

**Invocations of Feminism:  
Cultural value, gender, and American quality  
television**

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**October 2016**

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the emergence of a trend in American post-millennial television often described in journalistic discourses with the term ‘feminist quality TV’. While the strategic reliance on feminist politics is a historically established method in American television to promote certain programming’s cultural value, the cultural specificities of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century deem this phenomenon unique enough for an in-depth study. The emergence of ‘feminist quality television’ is governed by the rhetorical subversion of two phenomena simultaneously: the much-debated development of the era’s masculine-coded ‘quality television’ culture on the one hand, and the dominance of ‘postfeminist’ popular culture on the other.

Post-millennial ‘quality television’ culture cultivates the idea of aesthetic-generic hierarchies among different types of scripted programming. This category’s development has facilitated academic interest in television texts’ evaluative analysis based on aesthetic merit, an approach that other strands of TV scholarship contest for sidestepping the gendered and classed processes of canonisation informing the phenomenon. By the mid-2010s, the debate between aesthetic versus political analysis had intensified in television studies. The thesis intervenes in this by arguing for a synthesis of approaches that does not further foster already prominent processes of canonisation, but interrogates the cultural forces underlying them. Via detailed analyses of four programmes emerging within the ‘feminist quality TV’ trend, namely *30 Rock* (2006-2013), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), *The Good Wife* (2009-2016), and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013-), it seeks to understand how they mediate their cultural significance by negotiating formal-aesthetic exceptionalism and a politicised rhetoric around a ‘problematic’ postfeminism, thus linking

ideals of political and aesthetic value. The ultimate purpose of this research is to demonstrate the necessity in television analysis of unpacking both the specific genderedness of television's cultivation of aesthetic value, and the context of aesthetics and form in which the programmes' political implications emerge.

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## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my deep gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Yvonne Tasker and Dr Eylem Atakav, for their mentorship throughout the development of this research; as well as to my Viva examiners Professor Diane Negra and Dr Brett Mills for their insightful suggestions. I also want to thank my PhD peers at the Department of Film, Television and Media of the University of East Anglia, especially Irene Cuder, Dr Ksenia Frolova, Miriam Bross, Miriam Kent, and Ruchika Gurung, for their inspiration and support. Special thanks are due to my friends Mártonfi Anna and Mihalovics Éva, not only for their friendship but for assuming the ungrateful roles of sounding board and astute critic in times of desperate need.

I would not have been able to finish (let alone start) this work without the loving support of my parents Havasné dr Timár Ilona and Havas Miklós, and my brother Havas Péter and his family: Henni, Hanga, Kincsó, and the latest and tiniest addition to the gang, Villő; thank you guys.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my late father Havas Miklós who passed away during the development of this project. I am forever grateful for his encouragement and his dogged confidence in me. Köszönöm Apa.

## Introduction

‘Woman, writer, New York: those are all on my list of “TV no-no words.”’

Kenneth Parcell, *30 Rock* (‘Hogcock!’)

The above words are uttered by Kenneth (Jack McBrayer), the NBC-page-turned-network-president in the NBC series *30 Rock* (2006-2013), a meta-sitcom set behind the scenes of a fictional sketch comedy show, and whose main protagonist is the show’s head writer Liz Lemon (Tina Fey). Kenneth says this in response to Liz’s pitch for a series based on her life as a woman TV writer working in New York. To support his comment, he also presents a piece of paper with a list of words on it, titled ‘Kenneth’s TV No-no Words’, and explains to Liz American network television’s imperative of providing easy entertainment for audiences. The list, which the viewer can examine by pausing the TV image, includes the following expressions: urban, woman, shows about shows, writer, dramedy, politics, high concept, complex, niche, quality, edgy. To Liz’s objection that ‘TV can be successful without sacrificing quality’, he disapprovingly points out the word on his list. Liz retorts: ‘Maybe I shouldn’t bring my ideas to NBC. I’ll go to cable where you can swear and *really* take time to let moments la...’ We never hear her finish the word ‘land’ because the scene abruptly ends to cut to the next one.

This sequence’s satire works with the audience’s awareness of American ‘quality’ television culture and the distinction between the features and cultural values assigned to network and cable television. But it also assumes the underlying genderedness of these distinctions: ‘progressive’ female representations in this setup belong in the ‘edgy’ world of cable television. Yet as an NBC series about a woman writer and as ‘urban’ showbiz comedy, *30 Rock*’s satire reassures viewers that it *is* all of these things: edgy (frequently thematising contentious

political-cultural issues), self-reflexive (it is already understood to be the autobiographical rendering of Tina Fey's own career as television writer), and complex quality comedy. Further, it treats its audiences as savvy-smart (they will freeze-frame the image for the extra jokes on Kenneth's list and get the hall-of-mirrors metacommentary), and centralises the politics of urban womanhood, sending up popular debates about contemporary feminism. All of this on *network* television, with the programme, and its broadcaster NBC, reassuring us of its difference from other networks with their mediocre and sexist programming targeting provincial audiences, by satirising both them and itself. In this scene then, just as in the whole of the series, television culture's negotiations of cultural value, aesthetics, and gender politics become the comedy's central theme and are treated as fundamentally intertwined.

This thesis is interested in the issues that *30 Rock* thematises here and of which the series is also a prominent example: it investigates the emergence of a group of programmes in American television after the millennium whose categorisation as 'quality television' is predicated on their understanding as 'feminist television'. While the strategic association between cultural value and politics, especially gender politics, is nothing new in American television – to the extent that it might be called a staple of its heritage – the post-millennial makeup of this connection deems it unique enough to call for an in-depth examination. The tendency has become widespread enough in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to form patterns, and scholarship has started to examine its attributes from a feminist perspective (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016; Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016). This category of programming, in popular journalism occasionally declared a new era of 'feminist quality television' (Blay 2015), has been attributed with subverting two dominant phenomena simultaneously. In keeping with

the Western tradition of evaluating cultural products in a negotiation of socially 'realistic' representation and artistic expression, one subversion is broadly linked to politics and the other to aesthetics. The political subversion targets the previous (millennial) era's limited representations of female subjectivity associated with postfeminism, while the aesthetic subversion upsets the value hierarchies of a masculinist and 'non-televisual' quality television.

My primary goal is to understand the relationship between these two discourses of subversion in a cultural period in which feminism has once again become a popular and contested buzzword, and in which the most recent 'Golden Age of Television' is both celebrated for its aesthetic innovations and criticised for its reliance on patriarchal ideals of cultural value. The investigation seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the patterns of subversion/negotiation of postfeminist politics in 'feminist quality television' and how are these connected to genre and aesthetic conventions?
2. What are the patterns of the 'quality' descriptor in 'feminist quality television' in terms of aesthetic and formal innovation and how are these mobilised to engage with the struggle between the postfeminist/feminist?
3. How do institutional and media discourses make sense of 'feminist quality television's negotiations of gender politics and aesthetic value?

The thesis takes four American television programmes as case studies to examine these issues. The selected programmes are understood in their reception to negotiate the 'masculinism' of millennial quality television and to foreground gender politics and feminism as historic political movement. In order to highlight the role that television genres and their

cultural work play in the attribution of cultural value, the thesis looks at two comedies and two dramas respectively: the comedies are *30 Rock* and *Parks and Recreation* (*Parks*, 2009-2015), the dramas are *The Good Wife* (2009-2016) and *Orange Is the New Black* (*Orange*, 2013-). The fact that *Orange's* generic description has created much confusion in industry and press discourses – vacillating between comedy, drama, and dramedy without much consensus – is a point that will be discussed in detail and which feeds into my argument about the rhetorical negotiation processes around cultural value, genre, and gender in these programmes.

As indicated, the thesis examines the discursive interconnection between political value and aesthetic value in these programmes, and as such draws on similarly two-pronged scholarly traditions of television studies in its intervention: the established approach of feminist media studies, or in a broader meaning, a cultural studies analysis on one hand, and the emerging but popular field of 'television aesthetics' on the other. As will be shown, television studies as a still young and somewhat unacknowledged field of scholarly interest – itself bound up in anxieties over academic legitimation – has in its short history been a territory fraught with tensions over the question of which approach should take dominance; a situation not helped by popular and often academic declarations about the new age of aesthetically valuable television (or the 'aesthetic turn' [Lury 2016, 120]). These theoretical debates will be outlined in some detail in the last section of the Introduction, but here I want to signal a wariness around the either/or understandings of the debate. Specifically, I argue that the emergence of 'feminist quality television' provides an opportunity to demonstrate the necessity of combining these approaches: the programmes' cultural work cannot be accounted for without being aware of and unpacking the profound genderedness of television's cultivation of aesthetic value

in this latest 'Golden Age of Television'; and similarly, the political implications of this programming cannot be unearthed without considering the context of aesthetics and form. Further, both subfields have had a definitional struggle over a popularly coined term at their centre – 'quality television' and 'postfeminism' respectively – that has structured their recent development and their academic utility. The last section of the Introduction briefly details these definitional struggles as part of the discussion of the theoretical debates. Moreover, since there is a rich theoretical background to both feminism/postfeminism and 'quality television' that needs exploring, I devote three chapters to these questions in the main body of the thesis.

## **Methodology**

I analyse the four programmes via a combination of textual analysis, production discourse and institutional analysis, and critical reception analysis, the latter including popular reception and academic writings. I exclude audience reception analysis, or discuss it only generally in cases when the other factors are influenced by a series' apparent cultural work among audiences (e.g. Netflix capitalising on female fandom practices around *Orange* to promote the series' 'progressive' gender politics). These analytical methods aim to demonstrate how gender politics and the foregrounding of popular feminism are utilised in these texts' branding as quality TV, and to tease out the (often contradictory) negotiations of gendered cultural value and genre signifiers. The relatively small sample size of four programmes allows me to carry out a detailed analysis of their formal-political features and of the characteristics of their circulation in public discourses.

I selected these programmes as case studies because they answer to the following criteria, which together make them the most useful examples on which to examine the features of 'feminist quality television':

1. Their production falls into a period between 2005-2013 and is limited to American television.
2. All four series are widely regarded as mobilising a feminist rhetoric at odds, or dialoguing with postfeminist discourses by highlighting a political narrative context, centralising female protagonists in public-political environments, and dramatising and reflecting on feminism as historic and mediated political movement.
3. All four programmes are regarded in media and industry discourses as 'quality television', a descriptor in which aesthetic exceptionality and novel gender politics converge.

Regarding the first criterion, my interest is in examining the patterns of this category in this period and production context as it is *emerging*, and three out of the four case studies each provide an example of being a symbolic 'first' at a specific phenomenon in American television culture: *30 Rock* is, to my knowledge, a first of post-millennial prominent quality programming that centralises feminism as political force; *The Good Wife* is the first prominent quality drama to do the same; *Orange* is the first series that continues this trend on non-network (and non-cable) TV, providing a case study for the convergence era 'quality' industry's usage of feminism for branding practices. While *Parks* is hardly a first of anything in these terms, its inclusion is justified by the intense media discourse around the series as feminist quality comedy *par excellence*, and, crucially, by this discourse's frequent evaluative contrasting with *30 Rock* on the basis of the two series' different engagements with feminism, into which feeds the media promotion of Amy Poehler's and

Tina Fey's, the two series' stars', 'feminist' friendship. Pairing *Parks* up with *30 Rock* in my examination of quality comedy provides an opportunity to unpick the shifts in popular evaluative practices around what counts as 'ideal' feminist comedy.

In terms of the series' mobilisation of feminist discourses, the shift in focus and rhetoric around representations of womanhood can be linked partly to the recessionary cultural environment (Negra and Tasker 2014; Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016) in which the postfeminism of earlier texts predicated on prosperity and classed consumerism is no longer viable and requires a reconfiguration of the meaning of 'women's empowerment'. This political-social background will be considered in my analysis as contributor to these programmes' emergence, but is not a fundamental aspect of the investigation, since I see it as one in a group of interacting factors. *30 Rock's* start predates the 2008 recession by two years – having been in pre-production for at least another year – , and its political satire treats feminism, postfeminism, capitalism, race politics, and so on, as central to its narration. Rather than an exceptional precursor to recessionary women-centred media, it signals the growing politicisation of comedy in American culture after the millennium. This has given more space to women comedians' focus on gender politics (Mizejewski 2014), a process that in turn has become even more prominent in the recessionary period. Again, I see the cultural shift that the recession has brought about as an important factor in this development but not a defining one.

While the terms of the third criterion are admittedly vague and would allow for the inclusion of a number of other programmes, I identify a specific feature (a sub-criterion) in the selected programmes that justify their unique usefulness for my purposes: they each upset gendered conventions of genre, narrative, and aesthetics in ways that effect a (case-specific) cultural unease around either their generic-aesthetic

positioning or the purported progressiveness of their gender politics, or both, which in each case has a consequence on the discursive assignment of cultural value. The aspect of genre hybridity affected by gender politics is evident in other, more recent programming as well, but in keeping with my interest in the phenomenon as it is emerging, I concentrate on those that provide the earliest examples.

Following from these criteria, I exclude a number of programmes that can be understood as prominent examples of female-centred quality programming foregrounding genre hybridity, feminist discourses, and gender politics, such as *The Fall* (2013-), *Top of the Lake* (2013-), *Outlander* (2014-), *Transparent* (2014-), *Jessica Jones* (2015-), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015-), *Veep* (2012-), *Broad City* (2014-), *Masters of Sex* (2013-), *Homeland* (2011-) etc. *Orange* could be argued as exception to the criteria as it is relatively 'late' in the examined period. However, its inclusion allows me to show the wider cultural traction of 'feminist' rhetoric in the online programming platform Netflix's reliance on it as brand identifier. Contrasted with the other three programmes, all of which were produced for network television, it also demonstrates the relevance of technological-narrative shifts and changing viewer habits in the media convergence era influencing the ways in which feminist rhetoric is mobilised.

My sub-criterion around form explains why the HBO series *Girls* (2012-), a much-discussed representative of female-centred quality programming, is excluded from my selection. While the programme has since its debut been at the centre of debates about gender, body politics, and HBO's cultivation of quality (Nash and Whelehan 2017), these are inevitably linked to the half-hour dramedy's cultural work, and specifically to the legacy of the HBO dramedy *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). My discussion of subversions of gendered forms and genres takes the cultural dominance of the 'postfeminist' half-hour dramedy and the

melodramatic mode as templates against which the examined case studies define themselves *in aesthetic-formal terms*, as well as politically. While *Girls* undoubtedly performs much of its cultural significance via politically defining itself against (or updating) *Sex and the City*, it leaves the televisual format intact, which means that genre is a contested issue in its reception only to the extent to which the series dialogues with the *politics* of the predecessor – and as such provides a less useful example for my purposes. I will refer to this issue in relevant parts of the thesis.

## **Structure**

The thesis consists of two parts: theoretical discussion and analysis of case studies. The theoretical section expands on the terms briefly explained in the Introduction. Since these terms and phenomena, specifically quality television and postfeminism/popular feminism, are much debated in both scholarship and popular discourses, and my hypotheses about both need demonstrating in a detailed argument, each is a focus of a chapter. Chapter 1 concentrates on the question of gender politics, and has two aims: first, to summarize the academic debate about postfeminism and feminism's presence in popular culture, and second, to demonstrate the renewed emergence of a feminist rhetoric in public discourse and the ways in which it signals a cultural unease with postfeminism in recessionary media production. This chapter provides the theoretical basis for the case study chapters' discussion of the programmes' negotiation of gender politics. Chapter 2 picks up on debates around contemporary quality television, and turns to a detailed examination of the 'quality' brand's specificities as a category or genre of television, focusing on both the term's academic production, and on the debate that revolves around the gendered and

classed processes of canonisation. This chapter concentrates on gender politics' relevance for these processes, and also includes an historical examination of the term's definition and gendered implications. Chapter 3 centralises the question of culturally sanctioned transgressions ('edginess'), an aspect of quality television that carries heightened significance for its branding power. It examines the masculinism of the contemporary quality paradigm from the perspective of its cultivated subversion of 'traditional' television's content regulations. I contrast this kind of subversion with the issue of political transgression, and specifically American television's legacy of a 'feminist' transgression of expectations of femininity; a notion which has its own historical connection with assignments of cultural value. As seen, both Chapters 2 and 3 consider the history of the 'quality' brand from a gender perspective, an aspect that undergirds my later discussions of the case studies' appeal to a transgression of gendered political and aesthetic traditions.

The second part of the thesis comprises the case studies, and is divided into two chapters organised around genre. Chapter 4 discusses the half-hour comedies, and Chapter 5 the hour-long dramas/dramedies. This structure around form and genre corresponds to the thesis' focus on the connection between questions of aesthetics and gender politics, and also aligns with the programmes' categorisation in industry and media discourses according to their genre signifiers. This latter aspect is central to my discussion, since the respective series' feminist credentials are produced in the specific context of their genre positioning.

Rather than discussing each series separately, both chapters are split into thematic sections. The two main sections within each chapter are: A) issues of cultural value, genre, and aesthetics, and B) the negotiation of feminist rhetoric and postfeminism. The concentration on these two aspects answers to the twofold theoretical approach of the thesis,

aiming to show the interconnection of aesthetics and politics in the series' appeal to cultural value. Within each section, I treat the respective series to separate analyses but also provide comparative study when useful.

Additionally, the comedy chapter contains a third section concentrating on body politics, acknowledging the centrality of the body within the genre. Corresponding with this centrality, academic literature assigns importance to the ways in which physical humour and embodied comic performance are linked to the genre's expressive power and cultural value, and, crucially, to the ways in which this is used in women's comedy as a site of politics. As such, the significance of this discussion is the comic female body's treatment in quality comedy's modes of expression. As discussed in Chapter 3, a central feature of the quality category is its subversion of television's strict regulations of visual depictions of the corporeal, and the setup of these institutional regulations and subversions (the network versus cable dichotomy) is profoundly gendered. Therefore, the two comedies' treatment of the comic female body, as already a site of intense cultural anxieties, gains specific importance and is essential to their appeal to cultural value. While the drama chapter does not include a similarly discreet section on body politics, the question of embodied performance and sexual politics as signifiers of 'feminist quality' is crucial here as well, and is discussed integrated into the two main sections.

### **Research context**

The thesis combines a twofold approach, using feminist media studies' analysis of television on the one hand, and the academic discourse around aesthetic evaluative practices, i.e. the 'quality television' debate on the other. While the two fields occasionally overlap, recent academic

interest in the aesthetics of television has resulted in a renewed tension between these fields around the limits of validity and usefulness of their respective analytical methods. Although my thesis calls for their combination – or, perhaps idealistically, for abolishing their discursive opposition – I will here discuss separately their approaches and the dominant terms operating in them.

Anglo-American feminist scholarship has at least since the 1990s been governed by debates around the cultural dominance of postfeminism, a concentration inevitably central to feminist *television* scholarship as well, given the phenomenon's strong ties to, and roots in, popular media representation. The term and its cultural influence have been described by critical analysts as, historically, a cultural-political backlash against second-wave feminism (Faludi 1991), and as a popularised – and therefore distorted and simplified – understanding of and response to the mainstream second wave's political, economic, and cultural struggles against the patriarchal makeup of modern societies. Since second-wave feminism most prominently and publicly concentrated on the liberation of one particular social group – white heterosexual middle-class women – the movement has become associated with this image, and has been criticised by a number of feminist theorists for ignoring other, less visible social groups. Scholarship also argues that the way feminism's struggles have become incorporated into Western culture follows logically from the political and economic necessities of late modern neoliberal capitalism (McRobbie 2009, Tasker and Negra 2007, Negra 2009, Gill 2007). The entering of this subset of women into the education system and labour market from the 1960s onwards created a new consumer group whose existence in turn required new marketing strategies, ones that make use of the 'common sense' aspects of feminist ideas – those most marketable and realisable with leaving the status quo intact – while at the same time producing a type

of consumer-spectator citizen who is constantly in search of self-betterment through consumption.

In Angela McRobbie's seminal term, this is the process of 'feminism taken into account' (2009, 2) in most areas of Western culture and policymaking. Popular media's perpetuation of the image of the economically-emotionally independent, sexually liberated and empowered woman ensures the maintenance and reproduction of this structure, as long as the idea of empowerment is understood in individualised-intimate ways and does not entail political solidarity across boundaries of social categories. Further, postfeminist popular culture (re)produces an ideological struggle between the ideal of women's sexual-professional empowerment on one hand and the social primacy of coupledness, heterosexual romance, and the nuclear family on the other, perpetuating the issue of individual 'choice', rather than larger social-political forces, for female agency and happiness. As Diane Negra writes, 'postfeminism looks disapprovingly upon those forms of female agency unrelated to couple and family formation, preferring a self-surveilling subject whose concepts of body and behaviour are driven by status anxiety' (2009, 153).

These theorisations of postfeminism have become widely accepted in feminist cultural criticism, while also being debated for their broader consequences for Western societies' gender politics, particularly in respect to postfeminism's links to popular media's cultural work and logics of production. Scholarship contesting the criticism of postfeminism argues that historically, feminism's social-cultural power has always been entangled in its popular media presence, and the widespread pessimism of feminist academics regarding postfeminism's cultural work neglects the diachronic legacy and transformations of this entanglement, or indeed the ever-present negotiations of gender scripts

in cultural products, and issues of audience engagement (Lotz 2001, Hollows and Moseley 2006, Johnson 2007).

Recent years have seen a renewed popular cultural interest in feminism as a marketable and contested term and political tool, aided by the increased significance of online social media platforms as sites of politicised public communication. These phenomena signal a growing cultural unhappiness with the utility of postfeminism, especially its premise on narrow definitions of womanhood, consumer citizenship, and prosperity. Both this 'rebooted' feminism, its intense contestations, and its instrumentalisations in popular media products became especially increased upon the 2008 economic recession's wider cultural impact (Negra and Tasker 2014, Banet-Weiser 2015). Chapter 1 discusses in detail the debates in scholarship around the usefulness of postfeminism as theoretical term, and its apparent contestations in recent years. The latter includes the ways in which postfeminism's academic status as contested and structuring concept becomes reflected in the recent re-emergence of popular feminism in media products. This is tightly linked to television culture and to the field of 'quality television' analysis; not only because the medium is commonly regarded as a prime indicator of a society's social-cultural mood, but also because a prominent commonality between postfeminist media culture and quality television culture is their production of and appeal to upmarket consumer-spectators. Therefore, the status of the gendered public sphere, signalling an unease with the postfeminist premise of narrowly defined female subjectivity and affluence, is linked with the increased promotional value of 'diversity' politics and dramatisations of a 'problematic postfeminism' in prestige television culture.

The academic debate around 'quality television' has produced a similarly pronounced tension in television scholarship, here in a more

broadly outlined antagonism between aesthetic and political approaches, or as James Zborowski (2016) describes these, the 'TV aesthetics' and 'media and cultural studies' groups (see also Lury 2016). This contestation is partly due to the term's coinage in the industry and journalistic discourse, which makes it unstable and subject to constant strategic re-appropriations in the television industry. Given feminist scholarship's historic contributions to the establishment of the main concepts of television studies, behind the tension between political and aesthetic approaches looms large that between the tools of *feminist* and aesthetic analysis. As will be shown in Chapter 2, the advancement since the early 2000s of a primarily aesthetic analysis of television texts in academia is linked to the American television industry's re-definition of 'quality television' on the basis of the production of 'cinematic' content, reproducing a gendered binary of aesthetic value where the masculine-coded cinematic appropriates the spaces of the feminine-coded televisual.

Since the medium's significance for academic research is historically linked to its political value and economic-institutional practices, the suspiciousness in cultural studies about this recent academic development follows from the latter's perceived close ties to the paternalistic processes of industry and media discourses. More bluntly, television aesthetics analysis is seen to be a servile follower to the masculinist elitism underlying the emergence of convergence-era quality television (Newman and Levine 2012, 153–71). As will be shown, debates around the gendered and classed elitism in academic discussions of cultural distinctions and hierarchies have been a staple of television scholarship at least since the 1980s, growing in significance in concord with cultural critics' centralisation of postmodern culture's contested impact. Academics heralding the recent emergence of aesthetically-narratively different television culture, and feminist

scholarship's suspicion of this enthusiasm falls into this earlier pattern of debates, which includes the self-perceived 'underdog' status of each group. A power struggle is evident in this academic conflict, one that similarly structured the field in the 1980s and 1990s – with the difference that feminist television studies was then struggling for academic emancipation and for the legitimation of the study of a whole medium and its derided forms, while it is now often seen as the dominant approach that forecloses others, and is bogged down in questions of political representation and ideological processes of canonisation. Scholars like Jason Mittell (2015) and Sudeep Dasgupta (2012) warn against television studies 'limit[ing] itself to defending popular culture against "Quality TV"' (ibid.) on the basis of the field's deeply embedded political agenda; while, in contrast, feminist critics Taylor Nygaard and Jorie Lagerwey call for a 'challenge [to] the hierarchies of value placed on all modes of TV in order to reclaim TV studies' feminist roots and re-center feminine subjects' (2016).

This thesis aims to intervene in these debates, which seem to correspond to American television culture's categorisations of cultural value divided along the lines of aesthetics and politics. Precisely these demarcations begin to collide in the emergence of convergence-era 'feminist quality television': as will be shown in the individual analyses, each examined programme takes the 'masculinism' of contemporaneous quality television culture for granted, and establishes its 'feminist aesthetics' in response to this; a practice in which network and online television companies' institutional self-branding and promotion feature with specific significance. But as argued, the 'feminism' mobilised involves the rhetorical contestation of preceding postfeminist representational strategies linked with generic traditions. This trait of the programmes deems them central to feminist television scholarship, which, as stressed, has a historically rich literature

examining the ramifications of postfeminist television culture for the creation of the 'new female subject' both as consumer-spectator and protagonist. Because these series incorporate so prominently in their generic and narrative features the signifiers of the 'quality' brand and the politics of recent female-targeted television, their analysis needs to combine these apparently conflicted approaches to begin to unearth their cultural work. While this argument echoes Zborowski's (2016) in its conciliatory tenor, unlike his, it highlights the necessity of considering the specific findings of feminist scholarship.

The thesis is not interested in gauging and evaluating these series' feminism or postfeminism; nor does it champion their inclusion into the quality television canon, whether on aesthetic or political grounds. Rather, it examines how the texts and their promotional and institutional contexts utilise these terms to produce novelty programming in an age of television habitually described in TV journalism with the ominous phrase 'Peak TV' (Garber et al. 2015). My argument agrees with 'TV aesthetics' analysts that American television has undergone crucial aesthetic-generic shifts in need of interrogation; but it also agrees with its critics that canonisation processes are problematically gendered. Moreover, it supports feminist criticism's contention that this gendering is informed by postfeminism's and feminism's popular cultural presence and promotional power. It is in the nexus of these complex phenomena where characters like Liz Lemon emerge.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Feminist scholarship, (post)feminism, and American popular culture**

Since the late 1980s, a prominent strand of Anglo-American feminist media theory has been characterised by a concentration on the postfeminist cultural paradigm in Western societies, yielding a body of work that understands postfeminism as the primary expression of contemporary popular culture's relationship with feminism. This relationship has typically been conceptualised as detrimental for feminist politics and activism, and, in some academics' view, for feminist media scholarship as well, for the ways it has provoked undue scrutiny of and reflection on methods of feminist scholarly engagements with popular culture. Karen Boyle's (2008) analysis is representative, finding that the rhetoric of women's individualised empowerment in Western societies, the rise of self-help culture, and the language around feminism as lifestyle choice has created an understanding of feminism 'that is focused on the aspirations and possibilities for individual women (typically, white, affluent, American women) but rejecting of second-wave feminism's demands for structural change' (ibid., 179). For Boyle, when academic thinking becomes primarily occupied with this popular cultural understanding of the movement and what it means for the academic study of (post)feminism, it runs the risk of becoming entangled in debates whose terms are set by popular culture's hardly rigorous, and commercially driven, agendas.

Boyle's criticism of postfeminism, and also of feminist media scholarship that similarly tends to concentrate its studies on questions of (individualised) womanhood, is a recurring one in the field. Her view, and that of many other critics, is rooted in the concept that feminism is (or should be) first and foremost an anti-establishment political

movement and as such antagonistic to, or at least highly suspicious of, the ways in which the culture industries feed upon and exploit its most profitable aspects. However, a different line of argument has also emerged in academia that describes this relationship in a less sceptical light. Characteristic of this opinion is Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley's (2006) seminal analysis of feminism's history since the 1970s women's liberation movement, and its presence in the popular. In an argument opposed to that of academics like Boyle or Angela McRobbie (2009), they posit that 'an insistence that feminism needs to exist in opposition to consumer culture frequently precludes the possibility of feminism becoming mainstream' (Hollows and Moseley 2006, 10–11). In their formulation, feminist academics' sceptical stance on popular culture's usefulness in disseminating feminist concerns implicitly betrays a position that thinks itself morally superior to both the culture industries and audiences, and is even purist; 'reproduc[ing] the idea that the feminist has good sense and therefore the moral authority to legislate on gendered relations, and also reproduc[ing] hierarchical power relations between "the feminist" situated outside the popular and "the ordinary woman" located within it' (ibid., 11). However, they stress, it is precisely the area of the popular, rather than the academic or strictly political, where many people get their first understandings of feminism, and the representations that the popular provides form the initial basis of potential political involvement and activism. Consequently, a theorisation of feminism and popular culture should not be based on an inside–outside (of capitalist institutions and of consumer culture) model; this relationship is thoroughly dynamic as both areas need the other for their cultural validation.

In turn, this vision of feminist political consciousness potentially developing through consumption of popular culture has been problematised by scholars who come to the exact opposite conclusion

from the same notion, best exemplified by Ednie Kaeh Garrison's (2007) argument:

Coming to feminist political consciousness today involves weeding through disjointed, conflicting and apparently contradictory conversations. This includes contending with the tension between what gets to be establishment feminism in the eyes of the media, subsequent popular consciousness of feminism, and more complex articulations, comprehensions and practices (...). (Ibid., 194-195)

Thus, Hollows and Moseley's argument about feminism becoming (or even having always been) a mainstream cultural force via its popular cultural representations counters an established view in academia that understands the movement's cultural-political critique to be irreconcilable with its dilution into the popular. Angela McRobbie's (2009) sociopolitical account of the latter problem is an influential one in the field. Scrutinising the incorporation of feminist concerns into late capitalist Western societies' policymaking, legislation, education, popular culture, and popular consciousness, she finds that these processes have resulted in a 'suspension of the critique of capitalism' that has arguably always been a foundational aspect of the movement (ibid., 3). Thus, her understanding of feminism is firmly grounded in an anti-establishment, counter-cultural, and self-organised politics; one that contemporary late-capitalist consumer culture primarily associates with the second wave's (allegedly dated) political and cultural role. In this argument, disruptions and subversions of the status quo cannot by definition come from 'within the system', invoking Audre Lorde's much-circulated aphorism about feminism's race politics, 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house' (2007 [1984], 110–114). Further, feminist politics' incorporation into policymaking and popular culture 'in the guise of modern and enlightened "gender-aware" forms of governmentality' (McRobbie 2009, 2) works to contain and stifle its

potentially radical political influence. McRobbie contends that this phenomenon, summarised in her seminal phrase 'feminism taken into account', demonstrates that the movement is still viewed as a 'source of anxiety, concern and pre-emptive action, on the part of those bodies and institutions and organisations which do not wish to see established power and gender hierarchies undermined' (ibid.).

The difference of opinion about feminism's potential/ideal/actual position and cultural work in Western societies has become a structuring one, and deeply embedded into the field of feminist media scholarship. Since roughly around the millennium – i.e. since postfeminism developed fully into its 'feminism taken into account' state – scholarly interpretations of feminism's relationship with the popular, and of this relationship's consequences for feminist politics and theory, appear to have grouped into two identifiable camps, according to their distinct levels of scepticism about this relationship. Merri Lisa Johnson engages in detail with this divide in the introduction to her edited book *Third Wave Feminism and Television* (2007b), a collection of essays about the sexual politics of US television programmes, intended to provide alternative, 'sex-positive' and third-wave readings of a variety of TV texts. Since Johnson's account focuses specifically on television, it involves considerations of its medium-specific functions when discussing feminist academia's relationship with television's cultural work. As such, she considers television a primary site on which feminism and popular culture's relationship is negotiated, and factors into this dynamic television's own contradictions as 'bad pleasure' or 'idiot box' versus its disruptive potential in allowing viewers to reflect on their political and other anxieties (however, the issue of 'quality' television and its claims to cultural value precisely via strategic disruptions of social mores do not come up in her discussion). Johnson provides a review of what she sees as two oppositional strands of

thought in third-wave feminist thinking about TV, divided along the rhetoric of 'danger' versus 'pleasure'; she calls these two groups 'separatist feminist media critics' versus 'sex radical media critics' or 'visual pleasure libertarians' (ibid., 14–16). The former group is marked by its scepticism toward popular media that lures the viewer into a 'false consciousness', and sees TV as an expression of the 'always-already-ness of patriarchal capitalist white supremacist media manipulation and commodification' (ibid., 14); exemplified by varied bodies of work of established theorists like Tania Modleski, bell hooks, or Susan Bordo. The other group, with which she strongly identifies, understands TV as a site of multiple pleasures, concentrating on how this pleasure works, how viewers use it, and how subversive ideas operate in its ostensibly 'patriarchal' texts. Drawing on the works of Kristyn Gorton, Patricia Pender, and Amanda Lotz, Johnson advocates a view of popular culture that understands it as a 'source of theory':

Reading television as theory opens up the possibility of granting media culture a more important role in contemporary conversations about gender and sexuality; each show is a performance of theory, a dramatization of its insights and impasses. Television is, as Linda Williams once said of pornography and Colin McArthur of gangster films, one of the ways our culture talks to itself about itself (ibid., 19).

Johnson presents the academic work of this latter group, and by extension of the essay collection she introduces, as an unpopular and thus far uninfluential strand of thought in feminist media scholarship – the essays are intended to 'counter the trend in feminist television studies of reading for the wry pleasures of catching patriarchy at its old tricks again', because 'there is not enough work being done to articulate what we like about television' (ibid., 16) as a source of political pleasure.

Despite the alleged underdog status of Johnson's 'visual pleasure libertarian' camp, it could easily be argued that their 'cultural

optimism'<sup>1</sup> is very much grounded in an established conceptual background in feminist cultural theory and philosophy, and not such an unpopular thought after all.<sup>2</sup> As an example, Johnson's project of uncovering and interpreting feminist theories' cultural work in allegedly sexist TV texts evokes Rosi Braidotti's philosophical concept of affirmative feminism. For instance, in one of the collection's essays, Johnson analyses how *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) uses the figure of the violently-beaten-to-death pregnant stripper, concluding that far from mere shock value and titillation, the series knowingly brings to light and criticises patriarchal power relations through this trope (Johnson 2007a). Braidotti (2003) develops an idea of female sexuality – mainly based on Gilles Deleuze's and Luce Irigaray's work – that is 'nomadic', a 'subject-in-process', always in becoming, and not defined and fixed by the Oedipal construction of 'phallogocentric' modes of thought. In this concept, masculinity, 'as the privileged referent of subjectivity, the standard-bearer of the norm/law/logos (...) is antithetical to the process of becoming and (...) can only be the site of deconstruction or critique' (ibid., 49). Thus, the project of 'becoming-woman' or destabilising fixed gendered and other identities 'signifies the potential becoming, the opening out, the transformative power of all the exploited, marginalized, oppressed minorities' (ibid., 52). Braidotti's concept outlines a subversive moving away from 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century erotic imaginaries, where woman signifies a sexuality 'simultaneously titillating and denied', toward one that is 'more attuned to the technologically mediated forms of desire that are experienced and experimented with nowadays' (ibid., 57). In this we can discover a philosophical foundation that underpins Johnson's project of highlighting trends in television that

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, in the debate echo historic academic differences about the working mechanisms of the culture industries and postmodernity, going back to the 'cultural optimist' versus 'cultural pessimist' stances of the Frankfurt School's theorists.

<sup>2</sup> McRobbie for instance finds it necessary to devote a whole chapter to argue *against* these concepts, supposedly against the grain (2009, 150–170), both in the areas of policymaking and legislation (the politics of gender mainstreaming), of culture and female representation (third-wave feminism and Girlie culture), of philosophy (the philosopher Rosi Braidotti's affirmative feminism), and of higher education.

speak to these 'forms of desire'. In turn, McRobbie's analysis of Braidotti's development of such 'joyful feminism' that concentrates 'on the cracks and fissures, and possible points of rupture' of late capitalism (2009, 159), criticises it on socio-historical grounds. She contends that Braidotti's ideas of new modes of becoming and mutant/nomadic sexualities 'are the inventions of those who are already located within, or at least are moving towards, a space of affirmative feminism' (ibid., 160). In other words, McRobbie sees Braidotti's (and, I would add, Johnson's and other feminists' whose work shares these views) feminism as a utopian one that does not consider concrete social and cultural factors determining women's relationship with feminism today – in fact, McRobbie likens this strand of thought to feminist science fiction.

McRobbie's stance may represent a stubborn scepticism in its criticism of contemporary cultural (and other) manifestations of feminism and in heavily opposing its presence in popular culture, and thus her opinion could easily be explained away on the grounds of its straightforward dismissal of third-wave feminist thinking that embraces popular culture. However, these disagreements are also present in scholarship that *does* embrace popular culture, but here the focus lies elsewhere. Johnson's above cited introduction is instructive in this regard: in its attempt to describe feminist theory's relationship with popular culture along the lines of the pleasure/danger divide, I want to highlight her account's primary preoccupation with categorising *academic thinking* in order to explain her own relationship with television's cultural work. Indeed, since postfeminism's theorising became more or less widely accepted in scholarship, debates have started to shift towards a problematisation of this scholarship's modes of engagement with postfeminism and popular culture in general. This academic tension follows from the fact that feminism is so heavily entangled with its own mainstream

representations, and its terms and meanings are negotiated on these slippery, loosely defined grounds. Consequently, academic thinking continues to be developed highly self-reflexively, and revolves around questions of method, nomenclature, and of categorising scholarly work on the popular (a pursuit that has further intensified after the 2008 global recession and its cultural impact – see more on this later in this chapter).

In another example, television theorist Amanda Lotz's work is often engaged with reflecting on scholarly thinking about feminism's presence in popular media, and she conceptualises the post-millennial 'state' of popular-political feminism in order to provide alternatives for scholarly thought. In her articles 'Postfeminist Television Criticism' (2001) and 'Theorising the Intermezzo: The Contributions of Postfeminism and Third Wave Feminism' (2007), she proposes new taxonomies and new ways of thinking about postfeminism, both grounded in a culturally optimistic view of feminism and popular culture's relationship. Suggesting these new methodologies and categories, Lotz's perspective appears to be exemplary of Johnson's 'political pleasure' camp in urging academics to consider 'progressive' elements of popular culture. To this end, she proposes to re-name the post-millennial cultural era an 'intermezzo' (intended to relieve academia from grappling with the multiple meanings and layers of terms like postfeminism and third-wave feminism): an expression that implies that 'the overwhelming structural impediments to gender justice that existed before the activist efforts of second wave feminism' have been overcome but 'in which complete equity has not been achieved' (2007, 72). In this, her writing betrays a thinking that envisions feminism's work as an evolution, a continuous development towards a future of complete gender equality in representation and in real life – implicitly presuming a universal agreement among feminists about these terms and their relationships.

In accordance with this stance, Lotz's implied suggestion is (similar to Johnson's) that theory would benefit from a concentration on the 'how' of this evolution, which would mean a concentration on the 'positive' (i.e. 'feminist') elements of it. In other words, Lotz's proposal of new theoretical frameworks, languages, and methods to think about popular culture's and feminism's relationship is rooted in her particular stance on feminism's presence in popular culture as a positive one. This yields suggestions about how academics should relate to this (more optimistically), and what they should emphasise in it (the progressive elements). Consequently, when she proposes new ways to overcome existing academic tensions, her method still firmly grounds her in one of the camps that this tension has created, which helps little in advancing the debate.

A similar contradiction characterises Karen Boyle's already cited article (2008) which, like Lotz's and Johnson's works, provides an overview of feminist scholarly engagement with popular culture in order to point out its shortcomings and to offer a solution to them. In Boyle's view, these problems are rooted in the extreme nature of academics' investment in the question of what is the best way of representing women and feminism in popular culture – a preoccupation that for her puts too much weight on the issue of the 'right' or 'wrong' kinds of feminism, and that also frequently omits to consider those medium-specific elements that complicate interpretations of TV texts. Further, she argues, this exclusive interest follows from popular discourses' own anxious preoccupations with portraying contemporary womanhood. In other words, when scholarship debates the 'feminism' of individualised, iconic cultural, and often fictional, figures (good/bad Buffy, Ally, Carrie, Bridget, Madonna), it 'allow[s] the popular debate to set the parameters of [its] own study' (ibid., 178), which results in turning academic attention away from those 'important challenges' that 'feminism as a

*movement* poses and continues to pose' (ibid., 185, italics in original). As an example of this proposed challenge, she engages with the structural nature of inequities and of gendered violence. In the last section of her article, Boyle offers a reading of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*Buffy*, 1997-2003) that is intended to demonstrate what she means by such an engagement: her analysis asserts that the series, far from simply introducing a problematic (post)feminist female action hero, is also concerned to comment on and critique male violence as a social problem; an aspect of the programme that, in Boyle's view, eludes feminist scholars' attention, and needs further exploring.

