SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT:
Gender, Adolescence, and the Culture of Consumption in
Beverly Hills 90210

Lauren Chattman
In an exemplary episode of the media phenomenon Beverly Hills 90210, Brenda Walsh and her second-best friend Donna Martin arrive in Paris for summer language school, ready to immerse themselves in French culture. Initially they disagree about the first tourist attraction they should visit. Donna wants to go shopping; Brenda wants to visit Balzac's house. ("Who even cares about Balzac's house," complains Donna. "I can understand if it's Pierre Cardin's house.") By the end of the hour, the girls have done both, demonstrating the compatibility of consumerism and melodrama in generating the television narrative that has so captured the attention of our nation's teenage girls.

90210 follows in the tradition of the "woman's picture," which addresses and to a certain extent defines a specifically female audience by creating and feeding its desire for melodrama and shopping. The series also operates within the conventions of TV melodrama, which positions all viewers as passive and feminine consumers of the image. 90210 promises that when we watch we can all be teenage girls.

At the same time, 90210 derives what cultural prestige it has from its brand of politically correct "realism." Reviewer after reviewer has devalued 90210's melodramatic form and "superficial" construction of Beverly Hills teen style in order to champion the show's "realistic" and "serious" treatment of teenagers' problems. In a typical paean, the critic for The New York Times describes the show as, "a tough, realistic look at fast-track 90's teens." "They live in the United States, not fantasyland," she insists, dismissing 90210's glitzy moralizing as a television convention ultimately irrelevant to the show's appeal. The show's creator, Darren Star, has also defined 90210 in terms of realism: "I set out to create a thirtysomething for teenagers. I think the show holds a mirror up to their lives."

But as Sasha Torres has pointed out in her article on the original thirtysomething, the attempted opposition of melodrama and realism is difficult if not disingenuous, since the two discourses are historically and generically imbricated. Astutely commenting on 90210's exploitation of this overlap, Pamela Dell, entertainment editor of Teen magazine, remarks, "I think it does a good service, because there are a lot of angst issues for teens that nobody else is dealing with. And if it's melodramatic, well, what is teen life but melodrama?"

In this paper, I will argue that the series constructs a believable world not simply from "issues" like teen pregnancy, homelessness, or condom distribution in public schools, but by personalizing and packaging those issues via the twin discourses of melodrama and consumption. While the show's realism is partly figured by its allegiance to the "real" middle America represented by the Walshes—a conventional nuclear family transplanted from Minnesota—and its disdain of the phonniness represented by Beverly Hills, 90210 self-consciously alludes to its own constructedness with a never-ending series of subplots and in-jokes about the television industry. As if in homage to Baudrillard, the show presents as real the constructed world of Beverly Hills, where imagemaking is the town business, and "issues" are the raw materials of dramatic series, made-for-tv movies, and feature films. In the process, 90210 takes apart the oppositions of melodrama and realism, television and reality. It also destabilizes gender categories—much of the show's popularity derives from its male stars, who are fetishized and feminized as objects of the gaze.

Since the primary aim of the show is not to dismantle contemporary bourgeois capitalism but to sell itself, it should come as no surprise that its deconstruction of oppositions results in a reconstruction of them as artificial but necessary and desirable nonetheless. What one Village Voice writer has said about the official 90210 magazine might also be said of the series: "...what we've got here is...the teen version of Martha Stewart Living—follow these steps and the 90210 tableau can be yours." The reference to Martha Stewart, America's post-feminist hostess/entrepreneur, is apt. If domesticity can no longer be figured as an imperative of female nature, it is now presented by both Stewart and 90210 as the most desirable consumer option for girls.

