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What is This?
Reading *Pulp Fiction*: Femininity and power in second and third wave feminist theory

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Abstract
This article adds to the growing literature distinguishing second and third wave feminist theory. It opens by outlining theoretical differences between second wave and third wave definitions of femininity and the role and impact of femininity on gender relations of domination, whilst briefly acknowledging the complications of the relationship between third wave feminism and post-feminism. It then suggests that these diverging perspectives on embodied femininity result from fundamentally different second wave and third wave theories of power. In doing so, it develops a third wave conceptual definition of femininity and a theoretical framework for power relations that are distinct from a second wave approach. It illustrates these differences by offering a close reading of textual representation of femininity in the film *Pulp Fiction*.

Keywords
femininity, power, *Pulp Fiction*, second wave feminism, third wave feminism

R. Claire Snyder (2008) and others have critiqued third wave feminist writings for not developing or operating from a coherent theoretical perspective. While self-identified third wave feminists have articulated dissatisfaction with academic feminist theory and an interest in theorising through personal narrative and/or cultural production, we agree with Snyder when she suggests that third wave feminism must expand its purview to include a systematic development of theoretical concepts and frameworks. We take up Snyder on her call and do this by developing a theoretical framework for third wave approaches to and perspectives on femininity and power. We unpack how second wave and third wave definitions of femininity differ and

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how those differences reflect underlying assumptions about the role femininity plays in gender relations of domination. Building on the work of others who have written extensively about how third wave feminists differ from second wave feminists in how they embrace and celebrate femininity and ‘girlie’ things, we will begin by unpacking how femininity is defined from a second and third wave perspective in order to explain the differences in their relationships to femininity.

We suggest that these diverging perspectives on femininity result from fundamentally different theories of power. While distinctions between second and third wave feminism have been based on generation, strategies and theories of identity, as of yet, differences based on theories of power have not been explicitly articulated. No one has unpacked the underlying theory of power that undergirds and distinguishes second wave and third wave models of femininity. Finally, we illustrate these differences by offering a second wave and third wave feminist reading of textual construction of femininity offered by the character Fabienne (Maria de Medeiros) in the film *Pulp Fiction* (1994). We will not be analysing the text as second or third wave, but instead, analysing the text using second and third wave theory as analytic lenses. By doing so, we not only identify differences between second wave and third wave conceptualisation of power, but also further develop a distinctly third wave definition of the concept of femininity and offer a third wave theoretical framework for power and its operations in order to build third wave feminist theory.

**Second and third wave perspectives on femininity and power**

A second wave feminist perspective on femininity is one that assumes that normative features or socially prescribed requirements of femininity are the embodiment of patriarchal domination and oppression. Femininity is defined as a set of embodied characteristics and practices that are imposed on women and result from or signify their subordinate status in relation to men. For example, Catharine MacKinnon argues that ‘[s]ocially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms’ (1989: 110). For MacKinnon, femininity is defined and enforced by men, and women are forced through ideological indoctrination to embody femininity as the sexually submissive complement to masculine sexual dominance and power: ‘[a feminist theory of sexuality is] a sexual theory of the distribution of social power by gender, in which this sexuality that is sexuality is substantially what makes the gender division be what it is, which is male dominant, wherever it is, which is nearly everywhere’ (p. 130). Much second wave feminist theory adopts a similar approach to femininity. For example, Marilyn Frye states that ‘[t]here is a women’s place, a sector, which is inhabited by women of all classes and races, and it is not defined by geographical boundaries but by function. The function is the service of men and men’s interests as men define them’ (1983: 9). When describing the embodiment of women’s subordinate status, Frye iterates that
‘[i]t fits in a network of behaviors through which we constantly announce to others our membership in a lower caste and our unwillingness and/or inability to defend our bodily or moral integrity’ (1983: 15). Similarly, for Mary Daly, power is conceptualised as a ‘patriarchal prison’ forcing women into embodying femininity: ‘the word woman names the alienating archetype that freezes female be-ing, locking us into prisons of “forever feminine” roles’ (1984: 4; emphasis in original). Discussing the bodily modalities of femininity, Iris Marion Young argues that ‘[t]he modalities of feminine bodily comportment [...] have their source [...] in the particular situation of women as conditioned by their sexist oppression in contemporary society’ (1990: 153; emphasis in original). Here, femininity is assumed to be a result of patriarchal domination as either the embodiment of subordination or as a set of embodied practices imposed by men. Precisely because femininity is the embodiment of subordination, a second wave feminist perspective is one that is critical of femininity and calls for women to reject feminine embodiment or seek social change to eradicate the femininity enforced under patriarchy or male domination. In these writings, femininity is a mechanism of control that men as a group use to subordinate women as a group, and/or it is the embodiment of women’s powerlessness and oppression. Men define and/or enforce femininity; women embody it to signal and perpetuate their subordination to men. While there is some variation among second wave feminist theorists about whether or not there is an internal female or feminine essence that is suppressed, we identify the following assertions as consistent with a second wave theoretical perspective:

1. The practices and characteristics that girls and women embody as femininity under patriarchy or male domination are either imposed upon women or are the embodiment of women’s subordination and oppression.
2. Characteristics required of femininity are defined and enforced by men to serve their own interests.
3. Femininity, as defined by men, does not benefit women.
4. Femininity, thus, must be critiqued, surpassed, and/or eradicated.

Given this definition of femininity, it is not a surprise that, from a second wave theoretical perspective, male-defined femininity could never be a source of liberation. It must be rejected and overcome.

By contrast, a third wave feminist definition of femininity can be characterised as one that begins with an assumption that femininity is a set of cultural or social ideals concerning what a girl or woman should be. Femininity is not so much imposed on women or embodied by women as a result of their subordination, but instead, available to and can be embodied by anyone. This third wave definition of femininity draws on Judith Butler’s (1990) conceptualisation of gender as discursive, relational, and performative. For Butler, gender identities are a discursive construction of what women and men should be. Embodiment of these ideals is citational – that is, femininity and masculinity are corporeal articulations of circulating discourses of what a woman or man is. Rather than being the constrained
embodiment of oppression imposed by one group (men) upon another (women) or a fixed set of bodily practices to signify subordination, femininity is a set of available bodily and relational performances that, theoretically, can be embodied by (are available to) anyone and will be contextually variant. Consistent with second wave feminism, third wave feminist perspectives place femininity within broader and institutionalised conditions of a male dominant gender system. However, third wave feminism (in contrast to post-feminism as explained below) does not deny systemic and widespread pressures on girls and women to embody hegemonic forms of femininity.

Third wave definitions of femininity acknowledge that, in a male or masculine dominant social system, most available discourses on femininity situate the feminine as subordinate to the masculine. Third wave feminist perspectives view femininity not as an outward, bodily expression of subjugation, but instead as a corporeal performance of a discursively produced and contested set of criteria for being a woman within the structural conditions of gender inequality. For Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, ‘if feminism aims to create a world where our standard of measurement doesn’t start with a white-male-heterosexual nucleus, then believing that feminine things are weak means that we’re believing our own bad press. Girlies say, through actions and attitudes, that you don’t have to make feminine powerful by making it masculine or “natural”; it is a feminist statement to proudly claim things that are feminine’ (2000: 135). For Baumgardner and Richards, girlie is not ‘shorthand for “we’ve been duped”’ (p. 136). Femininity is here located squarely in the ongoing process of discursively constructing gender meanings and gender hierarchies.

However, the meanings of femininity and girlie things, and the hierarchies that result, are contested terrain. As Rebecca Munford (2007: 270) discusses, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (1997) write about Courtney Love as representative of a third wave emphasis on reworking femininity to dismantle hegemony and create something new. According to Heywood and Drake, Love is ‘[g]lamorous and grunge, girl and boy, mothering and selfish, put together and taken apart, beautiful and ugly, strong and weak, responsible and rebellious’ (pp. 4–5). Though they focus on the individual, they offer Love as representative of a more general and collective approach to reworking the meaning of femininity by third wave feminists. Similarly, in her study of a rock music subculture, Schippers (2002) argues that

[w]hen we situate the body and embodied gender in the ongoing process of social structuralation, how the body is presented and used is always in relation to other bodies within the localized context. In this way, alternative hard rockers’ bodies do matter in their gender politics [...] In the ongoing process of negotiating the relationship between masculinities and femininities, what they do with their bodies disrupts, to some degree, the heterosexual matrix that depends upon masculine sexual subjectivity and feminine sexual objectification. (p. 123)
Schippers conceptualises femininity (and masculinity) as embodied performances in everyday interaction. In third wave feminism, as a discursive process rather than social location (as it is defined in second wave feminism), femininity can be collectively reworked in potentially subversive ways to counter hegemonic constructions of femininity (Kearny, 1998; Schippers, 2002; Munford, 2007).