Boyle's criticism of feminist media theory's overwhelming interest in feminism's 'face' in television culture places her opinion outside the above camps by offering a different method of thinking. However, her analysis of *Buffy's* thus far underexplored 'type' of feminism directly undermines this argument. Boyle at one point cites Charlotte Brunsdon's much-quoted formula of the 'Ur-feminist article' (2005, 110-116), that in Brunsdon's view has become the go-to model in feminist media studies for engaging with popular texts. In this model, the feminist author first introduces a 'traditional' mode of feminist thinking in analysing popular media, producing a list of expectations that make a text feminist and which the analysed text in this traditional (i.e. outdated) mode of thinking fails to meet; the author then disidentifies with this paradigm and demonstrates how these expectations are outdated by mobilising her own progressive reading and thus a more up-to-date feminism, which the text passes and is thus proven progressively feminist. This model is similar to Tania Modleski's famous argument about the feminist syllogism (1991, 45), and which Boyle also quotes as characterising feminist television criticism. With these concepts in mind, Boyle's critique of trends in the field that focus on judging celebrities' and fictional figures' feminism, yielding that men

and masculinity can 'slip under the radar', is somewhat weakened by her subsequent analysis of *Buffy*. Despite her assertion that her intention is *not* to demonstrate how the series conforms to her own version of feminism, it results precisely in this. Regardless of the veracity of her critique of scholarly obsession with good/bad feminism, her method ends up setting up an existing – dominant – mode of feminist thinking, then pointing out its elision of a particular aspect of feminism to finally highlight this aspect in a particular series – producing the kind of academic work that Brunsdon, Modleski, and herself warn against. Contending that contrary to previous readings, *Buffy* is not exclusively concerned with issues of postfeminist femininity, and thus its analysts are wrongly entangled in the postfeminist paradigm of concentrating on this question, Boyle sets out to prove the hidden – or not so hidden, only neglected in her view – feminist message of the series in its critique of structural oppression and masculinism – ending up doing the kind of 'resistant reading' that she critiqued earlier, and which she sees as constraining academic thinking about popular culture.

My point is not to dispute the validity of Boyle's critique of the field of feminist media studies or even her alternative reading of *Buffy*. Rather, I want to highlight in both her analysis, and in that of Johnson and Lotz and also in their opponents', the contradictions in which these academic texts are caught up and which they also reproduce. The postfeminist paradigm has been thoroughly described and criticised in academia since the millennium; its inherent contradictions of the empowerment and 'choicisie' rhetoric, and their links to Western late capitalism's reliance on consumer citizenship brought to light and criticised in multiple accounts of feminist media theory, feminist social studies, postcolonial feminism, and so on. Simultaneously with its establishment, this body of work sparked its own reflection and criticism, producing the above outlined camps, and yielding a new set of

ambiguities that allow for this ongoing debate to continue without resolution. Thinking about postfeminist femininities has become a dominant theme for feminist scholarship. However, the same is also true for the criticism that pointing out the sexism of this paradigm is a neither new nor productive mode of engagement, and that it is more imperative to concentrate on *how* the culture industries strategically use feminism in the popular (Bonnie Dow already argued for this view in 1996). Both of these lines of argument are permanent staples now of academic thinking, even more so considering that a similar tension has long held sway over the history of feminist media criticism and activism, for instance in the ‘feminist sex wars’ of the 1970-80s, or in analyses of the ‘feminist’ TV sitcom of the 1970s highlighting the ‘liberated woman’ figure’s contradictory nature. The 2008 recession and its gendered effects (Negra and Tasker 2014) have only intensified this debate such that it is moving its points of tension to new territories in which this question’s contested nature itself provides the ground for a new impasse or a consensus – a consensus about the very prevalence of this contradiction. On one hand, the notion of postfeminist womanhood, and its problematic omission of a number of feminist concerns (as demonstrated by feminist scholars), is no longer a radical or marginalised opinion either in academia or in popular culture. Yet, paradoxically, the same is true for the academically and popularly expressed admission that contemporary feminist theory and activism does provide new impulses for popular culture to negotiate.

I contend that this notion, i.e. the ongoing tension and the widespread agreement about its irresolvable existence, has become mirrored in the contradictions that currently characterise popular culture’s relationship with feminism. Popular discourses about gender issues have started to become prominent and to echo the debates that have occupied feminist academia since the postfeminist paradigm’s establishment, a

development that to some extent has followed from the recent economic insecurities of Western societies. Heated discussions about the problematic nature of privileged womanhood and its representations, of systemic oppression and marginalisation on the basis of gender, race, body image, sexual orientation, and other non-normative identities permeate the American public sphere and cultural imagination, also sparking a new interest in discussions about feminism's role in negotiating such problems. I argue that this renewed popular interest reflects the existing academic tensions, and has crystallised around well-identifiable issues to the extent that they have become available for fictional dramatisations. Television is a prominent site of negotiating these conflicts – unsurprisingly, considering the medium's long established claims to immediacy and realism, its discursive amicability in American culture to liberal feminist politics and to female talent, and also its suitability for portraying cultural conflicts in an endlessly reproducible fashion.<sup>3</sup>

Anglophone feminist media scholarship has started to interrogate the renewed popular cultural fascination with feminism after the 2008 recession, and the various cultural phenomena this produces in the spheres of the cultural industries and media production, social media, celebrity culture, corporate branding practices, and so on. Representatively, the main theme of the 2015 annual 'Console-ing Passions' conference, the largest international event organised for feminist media academics, was dedicated to the idea of 'Rebooting Feminism', inviting delegates to scrutinise the implications of this notion. Similarly, the emerging figure of the 'feminist celebrity' (Hamad and Taylor 2015) and the sporadic appearance of Hollywood blockbuster films marketed for a gender-swapping or 'feminist' sensibility have been, as subjects of intense debate in both cultural

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<sup>3</sup> See more on these notions in Chapter 2.

criticism and fan cultures, examined in feminist academia (Savigny and Warner 2015b). The idea of a 'rebooted' popular feminism continues to be investigated in relation to the overarching theoretical framework of postfeminism and its embeddedness in the neoliberal market economy and governmentality, especially in the ways in which the culture industries constantly reconfigure and circulate ideals of citizenship, be it 'consumer', 'entrepreneur', or 'activist'. As Diane Negra notes in her examination of 'feminist' celebrity memoirs, 'our economic lives are both shaped by and embedded within popular and representational culture' to the effect that 'popular culture helps to mobilise emotion and to allocate blame, frequently redirecting resentment and anger at structural problems away from elites' (2014, 276). Savigny and Warner reflect a similar scepticism about this popular feminism, in their introduction to their edited collection emphasising a strong link between mediatised feminism and consumer culture which by and large operates to de-politicise the movement and re-package it as branded product (2015a, 1–24; see also Gill 2016).

Yet the intensified polarisation of American political culture and simultaneous centralisation of identity politics especially in the areas of gender, class, and race has unavoidably produced popular media phenomena that keenly emphasise a politicised approach at odds with a pre-recession liberal (post)feminism. The incorporation of the term 'intersectionality' (its academic coinage widely associated with race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's work [1989]) into the vernacular of some media products, media criticism, and punditry is a symptomatic aspect of this, as are numerous efforts in media production and discourses to speak to the increased sociocultural requirement of thematising identity *as* politics, seen for instance in the increased promotional value of 'diversity' in television (and, to a lesser extent, cinema) production. Feminist media scholarship interrogates these aspects of popular

culture within the interlocking connection of creative labour and market demands (involving postfeminism as governing backdrop), as for example seen in Linda Mizejewski's (2014) examination of the rising popularity of 'feminist' women's comedy on American television. In a similar example, the dubious prominence of the 'feminist' female celebrity is further intensified in the case of Beyoncé, whose 2013 'coming out' as *black* feminist threw into sharp relief the contrast with her pre-existing star image as 'post-race', postfeminist black diva (Durham 2012, Weidhase 2015). Yet another contentious issue is the increased presence of feminist activism on social media platforms and often in conjunction with commercial media's branding practices and with celebrity activism (Keller 2015). Previously marginalised strands of emancipatory efforts like transgender political activism have also become more visible and tied to the imperatives of popular media's political economy, as seen in the celebrity activism of Laverne Cox, Janet Mock, and the discourses around reality TV personality Caitlyn Jenner's widely publicised coming-out as transgender woman – each in specific ways throwing into relief processes of negotiation between transgender feminism's efforts to upset gender binaries, transgender 'mainstreaming', and homonormativity (Stryker 2008, Irving 2008, Lovelock 2016).

The above examples demonstrate the ways in which American popular discourses have started focalising the questions that academic reflections on postfeminism have for some time been asking about its relationship with feminist politics, and about its selective incorporation of feminist rhetoric into popular cultural production. The contradictions that this process creates reproduce on popular platforms the tensions that have long been present in feminist media theory about the relationship between feminism and popular culture. In a recessionary cultural environment, the circulation of such high-profile debates has

intensified in popular entertainment around the ways in which the label 'feminist' is used when invoking historically less visible feminisms (e.g. black and postcolonial, transgender). These debates demonstrate how the inquiries which had historically been marginalised in the popular for their critique of the working mechanisms of structural oppression, of postfeminism, and of liberal feminism, have been seeping into these popular representations and the discourses around them. However, since these representations continue to be subject to the logic and forces of commercial culture in their interpretations of feminist critique, pessimistic scholarly opinions about popular cultural treatments also continue to be valid. I argue that precisely this circular nature keeps feeding further marketable tensions into these discourses, since it shows which facets of these marginalised voices and criticisms are deemed fit or unfit for popularisation, which in turn keeps unsettling the ideal narratives of public discourse and provides it with further productive tensions.

The above interrogation of academic feminism's contemporary relationship with popular culture serves to support my main argument that the tensions surfacing in this are also increasingly present in fictional narratives that engage with representations of feminism and issues around gender. This is especially true for television, a medium that has a reputation of being the ideal fit for representing 'women's issues' and other social tensions that can be dramatised at length in serialised and episodic narratives. Further, these dramatisations appear increasingly in the controversial subcategory of 'quality television', where they can foreground a feminist politics as marketable novelty that strives to dialogue with and emphatically distance itself from earlier, 'postfeminist' gender representations. This process will be shown in the individual analyses in detail, but to cite a typical example, consider *Orange's* promotional strategies and establishing narrative

technique. The series and its paratexts stress that its portrayal of women is the opposite of the traditional postfeminist representation of womanhood, and *this* is its primary claim for ‘quality’ status in the ‘Peak TV’ and convergence media culture. As discussed in detail in Chapter 5, creator Jenji Kohan stresses in interviews that she used the trope of the privileged attractive white woman in a central protagonist role as a ‘Trojan horse’ to pitch the series to TV executives, in order to sell the idea of exploring stories of diverse women in prison. Similarly, the programme’s dialogues and narratives frequently reinforce this notion of exposing and ridiculing a ‘postfeminist’ womanhood.

The observation that the examined series use their status as ‘quality’ TV to explore issues around gender merits further investigation, considering television’s historic associations with both the feminine *and* lower culture – thus, in the next chapter I look at how the contemporary formation of a ‘quality’ TV that presumably distances the medium from its connotations with aesthetic mediocrity and unculturedness affects its gendered working mechanisms. This enquiry is all the more crucial to my project considering two contradictory aspects of American TV history’s relationship to gendered cultural value: first, in the historic emergence of the term, ‘quality’ as buzzword was initially used to promote the 1970s ‘feminist’, female-centred sitcom. Second and in contrast, the early 21<sup>st</sup> century establishment of ‘quality television’ mobilises ideals of cultural value governed by an underlying masculine-coded understanding of genre and aesthetic judgement. I tease out the details of this apparent contrast by providing a diachronic analysis of the term’s gendered development in American culture from the 1970s onwards. Through this I demonstrate how the series I use as case studies formulate and navigate their gender politics both in the current landscape of ‘quality’ TV and in the historic context.

## CHAPTER 2

### Quality TV and gender

#### Defining quality television

There has been much debate in television scholarship since turn of the millennium about the definition and usefulness of the term 'quality television'. To some extent this derives from the fact that the expression – similarly to 'postfeminism' – originates in popular discourse, and is thus elusive to academically rigorous definitions. Most scholars agree that the category's features have solidified to an extent that allows for theorising it as a separate genre or specific type of television programming. The term itself is not new – as it has been circulating in popular discourses and in scholarship at least since the 1970s – but its understanding has changed significantly in the post-network era, in concord with shifts within the industry and in the medium's public image.

While quality TV is theorised as a separate category of television, scholarly writings also acknowledge that traditional televisual genres continue to operate within it, and accordingly distinguish between quality comedy and drama. Nonetheless, when describing characteristics of 'quality' features in terms of what sets them apart from other forms of TV, academics tend to emphasise commonalities among these forms in order to highlight definitive features relevant to all. For instance, Jason Mittell devotes detailed analyses to both quality drama and comedy programming to demonstrate how 'narrative complexity' works in each form (2006). Similarly, when Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (2007b) examine HBO programmes' strategies of using explicit content, their examples include both *The Sopranos* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-). However, despite considerations of different

formal-generic traditions in these examples, concepts about quality TV tend to concentrate on quality *drama* as the default genre on which its working mechanisms are most effectively illustrated. This follows from drama's and comedy's historically different cultural estimations: comedy, being a genre of lower cultural status, may gain a 'quality' descriptor, but since drama and tragedy are positioned in Western culture on a 'higher dramatic plane' (Rowe Karlyn 1995b, 97), both the contemporary concept and the longitudinal development of quality television are connected to quality drama's emergence.

Jonathan Bignell (2013) identifies three main characteristics of quality television: first, an aesthetic ambition 'with the literary values of creative imagination, authenticity and relevance', which differentiates the programme from other programming seen as 'generic' and 'conventional'. Second, it exhibits high production values that 'prioritise strong writing and innovative *mise-en-scène*'. Third, it is targeted to 'valuable' or quality audiences (middle-class, educated, affluent), in order for the production to become economically valuable (ibid., 179). Television scholarship generally agrees with this definition, including the argument that quality television is best understood as a genre (Thompson 1997, Mittell 2006, Cardwell 2007). Its theorisation as a genre then somewhat contradictorily involves the notion that it resists the 'generic', or formulaic, dimensions of television narration. Sarah Cardwell in particular goes to great lengths to conceptualise quality TV in these terms, arguing for stripping the word of its evaluative implications and highlighting specific generic features instead, which presumably creates a more democratic and objective atmosphere for critical judgements over any type of television (ibid., 23 and 32-33). However, this argument fails to take into consideration that the term's evolution and contemporary generic meaning originate in evaluative critical judgements and cultural hierarchies, which betrays the

prominence of certain types of subjectivities in this process. This becomes clear in the term's historical development to which I now turn.

Before the 1990s, 'quality TV' was primarily associated with programming aimed at a 'quality' demographic (Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi 1984). This definition also cultivated in the network era an aesthetic that is 'clean', 'least objectionable', and profoundly televisual (Lentz 2000). Mittell (2006) provides an exhaustive account of the factors that changed institutional practices in the 1990s to facilitate a different kind of programming, in order to explain the emergence of 'narrative complexity', his term for the new feature of American TV programmes. In his subsequent book *Complex TV* (2015a), Mittell expands on this concept and also expresses his disapproval of the term 'quality' for its hierarchal connotations, instead proposing 'complex TV' – an expression signifying a TV text's aesthetic efforts while, purportedly, avoiding an elitist hierarchy between 'complex' and 'simple' TV, similar to Cardwell's concept.<sup>4</sup> Listing key facilitators of narrative complexity (2006, 31–32), Mittell highlights series creators' increasing interest in television as new territory of artistic freedom, pointing out that many of them come from a career in cinema. He explains the trend of film directors' and screenwriters' discovery of television with the medium's presumed amicability to innovative storytelling as opposed to blockbuster cinema's preference for visual spectacle (ibid., 31). Film directors' and screenwriters' move towards television is then beneficial for all parties: creatives are given more room for artistic experimentation while the television industry capitalises not just on the new and innovative products but on the higher regard in which these producers and creators are held, given their association with cinema. Quality in television is therefore

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 5 examines Mittell's argument in *Complex TV* in more detail.

formulated in relation to cinema, rooted in the latter medium's cultural estimation as superior to television.

Jane Feuer's (2007) critical analysis of quality television further specifies the importance of television's and cinema's different cultural status. She postulates that when television lures creative personnel away from cinema, with them arrives an aspiration to associate quality television with art cinema (as opposed to 'formulaic' genre cinema). Thus, what is regarded as certain television programmes' higher artistic value and originality than the norm, implies a cultural hierarchy between the two mediums that is extended to a parallel hierarchy among television genres and programmes. Feuer's criticism of this cultural hierarchy is echoed by a number of television theorists (e.g. Newman and Levine 2012, Mills 2013).

A further aspect of the role cultural hierarchies play in the emergence of contemporary quality TV is the way premium cable television handles explicit content. McCabe and Akass (2007b) describe the process in which HBO created its 'not TV' brand in the 1990s, which involved capitalising on its exempt status from broadcasting regulation practices as subscription-based premium cable channel. Their investigation shows how the graphic sexuality and violence that is a frequent feature of HBO's (and later other cable channels') original programming, contributes to its brand identity as trailblazer of quality television. In what they phrase as HBO's practice of 'courting controversy', the ideas of quality that discourses around series like *The Sopranos* and *Deadwood* (2004-2006) evoke, are associated with an explicitness justified through 'creative risk-taking and artistic integrity' (McCabe and Akass 2007, 69). HBO and its *auteur* producers legitimate 'illicit' content by linking it to exceptional aesthetics, authenticity, and 'dramatic verisimilitude' (ibid., 70-75). Although the authors do not emphasise it, their short case studies also illustrate how the idea of cinema as bearer

of higher cultural value affects the two series' development in generic terms. Both draw on American cinema's legacies of 'tough' genres like the gangster film and western, and as such are deeply embedded in discourses of tradition around nation and masculinity.<sup>5</sup> However, HBO's self-promotion that constantly seeks to re-confirm its headliner programming's high cultural status through associations of the illicit with cinematic and literary values and authenticity, betrays an anxiety around the cultural positioning of illicit content (ibid., 73). A clear sign of this is the channel's much more muted promotion of its consequently lesser known, but just as explicit, programming like its sex documentaries: HBO's 'internal regulation is cautious in handling the salacious and gratuitous, and absorbs the illicit into the serious business of making original groundbreaking programmes' (ibid.).

HBO's frequent rationalisation of the ways explicit content features in its flagship programmes further points to the anxiety with which industry and media discourses around 'quality TV' (not just on cable) are involved in efforts to re-position and re-define the term's meanings. The appeal to the cinematic or 'above TV' status creates a paradoxical situation, since scholarship and TV criticism simultaneously praise quality TV as profoundly televisual in utilising to the maximum the medium's specific characteristics, as seen in Mittell's analysis of 'narrative complexity'. He defines this as 'a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration' that uses the seriality of soap operas, while 'rejecting ... the melodramatic style' (2006, 32).<sup>6</sup> While pointing out the culturally less valued soap opera's legacy in the formation of contemporary narrative complexity, and as such

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<sup>5</sup> The justification of portrayals of explicit sex and violence as a claim to realism recalls the ways producer Norman Lear's 'relevance' sitcoms were discursively positioned in the 1970s, invoking the 'authenticity' of profanity as masculine trait. I detail this historic discourse in a later section of this chapter drawing on Lentz (2000). A crucial difference is that the 'relevance' sitcom's significance is limited to its claim to televisual realism (as opposed to cinematic aesthetic), and thus it becomes positioned as non-quality through its attachment to racial politics and 'working class' profanity.

<sup>6</sup> Mittell changes his stance on melodrama's influence in *Complex TV* (2015a) but a gendered evaluative judgement continues to govern it. See Chapter 5.

contending that it uses narrative forms specific to television, Mittell's rhetoric also asserts the relative cultural position of these two types of TV: '[w]hile certainly soap opera narration can be quite complex and requires a high degree of audience activity (...), narratively complex programming typically foregrounds plot developments far more centrally than soaps, allowing relationship and character drama to emerge from plot development in an emphasis reversed from soap operas' (ibid.). Since the article's purpose is to demonstrate the ways in which this new type of TV is 'innovative' in opposition to 'conventional' programming (ibid., 29), this sentence makes a clear statement about which kind of storytelling practice (foregrounding plot versus foregrounding relationship drama) is understood to be more valuable. Mittell rhetorically distances 'complex' TV from soap traditions in parallel with drawing comparisons with cinema. Defining 'complex' TV's 'operational aesthetic' as a set of narrative devices that bring viewer attention to the mechanics of plotting, he explains this in the context of the cinema of attractions, where television's 'narrative special effects' appeal to viewer appreciation akin to cinema's narrative-stopping visual spectacle (ibid., 35).

Mittell's account of narrative complexity presents an example of the discursive struggle around the positioning of quality TV in cultural hierarchy. These discourses invoke the cinematic in an effort to provide aesthetic validation, while downplaying television's own heritage as something that quality TV may have grown out of but has definitely outgrown. Television's recent aesthetic validation in scholarship, championed prominently by Mittell, has effected an intense debate, evidenced in rebuttals from Feuer (2007), Kackman (2008), Mills (2013), Imre (2009), Newman and Levine (2012), and Nygaard and Lagerwey (2016). These works problematise the notion of 'quality' or 'complex' television by bringing attention to the inherent elitism of its discursive

development on the grounds of classed and gendered ideals of cultural value. Melodrama's and soap opera's influence on television's generic and political traditions features significantly in these arguments, bringing to mind Lynne Joyrich's (1988) investigation of a similar phenomenon two decades earlier.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Patrice Petro's (1986) and Charlotte Brunsdon's seminal essays (1990) brought attention to these questions through examinations of academic valuations of Anglo-American media culture in a time when our current understanding of quality TV was just about to emerge. While Petro and Joyrich foreground the question of gendered cultural hierarchies, Brunsdon's concern was primarily with Bourdieusian issues of class and social power in establishments of television canons. Joyrich's, Petro's, and Brunsdon's arguments are echoed in contemporary critics' interrogations of the question of aesthetics on political grounds, stressing that quality TV emerges from a rhetorical distancing from feminised and classed television culture. Their intervention in television aesthetics theory brings attention to how gendered and classed power structures (both institutional and academic) operate in the canonisation of a category whose common defining point derives from critical evaluative judgement, and whose concentration on the aesthetic results in glossing over this practice's extremely political nature.

### **Gender and cultural value**

As discussed, a strand of television scholarship contends that the evolution of contemporary quality TV is embedded in gendered and classed understandings of cultural value. There is some academic consensus about the way quality TV makes use of female-targeted

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<sup>7</sup> I will engage with Joyrich's concepts about the relationship between television, cultural value, and gender in the last section of this chapter.

soaps' and melodramas' narrational and character development heritage, at the same time also distancing itself discursively from these lesser-valued forms and foregrounding other narrative-generic techniques. Kackman (2008) also reminds us that discursive formulations of quality TV are carried out via 're-embracing the gendered hierarchies that made the medium an object of critical and popular scorn', and sidestepping in the process feminist media criticism's historic contribution to the emergence of television studies (ibid., see also Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016). But while in previous eras gendered hierarchies were primarily manifested through contrasting evaluations of different *media* (TV in general viewed as a feminine, thus despised, medium), now that TV has become eligible for aesthetic judgements, this differentiation continues *within* television, in the gendered cultural hierarchy between quality and 'other' programming.

So far I have argued that the emergence of contemporary quality TV is founded upon a classed and gendered differentiation from 'other' TV, igniting a debate in television studies between scholars celebrating television's aesthetic revolution, and those using the political analysis approaches of media and cultural studies to criticise its gendered and classed hierarchies (Zborowski 2016). In the following I combine the 'aesthetic' and 'political' approaches to map the gendered hierarchy and to show how this works not just in the 'quality' versus 'conventional' opposition but also *within* the paradigm of contemporary quality TV. This differentiation follows from the convergence-era television industry's economic incentives governed by increasingly fragmented audience targets. In this economy, quality TV's appeal to urban, high-income, educated viewers involves a gendered division of labour (among others); and the history of quality TV since the 1970s is founded upon differentiations between the feminine and masculine both in terms of target audiences, production practices, genre and textual

features, and public discourse. Examining this gendered opposition between two types of quality TV texts, I argue that gender politics govern the dualistic formation of a 'masculine' quality drama on the one hand, and a 'feminine', postfeminist, female-targeted quality television on the other.

It is now a common understanding in television scholarship that default 'quality' television links high aesthetic and production values with the exploration of white masculinities (Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016, Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016). Series that helped shape the quality canon in the last twenty years like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire* (2002-2008), *24* (2001-2010), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *Lost* (2004-2010), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *The Walking Dead* (2010-), *Game of Thrones* (2011-), *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), *Deadwood* and *True Detective* (2014-) share not only now obvious generic-aesthetic features (markers of their quality) but also a preference for concentrating on, and dissecting, disparate kinds of troubled masculinities. These programmes' politics are marked by a multifaceted scrutiny of changing ideologies around society, family, and identity via stories of complex (anti)heroes (Lotz 2014, Mittell 2015b). What is largely omitted from academic examinations of these programmes is an inquiry into *how and why* these cultural anxieties appear as a profoundly male experience linked to quality television's genre hybridity and cinematic style. Lacking this investigation, inherent masculinity remains an assumed (whether celebrated or lamented) feature of quality drama's novelty aesthetics.

But the economy of convergence-era TV also produces a 'feminine' quality television canon, characterised by the use of female leads and by its close ideological connection with postfeminist cultural discourse. The emergence of postfeminist TV programming has its own extensive literature in feminist television and cultural theory, investigating its relationship to neoliberal consumer culture, to postfeminist gender

politics, and to American television history's relationship with feminism among others. For instance, two Ur-texts of postfeminist television, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) and *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) have both been objects of study in McCabe and Akass' anthology series *Reading Contemporary Television* (2004 and 2006, respectively), whose selection of individual American TV programmes is based on the primary role they play in shaping contemporary television culture. Yet studies of millennial postfeminist television from the perspective of its specific relationship with quality TV discourses have been scarce. One exception is Diane Negra's (2004) work on *Sex and the City* and on the ways the programme articulates the meanings of 'quality' in its address to female audiences and in its connections to postfeminist consumer culture. Negra's argument that quality in *Sex and the City's* case has to be understood in the series' relationship to postfeminism means that, in a broader sense, quality becomes defined by the text's treatment of gender politics, i.e. by its representation of contemporaneous concerns about the new female subject and by its ambiguous relationship to feminist/postfeminist politics. In other words, quality here is defined not so much as an aesthetic category but more as a political one: questions of aesthetics and narrative become articulated mostly through questions of gender politics.

This observation can be extended to other female-led quality series emerging after *Sex and the City's* trendsetting success, such as its short-lived copycats *The Lipstick Jungle* (2008-2009) and *Cashmere Mafia* (2008) or the more lasting *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-): these programmes' notion of quality is tied to their negotiation of issues of womanhood, tailored towards the target demographic's assumed interests; and their cultural value hinges on whether their politics of representation transgress the boundaries of the gendered status quo. This becomes even more visible in the programmes'

relationship to genre: postfeminist quality television's concentration on the political, rather than the aesthetic, articulation of quality, implies that this type of television locates its expressive modes in the frameworks of melodrama and dramedy, since it is not that interested in generic-formal transgressions, and as such remains in the domain of 'women's genres'. Thus, the soap opera's televisual heritage is not only more visible (because less concealed aesthetically) but also means that the notion of quality is not primarily expressed through narrative-artistic invention. Consequently, this programming becomes culturally inferior in relation to the quality associated with masculine-coded television. In this setup, the idea of transgression is split along gendered lines between the aesthetic-formal and the political, the former having more cultural currency than the latter.

The concentration on the new female subject's representation in postfeminist quality television has spawned a number of female-targeted series on premium cable that present various kinds of 'troubled' white womanhood, such as *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015), *United States of Tara* (2009-2011), *Weeds* (2005-2012), *The L Word* (2004-2009), *Enlightened* (2011-2013), or *The Big C* (2010-2013). Produced for cable, these programmes are able to express more varied ideas than they would be on networks about subversions of traditional images of women (see Nygaard [2013] on cable channel Showtime's 'Ladies with Problems' programming formula). But these subversions are tied to the half-hour dramedy form and revolve around the complexity of middle-class white womanhood, their narratives beginning to complicate gendered ideas around the domestic and public arena. This programming taps into millennial discourses about the independent, empowered, and consequently complex, woman whose narrative centralises generically-aesthetically restricted explorations of this identity. Postfeminist quality TV's roots in the explicitly political explains

why its limited representation practices, i.e. its focus on women fitting into particular social categories (housewife, career woman, mother), become crucial questions in their evaluations both in academia and in popular criticism. Notably, the male-focused quality drama's protagonist is mostly identified via his profession (mafia leader, small-town sheriff, chemistry-teacher-turned-meth-cook), which in turn is associated with plot, genre, and transgressive aesthetics. His identity, unlike the postfeminist woman's, becomes articulated through these artistic practices. In contrast, the postfeminist protagonist exists through her domestic and private identities, and this focus determines generic and aesthetic practices; consequently, the progressiveness, or lack thereof, in representation overrides aesthetic concerns.

Because of postfeminist quality TV's hierarchical relationship with masculine-coded TV, it is more useful to theorise the category as a subset of contemporary prestige drama rather than as its polar equivalent. As high production values and the targeting of select demographics are given features for both, the distinguishing factor between them becomes the specific methods employed in articulating cultural value. As we have seen, for masculine-coded programming this means a foregrounding of aesthetics, genre, and plot, while postfeminist quality TV defines it through the politics of characterisation of a culturally most recognisable female protagonist, rendering issues of genre, plotting, and aesthetics subordinate to characterisation practices. Further, the theorising of postfeminist quality TV as a subcategory of quality drama also makes sense in considering both categories' textual-discursive modes of audience address. Male-centred quality drama is, despite its focus on 'troubled' masculinities, at the same time interested in attracting other-than-white-male audiences, as indicated by the trope of 'strong' female and minority supporting characters which the narratives of ensemble series tend to exhibit. The

appeal to a universal aesthetic value invites a de-gendered, non-ideological appreciation of these forms, at the same time veiling the power dynamics inherent in their construction and evaluation. This universal quality is also linked to high-concept serialisation's emergence on television, promising a contrast with 'traditional' TV's ephemeral and episodic patchwork structure; and the appeal to the superiority of metanarrative assumes a lack of gendered cultural hierarchies. This programming offers accessibility for a wide selection of social groups on account of its aesthetic value. Contrastingly, postfeminist programming primarily targets a gendered segment of these audiences, and the quality that it claims to have is understood in terms of its political address to this group.

The inherent gendered split within current definitions of quality TV can be further illuminated through an historical examination. In the following I trace how the idea of quality television was constructed from the 1970s onwards (a period when industry vernacular started to rely heavily on the term for promotional purposes), and concentrate on how both the programmes and contemporaneous discourses invoked gender politics. By locating diachronic patterns in the ways the relationship between gender and quality TV is configured, I highlight the specific historic contexts in which this relationship shifts over time.

### **'Quality' discourses in the network era**

The historical trajectory from the 1970s to the present of the discursive formation of 'quality' on television is a gradual shift from foregrounding a political meaning toward an aesthetic one. Key works of television historians like Jane Feuer et al. (1984), Lynne Joyrich (1988, 1996), Bonnie J. Dow (1996), and Julie D'Acci (1994), engaging with television's relationship with gender, feminism, and cultural value in the period

between the 1970s and 1990s, emphasise television's popular association with immediacy and with a suitability for (the illusion of) social-political realism. As Joyrich postulates about TV melodrama, this striving for, and illusion of, a close connection with the referential is linked with established narrative structures of scripted television and their low cultural value: 'With no agreed transcendental value to be achieved, melodrama can offer no final closure, and thus its narratives – in both continuing serials and episodic series – are circular, repetitive, and unresolvable' (1988, 140).

In the history of television's relationship with 'quality', 1970 is a seminal year, marking the debut of the workplace sitcom *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) on CBS. Produced by the production company MTM, the programme proved a game changer both in the television industry's relationship with its own popular reputation as low culture, and also in feminist politics' relationship with its representations in popular culture (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 1984). The fact that this happened in the situation comedy genre shows that the idea of quality television in its meaning of political-social innovation was understood to be better suited for comedic forms; specifically, for a new type of comedy that does not just provide easy entertainment but has social consciousness. Therefore, the TV industry's new directive of creating 'quality' by catching up with the era's radical social-political upheavals (like the women's liberation movement) was executed via a direct and calculated association between feminist politics and the sitcom form. Writing in the 1990s, Bonnie Dow noted that in television history, female-led dramas have always been a scarcity due to that format's higher cultural regard; consequently, situation comedy 'is the type of programming in which women are most often and most centrally represented and from which television's most resonant feminist representations have emerged' (Dow 1996, xviii; see also D'Acci 1994, 14 and 71; Rowe Karlyn

1995b, 97–99). ‘Quality’ becomes realised here in a genre that, due to its traditionally low-culture status<sup>8</sup> (presented in a low-culture medium), has more freedom to be politically-socially subversive than others – further proving the point that television quality in this era is primarily associated with, and defined by, political rather than aesthetic meanings.

In *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and in other female-led sitcoms that followed it throughout the seventies (*Maude* [1972-1978], *Rhoda* [1974-1978], *Phyllis* [1975-1977], *The Betty White Show* [1977-1978]), the television industry began to develop models for how to capitalise on its popular associations with topicality in order to remedy its ‘low culture’ reputation. The feminist sitcom formula that dominated the era was an answer to the ‘social relevance’ mania characterising 1970s television, which all three major networks (CBS, NBC, ABC) utilised in order to reach the newly discovered quality demographic (Feuer 1984a, 4; D’Acci 1994, 13–14; Dow 1996, 32). Competing with the MTM sitcom as a reformer of television narration, Norman Lear’s Tandem Enterprises launched its flagship sitcom *All in the Family* (1971-1979) on CBS. Through their competition, the two production companies transformed traditional sitcom form, and they also ‘represented a kind of brand differentiation within the same product line’ (Feuer 1984a, 8). As Kerr describes, ‘...much of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s success has been attributed to its coincidence with the crisis of the nuclear family and the impact of the women’s movement, in much the same way that *All in the Family* has been associated with changing liberal attitudes toward race and racial equality’ (1984, 80).

In the 1970s female-centred sitcom, MTM and CBS produced ‘quality’ comedy by directly associating it with the women’s liberation

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed exploration on the relationship between cultural value and genres see Rowe Karlyn (1995b, 95–115).

movement. Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) represented the new female subject who earns a living, and is single, childless, and well-educated. A female characterisation considered revolutionary for its time (ibid., 80-81), this was meant to appeal to white professional women audiences, an emerging target demographic for the culture industries. The female character's innovation drives the idea of quality and provides the MTM sitcom's backbone. That is, all other novelty features of form, such as the ensemble cast of colleagues, the workplace as main location, the emphasis on character rather than on situation, or the untypically fluid camera movements (ibid., 87-92), originate in the radicalism of the female lead's gendered characterisation. In other words, television's assumed ability to portray social issues and to engage with questions of social identity in a complex way provides the foundation of its 1970s configuration of quality (and popularity). And crucially, this quality is linked with television's perceived femininity, with the idea that television, a signifier of female consumerism, may best draw on this femininity as a political capacity to re-define itself as innovative.<sup>9</sup> An element of this is television's perceived closeness with the (female or feminised) viewer: its domestic presence, in opposition with cinema's perceived masculine distance and voyeurism, is utilised here as a positive trait (Joyrich 1988, 146; 1996, 36–39).

However, even this configuration of 'feminine quality television' via the MTM sitcom emerges in a dualistic opposition with other, 'masculinist', televisual features, manifested in the above mentioned Norman Lear sitcom. Lentz (2000) gives a detailed account of how the contemporaneous popular discourse set up the dualism between 'quality' versus 'relevance' by highlighting the differences between MTM's and Tandem's comedy style. In this relationship, *The Mary Tyler*

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the television industry's construction of the 'women's audience' see D'Acci (1994, 63–73).

*Moore Show* becomes associated with middle-class whiteness, intellectualism, and 'sexual modesty' (ibid., 68), while *All in the Family* earns its reputation for political 'relevance': its established centralisation of racial issues situates it in 'a discourse about the "real", not the moral or polite. And reality is allowed to be shocking' (ibid.). Thus, the opposition between 'quality' and 'relevance' also becomes an opposition between 'feminist politics' versus 'racial politics': 'sexual modesty' and white, middle-class femininity versus 'sexual licentiousness', 'gritty realism', and working class masculinity respectively. Here, the traditional dualism of a 'feminine' television and a 'masculine' cinema is projected onto 1970s television through these categories, while their assigned features render their cultural values oppositional along political lines, and also render their aesthetics subservient to these politics. In this connotation though, unlike in the TV versus cinema dualism, the MTM programme's liberal feminism assumes higher quality than the Norman Lear sitcom's 'masculine realism' and physicality (additionally, this dualism also keeps antiracist and gender politics safely separate in popular consciousness [ibid., 80]).

Feuer (1984) discusses the differentiation between the MTM and the Lear sitcom similarly but in aesthetic terms. In its own way of re-inventing the sitcom form, the former developed the character comedy: instead of the classic problem/solution narrative format, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and its successors foreground the protagonist's psychological journey. Thus the situation becomes only a pretext for character study, which also results in a more nuanced televisual style. Further, because of the emphasis on character dynamics, discussions of political issues primarily focus on the personal dimensions of these problems. In contrast, the Lear comedy is based on situation: in order to present specific 'social issues', it 'retains the simplistic, insult-ridden, joke machine apparatus to a far greater extent than did *The Mary Tyler*

*Moore Show* (Feuer 1984b, 35). Characters are less complex here and virtually 'stick figures in a political allegory' (ibid., 46), where each stands for an ideological-social type, including female stereotypes. The Lear comedy's overtly political nature allows for less psychological depth and thus less opportunity for identification and sentimentality; it is also less interested in formal innovation, treating style as secondary to politics.

In further scrutinising the MTM workplace comedy's political novelty, Serafina Bathrick (1984) argues that it is ideologically significant that the showcasing of a new, liberated and complex, female character, happens while simultaneously pushing straightforward discussions of politics into the background. For Bathrick, 'the presence in the workplace of the humane and accessible woman' might be a political novelty but is also connected to the treatment of politics as 'background'; therefore 'whether the TV newsroom as workplace marks a new environment for a new kind of women's work remains to be considered' (1984, 105). I want to carry Bathrick's point further by considering the different ideological work the two types of comedies perform in transforming the traditional sitcom formula. By creating the workplace or character comedy, or 'warmedy' (Feuer 1984b, 43), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* 'domesticates' the workplace, and to a certain extent de-politicises it via its feminisation; while *All in the Family's* 'issue' comedy brings (racial) politics into the domestic space and thus masculinises it by turning it into an arena of public debate. As such, the 'masculine' political-public and the 'feminine' personal-private contaminate each other in these two contrasting rearrangements of a traditional TV genre – but in the process they carry their gendered dimensions with them into the ideologically new form.

In sum, television's reflection of the ideological-cultural-economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s yielded a new understanding of quality

whose definition was primarily politically rooted: this definition was linked with quality TV's 'femininity' as a political trait. However, this notion is further nuanced if examined in television's contemporaneous context of the idea of the 'political': in the discursive-textual contrast with the Norman Lear sitcom, the feminine/feminist sitcom prefers character development and refined aesthetics to the latter's direct political satire, masculinism, and lack of interest in formal innovation. Already in this period, an implicit polarisation is set up between a feminine and a masculine television; but the difference emerges as 'feminine' TV's superior value following from a foregrounded aesthetics that in turn is rooted in emphasising the personal within the political. This is in contrast with present era quality television's configuration, which utilises the idea of aesthetic-formal innovation but connects it with, and embeds it in, a masculinised cultural tradition, thus concealing its gendered ideological work. 'Feminine' quality dramedy however continues to be defined based mainly on a politically subversive, but individualised characterisation practice (fostered by postfeminist discourse), and realised in the tried-and-true aesthetics of the half-hour comedy/dramedy. It was in the 1970s then when American television first tested out our contemporary notions of quality in terms of aesthetics, demographics, and the political – and following from television's traditional 'femininity', it is only logical that this happened through forms, styles, and characterisation methods associated with the feminine. These experimentations and their formulas of success later became utilised in television's gradual establishment of the more aestheticized, 'masculine', and decidedly more prestigious quality drama.

The last few years of the 1970s and early 1980s saw the 'feminine' character comedy's decline and the rise of the hour-long character drama. Shifts in political-cultural circumstances such as the three

networks' new 'Family Hour' programming initiative and the Reagan/Bush era's neoconservative political atmosphere, effected an institutional reluctance for experimenting with women's portrayals (Kerr 1984, 85–87). Wary of presenting content that could be seen as in any way controversial, television brought back female representations deemed 'traditional', thus creating the truly contradictory situation in which 'ratings were dominated by examples of what were known inside the industry as "T&A programming", "candy-for-the-eyes" and "jiggle television"' (ibid., 87). It was in this cultural atmosphere that MTM developed the hour-long dramas *Lou Grant* (1977-1982) and *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), both of which contributed to the establishment of post-network era quality drama. They concentrated primarily on male characters in professional environments, utilised masculine-associated genres and created their notion of quality in connotation with the cinematic-artistic. *Hill Street Blues* amalgamates the cop genre with documentarism, while *Lou Grant's* inception was largely owing to the cultural impact of the film *All the President's Men* (1976) – the series is set at a daily newspaper and follows an ensemble of investigative reporters chasing news stories of great political-social impact (Wicking 1984, 167). Thus, the programme is imbued with 'heavyweight social issues' (ibid., 166) presented via innovative storytelling methods. Crucially though, these and other series' several formal features originate in the 1970s MTM sitcom, such as the ensemble cast, the workplace as familial space, and the emphasis on characters' psychological development.<sup>10</sup> A crucial difference however is that innovations of the 'feminine' sitcom were primarily politically motivated: for example, the emphasis on character was a consequence of the effort to create identification points for a new type of protagonist (the female professional, the divorced woman, the single woman), and

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<sup>10</sup> They are also influenced by melodramatic and soap opera forms' narrative and characterisation methods, evidenced for instance in the increased hybridisation of serial and episodic structure.

thereby to minimise her potential abrasiveness that could alienate audiences. When the hour-long quality drama emerges, no such motivation is behind it to facilitate its characterisation methods; rather, it utilises this style by simultaneously emptying it of its gendered political impetus, and incorporates it into other distinguishing markers of quality.

