Confessions of a Free Woman: telling feminist stories in postfeminist media culture

Anu Koivunen*
Department of Cinema Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract
Since its inception in late 1980s, the notion of postfeminism has been a highly contested term. While today circulating as an established description of “prime time feminism,” a highly visible media discourse of gender and sexuality that foregrounds individualism and consumerist tropes of choice and empowerment, its meanings for feminism as political agenda and cultural criticism nevertheless remain a point of disagreement. Is postfeminist discourse of gender and sexuality to be seen as a sign of second-wave feminism being partially incorporated into mainstream narratives? Or, rather, does it articulate a historical shift within feminist thought and cultural imaginary itself, or even a break-up with or a rejection of feminist historical legacy? In this article, these issues are investigated through a reading of a six-hour documentary Flying—Confessions of a Free Woman 1–6 (Jennifer Fox 2007, Easy Films, Denmark and Zohe Film Productions, USA) as a case of highbrow postfeminist television. Investigating how the documentary constructs an account of “the modern female life” in a global perspective, the article argues that Flying both articulates a sense of historicity and denies it. While never uttering the f-word, in its refiguring domestic ethnography as a mode of autobiographical self-interrogation, the documentary series evokes, albeit implicitly, a number of key tropes of 1960–1970s radical feminism: the notion of personal as political, the investment in consciousness-raising as a form of activism, the emphasis on shared experiences and emotions, and the idea of global sisterhood. As a consequence, it is argued, feminist critique is acknowledged and actualized only as an incitement to communication (sharing) and community-building in an affirmative sense. In this postfeminist story of feminism, hence, dissonant and critical voices are excluded as politics is reduced to an affect.

Keywords: documentary; television; feminism; postfeminism; intimacy; gender; confession

In 2007, television audiences in many European countries were treated with an extraordinary rarity: Flying—Confessions of a Free Woman1 a six-hour documentary series about “what it means to be a woman today.” In six one-hour episodes, director-producer-camerawoman-protagonist Jennifer Fox takes her viewers on a journey around the world and into her private life. While structured as a story of Jennifer Fox’s love life and of her ambiguous feelings about having a child, the documentary also features a kind of visual ethnography as Fox travels and discusses gender relations and questions of sexuality with women in different parts of the world.

According to production information, the series is a result of filming over three years, 2002–2005, and based on over 1,600 hours of footage. Mixing genres of autobiography, video diary, journalism, and docuseries, Flying comes across as highbrow television, carrying signatures of high production value and independent film culture. Financed by broadcast presales to European public service companies (BBC/Britain, DR/Denmark, SVT/Sweden, and YLE/Finland) and television channels with special quality brands (ARTE/Germany and France, IKON TV/the Netherlands, SBS/Australia, Sundance Channel, and HBO), the documentary has also been screened at several prestigious film festivals from International Documentary Festival Amsterdam to Sundance, Vancouver, Thessaloniki, Edinburgh, and HotDocs.

*Correspondence to: Anu Koivunen, Department of Cinema Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden. Email: anu.koivunen@mail.film.su.se

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In many reviews and feature articles, *Flying* has been described as “an addictive soap about sexuality and sisterhood” and compared to *Sex and the City* as “there is little Carrie Bradshaw in all of us,” but also found as irritating in its solipsism. In Nordic countries the publicity surrounding the documentary to large extent reproduced the productional rhetoric, promoting, and celebrating the series as an investigation into “the modern female life” in a global perspective, into “what it really means to be a woman in this day and age.” In Sweden, this reading was enforced by the coincidence of the broadcasting with the announcement of Doris Lessing as the recipient of Nobel Prize in Literature, praising her as an epicist of the female experience.

In this essay, I discuss *Flying—Confessions of a Free Woman* as a case of postfeminist media culture. While initially diagnosed and identified as a trend of anti-feminism in the late 1980s (Modleski 1991) and subsequently proposed as a broad label for various “third-wave” feminisms, postfeminism has become an established notion within media studies during the last decade. In a series of journal articles, special issues, anthologies, and monographs, it has been established as a description of “prime time feminism.” In this framing, postfeminism describes how gender and sexuality are figured in contemporary media culture encompassing “chick flicks” (e.g. *Sleepless in Seattle*, Nora Ephron 1993), primetime TV drama (e.g. *Ally McBeal*, HBO 1997–2002; *Sex and the City*, HBO 1998–2004; *Desperate Housewives*, ABC 2004), reality television (e.g. *What Not To Wear* BBC 2002, *Wife Swap*, Channel 4 2002; *The Swan*, Fox 2004), cooking shows as well as lifestyle journalism and chick-lit (e.g. *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, novel by Helen Fielding, film 2001). While scholars seem unanimous in identifying a discourse of gender and sexuality poised on individualism, choice and empowerment, highlighting femininity as an embodied property and self-surveillance as a key female virtue, the meanings and consequences of postfeminism for feminism as a political agenda and a form of social and cultural criticism remain a point of disagreement. Is postfeminism as a discourse of gender and sexuality a sign of second-wave feminism being partially incorporated into mainstream narratives, a historical shift within feminist thought and cultural imaginary itself (Moseley and Reed 2002) or, “feminism undone,” a break with feminist historical legacy?

