

POSTFEMINIST DOUBLE BINDS: HOW SIX CONTEMPORARY FILMS PERPETUATE THE MYTH OF THE INCOMPLETE WOMAN

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Sweet Home Alabama, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* appear to promote feminist ideals. They feature smart, successful women who are determined to excel at their careers. However, each face a truly difficult decision—the career or the man? In a modern twist on two classic double binds, these six films contrive situations that place the potential male lover in direct opposition to career advancement. In some cases, the women keep their jobs, but in all they prioritize love, specifically “true love.” Additionally, the films each emphasize some transformation that the main character must undergo before she can ultimately succeed personally and professionally. While three films require the woman to relax—not worry so much about her career—the other three depict an ugly-duckling tale. Using Gregory Bateson’s concept of the double bind, Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s articulation of the double binds that women face, and theories of postfeminism, I contend that these films attract a large number of viewers by misusing the tenets of feminism. Furthermore, filmmakers construct arguments subtly and enthymematically.

“It’s like feminism never even happened, you know? I think any woman that would do this [enter a beauty pageant] is catering to some misogynistic, Neanderthal mentality,” argues the fictitious FBI agent Gracie Hart at the beginning of *Miss Congeniality*.¹ Ninety minutes later, Gracie tearfully accepts the “Miss Congeniality” award in the Miss United States pageant. This hardheaded, conditioned agent overcomes the burdens of her career to relish her own beautiful femininity and win the affection of a superficial male co-worker: a happy ending by contemporary U.S. standards. The problem, as Gracie puts it, is, “It’s like feminism never even happened.”²

Rather, the feminist movement did happen and now the general public takes its successes for granted. The product is a society that seems to support feminist tenets while simultaneously oppressing women. To demonstrate one

area in which this happens, I examined six films that assume women’s ability to gain access to the professional sphere. However, once there, these women must choose between a successful career and “true love.” I contend that *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* evoke feminist tenets in postfeminist ways to update the career/family and femininity/competence double binds for women, claiming that the limits a career places upon women preclude having both. The double bind, originally proposed by Gregory Bateson, contributes a complex understanding of the problems women encounter when they try to “have it all.” Additionally, theories of postfeminism provide a necessary lens with which we may update two double binds outlined by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. My analysis of the six films highlights two salient themes: (1) choosing between a profession and heterosexual relationship and (2) transformation as necessary.

GENDERED DOUBLE BINDS

Sweet Home Alabama, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*,

1 *Miss Congeniality*, VHS, directed by Donald Petrie (2000; Castle Rock Entertainment, Fortis Films, NPV Entertainment, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2000).

2 *Miss Congeniality*, 2000.



and *Miss Congeniality* rely on remnants of two classic double binds to create a message of what producers would claim is empowerment for contemporary audiences. A double bind assumes that only two choices exist and each is incomplete in some way. In an effort to better understand schizophrenia, for example, Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland define a double bind as “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he [sic] ‘can’t win.’”³ They proposed that placing people in double-bind situations could lead to schizophrenia. Joseph Heller calls it a catch-22.⁴ Kathleen Hall Jamieson adds a rhetorical element, defining it as a “rhetorical construct that posits two and only two alternatives, one or both penalizing the person being offered them.”⁵ She then genders the double bind concept by addressing five of the most prominent double binds for women in *Beyond the Double Bind*. Of those, two appear in these films: womb/brain and femininity/competence.

A patriarchal society expects successful women to go to college and plan for a career, but to forego or amend that possibility when the opportunity for a family arises. Jamieson clarifies, “when a bind casts two supposedly desirable states as mutually exclusive, the woman is invited to believe that she is incapable of attaining success.”⁶ So, for example, women who do not have a career must explain that they are

“just a housewife.”⁷ Conversely, women who do not have children must explain future plans or rationale for denying this part of themselves. The particular binds of womb/brain and femininity/competence speak to these struggles. In the first bind, a woman is presumed to be capable of exercising only one or the other. In the second, the more successful a woman is, the less feminine she must become or the more feminine, the less capable of success. Both of these double binds carry significant weight for women in professional situations.