In a telling example, while *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is known for spawning a number of spin-offs and launching the careers of its ensemble cast, of these it was only the male character Lou Grant (Ed Asner) whose spin-off series was developed in the hour-long dramatic form. In fact, *Lou Grant* itself is the series through which MTM develops the ways in which topicality and issue-oriented storytelling work in a more 'serious' format. In other words, when MTM, in its quest for novelty programming, first ventures into experimenting with genres which have higher cultural prestige than the sitcom, it turns to masculine-coded cultural traditions – culminating later in *Hill Street Blues* becoming 'the new paradigm for television' in terms of innovative style and social criticism (Feuer 1984a, 26). Unsurprisingly, this series is frequently discussed today as being highly influential on the paradigm of post-network quality drama.<sup>11</sup> Such a quest for aesthetic value does not necessitate political innovation in gender representations, and this aspect diminishes in the concept.<sup>12</sup> Decentering the idea of radical female portrayals, the increasing masculinisation of quality TV also brings about a 'feminism taken into account' (McRobbie 2009) type treatment of women's allocated spaces in ensemble casts. Dow shows that in the 'professional serial drama' form of the 1980s, 'the influence

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<sup>11</sup> Producers of contemporary quality TV like *The Wire*, *Deadwood*, and *House of Cards* (2013-) analyse the series' influence on their work in these terms in Ryan (2014).

<sup>12</sup> The best-known example for an exception that proves this rule is *Cagney and Lacey* (1981-1988), a drama that attempts to amalgamate the 'tough' cop genre with feminist politics, and strives for quality status through this. But the contemporaneous intense cultural anxieties around the female protagonists' political 'meaning' demonstrate the unease with which foregrounded gender politics are accepted into genres associated with higher cultural value (D'Acci 1994).

of feminism in American culture is obvious' but limited, naturalising the postfeminist paradigm via women professionals' obligatory inclusion as supporting characters into masculine-coded forms of quality television (1996, 98).

The historic shift in the discursive formation of 'quality', moving from the 'feminine' or liberal feminist sitcom toward the masculinist/aesthetically-driven quality drama can be best illuminated through Joyrich's concept about discursive connections between television, postmodernism, consumerist culture, and femininity (1988 and 1996). Joyrich states that academic cultural criticism historically configures television culture as *the* primary manifestation of late capitalist mass culture and postmodern chaos, associated with threatening the classic humanist ethos through the collapse of its traditional dualistic values and epistemologies, where this pluralism is profoundly gendered:

Rather than the masculine spectator stimulated by the negativity inherent in modernist art, television creates an effeminate viewer, passive and gullible, in need of comfort and support. Within this discourse, TV's mystification becomes almost a castration. (1996, 26)

The contradiction in the popular and academic image of a 'feminization lurking over all American culture' (1988, 146) is that within the constant fear of mass culture's destruction of traditional values such as 'the distance between subject and object, active and passive, that upholds the masculine gaze and the primacy of the male subject', resides these values' continued high evaluation. Thus, postmodern culture is 'desperately trying to retrieve and maintain its traditional distinctions', for instance by utilising the low-culture form of melodrama on TV as a privileged formula, 'promising the certainty of clearly marked conflict and legible meaning even as it plays on the closeness associated with a feminine spectator-consumer' (ibid., 147). In this way, postmodern

culture 'decenters oppositions even as it attempts to resuscitate them' (ibid.).

Joyrich's theorisation of the discursive tension between a feminising, infantilising, fragmented, consumerist television culture and a masculinist cultural tradition canonised as carrying great universal values, provides an explanation for the emergence of television's own formation of an elitist, gendered idea of quality – a quality that carries associations between the seemingly non-televisual (because cinematic), and the masculine voyeuristic (see cable's utilisation of sexualised graphic content). In this perspective, the longitudinal gravitation towards the masculine-coded quality drama's cultural dominance seems almost an inevitability. In the mid-1990s, Joyrich already demonstrated how TV culture would attempt to ease the postmodern tension by introducing such features into its meanings; in the poignantly titled essay 'Threats from within the Gates: Critical and Textual Hypermasculinity' (1996), she shows how 1990s 'action and crime dramas (...) attempt to deny television's "feminine" connotations in order to construct a masculine spectator and achieve the status of "quality" television' (ibid., 11). Today's quality TV canon not only fulfils but brings to its logical next phase this possibility by establishing ideas of exceptionalism, authenticity, authorship, metanarrative, universalism, and other qualifiers of modernist artistry on cable television, all the while embedding them in a tradition of masculinity that it borrows from the higher valued medium of cinema.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Television, transgression, and cultural value**

This chapter examines the connection between cultural transgression and cultural value on television, specifically what I identify as a discursively gendered divide between ideals of aesthetic and political transgression. Quality television discourses cultivate the idea of 'edginess', generally meaning aesthetic uniqueness and narrativisations of divisive themes. I argue that the programmes analysed in this thesis amalgamate these strategies of transgression by linking 'novel' treatments of form and narrative with 'novel' treatments of popular feminism. From this follows a need to examine closer how television associates the idea of cultural boundary-breaking with cultural value.

Television scholarship agrees that the institutional and aesthetic paradigm shift that facilitated the emergence of today's quality TV culture, is linked to HBO's aggressive brand building in the 1990s (Edgerton and Jones 2009; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008b; McCabe and Akass 2007b). HBO's novel method of promoting its brand identity by embedding its original programming in discourses around exclusiveness, artistry, and explicit content has played a crucial role in establishing associations of some television with higher cultural value. In the first section of this chapter, I examine the gendered aspects of the subversively explicit on HBO. Since the politics of subversion cultivated by the company quickly gained currency in the industry, my discussion treats these politics as broadly characteristic of today's culturally dominant quality TV paradigm. Considering that the HBO model's artistic merits are associated with a taboo-breaking usage of explicit content, my focus will primarily be on how this is mobilised to evoke the aura of high cultural value, specifically in its relationship with taboos around the gendered body, social mores, and language. The second

section unpacks the meanings behind a legacy of 'feminist transgressions' on TV, both in an historical trajectory and also in the post-network paradigm of quality TV. The argument concentrates on the changing cultural understanding of the transgressively feminist and its links to shifting notions of quality. This section also builds its timeline around the cultural paradigm shift that HBO's treatment of televisual quality has established, and thus outlines a before/after relationship of 'feminist' transgressions with it.

### **HBO's 'quality' transgressions**

The previous chapter argued that HBO's promotion of a motivated usage of explicit content served to emphasise its uniqueness in the 1990s television landscape. McCabe and Akass (2007b) show that the eagerness with which producers of HBO's flagship series link sexually explicit or violent content to authenticity implies an underlying unease with this content. This nervousness speaks more broadly to the cultural status of the explicit (especially if connected to the body and its boundaries) as in itself inherently suspicious in the hierarchies of taste. As genre theories of cinema have shown, genres defined by their centralisation of the physical and by an appeal to the viewer's strong physical-emotional reaction, like pornography and horror, have historically been categorised as low culture (Williams 1991). HBO's promotional treatment of the explicit emphasises this content's artistic and/or narrative motivation, thus removing the notion of 'just physical' entertainment from its function to secure its programmes' cultural prestige.

However, it is not only the explicit content that gains cultural validation by its association with the artistic, but also the medium of television itself. Despite the assertion of its much-quoted slogan ('It's not TV. It's

HBO.’), HBO remains closely attached to and dependent on television culture, or as Avi Santo dubs the cable network, it is ‘para-television’ (2008, 24–30). In this bartering around cultural prestige, two phenomena – television and representations of explicit content – that have both been evaluated in cultural history as pandering to the masses and thus denied judgements based on artistic merit, use each other in an effort to create a culturally validated mode of representation. The crucial difference between these realms however is their gendered cultural coding: as discussed, television has long been associated with feminising/emasculating, consumerist, and middle-to-lower-class culture; while the profane and its associations with bodily or linguistic transgressions are connected to lower-class masculinity and to the exclusion of the feminine/female subject, from pornography to Freudian theorisations of the ‘smut’ joke. Television’s popular understanding as a feminine phenomenon is linked historically to its assumed avoidance of excess, to its appeal to a middlebrow, bourgeois regime of taste that strictly regulates representations of the corporeal. The sexually excessive or violent is however in a reverse, but symbiotic relationship with the feminine: in Linda Williams’ words, ‘what may especially mark these body genres [pornography, gross-out horror, and melodrama] as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntarily mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact *that the body displayed is female*’ (1991, 4; italics mine). In pornography and horror, the female body’s centralisation and its display of physical pleasure or pain causes these genres to be culturally associated with masculine viewing pleasures, and to be banned from middle-class tastes, especially from the feminine world of television. Williams’ third body genre, the melodrama, is of course not only exempt from this ban but permeates television as a female-targeted and feminine-coded form (Joyrich 1988), which speaks

to the differences in the cultural acceptability, function, and position of the bodily excesses these genres represent along gendered lines. HBO's quality TV discursively replaces melodrama's feminine-coded excess with the similarly low-culture, but masculine-coded excess of sex and violence, in the process lending cultural prestige to the latter modes of bodily transgressions.

From its beginnings in the 1970s well into the mid-1990s, HBO's programming and branding policies as cable channel relied primarily on an exclusivity emerging from the combination of television and profanity, two seemingly irreconcilable phenomena. Content that could only be broadcast in a cable environment, such as feature films without adverts and censorship, live sports events (mainly professional boxing), sex documentaries, and stand-up comedy with explicit language, dominated the cable network's programming before it started to produce original series (Edgerton 2009). In this era, the exclusivity promised to subscribers did not yet include the idea of a specific higher aesthetic value but mostly meant the novelty of showing content on television that was understood to be anathema to its political economy. The notion of taboo-breaking has then been part of the cable network's branding policy in most of its history; in its first twenty-odd years this was located in the cultural clash of a masculinised idea of the daringly explicit and of the feminine televisual. It was in the 1990s when HBO's cultural politics relating to its originally produced programming started to build the notion of an 'edgy' aesthetic into the brand by heavily promoting it as a cross-pollination of art and profanity.<sup>13</sup>

Additionally, the 1990s was also an era during which Western culture's already brewing broad ideological-political transformations really

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<sup>13</sup> Scholarly literature describes HBO's establishment of quality TV culture as a conscious business decision by the cable channel's management in the mid-1990s, and specifically attributes it to then-chairman Chris Albrecht's intervention. The marketing tagline 'It's Not TV. It's HBO.' was introduced in 1996 (McCabe and Akass 2007b, 84; Edgerton 2009, 8).

started to surface in the popular. In the process of spectacular 'post'-ings of cultural-political struggles and ideologies, traditionally low cultural forms gained new meanings in a re-arrangement of dominant taste regimes. As feminist cultural critics contend, postfeminism and the postmodern brought about a new valorisation of the pornographic in a discourse of feminist empowerment and self-actualisation (Gill 2007, Levy 2006, Douglas 2010, McRobbie 2009). The pornographic and horror gradually acquired a higher position in the hierarchies of taste in the 1990s, and were accepted into the mainstream as ironic and/or artistic. In this regard, HBO's strategy of combining the explicit and the aesthetic can be understood as recognising and tapping into this cultural atmosphere, and as contributing to its proliferation in its own institutional context. The obvious parallel between postfeminism's wider paradigm and HBO's policy is that the infusion with the sexualised/pornographic transforms an initially feminine-coded phenomenon (the feminist movement and the derided medium of television respectively) into a culturally more decipherable one.

In HBO's treatment, both television and the profane undergo a cultural re-evaluation as realms of entertainment whose cultural function becomes distanced from *mere* entertainment. Since I argue that the critical evaluation of both TV and the profane hinges greatly on cultural re-combining rather than actual content, a question arises about the exact nature of content that in cultural consciousness is associated with breaking established taboos. Setting aside the issue of cultural re-combining for now, i.e. the 'shock' factor of pairing the explicit with the televisual and the artistic, we can ask, what kinds of cultural boundaries is quality television understood to break thematically? My interest here is not in interpreting cultural products or separating theme and aesthetic treatment but to unpack connections between institutional cultivations of the gendered profane and the politics of cultural

(academic and popular) validation. Considering the HBO-style quality text I suggest that content discursively linked with transgression due to its illicit connotations, is in fact aligned with already existing modes of representations of the 'shocking'. Consequently, HBO's treatment of the explicit as boundary-pushing is less interested in a political subversion of this particular tradition, and is in fact conventional in its localisations of the subversive moment. A scrutiny of the critical discourse around these programmes further confirms this suggestion. To illuminate this argument, I analyse two academic works that exemplify the process whereby the inherent gendered traditionalism of 'edgy' TV texts becomes rhetorically repressed.

Marc Leverette's (2008) study of HBO's exceptional nature in the TV landscape due to its foregrounding of profanity asserts that the transgressive act lies in questioning the boundaries separating cultural categories. He discusses how HBO negotiates this boundary-crossing of othered or subcultural territories, using the example of George Carlin's stand-up comedy (among other programming). First broadcast on HBO, Carlin's comedy helped in the 1970s and 1980s popularise the world of stand-up, 'as well as having a normalizing effect regarding profanity' (ibid., 127). Leverette analyses Carlin's now classic monologue about the 'seven dirty words that you cannot use on television' (*George Carlin - 7 Dirty Words [Best Part] 2011*), positing that Carlin's method of socio-linguistically dissecting swear words that are taboos for television *on television* fulfils the criterion of the absolute subversive. But Leverette's argument, amplified with a demonstrative writing style that mixes academic language with expletives, leaves untouched the question of where exactly lies the political subversion beyond the act of using profane language where it traditionally does not belong. His argument overlooks that while Carlin's monologue may break certain taboos (the contextually classed nature of profane and proper language), it does not

upset more deep-seated ones linked with sexualised power relations. For instance, discussing a sequence about the word 'cocksucker's legitimacy, Leverette writes: 'for Carlin, the real danger of puritanical linguistic relativism can be seen here as he asks how did cocksucker come to mean "a bad man," when it's really "a good woman. How did they do that?"' (ibid., 130). While he deems this bit of the monologue characteristic enough to merit specific mention for its ridiculing of classist puritanism, unmentioned goes the misogyny and homophobia within the historic shifts in the word's derogatory function and in Carlin's rhetoric. This, considering that both Carlin's humour and Leverette's analysis lie in the *socio-linguistic* aspect, is revealing. The monologue is of course a product of its time, meaning that this act of boundary-crossing had its own contemporaneous cultural regulations, but a contemporary scrutiny could presumably engage with locating these. It is striking for instance that Carlin's wording imagines the ridiculed middlebrow, proper tastes as thoroughly female: the bourgeois society that deems foul language unacceptable is populated in his jokes with bishop's wives, mothers, and prim ladies in accordance with television's gendered associations. As such, when Carlin brings his seven dirty words into television, the overtly classed boundaries of taste that he oversteps are implicitly but profoundly gendered. Here, Leverette's statement that HBO 'sells a subculture' (ibid., 125) becomes problematic for its lack of enquiry into where exactly the political subversion of bringing the subcultural out of its marginalised home lies. After all, the subcultural art that Leverette cites, exemplified in Jean Genet's 'style as revolt, style as refusal, crime as art' (ibid.), is motivated by concrete social otherness and is inextricably connected with political emancipation. Leverette's omission is all the more conspicuous here since the next section of his essay examines HBO's broadcasting

practices in regard to boxing matches, and scrutinises the raced and sexualised mediation politics of spectator sports.

A similarly conspicuous absence of enquiry into the precise nature of transgression politics characterises Amanda Lotz's analysis of the male-centred quality programme in her book *Cable Guys* (2014). This work endeavours to account for the increased interest of a set of prestige TV texts in portraying problematic masculinities. Lotz finds that programmes like *Sons of Anarchy* (2008-2014), *Breaking Bad*, *Entourage* (2004-2011) or *The Shield* (2002-2008) complicate the patriarchal gender scripts of earlier television by depicting male characters as struggling with contradictions between social expectations of hegemonic masculinity and individual experience. She explains this phenomenon as owing to contemporary 'negotiations among aspects of patriarchal and feminist masculinities' in Western culture (2014, 38), influenced by a post-second-wave feminist consciousness in men's portrayals on television. As such, Lotz locates these texts' transgressive moment in their gender politics, i.e. their characterisation practices of complicated men. She does not bring the boundaries crossed into direct connection with the popularisation of profanity like *Leverette*; similarly, the analysis does not interrogate the interplay between the depictions of these masculinities, and aesthetic-narrative conventions or issues of cultural value on TV. The notion of boundary-crossing is limited to institutional differences between cable and network television for Lotz: the former encourages 'edgier' characterisation practices while the latter has more reactionary politics, 'erect[ing] a big tent that welcomes heterogeneous audiences with content unlikely to easily offend' (ibid., 61). Because Lotz's focus does not go much beyond an association of cable television with edginess, it unavoidably meets with obstacles in accounting for the cultural anxieties around masculinity that these programmes signal:

Interesting, and still unexplainable in my mind, is the impetus that stimulates stories about men's struggles. Some sort of catalysing event remains elusive, so that these preponderant themes and stories of struggle seem instead to be an organic bubbling to the surface of largely unconsidered and unspoken challenges for men. (Ibid., 81)

Omitting the enquiry into the relationship between cultural hierarchies, gender, and aesthetics, Lotz's analysis cannot account for the existence and construction of these progressively complicated masculinities. In another example, her textual analysis of *Sons of Anarchy* aims to demonstrate how the programme's gender politics problematise main protagonist Jax's (Charlie Hunnam) position in a setting portrayed as profoundly patriarchal (an outlaw motorcycle club). The series' narrative tensions revolve around Jax's ongoing struggles with this world's expectations of him as patriarchal leader, a position that clashes with his post-second-wave feminist characterisation as sensitive family man (ibid., 107-110). Crucially, Lotz notes that the series deploys a 'Shakespearean' plot in its premise of a power struggle between Jax, only son of the club's deceased founder John, and Clay (Ron Perlman) who is responsible for John's demise and took over the club's presidency, also marrying Jax's mother (Katie Segal), a Lady Macbeth-like figure. The Hamlet and Macbeth narratives have an established place in Western storytelling, and Hamlet especially has become a shorthand reference in modern cultural history for updating the Oedipal narrative. The issue of patriarchal storytelling traditions has been a staple of feminist cultural theory, which itself has partly been developed within the frameworks of psychoanalysis (Rowe Karlyn 1995a, Bronfen 1996). Considering that *Sons of Anarchy's* premise self-referentially invokes the Hamlet story, and that Lotz is also aware of this, the analysis of the series' gender dynamics from a feminist perspective would require an investigation of how it negotiates the conspicuously Oedipal

plotting techniques with its main protagonist's characterisation, understood as struggling with different – retrograde and progressive – models of masculinities.

Leverette's inquiry ties the profane's transgressive use to the interaction between two culturally incongruous realms of entertainment without considering the underlying gendered aspect. Lotz foregrounds gender (masculinities) in locating the progressive elements of 'edgy' programmes, neglecting to examine further this aspect's relationship with generic and narrative conventions and their cultural positioning. Thus, questions such as how and why these transgressions develop in this particular era in this particular cluster of texts remain 'unexplainable'. Both authors take the subversive moment at face value as it operates within culturally already sanctioned texts.

Nonetheless, the issue of cultural boundary-crossing features as an essential concern within examinations of quality TV's cultural functions, and is theorised as constitutive of its established position in television's value hierarchies. This happens in concert with strategies of the industry and media discourse that configure the transgressive moment as that which combines explicit content (i.e. that which would be censored on network TV) with 'edgy' storytelling and characterisation techniques (also incompatible with network TV). Since this transgression's definition hinges so fundamentally on a competitive comparison with network TV (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016), it eclipses questions about the political-social nature of such a breach of cultural boundaries, a neglect that also influences academic investigations of the quality text. This shift in emphasis occurs because in its history, 'mass' TV has been figured as more adept at focusing on political subversions rather than aesthetic ones (Feuer, Kerr, and Vahimagi 1984; Ott 2008). Consequently, this facet of network TV does not feature with the same

weight in the cable context, or is indeed side-lined in the evaluation of its subversive aspects.

It was due to the cross-cultural trajectory in configurations of transgression that HBO was faced with challenges in the late 2000s in its efforts to safeguard its reputation as the 'edgiest' among its competitors. Upon other cable and broadcast channels' rapid adoption of the 'quality TV' formula, and after the buzz around its brand-defining flagship series had abated, HBO had difficulties for some years in finding the next trendsetting programmes that would set it apart in the pool of variations on the quality TV model (Edgerton 2009, 14–17; Leverette, Ott, and Buckley 2008a, 6–7). This paradigm's impact also had a normalising effect on what counts as taboo and profane (Leverette 2008, 132). In this cultural atmosphere, HBO continued the 'courting controversy' policy via even more accentuated usage of violent and sexually explicit content in programmes such as *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective*. Media reception of the former series' explicit content problematised its reliance on narratives of gendered violence (Jones 2014, Sepinwall 2014), lamenting that the channel's 'pushing the envelope' strategy is tied to patriarchal storytelling traditions. However, critical discourse also notes that *Game of Thrones* endorses the trope of 'strong female characters', whose narrative dominance in the programme's sixth season effected critical and fan popularity (Marsh 2016, Cuen 2016). These two aspects of the programme, coming across as a trade-off – emphasis on archetypal 'strong women' in exchange for gratuitous nudity and sexual violence – constitute the series' notoriety in popular consciousness as ambiguously negotiating its gender politics. HBO capitalises precisely on this ambiguity that taps into a cultural unease with intensified gender discourse, but its strategies of boundary-crossing around the gendered corporeal are nonetheless familiar from cinema and art history.

## Feminist transgressions

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, in the network era the television industry constructed its programming's cultural value by drawing on a political rhetoric for which the medium was deemed an ideal venue. This logic produced discourses of 'quality' and 'relevance' in the 1970s, surrounding the MTM and Tandem sitcom respectively (Lentz 2000). Thus from this period onward, the term quality TV was associated with liberal TV, and not necessarily with excessive aesthetics or high production values. The subversion of culturally dominant representations meant seeking out themes that counted as progressive in the era, and embedding them in emphatically politicised narrative contexts. In accordance with television's reputation as being a 'verbal' rather than 'visual' medium, transgression was linked to politicised narrative and dialogue. Stories about Mary Richards asking for a raise, about Rhoda's (Valerie Harper) divorce, about Archie Bunker's (Carroll O'Connor) jovially old-fashioned racism, or later about liberal feminist Julia Sugarbaker's (Dixie Carter) righteous indignation over topical social issues in *Designing Women* (1986-1993), were not just occasional jokes within otherwise 'harmless' plots of sitcoms, but were essential to narrative structures designed to both represent and initiate social debate.

Further, the foregrounded alliance with 'women's lib' concerns was due to the industry's discovery of upscale female audiences. As discussed, the institutional term 'quality' denoted initially these audiences, rather than content appealing to their tastes. The notion of political progressiveness as a consequence of the industry's targeting of a 'quality' audience has arguably remained a constitutive element of any quality programming until today. However, as Santo argues (2008, 31), the post-network strategy of re-inventing the moniker was to highlight

the idea of quality *content* which was originally the critical discourse's creation rather than the industry's. But more than just a strategic mixture of targeting quality audiences and producing quality content, the post-network promotion of quality foregrounds the latter: by drawing on a paternalistic tradition of cultural value (authorship discourse, 'cinematic' aesthetics, genre hybridity, serialised narrative, explicit content), it transplants the idea of the 'politically progressive' into this masculinised context while in the process obscuring its initial function and its gendered origins.

The same trajectory is evident in the shift that occurs in the connection between genre and quality. The 'politically transgressive' idea of quality was established in the 1970s liberal feminist and female-led sitcom which, along with melodrama, is historically viewed as the form most closely allied with political feminist content due to the MTM formula's cultural influence. But the notion of low cultural value is also part of sitcom's working mechanism, restricting its potential to upset the status quo within the constraints of its expressive modes. The long-standing wisdom that television, and within that, the sitcom particularly is the exceptional venue where women's issues can be addressed best, brings to the fore the connections between both television's and (some) comedy's associations with the feminine and with a low cultural status. In this perspective, it is no coincidence that the post-network ideal of quality TV has been established within the quality drama framework (Thompson 1997, 17; Feuer 2007); and that the emergence of this subcategory historically is a slow generic shift between the 1970s and the late 1990s from the female-led half-hour comedy towards the male-led hour-long drama.

Thus, the notion that television and the sitcom have traditionally been the primary sites on which politically transgressive, and especially feminist, concerns can be negotiated, was due to the conjunction of two

factors: one is related to the lowly position these have occupied in cultural consciousness. Thanks to this, the medium had relative freedom to increase its reputation by pairing up its most ubiquitous form with politically influenced narration. But visually and/or linguistically explicit content was banned from network-era television. This leads to the second factor contributing to the 'political' notion of transgression in this time: since institutional censorship did not allow for expressing transgression via explicit content, the 'quality' discourse hyped at the time preferred an association with white, middle-class respectability (Lentz 2000). Maintaining its strictly regulated narrative and generic norms, television distanced itself from its bad reputation as 'tasteless' entertainment via a strategic association between TV as feminine object, political progression, and respectability. The institutional restriction was thereby treated not as a limitation but as a political asset, where television shuns profanity to express feminine and feminist transgression. This configuration of the transgressive differentiates network era 'feminist' TV from the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque, which locates its political transgressions in the overtly corporeal associated with low cultural, mass tastes (Rowe Karlyn 1995b). Of course network era feminist TV is still very much 'mass TV', i.e. it is not exclusively available or subcultural in its aesthetics and target audiences. It nonetheless negotiates within its framework an ideal of quality that, due to its institutional-cultural context, creates its definition in an emphatic elimination of 'physical' transgressions, contrasting 'politics' with them. This facet of network-era feminist TV also reflects the historically problematic relationship of feminism with body politics, as demonstrated by the 'sex wars' of modern feminist history and the debated question of embodied representations of feminism until today. Lentz's discussion of the sitcom *Maude* provides another example for this, here in the specifically raced contrast

between middle-class housewife Maude's (Bea Arthur) white liberal feminism and her black housekeeper Florida's (Esther Rolle) lack of interest in gender politics (2000, 69–78). The series construes these ideological differences in relation to the two women's different relationship with body and sexuality as raced subjects (Maude's prudishness versus Florida's sexual excess), since it explicitly understands this relationship to be crucial for their relationship with feminism (ibid.).

It is partly due to network TV's elimination/regulation of the physically excessive, and this elimination's centrality in the definition of a 'feminist quality' on 1970s TV, that later expressions of the feminist are conveyed increasingly around transgressions of the body. Rowe's (1995b) seminal concept of the unruly woman shows that feminism is expressed in cultural history as an excess, a breaking of societal rules pertaining to expectations of dominant modes of femininity. Her analysis of cinematic examples and of sitcom star Roseanne Arnold implies that these feminist excesses overstep the boundaries not only of the specific era's mandatory femininities but also, from the 1970s onwards, its expectations of *feminist politics*. As feminism has since the late 1960s become embedded in popular culture's constructions of gender to varying extents, those aspects of feminism that are most amenable to these constructions become period-specific features of an ideal femininity, producing perpetually changing contradictions in gender expectations. Thus, Rowe's unruly woman subverts not only an ideal femininity but with it, these dominant modes of feminism. It is owing to this that Roseanne's feminist unruliness is located in the excessive body and voice. In it converges a subversion of, on one hand, the rule of slim body, pretty face, soft voice – traditional embodiments of femininity – and, on the other, the sitcom feminism that dominated the 1970s and became the epitome of popular feminism for the period.

Roseanne's unruliness then goes against the policing of the body, including the policing of its feminism. While both the 1970s feminist sitcom and Arnold's comedy persona defy a hegemonic sexualisation of the female body, the former creates this through a notion of middle-class purity, in accordance with TV's institutional boundaries and with second-wave feminism's association with white middle-class housewives and professional women in popular imagination. The sitcom *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and Arnold's celebrity persona however transgress these representational boundaries via focalising the 'unattractive' and classed body. This aims to disrupt in part the 1980s 'backlash' era's dominant modes of femininity (Faludi 1991), but also an historic feminism constructed as middle-class, respectable, and all-around feminine (Rowe Karlyn 1995b, 54). Following from their respective eras' different constructions of femininity and feminism, 1970s feminist sitcoms and *Roseanne* express body politics that respectively operate as an elimination of the female body and as a naturalisation of it (the idea of 'what real women look like'). These strategies are also governed by their respective relationships with expectations of cultural value: the MTM sitcom's 'purity' constitutes an asset for the quality label, while *Roseanne* expresses political transgression by forming an alliance with traditions of the carnivalesque. Rather than striving for a higher position in hierarchies of taste, this transgression attaches itself to the lower-rung areas of popular culture both in the excessive female body's centralisation and in its political meanings, expressed through the critically dismissed but popular domestic sitcom form.

Cable drama's emergence and the cultural transitions of the 1990s (the growing influence of postfeminism) both contribute to a transformation of the meanings of 'feminist' unruliness. Cable's institutional sanctioning of explicit content as part of the artistic transgression of televisual

aesthetics accommodates the representation of an excessive overstepping of bodily boundaries. But this new possibility emerges in a cultural atmosphere that valorises the sexualised female body whether in the context of empowerment, consumption, or high art. Since postfeminist discourse insists that it emblematises political (i.e. feminist) progression, its foregrounding of the female body – a site on which various social anxieties can be negotiated – fits with quality TV's relationship to explicit representations of sexuality and violence as subversive not just in an artistic, but also in a political sense. This combination leads to postfeminist popular culture's heightened contradictions around the female body and also to its contradictory critical readings especially in the context of quality TV.

The postfeminist quality comedy/dramedy, constructed as a subcategory of quality TV specifically targeted at female audiences and epitomised by *Sex and the City*, speaks to the newly found political freedom in expressing female sexuality. As such, it inverts Rowe's notion of unruly feminism, which is excessive in pushing the boundaries of the 'acceptable' female body: it is not the boundaries of what constitutes an attractive female body that become exposed but the ideal of sexual respectability that the 1970s sitcom cultivated. The extent to which the feminist unruliness Rowe theorises can be portrayed visually, and can carry cultural value becomes clear here: in 'mass' TV, Roseanne's feminism involves both bodily excess and unruly behaviour (sharp wit, sexual appetite) in domestic sitcom's confines. In the postfeminist quality dramedy, the freedom of visual transgression does not translate this into politically excessive explicit visuals: the bodies on screen and what they do remain anchored to dominant ideals of beauty and to the postfeminist paradigm of a classed (sexual) empowerment, and in this aspect show a closer relationship with the MTM era sitcom. Unlike the MTM sitcom however, the quality moniker is not achieved through

eliminating the female body as sexual object/subject but through its centralisation, as consequence of the visually explicit's upward travel in cultural hierarchies.

Thus, postfeminist quality comedy/dramedy draws on both traditions of TV feminism: when utilising the possibilities of the explicit, it borrows from Roseanne's body politics in the act of turning the focus on it; but its expressions of 'sexual liberation' are tied to the dictates of the narrowly classed, raced, and bodily policed postfeminist ethos. Postfeminism's tight link between sexual liberation and individualised consumption culture also constitutes a pivotal difference from earlier TV feminisms: it forecloses a directly 'political' rhetoric around women's space in the public sphere and structural oppressions since it locates its feminism in the intimate private. McCabe and Akass posit that leading women of the HBO-type quality drama and of the half-hour dramedy like *Sex and the City* convey a 'female sexuality and erotic desire [that] has rarely been represented in such complex ways' (2009, 308), and that this representation is directly linked to 'feminism's "sex wars"' (ibid.). By speaking to this particular strand of feminist debate, this characterisation's sheer volume and cultural prestige also aids in carrying its importance over into a widely accepted understanding of feminism.

While not striving for an overtly politicised-public feminism like the 'feminist' sitcom, postfeminist quality dramedy still locates its transgression in its political value – that of sexual liberation which the explicit content means to underline – and this forms the basis of its quality moniker. Since it does not focalise a radical subversion of televisual aesthetics, genre, and narrative, this subcategory does not produce such a transformation of generic traditions as the quality drama. Consequently, television's continued alliance with feminist politics remains anchored to the half-hour comedy/dramedy and its

narrative traditions. This also keeps the form's relative position in the hierarchies of taste unchanged, even in an elite, critically acclaimed area of television. As noted, premium cable channel Showtime cornered the market of female-targeted quality dramedy with its 'Ladies with Problems' programming brand in the mid-2000s (Lawson 2010, Fallon 2010). In this gendered division of institutional branding policies, the quality category's generic hierarchies retain their fixity, presupposing their constructions of the transgressive aspect.

Tellingly, postfeminist quality TV fits more easily into the institutional and aesthetic traditions of network TV than prestige drama. For example, while *Sex and the City* has fared well in network syndication with the raunchiest bits censored, advertisers have been reluctant to sponsor *The Sopranos*, posing a problem to broadcasting the series on network channels (Santo 2008, 36; Simon 2009, 203). Further, HBO did not capitalise on the trendsetting success of *Sex and the City* by producing more similar programming; in fact, the series' cultural importance can be measured in the way it influenced the emergence of these on *other* channels like Showtime and network television. In the company's paternalistic branding philosophy, the half-hour women's comedy/dramedy has little transgressive value beyond what *Sex and the City* already provided politically and in securing an audience. This category is quite openly connected to 'mass' TV, both in its feminine subject matter and its generic connotations; in contrast, quality drama provides more potential for exploiting those aspects of the aesthetically/graphically transgressive that distinguish HBO from regular TV.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Nygaard (2013) shows that HBO's commissioning of the series *Girls* was governed by the desire to corner a female audience that had turned away from HBO after *Sex and the City* had ended. Her examination of discourses around the series shows that these are nonetheless embedded in the channel's articulation of quality on paternalistic-masculinist terms.

## Contemporary 'feminist quality TV'

The emergence of a programming strategy in the mid-2000s governed by the conjunction of quality TV aesthetics and an overtly political 'feminist' rhetoric has to be understood in both the institutional context and that of postfeminist popular culture more broadly. In the cultural work performed by the series discussed in this thesis (but also several others especially after 2010), the television industry's efforts to renegotiate the terms on which it articulates the 'quality' moniker can be detected. Further, Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra (2016) posit that the proliferation of the 'strong female protagonist' in 2010s quality television derives from a recessionary cultural insistence on female resilience in a new economic-political regime of precarity. The authors concentrate on the sociopolitical context of women's representations in prestige television, professedly setting aside issues of discursive negotiations of televisual aesthetics and cultural value – while my interest lies in combining these approaches. It is notable for instance that it was network television where this subcategory of quality shows emerged in the mid-to-late 2000s, such as *30 Rock* and *The Good Wife* (Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016). These series navigate censorial constraints by establishing a 'smart' aesthetics and narration, combined with a politicised gender discourse that dialogues with the postfeminist legacy, and invokes race, class, and body politics. While this can be seen as a response to a recessionary cultural atmosphere, *30 Rock*, as mentioned, debuted two years before the economic crisis, and is attributed in journalistic discourse with facilitating the popularity of female-led political quality comedy (Chaney 2013).

Crucially, *30 Rock's* pilot episode betrays an aspiration to be seen as 'talking back' to contemporaneous televisual paradigms, both in terms of the quality trend and gender politics. In an oft-quoted dialogue, Liz

Lemon describes the NBC variety show of which she is head writer as 'It's not HBO. It's TV' in a retort to stand-up star Tracy's (Tracy Morgan) insistence that he wants to do HBO-style explicit comedy on the show. This line is the epigraph to Leverette et al.'s introduction to their edited book on HBO (2008a, 1), intended to demonstrate the premium cable channel's cultural relevance and exceptionality. But it also illuminates *30 Rock's* and with it, NBC's ambition to stand out against the cable competition by defying its strategy of foregrounding 'raw' content. *30 Rock*, *Parks*, and *The Good Wife* all tap into the 'quality' discourse by positioning themselves both contextually and diegetically as not only fulfilling the criteria of a quality show, but expanding its possibilities via 'smart'-ness and complexity that negotiates the cultural hierarchy between cable and network television. While not a network but an online programme, *Orange* similarly represents for Netflix a challenge to cable television's (especially HBO'S) cultural dominance, as will be shown in the individual analysis.

The institutional-aesthetic 'talking back' strategy becomes linked with a similar 'talking back' to postfeminist television's gender politics in the four series' cultural positioning. The invocation of politicised discourse around gender reminiscent of the network era's feminist sitcom operates in a number of series that also assume the quality signifier, both on cable and on online streaming platforms (Netflix, Amazon). This has worked as a range of generic-aesthetic recombinings governed by efforts at political transgression to stand out in the competition (e.g. *Transparent*, *Outlander*, *Top of the Lake*, *Orange*, *Girls* etc.). This emphatically political address that speaks to a contemporary reinvigorated and contested popular feminism (see Chapter 1) provides these programmes' narrative tensions, and, most importantly, ensures that they will be discussed in the context of quality television. This programming aspires to 'narrative complexity' (Mittell 2006) via the

political complexity of contemporary feminisms, channelling its tensions through the narrative-aesthetic models of quality TV.

## CHAPTER 4

### Case studies I – Comedies

#### 1. The 'quality' comedy and gender

In contemporary television culture, the 'quality' sitcom is an especially curious phenomenon. According to its theorists, sitcom's prominence in American television history is due to its suitability to reflect on the ever-changing social environment, which makes it 'an enduring sociodramatic model that has helped "explain" American society to itself' (Hamamoto 1991, 153). Mills links the form's popularity with its lowly position in the cultural hierarchy to suggest that precisely this provides it with the potential of progressively challenging social structures (2005, 153–54); an argument akin to the Bakhtinian theorisation of the medieval carnival's social function as contained disruption of power relations. For Mills and Hamamoto, the sitcom's ideological power lies in its domesticity and familiarity, and its embeddedness in conventional modes of television production and consumption (Hamamoto *ibid.*; Mills 2005, 152).

If quality television is governed by a discursive distancing from television traditions in terms of audience address and aesthetics in a transitory media environment, then quality comedy's formation involves an especially distinct rupture from generic conventions, considering how deeply the traditional sitcom form is entrenched within American cultural consciousness. Mills (2009) stresses the struggle for cultural distinctions and classed hierarchies of taste per Bourdieu as the ideological motif underlying quality comedy's development: 'It's hard to argue that newer forms of sitcom are *funnier* than traditional ones; the fact that certain audiences might find them so can then instead be understood as indicative of categorised responses and preferences

which are likely to correlate with social distinctions' (ibid., 134). The departure from the original sitcom's conventions however cannot be as extreme as to render the form unintelligible; the 'comedy of distinction', as Mills terms it, is thus 'sitcom repositioning itself in order to protect its future by denying its links to the past' (ibid., 135). This repositioning is manifested mostly in aesthetic details for Mills; otherwise the quality comedy, if subjected to semiotic analysis, exhibits very similar working mechanisms to its predecessors in respect to its narrative and expressive strategies.

The notion of a 'comedy of distinction' is hardly a new phenomenon; as shown in Chapter 2, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* also discursively distinguished itself from other sitcom fare by appealing to a certain ideal of quality. Neale and Krutnik note that this went as far as producers refusing to call it a sitcom at all, preferring the term 'character comedy' or 'warmedy' (1990, 236). Similarly, *M\*A\*S\*H's* (1972-1983) mixture of the comic mode with the dramatic indicates its self-conscious dissociation from the 'triviality' of domestic sitcom, in accordance with the serious theme of war and medical work (Tasker 2009, 133–34). Echoing this, Neale and Krutnik quote Crowther and Pinfold's academic assessment in which they state, 'to describe *M\*A\*S\*H* as a situation comedy is more than a mite inaccurate' (1990, 236–37). These efforts to attribute higher cultural value to these comedies were then based on their apparent move away from a 'simply' comic mode towards more psychological, sentimental, serious, and thus dramatic, storytelling. This demonstrates the hierarchical relationship between the 'serious' and 'comic': as Mills argues, the serious mode is 'not only prioritised, but normalised' (2005, 22) in Western cultures as a default mode of representation; the comic is a deviance from that norm and needs to be clearly signalled.

The contemporary 'comedy of distinction' however differs from these earlier examples as it does not rely so much on a distinction from the comedy mode but, like quality drama, it establishes *artistic-aesthetic* significance. By foregrounding aesthetic superiority to its immediate cultural environment, it does not emphasise a move away from the comic mode towards 'seriousness'. Further, the idea of sitcom's political relevance and progressive power due to its wide audience reach becomes blurred in its discursive evaluation. For instance, quality comedies like *Scrubs* (2001-2010) or *Arrested Development* (2003-) clearly operate in the comic mode, and their academic evaluations stress their aesthetic-narrative novelties within this paradigm (Mills 2009, Vermeulen and Whitfield 2013). Similarly, Mittell (2006) examines the quality comedy for the ways it represents the narrative complexity of quality television, which does not involve a hybridisation of the dramatic and comic.<sup>15</sup>

If the contemporary quality comedy is in general characterised by a 'cultural distinction', i.e. by a denial of its low cultural legacy, then the comedy series that I analyse exhibit a more ambiguous position in their discursive formulation of 'quality'. Both *30 Rock* and *Parks* fit into Mills' concept of the contemporary quality comedy in aesthetic-generic and discursive terms, but this distinction becomes complicated by both series' open invocation of a specific historic legacy, namely that of network-era feminist sitcoms. This is quite obvious in *30 Rock's* case, whose very premise hinges on the viewers' appreciation of its inter- and metatextual nature as show-within-a-show backstage comedy. The series positions itself from its beginning as network-era feminist sitcom's successor (a much-noted example is the musical cue introducing Liz Lemon in the pilot episode, which tweaks *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* familiar credit sequence [Mizejewski 2014, 75]), and

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<sup>15</sup> This is clearly different from female-targeted dramedy's genre hybridity, signalling the underlying connection between gendered address and quality TV's modes of generic innovation.

name-checked throughout its run most of its prominent earlier representatives. While *Parks* is not this explicit about its historic positioning, its dominant strategy of modelling storylines after topical political-social events, and its social commentary on gender in the workplace comedy framework, demonstrate its efforts to emulate the female-centred network sitcom tradition.

