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Director's Commentary by Kathleen McHugh

Putting Paid to “Post”



The term “post-feminism” has been around for awhile and has many different meanings. In popular culture, its most generous interpretation is that feminism’s mission has been fulfilled and is no longer needed. The “p” word has also been used to suggest that feminism was a humorless, anti-pleasure, anti-male, strident radical movement that we have, thank god, gotten beyond. As many have pointed out, post-feminism seems to affirm the importance of feminism even as it dismisses it as past and out of date. An-

other term much in use these days is “post-race,” frequently applied to Barack Obama and his candidacy for president to suggest that Obama is beyond black, beyond race, a candidate for a generation of voters who can make race free judgments. Pundits have argued that his popularity signals that America is finally over or beyond its troubled racial past. Indeed, in the presidential debates, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama were both at pains to assert that their candidacies are not about gender or race, but about the real issues of war, the economy, and the struggles of the middle class. Yet two recent scandals, one about New York mayor Eliot Spitzer’s consorting with high priced prostitutes, the other concerning Obama’s pastor, Reverend Wright, and the racialized content of his sermons, have provoked members of the press to re-consider. A recent column in the NY Times designated post-feminism a “fairy tale,” detailing the misogyny to which Hillary Clinton has been

subjected and the very different responses of men and women to the Eliot Spitzer affair. Are we really beyond the feminist battles that we thought we were, Kate Zernike wondered, her article assembling similar commentary and questions from a number of female columnists. Then last week, Daniel Schorr recanted his use in January of the term “post race” in relation to Obama primary triumphs. He said that what he learned from Obama’s eloquent speech on race last week was that we are not yet a post-racial generation or age. He called upon his fellow members of the press to retire the term until some future contest not beset by the rhetoric of Wright or Ferraro. Another consequence of this remarkable election cycle is the popular realization that we’ve been too hasty in claiming to be beyond race and gender. Instead we are in a post-post period, which is to say living in the present with our social challenges.