**“’I Hate to be the Feminist Here’. . .Reading the Post-Epitaph Chick Flick”**

Abstract: Numerous accounts in recent years have announced (often zealously) the death of the chick flick, a genre whose output has conspicuously slowed since a peak in the 1990s. We analyse here two recent hits from the “post-epitaph” phase in order to understand the kinds of generic updates such films are attempting and how they place women in regard to changing gender norms and the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. We find that in *Trainwreck* (2015) and *The Intern* (2015) female protagonists’ affiliation with patriarchal power structures is re-confirmed and both films ultimately retain a commitment to a rigid order unwilling to countenance female sexual agency or envision more flexible economic arrangements.

Keywords: romantic comedy, postfeminism, chick-flicks, neoliberalism

To many, it feels as if the “chick flick” (in the sense that the term has come to be conventionally understood) has been dormant or dead in recent years, a casualty (and maybe or maybe not a mourned one) of some combination of generic exhaustion, the pornification of culture, the primacy of the “bromance,” and social media’s modifications of dating norms and the hook-up culture. The romantic comedy, as Suzanne Leonard notes, “has not kept pace with the sort of data-driven formulas that now structure romantic conceptualization, technological parameters that circumscribe the experience that many daters actually have (Leonard forthcoming).” In addition, the broad turn toward economic precaritization in recent years deprives the “chick flick” of one of its key functions: the assembling of an adult couple who can flourish in a credible, functional institutional order.[[1]](#footnote-1) Certainly, news outlets and Internet fora regularly declare this a moribund genre,[[2]](#footnote-2) and it’s evident that the once canonical and confident “boy meets girl” set up has been conspicuously absent from the movie screen in recent years. Among the many elisions that accompany the enthusiastic reporting of the chick flick’s demise is the fact that the genre has gone through a number of prior periods of decline, perhaps most recently between the late 1970s and the late 1980s (McDonald 2015, 15-16).[[3]](#footnote-3)

In this article, we look at how activity has nevertheless continued in a genre for which epitaphs are regularly written, focusing on the 2015 examples of *Trainwreck* and *The Intern*. *Trainwreck*, with its propulsive impact on star Amy Schumer’s career, can be fruitfully linked to Nancy Meyers’ *The Intern*, released just a few months later. Meyers’ role as one of Hollywood’s few female auteurs and long track record in scripting, directing and producing lifestyle-oriented “chick flicks” secured a considerable amount of publicity for the film which uses Robert DeNiro in much the same manner Meyers once employed Mel Gibson in *What Women Want* (2000) as an aging male who must cope with new female-oriented business agendas.[[4]](#footnote-4) Scripted by Schumer, whose feminism-inflected comedy television series *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-) engendered much anticipation for her feature film debut, *Trainwreck* is directed by Judd Apatow, known for his male-centric romantic comedies such as *The 40-Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Knocked Up* (2007).[[5]](#footnote-5) The importance of these films for us has to do with the manner in which they join together efforts at narrative innovation with an adherence to the standard menu of elements that characterizes the postfeminist chick flick while also operating as self-reflexive diagnostics of the state of romantic comedy. For telling reasons which we will explore here *The Intern* has been largely critically slated while *Trainwreck* was lauded as “saving” the genre despite an equivalent level of commercial success achieved by the films.[[6]](#footnote-6)

What is most important however about these two films, one with an association to an older order of female representation (through Meyers) and the other exhibiting a new chick flick form linked to raunch comedy and male focalization (through Apatow) is their shared placement in relation to a climate of new permissiveness in regard to women’s access to conventionally male economic roles and sexual and emotional misconduct. In an era noted for a resurgence of grassroots feminist activism given impetus by social media and the simultaneous emergence of a plutocratic feminism framed most clearly by Facebook billionaire Sheryl Sandberg’s best-selling book *Lean In* (Aschoff 2015), these films are committed to centering a femininity seemingly unencumbered by previous social role restrictions.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, both films notably conclude that playing the “male” role of sexual adventurer or CEO generates new conundrums and unsatisfying emotional lives. In this way, they retain a commitment to a rigid order ultimately unwilling to countenance female sexual agency or envision more flexible forms of capitalism. In a paradox that we argue is central to the workings of current female-centered popular culture, *Trainwreck* and *The Intern* are nevertheless largely understood as texts about the enlargement of women’s cultural and economic opportunity.