Two opposing forces operate in the establishment of these two sitcoms' cultural status then. On the one hand, they use the female-led network comedy's heritage as legitimising historic reference which, at least for *30 Rock*, is a constitutive element of the narrative. On the other, the contemporary quality comedy's aesthetics also work as reassurance that the series represent a departure from earlier eras of comedy and their characteristic gender scripts. This operates most explicitly via the self-conscious satiric-parodic mode's prominence which signifies the development both aesthetically and politically from the predecessors.<sup>16</sup> The ambiguity that works here between legitimation and departure emerges *because of* the two series' gender politics: the negotiated referentiality which they self-consciously highlight to create a 'comedy of distinction' also ensures that an emphatically politicised, feminist TV tradition is continued. In other words, unlike other contemporary comedies frequently analysed as examples of the comedy of distinction (*Arrested Development*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Office* [2005-2013], *Scrubs* etc.), the feminist quality comedy relies just as much on a gendered political heritage for the establishment of its place in this hierarchy as it does on its aesthetic markers.

This picture becomes further nuanced when examining these sitcoms in relation to the immediate predecessor of female-centred quality TV, the millennial postfeminist dramedy. The ways in which this subcategory

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<sup>16</sup> However, since the historic referents of quality comedy, like *The Mary Taylor Moore Show*, were themselves characterised by self-reflexivity as a marker of sophistication (Thompson 1997, 50; Feuer 1984b, 44), this can also be seen as a call-back to earlier quality TV.

links the quality moniker with genre hybridity, a gendered address, and feminist/postfeminist politics has been a central issue for feminist media scholarship (Negra 2004, Arthurs 2007, McCabe and Akass 2004). While this remains a contested territory of media theory due to differences in the evaluation of postfeminism's ideological work, for my purposes this scholarship is useful for contrasting the postfeminist quality dramedy's generic traits with those of *30 Rock* and *Parks*, a difference speaking to the two series' gender politics. As 'comedies of distinction', they distance themselves from the postfeminist dramedy in a less ambiguous fashion than they do from the feminist sitcom heritage. Whether the genealogy is admitted or not – for *30 Rock* it is, since *Sex and the City* is a prominent reference throughout – it works both paratextually and textually not simply as a tradition continued but emphatically as a tradition critiqued or even refused.

The generic distancing at work here is crucial as it determines all others. The half-hour dramedy, just like other formats in the quality category, integrates a number of generic features in order to allow for multilateral practices of audience address and interpretation; put simply, the ambiguity of meanings and narrative modes contributes to the 'quality' label. Most obvious here is postfeminist dramedy's reliance on cinema's romantic comedy as generic reference, mixed with the melodramatic mode, both of which centralise the domestic arenas of romance and sexuality (Arthurs 2007). However, while the romance narrative is part of the two examined comedies' storytelling methods, it does not feature with such weight here as to determine or alter the programmes' generic categorisations. The genre descriptions of the shows on popular online databases underscore this. *Sex and the City*, and most Showtime dramedies, are categorised by IMDb and Wikipedia as comedy/romance or comedy/drama. In contrast, the sites variably describe *30 Rock* and *Parks* as comedy, sitcom/satire, and sitcom/mockumentary/political

satire.<sup>17</sup> Genre hybridity is evident in all three cases but it is only the latter two that are still firmly positioned in the comic mode. This generic distinction becomes especially apparent when considering that in contemporary television, the establishment of a gendered, i.e. feminised, 'quality' brand has been founded on the fusion of domestic melodrama and comedy. That the studied comedies render this categorisation inferior to parody/satire speaks to their ambition to be included in the quality brand via a different route.

Satire and parody have historically been considered as comedies of higher value than 'average' representatives of the genre. King (2002, 93) and Mills (2005, 20) both note that this has to do with these forms' presumed closer proximity to 'serious' modes of storytelling via their 'statements about other forms or social events, (...) while "simpler" fare, such as romantic or gross-out comedies, are deemed interesting only inasmuch as they somehow entertain the masses' (ibid.). Romantic and gross-out comedies' centralisation of sexual politics and the corporeal account for this classed and gendered cultural disdain, while satire and parody, regarded as more 'cerebral' manifestations of humour, are held in higher esteem. This difference is revealing for the distinction operating between the postfeminist dramedy and the examined comedies. *30 Rock* and *Parks* assert a closer proximity to more prestigious categories of comedy, embedded in a heritage of masculine-coded modes of expression. The notion of a 'feminine' or women's comedy is historically represented in the romantic comedy framework (Rowe Karlyn 1995a); further, gender-centred, or even 'feminist', satire and parody has no established history in cinema or TV (bar for the 1970s female-centred sitcom which displays some of these characteristics but

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<sup>17</sup> See 'Sex and the City', *IMDb*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159206/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0159206/?ref_=nv_sr_1); 'Sex and the City', *Wikipedia*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex\\_and\\_the\\_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sex_and_the_City); '30 Rock', *IMDb*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0496424/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0496424/?ref_=nv_sr_1); '30 Rock', *Wikipedia*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/30\\_Rock](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/30_Rock); 'Parks and Recreation', *IMDb*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1266020/?ref\\_=nv\\_sr\\_1](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1266020/?ref_=nv_sr_1); 'Parks and Recreation', *Wikipedia*, accessed 25 July 2016, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parks\\_and\\_Recreation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parks_and_Recreation).

this does not affect its generic labelling). Unsurprisingly, analytical overviews of comedy pay little attention to the issue of political comedy from a gender perspective (and other issues of political representation). Rather, questions of gender and representation usually form a separate entry or chapter, divorced from the genre's other features (King 2002, Clayton 2007, Dale 2000). The two examined comedies' positioning in the realms of satire and parody *of gender relationships*, and their discursive categorisation as quality TV on this basis lays bare the lack of such a relationship in comedy history.<sup>18</sup>

While the comedies in focus 'earn' their quality moniker via an appeal to more prestigious modes of comedy, they at the same time divorce themselves from the heritage of romantic comedy as the established platform on which progressive gender representations tend to be expressed (Rowe 1995a). In Rowe's concept, the commonplace notion that tragedy is a masculine form and (romantic) comedy is where women's stories are mostly told, speaks to the cultural value allocated to female transgression. If the notion of the 'heroic woman' is an impossible sign in tragedy, her story is best fit within the boundaries of heterosexual love, motherhood, and loneliness, i.e. in the domestic/private sphere, and confined to the romance narrative (ibid., 42). Contrasted with this concept, *30 Rock* and *Parks* enact a gender inversion by their premise which neglects the romance framework, and relies on the heritage of comedian comedy by putting a female comedy persona in the centre of action, itself taking place in the public-professional sphere.

The concept of comedian comedy (Seidman 1981) as a prominent subcategory of Hollywood comedy has become widely used in comedy theory. The central persona in comedian comedy is an 'anomalous and

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<sup>18</sup> Female-centred satires of gender have since become popular on American television, with programmes like *Broad City*, *Inside Amy Schumer* (2013-), or *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*.

privileged figure' (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 105), in conflict with the 'real' world by continually breaking its rules and stepping outside its boundaries. His disruptive nature provides fodder for comedy but is also contained via the narrative conflict's resolution. As such, comedian comedy offers itself for an ideological reading in which 'cultural oppositions are at stake – non-conformity, eccentricity, sexual difference, the lack of fit between individual characteristics and desires and institutional norms and requirements' (ibid., 106-107). Neale and Krutnik also observe that comedian comedies of sexual difference exist in romantic comedy's narrative framework; here the comedian's performance does not feature with such prominence as in classic, male-led comedian comedies. King (2002) similarly notes that there is a tension between comic performance and narrative in comedian comedy, and the integration of the two accentuates the former: '[t]he comedian is taken into a fictional universe; or, rather, a fictional universe is built around the comedian' (ibid., 33) to accommodate his specific skills. Rowe emphasises that comedian comedy is inherently male-centred in that female performers are missing from its historic canon, which has much to do with the form's centralisation of comic performance and comic body at the expense of narrative (1995a, 45-46). Thus, the two analysed comedies' reliance on their star performers' comedian comedy in the workplace sitcom and satire frameworks, while not unprecedented, is an anomaly in the canon. Its importance for negotiating gender in comedy can be unpacked further in light of the *postfeminist* romantic comedy's ideological work.

If romantic comedy is the main vehicle via which popular culture negotiates gender inversions, this also implies that it is the main channel through which feminist concepts are inserted into popular narratives. Put bluntly, popular feminism 'happens' mainly via the romantic comedy. Theorists of the postfeminist romantic comedy stress that

while the genre continues to be the prominent storytelling framework for negotiating feminism and sexual politics, postfeminism puts a conservative spin on its articulation. Bowler (2013), Negra (2004), and Tasker (2011) agree that the genre expresses a deep-seated ambivalence about changing gender scripts and feminism's role in this. For Tasker, aesthetic tools like an ironic and playful tone help 'enact a knowingness that ingeniously recommends conservative gender paths' (ibid., 70). Bowler's account shows that the open discussion of sexual subjectivity typical of post-millennial iterations of the genre betrays an underlying discomfort with female sexual agency (2013, 188). Negra's concept of the 'retreatist romcom' similarly demonstrates that postfeminism's ambivalence about feminism's cultural work is enacted in narratives which pit women's professional empowerment and personal (romantic) success against each other (2004). The contemporary romantic comedy is then still the battleground on which gender roles are being contested, but in contrast with Rowe's earlier concept, gender inversions and transgressive rearticulations of female agency give way to the rhetorical dualism of a 'dated' feminism and postfeminist logic as 'oppositional forces grappling with each other for authentication' (Bowler 2013, 187).

The 'feminist' quality comedy's rejection of the postfeminist romcom/dramedy format can be understood as rejecting a historic dependence on the narrative of heterosexual romance as carrier of gender politics. This departure is partly useful for ensuring a higher place in quality television's hierarchies for its novelty component, combining the female comedian's centrality and the satirical-parodistic mode. The fact that it still carries the centralisation of gender politics is crucial to its critical evaluations. Both comedies are concerned with emphasising the female point-of-view and the ideological struggle between feminism and postfeminism in their narratives, while operating

in the hybrid genres of ensemble workplace comedy, mockumentary, comedian comedy, and political satire. This also means that the shift towards historically more prestigious and male-coded forms of comedy does not presuppose its 'masculinisation' where the presumed gender inversion fulfils the requirement of symbolic progression. The centralisation of *politically motivated* themes around gender within these generic frameworks results in simultaneously re-positioning gender politics' cultural relevance, including the postfeminism-feminism dualism, from the domestic and intimate arena towards the public and politicised.

These two comedies strive to elevate the position of gender politics and feminism in the hierarchy of television's popular genres and thus in cultural consciousness. That this attempt requires a simultaneous criticism and ridiculing of earlier, established forms of dramatising gender politics highlights the very precarious position of this discourse in popular media. The balancing of the plot and various aesthetic methods ensuring they are not read as romance but rather as self-conscious distancing throws the supposed feminist intent somewhat into question – the distancing can be interpreted as a lampooning of and hostility towards a specifically feminine-coded tradition of popular entertainment, namely romantic comedy and postfeminist TV dramedy.

### **1.A 30 Rock**

That this programme aspires to be a platform for a self-conscious discussion of gender politics operating in American society and specifically in show business, becomes evident from the pilot episode. The pilot also acknowledges the show's own stake in breaking away from associations with the derided traditions of feminine entertainment. The show-within-the-show premise as narrative device

allows for this transparent self-referentiality, which *30 Rock* turns into a license for multithreaded cultural criticism. In one of the first scenes of the pilot, Kenneth the NBC page describes the fictional variety show called *The Girlie Show* as ‘a real laydees’ show for laydees’ to visitors on the NBC studio tour, and thus to the TV audience. In this moment, Liz Lemon steps out of the lift in front of the group, and Kenneth proudly presents her as the show’s head writer. Cut to an unimpressed kid releasing a loud burp (‘Pilot’). That network television generally, but especially female-targeted programming, is by definition the opposite of prestigious is repeatedly articulated throughout the series. In a subsequent scene, the newly-appointed NBC executive Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) analyses the show’s ratings in this vein to an indignant Liz, but now translating the gendered derision into demographic terms: according to a report, the show’s current stars are ‘popular with women and older gays (...) but you’re missing men between 18 and 49’. Liz’s response: ‘I’m not *missing* them, they’re just not there’. Jack’s insistence that this is something to be fixed is questioned by a sarcastic Liz: ‘So your job is, you take things that are already working and you fix them’. Television’s cultural position as source of feminine pleasures needs fixing in the quality era, and the show’s commentary on the gendered tensions of this process works as acknowledgement of its own establishment of the quality moniker. Donaghy’s energetic entrance into his own office (kicking down a door), upsetting with his hypermasculinity the equilibrium of a hitherto well-functioning feminine space, can be juxtaposed with the programme’s own production history. Baldwin’s attachment to the project, and his celebrity persona as established film actor with a difficult personality, contributed to NBC picking up *30 Rock*, and Fey often stresses how vital his presence was for the series’ survival (e.g. Fey 2011, 172). Indeed, over the years, Baldwin’s occasional announcements of leaving the production were

followed by TV critics' assertions that his presence or absence was closely tied the fate of the already ratings-challenged programme (Carter 2011, Crider n/d). Its male star's dominant masculinity profoundly impacts both the fiction and the show's political economy itself, underpinning *30 Rock's* status in the quality brand. But if the establishment of quality status requires a certain degree of masculinisation in the television business, then *30 Rock* does it by making this condition its storytelling premise, presented as a central and contentious issue.

Another factor in *30 Rock's* assessment by TV critics as prestige comedy is its self-referential cultural commentary, in itself hardly a novelty in television. The historic connection with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* that both the text and critics confirm is based partly on that earlier series' similarly self-referential nature, combined with the narrative premise that centralises a single working woman in a television programme's production team. Self-referentiality and intertextuality played a crucial role in the quality category's design in the 1970s, established when MTM pioneered its new type of sitcom (Feuer 1984a, Thompson 1997). Thompson describes this aptitude for intertextuality as the 'quality factory' MTM's signature tool to assert the artistic superiority of the company's programmes (ibid., 82-83). Following an itemisation of the web of elaborate intertextual references in the hospital drama *St. Elsewhere* (1982-88), Thompson explains their function as a way to secure the aesthetic legitimacy of television culture and history (ibid., 89). Feuer similarly describes cultural legitimation via postmodern self-consciousness as part and parcel of MTM's quality brand. She argues that beyond legitimation, this tool can also fulfil deconstructive purposes to critique the medium's genres and styles (1984, 44); a method whose potential subversion is dubious considering

that for its target audiences 'presumably it's OK (...) to hate TV' anyway (ibid., 50).

In these accounts then, broadcast quality TV's self-referential history has a double-edged function: it is used to assert the exceptionality of the given programme while at the same time insisting that there exists a television tradition competing with more prestigious art forms, and the viewer is rewarded for (and by) recognising this history; in short, for being 'teleliterate' (Bianculli 2000). Teleliteracy then claims a cultural presence and is awarded a certain prestige. It is important to note that both Feuer and Thompson describe this feature of the 1970s-1980s quality programme as initially used only for reinforcing audiences' recognition of television as potentially 'smart' art form; intertextuality was not yet used for political satire and overt institutional criticism, since TV was still busy establishing its higher position in culture. According to Feuer, it happened only sporadically, in programmes like *Buffalo Bill* (1983-1984), that this style was taken beyond mere self-referentiality to satirise television as an institution (1984, 52-53), developed further in cable programming such as *The Larry Sanders Show* (1992-1998) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Further, Thompson describes early MTM programmes' formula of parody and self-mockery as pitting the protagonist's (like Mary Richards) competence and powerlessness against the institutional environment's incompetence (1997, 50). In contrast, *30 Rock's* and many other contemporary TV comedies' satire depicts the central character as *not* more competent than those surrounding her. While, as Feuer asserts, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* lacks real satirical bite because this would clash with its aspiration to present an overall sympathetic central character (1984, 43-44), *30 Rock* uses Liz Lemon for cultural criticism and satire just as much as any others around her.

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* exhibits a split between 'warmedy' and political satire as two irreconcilable styles, which has to do with its foregrounded gender politics. Feuer theorises character comedy as the method that carries the (for its time) progressive feminist message by depicting an independent, smart, professional woman exhibiting depth of character (which elicits in the audience 'empathetic laughter' [ibid., 37]). For Bathrick (1984), this format pushes politics into the background to defend the primacy of individual characters as the basis for comedy. The mockery of television does not affect this characterisation, and is separated from the former theme: Mary Richards is not responsible for the awfulness of the news show, and has an uninfluential job at the TV station. In contrast, *30 Rock's* treatment of network television as low art form is connected to its gendered nature and to the female protagonist's middle-management position as head writer, all working towards an overarching political satire. Intertextual satire as a tool ensuring the series' quality status presumes the gendering of this feature; quality aesthetics (intertextuality, satire, and parody) and the protagonist's gendered subjectivity (as creative labourer, avid consumer of mediocre television, and single woman) mutually reinforce each other.

The difference between the blueprint series and the successor is further underlined by their disparate gendering of workplace comedy: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* transplants domestic sitcom's gender politics by presenting the television studio as a masculine workplace which becomes feminised and familial via Mary's nurturing, accessible presence (Bathrick 1984, 105). *30 Rock's* pilot presents broadcast television as a medium serving feminine pleasures, whose balance becomes brutally disturbed by alpha male Jack's entrance and his insistence upon adding the black movie star Tracy Jordan to the cast of *The Girlie Show*, and to rename it *TGS with Tracy Jordan*. The

raunchiness of Tracy's comedy act is intended to complete the fictional sketch show and the workplace family with a raced masculinity. In a further difference with Mary Richards, while Lemon's role in the ensemble dynamic is that of the 'workplace mother', this is not an implicitly acted out ideological characteristic (to be noticed by media scholars) but an established trope of ensemble television to be openly mocked by the text, and thus informing the satire. For instance, in the episode 'Khonani', Liz gets upset with her staff upon noticing that they exclude her from their social activities; the conflict resolution comes when one of them explains to her: 'If this is a family, that makes you the mom; and you don't wanna go out drinking with your mom.'

It is now a truism surrounding the series' production history and its assessments that Fey conceived it with the intent to explore issues of gender, race, and class. The comic premise stems from the social positions of the main protagonists' triumvirate: conservative businessman Jack Donaghy, comedy writer Liz Lemon, and black 'rags-to-riches' comedy star Tracy Jordan. As Fey writes in her memoir *Bossypants*, this setup allows for showcasing their ideological differences 'about any topic that came up — race, gender, politics, workplace ethics, money, sex, women's basketball — and they would agree and disagree in endless combinations' (2011, 170–71). In other words, the narrative tensions providing the programme's episodic conceit are grounded in an 'issue-based' premise. Fey also often states that the series' social satire aims to show a multiplicity of perspectives, where Liz's centrality, representing middle-class white femininity and feminism, is balanced out with other points of view (Anon. 2007).<sup>19</sup> This evokes discourses of contemporary feminism around intersectionality which associate popular feminism with privileged womanhood; but the

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<sup>19</sup> Fey has also stated publicly the Norman Lear sitcom's ideological influence on her comedy's 'issue'-based approach and on its preference for contrasting a variety of character perspectives (*Tina Fey Receives 2016 Lew Klein Excellence in the Media Award 2016*).

addressing of a variety of points of view also fits with broadcast television's imperative to cater for a wide selection of audience tastes and subjectivities. This is a typical feature of network 'quality' television, which utilises this economic necessity to promote political correctness by subjecting a moral issue in individual episodes to a variety of discussions (Thompson 1997, 171–72). *30 Rock* links the multiple-points-of-view feature to popular feminist politics, which informs the quality moniker in overdetermined ways: these include the centralisation of female subjectivity, the text's frequent dramatisations of gender issues, Fey's star text as cerebral feminist and first female head writer on *Saturday Night Live (SNL, 1975-)*, and, connected to this, a heavily promoted 'female authorship' discourse. Even though the multiple perspectives are filtered through the same parodic and satirical aesthetic, the comedy of Liz Lemon's 'failed femininity' and feminism (Mizejewski 2014, 26) exists in a *primus inter pares* position to other perspectives, and facilitates the narrative.

The promotion of 'female authorship' is a feature that further establishes the series' quality credentials on at least two levels. First, in media discourses it accounts for its exceptional nature; as such, it speaks to the quality TV brand's requirement of novelty which here is achieved by the 'author's gender. Second, this 'femininity' affects the series' position in the history of female-led comedy: while *30 Rock* fashions its relationship to network-era feminist sitcom as a reverent one, it expresses critical commentary on the postfeminist dramedy and its reliance on romance narrative with the help of the 'female authorship' context.

In the first instance, both Fey and media discourses contribute to *30 Rock's* dominant understanding as stemming mostly from its singular creator's mind. While also emphasising in *Bossypants* the contributions of other writers and showrunner Robert Carlock, Fey often refers to the

series as her 'baby', a phrase providing a juxtaposition between motherhood and creative labour, and sending up an array of jokes and puns. For example, her account of *30 Rock*'s production history runs parallel with that of her first daughter's birth: 'In September, my daughter was born. (For the record: epidural, vaginal delivery, did not poop on the table.)' (2011, 172) Several pages later: 'In March, the first season of *30 Rock* was complete. (For the record: no epidural, group vaginal delivery, did not poop on the table.)' (ibid. 194) Motherhood and childrearing are the primary metaphors to relate the experience of being a television producer, and even to link this to network quality television's reputation as sophisticated but unrecognised entertainment in an affectionate tone:

*30 Rock* is the perfect symbol for the pro-life movement in America. Here's this little show that no one thought would make it. (...) As the mother of this now five-year-old show, would I still rather have a big, strong *Two and a Half Men* than our sickly little program? No, I would not, because I love my weird little show. (Ibid., 194)

Similarly, the book dedicates a chapter to relating the story of a busy Saturday on which Fey juggled three major responsibilities: guest starring on *SNL*, filming a special scene of *30 Rock* with Oprah Winfrey, and organizing a birthday party for her daughter; and 'each of these events was equally important in my life' (ibid., 202). Thus, the authorship discourse so crucial for establishing the 'quality' reputation of TV programmes and which creates a paternalistic understanding around most art forms, becomes literally maternalised and thus privatised here, at the same time also feeding into Fey's star persona that itself negotiates a precarious balance between feminist and postfeminist understandings.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> I develop my argument around this negotiation in the next section. On Fey's gendered celebrity see Mizejewski (2014, 67-75), Lauzen (2014), and Patterson (2012). It is worth noting that Fey habitually discusses motherhood

Authorship discourse also informs *30 Rock's* relationship to its direct thematic predecessor (a genealogy stemming from the series' gender politics), the postfeminist dramedy. *Sex and the City* is a constant reference as legacy to be parodied, criticized, and overcome, a relationship that influences the whole tone of the series. The 'single career woman living in New York' premise sends up this connection from the outset. The parody works to ideological ends to reassert that this show is about the sexual-romantic explorations of its heroine only insofar as it refuses the expectations of that postfeminist premise. Often confirming in interviews that Liz is a parody of Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), Fey describes the major differences between the two characters as those between sex drives (*Nerdist with Tina Fey* 2012) and the relationship to work (Brown 2009). The latter helps shift the programme's genre towards the workplace comedy from domestic comedy, and the former affects its tone, highlighting the parodic and satirical rather than melodramatic. Both media discourses and Fey articulate this characterisation method as expressing a more 'realistic' kind of womanhood than that which the postfeminist heroine represents (*ibid.*, Griffin 2010). Here then, Lemon's disinterest in sexuality, her commitment to work, her obsession with food, and all other exaggerated characteristics providing the basis for comedy, also become points of identification (she is a 'role model'). Griffin contrasts Liz Lemon with Carrie in this vein: '[w]e wanted to be Carrie; Liz Lemon is who we feel like in comparison (...). We love her because she's one of us, but we love her even more because she's even grosser, weirder and more awkward than we are' (*ibid.*). The text offers up this distancing from 'fantasy' towards 'realism' quite openly at the outset: in a scene in the first season, Lemon, her friend Jenna (Jane Krakowski), and Jack's girlfriend Phoebe (Emily Mortimer) chat in a restaurant about

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(whether literal or authorly) in a sarcastic tone similar to this quote, betraying an effort to strip it from sanctimonious-idealised associations by highlighting its abject aspects.

boyfriends, and Jenna remarks: 'How *Sex and the City* are we? I'm Samantha, you [Phoebe] are Charlotte, and you [Liz] are the lady at home who watches it' ('Cleveland').

The satirical treatment of *Sex and the City* also moves *30 Rock's* genre towards comedian comedy, a feature becoming more prominent after the first season. Fey and showrunner Robert Carlock note in a panel discussion that they changed the series' tone after season one to this effect. During the discussion, Fey first evaluates the female characters' early features as 'too typical' of contemporaneous TV, and, tellingly, as a 'waste of Jane [Krakowski's] talents' as a *comedian* with a knack for the absurd. Referring to a scene in the season one episode 'The Baby Show' in which Liz and Jenna talk over a cake about 'boys 'n stuff', Carlock disparagingly comments that the realistically filmed and joke-free scene is 'boring and this is not our show, and not what these characters should be doing' – at least evaluated from the perspective of the ultimately absurd and cartoonesque style of *30 Rock* (Tina Fey on Paley Center 2013).

Indeed, while themes and storylines typical of the postfeminist dramedy about single women permeate Lemon's narrative, this becomes a trope to be parodied, in the process aligning it more with comedian comedy. If the comedian comedy's ideological importance is 'a celebration of the individual in opposition to restrictive social or collective institutions' (King 2002, 42) by centralising an every(wo)man character not fitting into the boundaries of these institutions, then Lemon's shifting positioning as comic heroine in a multiplicity of narratives reinforces this ideological work both inside and outside of the text. The ideological-generic convention opposed in this setup is the postfeminist romance narrative's dominance for female comedians. The flexibility of comic actions and plots in which Lemon is variously a straight (wo)man, a buffoon, a comic foil etc. helps maintain comedian comedy's integration

between narrative and comedian: the fictional universe is built around the comedian and not the other way around (i.e. the comic actress is not integrated into a romance narrative), and Fey's comic skills are mined for laughs as motivators of plot. One aspect of this is the romantic heroine's, and her narratives', ridicule, and the parody integrates the two (comic performance and romcom conventions) in Lemon's figure.

Such ridiculing is best exemplified by the episode 'Stride of Pride', whose Lemon plot is based on a *Sex and the City* parody. Following a recent 'sexual awakening', she unsuccessfully tries to find some women at work to have brunch with *Sex and the City* style, i.e. by discussing their sex life over cocktails. The last scene is an explicit reference to the style and tone of the earlier series. In a setup atypical of *30 Rock*'s usual imagery and tone, Lemon is reclining on her bed with a prettified hairdo and wearing a pink tutu *à la* Carrie Bradshaw (Figure 4.1), typing into her MacBook the moral and emotional lesson of the episode for each storyline. The image of the computer screen fills the TV screen, while we also hear Lemon's uncharacteristically high-pitched voiceover as she is writing down her musings about interpersonal relationships in the style of Carrie's tortuous closed-ended questions. At the end of the long monologue she concludes: 'I guess what I'm saying is... I need to modify my Zappos order so please email me back at your earliest convenience.' Having finished typing, she closes the computer, falls off the bed with a thud, and the episode ends (Figure 4.2).



Figures 4.1 and 4.2

The episode parodies the postfeminist dramedy's trope of offering observations about gender relations via protagonist voiceover that pulls each storyline into one generalised life lesson. This also entails mimicking and making fun of *Sex and the City's* configuration of fictional female (feminised) authorship as privileged site of status in the romance genre. The female comedian is central to the parody in that it is structured around her comic performance. This centrality also dialogues with the episode's other storyline in which Tracy questions the funniness of female comedians, claiming that even a monkey in a suit is funnier than any woman. When Lemon and Jenna get back at him by performing a sketch to great success, we only see a montage of this (so whether the sketch is funny or not is beside the point) accompanied by an extradiegetic song with the following lyrics: 'This sketch is hilarious

take it from me/ Women are funny we can all agree:/ Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball –/ No, we're not gonna do it, it's beneath us all/ 'Cause we don't need to prove it to you'. While *30 Rock* makes great efforts to show that the comedy Fey performs is multifaceted (and 'we don't need to prove it to you'), it also has high stakes in a frequent evocative distancing from the melodramatically inclined postfeminist romance which relies less on comedian comedy and more on a conflict/closure-oriented romance narrative. In short, it aspires to prove that its heroine is funny by positing what she is *not*: a postfeminist romance heroine.

Authorship discourse feeds heavily into this shift from romance narrative towards comedian comedy; Fey tends to emphasise her inclination towards physical comedy in terms that speak to the binary categorisations of female comedians on the pretty versus funny axis (Mizejewski 2014). In interviews, she expresses this as a disinterest in filming romantic or sex scenes: to an interviewer's suggestion that Lemon is the female Homer Simpson she replies that a lot of criticism about the comic exaggerations of the character concerns Lemon's unease with sex, on which she comments: 'I wanted to write her that way because I didn't want to film those scenes. I wanted to be able to have a show where I didn't have to be cute and I didn't have to sit on top of anyone in a bra – that was important to me as a writer-performer. I liked it because it was not something I had seen before that' (*Nerdist with Tina Fey* 2012, see also Baldwin 2015). In short, comedian comedy overtakes *30 Rock* due to its central comedian's gendered authorship and influence. In this discourse, the series' universe is bent towards the preferences of its author-star who recognises that as female comedy performer, her options to do comedy are closely tied to the traditions of the postfeminist romance that centralises women as sexual subjects, but opts to steer away from its narratives and aesthetics by parodying them.

*30 Rock*'s generic establishment as quality comedy then relies heavily on postfeminist dramedy's parodic and satirical treatment, connected to the discourse of gendered authorship around its comic star. As Mizejewski writes, '[a]s a metafiction, television about television, *30 Rock* is especially self-conscious about media representations of women', which become central to '[t]he intense and unusual referentiality' of the series (2014, 67). The precise ways in which parody and/or satire are used have implications for the series' cultural work as ideological criticism, and thus it is important to examine to what extent *30 Rock* can be evaluated as a text expressing *critique* about the generic predecessor. King (2002) pinpoints the difference between parody and satire as a difference in targets. Parody tends to target aesthetic or formal conventions (ibid., 107-109), undermining these conventions but also 'pay[ing] an effective form of tribute to the originals', since 'to become a target of parody is to have achieved a certain status' (ibid., 112), namely the status of being culturally relevant. In these terms, *30 Rock*'s treatment of *Sex and the City* can be seen on a par with its treatment of other cinema and television texts. The series lampoons a wide array of media products, where the parody works not just as comic referencing of styles and aesthetics but as a template for plotting; i.e. the conflicts and resolutions are taken from the source text but incorporated into a different cultural setting, and the comedy stems from this discrepancy. Throughout its run, the programme worked films, series, and high cultural texts both obscure and popular into its narrative fabric, such as *Amadeus* (1985), *Mamma Mia!* (2008), *Harry and the Hendersons* (1987), *Night Court* (1984-1992), *Friends* (1994-2004), *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (1971), *The Dark Knight* (2008), or *Macbeth*. These references work similarly to *St. Elsewhere*'s intertextuality per Thompson's discussion: the quality TV text establishes its knowingness and positions itself in popular media history,

although *30 Rock*'s usage of these sources extends name-dropping via instances of complete repurposing of plot (e.g. the episode 'Succession's narrative recycles and parodies the plot of *Amadeus*). This type of transparency then speaks to the series' intent to pay playful homage, and its aim stays at that level; style and narrative are re-appropriated as reassurance that *30 Rock* knows its media history and inserts itself into it. In this feature it is similar to a number of other earlier and contemporaneous programmes, such as *Community* (2009-2015).

If satire is 'a form of comedy that also widens the scope for social/political criticism' (King 2002, 94), then satire is not aspired to in these homages. Satire as the aesthetic expression of criticism of social-political circumstances does however exist on *30 Rock* in relation to a wide variety of issues, most prominently relating to feminism, postfeminism, race relations, sexism, corporate capitalism, nation, show business, and so on. However, it is mainly in the case of postfeminist dramedy where the series uses parody and satire as an effective mixture, corresponding to King's concept. Overarching aesthetic parody is here used for political ends, i.e. to satirise the fiction of postfeminist womanhood. In other words, the fiction mobilises satire here through the parody of a specific televisual form, which speaks to the targeted notion's (postfeminist femininity's) rootedness in media fiction. In its ultimate purpose, it achieves specific ideological parody-satire as the grounds on which to articulate the female protagonist's comic persona.

The other instance where a similar mixture of parody and satire is prominent is the treatment of broadcast television as low cultural entertainment; in particular, *30 Rock* is renowned for its invention of fictional programmes that ridicule and criticise broadcast TV's political economy and aesthetics. Some of these shows are only mentioned throughout the series, others are also shown in brief scenes or even provide the premise of whole storylines; a selection of them includes

reality shows, game shows, and scripted series such as *MILF Island*, *Queen of Jordan*, *Are You Smarter than a Dog*, *America's Kidz Got Singing* and *Bitch Hunter*, or the female-targeted Lifetime TV movies titled *A Dog Took My Face and Gave Me a Better Face to Change the World: The Celeste Cunningham Story* and *Kidnapped by Danger: The Avery Jessup Story*. The fact that precisely these two areas, postfeminist womanhood and broadcast television, provide the primary basis for simultaneous parody *and* satire speaks to the overdetermined connection between them: the heroine's establishment as comic figure and the female comedy performer's establishment as 'author' of her comedy hinges on their ideological distancing from a gendered media tradition, just as network quality television's configuration hinges on a critical distancing from its immediate surroundings. Gender politics (feminism) and the recognition as quality television are inseparable stakes of representation for *30 Rock*, ultimately determining the programme's tone and genre.

### **1.B *Parks and Recreation***

Critical reception established a comparative/competitive relationship between *Parks* and *30 Rock* throughout their runs due to the shared career background of their central female stars as *SNL* alumni, and various other factors related to the series' genres and gender politics. While this discursive connection is an important referent for my own analysis as well, first I want to engage with a similarity that has *not* been a centre of critical focus but is an appropriate starting point to unpack *Parks'* reputation as quality comedy. This concerns an aspect of the series' production history, namely its tonal 'rebooting' between seasons one and two. This, like *30 Rock's*, was reportedly the production team's conscious effort to course-correct in establishing the show's character

(Baysinger 2015). In *30 Rock's* case, the change of tone and pace during the first two seasons was a strategic choice to shake off the air of postfeminist romance in order to develop a comedy foregrounding absurdist satire, thus elevating its reputation. *Parks* also underwent such a change, and its transformation is similarly to do with the relationship between generic conventions and gendered assumptions, with contextually different results. This is rooted in its specific production background: the series had from its conception struggled with the dubious reputation of being a spin-off of the American version of the British mockumentary *The Office* (2001-2003), and protagonist Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) being little more than a female Michael Scott (Steve Carrell), the American *Office's* central character. Consequently, the production team was concerned to find a way out of the predecessor's shadow.

*Variety* critic Brian Lowry's dismissive review of the first season (2009) is instructive of the way in which the programme was seen as problematically aping the *Office* template, and offers insight into which aspects appeared to be in need of revision. For Lowry, not only does the first season 'feel(...) like that established program in drag' (ibid.), it also fails to use the mockumentary format to express something original, which in his suggestion would be achieved by adding some 'political bite' (ibid.). The main reasons for *Parks'* failure as quality comedy are grounded here in two aspects: first, it does not use the mockumentary format for political satire and commentary to a required extent (i.e. to make it unique and different from *The Office*), and second, it does not make us 'care about Leslie's quest' (ibid.). These two criticisms are fundamentally interconnected for Lowry, suggesting that a 'feminised' version of *The Office*, being solely a vehicle for Amy Poehler's comic persona, does not carry enough cultural value in itself, and the way to

remedy it is by amping up the 'political commentary' aspect. The show's second season reboot took care of precisely these two perceived issues.

These two aspects are also the elements of the series that later became attributed to its ground-breaking and 'smart' nature ('TV's smartest comedy' according to *Entertainment Weekly* [Frucci 2011]). They also account for its cross-sectional position in media commentary that frequently uses *The Office* and *30 Rock* as immediate cultural references/templates for *Parks*. In the following I examine how the amalgamation of these two factors, i.e. the mockumentary tradition as political commentary and the female protagonist's character comedy were adapted to establish the series' 'quality' descriptor, resulting in a 'comedy of super niceness' (Paskin 2011) that incorporates popular feminist political satire.

The mockumentary or comedy *vérité* (Mills 2004) tradition as generic reference had determined the series' cultural position as embedded in the 'quality comedy' discourse from its inception; additionally, it was co-produced by Greg Daniels, creator of the American *Office*. These factors explain the imperative to remove the 'copycat' label from its reputation and to find the novelty element in its concept. Academic literature on mockumentary's cultural work shows that the hybridisation of documentary and fictional forms in post-network TV is a representative example of attempts to reconfigure the sitcom tradition and create a 'comedy of distinction'. For Mills (2004), this mixture of the serious (documentary) and comic (fiction) aims to shake off the stigma of TV comedy as being 'mere entertainment', and the British comedy *vérité* does this by reengaging with television's 'active social role (...) which sitcom has traditionally been criticized for abandoning' (ibid., 78). The British *Office* and other mockumentaries use the documentary form for comic intent, in which the humour stems from exposing the self-deception and inauthenticity of the camera's objects (ibid., 74). The

question of veracity, or rather of the (im)possibility of capturing the 'truth', is at the core of mockumentary discourse, and for its analysts like Mills, Hight (2010), or Middleton (2014), this function provides the possibility of social satire designed to elevate it above the level of 'average' comedy. Hight and Middleton both engage in a comparative analysis of the British original and the American remake of *The Office* as blueprints for the form's popularisation. They highlight that the Americanisation involved a 'toning down of the satirical bite of the original' (Hight 2010, 284) via 'an affectively charged representation of the workplace as a space of individual and interpersonal happiness and fulfilment' (Middleton 2014, 142). Middleton shows how the British original's aesthetics expose the corporate work environment's 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) in the everyman character Tim (Martin Freeman) and his forever deterred fulfilment of fantasies of a better life (Middleton 2014, 147-148). The series for Middleton is a satire of the post-Fordist white collar work experience, and, as paradigm of 'cringe comedy', it uses the faux documentary setup (the blurring between 'real' and 'unreal') to create an increasing discomfort in the viewer: '[w]e cringe in part because of the feeling that there is nothing we can look away to' (ibid., 147, italics in original).

*The Office's* cultural value is then dependant on its satire of 21<sup>st</sup> century Western societies' labour relations, conveyed through a comedy of awkwardness that in its bleak world view and gritty realism is often hard to experience as comedy – Middleton quotes Berlant who calls the series a 'situation tragedy' (ibid., 154). Middleton sees this defining 'cringe' aspect of the British *Office* as its aesthetic and ideological strength, especially in comparison with the American version. For him, the remake and Michael Scott's 'psychologically developed' (ibid., 156) character that becomes more and more sympathetic, 'alters the effects of the British version' to 'defuse the awkwardness and mediate the

show's critical potential with conventional forms of narrative pleasure and viewer identification with characters' (ibid., 160).

Hight further develops the evaluation of mockumentary's satirical potential via his analysis of HBO's *The Comeback* (2005-), seen as another pinnacle of self-reflexive and satirical mockumentaries (Hight 2010, 274-278). This series for him does to the world of show business, celebrity culture, and popular television formats (the sitcom and the reality show) what the British *Office* does to the corporate work environment. The mockumentary's use lays bare the uncomfortable discrepancies between the individual's performance of identity in social spaces and the petty desperation these performances conceal. The embarrassing and humiliating situations into which David Brent (Ricky Gervais) and Valerie Cherish (Lisa Kudrow), central characters of *The Office* and *The Comeback* respectively, get themselves, serve as scathing critiques of the social environment. *The Comeback* however expresses this perhaps even more brutally, since it frequently configures the exposure of Valerie's indignity as *gendered* victimhood in Hollywood show business – an aspect with which Hight does not engage. While Brent is exposed as the ultimate workplace bully (against whom Tim is offered as relatable point of identification), Cherish is the *victim* of the TV industry's systemic bullying, a situation for which she is partially responsible as an aging sitcom actress with delusional hopes of a successful comeback. The 'cringe', i.e. the viewer's urge to look away, comes from slightly different impulses: in Brent's case, it is our discomfort with having to follow around this horrible man, an affect reinforced by supporting characters' frequent side glances at the camera, establishing this muted mode of sympathetic connection with the viewer (Mills 2004, 69; Middleton 2014, 150). No such methods are evident in *The Comeback*, the viewer is left alone with her unease and without a sympathetic reference figure to connect with; and this results

in Cherish's even deeper isolation – both within the diegesis and between viewer and text – as debased casualty of the Hollywood machinery.