In this essay, I argue that *Flying* indeed actualizes many of the acknowledged narrative tropes of postfeminism, but it also offers a rather surprising version of feminist story-telling. Instead of entertaining a “retreatist” fantasy, harking back to a world before feminism, *Flying* reconstructs of form of 1970s radical feminism as woman-centered, global sisterhood, constructed through discovery of shared experiences and emotions. In so doing, articulates an ambivalent encounter between radical feminism and late capitalist ideology of individualism, using and translating thematic and formal tropes of the former to the service of the latter.

**FIRST-PERSON DOCUMENTARY MEETS POSTFEMINIST MEDIA CULTURE**

The first episode of *Flying—Confessions of a Free Woman* opens, like all the other episodes, with Jennifer Fox’s first-person voice-over narration and an image track featuring both shots of her as an adult sitting in a small airplane and a montage of home movie footage from her childhood. Both the image track and the voice-over introduction are repeated with mild alterations in the beginning of all episodes:

I never wanted to be a girl—the way girls were supposed to be. I grew up practising takeoffs and landings with my father on Sunday mornings in a small two-seater plane. My dad was everything to me. He could do anything. He left the house early in the morning and got to explore the world. He built buildings, had important meetings with interesting men and travelled everywhere. I adored my father. I wanted to be a boy. They could do anything they wanted. My mother was stuck at home with us kids. And she kept having more, one baby after another until she had five. I decided I would never have children, and I said to my mother that I would never get married like her. Nobody would ever tell me what to do. I wanted to be like my father. I wanted to be free.

This account of childhood family provides the viewers with an explanation of the film’s title and, at the same time, it introduces the narrative dilemma of gender identity. It is also presented as a backdrop for Jennifer Fox’s description of her contemporary self:
So there I was, a free woman, 42 years old, living the life I thought I wanted in New York City. I travelled around the world alone, I made a career as a filmmaker and teacher. I slept with whom I chose and fell in love with those I wanted. I knew I didn’t fit into common roles but I didn’t care. It was more important to be free. And I thought life would go on forever like that.

The opening sequence is followed by a video diary-like shot of Jennifer Fox looking at a positive pregnancy test result, with the voice-over narrator contending: “I was pregnant and I didn’t know what to do.” What follows is an investigation of this dilemma in a series of discussions with her friends and her family. In this way, the documentary invites to be watched as domestic ethnography. As Michael Renov has argued, domestic ethnography is a “vehicle of self-examination” where authorial subject interrogates her contemporary self “through recourse to the familial other.” In Flying, both biological family and the chosen family of friends serve as “familial others” for Jennifer Fox’s self-interrogation that is focused on issues of want and choice.

The first few minutes of the film establish the narrative suspense for the whole series: what will Jennifer do? What does she want and why? What will happen? In other words, the key question is the one summarizing much of postfeminist media culture: “what a girl wants,” to quote the title of Diane Negra’s recent monograph on the subject. The questions Jennifer discusses with her “familial others” concern her choices: Which one of her two lovers will she choose? How will she solve the dilemma of career and motherhood?

As the story unfolds into a drama of miscarriages, disclosures of past abortions, and plans for in vitro fertilization or adoption, the self-interrogation bears another trademark of postfeminist culture, “a distinct preoccupation with the temporal.” As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra have argued, in postfeminist media narratives “women’s lives are regularly conceived of as time-starved, women themselves are overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their ‘biological clocks,’ etc. to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis.” In reviewing her life trajectory and re-evaluating her choices, Jennifer Fox meets Bridget Jones, Ally McBeal, and all other professional single women protagonists in mainstream films or television series.

Yet, it is the very focus on self-interrogation, the emphasis on “me” and “my problems,” in Flying that most clearly frames it as a postfeminist media narrative. As the introductory voice-over contends, the authorial subject views herself as “a free woman”: we learn that she is a filmmaker and teacher, we see her traveling around the world, but her project of self-interrogation takes places without any discussion of conditions or resources, economic, social, or cultural. The childhood family and the early established gender identifications are the only context offered for analyzing “wants” and “choices.” In other words, the first-person narrator presents herself as a subject of choice as if in empty time, albeit gendered and sexualized, but occupied by an excavation into her childhood, and investing in consumerist discourses of self-actualization and self-transformation. As such, she enacts the ideology of individualism: the questions of want and choice are crucial for “an individualised project in which the self is both the subject and object.”