Julia T. Wood and Charles Conrad discuss the paradox of the “professional woman”; they contend, “in a range of professional situations, messages at one level of abstraction – social myths about women – interact with messages at a lower level of abstraction – assumptions about professional conduct – to form mystifying and potentially binding situations.”⁸ These “potentially binding situations” evolve into “full-blown double-binds” when the affected person succumbs to outside pressures and responds in a way that perpetuates the paradox and completes the bind. One such response, according to Wood and Conrad, is acceptance. They argue that “Professional women who adopt accepting responses act in a way that conform[s] to the contradictory injunctions: behave as non-professional women or as professional non-women. Non-professional women conform to sex-rolled stereotypes by becoming more concerned with interpersonal relationships than organizational performance.”⁹ Wood and Conrad also define the professional non-woman as a woman who “rejects herself as woman in order to construct a viable professional identity.”¹⁰ The concepts of femininity become more complicated in light of an emerging postfeminist ideology.

POSTFEMINISM, THIRD WAVE FEMINISM AND ANTIFEMINISMS

Postfeminism has several meanings among feminist theorists. It might refer broadly to the chronological time after feminism. Thus, postfeminist texts might indicate a

3 Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland, “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1972), 201.

4 Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1989)

5 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13-14

6 Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 14

7 I have often heard this in conversation, but not seen any theoretical literature to support this claim

8 Julia T. Wood and Charles Conrad, “Paradox in the Experiences of Professional Women,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47 (Fall 1983): 308.

9 Wood and Conrad, “Paradox,” 313.

10 Ibid.



postfeminist time in history. However, it might also imply a specific set of characteristics indicative of a text or a person. By definition, postfeminist texts appear to advance the tenets of feminism while actually supporting oppressive social structures.¹¹ They also depoliticize heterosexual romance¹² and encourage individuality above collectivity.¹³ A postfeminist time period is not required to have a postfeminist text. Therefore, feminism could be needed and active, but specific texts could propose that they are not and blame feminism for social problems. Alternatively, a postfeminist time might also imply feminism's end, as Davi Johnson states, an era "literally, after feminism."¹⁴ Although under this latter definition I would not claim that contemporary U.S. American society serves as an example

of a postfeminist time, postfeminists and postfeminist texts would.

Postfeminism appropriates some of the characteristics of the third wave feminism.¹⁵ For example, Barbara Findlen cites the importance of individual experiences as one impetus for organizing her collaborative work, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*.¹⁶ Additionally, Helene A. Shugart, Catherine Egley Waggoner, and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein identify *Listen Up* as one of the defining works of third wave feminism.¹⁷ However, the notion of politicized individuality has been exploited to support capitalism. As Jean Kilbourne argues, "Girls who want to escape the stereotypes are viewed with glee by advertisers, who rush to offer them, as always, power through products."¹⁸ Karrin Vasby Anderson and Jessie Stewart explain this shift. A scholarly conception of third wave feminism—one that incorporates the voices of women of color, theoretical concepts, politics, and the feminist efforts that came before—is often confused with a popular version of third wave feminism. This second kind is conflated with postfeminism because they share characteristics such as media and consumer culture focus and a concentration on individuality instead of collectivity.¹⁹ This definitional confusion opens a space for people, who claim to be feminists, to criticize feminism and support oppressive social structures—in other words, postfeminists.

Postfeminists purport that feminism has accomplished its goals and those still supporting it are making the world a worse place for everyone. Rhonda Hammer suggests that postfeminists are not simply antifeminists.²⁰ Postfeminists identify themselves as feminists and then articulate exactly why feminism has passed its prime. Critics such as Katie Roiphe, Naomi Wolf, Christina Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia, and others are successful not because they attack feminism, but because they claim to be feminists and attack feminism. They write best sellers and appear on talk shows to enumerate the faults of the movement and the

11 Davi Johnson, "Selling Sarafem: Priestly and Bardic Discourses in the Construction of Premenstrual Syndrome," *Women's Studies in Communication* 27, no. 3 (2004), 330.

12 Michele L. Hammers, "Cautionary Tales of Liberation and Female Professionalism: The Case Against Ally McBeal," *Western Journal of Communication* 69, no. 2 (2005): 169.

13 Mary Douglas Vavrus, *Postfeminist News: Political Women in Media Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 81.

14 Johnson, "Selling Sarafem," 331.

15 I consciously use the word "appropriate" here because I do not think that proponents of postfeminism engage in activities or critiques that forward feminist thinking.