Male dominance and androcentric hierarchies are disrupted and challenged when women articulate femininity in ways that transform it into something new and of value. The interaction is taking place in a larger context of structural gender inequality. However, consistent with a third wave definition, femininity can be collectively reworked and deployed to undermine those relations of inequality. A third wave feminist perspective on femininity, then, is one that assumes:

1. Femininity is a set of ideals for what a woman should be.
2. Femininity is embodied as surface performance.
3. Feminine performance is available to anyone regardless of sex category.
4. These ideals are multiple, sometimes contradictory, and contextually variant and specific, but within structural conditions of male dominance hegemonic discourses will situate the feminine as subordinate and inferior to the masculine.
5. To the extent that femininity is situated as inferior or subordinate to masculinity, a collective re-iteration of hegemonic femininity and its inferiority to masculinity legitimates and perpetuates gender inequality.
6. To the extent that femininity is collectively reworked to undermine hegemonic ideals or hierarchies, it can be subversive to male dominance and gender inequality and thus, a source of power.

Second and third wave feminisms situate femininity within the structural conditions of male dominance and gender inequality. While second and third wave feminist perspectives share an emphasis on the broader conditions of systemic and structural inequalities, the differences in how they conceptualise the role of femininity in those broader relations of inequality reveal fundamentally different theories of power and its operation.

Second wave theories of power are identifiable as such to the extent that they rely on a Marxist conceptualisation of domination and oppression. From this perspective, power is figured as the ability of one group to define, suppress, or otherwise control members of another group by controlling resources and establishing cultural practices, traditions, and rules that serve their own interests and ensure their position of domination. In the case of Marxist theory, one’s position in the means of production determines one’s location in relations of domination as having or not having power. The oppressed group is subject to power/control and can do little to resist short of dismantling the system that situates opposing groups in relations of domination and subordination as powerful and powerless. A second wave feminist theoretical perspective adopts this general theory of structural power and applies it to women and men. Men as a group possess power conferred to them by virtue of their structural position in the patriarchal or male dominant social...
structure and use that power to define, suppress, and/or control women to serve their own interests as men. Within this larger theoretical conceptualisation of power, femininity is described as the embodiment of oppression and/or a patriarchal construction imposed or forced upon women to ensure men’s dominance and to serve men’s interests.

By contrast, a third wave feminist perspective rejects the assertion that men possess power and women are subject to and/or lack power. Instead, third wave feminist perspectives conceive of power as relational, having multiple tactics and strategies, and as available to subordinate groups and not just the possession of dominant groups. In this way, third wave feminism rejects Marxist approaches to power and oppression and instead adopts a Foucauldian model of power. According to Michel Foucault (1978), power is not a possession attached to structural position, but is instead a field of force relations that is always present when disequilibrium exists. There are multiple strategies or techniques available to, not only those who benefit from disequilibrium, but also those who are disadvantaged. A third wave feminist perspective is one in which power is relational and strategies are multiple. Third wave feminist theories of power do not deny disequilibrium; they understand the disequilibrium as a dynamic and ongoing process rather than a fixed structure of domination and oppression. This theory of power is also consistent with some early feminist theories of race, class, and gender intersections. For example, though generationally part of second wave feminism, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) offers a third wave conceptualisation of power when she critiques feminist theory for only identifying men’s power over women and neglecting women’s power to act on their own behalf to resist domination.

Given this theory of power as relational, dynamic, and consisting of multiple tactics, it is not surprising that a third wave feminist perspective on femininity is one that positions femininity as a set of available bodily practices that can be part of a collective gender strategy, not as the embodiment of domination. While never denying that girls and women are encouraged to embody forms of femininity that might situate them as submissive to boys and men, third wave feminist perspectives emphasise how girls and women can collectively deploy transgressive forms of femininity or counter-hegemonic meanings of ‘girlie things’ as a discursive tactic to disrupt gender hierarchies. This Foucauldian model of power is in contrast to the Marxist model assumed in a second wave perspective. Reworking and/or deploying femininity rather than rejecting it is one effective strategy for undermining patriarchy.

**Pulp Fiction: Reading Fabienne**

Here we offer two readings of a cultural representation of femininity and masculinity – one through a second wave feminist lens and one from a third wave feminist perspective. We have chosen Quentin Tarantino’s cult classic film *Pulp Fiction*, and specifically the scenes involving the characters Butch and Fabienne because these scenes offer hyperbolic representations of masculinity and femininity. In its
exaggeration, we believe, it provides the opportunity to put aside questions of whether or not the representations of masculinity and femininity are indeed hegemonic, and instead focus on how second wave and third wave theories differ in their analytic interpretations of the power relations textually produced through the narrative and the role of the narrative in broader relations of inequality.

