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The Critical Investigation of HBO's Girls: Feminist Text, Quality, and Happy Womanhood

HBO's Girls (2012-) has garnered a range of television, popular media, and viewer criticism that engages with the show's promise as part of a larger post-Sex and the City representational landscape. New Yorker critic Emily Nussbaum describes the show as "merely the latest in a set of culture-rattling narratives about young women, each of which has inspired enough bile to overwhelm any liver."[1] The show features four twenty-something women who live in Brooklyn and survive with less-than-glamorous lives (failed relationships, dead-end internships, and sexual dysfunction). Even though the show received lower first season ratings compared with HBO's programming heavyweights like *Game of Thrones* and *True Blood*, the critical reviews and the 2012 Golden Globe Awards have marked the program's larger success as a cultural object that is both celebrated and reviled. Girls' first season finale is documented at pulling in just over a million viewers.[2] Much of Girls' success has been attributed to HBO's original branding strategy and the network's encouragement of controversy.[3] The second season garnered similar critical attention despite lower ratings (under a million for the opening episode of the second season).

Premium cable network HBO has also been the focus of both popular critical and academic inquiry that has been celebrated and dissected for the network's technological innovations, pool of creative talent, and freedom in the form of less content restrictions. My argument will center on the larger trade journal, popular press, and intellectual think pieces surrounding the show as a quality feminist/post-feminist text. In particular, I am interested in television and feminist theorist Charlotte Brunsdon's "feminist ur-text" as part of a larger critique of the feminist media critic. For Brunsdon, the "feminist ur-text" has become an embedded form of critique attached to feminist scholarship. Brunsdon's argument examines how certain feminist texts are analyzed through a second-wave language that points to the failures of women being trapped within a patriarchal worldview. At the same time, the critique also allows for the feminist critic to celebrate the text in question while never allowing for the discourse to move beyond a particular critique.[4]

I am interested in exploring the popularity and difficulty in the canonizing of Girls as an academic and feminist/post-feminist text—especially in discussing quality TV and HBO's lineage of male-dominated programming and critical acclaim surrounding shows such as *The Wire* (2002-2007) and *The Sopranos* (1999-2008). By examining the critical acclaim, hate, and inspired responses this show has received, I want to think about how particular shows become objects of popular taste especially as "quality" cultural objects. In the second part of my essay, I explore ways to rethink the show through alternative notions of growth and femininity. I will turn to media theorist Sara Ahmed's work on emotion, happiness, and affect as a way to think about the construction of Girls as part of a larger interrogation

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(L-R): Conference presenters during the "Criticism and Canons" panel

of the feminist and post-feminist canons.

Girls' first season "success" became measured almost immediately in a series of overnight editorials, blog posts, and think pieces that pointed to the show's popularity as an object of critique, scorn, and envy amongst the online world. In a January 2013 *Nation* article, critic Michelle Dean described the phenomenon of the show's and creator Lena Dunham's reflexive engagement with this world through the term "trollgaze." For Dean, "trollgaze" is "those pieces of pop culture as designed for maximum Internet attention as they are pieces of art that can stand (or at least wobble) on their own."[5] Much of Dunham's own previous career has been notable for her online (Instagram and Twitter) and YouTube presence. In other words, the show and Dunham seem to understand the relationship between critics and the larger world of comment sections. Dunham has expanded her image across media comment sections with commenters famously focusing on her more non-normative representation as a lead female character. Her previous work, the film *Tiny Furniture* (2010) converges a number of aspects from her onscreen and off-screen life. The film features Dunham's YouTube channel experiments that often call attention to her own body and placement within unusual settings. She has also become a fixture in various magazine and critical pop culture columns focusing on her body and fashion choices.