More powerful than 90210's selling of domestic melodrama as lifestyle is its selling of
youth. While teenage girls are the series’ target audience, 90210 does not limit its address to the biologically young and female. Rather, by beckoning all viewers to make themselves young consumers, it partakes of the larger cultural practice of constructing the public as a mass of desirable and desiring young women. Profiles of 90210’s stars in the mainstream press attest to the larger public’s fascination with what the show has to offer. Vanity Fair has featured 90210’s most sensational star, Luke Perry, on its cover. The magazine has also been the showcase of Ivana Trump, who advertised her defiance of age via plastic surgery, Demi Moore, nude and miraculously repossessed of her pre-pregnancy body, and Warren Beatty, a pre-Perry purveyor of male sex appeal who finally fathered a child after a 40-year adolescence. Vanity Fair claims, month-by-month, that adolescence is not a biological stage, but a lifestyle choice. 90210, in making youth culture available to all viewers, similarly attempts to denaturalize the teen-age years. If thirtysomething anxiously acknowledged its babyboomers’ fleeting youth, 90210 might be that generation’s solution to the “problem” of aging, holding out the possibility of a culturally constructed and perpetual adolescence manufactured in Hollywood. No one is more aware of youth’s value, and also its feminine-identified restrictiveness, than Perry, whose career success depends on his pretty-boy looks and his ongoing association with adolescence. Asked by a journalist if he would reveal his age, the obviously over-18 Perry reportedly joked, “I’ll tell you, but then I’ll have to kill you.” Once the privilege of aging female stars, secrecy about age has become the imperative of anyone who measures his or her self- and market-worth in the terms set by contemporary consumer culture.

The episode that I am going to discuss, from the show’s first season, is particularly concerned with exposing the construction of gender in our youth-oriented consumer culture. Characteristically, it advertises itself as a serious treatment of an “issue”—drug and alcohol addiction. But the episode, which revolves around a mother/daughter fashion show at West Beverly High, is also at once a critique of and an advertisement for conventionally spectacular and fetishized screen femininity.

Early in the fashion show episode, Jackie Taylor, ex-model and mother of Brenda’s beautiful best friend Kelly, sips vodka poolside and muses to a friend about her history of failed marriages and wrecked relationships. “The mistakes weren’t mistakes. They were lessons,” she remarks, ironically foreshadowing the conduct narrative that follows. As it turns out, Jackie has a few more lessons to learn before becoming a proper nineeties TV mom. Typical of 90210’s melodrama is the episode’s privatization of issues. Jackie’s alcoholism and drug abuse, while figured as symptomatic of larger social ills, are primarily problems that turn the Taylor family, non-traditional though it already is, upside down. Kelly is forced to take care of and cover for her mother; when Jackie admits her problem and seeks treatment, she regains authority over her daughter. But also typical is the episode’s strategy of generational reversal and the publicization of the private—young people teach their parents how to look and behave properly outside the home. While on the one hand the fashion show episode is a traditional melodrama about a self-sacrificing mother (Jackie goes into rehab for Kelly), it is also a lesson in how to turn your mother into a presentable young woman who can get good press.

The first few minutes of the episode reveal the various media through which information is filtered and characters are “seen.” It opens with an establishing shot of the school building. A diegetic voiceover—the school DJ, it turns out—advertises the coming “fashion extravaganza,” in which West Beverly’s mothers and daughters will model for charity. From the beginning, mothers and daughters are described as sharing an impulse toward both charitable self-sacrifice and public spectacle.

After school gaudily and auteur David Silver is introduced, we see the remainder of the next scene through the lens of his video camera. He picks up the narration where the DJ has left off: “Kelly Taylor: The girl who has everything. Great body, great clothes. Great body.” As Kelly whispers to Brenda that she has saved the best
outfits for them, her secret is being recorded. While David voices his private fantasy about Kelly, his video is intended for West Beverly’s video yearbook, in which Kelly will become an advertisement for the school’s brand of young womanhood. David’s hand-held camera, used repeatedly throughout this and many other episodes, is both a mocking but realistic revelation of an adolescent boy’s point of view and a playful allusion to the show’s own voyeuristic video apparatus.

In another early scene, Andrea Zuckerman, the brainy but insecure editor of the school paper, mocks the fashion show as frivolous as she tries to assign a “first-person” piece about it to one of her reporters. Andrea’s dismissal of the fashion show marks not her intellectual seriousness, but a wrongful denial of the social importance of fashion and a lack of self-esteem. Overriding her objection that she is too biased to cover the story, Brandon Walsh (Brenda’s twin brother) demands that she cover it herself from the inside. Not only will the fashion show teach her to practice the objective journalism that she preaches, it will help her to think of herself as an object: “It would be good for you to let down your hair, take off your glasses, wear something stylish.” Thus the episode both explores and exploits commodified feminine spectacle. In fine tabloid style, David will demand of Kelly before the show, video tape rolling: “Mother/daughter fashion show: Charitable cause or just another superficial sleazefest?” “Yes. No!” replies the distracted Kelly as she watches her mom disappear into the ladies’ room for a fix. By exposing the glamour industry’s exploitation of women, and by ogling women at the same time, 90210 similarly fudges its answer.

