Body Talk: Reconsidering the Post-Feminist Discourse and Critical Reception of Lena Dunham's *Girls*

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Abstract:
This paper will address the ways in which Lena Dunham, the creator, head writer, producer, sometimes director, and star of the television series *Girls*, defies the glorification of traditional femininity and denounces the representations of what Angela McRobbie named the 21st century "postfeminist masquerade." She also defies the televisual male gaze, as first posited in film theory by Laura Mulvey, by establishing a new form of authorship in TV. Flawlessly sculpted, sexualized female bodies from every era have long populated the landscape of HBO, the premium cable channel that airs Girls. Contrasting many depictions of twenty something women on television, Dunham chooses to bare the imperfections of her body in her performance. Shots of her naked figure often highlight her hardly flat stomach, double chin, and knickers not purchased from any lingerie shop. Although her character is not sexualized in the typical sense, her weight does not render her asexual or deter her from being both desired and desirable. And lastly, although the series frequently relies on romantic relationships, it is essentially about the friendships and bonds between the four *Girls*, and the ritual of undressing is not sexualized, but shows the intimacy of the characters.

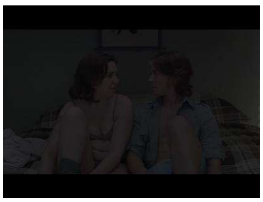
1 Since its premiere in 2012, *Girls* has continued to be a hotly debated cultural spectacle widespread in conference panels, think pieces, and numerous online outlets. Questions of the representations of privilege, race, gender and sexuality inform discussions on the series, while its creator, writer, star and sometimes director, Lena Dunham, has become the pinnacle of both praise and scrutiny. Dunham's often-naked appearance, which falls between normative Hollywood standards of attractiveness and those of comically asexual overweight actresses, remains a ubiquitous topic.

2 Straddling comedy and drama throughout each 25-minute episode on HBO, a premium cable channel with few limits (unlike network television programs such as ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX that restrict explicit content and rely on advertising revenue), *Girls* affords ample opportunities for the 27-year-old to showcase her bare body in various graphically depicted sexual encounters. As *The New Yorker*'s television critic Emily Nussbaum puts it:

> Besides, I could see that there was another thing to notice about *Girls*: Lena Dunham's body, which she had placed, quite deliberately, in the spotlight. Unlike many women on TV, Dunham is short and pear-shaped. She has a tattoo of Eloise on her back, plus ink done by her friend and co-star Jemima Kirke, whom she knew in high school at St. Ann's. The filmmaker can look beautiful in the manner of twenties movie star Clara Bow: She has a small chin, a bow mouth, and very large brown eyes flecked with gold. But just as often, she lets herself look like hell. Dunham films herself nude, with her skin breaking out, her belly in folds, chin doubled, or flat on her

> back with her feet in a gynecologist's stirrups. These scenes shouldn't shock, but they do, if only because in a culture soaked in Photoshop and Botox, few powerful women open themselves up so aggressively to the judgment of voyeurs.

3 Despite the amount of discourse on her body, few academic works have focused on the duality of Dunham's authorship as a showrunner and star. Her choice to defy Angela McRobbie's definition of the post-feminist masquerade, along with the frequently disseminated construction of the male gaze as first discussed by Laura Mulvey, marks a transition in the post-feminist and post-network landscape. It is our intention to initiate this focus. Possessing an unprecedented level of creative control on the HBO platform, Dunham establishes a new form of authorship and performativity within a medium that has merited heightened cultural primacy in the 2000s. Although the series is structured as a 30-minute comedy rather than an hour-long drama, it does not rely on network sitcom conventions because it holds more creative liberties. As Amanda Lotz noted in "Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes," "Scholars generally concur that feminist discourse is predominantly found in the comedy genre because of narrative and generic qualities that both introduce and then contain potentially subversive content."



4 While recent television studies scholarship such as Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* and Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine's *Legitimating Television* have sharply pinpointed the various complexities behind the role of the contemporary showrunner, few works have yet to highlight female showrunners, particularly alongside feminist television criticism. For the purposes of this paper, we aim to focus on a critical feminist reading of how Dunham achieves authorial control of her work as the showrunner and star of *Girls*. The issues of gender alongside race, class, and privilege indeed remain problematic within the series because it is a series focusing on white and upper middle class characters. The latter part of this paper will then focus on an investigation of the critical reception of the showrunner and her series, and as part of this subsequent analysis, we will address commentaries on the series in relation to race and privilege. We find this especially fitting as the divisions amongst critics and audiences further illustrates a post-feminist, post-racial, and post-network cultural landscape.

