

Title	Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman, by Mari Ruti
Authors	Guilluy, Alice
Publication date	2018
Original Citation	Guilluy, A. (2018) Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman, by Mari Ruti. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 15, pp. 156-161. <a href="https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.15.12">https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.15.12</a>
Type of publication	Review
Link to publisher's version	<a href="http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ReviewGuilluy.pdf">http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ReviewGuilluy.pdf</a> - <a href="https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.15.12">https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.15.12</a>
Rights	© 2018, the Author(s) - <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/</a>
Download date	2024-05-19 11:39:03
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7101">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/7101</a>



# UCC

**University College Cork, Ireland**  
 Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

## ***Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman*, by Mari Ruti. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 216 pages.**

Alice Guilluy

Over the last decade, scholarly interest in the contemporary romantic comedy (or “rom-com”) has grown significantly. A central focal point in the recent literature has been to interrogate the genre’s much-maligned reputation (Deleyto), and to highlight the sexist undertones in its usual dismissals as “trite or lightweight” (Abbott and Jermyn 2). A number of works have sought to rehabilitate the genre by tracing its lineage back to the more prestigious screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s (Jeffers McDonald; Grindon). Significant attention has also been paid to the representation of gender in contemporary rom-coms, and its close connection to postfeminism (Ferriss and Young; Negra; Radner; Schreiber). Within this scholarship, *Pretty Woman* (Gary Marshall, 1990) is often considered, along with *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989), to be a “format-defining” text of the genre’s contemporary cycle (Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema* 26).

Given the contribution of both *Pretty Woman* and its director to the rom-com canon, it is somewhat surprising that neither has received more critical attention. Mari Ruti’s *Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman* works to fill this gap, providing the first book-length examination of Gary Marshall’s film. From the start, Ruti also highlights the double standard to which rom-coms are held: “there is something questionable about our society’s routine disparagement of romantic comedies—a genre affiliated with women and femininity specifically” (2). Indeed, Ruti’s stated aim is to nuance discussions around the romantic comedy’s ideological conservatism, and to interrogate its alleged influence on female audiences. Her argument is twofold: firstly, she suggests that *Pretty Woman*, released at the cusp of the 1990s, is very much a precursor of some of the central concerns of third-wave feminism and postfeminism. Secondly, her reading of the film offers a more nuanced analysis of its gender representation: “what makes *Pretty Woman*—like later romantic comedies—a surprisingly complex object of study”, she stresses, is that it “walks a tightrope between retrograde, potentially antifeminist themes and progressive, potentially feminist ones” (14).

The book is structured in two chapters, the first of which offers a review of feminist film theory, beginning with the influence of psychoanalysis on feminist film scholars of the 1970s and 1980s. Of particular relevance to Ruti’s discussion of *Pretty Woman* is the question of agency and the gaze—most famously taken up in one of the founding texts of feminist film theory, Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema”—as well as fetishism and cinematic suture, particularly in the work of Kaja Silverman. The chapter then explores the shift from second- to third-wave feminism, and related changes in film theory. Ruti singles out two key works here: Mary Ann Doane’s development of Joan Riviere’s conception of the masquerade of femininity and Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity, both of which

theorise femininity as performative rather than essentialised. She notes that for both Doane and Butler, gender performance also has a liberating potential: “Butler’s claim [regarding] the performative nature of gender opens up the possibility of performing it transgressively” (63). However, this emphasis on individual agency also aligns, Ruti argues, with the demands of neoliberalism (65).

This is where Ruti arrives at contemporary debates around postfeminism, a concept which is central to her book’s overall argument. Drawing on the work of Rosalind Gill, Christina Scharff and Yael Sherman, Ruti defines postfeminism as “a mixture of antifeminist and feminist ideals” (82) whereby the feminist movement and its accomplishments are “both rejected by and incorporated into contemporary culture” (6), and which notably associates female emancipation with individual success (69–70). As scholars such as Lauren Berlant and Sarah Ahmed have noted, however, this has led to failure being blamed on individuals, and ignores wider structural inequalities. Of particular importance to Ruti is Ahmed’s concept of “happiness scripts” (73), particularly the “marriage script” which suggests that happiness for women is unthinkable outside of heteronormative romantic relationships. Developing her previous work on self-help literature, Ruti suggests that, in contemporary culture, neoliberalism has redefined conceptions of love and marriage: love has thus become “labour-intensive”, and only long-term relationships are seen as successful (74). Further drawing on the work of Rosalind Gill as well as film scholars such as Hilary Radner, Ruti notes that this is also true of the female body, which is subjected to constant surveillance and pressure for self-improvement. This has effectively turned women—including *Pretty Woman*’s heroine, Vivian (Julia Roberts)—into ideal neoliberal subjects.