In this episode, youth culture is both the problem and the solution. To Brenda, Jackie seems attractively hip and youthful while her own mother seems dowdy and old-fashioned. On the eve of the fashion show, Brenda tells Kelly how lucky she is: “It would be great to have a mom who’s just like a friend. And not just any friend. A friend who loves clothes and buys them for you because she knows how important they are to you. Who you can talk to about guys, and not have to leave out any of the good parts. Who treats you like an equal.” Kelly hides the shame she feels because of her mother’s drinking, her inappropriately youthful dress and her sexual promiscuity. Of the strapless leather number that Jackie puts on to meet her date, Kelly objects in classic adolescent horror, “Mom, you are wearing a jacket over that, aren’t you?” The next morning, Jackie returns home hysterical, telling Kelly that her boyfriend has dumped her for a younger woman, her scandalously smeared makeup signifying her own failure to pass as a girl. After realizing that Kelly has poured all the vodka down the drain, she shouts, “I am a grown woman and I will not have my sixteen-year-old daughter play cop in my own house.” Unable to act or dress her age, neither can she pass as an adult.

And yet the episode certainly does not advocate dowdiness as the image of proper motherhood. When Cindy Walsh, Brenda’s mother, expresses disapproval of Jackie’s flashy lifestyle, Brenda admonishes her for being judgmental. “Don’t give me that look like this town is crazy and we’re the only normal people in it,” says Brenda, begging her mom to be more “Beverly Hills.” Cindy stiffly replies, “I can’t change who I am to suit the neighborhood.” When Cindy accidentally learns that Brenda, embarrassed that her mother is so “down to earth,” has put off asking her to model in the fashion show, she promises to try harder to be more glamorous. As Cindy admires her new self in a full-length mirror backstage at the show, Brenda sidles up and stands beside her mother and in front of an adjacent mirror. “Mom, you look great,” gasps her daughter. “Well, I guess it’s about time,” says Cindy, admitting the mistake of her militant austerity. “I wonder how much this costs. Not that I’d ever consider buying it.” “Why not?” demands a delighted Brenda, paraphrasing a famous ad campaign: “You deserve it.” While the episode promotes proper distinctions between generations, at the same time it momentarily but approvingly turns Cindy Walsh into a giddy reflection of her teen-age daughter.

The vestigial subplot says much about the relation of gender, melodrama and spectacle in
90210. As the mothers and daughter's work out their relationships, Brandon and Jim Walsh busy themselves at home by assembling an electric organ. Jim Walsh's inept playing punctuates the fashion show plot, parodying conventional melodrama music. Because it is so clearly unglamorous and anti-spectacular, and for other obvious reasons, the organ is itself a parodic marker of masculinity. In spite of—or because of—his organ, Jim Walsh is a failure as a performer. Temporarily giving up the instrument, Jim and Brandon take their places in the audience of the fashion show, positioned to watch Jackie's drama unfold. Although they attempt to derive masculine, voyeuristic pleasure through looking, they feel embarrassingly emasculated. "Boy, there sure are a lot of women around here,"
Jim says nervously to Brandon. The son replies, "I think we should take our seats before someone figures out we're not supposed to be here." The Walsh men, experiencing their own construction as feminine spectators, might just as well be describing the construction of the 90210 viewer.

The core of the episode is the spectacle of Jackie's breakdown, which is both a critique of youth-driven consumer culture and a fashion "don't." By way of introduction, Jackie reminds her audience of the fashion show's good cause: "Of course, everything is for sale." Changing tone, she bitterly adds, "But then again, what isn't?" Implicating models and spectators alike in crass commercialism, rather than charity. As the first mother and daughter parade down the runway, her commentary deteriorates. "Don't we look maaahvelous," she drawls, seeming to mock the women's vanity by mimicking Saturday Night Live's preening talk-show host Fernando. "Shake it ladies," she jokes, lewdly suggesting that both mother and daughter are in fact selling themselves. When Brenda, Andrea, and Cindy walk down the runway wearing clothes donated by "Farley," she inappropriately reminisces, "I don't know if any of you remember, but about eighteen years ago, I was the Farley girl... That's back when twenty was considered young. Of course, now it's practically over the hill." As the audience shifts uncomfortably and Kelly stands in the wings covering her face, she demands, "I wonder if any of you movers and shakers out there would care to tell me exactly why women get so exploited in this town? I imagine there must be one or two of you who could still stand to be with a woman after thirty. But maybe I'm wrong." Jackie seems to be addressing Hollywood's establishment, rather than the luncheon crowd in front of her. Challenging all viewers to look at her on her terms, she expresses annoyance with the conventional stage machinery; "Would you get the damned spot out of my eyes?"

