

5 Back to the Future of Post-Feminist Film:

Hallmark, Netflix, and the “New” Woman’s Holiday

Film

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Abstract

Within the context of shifting dialogues around feminism and women’s roles at work and home, and an increasing recognition of racial and sexual diversity within these conversations, this chapter considers the resurgent popularity of the holiday rom-com genre, which, at its core, follows post-feminist narrative conventions. Examining the genre’s trademark emphasis on plotlines that follow the journey of women leaving urban spaces and high-paced careers in favor of simpler lives and small-town love, this chapter looks at *The Holiday Sitter* (Hallmark, 2022), *Boyfriends of Christmas Past* (Hallmark, 2021), *Single All the Way* (Netflix, 2021), and *The Holiday Calendar* (Netflix, 2018) to explore how the holiday film, as a genre, responds to a changed and changing landscape. To do so, it takes up the theory of the gimmick, asking: what persists and what is amended in these films in the wake of broader feminist activist awareness? How have narrative conventions shifted, if at all, to appeal to a newer generation of women and queer audiences? Overall, this chapter argues that the negotiating power of the audience, as they grapple with the contradictions and ambivalence of late capitalism and post-feminism, is one of the key appeals of the genre.

The 2022 holiday season was a banner year for Christmas movie production across a number of streaming and network services. Entertainment magazine *Vulture* reported that, in 2022 alone, 153 new holiday films could be found across 25 “television networks and streaming services” (Wittmer). Another report observed that, “You’d have to watch roughly 3 new holiday movies every single day in November and December” to cover all the offerings

from services the likes of Hallmark, Netflix, Lifetime, and Amazon Prime (White). Hallmark alone released 37 new movies for its 2022 “Countdown to Christmas” programming, premiering its roster of films on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays from late October to late December. Similarly, Netflix offered its “Season’s Streaming” line-up with a mix of over 60 new and old holiday films, including the strategic release of new films and limited TV series over the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Hallmark was born from the merging of two Christian television channels in the early 2000s and, as such, faces particular constraints in its programming based on audience desires and expectations. The production of neatly packaged Christmas-themed entertainment makes a good deal of sense given the larger history of the company. The original owners of the company, the Hall brothers, popularized greeting cards in envelopes, inventing the use of card display racks in stores and wrapping paper in 1917. Later, in the 1970s, the brothers developed a keepsake line of Christmas ornaments that kept their holiday business momentum going (Murtaugh). The Hallmark channel itself officially launched in 2001, kickstarting the company’s ties to mass entertainment in televisual form. Presently, in addition to Hallmark’s greeting card lines, multiple channels of holiday content, and year-round movie selections, the company also offers thematic merchandise tied to its most popular Christmas movies, including branded mugs, throw blankets, leisure wear, wine glasses, and a wine subscription service. This far-reaching merchandizing strategy cemented Hallmark’s place in the Christmas market, making abundantly clear the capitalist ties between selling goods and selling a lifestyle brand. As the characters and plotline of each movie promote a set of “must have” markers of festive living and celebration, the company provides these very consumer goods for purchase. Through this, viewers can emulate the spectacle of the Christmas lifestyle in full display.

The mass-produced holiday films of the present largely evolved from Hallmark’s earlier Christmas TV specials, which began in 1951 under the “Hallmark Hall of Fame” series—a series that Hallmark itself has dubbed “TV’s Longest Running and Most Award Winning” (“About the Hallmark Hall of Fame”). The first-ever special, *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (1951), is a Biblical opera about a disabled boy who encounters the Three Magi and is miraculously healed. Between 1952 and 1957, reruns of *Amahl* and broadcasts of Shakespearean plays were played. When Hallmark aired *The Christmas Tree* (The Christmas Tree (1958)) in 1958, the company set a model for the return to such programming later on with the emergence of the “Countdown to Christmas” in 2009. This model has simultaneously impacted how other production companies direct their efforts toward the holiday genre in an effort, as per Hallmark’s more recent influences, to appeal to largely women audiences.

