Susan Faludi’s 1991 bestselling book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* described the position of women in the United States that year. Faludi pointed out the media pundits who declared that while women had made unprecedented advances in the prior two decades and “equality . . . had largely been won,” women were suffering from “new problems that have no name” (Faludi x). Experts announced a plague of barren wombs, bad nerves, fear of intimacy, alcoholism, and chronic loneliness falling on women. The liberal feminism that emerged in the 1960s had created a woman who was successful at work but a wreck at home. Liberated from male control and pursuing their own ambitions, society had concluded, “Women were unhappy because they were free” (x). Faludi observed that the decade of the 1980s produced a steady stream of articles, books, and television shows all with the same message, “the awful truth about women’s lib” (xi). According to these sources, women needed men and stable domestic relationships. By 1990, women had become familiar with the news that career success had reduced their chances of marriage and children, ensuring them a lifetime of unhappiness. Faludi called the unrelenting news about the dangers of success the “backlash” against women’s equality (xix). Film trends starting in the 1970s and continuing into the new millennium demonstrated the enduring validity of Faludi’s argument. As historical artifacts, many films created for female audiences during this period illustrate an anti-feminist backlash cloaked in a superficial gloss of female empowerment.
Women’s Place in Film

In the 1970s, Hollywood appeared to be ready to take up feminist themes. Robert Benton’s *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) probed motherhood as the ultimate aim of women’s lives and Paul Mazursky’s *An Unmarried Woman* (1978) questioned women’s identities as tied to their relationships with men. It seemed that representation of women’s lives was taking a favorable feminist turn. As new possibilities emerged, the classic romance typified by films such as Leo McCarey’s *The Awful Truth* (1937) and the post–World War II women’s melodrama centered on a female victim, such as Douglas Sirk’s *Imitation of Life* (1959), appeared to be dead (Garrett 2). The standard Hollywood women’s film had assumed the primacy of the love relationship and the subordination of female desire to male ends, but in the 1970s, new films carrying feminist themes challenged the representation of women’s place and forwarded the political and social equality of women. Nevertheless, the turn toward a full feminist challenge of female representation in film was both short-lived and superficial.

By the late 1980s and early 1990s the romantic comedy was back with films such as Rob Reiner’s *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) and Nora Ephron’s *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993). Over the next decade romantic comedies morphed into “chick flicks,” highly commercial films produced to attract young urban women. While these films could not altogether ignore the change in women’s place in society, they tamed feminist consciousness by placing it within a frame of individualism and consumer power that obscured unresolved issues (Garrett 10). By examining films addressed to female audiences and the particular cultural contexts of their production, specifically Colin Higgins’s *Nine to Five* (1980), produced at the height of feminist influence, and the later chick flick by David Frankel, *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), one can see both the change and continuation of cultural beliefs about women, power, and female solidarity. Situated in the workplace, the site of intense gender negotiation, both films reflect where women and feminism found themselves socially and historically. Both films depend on age-old gender opposition and the assumptions about what women “really” want and demonstrate Hollywood’s participation in the backlash against women.
Feminist Themes

At its release, the film *Nine to Five* was wildly successful among women, earning over $170 million and winning the 1981 People's Choice Award (“Nine to Five,” IMDb). The film reflects the workplace issues such as sexual harassment and discrimination that had come to the fore in public conversation due to the work of feminist activists like Catherine A. Mackinnon. Empowered by Titles VII and IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, topics that were once unnamed and unrecognized became profoundly political (Maypole and Skaine 387). Debates over the wage gap, childcare, merit pay, flex time, and sexual harassment divided the nation. The popular press explored previously invisible women and their concerns. Between 1970 and 1985, the number of women working full time doubled, and surveys of women indicated that they were welcoming the changes in their roles (Wilkins and Miller 45). Precipitated by increased awareness and demands for change, by the late 1970s feminists’ work on behalf of women was beginning to pay off in terms of new opportunities.