Quality Debates

Much of HBO's premium programming history has focused on male antiheroes in shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. The rise of cable and premium channels during the 1970s and 1980s paved the way for the more complicated role of television as part of a financial system that does not rely on advertisers for revenue. "Quality" television debates have developed out of the more complex economic and aesthetic turns made by the cable industry. In general, critics have focused on TV's relationship to film and the elevation of the medium as part of a high art culture. A major component to this celebration of "high art" quality TV culture is an inherent realism that becomes attached to premium cable shows in their graphic depictions of sex, violence, and language which is not seen on basic cable or network television.[6]

Economic and policy decisions and what other theorists have identified as premium cable's "freedom" from strict content regulations provides another way to think through the celebration of "quality" that these shows activate. What becomes relevant in this female-centered programming is how marketing for specific shows that feature edgier content integrate the audience into a larger awareness campaign attached to the network brand. Additionally, much of the focus on quality television and HBO's status as expanding the boundaries of the medium also call attention to discussions of the auteur and the network's focus on talent compared to their basic cable counterparts. Writer, producer, and actress Lena Dunham fits into much of HBO's definition of quality and cultivation of talent. One of HBO's few female show runners, Dunham has been key in developing the network's more recent branding and focus on a younger and hipper (read: Brooklyn) post-*Sex and the City* demographic. Dunham's younger and more female-centered voice also echoes a number of new female show runners who are creating young, female-centered narratives across the spectrum of network and cable television. A recent *New York Magazine* article featured the rise of the female sitcom show runner and the popularity of shows like *New Girl* by Liz Meriwether. [7] HBO's premium cable rival Showtime has also recently featured female show runners in *The Big C*, *Nurse Jackie*, and most recently *Masters of Sex* that continue to garner high ratings compared with their more male-centered programming.

What becomes relevant in thinking about the current rise of female show runners and Lena Dunham's standout qualities is the larger critical response to her physicality. Dunham's body size and appearance share a similar history to comedian and star Roseanne Barr and her ABC sitcom *Roseanne*. Barr's show does not share the same "quality" television history; however, it is important to note what theorist Kathleen K. Rowe identifies in Roseanne's adaptation of the "unruly woman." [5] For Rowe, much of Roseanne's star production and branding is centered on her role as an author and creator of her image. Much of Barr's image production engages with a critical feminist language that pointed to her use of humor, excess, and class. Similarly, Dunham's image production mixes her own autobiographical and fictitious representations of her life that become manifested around her own body and lack of control. The second season's narrative plot line the focuses on Hannah's obsessive-compulsive disorder and how her behavior results in a serious anxiety breakdown. In a recent *Rolling Stone Magazine* cover story, Lena Dunham revealed her own life experience dealing with OCD and the after effects that contributed to her experience of being "drugged like a big horse" as a growing teenager. [9] Much of Dunham's image and presentation both on and off screen feature this self-reflexive engagement with comment boards—she is an active participant in the media and critical obsession that highlights her role on the show and its relevance to audiences outside of the HBO universe.

To a certain extent, *Girls* has become the "feminist/post-feminist" text for the millennial generation. A number of critical reviews of the show point to the show's extended world-view post-*Sex and the City* and the program's more subversive engagement with a variety of issues that young women face: short romantic flings, the dangers of "hook-up" culture, body image debates, and more general female relationship struggles. Critics such as Nussbaum have carefully balanced the line between exploring the show as a feminist text and positioning the show's relationship with gender as part of a new celebration of female relationships and representations of unlikeable female characters.

One of the main concerns for Brunsdon in her book *Screen Tastes* is to reexamine how issues of power are at the core of media and television studies. The historical scope of feminist criticism and television as a "legitimate" object of study began with the reevaluation of the soap opera genre beginning in the 1970s. [10] The study of soap opera and the figure of the housewife have been fundamental to a larger historical and aesthetic consideration of television studies as tied to feminist media scholarship. More recently, media theorist Michael Kachman has carefully pointed out the limits to quality television debates that tend to solely focus on masculine formalist aesthetics at the expense of a larger feminist televisual history. [11]