**Male authorship, Schumer’s stardom, and supposed gender inversions**

As we suggest above, a striking trend in this stage of chick flick development has been the centralization of male authorship in the genre’s few recent hits (focusing on Apatow and screenwriter Paul Feig) and the relative de-emphasis on female stardom. Furthering the idea that men are to be credited with a feminist, quasi-feminist or vaguely “modern” take on the chick flick is the fact that films since *Wedding Crashers* (2005) and *Knocked* Up have consistently focused on homosociality, sexual and scatalogical “dude humor,” the pleasures and perils of kidulthood and male coming-of-age plots.[[8]](#footnote-8) Less frequently recognized is the fact that the trend toward men making uneven journeys to emotional maturity and adult responsibility is matched with a depiction of “troubled women” in the genre who represent intensified versions of earlier postfeminist archetypes of regretful or melancholic women (*The Proposal* [2009], *Obvious Child* [2014]).

Arguably, a follow-on development from the paradigm of the slacker male and striver female, influentially identified by David Denby in 2007, the troubled woman also appears in the recent string of successful female friendship films such as *Bridesmaids* (2011), *The Heat* (2013) and *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015) all of which, critics have suggested, mark a turning point in the movement of the chick flick away from de rigeur romance.[[9]](#footnote-9) Such films seem to offer further evidence of Jack Halberstam’s claim that even Hollywood has recognized “that marriage has exhausted its own fragile plot (2012, 114).” There is nothing new about the female friendship film of course (Hollinger 1998), but all three films above (one of which was directed by a woman) draw on the “dude humor” associated with Apatow’s sturdy auteur brand and each has received positive reviews from prominent male critics such as A.O. Scott of the *New York Times* and Peter Travers at *Rolling Stone*. The same can be said of the financially and (largely) critically successful *Trainwreck*, which returns the romantic plot to the foreground of the chick flick. Unlike the *Sex and the City* films and putative erotic drama franchise *Fifty Shades of Grey/Fifty Shades Darker* (2015, 2017), these films have found the holy grail of bringing in a profit from female viewers and achieving critical success amongst a range of critics, male ones in particular. Many of the reviews for these successful chick flicks celebrate their perceived inversion of the gendered clichés of the genre.

Innovating raunch formulas through female focalization, *Trainwreck* settles on a core comedic gambit in which Amy displays many of the supposed traits of the commitment-phobic male – her discomfort with intimacy after intercourse is matched by an unapologetic commitment to recreational sex. After a date with sweet-natured orthopedic surgeon Aaron (Bill Hader) in which the couple settle into a taxi and Aaron gives the driver instructions for two stops, Amy smoothly overrides him, saying that there will be just one. Amy is depicted as socially deficient, failing to meaningfully sustain the female friendships to which the chick flick genre now pays regular lip service. Her one friend is a work colleague who echoes back her priorities of excessive drinking, one-night stands, and a mistrust of nice guys. Amy’s sister Kim, with her easy married life, is used mostly as a foil for Amy’s hardened belief that true love doesn’t exist and isn’t worth pursuing. Concomitantly, various tropes previously associated with the rom com heroine are displaced onto the men in the film. The role of the supportive friend is transferred to the men’s side of the plot through LeBron James’ star turn as Aaron’s sidekick and emotional sounding board, a character who comically speechifies on the importance of destiny and overwhelming romantic attraction, at one point asking Amy what “her intentions” are in regard to Aaron. Instead of the lady-boss or mother (-in-law) of films like *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) or *Monster-in-Law* (2005) with whom the chick flick heroine must reconcile, Amy’s philandering father Gordon is the source of her generational angst. Indeed, the suggestion that Amy is problematically male-identified is communicated in numerous ways throughout the film such as when she tries out a medical testing treadmill that assesses gait style and takes the opportunity to impersonate Hitler and Keyser Soze from *The Usual Suspects* (1995).