Jane Fonda, star and producer of *Nine to Five*, was committed to promoting the women’s movement’s goals and noted that there was “a historical synchronicity between the film *Nine to Five* and a social movement waiting be born” (Fonda). For Fonda, it was a “feminist film” with full-dimensional female characters. While many, particularly women, celebrated the film’s recognition of inequality and the reversals of social hierarchies, *New York Times* critic Vince Canby called the film “militant” and a feminist comedy dependent on “enthusiastic unabashed sexism.” In retrospect, contrary to Fonda’s assertions, the film reflects the feminist movement at its peak rather than its birth. As a comedy, the film was able to address salient issues by unmasking false assumptions and mocking male power.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as college-educated women entered the workplace looking for a career, they found working-class women who had been there all along. For decades, working women suffered mostly in silence from sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace (Maypole 388). *Nine to Five* tells the story of the disappointments and setbacks of this “pink collar ghetto,” made up of clerks, administrative aides, and secretaries. Unlike the professional women who would come after them, the
three main characters in the film work for economic reasons and not the self-actualization of a career. There is Judy, played by Jane Fonda, a divorced displaced homemaker forced into an unfamiliar environment when her husband runs off with his secretary. Violet, played by Lily Tomlin, is a widowed mother of four who is repeatedly denied a promotion. Doralee, played by Dolly Parton, is a generously endowed married woman carrying the stigma of the office slut. What they all want is a humanized and equitable workplace in which to earn a living.

Brought together by rage and common interests, these women forge a friendship and coalition in the midst of a patriarchal office. The patriarchs include the benevolent-looking chairman, the clueless president of the company, and their immediate boss, the “sexist, egotistical, lying, and hypocritical bigot” Mr. Hart, played by Dabney Coleman. In Mr. Hart’s office grown women are “girls” and everything flows from the top down. Their duties are not only performing their jobs, but also getting coffee, running personal errands for the boss, and in the case of Doralee, providing sexual gratification. All three characters suffer the daily indignities of the workplace. The newly hired Judy deals with unfamiliar technology and lack of confidence, Violet endures Mr. Hart taking credit for her work, and Doralee suffers unwelcome sexual advances from a boss who thinks it is part of her job to serve his needs. Unhappy with their office situation, these women come together with fantasies of revenge against Mr. Hart, leading to a series of misunderstandings and unexpected consequences. Before long, the women have an opportunity to turn the tables on Mr. Hart and recreate the office as a utopian community.

In the early scenes, we see a toxic environment in which women stand against each other. The first feminist message is that patriarchy precludes female friendship. Doralee’s position as the target of the boss’s attention excludes her from the rest of her officemates, who have concluded that her too-tight clothes are proof she is “banging the boss.” Violet protects herself through sarcasm and by “playing the good girl.” Judy is unable to speak up, and Margaret the office lush gets drunk. Roz, the office matriarch played by Elizabeth Wilson, spends her days enforcing the boss’s rules while the rest of the women attempt to elude those rules and her. As individuals, they are powerless. In order to deal with Mr. Hart, the women must bond together in common cause.
Solidarity comes through rage and the recognition that as women they suffer the same fate. In feminist fashion, the film presents women’s anger not as a source of fear but a catalyst for change. The denial of a promised promotion for Judy, Doralee’s endurance of another episode of sexual harassment, and Violet’s witnessing of the unfair firing of a female coworker set the comic narrative in motion. Anger is the catalyst transforming them from mere individuals to an effective group. An evening of feasting including cocktails, marijuana, and food is a gateway into a fantasy world of revenge and utopian possibilities. Once spoken, their fantasies have a power of their own in a farce of improbable situations in which Doralee, Judy, and Violet end up kidnapping Mr. Hart and secretly holding him captive in his own house. With Mr. Hart out of the way, they take control of the office and remake it into a utopian feminist space with flex time, childcare, and cozy decor. The feminist message is that women’s power to remake the world is in harnessing their rage, joining forces, and overthrowing the patriarchy.

**Challenging Assumptions**

_Nine to Five_, as a self-consciously feminist film, breaks the structure of both the melodrama and the romantic comedy. As transgressive types, the characters provide an alternative to the longsuffering women of melodrama and the women who are objects of scorn and subjugation in comedy. The narrative challenges the assumptions reflected in romantic comedies because there is no heterosexual romance to create competition between women. There is no secret romantic interest and no attempt to negotiate or transform women’s desire by subordinating it to male needs (Neale and Krutnik 142). The women’s goal is community solidarity, not heterosexual union. Joined together against a common adversary, the characters in _Nine to Five_ recover the meaning of female friendship as worthy of a woman’s commitment. While family concerns are in the background, they are not the center. The characters’ chief concern is workplace equity, and what happens in the workplace has implications for their personal lives. For Judy, for example, workplace empowerment means developing the fortitude to reject her groveling ex-husband when he returns
to reconcile. In addition, unlike women’s melodramas, the film does not use romance as a “revolt against convention” and sex as the only power that women have (Neale and Krutnik 133). The women’s rage is the revolt, justified on its own terms, and a source of power, overturning the idea that good girls do not get angry and avoiding the inevitable loss and tears of melodrama. Though previously alienated from each other, the characters become women-identified women, with comedic competition replaced by collaboration and melodramatic suffering replaced by triumph.