5 In *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, McRobbie asserts that the pressures of maintaining the "beauty standard" when popular media is omnipresent in everyday life leads to a representation of women through a "post-feminist masquerade" (64), a 21st century take on one of the central themes in Mary Anne Doane's 1982 *Screen* article, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator" (74-88). The preponderance of idealized bodies in film, television, and advertising, coupled with the influence of consumer culture encompassing the business of beauty products and regimens, leads to a microscopic attention to physical appearance and self-surveillance. McRobbie asserts that this masquerade is "a new form of gender power which re-orchestrates the heterosexual matrix in order to secure, once again, the existence of patriarchal law and masculine hegemony" (64). She cites the protagonist of HBO's last female-centered series *Sex and the City* as emblematic masquerade.[1]

6 In understanding the significance of representations of women, Mulvey's 1975 Screen article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" proves helpful. Mulvey propounds the concept of the "male gaze" of cinema, in which woman is the passive image/object and man is the active viewer/subject. Consequently, women only view themselves based on how they are perceived by men. Mulvey's contributions continue to be frequently cited in academia because they remain highly applicable to today's media. Film, and furthermore television and popular media, are hardly made from an opposing "female gaze" or the perspectives of women. The skewed onscreen representations result from inequalities with which most minorities struggle behind the camera.

7 Dunham defies the televisual male gaze widespread in HBO, Hollywood, and mainstream media. Concurrently, her character's physicality in *Girls* does not render her character asexual or undesirable in the eyes of attractive men. She makes a point to reveal her naked body in scenes of a sexual nature as well as those depicting everyday life. The series illustrates the following:

1. An ideal body does not lead to sexual confidence or satisfaction, in spite of the idealized bodies and sex scenes pervasive in film and TV.
2. Acts of female nudity can lead to physical humor, but, this does not render the female character asexual, unattractive or undesirable as a result.
3. Women can be shown naked, even together, without the scene conforming to the male gaze by possessing a fantasized sexual connotation.

[1] The series eventually became a symbol of post-feminist consumerist fantasies in its last seasons and two film spin-offs.

8 On the subject of physical expectations foisted upon women, Dunham revealed in a 2013 *Playboy* interview what she would do if she were to wake up with the body of a Victoria's Secret lingerie model. Her answer:

> I don't think I'd like it very much. I don't want to go through life wondering if people are talking to me because I have a big rack. Not being the babest person in the world creates a nice barrier. The people who talk to you are the people who are interested in you. It must be a big burden in some ways to look that way and be in public.

It should be noted that she did not pose naked for Playboy, and has not posed naked in other mediums not created by her, demonstrating controlled authorship of her body. While the magazine typically asks young and attractive actresses to undress for their most coveted cover or centerfold feature, the "20 Questions" section featuring Dunham typically focuses on interesting personas in popular culture, most frequently of the male persuasion.

9 Despite its many explorations of romantic relationships, *Girls* strives to be about friendship, and the only line we see Dunham's character Hannah Horvath write in her book is: "A friendship between college girls is grander and more dramatic than any romance." In the series' pilot, Hannah differentiates herself from her roommate Marnie (Allison Williams), stating she looks like a "Victoria's Secret angel" and herself as a "fat baby angel," whereupon she grabs a cupcake and asks that Marnie and her boyfriend Charlie (Christopher Abott) avert their eyes. Hannah and Marnie fall asleep watching *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), and later in the episode hang out in their bathtub together. While Hannah has no qualms with devouring a cupcake naked in the tub, and in spite of her recently uttered self-deprecating comment, she remarks to a demure Marnie, wrapped in a towel, that she never sees her naked. Coincidentally, Marnie's sex life with Charlie is absolutely lacking from her perspective.

10 In Season 1, Episode 3, "All Adventurous Women Do," Hannah's boyfriend Adam (Adam Driver) grabs the sides of her stomach during a post-coital session on his bed, and makes flapping noises and gestures to produce a comical muppet-like quality, stating that her stomach is funny. She replies that she does not wish for her body to be funny. He suggests she only needs to lose three to four pounds, and asks if she has previously attempted to lose

weight. He bursts into laughter as she turns around, and lightly yet still defensively states that no, she has not, because she had "some other concerns in my life." With that statement, Hannah acknowledges her imperfect body, but concludes it is not one of her defining characteristics. Hannah asserts this belief to Adam, who asks her to touch his non-existent stomach fat in return. In this scene, Dunham tacitly addresses the state of American television as far as women's bodies are concerned. Adam unsurprisingly remains unaware of the weight of her statement.