Figure I: Playing out *Trainwreck*'s gendered transfer of the chick flick's supportive friend role, LeBron James asks Amy what her intentions are regarding Aaron

Even as she admits to not liking or knowing much about sports and despising cheerleaders (during a half-time performance, Amy shouts at the cheerleaders “You’re going to lose us the vote!”), Amy’s non-compliance (for the first two-thirds of the film) with the expectations of femininity by refusing to be anxious about her choices or to be emotionally needy marks her as something of a “badass” – an increasingly ubiquitous term that has been applied to high-profile women from Beyonce to Sheryl Sandberg perceived to embody an indefatigable toughness and disaffectedness in the face of gender-based obstacles and celebrated in best-selling self-help books like Jen Sincero’s *You Are a Badass*. (2013). “Badass” works as a gendered accolade in Schumer’s *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo* (2016) as well as in a similar and closely-timed book, *Inside Amy Schumer*’s Head Writer Jessi Klein’s *You’ll Grow Out of It* (2016).[[10]](#footnote-10) Female-centered films including *Bad Teacher* (2011) and *Bad Moms* (2016) also hint at the currency of “badness” as a form of female coolness associated with the ability to subvert or innovate gender roles. As Ann Friedman points out in *New York Magazine*, “as women carve out careers and comfortably adopt traits that were once considered ‘masculine,’ there’s strong social pressure on them to mimic the stoicism that men have been traditionally expected to maintain (2015).” Phenomena such as that of the female “badass” draw from a pre-existing association between postfeminism and the (at least rhetorical) commitment to rule-breaking. As Marjorie Jolles has argued “Postfeminism’s dual imperatives for successful femininity – self-invention and self-regulation – are fulfilled not simply by following rules but also by breaking them in strategic and knowing ways.. . .one of the ways that the postfeminist’s successful femininity is achieved and supported is through the subject’s paradoxical relation to cultural norms: relying upon them to perform middle-class respectability and self-regulation, but self-consciously flouting them to display uniqueness in postfeminism’s logic that reads defiance as self-invention.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Despite its apparent inversions, *Trainwreck* recycles severak characteristics of the postfeminist chick flick. Dianna (Tilda Swinton), Amy’s boss at the lad mag where she works, is an extreme version of the narcissistic and feeling-less boss lady who chides her for her lack of gusto at work a few days after Amy’s father’s funeral; in many ways Tilda Swinton’s character (a role she was much lauded for) is a caricature of Meryl Streep’s character in *The Devil Wears Prada*, which was reportedly a caricature of the real-life Anna Wintour.[[12]](#footnote-12) Though she isn’t looking for ‘the one’ (a destined romantic partner) like Bridget Jones, Amy’s drinking and sexual life of comic humiliation, her unruliness, is largely just an expansion of her precursor’s until she does meet her ideal partner.[[13]](#footnote-13) Amy doesn’t downshift her career for love like Melanie (Reese Witherspoon) does in *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), but it takes her losing her job to realize how much love matters to her. Here, as in nearly all twenty-first century chick flicks, success in the protagonist’s job is intertwined with the success of her romantic partnership. The ready publication of Amy’s profile of Aaron in *Vanity Fair* after she has been fired for sleeping with a teenage intern is one of the ways *Trainwreck* avoids the contemporary recession, which films like *Bridesmaids* and *Julie and Julia* (2009) seem compelled to deal with. In fact, the film is largely in denial of the recession with its workplace setting of a magazine based in Manhattan, when films like *Gone Girl* (2014) have used the very fact of the publishing industry’s post-recession demise as key plot points in the narrativization of the reverse marriage plot.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Like *Bridesmaids*, *Trainwreck* performs a charade of concern for the protagonist’s emotional health and wellbeing that is meant to disguise its fixation on her marriagability. Amy’s “badass” status is based less on her successful adoption of masculine independence (which shows itself to be the evidence of her stunted maturity as is regularly the case with both the men and women of Apatow’s films) than on her repressed femininity. The emotional turning point in the film is Gordon’s death. At the graveside funeral, Amy lists all her father’s faults through a growing flood of tears, but then also claims that he loved both his daughters. The scene is clearly meant to be redemptive, and Amy’s disaffected stoicism up to this point must now be read as a repression of her natural “feminine” feelings. Her “masculine” disregard for others’ opinions cannot be maintained alongside her new appreciation for the emotions of familial and romantic affiliation. In fact, Amy must abandon her old opinions and take up the views of Aaron whose softer outlook on the world is exemplified in his earnest appreciation for the work of professional cheerleaders. When summing up Amy’s resistance to their relationship, Aaron says, “If you don’t try, then you can’t fail. That’s why you’re threatened by cheerleaders”. When Amy joins the cheerleaders for the film’s denouement and performs her transition from ‘badass’ to an iconic image of enthusiastic, supportive and vulnerable womanhood, all the supposed inversions and updating of the romantic comedy are overturned. Because the cheerleader’s conventional role is to exhort and glorify male achievement, Amy’s performance indicates her awareness that to be eligible for coupledom she must move closer to such a position. When we consider that, as Sarah Whitney writes, the “dominant grammars” of postfeminism “include a sanguine focus on empowerment, postracial assumptions and other obliterations of intersectional identity, and a fascination with women’s transgressive ‘badness,’” the stunted nature of *Trainwreck’s* ideological innovation becomes apparent (2016, 4).[[15]](#footnote-15) Ultimately it consists merely of situating the female badass in the generic territory of the chick flick, a place where she does not customarily reside.