Hight notes that *The Comeback* was a flop for HBO, never garnering a solid audience base during its initial run, and he attributes this to its relatively rare format in American sitcom conventions (2010, 278). While this may account partly for its failure, this in itself is hardly a convincing explanation, since at the time of its broadcast, there had been many other 'experimental' – and economically viable – formats and aesthetics prominent in the quality TV discourse. I contend that the series' treatment of the *female* protagonist within the mockumentary format explains much of its initial obscurity. A programme whose cultural work lies in laying bare the repeated and specifically gendered humiliations of its central female star without even a hint of retaliation, let alone any affective connection to the viewer, was not a welcome sight, even in the name of acerbic cultural criticism, for prestige television in the mid-2000s – a time when female-centred programming operated by and large under the imperative of postfeminist empowerment rhetoric.<sup>21</sup>

The examination of the mockumentary context via these series returns me to my point that *Parks'* second season reboot was determined by factors that lie in a cross-section of American modes of representing identity in the mockumentary sitcom format on the one hand, and the expectations of representing *female* identity on the other. Middleton's and Hight's implied critique of the American *Office* for its relative lack of social criticism – turning the story into a sentimental one about the workplace family – while acknowledging cultural differences, omits to consider the American workplace sitcom tradition into which the British

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<sup>21</sup> With the popularisation of female-centred comedy, this trend has somewhat turned around in the 2010s with series like *Veep*; HBO's recommissioning of a second season of *The Comeback* in 2014 speaks to this cultural shift.

series was transplanted. This tradition, which *The Office* was concerned to update, has specific female-centred origins. The American *Office's* novelty aspect was precisely the 'sharpening up' of *this* heritage, and in this context, the mockumentary aesthetics do help the programme appear more critical of workplace relations than previous fare by exposing the male boss as a slightly racist/sexist buffoon. Leslie Knope's presentation in *Parks'* first season follows a similar path, exposing the middle-management boss as delusional, bureaucratic, racist, and inappropriately enthusiastic about her work in local government.<sup>22</sup> However, this female protagonist's characterisation also evokes *The Comeback's* humiliation techniques in that it has a specifically gendered edge, where Leslie's failures as civil servant are interconnected with her failures as single career woman.

If the male boss's (however slightly) critical characterisation via the mockumentary format ensures the American *Office's* novelty, that template's feminisation was seen as a problematic way to establish *Parks'* prestige. Crucially, this was not only because the embarrassment narratives follow the *Office* template too closely in season one but also because this method sits uncomfortably with female-centred media texts' aspirational rhetoric. The first season's humour lies primarily in contrasting Leslie's aspirationalism about public service against the grim reality, and works to expose the ineffectiveness of public institutions via the ineffectiveness of Leslie's efforts. But this is achieved by humiliation techniques that target her character both in her professional position and in her private life: for instance, she has an imagined romantic history with cynical city planner Mark Brendanawicz (Paul Schneider), a character who inexplicably but tellingly disappeared after season two. This characterisation seems to deflect from the political commentary

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<sup>22</sup> In this perspective, the first season version of Leslie Knope is also more similar to *30 Rock's* portrayal of Liz Lemon, and to that comedy's cynical humour, than her post-reboot character.

aspect (see Lowry's lament about the lack of 'political bite'), a problem never really a reference point for the American *Office* for journalists. Dramatising 'bigger issues' became a priority only after the first season's critical failure: producer Dan Goor highlights that the programme's first real 'issue' storyline occurred precisely in the second season's first episode (Snierson 2013).

The *Office* template's feminisation then carries within itself the potential political critique's specific individualisation/privatisation – i.e. the story relies too heavily on the career woman's ridiculing –, which, as we have similarly seen in the case of *The Comeback*, was an ambiguous and unpopular characterisation technique for satirical comedy. The way to turn this around for the second season was to tap into popular feminist themes about women's struggles at the workplace, institutionalised sexism, female solidarity, and successful women as role models. The humour came now from contrasting Leslie's feminist aspirationalism, shifted from delusional to justified, with the political critique of American public institutions that inhibit her ambitions. This aspect soon became the ground on which to celebrate the series, witnessed in a number of glowing reviews (Escobedo Shepherd 2015, Trantham 2015, Ryan 2015). However, since the aspirational (or 'can-do') feminist discourse provides the social criticism's foundation in this new configuration, the series contradictorily ends up endorsing the effectivity of public institutions, accumulated in Leslie's career success. Nonetheless, this still accounts for the series' achievements for critics, at least in terms of quality if not ratings, implied for instance in Alan Sepinwall's (2015a) estimation written at the time of the final episode's broadcasting. This review is especially representative for its associations between the show's cultural value, political utopianism, and rhetoric of female empowerment as both professional achievement and successful maternity: starting out as 'delusional' in her political ambitions, Leslie

proved 'prophetic' in ending up as a 'super woman': 'an influential federal official (...), and as a wife and mom with a small army of adoring friends' (ibid.). Even the programme's economic struggle becomes a point of praise: 'the show's ability to last seven seasons despite middling-to-awful ratings is a Knope-ian feat in and of itself' (ibid.). Sepinwall concludes thus: '[i]n the end, it is one of the best comedies TV has ever seen, and one that stands out from so much [sic] of the great shows of this new Golden Age of Television because (...) its default philosophy was one of optimism at a time when even the best comedies today tend towards ironic detachment' (ibid.). His last point about the series' joyful tone connects feminist discourses (Leslie as superwoman and maternal figure) with its optimism or 'super niceness' (Paskin 2011), configuring 'optimism' as feminist virtue that elevates *Parks'* cultural value.

Sepinwall's celebration also illuminates a prominent difference of the series from mockumentary's earlier iterations: while Lowry lamented the missed opportunity to use mockumentary for real political critique, the praise here, and virtually all other accounts, barely ever mentions mockumentary as reference point for the show's quality, or if they do so, it is in a dismissive tone. The 'cruel's disappearance from the series' 'optimism' becomes its virtue because it is replaced by a rhetoric of female empowerment, carrying with itself its own mode of social commentary. The mockumentary discourse's significance became concomitantly muted throughout *Parks'* run, including the format's working mechanism as highlighting character critique and, through it, critique of institutions and social-cultural conditions. Mockumentary tradition becomes here a remnant of the series' rootedness in the quality discourse, a generic-aesthetic signifier of cultural value. Specifically, it becomes adapted for the utopian optimism that

permeates *Parks'* world, originating in the comic heroine's feminist aspirationalism and transforming the whole fictional universe.

Consider a scene in the pilot episode, in which Leslie shoos off a homeless man (Jon Daly) of a playground slide. The mockumentary format is used here to mock Leslie's work ethic as pointless effort to change things in small-town America via a bureaucratic approach. Producer Mike Schur mentions in an interview that the series' finale gives us an easy-to-miss glimpse into how that man's life turned out later: when Leslie and the gang are asked to do one last Parks and Recreation job to get a broken playground swing fixed, the well-dressed ordinary citizen making this request is played by the same actor as the homeless man in the pilot ('One Last Ride'). Schur underlines this twist's significance: 'I liked the (tacit) implication that somehow Leslie pushing a miserable drunk out of that slide in the cold light of morning was a low point for him, and that he cleaned himself up and turned his life around and was now a productive member of society. That's got a nice Dickensian flavor to it, I think' (Sepinwall 2015b).<sup>23</sup> While the mocking of public service, local politics, and small-town life and its inhabitants continue to be an important aspect of the series, this becomes framed in an affective mode reinforced by the utopian 'niceness' with which Leslie and her team are portrayed,<sup>24</sup> and is ultimately embedded in American political discourse around patriotic meritocracy. The *Entertainment Weekly* critic's celebratory review of the finale explicitly stresses this aspect: '[i]n Leslie Hope and ragtag band of proximity workplace acquaintances, we are left with a portrait of — to borrow

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<sup>23</sup> Such a use of narrative memory as symptomatic method of quality TV's serialisation practices, and Schur's use of the word 'Dickensian' (also frequently applied to cable dramas like *The Sopranos* [Newman and Levine 2012] and *The Wire* [Williams 2014]) provide further evidence for the efforts to position the series as quality TV. Thus, the two strands of rhetoric around aspirational feminism and quality TV converge in the homeless man's story on *Parks*.

<sup>24</sup> Although *Parks* still uses the 'cruel comedy' aspect in Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry's (Jim O'Heir) figure, hyperbolically focusing onto the cruelty with which the others handle him. This is however present, again, as remnant of the mockumentary tradition, here operating only within the diegesis, and carefully offset with Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry's happy private life and general bonhomie portrayed in an equally hyperbolic fashion. Further, the character's constant mockery serves to reinforce the 'niceness' of the rest of the narrative.

some words our president spoke shortly before *Parks* premiered — “a new spirit of patriotism, of responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves but each other” (Jensen 2015).

Thus, both the text and its reviews dismiss the connection between the mockumentary format and the political importance of ‘cringe comedy’. The series’ cultural work emerges as an optimism that is assigned significance in its perceived uniqueness in contemporary quality television. Paskin’s (2011) review especially sets up this contrast between ‘cringe’ comedy and *Parks*:

This comedy of discomfort, still in its most perfect form in the British version of *The Office*, is such a staple of the Thursday night sitcom experience (...) that when things start to go haywire on *Parks and Recreation*, sometimes we instinctively reach for a pillow, even though *Parks* no longer causes cringing. It has abandoned mining the uncomfortable for laughs, in order to explore the comedic potential of super nice people.

If deep down inside, under the endemic disgruntlement of *The Office* or endemic egomania of *30 Rock*, most sitcom characters are ‘good people,’ on *Parks* there's no deep down inside about it. (Ibid.)

Paskin’s praise, based on *Parks*’ difference from today’s quality comedies, is itself in contrast with academic literature’s positioning of the series, which evaluates it as on a par with its contemporaries. Newman and Levine (2012) assess the quality comedy, similar to Mills (2009), as discursively and textually moving away from the ‘conservative’ sitcom tradition, and classify *Parks* among the type of comedies that operate with this aesthetic and political dissociation (Newman and Levine 2012, 59-79). As noted, they consider the historical establishment of cultural hierarchies as influenced by a gendered progress narrative, i.e. as ‘a shift away from the feminized

past and toward a more masculinized future' (ibid., 11). In television comedy's case, this shift works between the old-fashioned, multi-camera soundstage sitcom and the new, cinematised single-camera comedy. The latter

is invested with value by differing from a past ideal of television, one associated with the period before convergence (...). By relegating this kind of show to the past, or to the realm of the juvenile, feminine, or *passé*, the culture of television's legitimation seeks a new identity for the medium. (Ibid., 79)

Since Newman and Levine mention both *Parks* and *30 Rock* as representative examples of this process of cultural legitimation, it would follow that the series and the discourses in which they are embedded, perform similar cultural work, including the aspect of 'de-feminisation'. However, I argue that these series' legitimation processes are fundamentally different from those other comedies of the convergence era that Newman and Levine cite, in that the distancing is entangled with a strategic association with the 1970s female-centred MTM sitcom. But while for *30 Rock* this is rooted primarily in the sarcastic evocation of some narrative elements and politics (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* as predecessor in its setting, narrative premise, and the career woman's centralisation), for *Parks* the connection is more ideological and involves matters of tone and characterisation.

Consider the generic descriptors by critics: 'comedy of niceness' (*Parks*) and 'warmedy' (the MTM sitcom). The latter means for Feuer (1984b) a foregrounding of empathetic character development for the 1970s 'independent woman' who struggles against the social conventions of her time. As discussed, the 'quality' of the MTM comedy needed a competitive contrast with contemporaneous sitcoms for its establishment, evident in the hierarchical evaluations of the Norman Lear and the MTM sitcom. Evoking a similar dichotomy, *Parks'* critical

evaluation often configures it as different from, and more progressive than, *30 Rock's*, as seen in the above quote from Paskin. This competitive differentiation – witnessed in a number of reviews – singles out *Parks* on the basis of its feminist optimism atypical of today's 'dark' quality comedy, and invokes the past, as in a later paragraph of Paskin's review: 'If championing good old fashion [sic] niceness makes *Parks* a throwback to a simpler sitcom era, it hasn't made it any less funny' (Paskin 2011). The remark displays a concern to praise the programme via an ambiguous negotiation of the past that works both as distancing and legitimation. The production team is similarly keen to emphasise this connection: Poehler's remark at a panel discussion that she sees Leslie and Ron's (Nick Offerman) relationship as akin to that of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* Mary Richards and Lou Grant (Friedlander 2014) is representative. The *Variety* article reporting the comment is titled '*Parks and Recreation's* Hidden Political Commentary', and refers to Poehler's and Mike Schur's comments about the character dynamic between Leslie and Ron as that between the mum and dad of the workplace family. As Schur puts this in political terms, 'when people want a dad they vote Republican and when they want a mum they vote Democrat' ('*Parks and Recreation*' - Amy Poehler and Michael Schur on Leslie and Ron 2014).

Ultimately then, it is *Parks*, and not the *American Office*, that can be considered the logical completion of the British *Office's* Americanisation, in that it becomes fitted into the female-centred workplace comedy tradition with its rhetoric of female empowerment. This involves a complete reversal of 'cruel' mockumentary's ideology, but the 'old-fashioned' – antiquated, *passé*, feminine – niceness into which it is transformed, retains its quality descriptor by mining contemporary feminist concerns for political satire. The Leslie-Ron dynamic corresponds to the pairing of Jack and Liz on *30 Rock* as

configurations of gendered social-political commentary, and in both cases this is founded on feminist politics' invocation, at the same time allowing for a discursive connection with a specific chapter of American television's past as legacy. But *Parks*' 'niceness' works to reconcile the 'warm' character comedy of the past and today's mode of feminist political satire, a reconciliation always treated ambiguously on *30 Rock*. The utopianism in which this results overwhelms the comedy to the extent that by the seventh season it even impacts the genre, creating an actual utopian science fiction witnessed in the three-year time jump and the flash-forwards to a utopian future. The connection between Leslie's feminist enthusiasm and American society's general well-being ultimately become indistinguishable and overdetermined; if 'feminists love a utopia' (Shapiro Sanders 2007), then *Parks* certainly gives us one.

If reviewers praise *Parks*' singularity in its difference from *30 Rock*'s mode of social criticism, then this speaks to the ambiguous evaluations of their alliances with contemporary popular feminisms, and consequently to the debated cultural status of these feminisms. Here the question of postfeminist discourses comes into play, informing the ways in which the two comedies invoke feminism. I address this issue in the next section, also engaging with Fey's and Poehler's star texts that foreground the 'feminist' in their 'transgressive' enactment of women's comedy. This section thus also asks how these personas relate to their positioning as comic heroines in sitcoms whose quality descriptors rely on associations with feminism.

## **2. Negotiating postfeminism**

As argued, both the comedies and their journalistic evaluations attribute great importance to the female protagonists' representational politics. The discursive significance of these gender politics has a

determining effect on the series' generic configurations and modes of comedy, which are then ultimately brought to bear on their cultural value. Representational politics are of course a pivotal question for media criticism, which also highlights these politics with more urgency in respect to media products whose cultural importance is located in their centralisation of marginalised social identities and subjectivities. In these instances, methods of representation effectively determine judgements of quality. In recessionary discourses about the quality TV moniker, both media producers and critics grant special attention to the ways television texts deal with social identity marking out marginalised communities (gender, sexuality, race, age etc.). Political relevance and an appeal to 'diversity' once again becomes a basis on which the TV industry conceives its 'quality' products and caters towards target audiences, in some ways similar to the state of affairs in the 1970s. Both trade press and producers acknowledge and circulate the 'diversity' trend as a negotiation of representational progress, aesthetic achievement, and the industry's economic imperatives in the 'Peak TV' era to supply novel content compartmentalised by audience segmentation (VanDerWerff 2015a, Ryan 2016a, Morris and Poniewozik 2016).

The intense attention paid to, and the cultural-economic investment in, the politics of representation also explains the debates surrounding the central female characters of *30 Rock* and *Parks* – two network comedies that garnered media attention for their initially rare method of situating their female protagonists in workplace settings and situations, while also mining the female comics' talents outside the romance framework and instead in comedian comedy and satire. For a while, feminist and other TV critics devoted think pieces to the question of whether Liz Lemon or Leslie Knope was the better feminist role model (e.g. Dailey 2010, Brooks Olsen 2015). The verdict in these evaluations usually

declared Knope the winner with her unrelenting feminist aspirationalism dismantling institutional barriers; whereas Lemon became gradually seen as failing the feminist promise for which the first few seasons of *30 Rock* supposedly laid the ground, due to her grotesque-childish portrayal (a representative think piece title: ‘The Incredible Shrinking Liz Lemon: From Woman to Little Girl’ [Holmes 2012]). Mizejewski’s analysis of Fey and *30 Rock* investigates the ‘backlash’ the series and its star increasingly suffered by the early 2010s (2014, 75-85), with one of the critics derisively dubbing the series’ questionable gender politics ‘Liz Lemonism’ (Dailey 2010). Mizejewski notes that these evaluations habitually conflate the fictional character with the comedian, and also that ‘the mixed signals around Fey – the longing for and nervousness about feminism in popular culture – are demonstrated in the high stakes of the looks of this perfect feminist idol, given multiple cultural pressures to picture her as nonthreatening, mainstream, and even glamorous’ (2014, 84). A similar dynamic is evident in the journalistic fascination with the comparison/contrast of the feminisms operating in *30 Rock* and *Parks*, and in the impetus to establish a competitive relationship between the two protagonists based on their dramatised relationship with feminist representation.

Yet tellingly, while in the Lemon/Fey backlash the star text and the fictional character work to mutually explain each other for critics, the Lemon versus Knope feminism contest does not (or rarely) provide opportunities to invoke the – by this time widely circulated – friendship narrative between the two comedians.<sup>25</sup> Popular press accounts describe this friendship only in terms of cooperation, female solidarity in a male-dominated profession, and an appreciation of different comic talents informing their double act performances (Fox 2015). They do not discuss this in the way they do the fictional characters, i.e. via

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<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere I discuss the brief history and characteristics of this friendship narrative; see Havas (2017).

competitive comparisons of their enactments of feminist politics. This specific lack of attention is all the more significant, for contemporary popular cultural discourses about feminism regularly pit female celebrities against one another based on their articulations, refusals, and presumed disparate understandings of feminist politics (a discourse that Poehler has been known to criticise [Duberman 2014]). This discrepancy then speaks to the importance lent to the feminism enacted *on the quality series*. In other words, the competitive evaluations of Fey's and Poehler's feminisms become shifted and concentrated onto their respective programmes, bearing the responsibility of 'progressive' representations of women, and leaving the connection between their star texts intact. The 'feud' between the two fictional characters, created entirely in popular journalism but not supported by the two series' promotional strategies or production teams (let alone by the two comedians), generally signals the perennial struggle to control feminism's meanings in media discourses (Banet-Weiser 2015), which here governs the tone of the comparative criticism levelled at the two texts. But more importantly for my argument, it also demonstrates the nervousness in a postfeminist cultural environment surrounding the gender politics of female-centred TV texts that situate themselves in the quality discourse for both their aesthetic *and* representational features.

The high stakes invested in the programmes' gender politics then speak to the link between the quality discourse and the postfeminist ethos operating in women's popular cultural representations. Aspects of 'quality' postfeminist television's development correspond to the overlapping logic inherent in these two paradigms. First, 'exclusivity' in class terms is a constitutive component in the establishment of both; quality TV's imperative to target upmarket audiences and postfeminism's insistence on an empowerment narrative for privileged white femininities produces the 'quality postfeminism' that feminist

media scholars have described and interrogated. Second, if television's cultural strength has historically been configured as an immediacy in dramatising social issues, it primarily does so via individualising and privatising them in quality television's serial narrative (see for instance Creeber's [2004, 116] interpretation of the millennial 'soap drama's cultural work in these terms). This heritage is particularly suitable for the postfeminist mode of re-inscribing the political project of feminism onto the private spheres of sexuality and romance, motherhood, 'choice' feminism etc. Thirdly, both paradigms' cultural work and successful integration into cultural consciousness hinges on declaring their respective historic backgrounds overcome, at the same time obscuring their dependence on this legacy for their existence. McRobbie's description of postfeminism as 'feminism taken into account' can be paralleled with HBO's 'It's not TV' slogan for the way they both necessarily contain the term they allegedly leave behind.

Considering these features that make the two phenomena such perfect bedfellows, the idea of a 'feminist quality TV' seems an inherent contradiction in terms. This contradiction partly accounts for the two comedies' uneasy cultural position, mostly expressed in the debates surrounding their feminisms, and located for instance in the criticism that a programme centralising privileged white femininities is already problematic in its appeal to feminist politics. Further, the way in which the 'comedy of distinction' operates for *30 Rock*, meaning an intense preoccupation with its own past and present, also speaks to this unease. Consequently, the series' explicitness about this 'distinction' cannot be interpreted without considering the importance it ascribes to its genderedness, an interconnection rarely analysed by the series' popular and academic criticisms (i.e. it is either discussed as a 'quality series' or a feminist/gendered one). Kenneth's words to Lemon quoted in the Introduction make explicit how *30 Rock* plays on its own problematic

efforts to produce aesthetically superior comedy on network television that centralises and *politicises* female subjectivity. The comedy framework capitalises on these contradictions as a genre operating to expose and contain the anxieties inherent within cultural phenomena (which in this case means the series' very existence). The fact that 'feminist quality comedy' creates such cultural anxieties signals the precarious position of efforts to politicise issues of gender in 'non-feminine' subgenres of television.<sup>26</sup>

The contradictory position that the two series occupy in the quality comedy model due to their 'feminist' moniker provides a concept to account for their generic transformations. I demonstrated in the previous section that the generic configurations and shifts in tone were direct consequences of the female comedian's centralisation in the narrative. I argue that these trajectories result in 'extreme' generic hybrids in 'quality' comedy's broader televisual environment. *30 Rock* thematises the complexities of (post)feminist womanhood by situating it in an increasingly cartoonesque and disillusioned satire, expressing this pessimism in an over-the-top absurdist framework, the trait for which it is celebrated as exceptional in TV criticism (the series is an 'apocalyptic view of the TV industry' for Emily Nussbaum [2012a]).<sup>27</sup> While *Parks* obviously employs a different tone, mobilising an optimistic mode of comedy, this leads it similarly outside the realms of 'realistic' genre traditions all the way to utopian science fiction (an especially 'extreme' leap, considering the programme's mockumentary/comedy *vérité* origins). The final season's time jump and flash forwards, as

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<sup>26</sup> This precariousness probably also explains why *30 Rock*, in its zealous name-checking of its female-centred and other predecessors, completely neglects referencing *Roseanne*. This series' alignment with a working-class feminism in domestic sitcom form, and Roseanne Arnold's comedy of excess both exclude them from the history of female-centred *quality* comedy.

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Butler's (2010) discussion of 'quality' comedy's aesthetic-stylistic features draws up a schema termed 'televisual continuum' between the extremes of 'stylistically utilitarian' and 'stylistically exhibitionistic' comedy. He sees the animated series as the ultimate fulfilment of the exhibitionistic style for its capacity to 'contain visuals impossible to generate with camera and actors' (ibid., 216), and places *30 Rock* close to this pole. In this light, *30 Rock*'s frequent descriptions as cartoonesque, and Liz Lemon's comparisons with Homer Simpson reveal its discursive associations with 'extremely' stylised television, even within the quality television context.

described, signify the ultimate and – from a storytelling perspective – logical endpoint to articulate an aspirational feminist politics, and these plot devices have been treated by critics, just like in *30 Rock*'s case, as pivotal elements of the comedy's exceptionalism.

Both comedies then narrativise their distinct takes on gender politics in forms that help them stand out in the cohort of post-network comedy, and even more noticeably, they both mobilise their respective generic hybrids (utopian sci-fi and absurdist satire) in ways that offer the possibility to interpret them in the terms of the parabolic. Granted, American fictional television's tradition of focusing on small communities, established within well-defined identity boundaries, may generally offer up such interpretations. But *30 Rock* and *Parks* directly invite an understanding of their narratives as corresponding to events and conditions of the American 'reality' in the framework of the parable, allegory, or morality tale. In both, the trope of the small workplace community standing in for American society operates as a politicised space where contained experiments with gender, race, class, etc. relations are carried out. Examples of this are numerous and apply both to singular episodes and larger narrative arcs of the programmes.

For instance, the *30 Rock* episode 'Believe in the Stars' metatextually employs the possibility by utilising Tracy's and Jenna's characters as 'the' black star and 'the' woman star of the fictional variety show, to satirise the journalistic question of 'who has it worse in America, black men *or* women' (the corresponding social event at the time of the episode's broadcast was Hillary Clinton's and Barack Obama's competition in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries). When the two start a 'social experiment' to prove their points by dressing up as the other (i.e. a white woman and a black man), not only does the story make its own function as 'social parable' explicit, it also turns into a whistle stop tour of what demographics the main characters represent,

or what they think they represent, reflected in their dialogue (e.g. Jack considers Kenneth not a white man but, 'socioeconomically speaking, an inner-city Latina'). Liz invites Oprah Winfrey, whom she thinks she met earlier on a plane, to mediate. The denouement in which it is a chirpy black teenage girl named Pam (Raven Goodwin) who arrives instead of Oprah, not only lampoons Liz's unwitting racism (she mistook Pam for Oprah while on a sedative), but also satirises the ways social discourses about race and gender ignore non-white femininities, unless mobilised to 'fix' the perceived issues of more visible social groups. (At the episode's end, Liz praises Pam's mediating skills to Jack, and he advises her thus: 'Be a white man. Take credit.')

The parable makes statements about each character's social standing, using them as representatives of their culturally defined social groups. The premise and narrative strategy are a result of efforts to integrate contemporary concerns of feminism into today's quality comedy, and ends up being the hyperbolically metafictional, cartoonesque, self-obsessed, absurd, apocalyptic etc. comedy for which *30 Rock* is known. Put another way, the incorporation of gender politics' scrutiny into the comedy appears to call for the frantic-sarcastic style, mandated with carrying the meanings it struggles to articulate.

Similarly, in *Parks* the municipal government setting functions as insulated environment standing in for representative groups of American society, and as such it is also a segment of labour relations where – like the cultural industries for *30 Rock* – a socio-politically visible area of American society can be observed in operation, although this is offset with this community's provinciality. While for Jeffrey Sconce (2009) this provinciality effects a derisive mode of comedy, his description applies largely to the first season, and loses its relevance once the tonal shift described in the previous section takes place and overwrites the narrative. The extent to which the series distances itself

after season two from this 'condescending' (ibid.) humour hinges on its alliance with feminist satire, a strategy that at the same time also ensures that the narrative no longer operates as representing only a provincial and ridiculed type of government and its gender relations, but as one that applies to social-political conditions more broadly. For instance, the episode 'Filibuster' takes its main plot from nationally known political events, namely Texan Senator Wendy Davis' headline-making 11-hour filibuster in 2013 to block the voting on a Senate Bill aimed to restrict abortion rights in the state. The episode satirises the misogyny of the Pawnee City Council's members when Leslie Knope similarly attempts to block a vote, sporting a pair of roller skates that allude to Davis's famous pink sneakers. This episode also integrates into this plot a controversial voter ID law proposed in Texas in 2011, considered by its critics discriminatory against low-income and minority voters. The proposed bill that Leslie filibusters in *Parks* would revoke voting rights from non-Pawnee citizens, and is tailored against Eagletonians (a more affluent town previously merged with Pawnee) who oppose Leslie's council membership. The story thus turns into a dilemma for Leslie between a democratic, i.e. morally right choice (blocking the vote on an undemocratic bill) and one that would benefit her career (letting Eagletonians lose their voting rights to save her seat). This is a dilemma frequently presented in the series as central to Leslie's politics, complicating the meaning of her feminist ambition and energy. The convolutedly politicised plot comes to dominate the series in a way that is both connected to specific feminist concerns and to identity politics (of the feminist as political figure), and also goes on to define the insulated 'lab experiment' nature of its meaning-making, culminating in the series finale's utopian vision.

In sum, if the generic and tonal characteristics of the two programmes gain their reputation as exceptional or extreme in their realisation of

their female protagonists' stories, then this cannot be understood without the cultural context of postfeminism in which these stories are articulated. Both series function as isolated efforts to integrate a 'public' (as opposed to 'privatised') idea of gender politics with quality television's aesthetic and representational features, and this choice leads them to 'unreal' territories of genre and modes of comedy.

### **2.A 30 Rock**

This series' pilot episode, as discussed, makes explicit claims about the relationship between network television's cultural status as feminised source of viewing pleasures and the ways masculinised ideals of value become integrated into this, thereby situating itself in quality TV discourse and foregrounding the relevance of gender. The pilot also makes clear that its primary perspective will be that of the 'single career woman' as both target audience and producer of network TV's derided content. Ensuring that the viewer understands what kind of femininity Liz represents, the pilot has Jack describe her in a condescending mini-lecture, a quote that has ever since functioned as Lemon's sleight-of-hand profile for critics. To Liz's remark 'I don't cook much', Donaghy replies:

Sure, I got you. New York third-wave feminist, college-educated, single-and-pretending-to-be-happy-about-it, overscheduled, undersexed, you buy any magazine that says 'healthy body image' on the cover, and every two years you take up knitting for... a week?

We get a handy user manual here for Liz's character as conveyed by the conservative-patriarchal older male boss. The description is a recognisable type of womanhood originating in second-wave feminism's popular image, now a staple of postfeminist media culture: the self-absorbed, self-described feminist successor of the urban empowered

career girl, an image popularised by *Sex and the City* and its ilk. Nussbaum's (2012a) praise of Lemon and Fey, defending them against the discussed backlash, treats this monologue as 'nailing' Liz 'on sight'. Rebecca Traister (2010) also uses this quote to defend Fey against the backlash, arguing that her self-deprecating comedy involves lampooning her own comic persona and star text in relation to popular feminism. Mizejewski's academic analysis refers to this description as well, specifically the 'third-wave feminist' moniker, to demonstrate that Lemon functions both as caricature of the 'sourpuss' workaholic feminist, and as criticism of corporate culture's institutionalised sexism (2014, 66).

While these assessments usefully point out how the programme articulates Lemon's social identity, I argue that its understanding is incomplete without considering the next lines of dialogue. To producer Pete Hornberger's (Scott Adsit) enquiry about how he came up with such a 'dead-on' reading of Liz, Jack replies: 'Years and years of market research'. This implies that Lemon's categorisation as prime example of postfeminist womanhood follows from the network executive's experience with studying audiences and consumers – Jack's job title is 'Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming'. The dialogue connects Lemon's 'dead-on' description to corporate capitalism's strategies of establishing and catering to a society of consumer citizens (the series often mocks, and demonstrates the meanings of, corporate terminology like 'vertical integration'), of which the postfeminist/feminist single woman is a prominent representative. Lemon is not only a caricature of this woman, but is conceived as a construct of the capitalist culture industries. Thus the series admits at its beginning that if Lemon is to be read as *the* postfeminist/failed feminist, then she is created by and through the culture industries; in short, she is media fiction. Whether Jack 'nails' Liz's character or not is not the

concern of this dialogue but rather the blurring of her identity that it causes: she can simultaneously function as a potential (although progressively failing) 'role model', i.e. another example of a 'strong' female protagonist; second, as a caricature of (post)feminist womanhood (explaining why her critics feel let down by her portrayal in later seasons). Thirdly, she functions as open admission that even this caricature of the postfeminist woman is a creation of Western consumer culture. The text makes clear its struggle here with its embeddedness in the postfeminist context by the character's overdetermined nature, and makes this struggle the programme's starting point. In this, the female protagonist's treatment as multiply transparent and shifting figure – also always inevitably projected onto Fey's star text as comic alter ego – betrays an effort to comment on the portrayal it produces. As I will show, Fey's already established reputation as observer of gender and other social relations also feeds into this interpretation of social commentary accumulated in Lemon's figure.

Linda Mizejewski's (2014) analysis of *30 Rock* and Fey, to date the most thorough academic investigation of the gender politics of both, offers insight into the intricacies of the series' thick web of commentary on the relationship between the media industries, corporate capitalism, nation, identity, body politics and so on. As discussed, race relations and the ambiguous dynamic of feminism and postfeminism take a prominent place in the satirical treatment of these categories. One of Mizejewski's primary arguments is that the series is hardly a straightforward feminist text, precisely because of its observational character: '*30 Rock* is not a feminist text but rather one that explores the unruly ways feminist ideals actually play out in institutions and in popular culture' (2014, 26-27). Interrogating the development of Fey's comedian persona as brainy satirist of gender relations which lead to her reputation as a feminist,

Mizejewski also engages with how this persona became complicated in its 'cover girl' iteration once Fey garnered overnight popularity and media interest during the 2008 presidential campaign with her impersonations of Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Mizejewski's overview of Fey's comedy and star text emphasises that both involve a consistent and wide-ranging mode of observational humour. She describes this facet of Fey's comedy as the defining feature of her career, with *Mean Girls* (the 2004 film whose script she wrote) being praised by critics as a 'sociological' take on 'girl world', or with her Weekend Update news anchor persona on *SNL* as no-nonsense feminist making acidic jokes about institutionalised sexism and misogyny. Mizejewski considers Fey's pre-*30 Rock* comedy significant because it discusses gender in a way that positions the comedian as an outsider to the social relations on which she comments – even to her own celebrity.

Indeed, Fey's persona as more of a writer-observer rather than an actor-performer of gender relations has been part of her celebrity from the beginnings of her media presence. An early article profile has Amy Poehler describe her thus: 'She's not the first girl to belly-flop into the pool at the pool party. She watches everybody else's flops and then writes a play about it' (Heffernan 2003). But if the strength of Fey's comedy is rooted in its observational humour, then this becomes ambiguous in its interpretation as feminist once her own star text gets involved via Lemon's satirical-sarcastic portrayal. Mizejewski's reluctance to designate *30 Rock* with the 'feminist' moniker is linked to the series' sarcastic tone concentrated onto Lemon's, i.e. Fey's alter ego's, position in the show's fictional world:

Far from claiming *30 Rock* as a feminist text, my primary argument here is that it does a different kind of cultural work than expected [by journalists critiquing Lemon's portrayal as failed feminist] in representing a feminist TV writer complicit in profit-driven, sexist,

mainstream media and in exploring the messy ways feminist ideals play out in institutions and popular culture. (...) Significantly, Liz Lemon is a liminal figure in relation to corporate and cultural power as well as to feminism, and *30 Rock*'s comedy draws from both corporate and feminist politics. (Ibid., 77)

Liminality and outsider-ness describe both comedian and fictional character in relation to feminism for Mizejewski, and implied in this is that precisely the scrutinising take on Liz and feminism is what impedes the series' classification as feminist television. Paradoxically then, the trait through which Fey's popular image was established as Hollywood's token feminist, namely the position of outsider-observer and astute satirist of gender relations, works against this moniker when the object of scrutiny becomes the cultural state-of-affairs of feminism and postfeminism, projected onto an alter-ego figure performed by the 'token feminist' comedian.

If *30 Rock* is problematic in the way it can (or cannot) be declared a 'straightforward' feminist text, then this is due to Liz's portrayal as both representative, consumer, and producer of images of postfeminist womanhood, also always carrying the extratextual understanding that she is Fey's fictional version. As shown, the series not only acknowledges this portrayal but foregrounds it as its storytelling premise to be interrogated and lampooned. 'Feminist' or not, in this feature the series nonetheless evokes feminist theorists' positions regarding postfeminism's inseparable connection to neoliberal ideologies of individualisation and consumer citizenship. McRobbie (2009, 2011) scrutinises the ways in which neoliberal governments, colluding with popular media, assign to affluent young women a crucial social role as ideal subjects of what she terms 'the new sexual contract'. She discusses this as an ethos that ties women's economic power to the 'freedom to consume', fuelling the expansion of the fashion-beauty

industry under the aegis of consumer citizenship, and discouraging political participation (2011, 182). As Gill and Scharff suggest, 'neoliberalism is always already gendered, and (...) women are constructed as its ideal subjects' (2011, 7 quoted in Wilkes 2015, 26).

As noted, Lemon's portrayal, and the intricate matrix of workplace and domestic relations in *30 Rock*, insist that neoliberal-postfeminist capitalism and media culture 'is already gendered' and targets female/feminised social subjects. Further, it mines the opportunities for satire in the individualisation politics inherent to this paradigm, evidenced in the constant clashes between Liz's uninformed and entitled 'social consciousness' feminism and her environment's efforts to stifle her politics. Mizejewski offers a detailed analysis of the episode 'Brooklyn Without Limits' that (like many others) thematises this tension, noting that while the series satirises 'both feminist hypocrisy and postfeminist bourgeois angst', there is also 'a privileged, middle-class politics looming under the surface of *30 Rock's* comedy as its perimeter in imagining social change' (2014, 84). The episode makes fun of Liz's social consciousness as she proudly buys a pair of jeans from a company that she thinks is an independent fair trade business and not part of an ugly corporation, until Jack enlightens her that it is owned by Halliburton and exploits Vietnamese workers. Since a major draw for Liz was that this pair of jeans was the only kind her backside has ever looked good in, and she now has to go back to unflattering clothes that accommodate her politics, the episode narrativises the conflict between a secretly self-centred feminist social consciousness and corporate capitalism as concentrated onto Lemon's body. Mizejewski posits that while this storyline is sharp (and quite dark) in mocking both Liz's political consciousness and Jack's defense of global capitalism, it also unwittingly exposes its own blind spots regarding its treatment of feminist politics since it 'does not acknowledge (...) the limitations of

Liz's liberalism'. It centralises 'a personal choice about her looks, money, and commodities' instead of actual political activism against corporations, thus 'accept[ing] personal power as the only viable kind of agency' (ibid., 85).

For Mizejewski, this personalisation of social issues is the real 'Liz Lemonism', i.e. the fault in *30 Rock's* gender politics. I argue however, that if Lemon is a caricature of the 'ideal subject' of postfeminist and neoliberal cultural politics (proposed in the pilot episode), then the episode's and the whole programme's insistence that the uninformed liberal feminist inevitably buys into the rhetoric of self-work and a short-sighted concern with commodities, makes perfect sense. Importantly, the series' trajectory stresses the process in which Liz increasingly conflates the political with the personal, gradually short-changing her 'bleeding-heart', issue-oriented feminist intentions for a concentration on individual concerns. To wit, a three-episode arc at the beginning of the second series offers a detailed scrutiny of this process, dramatising it as a struggle between Liz and her environment. The serialised plot of these episodes revolves around Jenna's body issues: during the show's summer hiatus, she gained enough weight to be deemed unpresentable on television, a narrative conflict thematising the media industry's sexist treatment of female performers: 'She needs to lose thirty pounds or gain sixty. Anything in between has no place in television', says the slightly overweight Jack ('SeinfeldVision'). The next episode deals with the weight gain's consequences for Jenna's stardom and with Liz's and Jack's opinions on it, representing the liberal feminist's and the sexist capitalist's stances respectively ('Jack Gets in the Game'). Liz initially insists that they ignore Jenna's changed body and continue to treat her as the pretty girl of the show. As she consoles Jenna, Jack pops up from the background, and the massaging of Jenna's self-esteem turns into an 'issue' debate between the two leads:

Liz: How come men can be heavy and be respected like James Gandolfini or Fat Albert? You know it's a double standard and America needs to get over its body image madness.

Jack: Oh come on, what are we, back in college, freshmen year? Let's go to the common room and talk about apartheid.

Liz: Well OK. I'm sorry if I care about making the world a better place.

Jack: You should be. It's a complete waste of time and prevents you from dealing with THIS (*gestures at Lemon's body*).

Liz: Excuse me, what about THIS do I have to deal with?

Jack: How's your love life going?

Liz: I... believe that love comes to you when you're not looking for it.

Jack: Did you return that wedding dress that you bought?

Liz: I'm gonna sell it online but my Internet is being weird.

Jack: How about the furniture for your home office, have you even set that up yet? (*A smash cut shows a stack of unopened Ikea boxes sitting in Lemon's home.*)

Liz: I'm not making excuses Jack but THIS (*gestures at her body*) is taken care of. (*Yelps and touches her cheek.*) Nerds! I missed a dentist appointment this morning!

The episode sets here up the stakes around which the comedy about the fat and ridiculed female body revolves: while pointing out the obvious feminist stance, articulated by Liz as social-cultural issue, it also shows that her feminism is easily steered away by corporate capitalism's local representative into a personal, self-absorbed identity politics. Crucially, Donaghy's manipulative change of subject from an interest in the issue's social relevance towards Liz's own romantic and private life, culminates in a punchline that configures Liz's body as the main problem. The body that becomes centralised here however is not the 'THIS' that both gesture towards emphatically. Shifting from the sexualised connotation inscribed onto the female body (love life, marriage), the scene finally locates the comedy in the decidedly unsexy notion of Liz's toothache. The scene's trajectory starts with a

verbalisation of the feminist concerns at stake, followed by their highjacking by the powers-that-be into the language of postfeminism, which the comedy again thwarts such that the focus on the female body highlights a dualism between Liz's sexual(ised) and comically failing body.

A later scene reprises the same arc in which Liz's hyperbolic interest in Jenna's body image problem as feminist issue becomes ridiculed and turned back against her as rooted in her unhappy personal life, culminating in the physical comedy of Liz's disintegrating body. Jenna and Liz decide to ignore the weight issue on the show; Jenna out of vanity, Liz out to prove the feminist point, and still adamant that the TV industry needs a lesson in social consciousness. Again, a male voice distracts them in the scene as staff writer Frank (Judah Friedlander) enters and suggests a 'fat Jenna' character with the catchphrase 'Me want food'. Lemon refuses:

Liz: We are gonna dare America to change their own attitudes about body image.