11 One of the most blatant examples of the 'double standards' imposed on *Girls* is observed in the reactions of its viewers, which take the form of disbelief that Hannah is attractive enough for her partners; they range from Adam to a wealthy and handsome 42-year old doctor played by Patrick Wilson in Season 2, Episode 5, "One Man's Trash." That Dunham has become something of an auteur brings to attention the treatment of male entertainers who retain a considerable amount of control over their work. Did we ever question or castigate Woody Allen, Jerry Seinfeld, and Louis C.K., among a hundred other performers, whenever their onscreen personas successfully woo sexual partners? Did we ever scrutinize their bodies? Did anyone ever stop to ask whether Alvy Singer was too short and spindly for Annie Hall? Perhaps it is the redeeming qualities inherent in their comedic personas – their power, success, humor or charm – that leads us to believe they could have sex and be in relationships with attractive women. And this is what we come to learn about Hannah. Dunham suggests that an 'ideal' body does not necessarily lead to sexual satisfaction. Taking again from the *Playboy* interview, she states:

> My goal is to have a sexual verisimilitude that has heretofore not been seen on television. I did it because I felt that the depictions of sex I had seen on television weren't totally fair to young women trying to wrap their brains around this stuff.

12 In contrast, Marnie, the tall and svelte "Victoria's Secret angel," has perpetually lackluster intercourse with Charlie. This is not to say that Hannah has not had her fair share of sexual misadventures, but she is more privy to pleasure when possible. Marnie is portrayed as being unable to experience sexual gratification, and is more interested in the socioeconomic status of men and how it can elevate her from her own circumstances.[2] When

[2] As far as the two other "Girls" are concerned, the jittery Shoshana (Zosia Mamet) is insecure about her own

nudity in the series is taken out of a sexual context, the female body is depicted for purposes heretofore unseen on television. Images of the exposed female figure, particularly Dunham's, function as a storytelling device that can not only enhance the dramatic impact of a scene, but also sustain the visual joke in a sequence.

13 In Season 2, Episode 3, "Bad Friend," Hannah takes a freelance writing job and consequently tries cocaine for the first time. The protagonist explores the concept of vulnerability and youthful adventure by doing drugs; this is a prime example of Dunham locating the comical impact of female nudity in her performance. "Bad Friend" makes use of the proverbial 'double act' dynamic in comedy, though it is quickly subverted; the female is not relegated to the position of the 'straight man.' The uncovered female body produces humor in a rave sequence where Hannah trades shirts with a stranger on the dance floor, and emerges from the crowd with a mesh top and her nipples exposed. What makes the sequence interesting is its complete lack of a sexual connotation.

14 The visual joke is sustained in the next sequence, in which Hannah finds herself in the same outfit under the dull fluorescent lighting of a drug store. Removed from the sweaty commotion of the rave, her state of undress in a mundane setting illustrates the absurdity of her dalliance with cocaine. In her performance, the viewer sees that the interpretation of the female body is inextricably tied to the context in which it is presented. And as demonstrated in this episode and many other instances throughout the series, while female nudity can be used in service of humor, it is merely one of the many devices shoring up the joke.

15 At the drug store, Hannah finds that her former-junkie neighbor Laird (Jon Glaser), who is attracted to her, has been following her. Although he is not as debonair as her past suitors, his attraction is signaled when he calls her "a pretty face," much to Hannah's surprise and delight, indicating that her sexual desirability is intact in spite of her antics.

status as a 20-year-old virgin in the first season, while Jessa (Jemima Kirke) understands sex as a means of dominating the opposite sex rather than that of experiencing pleasure or establishing an intimate connection. We never see Marnie, Shoshana, or Jessa as exposed as Hannah, although Jessa exposes her bare breasts, but these tendencies may very well be attributed to the actresses' choices.

The episode culminates in Hannah's tryst with Laird, an artificially created experience of vulnerability which will serve as the subject of her article (a la the confessional pieces of xoJane.com[3]). With that, Hannah proves herself the author of her own sex life. Throughout the series, Dunham's character is still very much a serious romantic lead with attractive partners. Dunham, then, is never rendered asexual or unattractive because of her imperfections in the form of humor or less than idealized appearances. Both her character and real-life persona never attempt to live up to a post-feminist masquerade, proving that this assumed standard is not necessary to gain personal or professional success and self-fulfillment.