Schumer’s renovation of the tired representation of the chick flick heroine, of the type described by Manohla Dargis as “sexless cuties…[whose]female pleasure is often expressed through shopping” to a woman who is “brash, funny and often vulgar” makes her “raunchiness” the perfect match for the “man who made *The 40-Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up.*” It is only through the regendering of the genre through Schumer’s youthful “badass” feminism and Apatow’s ongoing association with films about the death of adulthood that *Trainwreck* overcomes the normative dismissal of the chick flick as solipsistic feminine escapism, unworthy of critical attention, let alone praise. In contrast, Nancy Meyers, as Deborah Jermyn clearly shows, “holds the dubious distinction of being seen as the sovereign of a genre which, in the hierarchies of critical esteem and academic gravitas, is the cinematic bottom-feeder that lurks somewhere beneath the action movie;” *The Intern* was largely reviewed as another piece of evidence for this dismissive view (2017). Protagonist Jules (Anne Hathaway) could also be considered something of a badass for being a successful founder and CEO of her own start-up; in fact, at a child’s birthday party De Niro’s Ben, who has accompanied Jules’ daughter while her husband is ill, responds to the other moms who describe Jules as “tough” by saying, “Sure – Jules – she’s a total badass; I guess that’s how she became an internet sensation.” And yet, without the added authority of male authorship *The Intern* is, according to longtime *Rolling Stone* critic Travers, “pure fantasy piffle from writer-director Nancy Meyers” and it is only the ‘raging bull Robert De Niro…who makes it go down easy”. In sum, the gender inversions that supposedly have come to structure the post-epitaph chick flick prove flimsy, rhetorical and often subject to correction through conservative denouements.