It is an hour of *Pulp Fiction* – and the decided masculinity of gangsters, hired hit men, professional fighters, and heroin dealers – before the audience is introduced to the jarring dissimilarity of Fabienne’s hyperbolic femininity. Because the legibility of gendered embodiments relies on the relationality of masculine and feminine traits, the exceptionality of this single character’s femininity establishes a distinct gender polarity and a strikingly unambiguous text for an analysis of femininity and power. Fabienne’s gendered persona stands out against the rest of the film as a whole but particularly in contrast to the only character with whom we see her interact, her male lover, Butch (Bruce Willis), who is a champion boxer on the run from a murderous mob boss he recently double-crossed by killing an opponent rather than throwing the fight. Our analysis begins when Butch flees secretly from the boxing arena in a taxicab toward the motel where he and his lover will spend one last night in Los Angeles before their desperate escape the next day.

**A second wave feminist reading**

Immediately upon Butch’s entrance into the motel room, it is obvious that Fabienne occupies a passive and submissive femininity in opposition to Butch’s active and dominant masculinity. Crucially, Fabienne fulfills an ideal of femininity that Butch considers to be a woman’s proper role. Only seconds pass between Butch’s exchanges with his female taxi driver, Esmarelda (Angela Jones), and his initial contact with Fabienne, and the differences between these two interactions establish a ‘proper’ femininity within the context of male dominant power relations. During the cab ride, Esmarelda first informs her fare that his boxing opponent was killed, thus providing information even he did not have about his own business affairs. Furthermore, she inquires in great detail about the death of the other fighter and conveys her ‘much interest in’ knowing how it feels ‘beating another man to death with your bare hands’. By both exhibiting and requesting excessive knowledge and information and showing interest in masculine prerogatives of physical strength, violence, and activity, Esmarelda fails to embody a male-defined proper femininity, and for this Butch labels her a ‘weirdo’. We are encouraged to judge Esmarelda as unseemly as both Butch and the camera dismiss Esmarelda: her image becomes blurred in the foreground as the audio and visual focus of the viewer is forced back to Butch, who is speaking of his victory but seemingly to himself and no longer to the forgotten Esmarelda. Her appropriation of masculine prerogatives is further rendered discordant through the use of the antiquated rear projection technique to display a black and white process shot behind the taxi. As this technique stylistically situates these characters in a movie from the 1940s or 1950s, Esmarelda’s sex and femininity appear irreconcilable.
Fabienne’s persona, in contrast with Esmarelda’s, is consistent with patriarchal definitions of womanhood, as displayed by her method of inquiry into Butch’s homicidal bout in the ring. She asks him, ‘Hard day at the office?’ With these few words she not only assimilates the properly gendered role of the housewife but also assures that the collection of information remains in the masculine sphere, resigning to her status as the passive and uninformed companion. Unlike Esmarelda, Fabienne ‘never listen[s] to [Butch’s] fights’ on the radio, an act that itself would involve her in affairs and information beyond her proper role, but merely waits patiently alone in the dark motel room for his return. Butch is still checking through the window for tailing gangsters when Fabienne clearly establishes that she does not need details of the events that have put both their lives in danger but will follow him blindly. Her later questions, such as ‘Where are we going to go?’ and ‘What time does our train arrive?’ reveal further that she aids Butch in carrying out his plans, such as in the properly domestic activity of packing their suitcases, without demanding any involvement in the formation of these plans. Her constant deference to Butch’s decisions and his approval establishes Fabienne’s complete dependence on Butch, whether for her pancake money or travel itinerary.

Fabienne is shown repeatedly participating in, and thus perpetuating, an exaggerated relationship of inferiority and superiority in which she enthusiastically seeks Butch’s approval. Fabienne’s femininity confines her in the structural position of the instructed in relation to Butch as the instructor even at moments when her knowledge surpasses his or would prove beneficial to him. For example, her request that they visit Bora Bora is answered by Butch’s insistence that his French lover ‘[does] not speak Bora Boran’. Because her awareness and smirk are visible to the camera, Fabienne can be understood to be occupying a compulsory status of naïve pupil which prevents her from correcting him. She instead engages in his sloppy Spanish lesson, in which he selectively educates her in shoe shopping and being on time, qualifying her to be his ‘little mamacita’. She dutifully repeats his lines and beams at his praise of her ‘excellent pronunciation’, her pride lying not in her own intellect but merely in reflecting back to Butch his superior knowledge and teaching abilities. Fabienne is presented as passive, supportive, and infantile or, in other words, feminine.