At the same time, *Girls* also proves to challenge certain feminist readings, especially when turning to the difficulties the show poses as part of a larger

televisual and Internet world of criticism. In a recently published series of articles in the journal *Feminist Media Studies*, author Katherine Bell discusses Girls and Dunham's critical negotiation with postfeminist discourses surrounding privilege that comes with the shows focus on four white upper-middle class female characters.[12] Similarly, theorist Masa Grdesic in her article "I'm not the lady: Metatextual commentary in Girls" turns to the larger Internet commentary culture and manufactured self-awareness that surrounds the show and creator Lena Dunham. Grdesic points to critical think-pieces produced over the last year that look more closely at the show's female focus and the larger pop cultural response to the show by critics and fans alike that identify with the show's representation of white-upper middle class femininity. At the center of this debate are critics and bloggers who similarly don't identify with depictions of Dunham and her friends, but are compelled to point out this lack of color, class stratification, etc.[13]

The issue of race (or lack thereof) became a particular critique attached to the first season's focus on predominantly white characters. A popular think piece by columnist Kendra James openly challenged the show's first season portrayal of non-white characters. At the center of this post is a discussion on whiteness and the show's lack of acknowledgement of a more diverse world (especially in failing to represent a version of Brooklyn that is non-white).[14] At the same time, whiteness is also part of a larger structural critique that is aimed at HBO and the repetition of particular televisual narratives like *Sex and the City* and *Friends*. Media theorist Sara Ahmed, in her work on emotion and happiness, turns to the figure of the feminist killjoy alongside the figure of the angry black woman in thinking through the genealogy of unhappiness that accompanies both figures and by "pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics."[15]

Happy Womanhood- Challenging Postfeminsim

I want to again focus on these intersections that Ahmed points out in thinking through feminism's relationship with race, gender, and the notion of "happiness." For Ahmed, happiness operates as an object and relational force between subjects, scenes, and other types of objects in which "happiness can participate in the widening of horizons in which it is possible to find things."[16] At the same time, Ahmed notes the fundamental collapse of happiness in relation to disappointment and how particular texts and objects can become associated with that gap between happiness and unhappiness and what fails to come through on that promise.[17]

A major concern for Ahmed's project is to create a critical feminist project that offers an alternative way to understand relationships between subjects, and to challenge and expand upon the Second Wave movements so as to offer a different framework by which to measure and evaluate types of representations across literature and film. I use Ahmed's work as a way to call attention to Brunsdon's idea of the feminist ur-text and to think about ways to find a different framework by which to evaluate and understand certain types of representations of feminism that expand beyond patriarchy. I want to use Ahmed's notion of happiness in relation to *Girls*' second season's more fantastical and uneven turn—as noted by a number of critics—and focus on the fifth episode, entitled "Another Man's Trash." I turn to this particular episode as a larger critical space for feminist television aesthetics, and to extend the discussion even further to think about the space created by critics and popular reviews and personal blogs in reaction to the show's engagement with happiness and fantasy.

"Another Man's Trash," which first aired on February 10th, 2013, has been singled out by a number of critics as easily being both one of the worst and best episodes in the show's two seasons. The narrative is simple, capturing Hannah and doctor Joshua's (Patrick Wilson) two-day romance as strangers who are both attempting to fight off loneliness. Much of the episode's acclaim conjures up critical reception to classical quality television texts and the ability for episodes to stand alone in relation to the series as a whole. In an online *Slate* review of the episode, a reviewer identifies his ambience and greater dislike toward the episode in his inability to identify with Hannah's character: however, to even a larger extent the review highlights her relationship to happiness as misrepresented and

difficult to understand in relation to the parameters of fantasy, melodrama, and consumer culture. [18]

The critical response to this particular episode focuses on Hannah's desire for happiness. Much of the response focuses on when she walks into the doctor's house for the first time and begins to comment on all of his material possessions—the sweater, the brownstone, the interior of the home. Critics also specify Hannah's moment with Patrick at the climax of their relationship in which she outlines her own version of happiness. Hannah reveals through tears and a long monologue her inner secret of wanting "happiness": "Then I came here and I see you. You have the fruit in the bowl and the stuff…I want what everyone wants. I want all the things. I just want to be happy." At this point in the episode, Hannah and Joshua have spent the last two days together. The episode reveals little about the actual relationship between the two characters. Rather, we see small snippets of dialogue and scenes all within Joshua's home—in the kitchen, on the deck, playing naked Ping-Pong, and in the bedroom—that highlight the couple's brief encounter with intimacy while also revealing a starker emptiness to the nature of their lives and relationships.

