some point, grow. My argument is that this space of seemingly endless youth (a western white middle-class privilege per se) is part of the problem. It licenses self-obsession and, alongside this, Dunham’s quasi-feminism seemingly scores her points for being ‘brave’ in regard to having her ‘imperfect’ body shown on TV screens across the world. I query the status of this achievement.

Conclusion: Feminism ‘Adopted’ in Neoliberal Times?

If the perfect functions as a technique to create a competitive self among the ranks of young women, then we could say that this constant self-beratement is its outcome: ‘I should be doing better than I am’. But against whom is this competition waged? It is inner-directed self-competition. The competitive ethic is internalised for the reason that where gender hierarchies must more or less remain intact there cannot be open competition in work (and indeed in school) with their male counterparts. At most it will be said that a competitive woman wants to make it to the top ‘in a man’s world’. By these means too is male privilege actively safe-guarded. So the two combine, an inner-directed self-competitiveness which is in effect self-beratement about not being good enough or perfect enough, and outer-directed competition or antagonism towards other women. But from where does this perfection as benchmarking strategy stem? Clearly, as the labelling of this article as ‘notes’ suggests, there is a need for more work to be done on how we can
unpack this split-self desire for ‘perfection’. How might it fit, for example, within the landscape mapped out by Butler in her book *The Psychic Life of Power* (Butler 1997b) or alongside Sara Ahmed’s work on ‘happiness’ (Ahmed 2010)? In my own reworking of Butler’s ideas I drew attention to the melancholic effect which resulted from a known thing—feminism—having to be jettisoned or given up. The ‘love’ of feminism, for its promise of equality, gender justice and solidarity, and its abandonment, created an angry turning in on the self and an ‘illegible rage’ which Butler argued could be a ‘nascent political text’ (184). But where does this leave us when feminism seems to have been accommodated into the popular and political culture of the last few years? I stress accommodation and appropriation to differentiate my argument here from what other feminist writers have seen as ‘complicity’ (Fraser 2009; Yeatman 2014). To use the word complicity is somewhat accusatory and implies that certain kinds of feminists have allowed themselves to become aligned with the forces of conservatism and of the Right. In common sense terms, this is correct and one could look to Sandberg again in this regard. But one senses that writers such as Fraser (2009) have other more academically engaged feminists in mind, not the transparently corporate feminism of the ‘lean-inners’. Complicity does not seem helpful when what one is discussing is the cultural appropriation of feminism such that it becomes part of everyday governmentality. This takes place precisely because feminism is less about this or that group of women, and more of a formless, headless movement residing in a whole world of texts, theories, events, books, films, art works, activities, interventions, campaigns, writings, slogans, ‘postings’, as well as in policies and changes to legislation and so on. It has a formal and an informal life. It is an eruption, a discursive explosion and for this reason it comprises an open space for what Virno (2004) calls ‘capture’. Indeed, following Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), contemporary capitalism can find itself revived and rejuvenated when it takes feminism (or what they call the social and artistic critiques) on board and learns from what these have to offer. This is also close to what I argued in *The Aftermath of Feminism*. However, the doing of this job of accommodation and ‘adoption’ is more tenacious and far-reaching than even these authors suppose. My argument here is precisely that one outcome is this ‘can do and must do better’ ethos which is brought into close proximity with the deeply individualising forces of modern times and then, hey presto, made compatible with being a modern day young feminist who will excel at school and make her way to the boardroom in years to come. Here we find all ideas of gender justice and collective solidarity thrown overboard in favour of ‘excellence’ and with the aim of creating new forms (and restoring old forms) of gender hierarchies through competition and elitism.

In the meantime, and as part and parcel of this (re)packaging of competition, what is brought back to life is the traditional mode of girls competing with each other (‘mean girls’) within the confines of normative femininity. This is intensified and finds new outlets through the embrace of digital technology, especially the camera-phone and the rise of the ‘selfie’. If space permitted, we could undertake an analysis of the invidious illusion of control proffered by these prosthetic gadgets and their specific consequences for young women (see Banet-Weiser 2014; Yeatman 2014). This is not so much a totally new dimension of female punishment (albeit seemingly self-chosen in that it is relatively easy to opt out of the sociality of Facebook), but more a matter of older, reprehensible features of traditional female culture being reactivated and having new life breathed into them. The compulsion to compete for perfection and the requirement to self-regulate are forms
of violence, and also an anti-feminism masked by meritocratic ideals which reflect the new practices of gendered governmentality or the feminine ‘conduct of conduct’. The perfect suggests that it is only viable to compete against other women. It thereby intensifies those gender differences which might otherwise be at risk of being dissolved. The perfect does this by directing itself to girls and women only, and in so doing ensures the maintenance of boundaries against the threat of erosion through queer or transgender politics. It turns feminism against itself by subjecting it to the transformative power of individualisation, and it instates new hierarchies accordingly. We are left then with the image of the self-conscious, self-benchmarking young woman, also a child, posting her pictures on Facebook (ironically presided over by Sandberg herself) and in so doing seeking some kind of confirmation which those very actions and those same technologies fatally undermine.