Frank: Why do you have to make everything into an issue? Don't you have things to do with your own life?

Liz: At least I don't live with my mum. (*Yelps, touches her cheek.*)

Frank: Hey my mum is cool.

Liz: I got my life together OK? (*A tooth falls out of her mouth onto the desk.*)

In repeating the themes addressed in the earlier scene, the narrative offers up Liz not simply as an already 'failed feminist', but as template of the uninformed one on whom the postfeminist and capitalist project have been doing their work. Still at the beginning of Jack's mentorship – a central theme of the whole of the series – Liz here retains her interest in 'making the world a better place', a mantra later replaced, via Jack's influence, with the one 'Get out there and get yours' ('Kidney Now!'). If

Liz ‘constantly compromis[es] her ideals as the cost of working for a national network, becoming “schooled and seduced” into sleazy network thinking’ (Mizejewski 2014, 76), then this process also prominently entails the gradual abandoning of the feminist project as her ideal. The ‘observational’ comedy at work here uses the spaces and communities of privilege not to inherently confirm a postfeminist and post-race ethos but to complicate and lay bare their working mechanisms. Traister (2010) argues that the Fey backlash signals an uneasy relationship between feminism and comedy, noting that Fey ‘is a professional comedian’ and ‘not a professional feminist’. Mizejewski’s academic examination, as noted, is also reluctant to link the series’ cultural work to feminism, following a similar logic in which a comedy *about* feminism and postfeminism forecloses such a direct connection.

Entangled in this uneasy connection between comedy and feminism is the metatextual authorship discourse around Fey as producer and performer of ‘quality’ comedy, intensified by using the Lemon figure as fictional *Doppelgänger*. In comedian comedy’s history, the idea that the comic persona is a thinly veiled alter ego of the comedian is a familiar staple, and in television, this has organically merged with the establishment of ‘quality’ comedy. A number of prominent TV comedies have built their worlds around this alter ego both in the network and post-network eras (their titles often bearing the comedian’s first or last name), in some cases using this transparency to create metacomedy about the television business (e.g. *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *The Comeback*). The authorship discourse around quality drama, which is concerned to ‘explain’ the TV text with the ‘author’s’ personality and art (Martin 2013), has in this way been prominent in television comedy’s history as well, regardless of its assigned cultural value. Moreover, while comedian comedy and sitcoms about/by a comic performer have primarily been a male domain (Mills 2005), there have been instances of

female-centred metatextual comedian comedies on television, like *Roseanne*, *Ellen* (1994-1998), *Cybill* (1995-1998), or *Fat Actress* (2005). These programmes' cultural significance has been located in the ways they upset the gendered codes of decorum for the female performer as subject/object of humour. *30 Rock* combines these distinct traditions: on the one hand, it uses the 'female comic performer as alter ego' framework, also being a metatextual comedy about the TV industry. On the other, in casting the female performer as *writer* of comedy, and with Fey's initial star persona being that of the comedy writer as opposed to performer, it upsets the parallel traditions of male comedian comedy as revered definition of authorship (Jerry Seinfeld, Larry David, Louis C.K. etc.) and of female-centred comedian comedy that has until recently largely been understood as outside the quality discourse and/or about the female *performer* (Roseanne Arnold, Ellen DeGeneres, Kirstie Alley, or Lisa Kudrow in *The Comeback*).

The metacomedy about television, female authorship, and feminism via which *30 Rock* inserts itself into the quality discourse is as such unprecedented and creates multiple issues which it is concerned to perpetually negotiate. Fey's author persona as writer-performer-producer of her own 'comedy writer' alter ego, located in quality discourse, seems to be yet another 'impossible sign' – and part of this impossibility is the comedy's concentration on feminism/postfeminism as its dominant object of satire.

Fey's next project after *30 Rock*, the Netflix comedy *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, lacks both the 'comic alter ego' aspect and a meta-satire of feminism, with Fey being mainly involved in a writer-producer capacity. Perhaps not coincidentally, this series has been more unequivocally embraced by critics as feminist text in its gender politics. This suggests that a centralised mockery of feminism/postfeminism in Fey's comedy is tied to her self-centralisation as comic performer – bringing into play

the common wisdom that women's comedy relies greatly on self-deprecation (Mills 2005, 112), a characteristic dominant for analysts of Fey's humour. The ways in which woman comedians (ab)use the social convention of self-mockery to lay bare unequal gender relations has been an object of scrutiny for feminist scholars (Rowe Karlyn 1995b, Arthurs 1999). Again, Fey's 'authored' comedy in *30 Rock* resists a stable positioning in this context, an instability due to its centralisation of feminist politics as channelled through the female comedian's self-mockery and as agent of the 'quality' status. 'Feminising' articulations of her author persona, like the maternalisation shown in the previous section, work to mitigate the cultural unease this instability causes.

The above considerations do not serve to take a stand in the question of *30 Rock's* and Fey's feminism or postfeminism. Rather, my concern has been to show that both text and comedian consistently keep upsetting the discursive assumptions about the popular cultural presence of these. Because this instability of meaning is so prominent in the series and the comic's star text, and because both betray an intent to politicise these meanings, integrated into the quality comedy's modes of expression, *30 Rock's* significance as media text is located best as signalling the (rather cynically envisaged) process of the recent 'rebooting' of feminist discourses, intensified in post-recessionary media culture. Sarah Banet-Weiser's (2015) study shows how this renewed focus on feminist politics also continues to involve popular culture's efforts to allocate a narrowed-down meaning to the word. For Banet-Weiser this phenomenon misappropriates feminism's project of 'ambiguity', i.e. its concern to interrogate and denaturalise assumptions about gender and about its own meanings via sustained debate. As the above discussion of *30 Rock* and of Fey's writer-performer persona shows, one thing (perhaps the only thing) can be stated about both with absolute certainty: they trade in this ambiguity.

## **2.B Parks and Recreation**

While Fey's reputation in terms of her gender politics shifted in feminist media from 'arbiter of feminism' to 'questionable ally' due to *30 Rock's* cultural work and her celebrity's popularisation, Amy Poehler's star text travelled in almost the opposite direction: the TV series designed to be her first central comic role also established her feminist image. The two comics' different creative backgrounds partly account for this disparate route: Fey's persona as writer-author determined her evaluations from the beginning of her career, while Poehler was never associated with authorship in a similar way. She first garnered renown as a versatile sketch performer on *SNL*, a role dominating her early star text. As her star vehicle, *Parks* served to articulate this versatility of performance as a feminist trait, affecting both the career woman's political empowerment narrative and the series' critique of institutions. I showed above how this element of the text eventually governs its genre and reverses mockumentary's cultural work, mobilising the idea of a 'utopian' or aspirational feminism to the degree that it steers the 'realist' fiction towards actual utopian science fiction.

Performance is a key term for comedy, and scholarship describes the ways in which the mockumentary/comedy *vérité* form upsets its conventions to produce contemporary 'quality' comedy (Thompson 2007, Hight 2010, Middleton 2014, Mills 2004). A basic tenet of sitcom theory is that the form traditionally foregrounds comic performance as a method of distinguishing it from more serious and 'realistic' forms. Mills writes: "'sitcom naturalism" is based on audiences "suspending disbelief in return for pleasure", in which the laughter track, the theatrical shooting style and the displayed performance clearly demonstrate sitcom's artificial status and its clear, precise, single-minded aim: to make you laugh' (Mills 2004, 67). The mockumentary

aesthetic however, hybridising the factual and fictive form, questions both documentary's claim to authenticity, 'whose veracity rests on the assumption that there is a *lack* of performance' (ibid., 73), and also the tenability of traditional sitcom's 'displayed' performance style (ibid., 72-74) via exposing the inauthenticity of both kinds of performance. *Parks* reverses this process, even while retaining mockumentary's basic aesthetics. This speaks to the importance of the mobilisation of a politicised, and 'directly' employed feminist rhetoric for the establishment of the series' quality moniker.

The extent to which 'feminist' intent overturns mockumentary's efforts to ridicule 'fake' performances (of the self and of traditional comedy), can be demonstrated in the difference between the ways *Parks* utilises Poehler's comic talent and, for instance, the British *Office's* or *The Comeback's* commentary on comedy performance via David Brent's and Valerie Cherish's 'displayed' performances. The latter two enact 'cringe comedy', laying bare the characters' stupidity and self-delusion, which extends to their own (erroneous) perception of their environment's appreciation of their humorous performance – the viewer is invited to 'laugh(...) at and not with' them (ibid., 73). At the same time, Ricky Gervais' and Lisa Kudrow's performances of this self-delusion are not 'displayed', at least not in traditional sitcom's terms. *Parks* gradually inverts this strategy; while Leslie's self-deception is similarly a source of comedy in the first season, the programme increasingly foregrounds Poehler's comic skills without the effect of a diegetic inauthenticity. The difference comes to the fore clearly in the repeatedly used method of jump-cut monologues which became the series' signature feature, and the first of which appears in the pilot. In this, we see a montage of Leslie asking Ron in different ways to allow her to form a committee ('Pilot'). The scene was reportedly not pre-written (Raymond 2013), signalling that Poehler's improvisational talents were strategically incorporated

into the programme's aesthetic. At the same time, the frequent usage of jump-cuts is explained as coincidentally emerging: the editor of the third episode 'The Reporter' was apparently unable to decide what to edit out from a scene involving a similar series of Poehler's improvisations, and ended up keeping all of them, leading to the jump-cut solution (ibid.). In these montages, we are simultaneously invited to laugh at Leslie's delusional enthusiasm as part of the narrative, but also to appreciate, extradiegetically, Poehler's improvisational talent. The improvisational 'feel' is in accordance with mockumentary's aesthetic tradition, but becomes a dominant feature of *Parks*. Even more importantly, it becomes habitually employed to signify commentary on gender relations.

For instance, one of the most celebrated jump-cuts occurs in the episode 'The Hunting Trip', in which Leslie takes the blame for accidentally shooting Ron in the back of his head on a hunting trip. She gives a statement to a park ranger whose attitude betrays a sexist assumption about the accident's circumstances. Through the combination of Poehler's performance and the jump-cut technique, we first register Leslie's growing exasperation at the ranger's patronising condescendence in demanding an explanation, then her resolve to get out of the situation by performing a series of 'typical' feminine responses with which he feels more comfortable than with her real voice and with a 'non-gendered' explanation. Leslie's utterances become more and more hyperbolically ridiculous and turn into a satirical parody of paternalistic notions of womanhood via Poehler's exaggerated performance in the jump-cut montage. The improvised bits, including 'I cared too much I guess', 'I was thinking with my lady parts', 'I thought there was gonna be chocolate', 'I'm wearing a new bra, and it closes in the front, so it popped open and it threw me off', 'All I wanna do is have babies', 'I'm just like, going through a thing right now',

'This would not happen if I had a penis', 'I'm good at tolerating pain, I'm bad at math, and I'm stupid' etc. telegraph the ridiculousness of the ranger's sexism. Performance works on two levels here: one within the diegesis, with Leslie acting out a series of 'inauthentic' femininities for the ranger's benefit, simultaneously reaffirming her own authenticity of self in the contrast; and also as Poehler's displayed comic performance. Thus, performance in this scene is not meant to expose the diegetic comic performer's delusion (as with Brent or Cherish) but a supporting character's misogynistic self-delusion who represents paternalistic male authority. (Whereas in *The Office* or *The Comeback*, it is usually the supporting characters through whom the text signals to the audience the protagonist's ridiculousness.) This scene is included in *Vulture's* list of the programme's best jump-cut montages, ranking number two (Raymond 2013), with an introduction that lauds it for authentic or 'subtle' feminism, articulated through the mockumentary's method of exposing the contradictions in documentary's claims to authenticity of performance. The political feminist intent here overwrites the genre's ideological intent, and the 'authenticity' of feminism is re-confirmed via Leslie's own authenticity as aspirational feminist public figure. This authenticity emerges in a contrast with her environment's (here the ranger's) consistent efforts to sabotage it: we laugh with her, not at her – at him. The display of the female comedian's skilled performance establishes this ideological reversal of aesthetic means.

Critics then embraced both the programme's and Leslie's 'authentic' feminism as markers of a quality television that pedagogically problematises gender relations. Further, unlike in *30 Rock's* and Fey's case, media reception willingly reconciled the discrepancy/similarity between fictional character and comedian since Poehler's celebrity was increasingly governed by a performance of a similarly straightforward, argumentative, and optimistic feminist attitude. Poehler's various

confirmations of a feminist identity, her affiliation with feminist organisations, and her founding of the website and web series *Smart Girls at the Party*, an 'empowering' platform for teenage girls (Kleeman 2014), supported this perception. Similarly, her autobiography *Yes Please* (2014) betrays an effort to further participate in contemporary discourses about an aspirational-optimistic feminism, in its rhetoric echoing the series' and the fictional character's assertive-yet-accessible feminist reputation. The animated Pixar film *Inside Out* (2015) also capitalised on this by casting Poehler as voice of the personified emotion Joy. These articulations of her star text in relation to popular feminism are considerably easier to make sense of for popular media discourses than Fey's less directly mediated and strategically problematic/problematising gender politics.

Yet Poehler's and the series' promotion of an aspirational feminism, foregrounding optimism, pugnacious female ambition, self-work, and solidarity, also opens itself up to criticisms of a blindness to class and racial privilege. Indeed, just as her memoir/advice book has been embraced as feminist (Rodriguez 2014) and complicating the messages of recent career advice books for women like Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* (Sandberg 2013, for a comparative criticism see Yabroff 2014), it has also been accused of ignoring social inequalities. Rodrigues (2014) writes, 'the white-lady memoir, as informed by white liberal feminism, is complicit in a stagnant form of popularized non-politics that emphasizes non-confrontation, positivity, and individualism'. Diane Negra's (2014) academic account similarly shows this to be a dominant feature of recent female-authored celebrity memoirs, including Fey's *Bossypants*. For both critics, this rhetoric makes such texts unacknowledged allies to recessionary postfeminist-neoliberal corporate culture, and, ultimately, a 'neo-patriarchal' genre (ibid., 284). Negra argues that this literature 'exhibits intense approbation for female entrepreneurialism in a

neoliberal cultural environment and a postfeminist celebration of the self' (ibid., 278).

While Negra's assessment of celebrity memoirs does not include *Yes Please*, its position parallels Rodrigues' criticism of the book. Debates around this literature demonstrate once again the inevitably problematic nature of claims to a feminist politics in a postfeminist cultural environment. What Yabroff (2014) sees as Poehler's active resistance to Sandberg-type feminine careerism, instead promoting female solidarity and individualism as summarised in the book's recurring mantra, 'Good for you, not for me', Rodrigues refuses as a sign of postfeminist privilege for neglecting unequal social, political, and economic circumstances. The issues expressed around the 'choice' feminism of *Yes Please* loom large for *Parks*; yet the series has not been subject to such critical treatment by feminists as Poehler's book. Framed in the competitive comparison with Fey and *30 Rock*, the programme has been overwhelmingly embraced as *the* signature feminist TV text of the early 2010s.

A crucial element of the programme's celebration as feminist quality TV in its reception is its persistent portrayal of local government's institutional sexism as a hurdle the heroine needs to overcome. A classic structuralist reading shows the series in this light: the overarching (grand) narrative frames feminist aspirationalism as motivation of the protagonist's quest where different iterations of the anti-feminist social environment stand for the villainous other; the heroine has her helpers and community, and she occasionally suffers failures in her mission, which, as stated in the pilot, is to become the first female president. That this ambition is initially presented as delusional but is later validated as deserved reaffirms the shift in the storytelling technique toward the grand narrative. This more or less linear narrative structure, couched in quality TV's serialisation (Creeber 2004), locates viewing

pleasure in the sustained tension between 'realism' (mockumentary aesthetics and stories of Leslie's failures) and fantasy/utopia. The series' ending leaves open the question the pilot episode posed and the grand narrative has at stake: we never find out whether Leslie became president. The story then preserves this tension between 'realism' and utopia even for the denouement, but the intense focus on the question (via withholding information) shows the significance lent to the issue of utopia, here equated with a female presidency, itself signalling in the American cultural imagination the ultimate realisation of women's subversion of patriarchal public institutions. The ultimate utopia is left ambiguous to draw attention to its political significance.

The grand narrative of the quest for utopia in the framework of quality television, providing viewing satisfaction simultaneously from narrative resolution and ambiguity, aligns itself with some current strands of feminist theory. Lisa Shapiro Sanders' (2007) position on utopian thinking's potential in debates over feminism's multiple iterations is instructive. She defends second-wave feminism's utopianism against arguments that see it as dated and static in its historically universalising and essentialist tendencies (ibid., 3-4). Instead, she locates utopia's usefulness for contemporary feminism in 'the productive expression and negotiation of conflict (...) envisioning social change that emphasises the transformative over the perfected vision' (ibid., 12).

Fictional narratives being prominent grounds on which cultural struggles are affectively negotiated, and television's narrative economy allowing for presenting such struggles without necessarily resolving them, they provide the series with the opportunity to present a feminist utopianism similar to Shapiro Sanders' concept. The collaborative negotiation she calls for is useful for thinking about both *Parks*' and *30 Rock*'s textual features and also the intense media promotion of Fey's and Poehler's friendship. Further, both series position themselves in a reverential

relation to 'feminist' predecessors (the 'utopian past' [ibid.] of the MTM era female-led sitcom), and both comedians are celebrated as successors of the network era's feminist/female comedians, thus resisting somewhat quality comedy's initiative of denying the past, and the generationalist tendencies of postfeminism. The two comedies trade in different invocations of gender politics and feminism, stemming from the female leads' disparate creative backgrounds and star texts affecting the programmes' narrative and generic traits. *30 Rock* critiques the contemporary 'reality' of a feminism-influenced and privileged urban environment in an increasingly *surreal* and cartoonesque tone,<sup>28</sup> while *Parks* imagines an 'ideal' feminism's triumph on both a rural and national political level. In this sense it overturns the 'apocalyptic' state that the other programme presents, while situating this fantasy in a televisual form known for its play with aesthetic codes of realism. For the two programmes then, the 'reality' and 'fantasy' of feminism are in reverse connection with the 'realism' and 'fantasy' of genre and aesthetics: *30 Rock* creates a 'reality' of feminism in a non-realist aesthetic, while *Parks* presents a 'fantasy' of feminism in a realist aesthetic. Questions about whether these disparate approaches are in conflict, and which is more progressive, are turned into crucial issues at stake in their evaluations in (feminist) popular reception; yet Fey's and Poehler's carefully publicised friendship narrative and their frequent pairing as comic double act struggle to neutralize these.

Both the comedies' and the comedians' cultural positions are formed then in resistances to popular reception's imperative for monolithic and competitive appraisals of a centralised feminism, itself entangled in contemporary debates around ambiguity, cultural difference, and negotiation of conflict. In the analysis of these cultural struggles around

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<sup>28</sup> Although the series plays with the idea of feminist utopia in its epilogue: set in a distant, cartoonesque future, the last episode's tag shows a dialogue between immortal NBC chairman Kenneth, and Liz's great-great-granddaughter, a black writer who pitches and sells Liz Lemon's life story to him ('Last Lunch'). The sitcom we watched was in itself the product of a utopian feminist future.

the two series, I frequently referred to the issue of the female comedian's performance; indeed, the question of the female *body's* involvement in comedy and parodies of femininity carries heightened stakes for judgements over the programmes' achievements. The next section investigates this relationship.

### **3. Body politics and the 'quality' comedy**

The structuring concept of Mizejewski's (2014) book about contemporary female comedians is encapsulated in its title, *Pretty/funny*: that is, women's comedy tends to be rooted and evaluated in the comedian's relationship to her body as sexual(ised) object. For Bridget Boyle (2015), the female body is involved in a gendered performance via its visual presence even 'before the gag'. As Boyle argues, cultural anxieties around women's physical comedy stem from two kinds of associations: one is linked to the maternal body (too 'sacred' to be funny), and the other to the 'performance of beauty' (ibid., 80-83). The latter echoes Mizejewski's argument: the cultural paradigm bluntly described as 'you are either pretty or funny' governs women's culturally sanctioned relationship to humour, and women's comedy tends to be borne out of the pretty/funny paradigm's transgressive treatment. This dynamic harks back to various other Western beliefs about femininity as constructed in the hierarchal opposition of male/female: Mizejewski also briefly refers to the mind/body dichotomy, but the virgin/whore duality similarly signals her fixedness to an (extreme lack or excess of) physical-as-sexual existence. Rowe's (1995b) influential work on women's comedy shows why the transgression of these paradigms ('unruliness') occurs so poignantly in comedy, given that the genre is a primary outlet of cultural anxieties about human physicality. That women's presence is similarly

pronounced in other 'body' genres like horror or pornography speaks to the female body's cultural significance as sexual sign (Williams 1991); and the 'unfunny' imperatives of these forms explain why female protagonists have historically been more crucial to them than to comedy.

For Mills, '[i]n comedy, the body becomes vital to performance and characters are often constructed so as to be aware of their own physicality' (2005, 86). This can account for female performers' more pronounced presence in forms that rely on an emphasised physical performance and which are, consequently, seen as less valuable forms than others in cultural hierarchies. Comedy's transgressive and empowering possibilities for socially powerless groups stem from its low cultural status as a genre foregrounding physical performance. Further, comedy's signifying processes operate from an assumed common knowledge of social stereotypes, whether confirming or upsetting them; as such, women's displayed comic performance inevitably invites special attention to its relation to sexuality (ibid., 82).

Nonetheless, as histories of physical comedy, specifically of slapstick, attest, the genre has developed both on film and television centralising male comedians (see Boyle [2013] for these histories). According to this scholarship, the body's inscription with specific meanings in its confrontations with the outside world has existentialist connotations, expressing a struggle between the body/spirit split that originates in Christian thought. Alan Dale's account (2000) is indicative:

...slapstick is a fundamental, universal, and eternal response to the fact that life is physical. (...)

The word 'existential' sounds too tony for slapstick but indicates its prevalence in our experience. (Ibid., 11)

Boyle (2013) terms this notion of the comic Everyman's universality 'the neutral fallacy'. Complicating Dale's definition of the slapstick gag as a 'physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity' (2000, 3), Boyle points out that 'this hypothesis presumes that "dignity" can be located and fixed outside of gender, which feminist theory contests' (Boyle 2013, 91). Indeed, in Dale's considerations, slapstick's Everyman is gendered only in the ways in which his exasperation over the body/mind split includes a failed connection to his love interest (2000, 14). Both Dale and Alex Clayton (2007) explain women's historic marginalisation in comedy as rooted in the conflict between the hero's lack of dignity and women's cultural position. If the slapstick body is characterised by a 'comic dualism' (ibid., 146) as 'at once an object within the world (...) and a subject acting on the world' then the undignified moves and physical assaults involved (clumsiness, acrobatic contortions) are at odds with 'the dominant ideal of female beauty in patriarchal society' (ibid.). In short, the extreme physicality dominating slapstick seems unfit to express humour when its subject/object is the fragile, precious etc. female body (ibid., 148).

Theorists of slapstick regularly note the cultural contradiction around women's physical comedy, also devoting much praise to the few slapstick comedies centralising female comedians for the ways they subvert this. If the slapstick hero is a 'martyr' of his physical constraints (Dale 2000), then the slapstick heroine's martyrdom is located in her sexuality, a notion also connected to the fact that female comedians have traditionally been most visible in romantic and screwball comedies. Because the female performer is already located in a specific physical existence, her comedy forecloses expressing the existential, universal, fundamental, etc. conundrum of the body/mind dualism that the male comic's body offers. Rather, her comedy works as a struggle against her inferior position as sexualised object, and women's comedy

is often evaluated upon how successfully it does this. Such accounts often cite Katharine Hepburn's screwball comedies as high points of this effort. Clayton's description of the star's slapstick in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) accentuates how *ostensible* her physical indignities are: 'while her numerous accidents in the film (...) all result from a certain misplaced confidence, the film is less interested in scoffing at such assurance as it is in savouring her response to the mishap' (2007, 149). He contextualises Hepburn's performance paradoxically in an empowering desirability that stems from the ways she upsets gender norms, admiring 'the attractively androgynous qualities of her physicality' (ibid., 150; see also Dale's praise of Hepburn's 'blend [of] slapstick and sexual charisma' [2000, 129]). Hepburn's mode of slapstick is paralleled in the film's 'comedy of the sexes' narrative: her exceptional activity throws into relief who is in charge between the male and female leads, and the film is generally read as overpowering patriarchal masculinity and society in a romance context (Rowe Karlyn 1995b, 147–56; King 2002, 52–55).

Hepburn's case exemplifies that women's slapstick is inevitably created through the female performer's relationship to sexual connotations, and its execution is, especially in the post-second-wave feminist era, interpreted on the basis of its political (liberating) potential. Because of the historic cultural disdain for women's comedy, its practice continues to be entangled in the political project of struggling with this heritage. Boyle calls this a 'double bind' of women's (physical) comedy: the imperative to be funny is in conflict with the imperative to be politically transgressive, or, as she extrapolates, to be taken 'seriously' (2013, 2015). She maintains that the two projects, (physical) comedy and feminism, are conflicted since 'paradoxically, assigning a serious, counter-patriarchal function to female-authored comedy means that the female comic never really takes herself seriously as a comedian'

(ibid., 86) and vice versa. The 'you are either funny or pretty' dilemma translates for her into 'you are either funny or a feminist'.

While Boyle's concept is flawed in its unexamined and assumed bond between seriousness and 'disembodied' politics, it demonstrates the stakes involved in women's physical comedy as tethered to the politics of representation, and ultimately accounting for its value judgements. The release of aggressive impulses connected to 'existential' or 'universal' struggles in the slapstick canon, as interpreted by its theorists, translates into feminised forms as a struggle that remains within the physical sphere. Here the conflict is not between the body/mind split but revolves around how that body is to be read in the first place: sexual or beyond. The double bind Boyle describes may then be replaced with a question contextualised in the female body's location in comedy's political possibilities: can women's physical comedy be anything else than political, and can that politics ever be outside of the physical-as-sexual context? Karnick and Jenkins' summary of the scholarship on the carnivalesque emphasises the ideological paradox inherent in these possibilities: comedy allows for the 'exhilarating release from social control, as a source of transgressive pleasure' on the one hand, but on the other, it can also work as confirmation of a 'cultural community's most fundamental beliefs and values, directing its scorn against outsiders and nonconformists who threaten this basic order' (1995, 270). The comic female body is repeatedly entangled in these opposing forces, and the reading of its display (perhaps even regardless of the joke's and the female comic's intentions) is always conflicted among social communities whose dispositions are always dependent on raced, classed, and gendered factors among others (themselves linked to the social mores of different eras). In short, the

displayed comic female body is always inevitably political due to its conflicted 'inferior-yet-superior' cultural position.<sup>29</sup>

Boyle's discussion of the (for her paradoxical) notion of 'serious' or political comedy involving the female body evokes theorisations of the satire. The proposed opposition between feminism and physical comedy can be juxtaposed with comedy theory's statements about the uneasy relationship between satire and physical comedy/slapstick. Dale states that 'problems (...) arise when people try to take a work of slapstick seriously: they usually attempt to "elevate" it by praising it either as satire, which often seems overstated or wrong, or for its pathos, which is often enough right but which is to praise a comedy for the moments when it ceases to be comic' (2000, 17). (To foreshadow my argument, these two impossibilities for Dale aptly describe the basis on which *30 Rock* and *Parks* have respectively been included in the 'quality comedy' canon.) 'Low comedy' and 'serious' political intentions make strange bedfellows for King and Mills as well, as discussed earlier regarding the cultural hierarchies operating between the satire and the romantic or 'body' comedy, implying that only one or the other dominates in comedy.

If in this scholarship slapstick excludes, or eclipses, the political intentions of the satire, then the reverse must also be true, and this is clear in the quality comedy's case. More generally, since quality television is often praised as intellectual entertainment, it could be expected that it excludes physicality for the sake of aesthetic and/or political sophistication. But television's institutional specificities complicate this statement (as examined in Chapter 3): HBO's establishment as not-TV entertainment involved a calculated valorisation of explicit content paired with artistic motivations,

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<sup>29</sup> The 'sex war' debates in feminist thought originate from a similar tension between ideas of 'sexual liberation' versus 'liberation from the sexual(ised) body'.

positioned against 'regular' TV. However, for quality comedy, this strategy is not so straightforward; whether on cable or on network television, critics treat the 'distancing' from the sitcom tradition partly in terms of a foregrounded cerebral-verbal humour. Hypothetically, the mobilisation of explicitness, corresponding to cable drama's use of the corporeal, could be a turn towards a 'carnavalesque' mode of comedy. Granted, there have been instances of comedy capitalising on cable's sanctioning of explicit content, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm's* (McCabe and Akass 2007b, 62–63) or *Veep's* abundant use of profanities. But these are not 'body' comedies, i.e. they are not celebrated for a transgressive treatment of physical comedy, but for their use of verbal humour (however profane), improvisation, 'authored' mockumentary, and political-cultural satire.

The 'comedy of distinction' then strives to break away from sitcom tradition's reputation as 'low' comedy, including its physical associations. *Sex and the City* could provide an exception to this disregard of physical comedy, were its cultural work not located in a combination of political transgression around female sexuality, a 'cinematic' look, and verbal wit regarding its frivolous subject matter. As such, it uses the female body as transgressive for its politics, but not as a source of humour itself. This practice of the series tethers the female body to the pretty/funny dilemma of postfeminist times: the sexually liberated female body cannot be funny, or else it will not satisfy the parallel imperative of glamour and desirability anchored to its political transgression (Winch 2013, 79). Indicatively, *Sex and the City's* generic hybrid between comedy and melodrama excludes *comic* female physicality for the sake of politically infused sexual and romantic angst.

If physicality is not a much mobilised source of humour in the 'comedy of distinction', then women's physical comedy is inevitably bound up in even more complicated anxieties about its presentability. Because it is

so entangled in the politics of its meanings and because these meanings link it to 'low comedy', there have only been a few TV comedies, 'quality' or otherwise, premised on a central female character's physical comedy. As mentioned earlier, attempts such as *Fat Actress* or *The Comeback* were financially unsuccessful, even though both mobilised metatextual discourses around female celebrity, authorship, and comedy performance, and thus were, hypothetically at least, sufficiently linked to 'quality' discourse. *Fat Actress*, Kirstie Alley's metacomedy about her struggles in Hollywood after her weight gain, fared worse of the two, cancelled after seven episodes and unanimously panned by critics; while *The Comeback* was praised as a misunderstood gem and after some years recommissioned. These comedies' relative failure is connected to their mobilisation of female physicality as source of the character's indignity. The humiliations suffered differ however in the ways they are linked to 'quality' discourse and, importantly, to the kinds of physical appearance mobilised.

*The Comeback* critiques the entertainment business's sexism through the plights of the aging, but otherwise recognizably Hollywood-attractive sitcom actress. Here, physical comedy's emphasis on the discrepancy between performance and authenticity effects a sufficiently sophisticated cultural commentary for quality comedy. *Fat Actress* could however not be any blunter about its stance that its cultural commentary remains in relation to Kirstie Alley's discursive fatness, starting with the title (it could have been named, after all, 'Kirstie'). Indeed, critical reception dismissed it as a missed opportunity for exposing Hollywood's mistreatments of not conventionally attractive actresses, instead relying on an overabundance of (visual) jokes about Alley's body. Its failure as 'quality' amounted to not linking the fat female body to political representation but instead foregrounding its 'funny'. Further, if the initial reluctance with which *The Comeback* was

received can be attributed partly to Cherish's victim status as deluded has-been star, then *Fat Actress* cannot be accused of such diegetic treatment of its female protagonist. Fictional Kirstie is portrayed to be aware of, and blunt about, her reputation in show business as a 'fat actress', and the programme is premised on her directly mediated struggles with this position without the mockumentary framework. Consequently, discrepancies between 'authentic' and 'performed' self and the resulting indignities do not play such a crucial role in the programme's meaning-making as in *The Comeback*. Discursive victimhood does not gain such significance here, owing to the prominence of body jokes couched in the female protagonist's relative self-awareness and associated female authorship. Albeit the performer seems to wallow in excessively joking about Albeit the comic persona's fat body, hardly inviting interpretations of gendered victimhood. This trait inhibits the comedy from becoming 'quality' in its politics and aesthetics. *Fat Actress's* economic and critical failure seems to be rooted in its relative refusal to be political(ly observant) about the fat female body, foregrounding instead the 'funny' of its central meaning as diegetic problem.

The differences between *The Comeback* and *Fat Actress* illuminate a further aspect of women's physical comedy, namely the discursive link of its politics to cultural inscriptions of female bodies' anatomical 'types'. Arthurs and Grimshaw's (1999) overview of feminist scholarship on the female body emphasises its theorisation as the 'disciplined body'. Women's relationships to the body's cultural constraints are crucial in feminist writing and throw into relief 'questions concerning female agency, motivation, and pleasure' (ibid., 10). The political implications of women's physical comedy are then inseparable from contemporaneous social mores surrounding the 'acceptable' female body type, a notion especially fraught with problems in postfeminism's

much-examined connotation of empowerment rhetoric with visual representability. The specific body norms governing women's media presentation come to bear on evaluations of women's physical comedy, and the most prominent of these norms is to do with the dualism of the fat/skinny body, transposed to the dualism of excess/restraint or undisciplined/disciplined body. The politics of women's physical comedy are infused with the meanings that these contrastingly configured bodies express, but this is not always acknowledged in critical evaluations. For instance, examining the sitcom *Roseanne's* politics, Mills frames this in a contrast with Lucille Ball's comedy, concluding: 'it is arguable that Roseanne's refusal to be laughed at for her body, no matter how unconventional that body is, may in fact be a more radical gesture than Ball's unruly physicality' (2005, 117–18). Mills evaluates the two comedians' feminist radicalism based on their relationship to physical/verbal comedy in general, and does not consider the different cultural readings attached to the two 'types' of female bodies in question, coming to bear on the avenues of transgression offered to them. For Lucy/Lucille Ball's 'disciplined', middle-class body, this unruliness may manifest itself in 'excessive' acrobatics (similar to Katharine Hepburn's slapstick); but for Arnold, her body already labelled undisciplined, the comedy may be understood as more 'radical' if strategically turning the attention from her corporeal presence towards verbal wit.

Arthurs (1999) offers a useful concept accounting for this discrepancy, drawing on Mary Russo's (1995) influential work on the female grotesque. She differentiates between two dominant extremes of female grotesques in a consumer market economy: one is the 'monstrous and lacking' body, marginalised for its low-class fatness; the "'stunted" body who transgresses in her being', 'the passive repository of all that is denied by the sleek and prosperous bourgeois' (Arthurs

1999, 143). Her example is British stand-up comedian Jo Brand, but Roseanne or Melissa McCarthy's film persona also mobilise this type of female grotesque by complicating it with verbal wit and (sexual) agency (Meeuf 2016). On the other end of the spectrum are bodies that are not excessive in their being but become so by denying the limits of femininity associated with them, 'embracing the ambivalent possibilities of carnival through masculinisation' (ibid.). These are the active, 'stunting' bodies of acrobatic slapstick performers who might be conventionally attractive but express female agency by foregrounding 'funny' physicality. This classification shows that the issue of perceived anatomical body type can drive female comedians in different directions to express political subversion.

The female comedians central to *30 Rock* and *Parks* no doubt fit into Arthurs' second category of the female grotesque as they are both treated in media reception as attractive actresses transgressing in their comedy the boundaries that govern established readings of their displayed bodies. As will be shown however, the two programmes' physical comedies move in disparate directions, and these strategies are linked to the earlier discussed shifts in comic tone and genre prominent in their production histories. Since these shifts in emphasis are linked to refusals to develop comedy in the postfeminist romance category, instead foregrounding satire and workplace narratives, they are also efforts to create 'quality' via the female comics' thwarting of expectations of humour around sexual desirability and agency. Fey increasingly engages the 'unruly' female grotesque as source of comedy, while Poehler goes in a different direction with *Parks*' 'cerebral' humour and foregrounded earnestness around feminist concerns. Both of these strategies are embedded in a rhetoric of feminist transgression, but, as shown, it is Fey's comedy that became caught up in controversy about its questionable feminism. This was located in various connected

discrepancies, partly to do with quality comedy's unease with bodily comedy in general, and intensified with the complex problems that the *female* comic's authored physical comedy poses. Moreover, this particular comic's celebrity was already involved in articulations of feminist politics as cerebral and verbal comedy, reconciled in popular journalism with a postfeminist 'cover girl' image. Consequently, the female grotesque's increased prominence in *30 Rock* caused anxieties in popular reception, coming to bear on the programme's reputation both as 'quality' and 'feminist' entertainment. *Parks* in comparison solved the dilemma of Poehler's physical comedy by gradually removing it from the series' cultural work, or reserving it for the expression of an 'authentic' feminist subjectivity. 'Transgression' here operates as the refusal to offer the female body as an area of cultural contestations over its meanings. *30 Rock*, on the other hand, confronts these contestations head-on in the sitcom narrative's repetitive manner, occasionally even tapping into the conundrum of whether and how the comic female body can be read as political outside of the sexual spectrum.

### **3.A 30 Rock**

If Liz Lemon's 'failed femininity' (Mizejewski 2014, 26) is a parody of postfeminist femininities, then it emerges in discourses around the female comic's authorship as her personal choice not to sexualise the female heroine (see first section). However, Mizejewski posits that while voicing cultural struggles about sexual politics, *30 Rock* otherwise does not employ much physical comedy. She notes this when summarising the episode 'Mamma Mia's wrap-up, in which Liz only gets to appear on a magazine cover in a grotesque ('funny') pose instead of a glamorous one: '[n]either Tina Fey nor her character Liz Lemon is generally associated with bawdy, grotesque comedy, but the cover-girl episode of *30 Rock* strongly suggests that for both of them, gender expectations

about being pretty are rich comic material' (2014, 75). Here I want to qualify this assessment by demonstrating that both Fey and Lemon *did* become gradually associated with an increasingly grotesque and physical parody of femininity, and this episode is one which perhaps most metatextually realises this. Further, this particular trajectory is connected to, and a foregrounded characteristic of, the generic and tonal shifts taking place in the series' second season. *30 Rock's* physical comedy around the female lead greatly increased concomitant with its growing reliance on the absurdist satire of postfeminist dramedy. The humour employed mobilises tropes of the female grotesque; recurring jokes (both verbal and physical) involve virtually every aspect of Liz's obtrusively abject female body from bowel movements, menstruation, vomiting, hairiness, and sweat to markers of the conventionally unattractive and/or aging body, such as large backside, bad skin, and wrinkles.

Feminist blogosphere debates over the consequences of Lemon's increasing grotesqueness for women's representation demonstrate how prominent this feature became in *30 Rock's* later seasons. I demonstrated earlier how this debate also set up a discursive competition between the 'ideal' feminisms of *30 Rock* and *Parks*. Prominent in these discussions is the way in which they position *30 Rock's* physical comedy, specifically Lemon's grotesque femininity, as source of the missed feminist opportunity which *Parks* supposedly achieves. Some sample titles are: 'The Incredible Shrinking Liz Lemon: From Woman to Little Girl' (Holmes 2012) and 'Has Liz Lemon Become "Dumbass Homer"?' (S. Adams 2012). Liz Lemon's character trajectory corrupts quality comedy's reputation as 'grown-up' and intelligent entertainment in a medium otherwise seen as infantile, a reputation involving Fey's existing author image as 'to-be-taken-seriously' female comedian (Mizejewski 2014, 11). Further, Mizejewski notes that

feminist critics' disappointment with the series' gender politics has to do with a perceived incongruity between Lemon's visual portrayal as 'frumpy feminist' and the fact that '30 Rock does little to disguise Tina Fey's attractiveness' (ibid., 83).

Two interconnected themes emerge from the criticisms regarding the programme's treatment of women's physical comedy: first and predictably, both feminist criticism and the quality comedy discourse continue to be territories especially fraught with anxieties about the female comic's body in relation to its political meanings and cultural value. This is also evident in Boyle's (2015) concerns about blending 'serious' feminism with the comic's imperative to be funny, or in the collective critical refusal of Kirstie Alley's comedy of a fat body that is 'only' fat and beyond control without being sufficiently political and sophisticated. Second, in Lemon/Fey the attractive female comedian's treatment of desirability becomes questioned based on the 'reality' of said comedian's body. Put bluntly, the pretty comedian looks suspect for using physical comedy to express 'unruly' ugliness, a suspiciousness doubled with the dubious satire of a *feminist* subjectivity. Boyle argues that such treatments play into the hands of patriarchal beliefs: 'When the female physical comedian self-consciously highlights putative flaws in her appearance for comic effect (...) she reifies a singular, restrictive concept of gender performance' (ibid., 87). Similarly, when Lemon's hyperbolic grotesqueness is inscribed onto the attractive female body, it precludes for Fey's feminist critics the possibility of an authentic feminism, and becomes retrograde in its misguided self-deprecation.<sup>30</sup>

As Sadie Doyle puts it:

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<sup>30</sup> This Fey/Lemon tension evokes romantic comedy's trope of the attractive (female) performer playing an 'ugly duckling' who gets a makeover as narrative twist, revealing her (and the star's) 'real' self. Since makeover discourse is already prominent in Fey's star text (see Mizejewski 2014, 72-74), signalling broader cultural anxieties about women's cerebral humour, it becomes mobilised again for explaining the perceived Fey/Lemon discrepancy – as a 'reverse' makeover. This surfaces in Fey's often repeated statements that while she can be dolled up to pose on magazine covers, she secretly prefers to play awkward nerds who represent better her 'authentic' self (Fey 2011, 5–6). Further, flashback scenes of *30 Rock* showing Liz in unflattering wigs and clothes

The character of Liz Lemon is played by beautiful, successful, smart, funny, apparently happy person Tina Fey, and is meant to be unattractive, only semi-successful, smart, funny, and unhappy. It's interesting that 'smart' and 'funny' get to stay in the picture, as long as the looks, the success, and the happiness are toned down; it tells you something about who you're allowed to like. (2010)

The characteristic for which Lemon became a celebrated point of identification in her early media reception, namely her 'deeply flawed' femininity, was recognised in the backlash years by critics as becoming too exaggerated to be authentic to feminism.