Critics of postfeminist rhetoric of freedom—the title word recurring in Flying—have pointed out how the emphasis on individualism entails constant self-surveillance and an internalized discipline through the “language of personal choice.” Characterizing this development as a “fall of the public woman” and as “feminist tragedy,” Angela McRobbie has argued that it fundamentally entails loneliness for the postfeminist female subject.

While Flying reiterates features of postfeminist media culture, indeed addressing its audiences as a real-life, fortysomething version of Sex and the City, it nevertheless repudiates many of the criticisms through its recourse to the key tropes of 1970s radical feminism: it reframes the self-interrogation as a politicization of the personal, it evokes the political practice of consciousness-raising through its aesthetics, and it extends the domestic ethnography and the focus on individual into a global discussion of sisterhood, thereby contesting the reading of postfeminism as loneliness.
PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: REVISITING THE TROPES OF 1970s FEMINISM

As a documentary project, *Flying* represents what Anne Jerslev has termed “TV of feelings” (*følelses-tev*), a discourse of intimacy permeating contemporary television featuring video diaries, eyewitness genres, personal documentaries, reality programs, game shows and docuseries. Intimacy, here, entails confession, and in terms of its themes and narration, *Flying* is a paradigmatic case of confessional media. Jennifer Fox and her friends share secrets, traumatic memories, shameful experiences, conflicting emotions, and speak candidly about sexuality. In the spirit of television as a therapy machine, the participants seek purification, unburdening, and liberation through acts of confession, while at the same time acting as authorities for one another, requiring confessions, appreciating them, and intervening in one another’s disclosures.

Focusing, hence, in its themes and aesthetics on “the staging of social and aesthetic transparency,” *Flying* establishes an emotional contract with its audience: the narration promises and delivers authentic talk situations, confessions of intimate issues and real emotions for the viewers to engage in with compassion. Terming these talk situations as “sharing,” Jennifer Fox documents discussions with her friends “passing the camera” among discussants. This technique of filming encounters and discussions with friends by implying a “shared textual authority”—allowing her subjects to shoot one another as well—enhances a sense of true dialogue taking place on the screen. As Michael Renov has argued, domestic ethnography is a modality of autobiography that highlights “intersubjective reciprocity,” one in which “authorial subjectivity is explicitly in question or on display.” While the narration of *Flying* is dominated by the consistency and force of the first-person voice-over narration and by the determination with which the question of “women’s choices today” is pursued in relation to the narrative dilemma concerning the choices of the authorial subject, the aesthetic strategy of “passing the camera” is not without importance. This aesthetic strategy was emphasized by the documentary website call for viewers to submit their own confessions and discussions to result in a “7th episode” to the series.

While the use of video diary aesthetics undermines the radical effect of other subjects filming the author and subjecting her to their gazes, in *Flying* the notion of “passing the camera” contributes to framing the confessional talk, often dismissed as merely therapeutical, as political action. In my reading, “passing the camera” gives an aesthetic form to the notion of talking as “sharing,” evoking a principle of communication used in consciousness-raising as a radical feminist strategy to undo hierarchies and to “give voice” to all participants. Indeed, *Flying* evokes the radical feminist practice of consciousness-raising in the very first episode by reframing Jennifer Fox’s private dilemma as a general issue of gender and sexuality, mirrored in her friends and new acquaintances and their respective experiences and investigated in their discussions. As a practice, consciousness-raising is intimately linked with the notion of “personal as political.” In a famous defense of this form of action as political rather than mere personal therapy, Carol Hanisch argued in 1969: “one of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems.”

This evoking of consciousness-raising is enhanced by the insistence of *Flying* on establishing a sense of globally shared experience of gender. The documentary unfolds as a celebration of confessional “girltalk,” a “global slumber party.” Jennifer Fox’s personal dilemmas are reframed as a transnational discussion of gender identities, female–male relationships and heterosexuality. The voice-over narrator expresses both amazement and delight in detecting cross-cultural, cross-generational commonalities:

> My work life meant I had girlfriends all over the world. I brought my camera everywhere and passed it between us. (...) It was surprising to me how similar our lives were. My girlfriends came from different cultures, classes and backgrounds. Yet it seemed as if we were all sharing the same confusions.