**Female authorship, Hathaway’s stardom and supposed feminist inversions.**

In *The Intern* contact with a decent, old-school patriarch enriches everyone and repairs faltering institutions. Brooklynite Jules, the founder of a wildly successful online fashion business finds herself with senior citizen intern Ben, and it is through Ben’s eyes that we assess Jules’ delicate and failing work-life balance. Matt, Jules’ husband, maintains a precarious order at home, serving as primary parent to their young daughter, having given up his own promising career in the tech industry. In an observation that speaks to the film’s fundamental concern with this alternately gendered domestic arrangement, Matt comments of his position and Ben’s (who has become a valued PA and mentor to Jules) “It’s like we’re your sister wives.” This concern is then ideologically operationalized by the film in the revelation that Matt is having an affair. While the film closes with a tentative reconciliation between the couple and Jules’ resolution to continue heading her company rather than hire a CEO from the outside, there is a strong sense that male adultery is a logical outcome of such a “modern” marriage. A certain amount of optimism arises from the fact that Jules has doubled her male support system through employment of Ben, and yet *The Intern* is finally unable to plausibly put aside its anxieties about a changing gender and economic order. The film’s difficulty in conceptualizing a meaningfully female-centered capitalism is suggested in its unconvincing feminization of a stock male entrepreneurial environment. Additional implausible elements include the crude revelation that the very same premises used by Jules’ company once served as Ben’s workplace, and the fact that Jules whimsically rides a bicycle around the office.

 The film’s habit of recognizing but not correcting gender and age discrimination mark it as a far less progressive text than it means to be. Notably *The Intern* accumulates two female casualties: the hard-working Becky, Jules’ business school-trained PA who bursts into tears when she learns that Ben is being given professional opportunities she is not (in what we understand to be a characteristic act of decency and generosity Ben makes a point of telling Jules that Becky helped him with an important report; however, we never see this work nor see any change in Becky’s position). The film’s emphasis here is on Ben having opted to include Becky, which is part of its larger prioritization of traditional white male corporate decency; Ben is a better mentor to Becky than Jules. The film’s second casualty is Patty (Linda Lavin), a woman of a similar age to widower Ben who invites him to dinner and makes her interest in him apparent by kissing him on the mouth. When Ben begins dating the younger Fiona (Rene Russo), an on-site masseuse at Jules’ company, and brings her as his guest to a funeral, Patty is reduced to giving Ben the finger from across the aisle as the coffin passes between them.

On the whole, *The Intern* is concerned with recuperating and reinvigorating a gentlemanly, traditional, and confident masculinity. This is clearly manifested in the scene where a drunk Jules calls her employees “boys” and then laments, “How in one generation have men gone from guys like Jack Nicholson and Harrison Ford to…”, at which point a cut to her nerdy employees, dressed casually if not scruffily, finishes her sentence for her. There is no lack of irony in the visual joke of De Niro standing next to Jules as she says this. But it is through the example of Ben, whom Jules points to as a living incarnation of “old school” masculinity, that the three young male employees learn to wear collared shirts, carry handkerchiefs, speak appropriately to young women and generally “grow up” and away from their millennial casual attitudes toward social graces. They become Ben’s work friendship group, in which he plays a fatherly role to them and they, in turn, accept him as one of the boys. When they break into Jules’ mother’s home to delete an email she accidentally sent to her mother calling her a “raging bitch,” the group’s camaraderie highlights by contrast Jules’ isolation from female peers. This is made painfully explicit when, after Ben gives Jules another piece of fatherly advice, she calls him her best friend.

Despite *The Intern*’s ostensible concern with Jules’ impossible placement (so exhausted from work she doesn’t eat and runs from obligation to obligation) the film’s resolution places her right back in this position. Jules’ chaotic quotidian life and her seeming inability to manage it contrasts vividly with Ben’s well-balanced one. *The Intern*’s depiction of a well-provisioned white man who the film lauds for his focus on the emotional rather than economic rewards of work is a breathtaking revision of the “internship culture” which customarily disenfranchises economically vulnerable young people, not those with a pension. The film’s real concern centers on men’s access to meaningful work outside the home and it celebrates Ben’s humility in taking a position as intern, understanding that staying at home, cultivating hobbies and visiting his grandchildren are insufficient activities for a still vital man. In a parallel move, the film finds it highly unsurprising that Matt’s role as “house husband” proves insufficient for him leading to the unfaithfulness in his marriage. Through these men, Meyers’ film maps out its political terrain by reiterating feminist critiques of the narrowness of forced domesticity and the lack of recognition for caregiving through the inverted image of men who seem to suffer from the “problem that has no name.”