Since it revolves so much around both the fictional character's and the comedian's desirability and anatomical features, the backlash can also be considered according to Arthurs' concept discussed above. The two distinct categories of female grotesque invite radical possibilities for female comedians to upset cultural expectations. For the 'stunted' female body, marginalised for her 'passive' fatness/ugliness, this unruliness can manifest itself via presenting an actively desiring female subjectivity combined with critical wit. The opposite, the 'stunting' body, denies the imperative of female bodily decorum by upsetting the meanings inscribed onto her conventionally feminine appearance. Arthurs' example for the latter is the monstrous and 'witch-like' Patsy (Joanna Lumley) of *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-2012), a much-examined character for British theorists of gender in comedy, whose unruliness was influenced by Lumley's pre-existing star text: 'we are not just contrasting her grotesque performance with an abstract idea of feminine norms of bodily decorum but with her previously established star persona as the epitome of upper-class, classical beauty' (Arthurs 1999, 146).

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are regularly explained in paratexts as reflecting Fey's pre-makeover look. 'Ugliness' is then here constructed not as a physical feature but as cultural status and identity to negotiate the Fey/Lemon tension. If Fey is considered then in some media discourses a 'real' feminist, this evaluation has much to do with her star text's constant reminder of, and emphasis on, a pre-makeover identity.

If the two, in themselves already marginalised, types characterise the female grotesque of contemporary media, then Lemon/Fey pose a problem for their allocation in this matrix, which might account for the intense controversy around their (lack of) feminist potential. Nominally, Fey the postfeminist cover girl is incongruous with Liz the ugly and frumpy feminist with the large buttocks, pigeon-toed walk, and nasty eating habits. If the 'stunting' physical comedian expresses feminist unruliness by combining an enhanced version of femininity with an accelerated masculinity of behaviour, then Liz hardly fits this mould. Her visual portrayal and her environment's constant appraisals of her as masculine and ugly position her in the former category, that of the 'stunted', passive (albeit middle- and not lower-class) female grotesque, 'transgress[ing] in her being' (ibid., 143). Portrayals and storylines of later seasons demonstrate how Lemon increasingly becomes the carnivalesque grotesque 'spectacle' that Rowe describes in relation to the unruly woman. She transgresses precisely those pollution taboos that the carnivalesque female body upsets in her being and behaviour: apart from her eating habits which provide a recurring gag both visually and verbally, many of the 'cringe' elements of *30 Rock* emerge from jokes about her bowel movements. She gets diarrhoea on a date with her handsome neighbour Drew (Jon Hamm) and becomes exposed to him sitting on the toilet while a foul smell wafts from her direction ('St. Valentine's Day'). She gets food poisoning from a dodgy sandwich on a road trip, and is repeatedly shown hugging the toilet ('Stone Mountain'). The episode 'Reaganing' has a flashback scene in which Lemon chattily shares with Jack embarrassing anecdotes like this: '...and I'd been on the toilet so long my legs had fallen asleep, so when I tried to stand I just fell into my throw up.' Jokes about her menstruation are a similar constant in later seasons (e.g. 'Standards and Practices'), and these and numerous other frequently referenced aspects of her leaky

female body's abject liminality, be it bad breath, sweating, flatulence, or hairiness, are usually framed by Jack's abhorrence. In these examples, Liz's female body functions as the manifestation of the 'lower stratum' in Rowe's account of the Bakhtinian grotesque: '[w]here the classical body privileges its "upper stratum" (the head, the eyes, the faculties of reason), the grotesque body is the body in its "lower stratum" (the eating, drinking, defecating, copulating body)' (1995, 33). Mizejewski similarly references the Bakhtinian concept in her analysis of the 'Mamma Mia' episode's denouement, which shows Liz posing on a magazine cover in Lederhosen, squatting over a toilet and pretending to give birth to a rubber chicken (2014, 75).

Rowe's concept, like Arthurs', understands the grotesque female figure as liminal already in her physical being, both in terms of 'copiousness' and sexual appetite; and these traits provide her with a feminist potential (1995, 48-49). If for Rowe the excessive female body expresses an out-of-control appetite, including sexual appetite, then the latter is emphatically reversed, and replaced with an out-of-control *lack* of sexual desire in Liz. The 'Reaganing' episode mines the potential for grotesque comedy in this lack-as-excess. A therapeutic discussion between the two leads reveals that Lemon's 'performance' issues come from a traumatic childhood memory, shown in flashback with Fey in a bizarre 'preadolescent girl' costume: she once fell over in roller skates with her underwear down while grabbing a Tom Jones poster, and was found in this pose by an aunt.

Further, the grotesque comic woman's theorisation connects physical uncontrollability with excessive speech, as a 'failure to control the mouth' (ibid., 37). Here, Lemon fits the concept: her 'mouthiness' is another constant of the series, both literally in the structuring screwball exchanges with Jack, and in a broader sense, coming partly from her social status as comedy writer and from her affective portrayal as

stubborn and loud defender of strictly defined values. (This aspect of the character discursively connects her to Fey's own cultural status as comedy writer and stern observer of gender relations; which, in an even broader association, accounts for the programme's cultural position as female-centred *quality* – sophisticated and cerebral – text.) The carnivalesque female mouth is a repository of both physical and intellectual connotations, but as noted, in this concept these connotations are 'never innocent when attached to the *female* mouth': they suggest 'an intrinsic relation among female fatness, female garrulousness, and female sexuality' (ibid.). Lemon's position does not fulfil this description fully (anatomically, and in its relation to sexuality), and this discrepancy accounts for the intense debates in feminist receptions of *30 Rock*, discussed earlier in relation to Fey's star persona as negotiating the ideal of the postfeminist celebrity body.

If Fey explains in interviews Lemon's excessive disinterest in sexuality, and the utilising of physical comedy at the expense of sexual desirability, as a mode of empowerment for the female comedy author (see chapter 4/1), then these features position the fictional figure in the second type of Arthurs' female grotesque, the 'stunting' female body. This body transcends its preferred readings as primarily a sexually desirable object by demonstrating its other possibilities. However, this mode of grotesque needs performed desirability as a reference point for it to make sense, as in Hepburn's star text or in Patsy Stone's parody of hyperfemininity as masquerade. Lemon's portrayal upsets this imperative because the text positions her body (extratextually coded as desirable) simultaneously as 'stunted' female grotesque. Such an ambiguity regarding Lemon's status as female grotesque is an overdetermined result of the series' and its star's position both in quality discourse and in discourses of postfeminist desirability. If she is portrayed as the 'stunted' female grotesque, liminal in the

overemphasis on her abject bodily functions, then this is articulated as a resistance to the postfeminist codes of sexual agency, itself a contested notion in Fey's author/cover girl image. The extent to which its purpose is to refuse the imperative of sexual desirability determines the comedy of the 'stunted' female grotesque: both the lack of sexual appetite and the excess of literal appetite become exaggerated features of comedy, and their precise meaning – empowering or humiliating – is a constant source of tensions.

If Liz as 'stunted' female grotesque emerges due to a 'stunting', that is, actively chosen, mode of female transgression – i.e. she is frumpy and sloppy because she/Fey do not bother to abide by the codes of postfeminist femininity – then this is a problematic trajectory because of Fey's celebrity as cerebral feminist come postfeminist cover girl. Indeed, the frumpiness and jokes about the feminist woman's body multiplied on the series significantly following Fey's increased exposure in popular media, allowing critics to lament that Liz's figure became a pathetic caricature of her former portrayal. Thus, the communicated 'empowerment' in Fey's authorly choice to play Lemon against postfeminist womanhood and to develop *30 Rock* as a rejection of romance in generic terms, became seen in reception less as empowerment than retrograde humiliation. The structuring paradox in this tension is that in Fey's communication, creating bodily comedy about the female subject that is not rooted in sexual desirability is an act of self-liberation (so supposedly feminist and 'authorly'); but this is an impossible notion precisely because it is so much embedded in the text's association with *intellectual* feminist politics and comedy, starting with the fact that the heroine is constructed as a witty parody of popular feminism.

Yet Lemon's grotesque portrayal still strives to be interpreted as empowerment for the failed feminine/feminist character, echoing

paratextual discourses about Fey's agency as female comedy author. This portrayal is linked to the programme's 'quality' features, namely to its efforts to develop complex narrative and joke structures. Lemon as parody of postfeminist femininity in her grotesque, as in unfeminine and sexless, womanhood is carefully offset with a confirmation of agency and with her explicit rejection of the romance narrative, a characteristic also prominent in the text's constant metatextual refusal of a Jack-Liz romance. In the most overt instances, as indeed in the 'Mamma Mia' episode, Lemon initiates many of these gross performances of unfeminine femininity, and they often function both as culmination and resolution of plot. In the episode 'Black Light Attack!', she lets her moustache, nicknamed Tom Selleck, grow out to help Jenna compensate for her anxieties about aging publicly. The scene in which she presents Tom to the world showcases both Liz's subjectivity and the staff's horror as she walks down the corridor in slow motion. The moustache itself is more of a Frida Kahlo than a Selleck, signalling a 'real' image of female facial hair as opposed to comic exaggeration, but the upheaval it causes *is* hyperbolically comic precisely due to the moustache's 'realness'. Lemon has a blast being hairy while publicly eating, drinking (milk, nonetheless), and laughing with a full and open mouth at a male writer who retches at her sight. The scene is counterpointed with a shocked Jack who looks on in the background while in the midst of a scheme that involves convincing an employee that he is in love with Lemon. Lemon's 'unruly' excess as female agency is balanced out with, and does not work without, an exaggeration of her environment's disgust at it – the comedy emerges from this contrast.

Other examples abound: In 'The Tuxedo Begins', she dresses up as a cartoonish mixture of a bag lady and Heath Ledger's Joker character from *The Dark Knight*, spending the whole episode in the costume to prove a point to Jack about the misery of urban living, again revelling in

the performance of repulsive female physicality. In 'Apollo, Apollo', she permits Jenna to show to the staff embarrassing footage of her in an early 1990s TV advert for a phone sex line; here, her colleagues' rowdy amusement is countered with Liz's resigned observations. At the raucous laughter following a close-up image of her and another woman trying to sexily eat a greasy slice of pizza, she comments: 'I remember that girl. She cried all day.' These instances show Lemon as revelling in or at least owning up to her environment's revulsion over her gross bodily performance, be it a Chaplinesque waddle due to a bunion surgery ('Aunt Phatso vs Jack Donaghy'), a number of awkward dancing scenes ('Flu Shot', 'Retreat to Move Forward', 'Black Light Attack!', 'Dance Like Nobody's Watching' etc.), and any instance of hearty eating. Whether throwaway joke or narrative twist, this active acceptance of her unfeminine body reads as calculated resistance to the eroticised context in which postfeminist womanhood is commonly articulated (i.e. sexual-as-empowered). This notion of resistance resonates with the extratextual trajectory of Fey's growing popularity and her star text's parallel sexualisation: it throws an ambiguous light on popular media's production of meaning around the celebrity body via contrasting the funny/pretty body.

The aforementioned episode 'The Tuxedo Begins' merits further examination for the ways it uses Fey's physical comedy in the quality comedy context, and also because this episode often serves as shorthand example for Fey's preference to play 'ugly' for comedy at the expense of glamour (Ess 2013). I finish this discussion with a detailed analysis of the episode to demonstrate the complexities of the programme's body politics. The main plot is structured around a Jack-Liz debate on yet another sociocultural issue, starting with Liz lamenting her fellow city dwellers' inconsiderate behaviour in public places. Jack suffers a mental crisis after getting mugged at the beginning of the

episode, and the duo's disagreement revolves around how urban living can be handled in a zeitgeist marked by recession and overpopulation. Jack insists that his mugging was a sign of class war and proposes to 'save' the city and protect the elite's rights by running for mayor. Liz is first bogged down in her exasperation with people ignoring common rules of decency, but an epiphany makes her leave behind her strict ethics, instead vowing to outperform her fellow citizens in selfishness. This decision is the rationale for her crazy costume change that becomes increasingly outlandish, and positions her as cartoon villain.

Early in the episode, Liz dresses up as a homely old lady in a sketch to fill in for Jenna who refuses to look ugly and old. This scenario reaffirms that Liz lacks feminine vanity while now also living in a happy relationship: 'Maybe I should wear this home', she says studying herself in the mirror, 'Show Chris what he will be looking at in forty years. Looser skin, same underwear'. When she later notices that the costume provides her with more space on the subway, combined with a horrid cough, a smell emanating from her gym bag, and her yelling nonsense at people, she decides that the only way to survive in the city is 'to sink down into the filth'. Thus ensues her increasingly grotesque turn into the crazy bag lady, and, as the plot becomes more obviously a *Dark Knight* parody, into Ledger's Joker (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). 'Sinking down into the filth' then unites the carnivalesque woman's monstrosity and the (male) cartoon villain's amorality: the abject body and the abject intellect. The Jack-Liz debate recreates the film's opposition between the morose superhero and the crazy clown supervillain, similarly configured as a fight for the city's 'soul'. However, it is only Liz for whom this involves a bizarre costume change; for Jack, wearing a tuxedo throughout the episode suffices to perform the role of 'privileged masculinity in crisis' and to satirise this trend in television and cinema.



Figures 4.3 and 4.4

Liz's comic costume transformation into the menacing clown figure's iconic version can in its first stage be interpreted in the terms of the female clown who, as Mizejewski summarises, is a marginal figure in traditions of the grotesque carnivalesque because of her associations with the 'witch, spinster, or hag' (2014, 21). If the classic male clown represents potentially sympathetic non-normativity in his resistance to authority that can also be mobilised in the romance narrative, then the female equivalent, the ugly crone, is harder to reconcile as sympathetic point of identification due to her non-compliance with normative codes of femininity. Liz's first transformation as smelly old woman cruising the subway and the streets of Manhattan fits with this tradition, and also with the series' consistent jokes about Liz as old and ugly spinster. Wearing a crone clown costume seems to logically fulfil Liz's overarching portrayal in a cartoonish comedy. Further, the carnivalesque nature

of this female unruliness is rounded off with other, sensory aspects of her abject body, repository of dirt and leakiness: she blows her nose, has an ugly cough throughout, eats boiled eggs while laughing maniacally, and her gym bag stuffed with smelly workout clothes becomes her signature weapon. But the crazy hag visually turns into the Joker, and the Liz-as-spinster gag begins to function as Joker parody in the plot's overall metatextual paralleling of the film's serious themes. If the hag costume literalises Liz's cultural status, then her turning into the Joker in this intellectualized plot overrides the female clown's feminine abjectness. The Joker already functions as receptacle of overdetermined meanings, partly confirmed in the Nolan film. Not least, these include his readings in queer theory as 'stereotype of gay and transgender panic' (Bishop 2015). The Joker is already a satire, albeit a menacing one, of (hetero)sexuality: his villainy represents a constant threat to Batman's multiply coded ubermasculinity, an aspect that became his manifest trait as supervillain (gay innuendo, drag) in Batman comics of the 1980s and onwards (e.g. *Arkham Asylum* [Morrison and McKean 1989]), to which the film briefly alludes as well.

The woman-as-hag-as-Joker connotation throws into relief both the traditions of the problematic female clown and of the menacing male clown in Fey's performance of the female grotesque, 'stunting' and 'stunted' at the same time. On the one hand, melting the hag into the Joker works towards liberating the female clown figure from connotations that tether her to the 'physically monstrous *female* other' context. The intellectualizing plot that revolves around an issue of community and values, ascertains that the hag is read in this context and not a primarily gendered one. Further, the Batman satire helps interpret it as 'comedy of distinction' in which the female grotesque plays a pivotal role. On the other hand, she still remains the monstrous other in the debate, and when the hag turns into the Joker she also

turns into a figure onto whom a nexus of gender and sexuality transgressions are emphatically inscribed. This modifies the presumed liberation from the monstrous female other – in that she melds with the monstrous male other. While the episode strives to express a new kind of ‘unruliness’ for the female grotesque by inserting her into an intellectualized plot and thus shedding the hag’s meaning as *gendered* other, it also underlines the figure’s modes of upsetting gender binaries.

Masculinisation is a key term for the female grotesque as performance, and the gendered ambivalence it expresses accounts for its popularity in camp culture. Arthurs notes in relation to *Absolutely Fabulous*’s Patsy that the character’s parody of hyperfemininity and hedonism became appropriated for drag performances, a trajectory that eventually allowed for her popular readings as ‘really a man in drag’ (later confirmed on the programme as well). For Arthurs, this reading ‘recuperates’ the female grotesque’s radicalism, since it reduces her transgressive ambivalence to a definitive ‘clue to her identity and behaviour’ (1999, 160-161). In Lumley/Patsy ‘we have a woman playing a woman who can be appropriated as “really” a man’ (ibid., 148), eclipsing the original reading as that of a woman playing an ‘authentically’ unruly woman. In contrast, Fey playing a woman who performs abject femininity as the hag, who transforms organically into a fictional man associated with upsetting gender norms (masculinity and heterosexuality), results in accelerating the anarchic potential in the female grotesque’s ambivalence instead of tying it down. For the hag’s metamorphosis into the Joker does not ‘fix’ her meaning as ‘really a man’ but rather upsets *his* menacing meanings: just as the whole episode mocks the Batman franchise’s po-faced masculinity, so the Joker parody says, ‘he is *really* an old hag’, performed by a woman (Liz) enacting a version of abject femininity (the hag). Because the episode never explicitly admits the allegory (unlike most of others), this

interpretation, however obvious, remains dependant on the viewer's recognition. Further, Liz's Joker costume and makeup keep their ambivalence visually such that the 'Joker' could still be read as a crazy old woman with overdone and smudged makeup. Textually Liz remains the hag, and the Joker impersonation happens only metatextually, even though the allegory function overtakes the episode without much remaining 'realism'.

The episode's busy connotations and allegories are all inscribed onto the female grotesque whose performance initiates both the overdetermined codes of 'quality' comedy, and also the ambiguous treatment of gender. They strive to confirm that the glamorous female comedian can perform grotesque femininity in a way that occludes the pretty/funny problem (since the 'issue' allegory overrides the 'hag' performance's associations), and the resulting chain of codes blurs expectations about gender whether as performance or identity. The episode then ends up a strategic undermining of gendered comedy around femininity and heterosexuality at the same time as it appears to overcome this whole tradition in favour of intellectual, 'quality' comedy.

That the storyline's meanings are ambiguous about overcoming or, on the contrary, centralizing physical comedy as about femininity and heteronormativity, is further nuanced in the episode's B plot, revolving around Jenna and her female impersonator boyfriend Paul Lastnamé (Will Forte). This relationship's serialised arc serves as mockery of the hedonism associated with celebrity culture, and at the same time as example of 'edgy' and progressive portrayals of sexual relations. Functioning to 'humanize' Jenna's cartoonishly self-centred figure, her love story with Paul is shown as an obvious match since his biggest success as drag performer is his Jenna impersonation. The 'progressive' attack on heteronormativity is then rooted in Jenna's extreme vanity; her ideal partner is herself, or at least a man looking like herself –

simultaneously upsetting and reaffirming codes of heteronormativity. Further, a recurring joke about the couple is their decadent sex life (possibly a comic take on *Sex and the City's* Samantha [Kim Cattrall]), which is disturbed in 'The Tuxedo Begins' by the threat of settling into normalcy as one night they accidentally fall asleep without having sex. Instead of accepting this as common trajectory of a settled relationship, they decide to view it as a new fetish they dub 'normalling'. When the revelation strikes that their everyday activities together are indeed just 'couples' stuff', they agree to take a break in the relationship to both go on a 'sexual walkabout'. This storyline unfolds parallel to Liz and Jack's, in the wrap-up showing a partial diegetic connection between the two. As that other plot is resolved by Jack/Bruce Wayne throwing Liz/the hag/Joker into a pile of garbage on the street, followed by the two leads agreeing on the moral of the story, Paul and Jenna observe from a distance arm in arm. To Paul's comment 'Reminds me of us', Jenna dreamily reminisces: 'I'll never forget the first time you dressed up like an old lady and I threw you into some garbage'.

Thus, this couple's story of 'progressive' love further informs the A plot's tacit commentary on the ambiguity of gender roles (plus it continues to mock the idea of a Jack-Liz romance), but here in excessively sexual terms to balance out the excess of both Liz's lack of sexual appetite and, extratextually, the female comic's desexualisation. This continued duality is evident in the ending, which also serves as closure to *The Dark Knight* parody, in that it contrasts the film's sinister aesthetic with Jenna's comic hypersexuality. The camera slowly pans away from Jenna to show the dark Manhattan skyline (Paul has just run off in a pink wig and without underwear to find new sexual partners), and the episode's signature score imitating the Batman franchise's agitated string music returns to underline the connection with the film. Quality comedy's 'smartness' is again expressed via voiceover like in the

'Stride of Pride' episode's *Sex and the City* parody, providing the punchline to the joke set up by the stylistic imitation. This time the voice is Jenna's (she 'authors' this scene), who monologues to the dark city's image thus: 'New York City. Villains and heroes. The one percent and the ninety-nine. Eight million people in this crazy beautiful city, and I, Jenna Maroney, am going to go to town on every last one of them.'

### **3.B *Parks and Recreation***

I demonstrated earlier that *Parks*' positioning in the quality comedy cohort involved a paratextual association with the 1970s female-centred comedy, or 'warmedy'. Willa Paskin's (2011) review is especially direct about this connection, praising the programme's 'old-fashioned' nature. This means for her that *Parks* lacks the 'cringe' moments so characteristic of today's celebrated smart comedies, or in her term, 'comedies of discomfort'. Her analysis also shows that if cringe is replaced by 'niceness' on *Parks*, then this works as comic excess, or repetitiveness, of that niceness within character development:

Has a sitcom ever had so many characters that are variations on 'sweet, kind person?' The driven sweet, kind Leslie; the goofy sweet, kind Andy; the grounded sweet, kind Ann; the guarded sweet, kind Ben; and Ron, whose mustache only hides the sweet, kind guy lurking underneath. (Ibid.)

The most hyperbolic expression of that niceness is Chris Traeger (Rob Lowe), who functions as the programme's self-reflexive commentary on its own excessive reliance on optimism as storytelling strategy.

The programme's hyperbolic sweetness is paired with a toning down of physical comedy around the comic heroine, and foregrounding her aspirational feminist politics. Humour of humiliation and discomfort is, as mentioned earlier, projected onto the buffoon character

Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry who is even denied his own name; and he is also the figure most frequently involved in slapstick gags around incompetence, clumsiness, and the leaky and large comic body. The episode 'Halloween Surprise' plays both his uncontrollable body and his environment's 'cruelness' towards him to excess: when he has a heart attack triggered by Leslie and her friend Ann's (Rashida Jones) prank, the colleagues' genuine worry for him is mixed with ridicule as the attack is accompanied by his explosive flatulence, occasioning jokes about the 'fart attack'. That this portrayal works as strategic counterbalancing of the programme's overt niceness is demonstrated in scenes where Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry is seen in his (overly nice) family circle: in the episode 'Jerry's Retirement', Leslie is shocked to realize that not only is he surrounded by adoring family members, but that in his own house, i.e. in a domestic environment, he is not a clumsy loser at all. When in Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry the series admits that the figure of discomfort and humiliation is a necessary function of contemporary workplace comedy (since he is positioned as such only in the workplace setting, one of American television tradition's central locations) it also associates with this function an emphasis on *physical* cringe comedy.<sup>31</sup> Put another way, this 'comedy of super niceness' presupposes moving physical comedy to its fringes in favour of intellectual-verbal comedy at the same time as it removes the 'cringe' aspect. But such a shift in humour towards 'niceness' is apparently a little too old-fashioned without a tongue-in-cheek reference to more 'cynical' (Paskin's term) modes of humour, hence the featuring of Jerry/Garry/Larry/Terry as eternal butt of slapstick jokes.

As noted, the series links the toning down of physical comedy around the female heroine, including the female grotesque, to a progressive feminist politics. Leslie's affective portrayal after the first season as fully

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<sup>31</sup> This admission becomes explicit in the episode 'Park Safety' when Ron explains to the camera Jerry's function in the office precisely in these terms.

deserving the political goals to which she aspires presupposes her visual portrayal as that of the intellectualised female body, meaning an effective negation of that body as sexual object, and simultaneously, as central comic object. Since Poehler's star text was never really imbricated in such discourses as Fey's was (cover girl, makeover narrative, female authorship), and neither did the series foreground her body as spectacle in the way *30 Rock* did Fey's, no such struggles around the pretty/funny dilemma were overtly present in the series' narratives and in its media reception.

However, the question of the comic female body does come up in *Parks*' portrayal of Leslie, which is connected to the series' struggles to configure its novel take on the mockumentary-style workplace comedy. The course-correction between seasons one and two from mockumentary's comedy of discomfort towards 'niceness' also involved a recalibration of physical comedy around the heroine. The short first series (consisting of only six episodes) based much of its humour on Leslie's over-the-top enthusiasm and its inappropriateness; and many of these gags were structured around Poehler's physical comedy. This also evokes the postfeminist chick flick's use of slapstick, in which physical humiliations of the heroine tend to establish a link between physical, professional, and romantic incompetence. One of the most prominent of such gags occurs in the pilot, in a scene in which Leslie falls into the pit she intends to turn into a park, while inspecting it. Her blind delusion is evidenced in the monologue just seconds before the fall, as she describes her (comically oversized) plans for the future park: 'Imagine a shiny new playground, with a Jungle Jim and swings, pool, tennis courts, volleyball courts, racquetball courts, basketball court, regulation football field. We could put an amphitheatre over there with Shakespeare in the Park'. As she tries to descend into the pit for a photo opportunity, her slip and fall are captured in mockumentary's aesthetic

(long shot, whip pan, zoom-in, blurry image), enhancing the contrast between her head-in-the-clouds attitude and 'reality'. Crucially, this contrast is articulated in slapstick comedy's terms, that is, between her high-flying ambition and her clumsy comic body drawing her down, awkwardly contorting, rolling, and tumbling to finally stop at the literal and metaphorical bottom (see Figures 4.5-4.7).



Figures 4.5-4.7

Leslie's body *could be* theorised here as the slapstick body in scholarship's terms, that is, as body-as-machine (a recurring description

of Keaton's or Chaplin's physical comedy, see Clayton [2007, 91-94]), in its rigidity struggling with laws of nature and thereby expressing the fundamental contrast between body and mind. Yet, if '[t]he slapstick hero's skill at deploying his paradoxically acrobatic clumsiness is central to his status as an Everyman' (Dale 2000, 14), then Leslie's fall, however clear an attempt to follow a comedy tradition, is caught up in ambiguous meanings, and only semi-successful in achieving this effect. This is because the slapstick *female* body offers other iconographic connotations, with the butt and spread eagled legs pointing to the sky in a tight skirt, and, after stopping at the bottom, lying limply on her back in the dirt with one shoe missing. Whether associated with sexual vulgarity or victimhood, this sequence shows why the efforts to play up Poehler's physical comedy in the context of mockumentary's cringe tradition were abandoned subsequently. These efforts showcase the female slapstick body in the male-centred tradition of that body as struggling and failing against its environment; but the above inscriptions are hardly reconcilable with the genderless and universal 'body-as-machine' or 'body versus environment' meanings, instead resonating with issues of representation. The narrative context that positions Leslie's social identity as post-second-wave female career politician, expressed in the outfit (grey skirt suit), amounts to the ridiculing of *this* figure. As discussed, women's slapstick mainly exists in romantic comedy, and in that, as a body that triumphs in this context even in its clumsiness. This triumph follows from the discursive retention of desirability (Hepburn) and/or from the acrobatic skill celebrated both for its physicality and the politics it represents (consider Lucille Ball's housewife appropriating public spaces).

Developed within sketch comedy's traditions, Poehler's comic persona during her tenure at *SNL* was mainly understood in the latter terms. For instance, her popular recurring character Kaitlin, a hyperactive and

chatty girl wearing pink Minnie Mouse pyjamas, glasses, and braces makes use of Poehler's energetic and cheerful persona in its physicality, the humour stemming from the discrepancy between this attitude and her tiny frame (e.g. *Kaitlin at the Mall - Saturday Night Live* 2013). Displaying an out-of-control possession of stage space (running and jumping around, climbing on furniture), the performance also involves a similarly out-of-control vocal expression: her signature gag is to repeatedly shout 'Rick-Rick-Rick' at her stepfather, the contrastingly laidback, quiet, and large Rick (Horatio Santz), and to bombard the weekly host with a chain of absurd questions. As a small, preadolescent girl, Kaitlin is also an effort to make use of Poehler's comic body type by desexualising it. Here, the female grotesque mobilised is that of the 'stunting' body in Arthurs' term: in Kaitlin, Poehler's comic body as spectacle is used to 'transgress the norms of femininity by denying the limits of [her] female bod[y], embracing the ambivalent possibilities of carnival through masculinisation' (1999, 143). In Kaitlin's case, masculinisation amounts to de-feminisation, i.e. to ridding the body of markers of adult femininity.

If Poehler's pre-*Parks* physical comedy was that of the 'stunting' female grotesque, marked by a transgression of feminine decorum, then positioning it in 'cringe' mockumentary's aesthetics caused a discrepancy of ideological meanings. The first season offers several instances in which the female politician's masculinisation results in her humiliation rather than 'empowerment'. This strategy comes eminently to the fore in the episode 'The Banquet' in which Leslie attempts to join the 'boys' club' of politics by showing up at an event sporting a tuxedo and a short, masculine haircut. The humour stems from her misplaced pride at this seemingly feminist act, contrasted with her obliviousness to everyone's amusement and Ann's embarrassment as they are mistaken for a lesbian couple. While cross-dressing can be considered a

transgressive act of the 'stunting' female grotesque as theorised in feminist scholarship, Leslie's inability to read the cultural inscriptions on her own chosen bodily display undermines such ideological subversions. Mockumentary's cultural work operates here in its original meaning, that is, in revealing a conflict between social performance of self and 'actual' self. However, while this method works in comedies like the British *Office* to demonstrate a universal condition of labour relations, here the satire is aimed at the 'genuine' state of a 'feminist' womanhood in the workplace setting, lampooned in its bodily expression. Leslie reads her attire as 'empowered/ing' (omitting to notice the loaded meanings of 'masculine'), while her environment (and the viewer, supposedly) reads it as 'butch lesbian'/'cross-dresser'. The humour relies on a shared recognition that not only are these identities encoded in fashion choices but that they present comic incongruities. However, since the programme was reportedly developed to express political progression in women's portrayals (being Poehler's star vehicle), such meanings were abandoned in the long term, which involved getting rid of the feminist career woman's mockery in her physical display.

Abandoning strategies that would ridicule Leslie's feminist aspirationalism, the show in later seasons reconfigured Poehler's comic physicality and performance of the female grotesque (including associations of the single career woman). This abandonment of ridicule corresponds to the postfeminist chick flick's gradual decline in American cinema by the mid-2000s (Negra 2017) and to the discussed popularisation of feminist rhetoric in public discourses. In this, the series followed a different trajectory from *30 Rock's*, eventually relinquishing grotesque femininity as central element of the narrative. At the same time, Poehler's minimised physical comedy was increasingly replaced with mobilising her skill at vocal work and impersonation – Rowe's

unruly woman is mainly present here as the out-of-control female mouth. This characteristic overlaps with Liz Lemon's and *30 Rock*'s in that verbal sparring dominates the working woman's portrayal and plays an important part in constructing 'quality' comedy. The rebooted second season's first episode ('Pawnee Zoo', also the first with an 'issue' storyline, here about gay marriage) opens with a scene at the office in which Leslie bursts out rapping the full third verse of the 1980s hip-hop song 'Parents Just Don't Understand'. This scene comprises the whole of the cold open and has no narrative significance. Its only function is to set the new season's mood and to display Poehler's mock-rapping skills without any double-edged commentary on Leslie's performance of self in mockumentary's fashion, painting her as sympathetically silly. Leslie's rapping even gets genuine applause from the colleagues, something that would have been out of place in the first season's character relations. The jump-cut scene in 'The Hunting Trip' similarly makes use of Poehler's vocal imitation skills, the performance in that case both embedded in the narrative, and also confirming Leslie's 'authentic' feminism. Leslie/Poehler's vocal skills are also showcased for instance in 'Park Safety' or in the episode 'Ron & Jammy' in which she impersonates in jump-cuts Ron's ex-wife Tammy 2 (Megan Mullally).

The series' remaining physical comedy is rearranged to not only neutralise gendered connotations, but to replace contempt among workplace colleagues with 'genuine' comradeship. The comedy abandons the satire of the workplace in the ways that Hight (2010) and Middleton (2014) lament in the Americanisation of the British *Office*, i.e. it configures it 'as a space of individual and interpersonal happiness and fulfilment' (ibid., 142). Still, comedy of discomfort rooted in incompetence is not completely abandoned; a scene in the episode 'The Comeback Kid' offers an example of this. Producer Mike Schur describes the scene in question as an uncharacteristic and 'physically

uncomfortable scenario' around which the whole episode was written (E. Adams 2012). Its plot revolves around Leslie's public announcement that she will enter the race for city council. Due to a shoestring budget and her colleagues' mistakes, the event goes massively wrong: they book an ice-hockey rink for the venue; the podium, built by Ron, is too small and lacks stairs; the campaign banner shows an enlarged quarter of Leslie's face; and only the first few seconds of the entrance music (Gloria Estefan's 'Get on Your Feet') play on a loop as she and the entourage enter the rink. Since her assistant was also unable to secure a red carpet that goes all the way to the podium, Leslie and the gang continue the rest of the way tiptoeing on the ice in a long slip-and-fall slapstick sequence. This scene, the episode's narrative highlight, has been praised as one of the best executed gags of the series, both mining the slapstick potential gradually to its limits, and also functioning as narrative and character development: the gang, shuffling and slipping towards the stage, struggles to keep *Leslie* on her feet, with Ron eventually dropping to all fours to serve as a step for her to climb up, or rather for the others to shove and push her onto the stage (Figures 4.8-4.12).





Figures 4.8-4.12

The workplace ensemble's collective struggle towards a common goal becomes literal as physical comedy here, emphasising that this is all in service of realising Leslie's political dream. Mockumentary's satire of incompetence is reversed on affective terms: the first season's character dynamic where everyone mocked Leslie as incompetent and inappropriate is here distributed evenly among the group since the whole collective is at fault for the disaster. The scene exploits the genre's contrasting of disingenuous public performance and 'reality' as they try to smile and wave their way to the stage; and it is the rally audience who function as incredulous witnesses to the group's failure. But the event, however disastrous, happens in the first place because of Leslie's popularity among the team, and *this* results in the physical comedy gradually enveloping all of them. The comedy trope of 'ragtag group of misfits prevail by helping one another' (Heisler 2012) overturns the mockumentary's ideological work such that it celebrates workplace incompetence and inappropriateness if mobilised to help the feminist woman achieve her goals.

The female protagonist is still much involved in physical comedy, but her role in this changes. As seen in Figure 4.12, her arrival at the stage ends in her lying limply on her back to regroup; this position offers itself to be contrasted with the one in Figure 4.7 (Leslie lying at the bottom of the pit). While in both instances the camera angle and the long shot correspond to mockumentary's relationship to its objects, that is, 'looking down' at them and observing from the distance, the implications are different: in the earlier example, the POV is that of her colleagues making fun of her; in the second, it is that of the rally audience watching the bundle of doubled-over bodies of the same colleagues, holding Leslie up and doing their pratfalls. Leslie's misery is not only her own, and the filming does not gender her physicality the way the pit scene does. Contrasted with the pilot's visual and narrative

treatment that singles Leslie out from her environment, comradeship is here reinforced mockingly and affectively at the same time. Schur comments that this scene's group arrangement visually resembles the Iwo Jima Monument, with Leslie being the human flag that the others are trying to raise (see Figures 4.10 and 4.11), encapsulating the comedy's operation both as group slapstick and as a relationship to its own ideology (E. Adams 2012).

The physical comedy's set piece nature in 'The Comeback Kid' is not only an expression of cooperation but its singularity also illuminates the series' otherwise muted reliance on slapstick. Indeed, if physical comedy is mobilised around the female heroine, it is to underline Leslie's enthusiasm, couched in some form of cooperation and affective relationship. It also mostly involves dancing and dress-up. In the previously mentioned 'Filibuster' episode, her silly 1990s roller-skater garb lightens the political theme, and earlier in the episode she and boyfriend Ben (Adam Scott) perform a dance routine in their costumes. In 'The Comeback Kid', she attempts to break-dance in her camera confessional to celebrate re-entering the race; in 'Halloween Surprise', she and Ann start dancing enthusiastically after she decides to buy a house; in 'The Fight', Leslie and Ron's conflict is resolved via her dancing to and reinventing the lyrics of Billy Joel's 'We Didn't Start the Fire', culminating in the pair's reconciliatory rendition of the song. While these examples function to reinforce Leslie's energy and comic relatability to counterbalance the ideologically argumentative plot around the feminist politician, they also stand out as incidental in the programme's larger narrative trajectory. The body politics accompanying this narrative force gendered slapstick into the background in order to construct the female politician as primarily intellectual subjectivity, a characterisation also dominating the series' humour as 'sophisticated' entertainment.

*Parks* then mobilises a different mode of comedy from *30 Rock's* to express women's comic performance and imagery. While both series are concerned to narrativise a politicised resistance to the pretty/funny dilemma dominating discourses about women's comedy, Fey's sitcom centralises the female comic's body in self-referential narratives to showcase its possibilities and boundaries, and *Parks* strategically abandons it in order to articulate a rhetoric of respectability politics. This strategy affects the programme's tone not only in its reliance on verbal and political comedy, but, gradually towards its sixth and seventh seasons, in its mixture of comedy and melodrama. The 'niceness' and empathetic character treatment of *Parks*, somewhat similar to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, eventually effects an affective tone with muted irony or mockery, best exemplified in the Leslie-Ben romance but also evident in portrayals of friendship. Mills notes that comedy usually avoids openly emotional characterisation methods, as psychological realism is more consistent with drama's and soap opera's modes of expression. These forms enhance the audience's emotional involvement via a shooting style which entails the frequent use of close-ups, a less preferred shot in comedy (2005, 85). Mills' examination of the series *Friends* (1994-2004) demonstrates how that programme balanced comedy and melodrama in a way that illuminates the difference between comic *performance* and (melo)dramatic *acting*, the former effecting a degree of emotional detachment, the latter empathetic audience involvement. *Parks* frequently exhibits a similar mixture of modalities in later seasons. The shooting style adapts to this shift, reducing mockumentary's visual vocabulary around observational distance (long shots, shaky cam etc.). A scene at the end of the episode 'Smallest Park', where Leslie and Ben make a pivotal decision about their relationship, abandons comedy for the sake of affective narration; the dialogue accordingly contains only a few jokes and turns serious by

its finish. The camera gradually zooms in on the actors' faces to capture emotions and reactions, concerned to establish this as a moment of serious or 'realistic' tension and sentiment. In this, the remnants of mockumentary aesthetic (handheld camera, blurry image, re-focusing) are used against their original ideological intent: as the camera aims to catch 'genuine' behaviours and emotions, the style returns to a pre-mockumentary state which could be called, in these instances at least, documentarism. Such modalities are mostly present, as this scene demonstrates, in the romance narrative and other intimate relationships like friendship and solidarity. The 'progressive' political narrative appears to presume a partial return to television forms ('warmedy') and aesthetic methods (documentarism) associated with earlier cultural periods.

The increasing sincerity of generic and stylistic strategies corresponds then to an earnestness about feminist politics on *Parks*, evoking Boyle's (2015) concept that women's (physical) comedy and the intent to express feminist transgression are at best uneasily reconciled. This is an operative sentiment for *Parks*, which also effects its celebratory comparison with *30 Rock* in media reception as more progressive in its portrayal of women and women's comedy. A great deal of that critical judgement is rooted in *Parks*' emphasised turn away from women's *physical* comedy and from the practice of cringe slapstick. Since *Parks* expresses female unruliness via foregrounded intellectual-political narrative around the career woman, the occasional physical comedy is mostly present in service of the narrative's 'feminist' intentions.

As *feminist* and *quality* television, body politics are a pivotal issue for the two comedies, on which both the configuration of aesthetic-ideological meanings and their critical appraisals hinge. A similar

ideological intent nevertheless leads *30 Rock* and *Parks* in dissimilar directions in their usage of physical comedy and in exploring the question of 'female experience in public spaces'. The issue of physical comedy and slapstick looms large for media reception's evaluations of their 'feminism' and 'quality'. In *30 Rock*, the abundance of Liz's physical comedy in later seasons was argued to have undermined a convincingly progressive feminist rhetoric. As shown, Fey's physical comedy is pivotal to plotting, resulting in constant negotiation processes among intellectually-aesthetically 'superior' narrative, a mobilisation of feminist concerns, and the ideological tensions already inherent in women's physical comedy. Efforts to focus on the female heroine's idiosyncratic physical comedy, precisely because of the differing imperatives of these paradigms, account for both the text's noticeable struggles to offset them, and for critical reception's unease.