This aspect of their relationship is amplified through the casting. For example, in the bathroom scene, the nude musculature of Willis towers over the petite physique of de Medeiros, who is swallowed up in a giant bathrobe and towel. Here the paternal Butch reminds the childlike Fabienne not to talk with her mouth full (of toothpaste) and she spits on command. Similarly, Fabienne smiles proudly at earning a ‘Good job, Sugar Pop’, for her success in packing Butch’s luggage, but cowers in tearful terror when reminded of ‘how fucking stupid’ she is for forgetting his father’s watch. As the audience is aware of the absurdity of the watch’s history, it is apparent that the present crisis is caused by an imposed level of feminine ignorance, but Fabienne, faithful to a particular model of femininity, does not even ask for an explanation. As Butch throws both verbal insults and heavy
objects, Fabienne has neither the social status nor physical strength to defend herself. Here Butch takes full advantage of all of the patriarchal power at his disposal. He is the all-powerful man; she is the powerless woman. Because she is powerless, she dutifully and confusedly crumbles in the corner and cries. This exchange is mirrored in their final scene as Butch yells for her to spread her legs over his chopper for an immediate escape without revealing the reasons for their urgent departure. Again confused and overwhelmed by Butch’s completely unexplained anger and anxiety, she is powerless to demand information and once more breaks down in tears. As expected, Butch does not surrender any of the control or knowledge privy to his position as a man, but rather distracts her with trivial questions about her breakfast choices and loving kisses to her neck before again insisting that she straddle his machine and follow him.

This arrangement, in which Butch leads and controls all access to information while Fabienne remains uninformed and willing to spread her legs on demand, is clearly acknowledged by both parties. Fabienne even refers to herself as a potential ‘burden or a nuisance’ if she indeed goes along with him on his getaway and therefore acknowledges openly that her only contribution to their affairs is her presence and availability. Butch simultaneously interrupts and obviates Fabienne’s fears of being a mere encumbrance with an inaudible off-camera gesture that causes Fabienne to moan with erotic pleasure and also therefore to remember her role and usefulness in their risky excursion. She confirms her understanding of this arrangement by responding to Butch’s sexual manoeuvres with ‘L’aventure commence’. Her sexual accessibility to Butch is also evinced through her attire: when in the motel room, to which she is largely contained in the film, she appears in a short, thin dress, a bathrobe, or merely a T-shirt and panties. Furthermore, before the couple engages in erotic activity, Butch first obtains assurance from Fabienne that any sexual gratification he provides her will be fully reciprocated. The film also dedicates considerable screen time to her appearance (including doing her hair and seemingly brushing her teeth throughout the night). She confesses to Butch that while he was out in the world conducting serious business, she was looking at herself in the mirror and contemplating how her body could be sexier. Butch reminds her that her aim should be to achieve what men find attractive.

Fabienne illustrates the importance for women under patriarchy to be, above all other attributes, attractive to men. Although Butch reminds Fabienne ‘how fucking stupid’ she is even in moments when he is not angry (such as immediately after she fulfils her commitment to give him sexual pleasure) the accusation that she is ‘a retard’ is remedied by the acknowledgment that she is attractive. When Butch angers Fabienne by mocking her in his ‘mongoloid voice’, she is quickly appeased by a compliment of her looks, as she likes being called a ‘beautiful tulip’. This is the trade-off between her adherence to patriarchal femininity and his tight control on the privileges of masculinity. He retains the knowledge, information, control, money, and decisiveness while she exists as a beautiful, dependent, and available companion. Indeed, it is at the times when Butch’s rough and active manliness is in the starkest contrast to Fabienne’s passive and submissive femininity that the
audience is encouraged to think she is happiest and most secure, as is exhibited during the initial dialogue between the two when she insists that she ‘like[s] the way [he] stink[s]’ and that they should ‘make spoons’. As she lies passively in bed, waiting, as instructed, for him to return from his active worldly business, she needs to be enveloped in his strength in order to feel secure and protected. Thus, in the act of spooning, Butch both literally and symbolically fills in the spaces where Fabienne lies void.

From a second wave perspective, then, the film offers a clear representation of a woman embodying her own subjugation and powerless to control her own destiny. All of Fabienne’s feminine characteristics situate her as Butch’s inferior subordinate. She has no power in her relationship with Butch, and because she is passive, weak, stupid, infantile, and obsessed with her appearance – that is, feminine – Butch finds her both controllable and desirable. This endorses the patriarchal requirements of femininity that reflect men’s interests and sustain men’s dominance over women.