While the melodramatic plot suggests that drugs and alcohol cause Jackie to act in this self-destructive and embarrassing way, her monologue suggests the opposite cause and effect relationship: Society's exploitation of women has driven her to drink. "I feel like a fashion addict," Jackie has joked earlier, eliding her desire for self-adornment and her need for drugs and alcohol. Yet fashion addiction is a requirement of conventional mental health. While the embarrassed Kelly momentarily wishes that her mother would just disappear, the narrative demands that Jackie be properly spectacular in order to set a good example for her daughter. Gone is the leather mini-dress as Jackie packs a suitcase for the rehab center; in its place is a chic black catsuit and matching Chanel bag. In the end, commodified self-construction is figured not as a symptom of diseased culture, but as a step in a self-help program.

Ultimately, the merging of generations through shared spectatoriality serves to maintain traditional bourgeois family values. The morning after the fashion show, Kelly calls Cindy Walsh to tell her that Jackie has agreed to enter treatment and to thank her for being a surrogate Mom: "I think Brenda's really lucky to have a mom like you." Brenda, hovering in the background, asks, "What did Kelly want?" Cindy replies, "She just wanted me to know how lucky I was to have such a great daughter." As Cindy and Brenda fold laundry together, they represent an infinite regress of objectified women. "I try my best. Just like my mother did," says Cindy, passing along this wisdom to her own daughter. Selfless spectacle (they may be folding laundry
or contributing to charity, but they look good while they are doing it) has always been in the family. The women in this episode have learned that in order to generate healthy offspring and a healthy economy, they must dress old values in new clothes.

As Kelly and Jackie pack up the car for their trip to “Timber Hills” (a Betty Ford-like sanatorium where fashion once again merges with cure), David arrives and gives Kelly his tape of the show, assuring her that Jackie’s breakdown will not make it into the video yearbook. While this suppression of the evidence is presented as a help to Jackie and Kelly in controlling their public images, it is also a suppression of Jackie’s critique of Hollywood imagemaking.

At about the time when 90210 began to get widespread media attention, so did another teen phenomenon, the grunge rock band Nirvana. During the last weeks of December 1991, its sarcastic song about conformity in high school, “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” defied all record industry wisdom to become MTV’s number one requested video and its album, Nevermind, reached Billboard’s number one spot.

Nevermind’s cover shows a naked baby underwater grasping at a dollar bill hooked to a fishing line. The hit song, which takes its title from a deodorant marketed specifically to teenage girls, criticizes the cult of high school popularity and the market values that now define the teen years. With Nevermind, Nirvana mounts an attack on consumer culture’s trade in youth. Ironically, the band’s very market success has limited its critical power. The popularity of “Smells Like Teen Spirit” has made the song an attractive marketing tool for the very product it mocks. Mennen’s Teen Spirit deodorant was in...
fact advertised during 90210’s early episodes. The ads, featuring peppy teens sunbathing and playing volleyball, abruptly disappeared when Nirvana’s song hit the charts. But instead of destroying the product, “Smells Like Teen Spirit” helped mold its new campaign, in which peppy teens chant “smells like teen spirit,” while sunbathing and playing volleyball.\(^\text{11}\)

If 90210’s co-optation of cultural critique is a bit more sophisticated than Mennen’s, it is no less crass. Star has described his generation’s liberal political agenda as a necessary component of cool: “We’ve gone from a time when money seemed fast and easy for a lot of young people coming out of college. And now money’s not so fast and easy, and you’re forced to think about things socially. And, in fact, it’s become very unhip not to.”\(^\text{12}\) Refusing conventional liberalism because it has become a fashion accessory, Nirvana proposes different political solutions. Referring to veteran rock satirist Frank Zappa, who was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1991, Nirvana’s bassist Chris Novoselic proclaims in a very different vein from Star: “If I had prostate cancer, I’d get a gun and shoot George Bush.”\(^\text{13}\) Unfortunately for Nirvana, Star’s interpretation of political action as a necessary object is ultimately more commercial than Novoselic’s fringe nihilism.