16 *Girls* routinely posits images of the female body – which are, on the surface, conducive to scopophilia – in prosaic situations, confronting its viewers with the possibility of women's bodies not being titillating so much as simply existing on television. Such is the implication of scenes featuring female characters in various states of undress and engaged in everyday activities, as well as intimacy based on female friendship. Echoing the scene in the bathroom in the series' pilot, the conclusion of Season 2, Episode 4, "It's a Shame About Ray," sees Jessa seeking comfort from Hannah after the disintegration of her marriage. When she joins Hannah in the bathtub, female nudity is normalized as the turmoil experienced by the character forms the subtext of the scene. The integration of humor via bodily functions – signaled when Jessa disposes of her snot in the bathwater – further solidifies the moment as one of female bonding in which nudity is merely circumstantial to the narrative.

17 When *Hustler* magazine released a *Girls* pornography parody in May 2013, Dunham explained her reaction on her Twitter account:

[3] xoJane.com is a lifestyle website aimed at a largely female readership, featuring articles replete with details of its writers' personal lives. Jane Pratt, who founded the website, has admitted to encouraging her writers to experiment with lifestyle trends as a means of generating content

> Okay, I wracked my brain to articulate why I can't just laugh off a porn parody of *Girls* and here are 3 reasons:
>
> 1. Because Girls is, at its core, a feminist action while *Hustler* is a company that markets and monetizes a male's idea of female sexuality [sic]
> 2. Because a big reason I engage in (simulated) onscreen sex is to counteract a skewed idea of that act created by the proliferation of porn [sic]
> 3. Because it grosses me out.
>
> It's important to me to be honest about the complexities of having that out in the world. Love, Lena (porn name: Murray Broadway) [sic]

18 There is a phenomenon in which the significance of female performers to the medium of television is skewed by depictions of their characters' sexuality. Dunham, then, stands as something of an oddity in the media, lauded for her achievements on and off screen, and scrutinized for embracing nudity in her performances. Her access to multiple creative roles parallels that of another performer-showrunner: Tina Fey, who is widely credited for advancing the position of female talent in television. As the first female head writer of *Saturday Night Live*[4] and creator of *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-2013), Fey's contributions have generally been made within the confines of network television, whose broadcast regulations preclude nudity. Perhaps therein lays lies the difference between the public reception of Hannah Horvath and Liz Lemon, and, by extension, their off screen counterparts. That is not to say that Fey has been exempt from an invidious examination of her appearance by the media, but the sexual exploits of her mostly asexual Liz Lemon, sparse and only ever implied, have somehow made her public persona more palatable than that of Dunham.

19 The disparate portrayals of these two figures in the media belie the nearly identical nature of their professional roles, which signifies the impact still inherent in female nudity. Fey's contributions are no less provocative than Dunham's; the central premise of *30 Rock* serves to lampoon the very industry which catapulted her to fame. But when Dunham bares her body in *Girls*, it is as though all attention is diverted from her status as a storyteller to a wrongly supposed request to be viewed as a sexual spectacle. Facing similar issues in network television, Mindy Kaling has sought to explore the romantic experiences of a young professional in The Mindy Project (Fox, 2012-present), of which she is both performer and showrunner. In response to commentary about her character's appearance, Kaling has stated that she does not view her character's weight as her problem, but a constant means by which her onscreen counterpart is defined by her sexual partners and those inhabiting her reality.

[4] Tina Fey's tenure as head writer of Saturday Night Live began in 1999 and ended in 2006.

Both Kaling and Dunham have been the subjects of media coverage, but most of these features, no matter how complimentary, ultimately emphasize the ways in which their bodies deviate from the idealized female form. While the romantic prospects of Kaling's Mindy have been misinterpreted as an invitation for the audience to speculate the desirability of the performer, Dunham's character has elicited unwarranted commentary on her body. The otherness attached to Dunham and Kaling's physicality by popular media attests to a propensity to define female talent as aberrations of physical ideals without consideration of their various talents. As Kaling stated in a September 2013 feature for *Parade* magazine:

> I always get asked, "Where do you get your confidence?" I think people are well meaning, but it's pretty insulting. Because what it means to me is, "You, Mindy Kaling, have all the trappings of a very marginalized person. You're not skinny, you're not white, you're a woman. Why on earth would you feel like you're worth anything?"