As Staples (2023) has noted, despite being declared all but dead less than a decade ago, streaming services have been responsible for the resurgence of the romantic comedy genre, of which the holiday film is a popular off-shoot. While Netflix has neither the history nor the scope that the Hallmark brand and its consumer offerings do, it has been steadily producing and streaming holiday-themed movies for the past five years. With its beginnings in DVD-by-mail in the late 1990s, and influenced by the dot com bubble, Netflix has, at its core, always been about curated viewing selection. Subscribers browsed and ordered film options online from their homes; DVDs were then sent out and returned via the U.S. Postal Service, with no late fees as Netflix's claim to fame at the time. In 2007, Netflix gradually moved over to its online streaming service, showing television series and films produced by other companies. Soon after, in 2011, it began setting out a budget for its own original programming, which began in 2013 with *House of Cards* (2013–2018). As of 2018, the streaming service has taken on the project of screening in-house produced films in earnest, increasing the number of Christmas productions the company has produced each year since. Although Hallmark has strict regulations (lower budgets, tight production schedules, and Christian-centered narrative themes), Netflix has, in comparison, far fewer constraints with budget, timelines, or storylines (Frielander, 2020; Hirose, McLachlan, 2022; Wronski, 2020).

With the rush to add more holiday content in the last five years, Hallmark and competing streaming services (like Netflix and Lifetime) have made efforts to address the heteronormative, upper-middle class, evangelical, white-centered narratives that have dominated the genre to this point (Murtaugh; St. James). This chapter explores how, as a genre, the holiday movie responds to the changing cultural landscape of the last decade. Specifically, we explore the role of the holiday film within contemporary dialogues of feminism and the necessary push to include racial and sexual diversity within these conversations. We look at *The Holiday Sitter* (Hallmark, 2022), *Boyfriends of Christmas Past* (Hallmark, 2021), *Single All the Way* (Netflix, 2021), and *The Holiday Calendar* (Netflix, 2018) to consider what persists and what is amended in this shifting focus within the genre. Arguably, the extent to which the holiday genre formula changes toward more progressive ends depends on the production and distribution context of the holiday film. Even so, across the different production contexts, current gestures toward representational inclusion do little to challenge the long-standing narrative tropes of the genre. Instead, we find standardized plotlines with queer, racialized, and/or politically aware characters playing out the same old stories.

What begs greater attention, however, is the ambivalence of contemporary audiences toward these holiday films and the subsequent conversations they inspire in online spaces. This audience ambivalence is often centered around the

“gimmicks” (Ngai) that such films produce, or, the generic conventions they uphold that everyone loves to hate. For Ngai, the gimmick is an aesthetic phenomenon that is specific to capitalism and key to the process through which we, as audiences, make aesthetic value judgments on varying kinds of visual content. The gimmick is a cheap trick, recognizable for the very fact that it is, indeed, cheap and a trick, and for what audiences are supposed to take away from it. It becomes a shortcut, a metonym for cultural experience and expectations. For instance, the majority of holiday films include a Christmas market that characters visit with family or friends; it is often the site of either meaningful or comically awkward encounters with budding romantic interests. The Christmas market is a backdrop for the narrative that itself provides a series of props to move the story along, while also signifying the consumer comfort of Christmas treats, outdoor fires, holiday displays, and fresh air. It presents these as timeless elements of holiday experience while simultaneously making them an integral component of the collective holiday experience. We, as audiences, are privy to the trick that we should buy into these ideologies and, at the same time, are willing to buy in. We are both seduced by the magic and repelled by the holiday tropes we come to expect. In grappling with such ambivalence alongside Sianne Ngai’s *gimmick*, we suggest that such gimmicks hold great value for understanding our broader negotiations with neoliberal consumer lifestyles and how these play out in our holiday film viewing experiences.