A third wave feminist reading

Fabienne’s scenes form a stark contrast to the remainder of the film not only because of the acutely gendered differences between this character and others, both male and female, but also because of the control her femininity affords her over her environment. This is most evident in the couple’s initial on-screen interaction, which closely follows but greatly contrasts with Butch’s exchanges with Esmarelda. This taxi driver’s mirroring of Butch’s masculine aggression, violent interests, and assertiveness are consistent with the vintage filming techniques used for Esmarelda’s scenes. As the rear projection of the black and white process shot stylistically places the pair in a 1950s cinematic environment, the only legible display of power or strength available to Esmarelda is to be articulated through masculine performance. Fabienne, however, embodies ideals of femininity that superficially articulate the hegemonic gender requirements and androcentric hierarchies, but are also resources for participating in and manipulating the interpersonal power relations between her and Butch. Fabienne maintains a consistently hyper-feminine persona, which demands of Butch a corresponding form of masculinity and also places limits on their actions and interactions.

Immediately after Butch’s entrance, Fabienne delivers a cliche that simultaneously assesses Butch’s welfare and establishes the boundaries of their discussion: ‘Hard day at the office?’ They continue to banter about his workday, but Butch leaves out the gruesome details. Although this hints at Fabienne’s naïveté, it is clear that although she ‘never listen[s] to [his] fights’, she is fully aware that they are ‘in a lot of danger’ because ‘everything [went] as planned’ and that they will be killed if they are found. It becomes evident that Fabienne’s feminine performance maintains order in her environment and the safe space of their relationship. Her familiarity with the dangers of the mob world or the boxing ring does not penetrate the refuge established by their highly and oppositely gendered exchanges, as she has no
obligation to feign mastery or excessive interest in Butch’s affairs. While this situates her as the naïve girl, it also allows her a position of great mental strength and optimism, insisting that they will not be found and focussing instead on the excitement of picking a destination.

As this performance of femininity shields her from the perversions and violence of the masculine arena from which Butch is fleeing, it also demands of Butch a specific and corresponding form of masculinity. Butch’s interactions with Fabienne are distinctly different from the scenes in which Fabienne is absent. He is encouraged to adopt a masculinity in her presence that, while not being effeminate, is not the one he appropriates with gangsters or even with Esmarelda. Fabienne’s performance of femininity also serves as the policing agent when her partner’s gendered expressions fall out of line. For example, when Butch wakes up as a ‘grumpy man in the morning’, Fabienne does not bark at or lecture him but instead sweetly and playfully teases him and kisses him until he is admittedly ‘satisfied’ and visibly mellowed, at which point he obeys her order that he get his ‘lazy bones’ out of bed so they can get breakfast. When Butch wakes up gruffly complaining about the ‘motorcycle movie’ Fabienne’s decidedly feminine reflection is visible on the television screen. This has the effect of making it appear as if she is in that film, amidst the ‘explosions and war’, and yet larger than and unaffected by the machismo violence that surrounds her, to which she is only attentive ‘in a way’.

Similarly, when Butch realises his father’s watch is missing and hurls the television at the wall and foul insults at Fabienne, she does not yell back in response. She retreats quietly to the corner where she cowers. The crouching and tears are discernable signs of weakness and submissiveness, but they also allow Fabienne to maintain a degree of control in the midst of this chaotic situation. Not bound by masculinity’s requirement of answering violence with aggression, Fabienne is able to express emotions of sadness and to apologise, which quickly makes Butch realise the absurdity of his own actions and call himself back into line. ‘NO! It’s not your fault’, he screams and then begins to blame himself for not making things clear enough for his partner. If femininity is culturally linked to being emotionally expressive, then this aspect of femininity is constructed in hegemonic gender discourse as a sign of weakness. Although Fabienne demonstrates how femininity can sometimes work in an individual woman’s favour, her tearful and cowering display does not really offer any challenge to the hegemonic positioning of women as emotionally weak. However, when we see the effect this has on Butch, within the context of the narrative construction of their relationship to each other, it challenges the notion that crying is a sign of ineffectual weakness and that men are and deserve to be in control.