After the episode aired, a number of commenters and critics provided an explosion of recaps and think pieces calling attention to Hannah's relationship with Joshua. Commenters on the *Vulture* website even joked that the comment section had reached 200 comments and counting, and that the "episode certainly touched a nerve." [19] A number of commentators pointed out the impossibility of Hannah's ability to bed Joshua's character due to her lack of physical appeal. An equal number of commentators fired back, pointing to Dunham's larger reflexivity regarding her own body and body image in general. The critiques revealed not only misogynistic readings of Hannah's body and her heterosexual coupling abilities, but to a larger extent a broader critique and celebration of Hannah's relationship with objects. As one commenter wrote: "I hated also what Hannah took for happiness, though again I was not surprised. I've often felt this show to be secretly conservative."[20] Other reviewers celebrated this paradox that emerges. Viviandarkbloom from *Vulture* claims, "I'm sorry, but this was the best 'Girls' ever -- exactly in its collision of Hannah's self-sabotaging, immature hipsterism with the NYC/Brooklyn pipe-dream of STUFF that she finally admits to herself she wants."[21] In a certain sense, both commentators acknowledge Hannah's fixture on the objects and things of Joshua's home, but also the darker undercurrent of consumerism that seems to both offer insight and failings of a young woman longing for a particular aspirational lifestyle.

Conclusion

The critical response to the first two seasons of *Girls* engages with a larger dilemma surrounding quality TV debates while simultaneously employing a critical language that struggles in identifying fully with a feminist/post-feminist reading of the text. In a certain sense, the critical discourse that surrounds the show points to its complicated reception amongst audiences as both a "ground-breaking" cultural piece and a work that engages with feminism and race (or more so the lack thereof). The second season response has proved to be equally if not more critical of the show, and of Dunham's portrayal of Hannah as even more unlikeable than the first season. More specifically, the critical focus on the show's use of fantasy becomes a way to further examine the changing medium of television itself along with certain expectations that accompany the popular trope of women's entertainment. I have attempted to address the larger political/cultural space that has emerged with a show like *Girls*, and the possibility and impossibility that this space allows for critical discussions regarding race, gender, and class. At the same time, the question remains how a premium cable show like *Girls*, with an approximate audience of about 600,000 viewers per episode, can become a space to express so much hope and disappointment about the current economy, state of feminism/postfeminism, and race that openly speaks to television's specificity as a project of equality while also failing to reach up to that standard. Thinking about Ahmed's notion of "happiness" in relation to the show's larger reception also offers a way to evaluate television's relationship to the viewer as a happy object. Happiness also includes these missed connections and promises that supposedly "happy"

objects bring.

In a sense, the popularity of *Girls* after two seasons is critical to the show's affirmation and disdain amongst critics and audiences. The celebration of the show as a "quality" object also is in line with more masculine and auteur formal aesthetics. The show is also very much recognized as having roots in the televisual medium, or at least referring to that history through the show's connection to various sitcoms, as Nussbaum and other critics have pointed out. The complexity of *Girls* as a cultural object brings to light a number of debates that extend well beyond the televisual screen; the inclusion of *Girls* as part of a particular feminist/post-feminist canon becomes difficult when thinking about the show's engagement with whiteness and privilege and analyzing those who are the gatekeepers and labelers of the canon in the first place. I believe these tensions amongst readers, critics, and viewers is part of what makes this show so relevant and difficult to easily talk about as "quality" or "defining" programming.

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Notes

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