16 Barbara Findlen, ed., *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2001), xv.

17 Helene A. Shugart, Catherine Egley Waggoner, and D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein, "Mediating Third-Wave Feminism: Appropriation as Postmodern Media Practice," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18 (2001): 195.

18 Jean Kilbourne, "The More you Subtract, the More you Add': Cutting Girls Down to Size," in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World* ed. Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2004), 265.

19 Karrin Vasby Anderson and Jessie Stewart, "Politics and the Single Woman: The 'Sex and the City Voter' in Campaign 2004," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8 (2005), 598.

20 Rhonda Hammer, *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 15.



problems it has caused.²¹ As Johnson clarifies, “postfeminism is successful precisely because its appeals are not universally antithetical to feminist politics.”²²

Incorporating feminist ideals into popular texts appeals to women seeking empowerment and produces a dangerously persuasive and highly lucrative discourse. The temptation to adopt a postfeminist ideology has insidious implications. As Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter articulate, “the proclamation of ‘post-feminism’ has occurred at precisely the same moment as acclaimed feminist studies demonstrate that not only have women’s real advancements been limited, but also that there has been a backlash against feminism of international significance.”²³ This sentiment is echoed by Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash*.²⁴ In erasing the more radical parts of feminism and retaining the presumption of equality for women, television and film industries have benefited greatly from postfeminism.²⁵ To ignore the social implications of postfeminist logic would be irresponsible. Although these films seem innocuous, their logic perpetuates limited choices for women. Moreover, their financial success demonstrates the degree to which this logic remains popular (see below).

Sweet Home Alabama, The Wedding Planner, How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days, Down With Love, Never Been Kissed, and Miss

Congeniality position the lead female characters in thriving careers, but ultimately resituate the women primarily as love interests. In doing so, these texts qualify as postfeminist. In all six films, the women have secured great jobs as writers (in three of the films), a wedding planner, a fashion designer, and an FBI agent. However, when confronted with the decision to remain single and professionally successful or become romantically monogamous and have questionable career success, in every case the women choose the boyfriend. The question remains: is a heterosexual, monogamous relationship oppressive? Heterosexual monogamous relationships do not necessarily oppress women. However, I contend that when coupled with the career/financial/self sacrifice each woman makes, they become oppressive. An expectation is formed; a hegemonic structure reified.

These films strive to separate what second wave feminists attempted to conflate: the personal and the political.²⁶ While shrugging at the importance of having fulfillment outside a relationship, these films elevate romance to an unquestionable sphere by ignoring the fate of the career by the end of the film and concentrating solely on the love relationship. They purport that (a) of course, a woman wants (needs) a relationship, and (b) audience members should not challenge this with arguments of social implications. By focusing on single women—that is, women without children or a husband—these films update Jamieson’s double binds so that they apply to women earlier in their lives.

UPDATING CLASSIC DOUBLE BINDS

Sweet Home Alabama, The Wedding Planner, How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days, Down With Love, Never Been Kissed, and Miss Congeniality earned over one hundred million dollars in their opening weekends alone, confirming that not only are these films highly visible, they are also well supported.²⁷ My analysis of these films suggests two major double binds that reinforce hegemony: (1) the need to choose between a career and a man; and (2) the need to transform to be complete.²⁸

21 bell hooks, “All Quiet on the Feminist Front,” *ArtForum International*, Dec. 1996, 39; and Susan Douglas discusses how the media consistently frames conversations about feminism as catfights. Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 221.

22 Johnson, “Selling Sarafem,” 332.

23 Vicki Coppock, Deena Haydon, and Ingrid Richter, *The Illusions of ‘Post-Feminism:’ New Women, Old Myths* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), 3.

24 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

25 Bonnie Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 88.

26 Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, “The Rhetoric of Women’s Liberation: An Oxymoron,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 74-86.



In these films, transformation is used as a rhetorical device to show audience members how to negotiate problematic career/love situations in a world shaped by feminism.

The first theme involves the basic plot of each film. In all the films, a woman has a job. One is already successful, four want to advance and need to prove themselves, and one must redeem herself. Each protagonist meets (or already knows) a great guy, and must choose between this man and her blossoming career. In all six, “true love” wins and the audience is left to wonder what will become of that career for which the lead has worked so hard. This theme plays out in two ways: (1) the lead character keeps the man and likely loses job/promotion, or (2) the character keeps the man and probably keeps the job/earns respect.²⁹

27 “Business Data for *The Wedding Planner* (2001),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; “Business Data for *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; “Business Data for *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; “Business Data for *Down With Love* (2003),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; “Business Data for *Never Been Kissed* (1999),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com; “Business Data for *Miss Congeniality* (2000),” Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com.

