

Marie-Alix Thouaille  
University of East Anglia (UEA)

### Postfeminist Seriality: Winona Ryder and the 1990s Single Woman Author Cycle



#### Abstract

The image is striking—and strikingly familiar. A beautiful, young, single, middle class, white woman labours at her cluttered, historicised writing desk. Her ink-stained fingers travel across the virgin white page, quill violently scratching the parchment. In another era, in another genre, she forges suicide notes, idly tip-taps her Masters thesis on her typewriter, journals in bed, or directs a generation-defining documentary. In the period 1988-1999, more than any other actress, Winona Ryder functioned as the signifier for this ostensibly disruptive creature: the unmarried creative woman. In this paper, I ask: what is at stake in Ryder's single woman author cycle? Why did *Heathers* (1988), *Reality Bites* (1994), *Little Women* (1994), *How to Make an American Quilt* (1995), and *Girl Interrupted* (1999) repeatedly depict the allegedly 'uncinematic' act of authorship (Buchanan 2014, 4) and (re)present the single woman author as its privileged mediator? And finally, how did Ryder become synonymous with the unruly single and singular authorial subject?

I argue in this paper that the single woman author in general, and Ryder in particular, function as the locus of historically specific discursive tensions. With reference to Ryder's onscreen roles, I suggest that Ryder/the single woman author character inhabits contradictory subjectivities: (in)visibility, (dis)empowerment, (anti)feminism. In this way, this hitherto understudied figure represents the *postfeminist* subject par excellence. An embodiment of Angela McRobbie's 'double entanglement' (2004, 255), Ryder's single woman author cycle 'takes feminism into account' through the subversive possibilities of female authorship, and simultaneously 'repudiates' (McRobbie 2004, 255) feminist ideology through the recurrent quest to become 'unsingle', or see female authorship 'authorised' by a benevolent patriarchal figure. This paper moreover argues that Veronica, Lelaina, Jo, Finn and Susanna's diegetic authorships are bound up with Ryder's edgy persona. At the time, commentators continually invoked Ryder's unusual upbringing on a commune, her parents' counter-cultural statuses as archivists of magazines devoted to mind-altering substances, or her godfather, Timothy Leary. Crucially, Ryder's (extra)diegetic edginess was contained both by her discursive fragility (she was frequently described as 'fragile', 'waiflike' or 'ethereal'), and her characters' recurring recuperation into heteronormative romance.

This paper concludes that in understanding the complex threads of Ryder's single woman author cycle, we can ultimately shed light on the ways in which our popular culture figures, discourages, and disparages women's real world authorship.

### **Biographical Note**

Marie-Alix is a CHASE-funded doctoral student at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Her research studies the single woman author in contemporary American film. She is particularly interested in the postfeminist intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and authorship.