The move by Netflix to enter Hallmark’s holiday film stronghold is an advance shared by many other companies that have also begun to include a fuller catalog of holiday films, bringing a greater audience and critical attention to the genre. One place where this is especially notable is from feminist audiences and scholars. The rise of fourth-wave feminism, with its digital focus and drive for justice-oriented politics, has caused many critics, audiences, and scholars to collectively critique the post-feminist neoliberal values upheld in early 2000s popular culture and largely reflected in the holiday genre (Banet-Weiser; Chamberlain; Keller and Ryan; McRobbie). Diane Negra’s book *What a Girl Wants?* illustrates how early 2000s films for women audiences advance an ethos of post-feminism that is regressive in its gender politics. Post-feminism’s emphasis on a “white and middle class” lifestyle that positions “consumption as a strategy for the production of the self” troublingly ensures that “other kinds of social difference are glossed over” (Negra and Tasker 2). In the current moment, post-feminism blends popular forms of “girl power” feminism with a “boss babe” ethos that focuses more on branded slogans than advancing strategies for combating social and political inequities.

Many examples of popular media since at least 2015 have shifted away from such post-feminist paradigms and begun offering more explicitly feminist protagonists and plotlines (MacDonald 2019; 2021). This can be seen in every genre from superhero and fantasy (*Jessica Jones*, Netflix 2015–2019; *Black Widow*, 2021; *The Woman King*, 2022), to historical drama (*Far from the Maddening Crowd*, 2015; *Lady MacBeth*, 2016; *Little Women*, 2019), to coming-of-age comedies (*Lady Bird*, 2017; *Book Smart*, 2019; *Sex Education*, 2019–). The digital circulation of feminist politics to the broader publics has resulted in greater online feminist conversations about gendered inequities. Keeping this in mind, what then can we make of the seemingly contradictory resurgence of holiday movies, which, at their core, uphold post-feminist narrative conventions? To address this contradiction, we suggest it is useful to think through how holiday films simultaneously circulate post-feminist and more progressive, intersectional feminist politics. For us, the key to this is found in the recognizable gimmicks, or expected holiday tropes, of the genre.

The Holiday Genre and Its Gimmicks

The holiday genre marks a long festive season of consumption (on many levels) that extends well beyond the month of December. In doing so, it provides viewers with a collective experience through which they can both celebrate and commiserate about the advanced capitalist impulses of contemporary holiday culture and the drive for glossed-over seasonal lifestyle perfection. Hallmark Christmas movies are where “there is always snow on the ground, where togetherness is the word to live by, where the horrors of the world reliably subside amid the flurries of a beautiful snowstorm” (St. James). In this way, the holiday genre is “a form of aesthetic expression ... [with] the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated” (Berlant 4). One antagonism that the holiday genre negotiates aesthetically is that between feminism and consumerism. The push and pull between the stock tropes of the holiday film—which are readily outlined and somewhat parodied by the range of “Hallmark Bingo” games available online—exemplify this genre as a site of contention.

Viewing audiences in recent years have taken to social media to “meme-ify” their thoughts on the genre, thus creating a viral paratextual digital discourse. Many social media users in the 2022 season humorously commented on the formula of most holiday films: a woman unhappy with particular aspects of her single, career-focused life falls in

love and finds meaning in small-town domestic bliss. As one Twitter user put it, “I fell asleep halfway into a Hallmark holiday movie, then woke up halfway through another. It took me 30 minutes to notice”

(@English_Channel 2022). Another popular Twitter thread takes aim at the chaos facing Twitter after its purchase by Elon Musk in November 2022 and describes a potential new plot where a newly fired Twitter employee heads to their parent’s small town and meets a single sexy carpenter (@CethanLeahy 2022). The point of these paratextual in-jokes is that the plots and themes are largely interchangeable. They are then the genre’s central gimmick; it is post-feminism par excellence. It is asking us to root for the urban, high-powered career woman in her move to a simple domestic existence—a trope that has been around since the 1980s, if not earlier, in a variety of media forms (for example, *Who’s the Boss*, ABC 1984–1992; *Baby Boom*, 1987; *Steel Magnolias*, 1989; and Nora Roberts and other trade romance novels). Women audiences have had an equally long-standing negotiation with the ideologies on offer (Modleski; Radway). There is an interchangeability of plots that works across a variety of late-capitalist landscapes, from the Reagan-era recession to the economic and political instability of the 2020s.