28 This project began when I felt I had seen the same movie six different times over the course of just a few years. I selected *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* based on my personal experience with the films. Noticing a trend of career/relationship-oriented films developing, I made a list of movies that seemed to address the same contemporary dilemma. Then, I rented seven films and excluded *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* because, although it illustrated the theme of transformation, it does not contain the job/man quandary as explicitly as the others. (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* does imply that Toula, the protagonist, abandons her job after getting married, but the problem is more with her family and less with her job.) The six films I decided to study also seem to form a chronological cluster in that they were released between 1999 and 2003, with one per year and two in 2003. Thus, they are linked temporally and thematically.

29 I write “likely” and “probably” because in all six films the audience never hears about the job once the love match has been sealed. However, each film implies the fate of the job in some regard that I discuss in greater detail in the analysis section.

The exposition and conclusion of each film are the two most revealing parts of the films. In the exposition, the audience learns about the lead character and her problem(s). At this point, the filmmakers invite the audience to identify with the protagonists by offering personal information to which other characters do not have access. For example, in *Sweet Home Alabama*, the audience sees a memory of Melanie’s childhood through a dream. In the conclusions of *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, the protagonist successfully captures the man, and the audience is led to believe that she loses her job or promotion. The second group of films, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality*, features the protagonist winning her love’s affection, and probably keeping her job, but the audience does not know for sure.

Whether the protagonist keeps her career or not, the filmmakers undermine this element by avoiding closure. As all the films illustrate, even if the woman focuses on her career at the beginning, by the end, the romantic, heterosexual relationship has become the salient concern. For example, at the end of *The Wedding Planner*, Mary has not only broken the cardinal rule of wedding planning—she has fallen in love with the groom—but she has also acted on it. In doing so, the audience is led to believe that she has lost her promotion. In another example, although Josie, in *Never Been Kissed*, makes career advancements for her investigative reporting, she is unhappy. The climax of the film is based not on a precarious career situation, but rather on a precarious romantic situation—will Josie get her first kiss? Thus, the audience is expected to focus on the “true love” aspects of the film, emphasizing the importance of “love” (or heterosexual relationships) to the characters and audience members.³⁰ The second theme examines how this “love” is made possible in the films.

In each of the films, the audience is allowed to view some change in the character. This second theme of transformation occurs in two ways in the films, defining two types of double



binds that mirror the two outlined by Jamieson, which I previously discussed. Set one, comprised of *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, modernizes the womb/brain double bind by focusing on the transformation of the career-oriented woman into the “non-professional woman.” Set two consists of *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* and updates the femininity/competence bind by portraying the transformation a “professional non-woman” must undergo to be a “real” woman. Because the producers of these films show this to the audience these transformations function rhetorically to illustrate for the viewer what “good” actions are in this society.

TRANSFORM THE WOMAN AND THE CAREER TO KEEP THE MAN

Instead of seeing the womb/brain double bind in terms of a mother attempting to go back to work, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* illustrate the difficulties associated with maintaining a heterosexual relationship after establishing a career. The womb/brain bind typically has focused on a woman already in a heterosexual relationship or with children and how these aspects contribute to an inability to effectively perform a job.³¹ However, the films I examined assume that women value

seeking a profession first, an acknowledgement of feminism. With this presumption, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* portray beautiful, career-minded women in a career/relationship bind and illustrate the transformation necessary to complete their lives

SWEET HOME ALABAMA

Sweet Home Alabama provides two transformations through which Melanie struggles before finding her love. First, she had to leave her rural roots behind to pursue a career in New York. She does this so well that when she returns to Alabama, she must readapt to the environment. The audience knows the second transformation, back into a rural Southerner, is complete when Melanie punches her would-be mother-in-law in the face for insulting Melanie’s mother. Her father confirms this by shouting, “The South has risen!”³² Returning to her supposed Southern ways, Melanie may now be with the man she truly loves, Jake. This implies that the identity Melanie adopted to establish her career felt false even to her.