Evoking the ethos of Robin Morgan’s famous 1984 anthology, *Sisterhood is Global*, the liberal, middle-class Jewish filmmaker travels around the world and discusses questions of gender, sexuality, and power with women in India, Pakistan, South
Africa, Cambodia, Britain, Germany, Russia, and USA. Each episode of the documentary features enact this sense of global sisterhood as scenes of “girltalk” in Africa, Asia, North America, and Europe are sewn together by scenes of Jennifer Fox traveling on an airplane. This rhetoric of a global reach and “women’s world” permeated the promotional, educational and interactive website framing the release of the series.39

In *Flying*, the combination of aesthetics of authenticity (passing the camera, the variety of talk situations) with the nomadic first-person narrator attempts to establish a sense of “shared worldview and emotional knowledge,” creating thus an “intimate public sphere of femininity” to quote Lauren Berlant.40 In her analysis, intimate publics are founded on a particular affective economy, a sense of sharing as an assumption, which enables the participants to voice complaint and seek reassurance in “an experience of shared emotion.” It is this emphasis on community and sharing that both unites *Flying* with 1970s feminism—and marks a definitive distance. The intimate public *Flying* caters to is founded on affirmation of gender identity, not questioning it unlike in the radical political agendas.

**TELLING FEMINIST STORIES: POSTFEMINIST AFFECTIVE ECONOMY?**

As characteristic for genres of self-inscription and confessional mode in general, *Flying* enacts as a narrative of becoming and reinventing the self. In its narrative trajectory, the documentary serves as a female coming-of-age story, a feminist *Bildungs geschichte*. While the series starts with a definite identification with the father, over the course of six episodes the childhood family album is revised and the child’s understanding of her parents relationship transformed. In the final episode, in one of the concluding scenes, Jennifer Fox is shown rediscovering her female genealogy in a literal manner: she accepts and acts her assigned feminine role in going shopping with her mother and her aunt, the two women she had previously rejected as identificatory possibilities. In the case of authorial subject, the coming-of-age entails both an understanding of her own issues as not merely personal problems and a sense of reconciliation with her childhood family.

While coming to terms with her mother and her aunt as appropriate “familial others” in her project of self-interrogation and while seeking “intersubjective reciprocity”25 with women in different countries, Jennifer Fox remains importantly silent about feminism as a framework for identity politics. Curiously, then, the documentary returns to the 1960–1970s tropes of both radical and woman-centered, gynocentric feminism in its aesthetics, themes and address, but makes no acknowledgement of past feminist subjects. Even though alluding, in its title, to Erica Jong’s bestseller novel *Fear of Flying*40,41, Jennifer Fox’s *Flying* is markedly devoid of any explicit references to feminist culture or critique.

It can be argued that in describing herself as a “free woman,” the first-person narrator takes feminism for granted, regarding it as a thing of the past. In this respect, *Flying* reiterates the rhetoric of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in granting feminism nothing but a “spectral, shadowy” existence, to quote Angela McRobbie. In *Flying*, however, feminism does not figure as “a psychic policewoman,” “disallowing girls from the pleasure of imagining the pleasures of pre-feminist womanhood.”23 Instead, both the authorial subject and her friends discuss their personal, political problems without any sense of historicity—of the issues of gender, sex, relationships, and reproduction being classic and contested topics within feminism. In *Flying*, the women subjects—the implied network of global sisterhood—are subjects of their narratives as daughters of their mothers, not the previous generation feminists. There is only a biological, not a political genealogy. While having concerns and envisioning solutions similar to feminists of previous decades, as Angela McRobbie phrases it, “never is the word spoken, they must live out their sexual and emotional lives without recourse to sexual politics. This is the condition of existence of these popular narratives, they must cast the possibility of a new feminism aside, they must muddle through without it.”23

Instead of passing as yet another simple case of “failed reproduction of feminist consciousness, a failure of generational reproduction, with younger women refusing to inherit their feminist legacies,”21 *Flying* both articulates a sense of historicity and denies it. On the one hand, the aesthetic of intimacy and the emotionally charged rhetoric of personal documentary draw on second-wave feminist
critique of individualism and on the second-wave feminist reframing of intimacy, sexuality, and familial relations as fundamentally political questions. On the other hand, this critical legacy is merely present in Flying as a form and an affect: the narrative situation and the sense of “sharing.”

As always, the telling of feminist stories and envisioning of feminist subjectivity is highly affective.42,43 Mirroring the postfeminist condition through 1970s feminist tropes and articulating questions about late modern life politics in a language evocative of 1970s radical feminism, Flying constructs a story about feminism that does not leave room for disagreements, dissonances, or conflicts. In the spirit of “sharing,” the documentary is committed to dialogue and discussion as community-building, as a process of seeking and finding commonalities, enhancing the positive emotions of solidarity, respect, and trust. As a consequence of this insistence, Flying omits all acknowledgements of breaches in the imagined women’s community. In this “intimate public,” there is no room for deconstruction or critique, both of them hence rejected as “unfamilial others,” unwelcome to the ongoing process of self-interrogation.

NOTES
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