How this is negotiated becomes a point of interest—not only through humorous send-ups around the predictability of plot but also with the more pointed critiques of the genre that arise in social media discourse. Many posts over the 2022 holiday season hinted at reversing the narrative so that the high-powered city girl *stayed* in the city. For example, @caitiedelaney writes, “writing a Hallmark Christmas movie about a woman who leaves her cozy small town life and carpenter husband for a corporate job in the big city. In the last scene she takes a lean cuisine out of the microwave, sighs contentedly in her studio apartment and thinks ‘I’m finally free.’” Other reverse narratives include a small-town boy going to the city and starting to hate Christmas after falling in love with a career woman (@kellicopter). In flipping the script quite literally, these paratexts intervene on the ideological assumptions that small-town living, with its indexical relationship to domesticity and traditional values, is preferable. They show instead that it is constraining and undesirable. This is echoed in a tweet that notes Mrs. Claus was a city girl who made the mistake of going home for the holidays and ended up stuck. The punchline of the joke is “900 years later her life is a living hell” (@RachelShukert). Another version of this is a request by one social media user for a film to be made about a mom who ends up lighting the tree on fire because no one appreciates the labor she puts into making the holidays festive (@GrandpaHarris65). Here the narrative flip is more direct: women trapped by Christmas domestic bliss are in hell and resorting to arson. This digital conversation, we argue, illustrates audiences that are working out their ambivalence around what the genre offers (joy) and what it actually delivers (ideological

constraints). We argue that this is even more striking given the fact that this online conversation took place at a time when more diverse narratives were on offer across the streaming and network programming.

Holiday films thus become a useful genre for interrogating cultural ambivalence around mass-produced entertainment and capitalism more generally. Such films have been described colloquially as “ridiculous, smooth-brained holiday cinema” (Wittmer) that is both “vaguely timeless” and “applicable to whatever time of year it is *right now*” (St. James). As such, it is worth asking why this is a genre that many both love and hate in equal measure. Indeed, why are the tropes, or what we frame as the “gimmicks” (Ngai) of the genre (tree decorating, missed opportunities, pageants, caroling, snow fall, baking, and *the* kiss before the credits roll) so comforting and also so “cringe” to their targeted demographics, which are socially engaged and *very* online. There is an audience faithfully watching these films, but their viewing experience is one of oppositional and negotiated readings (Hall 1973) that respond directly to the retrograde gendered ideologies inherent to the genre’s plotlines. We argue this viewing ambivalence points to one of the larger appeals of the holiday genre: a collective negotiation with the contradictions of late-capitalist existence and their ties to post-feminist ideologies. The genre offers “an aesthetic structure of affective expectations” that promises audiences “the pleasure of encountering what they expected” (Berlant 4). And yet it equally evokes frustrations around the constraints embedded in such expected outcomes. And if the social media discourse outlined above is any indication, the holiday genre offers forms of pleasure that simultaneously reinscribe the forms of gendered ideologies that induce ambivalence. Why then are there growing trends in popularity within the genre? Further, what kinds of pleasure does it also afford? As Christine Gledhill argues, “the question of how to understand the life of films in the social is paramount” (221). Taking this seriously, what is the social that is reflected in the holiday genre?

To address these questions, we look at four holiday films released during the last five years on the Hallmark channel and on Netflix. We begin with the first films from these companies to feature gay male leads, *The Holiday Sitter* (Hallmark, 2022), and *Single All The Way* (Netflix, 2021). In *The Holiday Sitter*, Sam Dalton (Jonathan Bennett) agrees to babysit his niece and nephew in the lead-up to Christmas and, in the process, falls in love with Jason DeVito (George Krissa), the man next door. In *Single All the Way*, Peter (Michael Urie) leaves a heartbreak and his high-powered job in the city to go home for Christmas in a small town in New Hampshire. He convinces his best friend and roommate Nick (Philemon Chambers) to come as a fake boyfriend to keep his family off his back. When

he gets home, his mom sets him up with James (Luke Macfarlane), a personal trainer and ski instructor, which creates a tricky love triangle.