The second chapter delves into the film itself and begins with an overview of its critical reception. Critics and academics writing in the 1990s were scathing in their reviews, both of the film as a cinematic product and of its regressive politics. Their criticism, Ruti notes, focused on the film’s representation of gender roles and sex work, as well as its glorification of capitalism and consumerism (108). Ruti underlines the particularly negative reviews the film received from male academics and underlines the patronising undertones of some of these comments. Whilst she agrees that *Pretty Woman* contributes to social conditioning and sells a “happiness script”, she rejects the notion that female viewers are “hoodwinked” by the film: “If anything, the preachy tone of critics such as [Claude] Smith and [Harvey Roy] Greenberg—a tone that depicts female viewers as passive idiots undergoing a thorough patriarchal brainwashing—is arguably more offensive than the content of *Pretty Woman*” (112).

On the contrary, the chapter explores the complexity of the film’s appeal for women and outlines some of its overlooked pleasures. For example, Ruti emphasises the importance of the film’s dialogue and the pleasure of quoting along with well-known lines such as “she rescues him right back” or “I can do anything I want to, baby”, some of which are more outwardly feminist than the film’s overall narrative. Ruti’s central argument is that *Pretty Woman*, as an iconic postfeminist text, contains both feminist and antifeminist elements, and she begins the second chapter with a discussion of the former. Contra much of the literature on the film (Greenberg; Caputi), Ruti argues that *Pretty Woman* is, in some ways, rather progressive in its representation of sex and romance. Thus, she suggests that the film blurs traditional gender boundaries by highlighting the similarity between its two leads, both of whom—to echo another famous line—“screw people for money” (113–14). Additionally, she notes that the film’s “meet cute” plays with a classic gender stereotype, as Julia Roberts’s Vivian is revealed to know much more about cars than Richard Gere’s Edward. Ruti also argues that both characters undergo a transformation in the film, describing Edward leaving the

“hypermasculine” world of high finance as a reverse Pygmalion narrative (139). Finally, she praises the film’s relatively explicit representation of sexuality as well as the sexual agency of its heroine, which she notes is fairly exceptional in this cycle of the genre. For Ruti, this is one of the key reasons for *Pretty Woman*’s enduring success amongst female audiences: “Isn’t there something rather brazen about a fairytale where the heroine’s first sexual encounter with the prince is not a kiss but a blowjob?” (132).

The film is more ambivalent, however, in its representation of money. On the one hand, Ruti argues that the film is a critique of wealth, asserting from the opening sequence that money doesn’t provide happiness (115). Moreover, unlike many of its contemporaries, the film also calls strong attention to class inequality, which is central to its premise (118). However, *Pretty Woman* manages to have its cake and eat it by simultaneously revelling in the visual pleasures of consumption (the décor, the food, and—crucially—the clothes) and decrying its moral corruption, particularly through the character of Philip, Edward’s lawyer. Additionally, whilst the film’s class inequalities are heavily racialized, this is effectively disavowed by the film. Ruti draws here on the work of scholars such as D. Soyini Madison, underlining that the central character’s ability for class passing “presupposes whiteness” (124). Additionally, she notes that the film relies on racial stereotypes to highlight the class difference between Edward and Vivian: whilst Hollywood Boulevard is presented as ethnically diverse, Rodeo Drive and the Regent Beverly Wiltshire are frequented almost exclusively by white patrons (128).

*Pretty Woman*’s postfeminist ambivalence is perhaps most significant, however, in its relationship to the male gaze and the masquerade of femininity. On the one hand, it is “impossible to watch *Pretty Woman* without realizing that Judith Butler is correct in postulating that gender is a performative accomplishment” (143). To support this point, Ruti pays significant attention to the film’s opening scene, a montage sequence in which Vivian gets dressed and applies makeup. Her emphasis on the fragmentation and objectification of Vivian’s body aligns with the analyses of other feminist scholars (Radner, “Pretty is as Pretty Does” 72–3; Brunsdon 97), though hers is a more positive reading. Indeed, she notes that the sequence also makes plain the “technical” skills involved in the masquerade of femininity. Significant, too, is the nervous dynamism of Roberts’ performance: whilst critics praised the actress’s “naturalness” in the role, Ruti compellingly argues that her constant “fidgeting” suggests the uncomfortableness of the masquerade of femininity (174). At the same time, Ruti notes that Roberts’s character is constantly subjected to the male gaze. This is strongly linked to class mobility, as Edward’s first desiring look at Vivian comes only after he sees her in a new and expensive cocktail dress. In addition to her constant objectification by the camera, she is also fetishized to make her ultimate “rescue” and completion of Edward possible. Ruti thus closes the chapter by returning to psychoanalytical theory, arguing that the film’s ambivalent self-awareness is central to its postfeminism as well as its fetishistic pleasures: as viewers, we are made keenly aware of the film’s fictionality; and yet, we crave the temporary fulfilment that comes with the rom-com’s happily-ever-after.