The dichotomy between urban and rural life perpetuated through Melanie’s identity is significant here because it connects feminism with urban, career success and “acting” like something she is not. The geographical location’s connection to identity reinforces the double bind of career/love. The film assumes that people have essential identities and to be professionally successful, women must deny that essence. On the contrary, to be socially successful, women must embrace their roots and are refused the opportunity to change. The alternative perspective in the film is Jake, who successfully combines a Southern lifestyle, a creative and professional career, and true love.

THE WEDDING PLANNER

Although Mary’s career has been a success, *The Wedding Planner* illuminates her need to deviate from her current habits, such as eating dinner alone, to achieve a complete life.

30 I place “love” in quotation marks because in half the films (*The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, and *Never Been Kissed*), the protagonist has known the love interest for a short amount of time, too little time (in this author’s opinion) to abandon career aspirations. In two, the relationship is subject to skepticism. In *Sweet Home Alabama*, Melanie hates Jake and has for seven years. In *Down With Love*, Barbara knew Catcher as his secretary, and Catcher’s secretaries only last for a week or two at the most before fainting in his presence. Finally, in *Miss Congeniality*, the relationship is based upon friendship, the only reasonable premise.

31 See for example: *Mr. Mom*, directed by Stan Dragoti (1983; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Sherwood Productions, 1983); and *The Contender*, directed by Rod Lurie (2000; Battleplan Productions, Cinecontender, Cinerenta Medienbeteiligungs KG, SE8 Group, 2000).

32 *Sweet Home Alabama*, 2002.



The filmmakers open with Mary, as a child, playing wedding with dolls. This portrays wedding planning as the essence of her personality and implicitly assumes that identities are stable. However, years later, when she attains success in this field, something happens that forces her to reconsider her path; she meets Steve. Her clients notice that she has lost focus and will not (cannot) stop smiling. In order to complete her life, Mary must transform subtly by veering off her narrow, professional path to find a space for Steve.

HOW TO LOSE A GUY IN 10 DAYS

While trying to embody the “faulted woman” of the dating scene to deter a man, Andie captures Ben’s heart and loses her own. *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* opens with Andie attempting to explain to her friend, Michelle, why telling a man that she loves him after only a week might compel him to flee the relationship. Andie claims that Michelle has made one of the classic mistakes in dating and aims to write an article outlining behaviors women should avoid. To write this, she must transform herself into such a mistake-making woman. Although the film designs this scheme as a means for Andie to excel at work, she ultimately gains a romantic relationship. After Andie drops her act, she and Ben break up, and Andie witnesses Michelle’s reunion with the man with whom she made the classic mistakes. This turn of events encourages Andie and the audience to reconsider these so-called behavioral problems. When Andie makes the final transformation by quitting her job, missing her interview for a new job, and taking Ben back, the movie ends.

Although none of these movies claim that a woman may not have a career and heterosexual relationship simultaneously, they strongly imply that a woman’s life is not complete without a man. By situating the protagonists as professional women from the beginning of the films, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* invoke the ideals of feminism to characterize these women. Then, just as postfeminism manages to blame feminism for many of the problems women face today, these films position Melanie’s, Mary’s, and Andie’s careers as antithetical to their dating successes. In this way, the transformations that each must undergo function rhetorically to perpetuate an updated double bind, one that focuses on women developing relationships and careers. The transformations illustrate the choices that women must make now that feminism has made getting workplace equality easier. In other words, these films portray women struggling in a postfeminist world, but they also have postfeminist characteristics.

TRANSFORM THE WOMAN TO KEEP THE CAREER AND THE MAN

Down With Love, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* incorporate a postfeminist logic into the femininity/competence double bind. Mediated representations of the femininity/competence double bind generally portray women as either beautiful and stupid or ugly and intelligent.³³ The three films in this category appear to promote empowerment because, in the end, the protagonists presumably keep their jobs and snare the men. However, to accomplish both of these tasks, the woman must undergo some transformation to conform to hegemonic femininity.