Next, we examine one of Hallmark's first films to star a racialized main character, *Boyfriends of Christmas Past* (2021), and one of Netflix's earlier films featuring a cast of Black main characters, *The Holiday Calendar* (2018). In *Boyfriends of Christmas Past*, Lauren Kim (Catherine Haena Kim) is an ambitious advertising executive who is close to her dad (Paul Sun-Hyung Lee) and step-mom (Susan Hanson) and close group friends. Her best friend, Nate Sagar (Raymond Ablack), an orphan who runs a community center, is in love with the commitment-phobic Lauren. The movie is a twist on the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol*, as four of Lauren's boyfriends from the past visit her so she can see her pattern of breaking people's hearts and avoiding the pain of her mother leaving her and her dad one Christmas in her childhood. In *The Holiday Calendar*, Abby Sutton (Kat Graham) is facing the existential question of how to leave a series of jobs that "feed the belly, not the soul" for her true passion—photography—when her Gramps (Ron Cephas Jones) gifts her a holiday calendar that once belonged to her grandmother. At the same time, Abby's best friend Josh Barton (Quincy) returns to their small town from his work as a travel photographer just as she meets the town's most eligible bachelor. Boggled down by the realities of the gig economy, missing her now-passed mother, and mired in a love triangle, Abby must face the difficulties of mustering up Christmas cheer.

These four films share crucial narrative overlaps: friends-to-lovers trajectories, close knit and supportive intergenerational extended families, and high-pressure jobs paired with at least one main character's desire to follow a different career path. We also find charming small-town Christmases, magical interventions, and last-minute declarations of love. Each film also includes standard gimmicks of the genre: snow, holiday pageants, holiday baking, and caroling. Through a consideration of these overlapping narrative gimmicks, we explore how different production models negotiate shifting audience desires for more diverse storylines within the holiday rom-com genre. We consider how Hallmark and Netflix respond to a desire for more diverse plotlines and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ and racialized characters, and how they still have much further to go.

Ambivalence, Capitalism, and Time in the Rom-Com Genre

In holiday films, gimmicks like the Christmas market or decorating a tree “embod[y] [a] significant temporal contradiction of capitalism ... a perpetual present ... and a relentlessly ongoing historical continuity” (Ngai 487-488). The gimmick saves on time and labor through metonymic shortcuts, and in doing so, lessens the value of the aesthetic experience in the critical eyes of its ambivalent audience (Ngai 470). It is not lost on us that time, labor, and value are also core concerns of feminism. This shared set of concepts between the gimmick and feminism is useful to think about within the holiday genre. Part of the appeal of holiday films is their perpetual reference to nostalgic Christmas experiences and “simpler times” as possibilities in the present. The films overvalue practices of capitalism and gender-normative domesticity as desirable. In doing so, they reinforce consumer lifestyles and post-feminist ideals even in moments of transformational feminist politics such as we see in the present. Post-feminist renderings of late capitalism are a central plot point of holiday films. It is both the evil character to fight against and, contradictorily, the soothing payoff at the end. This is clear in the narrative resolutions found in all four of the films we consider in this chapter.