_Nine to Five_ as satire mocks the high drama of the lone male hero by setting it against the triumph of a female-centered community. It challenges the conventions by mocking the heroic elements of male-centered drama. In fantasy cartoon sequences, Judy imagines herself as a wild game hunter pursuing the frightened Mr. Hart and Doralee sees herself as a lasso-swinging cowgirl, sexually pursuing and roping Mr. Hart. In their fantasies, women’s purposes overturn the heroic cowboy and the hunter. The film also challenges the fairy-tale stories of the suffering female innocent, with Violet imaging herself as Snow White—not as a poisoned victim, but as the one offering the boss a fatal dose in his coffee. By challenging these conventions early in the narrative, the film attempts to establish a different regime based on the feminist value of female empowerment.

_Nine to Five_ is not just a story of gender reversal, with women occupying the space previously held by men. The film provides a communitarian utopian vision of the world where male hierarchal authority gives way to feminine consensus and industrial space transforms into domestic space. In _Nine to Five_, women engage in anti-authoritarian practices that, as film scholar Kathleen Rowe asserts, “[contest] the institutions and structures of authority through inversion, mockery, and other forms of travesty” (_Unruly_ 32). Through subversion, the women hijack Mr. Hart’s authority by signing his name to memos implementing changes in the office. They uncover his corrupt business practices and institute new office policies. Mr. Hart has been made invisible, but no one misses him because the women have been doing the work all along. These actions are a struggle for political power and contain the blueprint for a utopian society, one in which wage equity, family/work balance, and just recognition would be the norm. By
promoting an egalitarian vision of the world, *Nine to Five* is not just about gender but also class.

The casting of three female stars reinforces the egalitarian theme. While Lily Tomlin is a comedian at a career peak, this is not a comedic comedy. Tomlin was one of the few women comics embraced by the women’s movement in the 1970s and one who has been the most up-front about her feminism (Martin and Segrave 366). In this film, she is only part of a larger social project and not the center. The presence of three main characters played by major stars sharing the stage neutralizes the competition and comparison that would arise in a buddy film. They stand together as a group in an us-against-him collaboration for the community.

Doralee, Violet, and Judy are types, allowing the comic narrative to undo and free them from the constraints they represent. Only Roz, uniformed in the equivalent of a man’s business suit, remains excluded from her coworkers’ shenanigans. Escaping from constraints of type means that Violet goes from being a tomboy who tinkers with cars on the weekends to gaining her authority. Judy finds her voice to reject an ex-husband, and Doralee recasts her sexuality on her own terms. The epilogue tells us what happens to each of them: Violet receives her promotion to vice-president, Doralee becomes a country and western singer, and Judy marries the Xerox man, a man of her choice. Freed from social scripts, all three fulfill not the destiny of their type or of women, but their own individual dreams.

*Nine to Five* as comedy challenges authority. Unlike anarchist comedy, which is centered on a disruptive anti-hero and demonstrates little interest in the characters’ motivations for troublemaking, here the motivation to disrupt the social order is justified rage. The film allows the female spectator to laugh at men in power. Instead of women being the butt of jokes, they become, as Rowe has suggested, “subjects of a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity and joy” (“Comedy” 41). The female spectator laughs because she recognizes the situation, but the laughter is a nervous one because the characters are in danger of going too far. When Mr. Hart goes to the hospital after a fall and Violet believes fantasies of his demise are inadvertently coming true, guilt and the desire to hide any evidence of foul play drive the immediate action. Guilt is the first price women pay for transgression.
Once the characters overcome the sense of guilt, their desires are unleashed not only to remake the workplace but also to rewrite the terms of heterosexuality. They overturn assumptions about female sexuality as passive and submissive. Doralee, with her body that provokes images of a loose woman, asserts her right to control the meaning and content of her sexuality. Rowe identifies the “grotesque” body of Dolly Parton, with its exaggerated female features, as having the potential for social disruption (Unruly 33). The fantasy sequence shows Doralee turning the tables on Hart and subjecting him to sexual humiliation, thus decentering male sexuality as defining for women. As a hostage, we see Mr. Hart tied, gagged, and harnessed, evoking reverse images of sexual dominance and submission. With work and sexuality revolutionized, women assert full political control.