Kaling also remarked, "While I'm talking about why I'm so different, white male show runners get to talk about their art." As she and Dunham are the creative voices of their respective series, the chasm between media attention drawn to their bodies and their status as television auteurs could not be more pronounced.

20 In the past, discussions of body image were deemed contrary to the advancement of women. Christina Hendricks, who portrays *Mad Men*'s (AMC, 2007-present) sexualized Joan Holloway, is often lauded as a healthy alternative to the waif figure, yet she frequently admonishes treatment of her body type as 'other.' When the fashion editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* referred to her as "full figured" during a 2012 interview, Hendricks subsequently refused to comply with any other questions on body image, stating that being labeled as such was "just rude." Meanwhile, Dunham's assertion of control over the representation of her body – done in service of upsetting the Hollywood status quo – is what intellectualizes her role in *Girls*.

21 At the forefront of recent series produced by women and about women, *Girls* propounds the discussion of female bodies on television as one which is highly significant, and one which is ushering in a new era of authorship and agency. While its depictions of mainly privileged Caucasian women can be understood as a cause for contention in racial or socioeconomic terms, Dunham's voice as a showrunner and performer is undeniably making substantial strides for women in television. Dunham and her critics, with varying results, have discussed the issue to engage with the public. Interestingly enough, one of the most powerful showrunners of primetime television, Shonda Rhimes of *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-present), *Private Practice* (ABC, 2007-2013), and *Scandal* (ABC, 2012-present), is a

professed fan of *Girls*, although she has previously castigated series such as *Bunheads* (ABC Family, 2012-2013) for its lack of diversity. Rhimes' series utilize 'blindcasting' in the hope of illustrating diversity and equality in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. In a 2012 interview with CNN, Rhimes commented on diversity in contemporary TV and *Girls*:

> I don't know if there is a responsibility on the part of the creator, I mean there is a responsibility on the part of the network. It's very interesting to me that HBO didn't say: why isn't the show more diverse? We believe in diversity, so why don't we make this show be more diverse? I think that's where I lay the fault. I've seen 'Girls.' I think it's delightful, I love it. And I think Lena Dunham is tremendous and interesting and a really talented writer. She made a statement where she said [she] didn't want to try to represent experiences that were not [her] own, and what [she] knew was this. The idea that she felt her experience wasn't relatable to anybody who wasn't white is disturbing to me. Because I watch the show- I find it delightful. So why couldn't one of those girls been Native American or Indian or Asian or Hispanic or black and it had been exactly the same story? I don't understand why it would have to be a different story because the person was a different color.

22 Dunham's statement about the limited representations of racial minorities in *Girls*, presented in an NPR interview in which she also remarked on her fear of racial tokenism in televisual storytelling, remains contentious. Admittedly, casting Donald Glover as her love interest in only the first two episodes of the second season did not prove an effective exercise in addressing the racial problems of *Girls*. His character, an African-American Republican, contributes to the central conflict of his storyline by admitting his dislike of Hannah's writing, which leads to a clumsy discussion of their differing politics and interracial relationship. The conclusion of his two-episode arc, however, reveals the difficulty of initiating an honest discourse on race, even if it is between two educated metropolitan twenty-somethings amidst a presumed post-racial America. Hannah, offended not by his politics so much as his remarks on her writing, is essentially apolitical and self-absorbed. Her ex-boyfriend's stance on social issues is never divulged; instead, his Republican alignment is an assumed negative trait which she uses as an excuse for their break up. Glover's presence in *Girls* possibly predated the series' racial backlash, as co-showrunner Jenni Konner mentioned in a *Salon* interview that his role was planned before the critical response. If this is unknown to the viewer, it appears as an attempt at anti-tokenism instigated by criticism. Most recently, Danielle Brooks, a recurring cast member of the commercially and critically popular, female-dominated and multi-racial *Orange is The New Black* (Netflix, 2013-present), announced in an *Ebony* interview that she will be the first black female cast member in the third season of *Girls*. However, she is only confirmed for an appearance in one episode. Perhaps the biggest problem that caused the racial backlash of *Girls* was the initial

buzz surrounding the series, a laudation of depicting the universal experience of post-college twenty-something women struggling with professional and personal problems. We have of course come to learn that while many of Dunham's more relatable scenarios may resonate with members of races and socioeconomic groups beyond her own, the series is directly inspired by the showrunner's personal experiences and social circles, many members of which appear to be white. The same can be said for some of the most popular film and television series based in New York, including *Friends, Seinfeld* and *Manhattan*.