DOWN WITH LOVE

Unbeknownst to the audience, Barbara Novak begins as Nancy Brown. After realizing that Nancy Brown—plain, socially unskilled, administrative assistant Nancy—will never have the opportunity to date Catcher Block,

33 See for example: *Mean Girls*, directed by Mark Waters (2004; Paramount Pictures, M.G. Films, Broadway Video, 2004); *She’s All That*, directed by Robert Iscove (1999; All That Productions, Film Colony, Miramax Films, Tapestry Films, 1999); *Not Another Teen Movie*, directed by Joel Gallen (2001; Columbia Pictures Corporation, Neal H. Moritz Productions, Original Film, 2001); *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, directed by Milos Forman (1975; Fantasy Films, N.V. Zvaluw, 1975).



she transforms into Barbara Novak—attractive, charming, best-selling author Barbara. Before ever meeting Barbara, Catcher assumes that she is ugly. After all, why would she write a book denouncing love if she were attractive? However Nancy has become Barbara for the sole purpose of appealing to Catcher. She knows that Catcher dates multiple beautiful women, so Barbara must stand out. She essentially builds a career and transforms her appearance so that she can capture Catcher. She could have established her profession as a writer without altering her physical body, but to be completely successful by contemporary U.S. standards, she must have a man as well.³⁴ After Catcher agrees to marry her, she discovers that she does actually want to keep her career and leaves Catcher. Barbara feels she must stick to the rules she has set out in her book; she should forget love and focus on her career, starting a new magazine. Catcher evolves to accept that Barbara can be married and have a career, and so they reunite.³⁵ Transformation, then, functions rhetorically in this film to show that women can “have it all” as long as they change themselves first.

NEVER BEEN KISSED

Although Josie proves her ability as a journalist at the Chicago Sun Times, Gus, her boss, refuses to allow her an opportunity to report. When she finally receives an opportunity, it entails transforming from her sale-rack outfits and practical appearance to trendy attire and a polished, primed look. Josie does not meet the love interest until after she has transformed, thus allowing him to see her post-transformation. In this film, both the success of her career and her relationship depend upon her successful transformation to a more feminine woman. More feminine in this case means abandoning a practical approach to dressing—buying inexpensive and comfortable clothes—in favor of privileging fashion over function. In this way, the film taps into dominant cultural discourses that position “buying into” the beauty industry as beneficial for one’s self, as Carole Spitzack has documented.³⁶

MISS CONGENIALITY

Miss Congeniality provides the most stereotypical representation of a woman in a position of intelligence and power. Many of the characters in this film (Victor Melling—her coach, Eric Matthews—her friend, Kathy Morningside—director of the Miss United States pageant, and Stan Fields—host of the pageant) freely comment on Gracie’s masculine walk, physical look, eating style, manner of persuasion, fighting ability, and type of dress. Because she ignored her boss’s direct orders on a sting mission, Gracie has been confined to deskwork. Eric, the lead crew member of the next mission, convinces their boss to let Gracie go undercover in the pageant. Thus, as in *Never Been Kissed*, Gracie’s career success depends upon her ability to feminize herself in every aspect. The audience has the opportunity to see exactly what this process involves: manicurist, pedicurist, hairstylist, make-up artist, tanning bed, waxing (body hair removal), limited diet, new clothes, new walk, and better manners. The “bonus” for this new Gracie is the

34 It might also be possible to question the acceptance of a book denouncing love if it were written by a plain woman. Would the potential readers have said, “Go figure?” Thus, perhaps the physical transformation is necessary to ensure professional success in this case as well. I lack the information to make such a claim, but it would be fair to say that if the evidence were there to support this theory, it would only strengthen the postfeminist slant on the films. Postfeminism stresses individual action and consumerism as political action. Companies consistently use the framework of empowerment to sell their products, and this film would be utilizing the framework of empowerment to justify feminizing one’s look to gain access to a professional field.

35 The changes Barbara goes through professionally are mirrored by her appearance. When she is Nancy Brown, smitten secretary, her hair is brown. When she transforms to “sex a-la-carte,” best-selling author Barbara Novak, she dyes her hair blonde. When she and Catcher accept both her career and their relationship, she reveals red hair from under a hat.

36 Carole Spitzack, *Confessing Excess: Women and the Politics of Body Reduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).



affection of Eric, which solves another problem outlined by Victor. He asserts Gracie is incomplete because she does not value relationships, thus Gracie's transformation redeems her professionally, and completes her socially.