*Nine to Five* is about overturning the patriarchy, but most of all it is about female power emerging from solidarity. Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that medieval carnival reflects a temporary abandonment of the social order authorized from above. Eventually in the practice of carnival, the society returns to the old hierarchal structures (Karnick and Jenkins 271–272). In *Nine to Five*, the characters that have engaged in revolt are able to maintain the degree of change they have instituted. However, their revolt in carnivalesque fashion requires authorization from above. In the narrative, Mr. Hart regains the upper hand through an inevitable reversal of fortune and the positive resolution comes as a *deus ex machina*. The kindly chairman of the board makes a surprise visit and, impressed with all the changes, credits Mr. Hart and promotes him to Brazil. *Nine to Five* ends with Judy, Violet, and Doralee in charge of the office and engaged in a celebratory toast. Thus, ultimately the patriarchal gods remove the impediment to women’s advancement while taking credit for the change. The necessary act of the gods demonstrates the limits of women’s advancement as dependent on institutions controlled by men. The women’s actions are “an authorized transgression,” so as a feminist film it is not completely successful (Karnick and Jenkins 272).

*Nine to Five* ultimately does not have the women on top, and it fails by reinscribing gender assumptions. The film assumes that real women share essentialist values rooted in the need to nurture. It assumes that women freed from patriarchal control would
make the whole world into an unthreatening domestic space, or that women would naturally place the community at the center of their concerns. This of course is not true for Roz, who refuses to join in the female solidarity and remains a collaborator with the patriarchy. Through her place in the narrative and the visuals of dress and manner, we are to conclude that Roz is not a real woman. She is outside the group of protagonists, and thus outside the group of women. As a Hollywood film, *Nine to Five* continues the tradition of placing men and women in opposition as a basis for overturning gender order. Films, like the culture, would have to deal with the source and nature of female power.

**Woman on Top**

The film *The Devil Wears Prada*, as a postfeminist “chick flick,” departs from *Nine to Five* in its assumptions about the source of female power and solidarity. Released at a time when women frequently occupied the top echelons and a professional woman was no longer a rare sight, it nevertheless reveals old entrenched ideas about women’s relationship to power. The film reifies the primacy of heterosexual romance in women’s lives. As a chick flick, it appeals to twenty- to thirty-something middle-class women and is what Suzanne Ferriss describes as “the contemporary media’s heightened address to women” (32). The address to women includes films such as Peyton Reed’s *Down with Love* (2003), Robert Luketic’s *Legally Blonde* (2001), and Sharon Maguire’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001). The audience, influenced by a postfeminist ethic, rejects second-wave anger and blaming of the patriarchy. Women’s solidarity is not against the patriarchy, but in what they share in terms of attitude, choice, and the joys of consumerism conveyed in self-deprecating humor (Ferriss 35). The embrace of the word “chick,” which in a previous generation would have been considered the equivalent of calling a grown woman by the demeaning diminutive “girl,” illustrates the historical change in attitude. The word “chick,” like the word “bitch,” is no longer negative but rather “conveys solidarity and signals empowerment” (Ferriss 34). The change in language reflects a fundamental change in thinking. The chick-power bravado evident in *The Devil Wears Prada* hides a new wave of backlash against
women’s equal participation in society and reinforces gender assumptions in a smokescreen of consumerism.

*The Devil Wears Prada* as a postfeminist film nods to liberal feminism while reestablishing old ideas about women, power, and love. It rewrites the history of women in that there is no patriarchy to overcome and no political battle to wage. The battle is in recreating the self with individual choice. Instead of female solidarity, one sees narcissistic individualism, woman pitted against woman in a field of unlimited opportunities. The only impediments are the choices one makes. The exercise of personal power quickly reduces to the choice in nail color. Instead of the personal being political, the personal effaces the political. Over forty years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, opportunities for women lose their significance in providing the possibility for social change. Contrasted to the optimism and frequent naïveté of *Nine to Five*, *The Devil Wears Prada* is a cynical, flashy parody of hard-won opportunities.