In its depiction of a female-centered version of the “work society,” *The Intern* ultimately resonates on numerous levels with Kathi Weeks’ examination of the employment status quo as a particular kind of (and too often unexamined) trap that necessitates feminist inquiry (2011). The most interesting light in which to consider *The Intern* may then be as a deconstruction of *Lean In* credos and an expose of the impossibility of meaningful systemic change through the heroic efforts of a single female executive. Such a view is reinforced through the static positioning of a bevy of frustrated women (Jules, Becky and Patty) whose predicaments are unresolved by the film. *The Intern* precisely illustrates Pedro Ponce’s observation that “the contemporary romantic heroine is unable to navigate and integrate (however provisionally) the many discourses that impinge on her identity (2014, 95).”

A significant intertext for *The Intern* is *The Devil Wears Prada* which likewise raises questions about the personal sacrifices attendant to women’s professional labor; situating the two films alongside one another through Hathaway’s star text illuminates her shift from put-upon employee to beset boss. The lessons Hathaway’s characters must learn in these two films also illuminate the chick flick’s move to a paternalist form of postfeminist generationalism (Cobb 2011). In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Hathaway’s portrayal of put-upon employee Andrea’s idealized postfeminist independence requires the repudiation of Streep’s “selfish feminist” Miranda Priestly, while at the same time leaving the narrative ending open to imagine Andrea as more perfectly succeeding at “having it all” in her future. *The Intern* initially appears as the fulfillment of that possible future for Andrea, now Jules, founder and boss of her own online fashion outlet and avatar of the *Lean In* ethos. Seemingly invested in overturning the retreatist plot of previous chick flicks (Negra 2008), in which resolving the heroine’s work-life balance dilemmas required a downsizing of her career, *The Intern* can only leave Jules where she began. The questions about having-it-all that it raises are “resolved” by her decision to keep running the company by herself after Ben’s encouragement and her husband’s promise to end the affair and “be better”. The film ends limply with Jules joining Ben’s Tai Chi class suggesting that the only real change effected by these developments will be Jules’ cultivation of resilience under post-recession neoliberal capitalism.

Of course, as we’ve outlined above Jules’ success is under threat from various factors ranging from the search for a CEO to her husband’s infidelity. Not unlike *Trainwreck*, *The Intern* confidently ignores the altered post-recession economic environment and its determining neoliberal features. As has been widely recognized, in “neoliberal capitalism that ideal [of the androcentric family wage] has been replaced by the newer, more modern norm of the two-earner family” (Fraser 2013, 220). As founder and CEO of a successful start-up, whose husband is a stay-at-home dad to their young daughter, Jules lives a life that seems to be a feminist inversion of capitalism’s ideal 1950s style family. However, her investors’ suggestion that she hire someone to be CEO to “help with her workload” undermines her postfeminist independence, leaving the chick flick heroine in need of further guidance from De Niro’s caring postfeminist patriarch, the only man around her who sees from the beginning that she should remain the boss of her own company. Ben even declares his own feminist credentials when he discovers that Jules knows about her husband’s affair, and he says to her “I hate to be the feminist here, but you should be able to have a huge career and be brilliant without having to accept your husband is having an affair as some kind of payback.” This is the only time the word “feminist” is used in the film, and the first time in a long time that the word hasn’t been used ironically to critique and dismiss a woman in a chick flick.[[16]](#footnote-16) That it is Ben who speaks a *Lean In* type of neoliberal feminist politics, rather than a woman (the only adult non-subordinate female in Jules’ life is her mother with whom she maintains a strained relationship) evokes backlash era representation of men as better mothers, better feminists, and better women in the manner noted by Tania Modleski (1991). In this way *The Intern* complies with other postfeminist cultural developments, including the rise of the male celebrity feminist whose declarations of feminist ideals are widely praised and left uncritiqued (in stark contrast to the female celebrity feminist who is typically sized up and judged for her [un]worthiness) (Cobb 2015).