23 In a *Salon* piece titled "'Girls' Still Racist," Julianne Escobedo Sheperd astutely points out that the series depicts an almost completely Caucasian cast set in Brooklyn, a city that she cites as the most statistically diverse in the United States. She concluded that "despite all its frank talk about abortion and HPV and sex, this show's advances in the realm of progressive womanist television are very nearly undermined by its oblivious, exclusionist and unknowingly racist (the worst kind, no?) aspects." And Kendra James' piece for *Racialicious* propounded more personal criticism, as she has a similar upbringing as Dunham, and even attended the same university, Oberlin College. She comments on the racial stereotypes presented by minor characters and concludes:

> Lena Dunham and I may have a bit in common, but regardless of what Emily Nussbaum says, I do not consider Girls to be For Us or By Us. Nussbaum's "Us"[5] and Dunham's show eliminate not only the other two-thirds of Brooklyn that exist, the reality of a minority-majority NYC population, but also the reality that my friends and I are currently living. Once again, we've been erased from a narrative.

24 TV critics such as Maureen Ryan and Alyssa Rossenberg have perhaps made some of the most well-rounded commentaries on this subject in relation to the television industry, with Ryan's *Huffington Post* piece, "HBO's 'Girls' Isn't Racist, Television is Racist (And Sexist)," and Rossenberg's "Women of Color in Television, Part 1" echoing Rhimes' sentiment that the onus of dealing with a lack of diversity should fall on television networks, which happen to be dominated by Caucasian men. This also speaks to the significance of media industries studies in probing these issues, and understanding the imbalanced infrastructure of the film and television landscape. In regard to issues of class and privilege and middle class feminism, while all of the characters in *Girls* come from upper middle class families, one of the main struggles of the series' protagonists is unemployment or underemployment compounded by the loss of financial dependency from their parents. This

[5] Nussbaum's "For Us By Us" assertion is mentioned in her March 2012 *New York* magazine article, "Its Different for 'Girls'" in which she quotes her colleague and *Salon* TV critic Willa Paskin: "the show felt, to her peers, FUBU: 'for us by us.'" Paskin and Nussbaum are here appropriating the slogan of the African-American apparel company, FUBU.

relatable component has not always been welcomed as a significant counter-critique. When it comes to a discussion of privilege and class as depicted in the series, all censure seems to be directed at Dunham and her background as a wealthy New Yorker with two famous artists as her parents. All of her series' co-stars also come from wealthy and famous families, further fueling the flames of class-based criticism.

25 Williams is the daughter of NBC news anchor Brian Williams; Mamet is the daughter of playwright David Mamet; Kirke is the daughter of Bad Company drummer Sam Kirke. As stridently as these family connections were publicized in the months following *Girls*' premiere, HBO was more likely to have offered Dunham her own series because of the success of her second independent film, *Tiny Furniture* (2010). Shot in her childhood home, the film is a more faithful portrayal of her actual lifestyle than what is depicted in *Girls*.

26 These examples of criticism aimed at the series' lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity are far more intellectually sound in contrast to those concerning her body. Drawing a slight parallel between *Girls* and HBO's other well-known series centered on four women in New York City, Andrea Peyser of the *New York Post* declared that Dunham's series was *Sex and the City* "for ugly people." The issue of appearances forms the crux of her review: *Girls*' four main characters are "20-something white gals," she writes, who "dress in mismatched consignment-shop rags." As it appears, the interpretive processes of many critics sustain arrested development as soon as they discern the surface of *Girls*. The deeper implication of Peyser, among other critics, taking umbrage with the 'ugliness' of the series is that despair runs counter to comedy.

27 Echoing Peyser's preoccupation with the explicit meaning of *Girls*' graphic content, Linda Stasi of the *New York Post* takes a more unapologetic approach in skewering Dunham's physicality as it appears in the series' second season. Comparisons to *Sex and the City* are ineluctable in her criticism, positioned front and center as the dubious paragon of feminist television. That Stasi exalts *Sex and the City* as the be all and end all of television series about women is a questionable conceit, though it further foregrounds the implication that attractiveness is analogous to success, one which detracts from the critical acuity of many who have attempted to review *Girls*.