Like older comedies, *The Devil Wears Prada* mocks women by representing an updated utopian vision. By wrapping its message in a high-gloss fashion spectacle, it hides its true meaning. Opening with a montage fashion sequence, the film conveys a “chick post-feminist aesthetic” of female pleasure in consumption, shopping, girly goods, designer clothes, and shoes (Ferriss 34). The viewer sees a pageant of young, beautiful, and fashionably dressed women heading off to a dream job. The use of widescreen frame, “beauty-lighting,” long shots, and designer knockoff fashions give the film a high production value look on a modest budget (Calhoun 56–57). Repeated fashion sequences set to music provide the mood and feel of one long runway show. The visual center of the film is the relationship women have with consumer goods in the project of self-creation. Emily, played by Emily Blunt, the assistant to the arch-villainess, has the solitary goal of working the Paris fashion show. The promised payoff is a treasure trove of highly desirable designer fashions. Emily becomes the butt of visual jokes when in the midst of all the glamour she comes down with a nasty cold, and ends up in a clumsy leg cast after a street accident. Among all the glitz, the joke is on women and the shallow lives they lead.

The film reeks with fear of female power. The lesson for the ingénue is that too much ambition and power will destroy one’s
chance at love. The lesson comes via Miranda Priestly, impeccably played by Meryl Streep, the editor of the glossy fashion magazine *Runway*. Miranda’s power extends over the vast New York fashion industry and beyond. Instead of Mr. Hart, we now have a woman at the top of the hierarchy. Miranda operates in a female workplace as a demeaning, demanding, and unresponsive boss. She expects her staff of fashionistas to be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, perform impossible tasks, and work miracles overnight. Miranda is a powerful dragon lady, a bitch, a “snow queen” whose personal life is a wreck (*Devil*). Her grand morning entrances into the office are those of a queen holding court, dumping belongings and demands for the day on her assistants’ desks. The director provides a montage sequence of the ritual of Miranda’s morning arrivals that overwhelm her staff. The signal of her arrival sends the entire office into a panicked dash to have everything in order for inspection. Miranda creates a mystique though the effective intimidation of unrelenting top-down authority. Contrary to the vision in *Nine to Five*, in this woman’s utopia there is no power-sharing, no solidarity, and no attempt at inclusion. Miranda is in complete control, as conveyed by her unwavering voice and stoic physical composure.

Miranda is at the top of the game because she is good at what she does, but also because she has made the personal sacrifices other women are not willing to make. Her personal sacrifices are a failing second marriage and parenting through surrogates. The narrative displays a contradictory message. While it does not condemn her for career success, she is nevertheless held up as an example of the dangers of unrestrained female ambition and the negative consequences of choosing to hold power. In several scenes, the narrative justifies itself by defending Miranda in feminist terms. Defending her boss, the protagonist Andy says, “If she were a man, the only thing people would talk about is how good she is at her job” (*Devil*). Yet the narrative continues to bring up Miranda’s personal failures.

Critic Martha P. Nochimson notes that Miranda becomes “a figure of mystic power,” one who both inspires and frightens (48). She inspires with rare self-possessed power and answers to no one. The contempt she demonstrates for those around her hides a thinly disguised destructive rage. The dark side of this power is the danger of causing devastation by destroying the community
and the prospects of love. There is also a desperate neediness in Miranda, who depends on her staff to hold her life together. Miranda blames her assistant Andy for her failure to make her children’s recital because Andy cannot perform the impossible task of getting Miranda on a plane in a violent thunderstorm. Miranda is both frightening and exhilarating. She is who women want to be and what they fear they will become.

Into this world of a woman on top enters recent college graduate Andy Sachs, played by Anne Hathaway. She not only has no professional experience but, to add insult to injury, no fashion sense—becoming the object of office guffaws. Dressed in dowdy size-six polyester, Andy is an unlikely hire for the fashion industry. What Miranda and the office “clackers,” named for their clacking stilettos, value above all else is appearances—the monitoring and presentation of the self (Devil). Soon, in order to survive verbal humiliations and advance her career, Andy undergoes a Cinderella transformation with the monitoring of the magazine’s art director Nigel, played by Stanley Tucci. Under Nigel’s fashionable eye, Andy enters the unlimited dream world of the Runway closet with its endless racks of Jimmy Choo shoes and Chanel suits. She emerges remade into a sophisticated fashionista, featured in a montage sequence set to the music of Madonna’s “Vogue.” The awkward duckling becomes a graceful and desirable swan via consumption. Andy’s professional and social power increases as she is willing to access the fashionable goods around her. Yet the more successful she becomes at the office, the more trouble she has in her personal life.