We see this mirrored in the couple’s final scene together when Butch returns to the motel on Zed’s chopper and yells for Fabienne to jump on the bike with ‘no talking now’. Visibly frightened by his terse demeanour and insulted by his refusal to give her information about their circumstance, she begins to weep. Rather than unconditionally yielding to Butch’s demands, Fabienne refuses to hop on board without answers to her questions and respect for her concerns. Again, she reacts to
his unacceptable and unreasonable orders in a manner that is distinctly feminine and it is clear that Butch’s behaviour is causing her emotional turmoil. This results in Butch checking himself, apologising, and promising to give her all the information she wants. Fabienne’s feminine response evokes sympathy from Butch, and more important, a change in his behaviour. Again, he ends up apologising to her only moments after hurling blame and anger in her direction.

The condescension that can be noted in several of Butch’s interactions with Fabienne is consistent with a male dominant construction of masculinity. However, in their interactions, there are ways in which it works in her favour. Fabienne’s adherence to features of hegemonic femininity serves her in releasing her from any need to engage in a chest-beating or pissing match with Butch. While he is bound by masculine codes of conduct that require him to constantly prove his superior intellect, Fabienne is free to maintain her coy demeanour with no obligation to enter such contests. For example, when Butch’s French lover deliberately suggests they travel to Bora Bora and he informs her she does ‘not speak Bora Boran’ – but ‘Mexican’s easy’ – she smiles amusedly at his errors without compulsion to defend herself. She is obviously aware of his mistake and it is precisely because she does not correct him that she is free to sustain the pleasant excitement of picking a destination. There are glimpses of Fabienne taking on more masculine characteristics and effectively changing Butch’s behaviour. For example, when Butch mimics her from the shower, calling her a ‘retard’, she aggressively silences him because she ‘hate[s] that mongoloid voice’. It is evident that this is not because she fears that she has an inferior intellect, but just because it is demeaning and insulting. Furthermore, she teases Butch when he similarly misunderstands her meaning. Just as she is not certain when Butch reports having hurt his rib, Butch thinks Fabienne is asking about the plot of the movie she’s watching, rather than about the content of his nightmare. She points out the silliness of his misunderstanding, and although in a typically feminine cute and amusing voice, she takes on Butch’s masculinity when she parallels his ‘No, retard, from the fight’, and says, ‘No, imbecile, what was your dream about?’

In some instances, Fabienne says and does things that subvert patriarchal definitions of femininity. She spends time looking in the mirror and contemplating how female bodies differ from male bodies and what makes them sexy. Her focus is not on what women do to attract men but rather on the pleasure and confidence women can find in reworking the trappings of femininity (for example, referencing Madonna). Rather than relating to men and gaining their approval, Fabienne is speaking to the notion that women’s sexy bodies are for themselves. This shifts the meaning of her minimal clothing in most of her scenes. Rather than being a sexual object, her sexy body is positioned as a source of pleasure for her. This also draws attention to Fabienne’s sexual subjectivity, further shifting the meaning of the visual representation of a scantily clad, attractive woman. Fabienne’s sexual subjectivity is further punctuated when she requests that Butch not shower. While Fabienne dedicates excessive time to her cleanliness and appearance, such as meticulously towelling her hair or repeatedly brushing her teeth, she says she ‘like[s] the
way [Butch] stink[s]’ and then requests that he join her in bed before showering because it provides erotic stimulation for her. While this reproduces the idea that women need to obsessively keep themselves clean, it also reveals that women have desires and sexual subjectivities. This is driven home when Fabienne sweetly requests that Butch satisfy her through oral sex and then coyly insists that ladies come first and that her own desires are gratified before Butch’s. While Fabienne’s pleasure is certainly important, from a feminist perspective, the narrative depiction of the pleasure situates Fabienne as a sexual subject and that representation challenges the meaning of hegemonic femininity.

From a third wave feminist perspective, while Butch and Fabienne embody many of the hegemonic models of femininity and masculinity, through the textual production of their relationship to each other, Fabienne’s deployment of femininity to manipulate Butch and to serve her own immediate interests subverts these models. As the narrative unfolds, Fabienne offers counter-hegemonic messages about the potential uses of femininity and thus, its value to women. Fabienne’s enactment of girlie-ness allows her to manipulate Butch to get her needs met. While Fabienne, the character, does little to re-invent the normative expectations attached to femininity, *Pulp Fiction* as a text offers counter-hegemonic meanings for the use and value of femininity.4

**Conclusion**

Through two different readings of the same text, we have shown two important theoretical distinctions between second and third wave feminism. We posit that each conceptualises femininity differently and that these definitions reveal fundamentally different theories of power. In a second wave feminist reading, Fabienne’s femininity reflects and perpetuates her subordination to Butch who, as a man, holds both physical and masculine power. Fabienne is powerless and her femininity reflects this. We suggested the film not only offers a patriarchal representation of femininity, but also endorses it as a legitimate rationale for Butch’s control over information and management and, ultimately, over Fabienne herself. A third wave feminist reading would be in agreement with the second wave assertion that Fabienne embodies hegemonic femininity. However, from a third wave feminist perspective, we argued that the film offered a counter-hegemonic narrative in that it showed how Fabienne could strategically use her femininity to get her needs met and to manipulate Butch.