In *The Holiday Sitter*, the final scenes show workaholic Sam realizing he loves Jason, the handsome neighbor, and imply that he is going to leave his city life to move in with Jason, who lives next door to Sam’s sister, brother-in-law, niece, and nephew, and across from Jason’s parents. This cements the block as the hub of a now massive and joint extended family. By confirming his love for Jason, Sam also commits to being part of the adoption process that Jason has longed for and formally just begun. The story shows an arc from hopelessly unmaternal big-city uncle to pending domestic fatherhood in a small town. In *Single All the Way*, Peter and Nick resolve to leave Los Angeles to be closer to Peter’s family. Peter opens a plant store in the quaint downtown, with the first six months of rent being paid for by Nick as a Christmas gift to Peter. Nick decides to refocus on his children’s book writing career, which has been at a standstill. When they announce their plans to Peter’s family on Christmas Day, there is clapping and tears of joy from everyone, with Peter’s mom declaring this to be the best Christmas present ever. Similarly, *The Holiday Calendar* follows Abby, who is caught in a love triangle and endless jobs but ends up choosing her best friend as “the one” before they go on to fulfill their shared lifelong dream of owning a photography studio—shown as opening at Christmas one year later. In the closing scenes of *Boyfriends of Christmas Past*, Lauren finally sees the truth of her commitment-phobia and rushes to tell Nate she loves him, just in the nick of time. The final scene shows them one year later at her father’s house for the annual Kim family Christmas potluck, where Nate proposes marriage and Lauren happily says yes. In all these resolutions, the outcome is a promise of domestic bliss, greater

connection with family, and a more fulfilling job that moves away from a soulless corporate life and toward supporting small-town economic growth.

Representationally, there is much to celebrate here. Two of the films champion and normalize family and community support for long-term queer relationships (Sam and Jason from *The Holiday Sitter* and Nick and Peter from *Single All the Way*). Three of the films include racialized romantic leads (Nick from *Single All the Way*, Abby and Josh from *The Holiday Calendar*, and Lauren and Nate from *Boyfriends of Christmas Past*) and two showcase interracial couples (Nick and Peter and Lauren and Nate), of which there is an absolute dearth in the genre overall. Three of the films depict the main characters suffering from grind culture in the workplace and the gig economy. However, these representational considerations remain within a firm generic structure that asserts only one way to assuage social inequities and struggles: domestic partnership. This is what leaves many audiences ambivalent—the concerns match the times, but the resolutions do not do the same, instead offering one systemic answer as the response to a different systemic problem. Key here, however, is the ambivalence embedded in our relationship to the gimmick themselves, which are something “we marvel at *and* distrust, admire *and* disdain” (Ngai 469). For viewers, these generic tropes are both “enchanting and repulsive” (472). The crux for viewers is that it “irritates and charms us” by how “it seems to both work too hard and too little” (472). Hallmark and other holiday films trade extensively in the gimmick and its corresponding narrative limitations.

Take, as another example, the recurring tropes found across the four films, which include a holiday pageant, a Christmas market, family holiday baking or holiday dinners, the buying or decorating of a Christmas tree, and, of course, falling snow. These become irritating in the sense that we see them over and over again as variations on a theme. Their recurrence does little to expand the conventions of the genre. But they also deliver for us what the genre promises overall: a beautifully packaged holiday landscape to vicariously experience and hope for in our own holiday traditions. The holiday genre is, in the clearest sense, a set of procedural narratives with a distinctly “operational aesthetic” (Ngai 470). This is readily found within the standardized plotlines and visual cues. There must be snow, and decorating Christmas trees is a sacred affair, often shown in a soft-lit montage with solemn music and the remembrance of an absent family member. There are night markets and tree lighting ceremonies that bring the community together in hope; there are last-minute revelations of love and mild obstacles the main character must overcome to declare their love. Finally, of course, there is one single, passionate kiss right before the credits. This laundry list of gimmicks underscores how a greater diversity of plotlines and the inclusion of queer and racialized

characters does, indeed, offer the representation that audiences crave, but is still asked to fit within a standardized script.

A striking example of this lies in the heteronormative gendered divisions that remain firmly in place in both *The Holiday Sitter* and *Single All the Way*, despite both films depicting same-sex romances. Peter and Sam Dalton, as one of the main characters in each film, are situated as more effeminate and take on the traditional role of the woman in holiday films. They both struggle with the demands of their high-powered jobs that take them away from family and love. They are neither handymen (Peter) nor domestically inclined (Sam), but they fall for men who are. Their counterparts (Nick and James for Peter in *Single All the Way*, and Jason for Sam in *The Holiday Sitter*) are more stereotypically masculine. Nick and Jason make a living with their carpentry and handyman skills respectively (although, importantly, Nick is also a children's author, which is used to point to the fullness of his character). James is a fitness and ski instructor. All three are more ruggedly handsome and provide grounded, caring support to their love interests, who are depicted as more excessive and emotionally overwrought.

