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# Review of *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood*

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**Abstract**
Hannah Hamad's timely work on the topic of fatherhood in film reckons that men are getting a very good deal in this postfeminist era and heroic mothers are everywhere in abeyance.

**Keywords:** Masculinity, fatherhood, gender

# Review of Hannah Hamad, *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary U.S. Film: Framing Fatherhood*. London & New York: Routledge, 2014. 189pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-89992-5 (hbk)

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Who would honestly trade pop Liam Neeson in *Taken* (Morel, 2008) for mom Meryl Streep in *August: Osage County* (Wells, 2013)? Nobody in their right mind, according to current cinema output. It may seem an unfair question, but Hannah Hamad's timely work on the topic of fatherhood in film reckons that men are getting a very good deal in this postfeminist era and heroic mothers are everywhere in abeyance. In short, there has been a resurgent interest in masculinity (and the best roles for women in the past year have been a disturbed woman - and stepmother - talking to herself in *Blue Jasmine* (Allen, 2012) and a bereaved mother talking to herself in *Gravity* (Cuaron, 2012).) Paternalism is on the rise: it's (de)construction time again. The author of this study sets out her view that postfeminist fatherhood is the hegemonic masculinity operating in contemporary American cinema and does so in compelling style, arguing that even the most abject of males can recover his reputation and achieve redemption through the simple expedient of becoming a parent.

The book commences by introducing the concept of paternal postfeminist melancholia, a register of universality and political evasiveness which underpins much cinematic production. Cultural logic determines the content and reception of Hollywood films, as Hamad rightly avers, even through happenstance. The immediate aftermath of 9/11 proved a tipping point for male retreatism, with a particular cluster of productions in 2002 highlighting and privileging


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traumatized fatherhood. The knock-on effect of heroic paternal figures has dominated cinema ever since, with an honourable exception being the cycle of superhero films from the 2010s in which overloaded filial figures dominate their respective narratives. The author casts her interrogative eye over many films and cycles prior to the Noughties and returns to the absolutely contemporary in order to prove her point that this is a stage in a continuum with quite a history, identifying *Kramer Vs. Kramer* (Benton, 1979) as the foundational text.

Contextualising her analysis over five primary headings, the author contemporizes her argument utilizing intersectionalities of fatherhood with the past; paternal protectionism; aging masculinity; immature masculinity; and postracial discourse. This transverse approach enables the author to examine clusters of thematically similar films with tropes that straddle many genres and analyses many aspects of contemporary films with a shared affective mode of melancholy in a series of case studies. Hamad is generous in attributing influence to her work, citing very recent output by authors such as Sarah Projansky, Benjamin Brabon, Diane Negra, Yvonne Tasker and Tania Modleski, as well as casting a daughterly nod to Susan Faludi, whose *Backlash* (1993) is the mother of much recent postfeminist output, heralding a much-needed focus on the articulating and recuperating of male subjectivities whilst motherhood, family and the feminine are derogated. Pastness invokes nostalgia whilst also excusing male excess, so the spectre of Mel Gibson with a large brood in *The Patriot* (Emmerich, 2000) is both diegetically consistent and relevant to the postfeminist era in which single fatherhood is privileged (the wife being conveniently dead) in a dualistic theoretical onslaught achieved with concise logic. This configuration is seen across the epic and the western, and is echoed in those post-9/11 dramas which highlight paternal protectionism in otherwise divergent narratives of


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disaster, apocalypse, alien invasion, the supernatural, search-and-rescue (including *Finding Nemo*, a Disney/Pixar animation, 2003) and vigilanteism.

The poster boy for immature masculinity is of course Adam Sandler, who begat the likes of Seth Rogen, Bradley Cooper *et al*, arising in the eruption of the bromance, a genre all its own and a hyperhomosocial sphere of apparently irreconcilable differences operating within the perfect fantasy world of man-child comedy in which immaturity is countered or offset by ameliorative paternity (and inbuilt ideological uncertainty). Sandler's own star is now somewhat on the wane – perhaps pushing him into the sphere of aging masculinity. The latter is a fascinating offshoot of Eighties cinema now that Stallone, Ford and Willis have all had unpredictable late-career successes. This is also virtually a genre unto itself, so quick in its evolution that it is already parodying its own existence in such films as the *Red* and *Expendables* franchises which send up action hero retirees with more than a knowing wink. (The presence of Helen Mirren in the former lends a certain gender balance to a complimentary portrait of balding old men). Dominating these films is the affective mode of melodrama, which finds its most acute expression in Clint Eastwood's male weepies, a cycle which the star has in large part directed himself having spent most of his career in white crisis. Sofia Coppola's *Somewhere* (2006) offers a typically ambivalent take on immaturity's brush with melancholy paternity in this sub-genre. Race is counteracted by the transcendent figure of Will Smith, the neoliberal crossover actor *par excellence*, who refers to his extra-filmic paternity in his work by casting his own son (and occasionally his daughter) in a number of his films. This is a marked departure from the ghettocentric dramas initiated by *Boyz in the Hood* (Singleton, 1991) simultaneously sidestepping thorny issues of both Moynihanism and racism in apolitical deracinated upwardly mobile suburbs.


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The volume as a whole might feel slightly repetitious but that stems from its origins in a cinematic meta-text which is now so widespread and formulaic as to feel routine to the average cinemagoer, proliferating and accreting across every popular genre and only being challenged, if at all, in an occasional 'independent' production such as *Away We Go* (Mendes, 2009). As the author herself states, "postfeminist fatherhood recuperates deficient masculinities at various stages of the male lifecycle across the spectrum of popular cinema" (p.91).

Hamad's final chapter addresses issues that couldn't be contained in the formal structure of the book as a whole, bringing up areas in which future scholarship might contest the status quo. These include queer and other forms of marginal fatherhood outside the heteronormative ideal family; and independent, crossover and art-house cinema. As Hamad declares, "Given the extent to which irony figures as a discursively dominant feature of postfeminist culture, and now permeates articulations of cinematic fatherhood, a consideration of the relationship between these phenomena seems warranted" (p. 146).

The reader may safely conclude from the text that white masculinity is no longer in crisis in this fantasy cinematic world of normalized postfeminist fatherhood, the success of *Frozen* (Buck, Lee, 2013) notwithstanding. Imminent publications on both masculinity and maternity in the field point towards a real chasm that has existed, placing this volume at the forefront of an expanding genus attempting to infuse a combination of academic balm and solid discourse into a growing consciousness that includes the infamous Bechdel Test, a mark of this gap in the culture. Hamad is a wonderfully lucid writer who provides a textbook set of analyses of Dad cinema (not to be confused with *le cinéma de papa*) couched within a resolutely relevant discursive framework. In a neat textual loop which sums up the masterful construction that characterizes this approach, she brings us from *March of the Penguins* (Jacquet, 2005) to *Mr*


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*Popper's Penguins* (Waters, 2011) via *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011), proving that worlds do collide in the intertextual time-lapse minefield that is modern moviegoing. As Hollywood fatherhood appears to be going forth and multiplying, it looks like this backlash (cinematic and scholarly) will run and run.



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