As a romantic comedy, what needs to be resolved is the tension between the extreme work situation and the romance with boyfriend Nate, played by Adrian Grenier. As a coming-of-age story, the tension is in the choice that Andy will have to make. Andy struggles with a choice between a fabulous career and a chance at love. Following classic romantic comedic narrative, the couple begins together, breaks up, and reunites by the end of the movie. The resolution depends on the renegotiation of female desire, with Andy being the one who must change. The underlying motivation of the film is to bring the couple together at the end. It differs from classic romantic comedy because in chick-flick fashion, the romance is resolved from the point of view and choice of the woman. While the couple is secondary, we are made to feel
that Andy’s job-related sacrifices—staying late, coming in early—are a woman’s sell-out to careerism instead of what most young people do starting in highly competitive industries (Stevens 1). The message is that high-powered careers for women are incompatible with love. Instead of the freedom to construct diverse lives, women have a false choice between love and work. The freedom is in being able to make the choice, while the consequences remain eternally the same. While love is not obligatory, it is the only way to personal happiness. Otherwise, all women may well end up like Miranda: successful but alone and inadequate as mothers.

Contrasted to Nine to Five, women in The Devil Wears Prada remain in competition with each other. As noted by cultural scholar Roberta Garrett, in typical chick-flick fashion, “The feminist value placed on female alliance, self-respect and the desire for economic and career achievement is indorsed but placed within a framework of consumer power and individual achievement rather than collective struggle” (Garrett 10). Andy finds herself in a hostile workplace, having to make the choice between fragile loyalty to her officemate or her own career success. Under Miranda’s demands, the choice of betraying a coworker or passing up Miranda’s offer to work the Paris show begins to feel like no choice. Miranda has already navigated these waters and gives Andy advice about the nature of her power and business acumen. Responding to the possibilities of following in Miranda’s steps, Andy says, “I don’t want to be like you” (Devil). Following the pattern of romantic comedy provided by Kathleen Rowe, Andy walks away from the prospects of Miranda-like power by throwing her BlackBerry cell phone into a fountain, thus breaking away from the mother figure in favor of heterosexual union (Rowe, “Comedy” 50). Rejecting Miranda, Andy is reconciled to her boyfriend—acknowledging the primacy of the love relationship in her life. The narrative does not end with a wedding but, in a postfeminist world, the final scenes are of Miranda helping Andy go on to another job, thus affirming the postfeminist ethic that women’s solidarity is in supporting each other’s personal choices, no matter what the choice. There is no compelling interest to bind women in overturning systems of power; only in the affirmation of the personal do women find solidarity.

Nochimson noted that director Frankel “missed the opportunity to make a really progressive social comedy” (48). Instead,
The Devil Wears Prada, made twenty-six years after Nine to Five, and featuring a powerful woman, has less potential as a feminist film to challenge gender conventions. The characters of Miranda and Andy both reinscribe what society has always known about women: they are better at love than they are at exercising power.

Both Nine to Five and The Devil Wears Prada carry the theme of a female utopia. In Nine to Five utopia is the establishment of equity and cooperation. Through recognizing and resolving shared rage, women heal the fracture in female friendships caused by the patriarchy. What emerges is a cozy equitable world of shared power. In The Devil Wears Prada, the feminine utopia is one of consumption and the freedom to choose, no matter how trivial or false those choices are. As a female utopia, the Runway office provides unlimited paths to self-creation through consumption of designer goods. Underneath luxury and glamour, Miranda’s empire at Runway is an anti-utopia, a highly dysfunctional workplace parading around as a women’s nirvana. Its dystopic qualities are evident in the constant monitoring of one’s self-presentation and the high control of all bodily functions. Sleep and food deprivation, and the threat of a verbal lashing and humiliation, control the female body. Women’s lives and bodies are subject to false ideals of female beauty and power. The utopian dream of a woman on top becomes a nightmare that reestablishes the fear of women with power. While Nine to Five assumes women’s natural nurturing role for the creation of utopia, The Devil Wears Prada is cynical about the possibility of any positive female contribution to social change.

Comedy, with its transgressive and political potential, has an opportunity to deliver new gender messages by undoing the old ones. The double messages, in which feminist and old gender ideas coexist, make both Nine to Five and The Devil Wears Prada weak as feminist comedies. While Nine to Five provided the beginnings toward truly feminist comedy, The Devil Wears Prada abandons the project altogether. The future of female narrative film will not look much different until society reimagines women’s power, or creative individuals break with Hollywood’s stranglehold on the representation of women. In the meantime, Faludi’s backlash feels more like a permanent state of affairs.
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