Figure II: In *The Intern* the gentlemanly Ben lets Jules sleep after giving her a lesson in feminism.

In a move to periodize postfeminism and its neoliberal dictates in the context of the recession, Charlotte Brunsdon has suggested that recent media culture produces a distinction between a postfeminist sensibility and a postfeminist environment (2013). A postfeminist sensibility, in which “’the girl’ is its central figure, consumption is its core activity and irony a defining tone” permeates the inversions and ironies of *Trainwreck* (Brunsdon, 378). A screen text like *The Intern* creates a postfeminist environment through its pervading realism that keeps postfeminist irony at bay (though allowing for minor ironic moments) and foregrounds “the increased significance of the young female workforce/consumer to the economy, and the compatibility between ideas of women’s agency and neoliberal reorganisation of world economies” (Brunsdon, 389). In the cop shows Brunsdon considers, the female cop must deal with the sexism of her postfeminist environment, but she is never narratively repudiated for taking on a traditionally male job. The same could be said of Jules who keeps her position as boss. However, *The Intern* retains a subtler postfeminist sensibility through its trope of the conflicted postfeminist woman who must continually learn the lesson of how to be a better feminist. As Brunsdon argues, “in dramatic terms, putting young women into traditionally male character slots works as long as they stay ‘young’ (i.e., without responsibilities to families)”, a postfeminist “fact” often reinforced by an older woman character who has tried to have it all and failed (like Miranda Priestly). It is Jules’ fear of this postfeminist imperative that necessitates Ben’s ironic “I hate to be the feminist here…” opener in the lesson he imparts on gendered double standards (389). That this lesson is now taught by an idealized, supportive and wiser older man shows the adaptability of a postfeminist sensibility to construct a narrative that repudiates the older woman/selfish feminist without ever having her on screen.

In part as a means of coming to grips with some of the ideological uncertainties/impasses and industrial shifts that currently characterize female media representation, we have sought in this article to map some of the attributes of the “post-epitaph” chick flick. While chick flick output has conspicuously slowed since a peak in the 1990s, there are numerous signs that death notices for the genre are premature. The dogged sequalization of the *Bridget Jones’s Diary* franchise (2001, 2004, 2016) over a fifteen-year period, for instance, testifies to an ongoing commercial investment in the chick flick that belies such accounts. Similarly, post- epitaph constructions exclude/ignore the regular production of (often critically lauded) “indy romances”, such as *Obvious Child*, *Sleeping with Other People* (2015), *Maggie’s Plan* (2016) and *Tumbledown* (2016). In two of the genre’s highest profile iterations (and notably two films featuring adult women rather than teen girls) affiliation with patriarchal power structures is strikingly re-confirmed. *Trainwreck* and *The Intern* offer evidence of the continued utility of the term postfeminism to high-profile forms of female-centered popular culture (Gill 2016). More precisely, they illustrate how postfeminism’s scrambling of feminist precepts is increasingly functioning to symbolically redress/mask other forms of inequality and to economically motivate female subjects in the face of capitalism’s evident failures.