By directly reasserting the importance of appearance, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* suggest that without a heterosexual relationship, these career-minded women are incomplete. These films place the protagonists in positions of professional power, but illuminate the romantic problems that occur in such situations. In *Down With Love*, the physical transformation indicates Barbara's success. In *Never Been Kissed* and *Miss Congeniality*, Josie and Gracie must physically transform not only to excel at their jobs, but also to complete their lives through a romantic relationship. Professional and social successes are predicated on physical and mental transformations. Rhetorically, this is important because if the women were only changing their physical appearances, it would be easier to write the films off as outdated or antithetical to feminism. However, because the women's physical transformations fuel mental transformations, such as gaining confidence and grace, the changes can be couched in a larger discourse about becoming a better person rather than one associated with pursuing a man.

All six films incorporate postfeminist ideology, highlighting a transformation in the main character and modernizing two double binds. The films begin with the women having successful professions, but imply (or state explicitly) that they are incomplete. To acknowledge the career path of these women modernizes the double bind. They complete the postfeminist logic, however, by leaving the heterosexual romantic relationships unquestioned. These films encourage the audience to forget that in half the films, the women had to transform their career expectation to propel the romantic relationship and, in the other half of the films, the women had to undergo a personal transformation to be attractive to men and keep their careers. By the ends of the films, the focus shifts from career to love and the audience is equally encouraged to forget about the career.

The fact that these films are romantic comedies is also significant because they are perceived as innocuous. I think it is common for audiences to forget that humor also functions rhetorically. Rhetorical criticism has not ignored the persuasiveness of comedy.³⁷ Ann Johnson explains that one potential reason why a television show like *The Man Show* escapes criticism of its blatant misogyny is because of its humor. She states, "Humor allows audiences to enjoy the pleasure of the diatribe and perhaps also see some truth in the observation on which the diatribe is built."³⁸ Although the films in question in this essay do not adopt a diatribe format, they do use humor to excuse any potential sexism present and encourage the audience to identify with the parts of the films that ring true for them. Thus, even though audience members know they are not "real," they still have a powerful message because they respond to contemporary social situations, such as work/life balance, and do so with a subtle, humorous hand.

POSTFEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY DOUBLE BINDS IN FILM

Sweet Home Alabama, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and

37 See, for example: Stephen Gencarella Olbrys, "Seinfeld's Democratic Vistas," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 5 (2005): 390-408; Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow, "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: Will and Grace and the Situation Comedy Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 1 (2002): 87-105; Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson, "The Rhetorical Limits of Satire: An Analysis of James Finn Garner's Politically Correct Bedtime Stories," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89, no. 2 (2003): 132-153; Kara Shultz and Darla Germeroth, "Should We Laugh or Should We Cry? John Callahan's Humor as a Tool to Change Societal Attitudes Toward Disability," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 9 (1998): 229-244; Chris Smith and Ben Voth, "The Role of Humor in Political Argument: How 'Strategy' and 'Lock-boxes' Changed a Political Campaign," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 39 (2002).

38 Ann Johnson, "The Subtleties of Blatant Sexism," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 2 (2007): 179.



Miss Congeniality attract viewers because they incorporate the postfeminist assumption of workplace equality and offer audience members the opportunity to identify with the characters. Although character identification does not alter our filmic expectations, postfeminist logic supplies a feeling of newness. It seems to speak to the concerns of modern women, while allowing them to ignore the political implications of their romantic choices. The six films I investigated update two of the classic double binds outlined by Jamieson to ensure their relevance in a changing society.

The womb/brain and femininity/competence double binds now invoke postfeminist ideology to suggest a feeling of empowerment for audience members, while reifying the binds. No longer does the professional woman of these films function as the token woman, as suggested by Wood and Conrad, but rather she is a member of a professional community with many other women. The beginnings of *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* purport that the protagonists of these films need not “deny or overcome their identities as women” to

achieve success, an ideal of feminism.³⁹ However, through the rhetorical device of transformation, the films restate traditional arguments about women and the workplace. As the first group of films indicates, even women who started as professionals might develop into “non-professional women.” The second group presents “professional non-women” as malleable enough not to be a threat to society.

The characters in these films complete the double bind by acquiescing to their situation, which is how the filmmakers would have them be. Wood and Conrad assert that a double bind is complete when the person in a double bind accepts the outlined social terms.⁴⁰ If the women rejected the framework of transformation, there would be no films or the films would not fit the romantic comedy genre. This way, the “delayed consummation” of the relationships is built upon feminist ideals about workplace equality, even if they do not play out in that way.