28 The issue of conventional attractiveness has sporadically surfaced in the narrative of *Girls*, and certain critics have accordingly designated the character of Marnie as their source of reprieve from the perceived "ugliness." Of course, such an attempt is usually made at the expense of thoughtful analysis of the series' plotting and genre conventions. That the character is somehow unable to find love is most curious to Stasi, who finds fault in the

verisimilitude of the character's storyline. In response to Hannah securing a romantic relationship in the time between the first and second season, Stasi writes that "sometimes it just doesn't pay to be smart, breathtakingly beautiful, nice and kind." The fixation on images of success ultimately dissuades critics from truly examining the narrative forces at work in the series and the ways in which they are established and conjoined, as in the interweaving of tragic elements in the framework of a situational comedy.

29 What Stasi and others fail to acknowledge is that Marnie obsesses over her appearance in order to find a rich suitor to improve her own socio-economic standing. This dated practice is reminiscent of recent college graduates in the era of Betty Friedan's 1960s treatise *The Feminine Mystique*. Following Marnie's break up with long-term boyfriend Charlie, she pursues a famous conceptual artist because she is ostensibly enamored with his lavish lifestyle. Her own career is stagnant, and she remains unfulfilled when she bases her happiness on a male partner. Upon learning of Charlie's fame and success in the world of mobile applications in Season 2, Episode 8, "It's Back," she attempts to rekindle their relationship. While the two engage in physical contact again by the end of the second season, she disingenuously fawns over his new accomplishments and abilities as a lover. Upon their reconciliation in Season 2, Episode 10, "Together," Marnie claims she does not love him for his money because she does not even know how much he has. He quickly declares it is indeed "a bunch, a lot, a lot of money." The two kiss at the end of the scene.

30 A trenchant exchange between Hannah and Marnie (in Season 2, Episode 2, "I Get Ideas") delineates their differing views of their bodies as well as the patriarchy under which they operate. After being rejected for a curatorial position, Marnie becomes a hostess at a high-end restaurant with the help of Shoshanna and Ray, who encourage her to capitalize on her beauty in the professional world. Hannah is less than accepting of her friend's new job; expressing disgust over the "rich, old men" who frequent Marnie's workplace, she exalts herself for making "clean money" and not "cashing in" on her sexuality. That Marnie vocalizes her desire for someone to tell her "how her life should look" in Season 2, Episode 4, "It's a Shame About Ray," is a telling example of characterization because none of the other three primary female characters have so openly implored direction in life. To place the trajectory of the character in an economy of beauty, it could be said that Marnie, the "Victoria's Secret angel," has always stood to gain the most for adhering to expectations imposed on women, but it is clear that within the narrative, she is defined as a passive agent in such an economy.

31 Ironically, Hannah faces a similar dilemma involving her sexuality and professional prospects in Season 2, Episode 9, "On All Fours," in which the drafts of her e-book are rejected by her editor (John Cameron Mitchell), who is not interested in her outlook on female friendship so much as her sexual history. Hannah's editor demands to know about the "sexual failure," the "pudgy face, liquid semen and sadness," a comically preposterous take on female objectification in the reality of Girls. Nonetheless, Hannah capitulates and agrees to write about her tryst with a teenager (in Season 2, Episode 7, "Video Games"). The possibility of Hannah's foray into the world of literature being hijacked and distorted into a lurid account of sexual encounters is left unexplored as she subsequently suffers a mental breakdown. But the outcome of her struggle is reminiscent of her ill-advised decision to write a crowd-pleasing story about death in Season 1, Episode 9, "Leave Me Alone," and as per the narrative patterns of tragedy in which the character frequently finds herself, the possibility of Hannah achieving success – even if she succumbed to female objectification – was simply not meant to be.

32 Accusations of anti-feminism leveled against the series could be attributed to its scenes of unfulfilling sex, which, Sarah Hughes of The Independent suggests, are redolent of the protagonist's "lack of self-worth." In a bid to trace the series' backlash to its most inflammatory elements, Hughes indicates that some have balked at the idea of watching young women displaying visceral reactions to sex. Yet it is these depictions of ungainly sexual exploration that have received the brunt of the criticism, with the assumption on the part of the media that a sex scene ought to be gratifying, especially one in a comedy. The unacknowledged irony lies in a secondary assumption apparent in many reviews of Girls: if the series' depictions of sex were outright titillating, it would somehow be found more agreeable. Could the series, which eschews these simplistic notions, be alternatively accepted as a more challenging viewing experience?