Further, the films themselves are a gimmick tied into not just the branding or marketing of a lifestyle company like Hallmark, but a branding of Christmas itself as something that has an aesthetic imperative tied to forms of time, labor, and value. The characters move through an endless assembly line of Christmas-related experiences or events in order to "make" Christmas in narrative form. We labor in our watching of them, and they become part of our own experience checklist—a perpetual cycle of consumption as a form of leisure labor. The events we see characters participate in on-screen start seeping into a normalized version of how we "do" Christmas offscreen. What we value shifts to keep up with the idealized holidays of these movies. If we read holiday film plots themselves as gimmick, we must then ask, as Ngai does: "[w]hat is being registered about a shared world . . . in this ambivalent, if mostly negative judgment?" or more succinctly, "why are gimmicks almost comically irritating?" (466). Perhaps it is because the gimmick lays bare our complicated interpellation as viewers; it draws us in by giving us what we know we want (475), and yet for many the base post-feminist neoliberal capitalism of the genre is something we don't necessarily wish to be associated with. It is a shortcut to a quick affective fix—a satisfaction that in the consumerist rush of the holidays, which we dutifully march through as "laborers" of a sort in the midst of political, economic, and climate chaos, there are spaces where all's well that ends well. On some level, the holiday film is a gimmick that merely comments on, and makes palatable, the gimmick of the commercial Christmas experience itself.

Conclusion

Despite queer representations and more racially diverse casting, the range of holiday films we consider here offers narratives that are neither new nor all that progressive. Indeed, despite the short-lived excitement of seeing a trailer for a new holiday film promoting such themes, they offer us a gimmicky distraction from a repeated set of older post-feminist narratives in a revised form. In this, the films stick closely to the holiday romance playbook and the gendered ideals it enforces. While such films tackle issues of underrepresentation and do make gains by virtue of including queer relationships and racialized actors, we bear witness to the same story lines over and over again. What this suggests, then, similar to other industry attempts for equity, diversity, and inclusion within their spheres, is the very real issue that very few to no supports exist for building or stretching the canvas, to include—and support—different stories, beliefs, and ways of being, and to imagine new worlds that more creatively envision new subjectivities and narratives. Attempts to build in greater diversity don't fully materialize given their inherent ties to a post-feminist ethos that often stereotypes and erases racialized characters and traditions that aren't easily incorporated into existing white, heteronormative structures.

Gimmicks, instead, offer us a way to negotiate the themes of the season. While we don't expect perfection from holiday films and television series, we do wish for more nuance, an awareness of the genre's trappings, and, of course, a gimmicky line or two from the media we love (and love to hate). At the same time, maybe it is the fate of these films to embrace post-feminism because, really, it is all we have time for. Within the genre of holiday films, it is possible that all we can ask for is the space to sit in ambivalence, beginning to ask the questions that need to be asked before we can move into critical awareness. And we need these films to do so. We need the gimmicks packed and served in a tight 90 minutes so that we can ask what is overlooked in the judgments that are ignored. We crave the holiday romance, hot chocolate, and cheesy good cheer so that we might explore what spaces can emerge when we crack open the relationships between characters, tropes, identities, and contexts, and to question and reframe the economies of visibility that arise when we gather and watch these films and comment on the absurdity of loving a film that has been touted as "oh, so bad." But, perhaps, that's the point: to bring us together, warm drinks and popcorn in hand, to assemble in one space with one task, temporarily forgetting the looming stresses of everyday life. So sure, the holiday film may not be entirely new, but the digital conversations that take place and the social and political contexts under which we consume their narratives and long for fleeting reprieves from the pressures of

the world are. Perhaps, then, this consumption and subsequent refusal of tired tropes and frustrating norms is the moment to imagine what might be otherwise—what might, indeed, be feminist.

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