Through showing the strategic potential of femininity, the text undermines broader constructions of femininity as inferior to masculinity and instead posits femininity as something of value. Reading the hyperbolic gender dichotomy of Fabienne and Butch’s filmic relationship, we have illustrated not only the distinct way each perspective defines femininity and its role in gender relations, but also the fundamental theories of power from which these viewpoints arise. In doing so, we have begun to model a third wave feminist theoretical framework. Unpacking the Foucauldian features of third wave
feminist theories of power as relational, dynamic, and multidirectional allows us to both describe and explain a third wave feminist relationship to femininity as a potential resource for not only manipulating interpersonal power dynamics, but also undermining broader relations of inequality by redefining the meaning of femininity as something of value or by undermining the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity.

This article, then, contributes to the continued development of a coherent third wave theoretical framework and adds clarification to foundational theoretical differences between second and third wave feminism. Given the theoretical agenda of this article, we have chosen not to evaluate the different readings. Instead, we have illustrated their similarities and differences through an analysis of the theoretical frameworks. We hope that this article will similarly compel others to identify underlying or explicit theories of power operating in a text or action as this will be far better than questions of generation or publication date when making distinctions between second and third wave feminism. We suspect that this sort of approach to feminist work will reveal that second wave theoretical perspectives on femininity and power cut across generations and that many feminists were utilising a third wave feminist theoretical model for embodied femininity and power long before generational distinctions between second and third wave feminism were articulated by self-identified third wave feminists.

Notes

1. By contrast, a post-feminist perspective as one that defines femininity as an individual choice and source of confidence and feelings of self-empowerment (Whelehan, 1995; Gill, 2007; Hanson, 2007). While there is some overlap between third wave and post feminisms in terms of defining femininity as a surface performance of circulating discourses about what a woman should be, the key difference between the two is the assumed context in which the performance is taken up. Third wave feminism, like second wave feminism, places performance in broader relations of inequality (Butler’s performativity) while post-feminism places performance within the context of individual choice and feelings about those choices. Here, femininity is a set of practices from which women can pick and choose. The feminist potential of femininity here then is that it can make women proud, confident, and happy. A post-feminist definition of femininity is one that defines femininity as a surface performance, that claims that performance as a matter of individual choice, that emphasises pleasure derived from a celebration of girlie-ness, and, crucially, does not acknowledge broader relations of systemic and structural gender inequalities.

2. Here we are focussing less on Foucault’s early work on disciplinary power and more on his later articulation of power as a complex web of force relations negotiated through multiple and sometimes contradictory strategies or tactics. For a useful discussion of the contrasts between Marxist and Foucauldian models of power and the implications of this difference for feminism, see Biddy Martin (1988).

3. By contrast, post-feminism defines power in terms of feelings of empowerment (Gill, 2007). Ignoring or rejecting systemic or structural power relations, post-feminism’s theory of power is decidedly individual and determined by how one feels. Because of
this, we would argue that a coherent theory of systemic power is absent from a post-feminist perspective and excludes it from feminist theories of power more generally.

4. Although not the focus of this article, a post-feminist reading is one that would emphasise how much femininity can be a source of joy, sensuality, and self-confidence for women. For example, Fabienne states quite clearly that she chooses to accentuate her feminine body because it makes her feel sexy and attractive. She '[doesn’t] give a damn what men find attractive’, but would ‘wear a T-shirt two sizes too small to accentuate’ a feminine pot belly if she had one. Fabienne says that a pot belly on a woman is ‘very sexy’ whereas on a male body it would be ‘oafish or like a gorilla’. Sexiness is here understood that women have at their disposal in a way that men do not. Fabienne emphasises that what makes her look and feel sexy is unavailable to men and thus, is a source of pleasure and feelings of power. While in some ways a post-feminist reading is similar to a third wave reading in the sense that femininity is used as a point of leverage, unlike a third wave reading, however, a post-feminist reading would focus less on the movie text as embedded within and part of a broader construction of gender meanings and hierarchies or even on the interpersonal power dynamics between the two characters. Instead, a post-feminist reading would emphasise how the text shows how femininity is available to women as a source of confidence and empowerment.

References


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