What both of the figurations over which I have pondered—first the post-feminist masquerade and now the perfect—have in common is that they envisage the capacity of a new female subject who is somehow or another inscribed within a process or mobilisation which brings changes to the gender arrangements in contemporary sociality. But the point is that this must be a set of changes which, paradoxically, leave the existing patriarchal regime relatively untouched. My figurations must therefore mark out the contours of ‘managed change’. What is conspicuously absent is any angry and outright critique of male domination. There is something of a taboo here for the reason that to contest male privilege is to risk inhabiting the old space of the radical feminist whose antipathy, as it is understood retrospectively, was to ‘men’. Both the post-feminist masquerade and the perfect display highly normative and ultimately pleasing femininity where any aggression is entirely inner-directed. A problem here is that for many feminists and gender theorists alike there is likewise a reluctance to resurrect and reinstate ‘old’ categories such as masculine dominance, patriarchy or male power. They are too crude, possibly essentialist, and theoretically unviable ‘after’ queer theory. This empty space of antagonism to male dominance in work or in everyday life is in need, therefore, of some new feminist theorising. At a more practical and campaigning level, there is of course awareness of new realms of misogyny (e.g. through trolling) but no wider vocabulary for expressing the need for gender justice predicated on the dislodging or even overthrowing of the current structures of male power. The dispositif of the perfect expects the young women to ‘fix’ things for herself, by means of a constantly monitored life-plan. It is a practical mode of self-government and for this reason it is some steps removed from Berlant’s fantasy of a good life, although for sure its optimism is cruel. We might also surmise that if the perfect is something of a handmaiden for contemporary neo-liberalism, then the seeming success of its fast passage into feminine common-sense, lies in its natural psychic habitus being within the super-ego. The constant, mundane admonishment of the super-ego against the more servile ‘id’, is already, well before the perfect makes its entrance, a force which requires intensive psycho-analytical attention, not to remove, but to, as Adam Phillips has recently argued, open up to contesting voices (Phillips 2015). The dilemma for feminism is the powerful affiliation of forces bringing neo-liberalism and super-ego into a dialogue with each other through the trope of feminine perfection which also carries a moral weight for its subjects.
NOTES

1. Three columns in fact appeared in *Mother&Baby* magazine. The final third and final one entitled, ‘Being a mum is the best thing in my life’, was published posthumously as a tribute on 8 April 2014. See: <http://www.motherandbaby.co.uk/2014/04/peaches-geldof-1989-2014#.VKYmPSuUcZM>

2. See, for example, the following recent campaigns: The Everyday Sexism Project (http://nomorepage3.org/); Let Toys be Toys (http://www.lettoysbetoys.org.uk/about-2/); and No More Page 3 (http://nomorepage3.org/).

3. Sitting on an early morning train from Essex into the City of London I am distracted by the number of young women, I guess heading for jobs as office, retail or personal service workers, who use the time of the journey to apply a full make up which includes a complicated array of brushes, blushers, mascara, eye liner, eye shadow, lipstick, lip gloss, etc. I cannot help myself from looking at the final effect which is usually indeed an impressive TV-style appearance as though the young woman was about to step on stage for *Strictly Come Dancing*. The feminist in me wonders at this enforcement of gender difference in the space of public transport and the workplace environment which expects or requires such displays of excessive femininity or ‘post-feminist masquerade’.

4. For example on matters of fertility, reproduction and sexuality.

5. In a similar vein to this article Hark very recently sees that feminism in its new guise could be so easily cathedted to the purposes of ‘success’ (Hark 2014).

6. Included in this realm of feminine responsibility is the intensive mothering phenomenon.

7. For example, among male and female students alike academics encounter a constant assessment of the worth and value of different universities, to have one university rather than another on the CV can affect the entire ‘human capital’ of the young person or job candidate.

8. The most frequently ‘seen’ couple in this regard are Ellen DeGeneres and her wife Portia de Rossi who are regularly pictured as they go about their everyday life including visits to beauty salons etc.

9. See, for example, London (2014).

10. A similar incorporation of imperfection into the slogans and advertisements of ‘women-friendly’ beauty products such as Dove is analysed by Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias (2014).

11. There is an image circulating on the Internet in which Dunham in the character of Hannah Horvath is pictured with a caption that reads, ‘Any mean thing someone’s gonna think to say about me I’ve probably said to me, about me, probably in the last half hour’. The line is uttered by Hannah in Season One, Episode Nine (‘Leave Me Alone’).

12. Some might see the series itself as a cynical answer to her parents’ demand to earn a living independently, since the programmes promise salacious material, and a cast of young women who are all in the process of exploring their own sexuality, to be presented in an uncensored way.

13. See, for example, Chester and Johnson (2015).


15. The technicalities of the social or the artistic critique being appropriated by contemporary capitalism is limited in the case of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) to modern forms of managerialism, and even here we do not quite see the actual modes of implementation.
REFERENCES


Angela McRobbie is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Having studied at the CCCS in Birmingham University in the 1970s she is author of many books and articles, including The Aftermath of Feminism (2008) and she is currently completing an analysis of the creative economy titled Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries (Polity Press 2015).