Ruti’s definition of contemporary romantic comedy is broad, and throughout the book she seems to define the “rom-com” and the “chick flick” as broadly synonymous. This contrasts with the work of scholars such as Leger Grindon or Tamar Jeffers McDonald, who have highlighted the rom-com’s longevity, from the screwballs of the 1930s to the contemporary rom-com via the “sex comedies” of the 1950s. By contrast, Ruti highlights the significant role *Pretty Woman* played in renewing the genre, which she argues had been “dormant” since the 1930s and 1940s (5). She draws a particular connection between the “spunky” heroine of screwball comedies and the “strong” rom-com heroine ushered in by Julia Roberts’

performance. As noted above, Ruti's positive evaluation of Vivian's sexual agency diverges from previous scholarship on the film. As such, the book provides a very welcome and more nuanced analysis of *Pretty Woman*, making a convincing argument for its significance as a legitimate and complex object of study.

Ruti's argument is based on detailed analysis of the film's narrative and characters, as well as a compelling examination of the film's cinematography and mise en scène in the opening montage and opera sequence. Such formal and stylistic analysis could, however, have been developed a little further in the book's persuasive discussion of class. As Ruti argues, *Pretty Woman* both "allows the viewer to participate in the fantasy of spending at the same time as it condemns those who make a habit of it" (152). I would suggest that the film's framing supports the latter, as it often calls attention to the usually invisible labour supporting the privileged lifestyle of rom-com protagonists like Edward: the cleaners, chauffeurs, bell boys, receptionists, etc. That so many of these supporting roles are played by the same actors across Marshall's films—Hector Helizondo, Larry Miller, or Barbara and Kathleen Marshall—adds to their significance. As the rom-com continues to be denigrated as an "uncinematic" genre, it seems to me crucial to engage in more detailed formal and stylistic analysis of films such as *Pretty Woman*, as Ruti does here in her discussion of the male gaze and the masquerade of femininity.

Overall Ruti's book is an important addition to the growing literature on romantic comedy and will be of significant value to scholars of the genre, as well as those interested in gender and postfeminism more broadly. Additionally, Chapter 1 offers a wonderfully approachable introduction to key debates in psychoanalytical and feminist film theory: as such, the book would be a great addition to a number of undergraduate film courses.

## References

- Abbott, Stacey, and Deborah Jermyn. *Falling in Love Again: Romantic Comedy in Contemporary Cinema*. I. B. Tauris, 2009.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke UP, 2010.
- Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Brunsdon, Charlotte. *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes*. Routledge, 1997.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Second edition. Routledge Classics, 2006.
- Caputi, Jane. "Sleeping with the Enemy as *Pretty Woman*, Part II?" *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1991, pp. 2–8.
- Deleyto, Celestino. *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*. Manchester UP, 2009.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator." *Screen*, vol. 23, no. 3–4, 1982, pp. 74–88.

- Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young. *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*. Routledge, 2008.
- Gill, Rosalind, and Christina Scharff. *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Greenberg, Harvey Roy. "Pretty Woman's Co-Opted Feminism." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1991, pp. 9–13.
- Grindon, Leger. *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History and Controversies*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Jeffers McDonald, Tamar. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. Wallflower, 2007.
- Madison, D. Soyini. "Pretty Woman Through the Triple Lens of Black Feminist Spectatorship: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture." *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, Indiana UP, 1995, pp. 224–35.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.
- Neale, Steve. "The Big Romance or Something Wild? Romantic Comedy Today." *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1992, pp. 284–99.
- Negra, Diane. "Structural Integrity, Historical Reversion and the Post-9/11 Chick Flick." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 51–68.
- Pillow Talk*. Directed by Michael Gordon, Universal Pictures, 1959.
- Pretty Woman*. Directed by Garry Marshall, Touchstone Pictures, 1990.
- Radner, Hilary. *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*. Routledge, 2011.
- . "Pretty Is as Pretty Does: Free Enterprise and the Marriage Plot." *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins, Routledge, 1993, pp. 56–76.
- Schreiber, Michele. *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture*. Edinburgh UP, 2014.
- Sherman, Yael. "Neoliberal Femininity in Miss Congeniality." *Feminism at the Movies: Understanding Gender in Contemporary Popular Culture*, edited by Hilary Radner and Rebecca Stringer, Routledge, 2011, 80–92.
- When Harry Met Sally...* Directed by Rob Reiner, Castle Rock Entertainment, 1989.

### Suggested Citation

Guilluy, Alice. “*Feminist Film Theory and Pretty Woman* by Mari Ruti.” Book Review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 15, Summer 2018, pp. 156–161. [www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ReviewGuilluy.pdf](http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue15/ReviewGuilluy.pdf).

**Alice Guilluy** is a Graduate Teaching Assistant at in the departments of Film Studies and of Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King’s College London, where she recently completed a PhD in Film Studies and German. Her thesis examined the European reception of contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.