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1. The precarious position of the millennial generation and its extended young adulthood has been a marked discourse of the recessionary 2010s. In 2016 the Social and Demographic Trends Division, Pew Research Center has released research showing that for the first time, more 18-to-34-year-olds are living with their parents than in any other kind of living arrangement (Fry 2016). It is worth noting, in relation to the films we analyse here and the ways they do and do not engage with recessionary economics, that both Amy Schumer (34) and Anne Hathaway (33) are members of this demographic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See for instance: Ryan, 2011 and West, 2011. A detailed and thoughtful account is provided by Nicholson who notes “In 1997, there were two romantic comedies among the top 20 box office performers. In 1998 and 1999, there were three. Each cracked $100 million in sales. Even as recently as 2005, five romantic comedies topped $100 million at the box office. Contrast that with 2013: There’s not one romantic comedy in the top 50 films. Not even in the top 100.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. McDonald notes this period of dormancy between the comedies of Woody Allen and the success of Nora-Ephron penned, Rob Reiner-directed *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Meyers’ films are frequently cited for their aspirational ambiences and luxurious mise-en-scenes. On the lifestyling aspects of the films see: Merkin, 2009. She writes “This aspect of her vision – its grounding in a particular ‘gracious home’ aesthetic, where the quality of your character is attested to by the quality of your bed linens and where good taste stands not only for itself but for all that it excludes in the way of fast cars, moral turpitude, kinky eroticism and political scandal – continued to grow stronger as [Meyers’] career progressed.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Successful chick flicks are often treated as sui generis narrative and economic phenomena, entirely unrelated to other similar films. *Trainwreck* was certainly dealt with in this manner as was *The Intern*. The involvement of Judd Apatow in the former and Robert De Niro in the latter may be seen to have leveraged the “shock” of these films’ success. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. According to boxofficemojo.com, both films had a $35million budget. *Trainwreck*’s domestic gross was $110, 212, 700, its foreign gross was $30, 583, 093, making its worldwide total gross $140, 795, 793. *The Intern*’s domestic gross was $75, 764, 672; its foreign gross was $118, 800, 000, making its worldwide total gross $194, 564, 672. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The situation is well summarized by Aschoff who writes “These days, despite the reluctance of many women to identify as feminists, the woman question is once again in the air. A spate of new books and articles, by both young and old feminists are receiving attention from all corners. Splashy projects like Femen and SlutWalk are raising eyebrows and making headlines, and modern-day consciousness-raising projects like Laura Bates’s Everyday Sexism blog and the Who Needs Feminism Tumblr page have proven remarkably popular (27-28).” Public reclamations of feminism in the entertainment industries have included magazine re-brandings of feminism as hip and light-hearted and public campaigning by female stars like Emma Watson and Patricia Arquette. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On this subject see: Cross, 2010. Cross asks “How do we explain the media’s celebration of the puerile and its apparent embrace by many adult men?” (8). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See “A Fine Romance,” *The New Yorker* July 23, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For instance, Schumer writes “Even white girls in the suburbs want to be badasses,” (p. 102) while Klein, expressing her regard for comedian Joan Rivers, notes “I adored her because she was such a badass.” Pps. 209-210. *The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo* (New York: Gallery Books, 2016); *You’ll Grow Out of It* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Going Rogue: Postfeminism and the Privilege of Breaking Rules,” *Feminist Formations* 24 (3) (Winter, 2012) p. 47 and p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For more on the representation of bad female bosses see: Hamad, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Both films incorporate montage sequences signifying the female leads’ decision to get control over their unruliness that include strikingly similar scenes of Bridget and Amy dumping alcohol bottles into a trash bin. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The occasional review has figured *Gone Girl* as an ‘anti-chick-flick’. See, for example: O’Sullivan, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In contrast to our reading, several reviews of the film lauded it as subversively feminist. See both Ryzik and Nussbaum for examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Indicative of such usage is a scene in *The Proposal* (2009) when Andrew and Margaret arrive in Alaska. Resentful of the charade of engagement that he’s forced to perform, Andrew refuses to offer Margaret any assistance as they make their way across a gravel path, down a ladder and into a boat. When reproached for his discourtesy by his mother and grandmother he tells them Margaret insists on carrying her own bags because she’s “a feminist.” Here Margaret’s feminism is presented as an impediment not unlike her high-heeled shoes and impractical luggage. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)