33 Nussbaum locates *Girls* within a continuum of "culture-rattling narratives about young women" ranging from novels about the female experience since 1958 to the music of contemporary female singer-songwriters. A recurring interest in privilege among young women is apparent in cultural products which have often elicited criticism informed by a gender divide:

> Because such stories exposed the private lives of male intellectuals, they got critiqued as icky, sticky memoir – score-settling, not art. (In contrast, young men seeking revenge on their exes are generally called "comedians" or "novelists" or "Philip Roth.") There's clearly an appetite for this prurient ritual, in which privileged girls, in

their rise to power, get humiliated, first in fiction, then in criticism – like a Roman Colosseum for gender anxieties.

34 A retributive undercurrent, as it appears, has long been entrenched in the genre of comedy, though whether these narratives are considered cruel or mean-spirited hinges on the existence of a dominant female perspective. Simply put, art which explores sexual politics in heterosexual relationships with a male voice tends to escape reproach. As observed in the critical reception of *Girls*, any trace of privilege or cultivation in the voice of the female artist tends to be commandeered as the thrust of criticism. There is a wealth of astute observations on relationships and sexuality in the tradition of comics debasing themselves in sitcoms, though they are often expressed from a male perspective. Nussbaum links the auteurist sensibilities and often unsavory aspects of *Girls* to an attempted reinvigoration of the tradition characterized by such series as *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989-1998) and *Louie* (FX, 2010-present). What other critics have considered a fault of the series – a narrow focus on privileged Caucasian women and their sexual misadventures – is regarded by Nussbaum as its moorings in a burgeoning medium, a "modern" mode of television which simply "makes viewers uncomfortable." On the topic of unsympathetic characters and *Girls*' darkly comical leanings, Hughes indicates a possible transatlantic divide in the series' critical and public reception, writing that it would be less likely to stand out in the United Kingdom, where "the self-absorbed and unaware" are celebrated in sitcoms. American viewers, she suggests, have yet to fully accept "truly dislikeable" female characters as viable sources of amusement, precluding their enjoyment of dark comedies tempered with insufficient sentimentality. Much of the uproar in response to *Girls* is therefore a result of viewers' visceral dislike of the series' characters as much as its digression from the formalistic constraints of the traditional sitcom. Perhaps the critical vitriol is incited not by Dunham's physical portrayal of Hannah so much as her character's flaws and contradictions, which is emblematic of a certain subgenre of television embodied by women behaving badly. And as demonstrated by the reception of *Girls*, this is a subgenre struggling to ingratiate itself with television audiences due in no small part to its gendered component.

35 While it may be a series exploring the familiar terrain of issues that define Generation Y, *Girls* is, to the delight of some and consternation of others, largely shaped by the auteuristic sensibility of its creator, Lena Dunham. She is by no means a female anomaly within established models of television production, and yet it is in a discussion of gendered authorship where the individuality of her status becomes apparent. Also brought to the foreground, however, is an important discourse about the qualifiers applied to a given piece

of entertainment by critics and audiences alike. These qualifiers, as demonstrated by the public reception of the series, are a product of mechanisms in the media which innately, and occasionally selectively, respond to far-reaching cultural issues of gender status, privilege and race. At its most reductive, television criticism faults for depicting a reality in which gender ideals are flouted, presenting such an affront as the defining quality of the series' and, by extension, its stars. For a more enlightening purpose, it does not attribute the intrigue surrounding Dunham to her being female or feminist in a field dominated by male showrunners, but rather the wide range of responses to her being such an entity. Indubitably, Dunham has garnered unparalleled and unprecedented creative control in the noteworthy format of HBO's original programming. But if a woman's contributions to quality television were examined with an overstated focus on her gender, her significance is ultimately minimized; paradoxically, the realm of 30-minute comedies, as well as hour-long dramas, requires an influx of female talent to make these gender qualifiers obsolete.

36 Considering the patriarchal dominance in Hollywood, Dunham and her contributions have elicited necessary conversations about the need for women to generate content. Should productive analyses of *Girls* continue to differentiate 'women's entertainment' from 'entertainment about women,' media industries will be more mindful of underrepresented media practitioners and audiences. It is our hope that future discussions of talent in television will not be stultified by gender, ethnic, racial or socioeconomic definitions, but benefit from a more tempered view of an artist's unique background and issues of underrepresentation in an entire industry. Subsequent criticism about the depiction of a limited, privileged demographic in Girls will pave the way for new voices which may be taken into account by its creator. In this symbiotic relationship, cultural criticism and feminist media readings will continue to prove its own value to television viewership.

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