Audiences would expect no other response from these characters. In other words, by presenting conventional double binds in comical situations and through a postfeminist lens, the films need not even articulate that the women’s careers do not matter; they simply allow the audience to fill that part in. These films do not produce a concern for the protagonist’s career. The films frame the primary problem as the love interest. Each film jeopardizes the relationship near the end so that the expectation for a happy ending revolves around heterosexual love instead of a stable career.⁴¹

Although Jamieson claims that our society has overcome the double binds in her book, she also correctly identifies the most recent double bind I found. Jamieson argues:

Women’s progress has been thwarted by double binds that, when surmounted, have in fact been replaced by other double binds . . . But as women have conquered the no-win situations confronting them, they have marshaled resources and refined aptitudes that have made them more and more capable of facing the next challenge, the next opportunity.⁴²

39 Wood and Conrad, “Paradox,” 311.

40 Julia T. Wood and Charles Conrad, “Paradox in the Experiences of Professional Women,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 47 (Fall 1983), 306. This is a simplified version of what Gregory Bateson outlines. Gregory Bateson, Don D. Jackson, Jay Haley, and John H. Weakland, “Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia,” *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1972), 206-208.

41 In *Sweet Home Alabama*, Melanie and Jake part ways and Melanie almost marries Andrew. In *The Wedding Planner*, Mary explains to Steve that she cannot be with him and almost marries Massimo and Steve almost marries Francine. In *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, Andie and Ben publicly break up and Andie almost gets to the airport for her interview in Washington, D.C. In *Down With Love*, Barbara almost convinces herself that she is a “Down With Love Girl” and that means she cannot love Catcher. In *Never Been Kissed*, Josie and Sam argue after Sam discovers that Josie was undercover and Sam almost moves to New York. In *Miss Congeniality*, Eric almost leaves the pageant with the rest of the team, abandoning Gracie to catch the criminal alone.

42 Jamieson, *Beyond the Double Bind*, 7.



Jamieson claims that our society has evolved from the womb/brain and femininity/competence double binds that insist two areas are mutually exclusive. She purports the new double bind is that “They [women] can have both at the same time, but only at the cost of cheating one or the other.”⁴³ In the case of the films I examined, I would extend this claim to acknowledge that this bind now begins earlier—concentrating on single women—and that the films explicitly encourage women to complete their lives by becoming less professional or more feminine and engaging in a heterosexual romance.

After witnessing endless romantic comedies, audience members no longer need filmmakers to write the endings. Instead, the films (and the arguments they make about an appropriate lifestyle) function enthymematically, relying on the audience to supply a missing piece of the argument. In this way, the films do not make overt claims; they subtly invite a dominant reading that utilizes the internalized double bind that previous films have implemented.

Interrogating postfeminist texts helps researchers better understand the attractiveness of such mediated texts, thus acknowledging the complexity of seemingly innocuous films. Developing theories to challenge such discourses might be a critical move for contemporary feminist movements to take. More research in this area could examine a number of different angles. First, each of these films could provide insights into not only the practice of heterosexual relationships, but also the function of classism and racism in double binds. Next, I believe these films could also yield an interesting examination of contemporary representations of “true love” and relationship expectations. Third, a comparative analysis of the treatment of the male characters’ careers might produce insights into a double bind that men face in postfeminism. Finally, an individual analysis of each film could speak to issues of political and geographical stereotypes, the function of anachronism in a

postfeminist text, themes of empowerment, and, of course, gender stereotyping and social reinforcement.

Although I acknowledge that each of these films could have been analyzed individually through a number of lenses, I was particularly interested in the themes of professional life, love relationships, and transformation that emerged from this collection of texts. By taking this broad approach, I contend that *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Wedding Planner*, *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*, *Down With Love*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Miss Congeniality* situate women in new double binds. These updated versions of the womb/brain and femininity/competence double binds do not question women’s ability to have a successful career and to be a woman, but they rather illustrate the problem with having a successful career and maintaining a monogamous heterosexual relationship. The films do not collectively claim that gaining success in both relationships and work is impossible, but they do subtly contend that one is more important than the other. By situating the love relationship problem as more important than the career problem, these films encourage viewers to consider self-transformation necessary to success and happiness.

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43 Ibid, 54.