The teenage lifestyle lampooned by Nirvana and inspiring 90210 is bigger than both the band and the series. George Bush himself attempted to use youth to lure young voters and sell himself as the candidate of “change” during his failed bid for re-election in 1992. On August 19 of that year, 90210 competed for viewers with a melodrama staged by the Republican National Convention, a spectacle complete with Marilyn Quayle touting feminine self-sacrifice. Shannen Doherty, the actress who plays Brenda and one of Hollywood’s rare self-confessed Republicans, was recruited to recite the pledge of allegiance and exhibit the youthful side of the party. If the Republicans failed to cash in on Doherty’s youthful femininity and her show’s success it was only because the G.O.P. limited its effort to the use of a single image. Perhaps Doherty herself would have been a better architect of a party makeover, judging from the way she conflates popularity, quality television, and economic prosperity: “I just hope that the popularity doesn’t change us in any way,” she says, using adolescent-speak to describe the show’s commercial success. “Because we all want to be popular, and we all want the show to really take off, because it is a really good show.”\(^\text{14}\)

---

1 For an examination of the links between melodrama and consumerism in 1940s “woman’s pictures,” see Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 1-37. She defines the genre in terms of melodrama: “They treat problems defined as ‘female’ (problems revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and the relationship between women and production vs. that between women and reproduction), and, most crucially, are directed toward a female audience.” (8) On consumerism and film, she writes, “The female spectator is invited to witness her own commodification and, furthermore, to buy an image of herself insofar as the female star is proposed as the ideal of feminine beauty.” (24)

2 Through TV, as Lynne Joyrich has written, “the ‘feminine’ connotations traditionally attached to melodrama—and to both consumerism and television viewing—are diffused onto a general audience.” Lynne Joyrich, “All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernity and Consumer Culture,” Camera Obscura 16 (1988): 131.


7 The examples are endless. To describe a few: Steve’s dysfunctional family consists of a washed-up television actress mother obsessed with doing a reunion of The Hartley House, her cancelled sitcom; in an early episode, Brandon has a brush with teen-idolhood after he is “discovered” for a bit part in a long-running TV hit Keep it Together; all the kids from West Beverly High rent Halloween costumes from a Hollywood
costume shop that stocks clothes used on movie and TV sets; Jim and Candy Walsh are figured and discussed by other characters as throwbacks to fifties sitcom parents; even the casting of Tori Spelling, daughter of 90210's producer Aaron Spelling, alludes to the world of real-life Hollywood families in which the show claims to be set.

8 As Baudrillard writes, it is impossible to separate or distinguish fantasy and reality in L.A.: "[Disneyland], Enchanted Village, Magic Mountain, Marine World: Los Angeles is encircled by these 'imaginary stations' which feed reality, reality energy, to a town whose mystery is precisely that it is nothing more than a network of endless, unreal circulation—a town of fabulous proportions, but without space or dimensions. As much as electrical and nuclear power stations, as much as film studios, this town, which is nothing more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture, needs this old imaginary made up of childhood signals and faked phantasm for its sympathetic nervous system." Jean Baudrillard, Simulations (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 26.


11 Nirvana's success provided several new marketing opportunities for the deodorant. When the band appeared on Saturday Night Live in January 1992, ad agency executives for Teen Spirit, attempting to capitalize on the band's popularity, purposely purchased commercial time immediately preceding the band's performance of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." Just months after this article was written, "grunge" has been adopted by Madison Avenue. Nirvana's style has inspired couture grunge fashions by designers like Marc Jacobs, modeled by society luminaries Blaine Trump and talk-show host Joan Rivers in the March 1993 issue of Vanity Fair. On the rapid cooptation of grunge by designers and marketers, see Peter Kobel, "Smells Like Big Bucks," Entertainment Weekly (April 2, 1993) 10.