Representative of this problem is the episode 'The Natural Order' and its mixed critical reception for a backwards treatment of gender and race politics (West n.d.). The episode rehashes an already dramatised 'issue' narrative around the different ways 'women' and 'black men' are treated at the workplace. In this iteration, Liz and Tracy feud over who gets undue preferential treatment based on gender/race, occasioning another exercise in a social experiment with the opposed parties forcing the other to accept what it means to have 'full equality'. This leads to Tracy being expected to behave like a professional adult and not a spoiled TV star (so in his case race and celebrity discourses collide), and Liz to be treated as literally 'one of the guys'. She is forced to participate in 'masculine' activities, like changing a heavy water bottle and going to a strip club with the male writers. Reviews lamented the episode's illogical politics conflating 'equality' with 'uniformity', again illuminating how the series' 'quality' features are associated with its identity politics, thanks to its own appeal to these as narrative foundations. Yet the

political plot allows the series to foreground another set-piece physical comedy from Fey: when Tracy challenges Lemon to replace the empty water bottle without help in the name of 'equality', this culminates in a prolonged slapstick gag of the '(wo)man against inanimate object' kind in a mostly dialogue-free sequence. Lemon's minute-long battle with the bottle, splashing water everywhere and repeatedly missing the cooler's opening, fully exploits the opportunity to showcase the slapstick comedian's skill at interacting with her physical environment.

If Poehler somersaulting downhill in the pit scenario amounted to the comic female body's contradictory usage for its visual execution and narrative function, ineffectual in achieving 'acceptable' slapstick for women, then the Lemon-versus-water-bottle scene works better in positioning itself in the genre's iconography.<sup>32</sup> As such it is a clear example of the programme's efforts to make women's physical comedy attainable in a 'non-gendered' tradition – yet it achieves this by positioning it within a heavily politicised plot around gender and race. The episode's political clumsiness, and this scene's set-piece position (stopping the storytelling around the halfway mark in favour of fully playing out the incident) suggest that the political plot is subordinated to physical comedy and not the other way around; in other words, the political plot is an excuse for Fey to display her slapstick skills.

The method of emphasising Fey's body comedy in a way that reinforces the 'quality' comedy's aesthetic sophistication is a recurring strategy on *30 Rock*: the episodes 'Sandwich Day' and 'Jackie Jormp-Jump' are memorable in their overdetermined combining of displayed comic performance and stylisation. Both use a long-take sequence of Fey's

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<sup>32</sup> The slapstick gag of man vs water bottle is a recycled one: e.g. the sitcoms *Ellen* (1994-1998, 'The Hand that Robs the Cradle') and *Joey* (2004-2006, 'Joey and the Critic') both executed it. For these series, the scene is pure sitcom gimmick characteristic of multi-camera TV comedy, i.e. an insulated gag for the sake of comic performance, and not integrated with plot. Contrastingly, *30 Rock* both embeds the sequence in 'quality' comedy's convoluted plotting and inflates it: much longer than in these earlier instances, it is played more to its limits via repetition and extended interaction between diegetic space and body.

medium close-up (their length fairly unconventional on American network television) to forward narrative as played out on the actor's face, effecting a comic shtick. In 'Sandwich Day', Liz/Fey eats a whole sandwich in one go (and take) to get through airport security. In 'Jackie Jormp-Jump', the minute-long close-up tells the story of a day when Lemon hangs out with a group of rich socialite women and indulges in their activities (spa, plastic surgeon's office, sushi restaurant etc.) without noticing the passage of time (Figures 4.13-4.20). The story plays out fully on Liz's face (and via her monologue), isolated from its environment and moved into an imaginary space that the viewer's recognition fills with 'realistic' context (helped by colour-coded background and props). This gimmick foregrounds Fey's facial performance and separates it from the rest of the diegetic space, reinforcing aesthetic singularity in the filming method.







Figures 4.13-4.20

These sequences use close-up against the conventions of melodrama and soap opera, preferring the comic possibilities of the human face instead of seeking emotional involvement – again demonstrating the different aesthetic strategies between *30 Rock* and *Parks*, stemming from their different relationship towards the question of how feminist politics and the female body can be mobilised in the quality comedy. *30 Rock*'s 'face' examples work similarly to the 'The Natural Order's full-body slapstick sequence in that they negotiate between narrative and 'show-stopping' comic performance. But the critical failure of the latter's political story arc points to the contradictions in which female-led quality comedy is caught up, and from a perspective directly opposed to *Parks*': if *30 Rock* strives to be progressive in constructing physical comedy that strategically *overcomes* the sexual connotations of the female body, and the sexual/feminist politics in which it is inevitably

entangled, it relies on an overdetermined politicising of plot around gender to achieve this. In contrast, an emphasised political motivation causes *Parks* to ditch women's physical comedy almost altogether, even though its central comedian's star text emerged on *SNL* as a discursively transgressive (feminist) foregrounding of physical comedy.

Ultimately, the two comedians' pre-existing star texts, including their differing involvement in discourses of 'feminist' entertainment, of women's physical comedy, and of female authorship, come to bear on the ways their respective sitcoms struggle to articulate a feminist politics in the 'comedy of distinction'. *Parks* tempers Poehler's earlier bodily comedy as 'stunting' female grotesque in favour of earnest and intellectual feminist politics, effecting shifts in the series' generic signifiers (mockumentary) and modalities (comic versus melodramatic). This indicates more generally the cultural unease with narrativising women's political and identity struggles in the comedy framework. That this unease is linked with tensions around the female body's representability in comic forms surfaces in the way feminist rhetoric on *Parks* seems to necessitate the neglect of Poehler's physical comedy. *30 Rock* contrastingly insists on the possibility of a successful melding of these, in the process constantly at pains to secure its position simultaneously in the 'quality' cohort (aesthetic innovation) and as feminist television (politicised plotting); both of which are thoroughly complicated by the intensity with which the series promotes Fey's physical comedy.

## CHAPTER 5

### Case studies II – Dramas

#### 1. Cultural status and genre in the female-centred prestige drama

While comedy's cultural position and its connection to sanctioned cultural transgressions allow for a relatively prominent female presence and authorship, the dramatic mode is a more complicated area to negotiate this presence. TV scholars agree that feminism's influence on the medium has primarily meant the relative abundance of women-centred situation comedies (Rabinovitz 1999; Dow 1996; Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016), and according to industry truism, female performers have better chances at making a career in half-hour comic forms than in prime-time hour-long drama. Similarly, comedy provides more opportunities to foreground female authorship: the female comic performer/comedy writer has become a prominent figure in post-millennial American television. This trend mobilises the 'comic alter ego' trope of comedy traditions (Roseanne, Kirstie, Cybill, Ellen, Fey/Lemon, Cherish/Kudrow, Amy Schumer, Lena Dunham/Hanna Horvath, Mindy Kaling, the double act of Abbi and Ilana in *Broad City*) where comic meaning emerges from the perpetual interplay between fictional character and 'author'. This mode of comedy is influenced by stand-up traditions, and provides fertile ground for centralising gender politics via the inexhaustible tension between performance and authorship, 'enacted' self and 'real' self (Gilbert 2004). It is partly due to this relationship, and its rootedness in embodied performance, that quality comedy has been a more welcoming form for female-centred narratives and authorship than quality drama. In the latter, performance (visual presence) and authorship are rarely intertwined in discourses around modes of expression and cultural value. The notion of the author-

mastermind emerges here as an intellectual but not embodied presence, existing outside of/above the text and within paratextual, critical, and industry discourses (Newman and Levine 2012, 38–58).

The issue of women's representation in television and cinema has predominantly revolved around screen presence (women 'in front of the camera'), corresponding to women's traditional location in art history. Consequently, the idea of female authorship as purely intellectual presence ('behind the camera') has been a much thornier issue in debates about gender in dramatic forms (see Tasker [1998, 201–203] on discussions of female film directors' public personas and gendered authorship). Academic accounts of post-network quality drama's masculinism stress that this extends beyond the text's aesthetic features and involves discourses around the male author-genius, complicating television's previous understanding as un-authored and feminine medium (Newman and Levine 2012, Lotz 2014, Martin 2013, Bigsby 2013). Quality drama's accelerated masculinisation, including authorship discourses borrowed from art history, accounts for the contradictory situation in which the medium previously derided as 'feminine' evidently struggles in its prestigious formats to reconcile female presence; understood both as female talent in front of and behind the camera, and also as gendered cultural meaning attributed to television.

While female authorship and centralised female subjectivity have always been scarce and problematic in American television drama (as *Cagney and Lacey's* production history attests, recorded in detail by Julie D'Acci [1994]), it is in the current context of 'non-televisual' and 'masculine' quality TV that this historic difficulty surfaces with higher stakes than previously. This contentious negotiation has in recent years taken a more pronounced turn due to the new trend of 'feminist quality TV'. For instance, *The Huffington Post's* Zeba Blay announces and

examines 'How Feminist TV Became the New Normal' (2015), as programming focused on 'difficult men' in millennial quality TV becomes overshadowed by series with 'complex female leads'; thus attributing foregrounded female subjectivities in fictional programming to feminism. Blay's article cites programmes of different formats and institutional backgrounds as influenced by this trend, highlighting the upsurge of *quantity* in prestige programming across the board. The article celebrates a transition in representational politics of race and body image, and the attendant media dispute over television's responsibility around representational 'realism'. *The Atlantic's* Kevin O'Keeffe (2014) also describes 'TV's renaissance for strong women' as a matter of representational diversity, citing *How to Get Away with Murder's* (2014-) central protagonist Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) as prominent example of progressive transgression both in terms of racial diversity and in the programme's portrayal of an 'unlikeable' leading female character.<sup>33</sup> O'Keeffe's description of 'a Walter White among women' creates a link between gendered categories of prestigious television, while invoking existing hierarchal positions and favoured avenues of emulation. However, he sees a crucial imbalance in these representational trends, chalked up to institutional context: in his estimation, network television is more accommodating to the 'strong female character' than cable due to the former's broader audience

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<sup>33</sup> Blay's article discusses as epitome of transgressive portrayal the series' famous scene in which tough lawyer Keating slowly removes her wig, fake eyelashes, and make-up to dramatic music ('Let's Get to Scooping'). Similarly to Blay, publicity discourses herald the scene as 'one of *the* most revealing moments on television" (*Viola Davis on Her 'How to Get Away with Murder' Scenes* 2015). Within the context of representational transgression as quality TV, it is notable that this portrayal's link to highbrow drama's depiction of complex male characters revolves around getting rid of the markers of a raced femininity, and thus around an *embodied* tension between public performance (masquerade) and 'genuine' black womanhood. The trope of a woman removing her wig/make-up in front of a mirror is in TV's and cinema's visual vocabulary traditionally linked to female duplicitousness and monstrosity, as characteristics associated with villainous female protagonists' desire to gain social power. While here signifying a cleansing process, the *mise-en-scène* evokes Glenn Close's Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988) wiping her make-up off in shame, but Kimberly Shaw (Marcia Cross) dramatically removing her wig in *Melrose Place* (1992-1999), or Tilda Swinton's Karen Crowder and her anxious ritual of donning her lawyer garb in *Michael Clayton* (2007) also come to mind. However, in discourses around the complex *and raced* female character, this trope struggles to express authenticity and relatability, inscribed onto the black female body and encapsulated in her (removal of) accoutrements of femininity, thus modifying the trope's original associations. The narrative still involves female duplicitousness but if it is positioned as the monstrosity of a power-hungry woman it becomes justifiable as complexity or 'reality' of character, of which this scene operates as key depiction.

reach and targeting of women viewers: 'cable has become a boys' club, and network TV is the true land of women' (ibid.). Both Blay and O'Keeffe describe these shifts in representation as emerging in the early 2010s, the 'only outlier' being Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies) of *The Good Wife* with her few years of head start (ibid.).

Feminist academics contextualise such representational changes in recessionary culture's broader social-economic background. Diane Negra (2015) argues that while 'quality' TV has until recently been understood as 'masculinised' TV, the recent ubiquity of the 'strong female character' in series like *Orange*, *Homeland* or *The Good Wife* provides narrative-affective frameworks for making sense of economic precarity in American life, channelling female anger and a 'negotiated/situational morality'. Negra describes these (anti)heroines as 'troubled by forces that are shown to be systemic and social' and thus '[the programmes'] importance lies in the critiques they can generate of our current affective marketplace' (ibid.). Kathleen McHugh's (2015) examination of *Orange* and *Top of the Lake* expresses a similar stance. She sees these series as premium examples of feminist quality TV in contemporary female-centred television, describing them as feminist interventions in the postfeminist representational paradigm, since they 'share deep structural concerns with power, inequality, and gender-based violence' (ibid., 18). The specific production contexts and authorship discourses betray for her a feminist politics, also accounting for the series' singular aesthetic-narrative traits; in short, their political motivation produces their superior aesthetic and cultural value.

If TV critics interpret the 'feminist turn' in recent female-centred quality drama as a breakthrough in women's portrayals on post-network, post-recession quality television, then this notion of success corresponds to a more general understanding of the recession's impact on gendered narratives of success and crisis. Negra and Tasker's (2014b) examination

of these narratives outlines popular culture's ascription of an imbalance to the recession's impact on men and women, contrasting dramatisations of troubled masculinities with narratives around female (economic) success. Similarly, Suzanne Leonard interprets the emergence of female-centred TV dramas like *The Good Wife* as media representations where 'women routinely serve as symbols of financial vitality', contrasted with 'male insignificance' in the workplace (2014a, 51).

While academic works situate media texts in the post-recessionary *financial-economic* context of female success and male crisis, the dualism corresponds to the logic inherent in popular writings on representational trends of gender in quality television, evidenced in the above cited think pieces. These journalistic accounts interpret the programmes' increasing engagement with social critiques of women's oppression and gendered adversity as female-centred television overthrowing the expired 'masculinity in crisis' narratives (without describing these female-centred programmes in terms of a 'femininity in crisis' or 'troubled womanhood'). In doing so they translate the thematic trends which feminist academics locate within popular texts into the terms of industry trends. Fictional critiques of female precarity and institutional oppression become a success story for women's representation and for 'feminism' in critical evaluations of quality television's gender dynamics. The progress attributed to this category revolves around the question of character complexity as key marker of both quality and gender representation: 'quality' here means feminist intervention with the effect that protagonists become more complex, morally ambiguous, and diverse than before, recycling the terms on which highbrow quality drama articulates masculinities. Yet, while character complexity is the buzzword habitually used to measure both of these gendered subjectivities' significance, such shared attributes

perform different cultural work: the complex female character, regardless of narrative context, stands for feminist success and the legitimation of a female subjectivity (*strong* female characters), while her male counterpart's ambiguous morality mediates anxieties about *fragile* patriarchal masculinities and their tenability.

While journalistic and academic discourses around gendered quality TV tend to revolve around character complexity and thematic concerns, the differences drawn as 'masculinity in crisis' versus 'female regrouping' say little about the complex relationships between such characterisations and traditional television forms or tropes of aesthetic-narrative 'complexity'. Female-centred (melo)dramatic storytelling is nothing new in American television and a significant body of scholarship exists around the topic. A comprehensive account is Amanda Lotz's *Redesigning Women* (2006) which examines the unprecedented increase of female-led TV dramas around the millennium. Lotz advocates for the review of existing analytical tools, and for considering television's institutional and economic shifts, in the examination of this trend. Attributing the period's upsurge in female-centred programming to the acceleration of narrowcasting, itself connected to cable television's increased dominance, she contends that the prevalence of female-targeted cable channels like Lifetime or Oxygen in this time organically led to the ubiquity of fictional content incorporating 'women's issues' storytelling. Her approach centralises generic attributes, such that the book is structured around 'types' of dramatic forms most influenced by such female-centred content. Of these, she views the workplace drama as the form in which diachronic shifts in women's representation are most obvious, due to the form's prominent position in American TV drama history on one hand, and to the discursive centrality of the issue of women's depiction outside of the home and in workplace narratives on the other (*ibid.*, 144-164). Her

examination of the Lifetime series *Strong Medicine* (2000-2006; a medical drama) and *The Division* (2001-2004; a cop drama) emphasises that the former's episodic format is better suited for incisive dramatisations of 'women's issues' and for concentrating on patients and women's health issues via disease-of-the-week storytelling, than the latter's serialised narration focusing on central characters' individualised melodrama. *Strong Medicine* 'educat[es] viewers through fictional storytelling' (ibid., 151) and is 'feminist in nature, providing a service for women beyond narrative entertainment' (ibid., 153), while *The Division* 'offers little innovation, tells few original stories, and mainly provides a different version of the cop series by exploring interpersonal relationships among officers more than the work they perform' (ibid., 155).

Lotz then evaluates the programmes' alignment with feminist concerns by considering the modes of their incorporation into television's narrative forms (episodic versus serialised). The question of cultural value, or more specifically these examples' relationship to discourses of post-network quality television is not addressed – although she briefly notes that the series' innovation is due to the niche audience focus, relative low cultural status, and limited budget of a cable programmer like Lifetime. This cultural position stands in obvious contrast with that of cable programmers producing high production value original content; Lifetime's reputation as female-targeted channel that modernised the 'women's weepies' in the TV movie subgenre is an easy target of parodies in US culture (not least on *30 Rock*) precisely for its 'feminine' aesthetics and storytelling. Further, the importance Lotz ascribes to *episodic* storytelling for incorporating feminist material is at odds with quality drama's valorisation of high concept serialization, and poses the question of how contemporary female-led quality drama negotiates these gendered hierarchies of storytelling.

In Lotz's account also reverberates a generally held belief about the hierarchical position among genres. For cultural critics, drama is the ultimately desired form to fulfil the obligation of progressive female representation as 'true' innovation in gendered storytelling. As argued earlier, this distinction goes back to the disparate cultural position of serious/funny storytelling where the former is understood as more 'genuine' representation and the latter as a comparatively distorted reflection of reality (Mills 2005, 22). The historic scarcity of women protagonists in highbrow dramatic forms speaks to the polarised cultural value of drama and comedy (Rowe Karlyn 1995a), and following this logic, the unease that this signifies has to do with drama's 'genuine' nature as opposed to comedy. Such discursive distance from a dignified 'realism' is similarly true for female-targeted melodrama with its associations with over-the-top pathos, gendered victimisation, and physically excessive audience (over)identification (Williams 1991; 2014, 107–36). If these genres are further removed from the 'realism' of representation than drama, then the gender disparities among them follow from ascribing a similar, hierarchal dynamic between the representability of male and female subjectivities: female experience is traditionally portrayed as further removed from 'realism', again confirming the feminist adage that patriarchal culture normalises male/masculinised experience.

Academic and journalistic accounts demanding or celebrating more female presence in prestigious dramatic forms are always at risk of reproducing this logic of value hierarchy; the carving out of a female space within the higher echelons of artistic representation runs the risk of reinforcing such differences in pursuing a relative proximity to representational 'realism'. When Bridget Boyle (2015) detects a discrepancy in the 'feminist comedy' phenomenon, her concern is that feminism as 'serious' or direct political effort is hard to reconcile with

the genre's aesthetic intentions; implicitly assuming that 'serious' representation is in closer proximity to 'reality' than comedy. Likewise, Lotz's repeated use of phrases like 'educating' audiences when discussing the recent increase of 'women's issues' themes in TV drama, betrays this concern with the 'real', equated with 'serious'. This link motivates popular and academic critical evaluations of feminist concerns' narrativisation in television, also inscribed onto character development. The pursuit of 'real' representation effects ideals of cultural value for female-centred drama that are markedly different from the male-centred quality drama's existing signifiers. It additionally creates the much-discussed divide between prestige dramas along gendered lines, as the two quoted articles by Blay and O'Keeffe exemplify.

'Realism' has a special resonance for television's representational trends which have been established in their difference from those attributed to film. In their survey of debates around television drama's ideological work, Thornham and Purvis summarise these as rooted in a core contradiction between 'television's ubiquitous sense of "nowness"' and its appeal to realism on one hand, and the imperative to organise the 'disorder of reality' into 'recognisable, meaningful and safe' forms on the other (2005, 66). Onto television's understanding as unique purveyor of a narrativised reality is inscribed its inherent feminisation (the 'fluidity' and 'formlessness' of mass culture), contrasted with cinema's 'more coherent, structured – and prestigious – narratives' as masculine features (ibid.). As the authors note, these contrasting characteristics also apply for the hierarchies existing among television forms: 'those forms of television which have sought to identify themselves as "serious", as concerned with "quality", as producing "difficult knowledge" rather than "easy entertainment", have sought on the one hand to identify themselves with realism and on the other to

distance themselves from the general “flow” of “television itself”, with its “trivialising” tendencies’ (ibid., 67). Current female-led television drama strives to occupy precisely this cultural space: for instance, the ‘difficult knowledge’ that the vision of a black woman removing her wig and make-up on *How to Get Away with Murder* produces as ‘serious’ entertainment and as heightened ‘quality’ of realism, emerges by appropriating the terms on which television’s ‘genuine’ and masculine-coded realism has historically operated. Meanwhile, the ‘difficult knowledge’ produced by ‘masculine’ highbrow drama involves the pursuing of an aesthetic-narrative singularity associated with cinema. Quality drama’s much-praised aesthetic superiority is caught up in the contradiction that Thornham and Purvis describe: the cinematic aesthetic and self-contained narrative of high concept dramas strategically departs from previous prestige television’s discursive alignment with a narrativised ‘realism’ and ‘nowness’. It is now female-led quality programmes whose cultural value is marked by an alignment with representational realism and political ‘nowness’, producing their own gendered distancing from ‘the general “flow” of “television itself”’. In this way, the historic gendered differentiation as described by Thornham and Purvis continues to exist within quality drama’s establishment, even in the discursive praise of ‘feminist quality drama’ and its overcoming of both the masculinist and postfeminist paradigms.

Prestige drama continues then to yield distinct generic and aesthetic markers influenced by a gendered address. This is prominently governed by television’s historic discursive relationship to representing ‘reality’ as opposed to cinema’s investment in creating ‘fantasy’. The lively academic debate around the ‘aesthetic turn’ is similarly divided along an ideological line governed by the dualism of aesthetic and political analysis. Scholarship arguing for the legitimacy of aesthetic evaluation (Mittell 2015a, Dasgupta 2012, Nannicelli 2016, Logan 2016)

bemoans the dominance of political approaches in television studies and considers it a methodological obstacle (Logan 2016). As dominant strand of political analysis, feminist scholarship centralises questions of representation as a potential aspect of cultural value. While this has also started to investigate how female-centred programming negotiates masculine-coded quality TV culture (Lagerwey, Leyda, and Negra 2016; Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016), the two academic discourses rarely overlap.

An exception to this divide is Amanda Lotz's work since she has separately studied both the female-led drama's millennial popularity in *Redesigning Women* (2006) and the prestige male-led drama's representation of masculinities in *Cable Guys* (2014), the latter considering prestige cable television's aesthetics. Her approach champions a narrative of progress inscribed both onto the examined texts' presumed feminism and, in *Cable Guys*, onto the higher cultural value they represent in industry and media discourses. In *Cable Guys* she posits that these texts signify a departure on television not just aesthetically but in their progressive alignment with feminism *as* male-centred television (as such, she understands the 'masculinity in crisis' trope as feminist).<sup>34</sup> Her political stance is directly opposed to scholarship sceptical of quality TV's gendered hierarchies, the seminal example being Newman and Levine's (2012) work. Their engagement with the minutiae of classed and gendered processes in the legitimation of cinematic quality TV is a useful intervention into the quality trend's celebratory analyses, but provokes the question of how quality television's existing and historically influential invocations of feminism and the attendant relative prominence of female protagonists relate to this. The June 2016 special issue of the journal *Television and New*

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<sup>34</sup> Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* (2015a) argues similarly, positing that the aesthetic complexity of contemporary 'quality' TV (although he disapproves of this term) involves a political complexity of gender relations (see next section).

*Media*, focusing exclusively on *The Good Wife*'s cultural work, addresses this question of political and aesthetic evaluation (Miller 2016, Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016), but such a simultaneous consideration of these approaches is rare in scholarship. Put another way, while much has been written about the ways in which the male-centred quality drama re-purposes storytelling traditions of television's derided female-targeted forms, especially the soap opera and melodrama, the recent academic and journalistic focus on female-centred drama has not yet engaged much with how this trend relates to the prevailing paragon of prestigious televisual aesthetic.

The two programmes selected as case studies are well-suited for examining quality drama's alignment of masculine-coded aesthetic value with a discursive feminism, since media reception hails both as quality and feminist entertainment. In academia, the latter perspective dominates; i.e. with the 'quality' status taken for granted, scholarship tends to examine the texts' politics. This is also true for Jason Mittell's short study of *The Good Wife* in *Complex TV*, demonstrating as it does how the series' 'progressive' gender politics affects its 'complex' storytelling (2015a, 258–59). Media discourses similarly position the programmes as pioneers of highbrow drama's specifically female-oriented modifications. As O'Keeffe's article indicated, these see *The Good Wife* as precursor of the 'strong female character' trope and of the narrative emphasis on female experience in prestige drama. Broadcast on CBS, the network associated today with procedural crime series and franchises mainly targeted at older audiences, TV journalists considered the programme at its debut in 2009 exceptional both for its focus on a female lead and for its serialised political narrative (Flint 2013); and it is still regarded as CBS's flagship entry into the prestige drama category (Adalian 2016, Goldberg 2016). As will be shown, *Orange*'s promotional campaigns since its 2013 launch highlight both its

aesthetic singularity and its concentration on diverse womanhood in order to establish Netflix's reputation as prime programming brand with female-targeted and -centred quality content. While a number of other series followed *Orange* on Netflix mobilising similar marketing strategies (e.g. *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, *Jessica Jones*), the series continues to be seen as the content provider's flagship prestige series targeting female audiences.

Apart from the programming context and promotional strategies, the two series are also useful to unpack how the negotiation of two discursively irreconcilable major components – the masculine-coded quality show's stylistic features and female-led drama's politics – redefine the aesthetic-narrative terms in which television appeals to cultural value, supported by reception and industry discourses. By way of a prelude to the individual analyses, I provide an analytic overview of a common characteristic of the two series that both use to reconcile the 'feminist' and 'quality' monikers: the programmes speak to and contest a notion of specifically marginalised female subjectivities as key component in their inception and cultural positioning. This usage emerges in the following aspects: theme and characterisation technique as novelty trait of the quality series; stylistic-generic markers resulting from this thematic focus; and finally the programmes' broader understanding in their respective institutional environments as problematically categorisable within the quality cohort.

As thematic device, the centralisation of otherwise marginalised female experiences works as a dominant issue to create dramatic tension that is reproducible for convergence television's storytelling practices. Both series are known for a novel storytelling style via focusing on subjectivities typically excluded from prime-time narration. *The Good Wife* unusually centralises the 'wife' in the scenario of the high-profile politician's sexual scandal, and the wife figure also allows the series to

intertwine this serialised political plot with the legal procedural's episodic structure. Alicia's position as 'underdog' (both as politician's wife and as attorney re-entering the workforce) allows for a narrative mobility between the husband's world of high-profile politics and the legal workplace environment's case-of-the-week plotting with its more 'televisual' narrative; signalling how centralised female subjectivity affects gendered codes of television storytelling. *Orange* similarly focuses on marginalised female identities, even using this theme to complicate power dynamics and points of identification in its premise to contrast the postfeminist woman's (young, privileged, attractive white hipster Piper Chapman's [Taylor Schilling]) perspective with those of the other inmates in Litchfield Penitentiary. Upsetting the fish-out-of-water storyline's conventions is the programme's and its promotion's key hook to the extent that the centralising of marginalised femininities, associated with a discursive realism, becomes the basis on which critics celebrate its novelty as quality TV. *New York Post* journalist Robert Rorke's assessment is representative; for him *Orange* is a 'TV revolution for women' because it has changed 'our notions of what kind of actresses we saw on TV' (2014).

The two programmes also integrate the theme of highlighting marginalised womanhood with the requirements of aesthetic exceptionalism that the quality brand advocates. For *The Good Wife*, the portrayal of the underdog female lawyer who is at the same time a representation of the 'scorned wife' figure in political sex scandals, expresses a departure from characterisations that these female roles arguably invite, rooted in melodrama's aesthetic and narrative traditions. Much has been made of Alicia's portrayal in Margulies' understated performance as opaque, Sphinx-like figure resisting gendered martyrdom and scrutiny, and it also speaks to the programme's aesthetic efforts. Suzanne Leonard (2014b) argues that

this characterisation technique offers a resistance to the intense publicity and media frenzy over political sex scandals via her silence ‘as a strategy of power rather than compliance’, offering a ‘feminist stance’ (ibid., 14). I want to highlight from Leonard’s assessment that the ‘strong female protagonist’s characterisation as stoical and calculatedly undecipherable figure, problematising the relationship between marginalised subjectivity and silence, corresponds to the series’ aesthetics hailed as sophisticated and subtle. Due to its blending of the political serialised and episodic narrative, paired with a clinical visual style and performances stressing characters’ ‘unknowability’, Emily Nussbaum heralds it for its cynical and critical take on ‘pretty much every institution under capitalism’, even though it started out ‘much like an empowerment procedural for the ladies, a “Lean In” fairy tale about a strong woman who would find her way’ (2014, 110). Nussbaum’s article demonstrates how the series uses the ‘strong female character’, defined by her resistant silence, to overwrite a specifically feminine-coded mode of storytelling and aesthetics in order to appeal to more prestigious trends of televisual narration and ideologies.

The theme of ‘marginalised femininities’ means for *Orange* an affiliation with realism as aesthetics and ideology, allowing the programme to express cultural value as politically motivated narrative-aesthetic complexity. McHugh’s (2015) praise of the series’ feminism points to the realist-documentarist style of its title sequence, a dynamic montage of real-life female prisoners’ ‘multi-ethnic’ (ibid., 20) faces in extreme close-ups. Analysing the sequence, she finds that it is unusual in its refusal to present a linear narrative or associative structure typical of opening credits, instead highlighting reversibility and ‘seriality without direction or progress, a fitting structure for its prison setting’ (ibid., 21). Linking the overt diversity of the collage of faces to realist aesthetics, she concludes that the documentarism, a unique stylistic choice,

exposes the 'privileged demographic' of Netflix subscribers to the 'reality' of incarcerated women's subjectivity and experiences (ibid., 21-22). The documentarism that, as McHugh argues, provides the series with feminist credentials is also what lands it in the quality cohort for journalists – 'a TV revolution for women' for Rorke. Alan Sepinwall (2013) remarks that 'not since *The Wire* has there been a show that's been this large and great a showcase for obscure actors of color'. *The Wire* is regarded in television criticism as a pinnacle of quality television for narrativising social-political commentary via documentarist aesthetic and representational diversity; the comparison appreciates *Orange* as superior television for a similar race politics and realism.

The manner in which the two programmes mobilise 'marginalisation' as narrative tool and characterisation technique yields dissimilar configurations of the 'quality' aesthetic, impacted by institutional and generic environments. For *The Good Wife*, the inscrutability of Alicia's (and Kalinda's [Archie Panjabi] and Diane's [Christine Baranski]) face and character, complete with the text's aesthetic choices (polished, symmetrical), indicates a critical view on American politics, law, and expectations of female morality. For Leonard, the resulting moral ambiguity offered to the viewer stems from the series' refusal to judge Alicia's character in the context of her sexual life. The fact that the stress is on her sexuality as the most debated and politicised arena also aligns with broadcast television's own negotiations of self-censorship and wide audience address foregrounded in the discursive cable/network dualism. Where *The Good Wife* refuses insight into the thoughts and sex life of a political wife dissected in her media coverage, *Orange* contrarily advocates revelatory insight into lives (including sex lives) so far rendered invisible in popular media, corresponding to Netflix's brand identity as response to the masculinist sexual explicitness of reigning cable aesthetics. This contrast between the two

series surfaces in McHugh's article, where she uses *The Good Wife* as counterpoint to *Orange*'s laudable feminism-as-realism-as-quality, citing the 'lush *mise-en-scène*', the chic costuming, and the relative lack of diversity accounting for the former show's failure to become feminist (as opposed to postfeminist) quality TV (2015, 22). I will return to this point later, but for now it demonstrates that the two programmes' narrative choices around the marginalisation of specific femininities account for the aesthetic superiority to which they aspire; and these womanhoods' specific position in the media landscape and the two shows' respective programming backgrounds impact on the disparate manner in which these aesthetics emerge.

Specific visual renditions of female faces reveal the two shows' different focus on mobilising a certain feminist politics: fictional Alicia's or Kalinda's 'Kabuki mask' face (also implying the face's permanent coalescence with make-up/masquerade) is in obvious contrast with the multiplicity of real and nameless paratextual faces in *Orange*'s title sequence, framed 'up-close-and-personal' (ibid., 21) and without make-up, showing every wrinkle and blemish (Figures 5.21 to 5.24).



Figure 5.21



Figure 5.22



Figure 5.23



Figure 5.24

Yet these strategic associations of female faces with certain kinds of female subjectivities and feminist struggles, however disparate they seem, logically follow from the series' institutional, cultural, and generic

environments influencing the manners in which they articulate the theme of 'women's marginalisation and overcoming thereof'.

Programming and industry background is the third area in which the notion of marginalisation (or rather marginality here) emerges. This has less to do with creative choices and critical judgements and more with broader negotiation processes of positioning the two series generically and institutionally as 'quality' television. Both programmes' production histories are marked by widely mediated struggles over categorisation as female-centred quality dramas in relation to both the male-led quality drama and the female-centred dramedy/melodrama. This surfaces most noticeably in annual awards circuit discussions, as trade press sees both series as perennially overlooked at prestigious television award competitions like the Golden Globes and the Emmy Awards. Journalistic accounts attribute this undervaluation less to artistic merit and more to their respective liminal positions in their programming contexts: in *Orange's* case this is expressed in terms of genre, and in *The Good Wife's* in terms of institutional background associated with cultural value. When the latter programme is lauded as quality television, this is often formulated as a virtue emerging *despite* the network environment (e.g. Goodman 2013). Yet, precisely this environment is also understood to forever preclude the series from entering the big league of cable quality by way of winning the industry's coveted awards (Hinckley 2014, Travers 2014, Idate 2014); a verdict that speaks to the discursive dualism of cable and network television's associated value hierarchies of aesthetic and narrative. I discuss this issue in more detail below; for now I want to highlight that the series' murky position in its programming context and in media discourses ('straddling the line between ambitious cable fare and network series' [Lowry 2015]) accounts for its reputation as 'marginalised' quality television, since this surfaces most visibly as a disadvantage in the

annual awards circuit. This liminal position indirectly follows from the programme's female-centred storytelling and 'feminism' rhetoric: the theme of marginalised female experience propels its lauded 'quality' aesthetic and narrative. The series' modes of expressing this theme earn their reputation as 'sophisticated' television by turning the constraints of broadcast TV into a virtue, as shown via Leonard's (2014b) analysis or via Nussbaum's appraisal of the series as critique of institutions in the guise of an 'empowerment procedural for the ladies' (2014).

The issue of marginalisation as affecting a programme's cultural cachet emerges for *Orange* around the question of genre; namely, the programme has been since its launch variably described as comedy-drama and dramedy. To this description contributed series creator Jenji Kohan's previous work on the Showtime programme *Weeds*, a prominent representative of the channel's cultivated female-led half-hour dramedy programming. The question of genre first became an obvious burden for *Orange's* cultural capital, similar to *The Good Wife*, in the Emmy Awards nomination procedure. This initially revolved around its hour-long episode length, in itself considered an anomaly at the programme's first launch.

In response to the accelerated blending of comedy and drama in high-end hour-long American television, the Television Academy announced several changes to its Emmy nomination rules in 2015. One of the most controversial of these concerned the categories in which a series can be submitted for nomination, from this year on determined not by content but by length: only series shorter than 30 minutes can compete in comedy categories while longer programmes are considered drama (Birnbaum 2015b). To offset the new rule's rigidity, programmes can petition for re-consideration of their category; their eligibility for this is decided by a panel of industry members. All of the series that used this opportunity to apply for changing categories, including *Orange*, were

hour-long series switching from drama to comedy; and only *Orange* was denied this and had to compete as drama in 2015 (Birnbaum 2015a). The media commentary on this new rule and its controversial effect on programmes' chances at winning soon honed in on *Orange's* problem, specifically on the industry's efforts to shoehorn the show into a generic category, upsetting its cultural position as quality television (Viruet 2015). The series' reputation in media discourses as side-lined in the industry's annual re-evaluations of its value hierarchies is then eerily similar to *The Good Wife's* notoriety as ever the underdog in the awards circuit. The quoted articles illustrate the controversial industry trends by citing these two series respectively in their headlines as prime casualties.

While *Orange's* position does not primarily revolve around the straddling of aesthetic-narrative practices associated with institutional backgrounds but rather around generic categorisations, the root cause for its neglected status is similarly the series' appeal to cultural value via a gendered mode of upsetting generic traditions. Netflix executive Ted Sarandos' comment on the Emmy ruling highlights precisely this status, calling *Orange* 'a truly pioneering series and an iconoclast which has always defied genre or easy categorization' (Birnbaum 2015a). If *Orange* is a 'pioneering' and 'iconoclastic' series, this reputation has everything to do with its novel concentration on female subjectivities rectifying a blind spot for television. Into this reputation of marginality and iconoclasm feeds the series' institutional background, questioning whether it is television at all – the media convergence era's re-organisation of gendered value hierarchies and audience targets further influences the series' understanding as hovering on the fringes of those established categories of quality that have dominated industry and media discourses in the last decade.

In the following I provide a detailed analysis of each series' configurations of their 'quality' status in connection with genre, and their alignment with a female-centred and discursively feminist storytelling.

### **1.A *The Good Wife***

Critics and academics alike discuss *The Good Wife's* cultural value in terms of a tension between institutional background and aesthetic-narrative achievement (Lowry 2015; Miller 2016, 5). This argument characterises Emily Nussbaum's (2014) *New Yorker* review as well, who in her praise likens the series to *The Wire* for its similar invisibility in the awards circuit; at the same time distinguishing it from prestigious cable output by setting up a duality between contemporary notions of 'quality' and the 'nostalgia' of network television that this show for her emanates (ibid.). After listing convergence media's lauded products as examples of today's 'anything goes' approach, she continues:

... the show didn't even get nominated for best drama at this year's Emmys (although the snub might be a point of pride: *The Wire* was never nominated for best drama at all). As sharp and as deep and as witty as *The Good Wife* is, it lacks all the Golden Age credentials. The series' showrunners, Robert and Michelle King, a married couple, don't have a pugnacious-auteur reputation or Hollywood glamour. They're collaborative workhorses, producing twenty-two hour-long episodes a year, more than twice as many as their peers on HBO, FX, or AMC. (...) Their series débuts every September, on schedule — no year-and-a-half-long hiatuses for them to brood about artistic aims. (Ibid.)

She celebrates the programme as quality series both because of and despite its institutional origins: for sticking to the formula of network prime-time drama without the arty nonsense of cable shows, for

adhering to the constraints of commercial breaks, product integration, and censorship, and for the sharpness that for her emerges mainly due to these constraints because it keeps the – in this context suspicious – creative freedom of television producers in check. Nussbaum also laments that the show's liminality entails a gendered aspect, demonstrated by an anecdote where a male TV executive dismisses it, to her disdain, as 'being "for women"' (ibid.). Her praise thus exposes, and highlights a frustration with, a gendered double-standard in the industry where the network/cable dualism also involves a gendered differentiation of 'quality' (see also Miller 2016, Nygaard and Lagerwey 2016). Yet in her analysis of the series' subtlety emerges another, this time only implied, duality, that of gendered *genre* hierarchies. She describes the fifth season plot twist of killing off major character Will Gardner (Josh Charles), who had that far been one angle of the show's central love triangle, through the aesthetic difference between highbrow drama's subtlety and female-targeted melodrama's excess: 'instead of playing as cheap melodrama his death reinvented the series. (...) It also, daringly, broke *The Good Wife's* primal link to a feminine TV narrative formula: the love triangle — the secret sauce for many female fans' (ibid.).

It is then the negotiated allure of and distance from a tradition of feminine-coded network melodrama in which the series' cultural cachet becomes pivotal for Nussbaum. In this echoes partly the common wisdom about the network/cable dichotomy's genderedness and its rigid boundaries; only this time this revolves around the question of television forms. When Nussbaum defines the series' quality she emphasises what it is not: a feminine and 'cheap melodrama' or 'an empowerment procedural for the ladies', and invokes by this the type of television that according to industry truism sells best to female audiences. Indeed, generic ambiguity is a prominent narrative-aesthetic

device for the series' premise and promotion, starting at the title that sarcastically invokes an archetypal female figure of American popular media in order to unhinge the associations that this epithet invites. The generic associations of the melodrama and soap opera become focal reference points to be upset; in this we can see a play of 'distancing while invoking' or 'absent presence', a similar method to that of network TV's female-centred comedy of distinction.

The pilot episode's much-discussed first scene (Leonard 2014b, 944; Miller 2016, 7) works out precisely the duality of gendered generic conventions from *mise-en-scène* to dialogue to performance. The press conference in which Illinois State's Attorney Peter Florrick (Chris Noth) announces his resignation following his sexual scandal is in its first minutes filmed concentrating on him and the attending reporters; the slow-building tension promises a political drama revolving around *his* ordeal. The revelation that we are instead going to follow his wife's perspective comes as the scene's narrative surprise, with the camera discovering her quiet presence next to the orating husband. As both Leonard and Miller note, we first see her face through a diegetic TV camera, indicating that the novel focus on the scorned wife will entail a scrutiny of the mediatised nature of political sex scandals (Leonard 2014b, 944; Miller 2016, 7). The dramatic/soapy slap that Alicia subsequently places on Peter's face backstage completes the scene not only to 'transition... [her] into the star of the show' (Leonard 2014b, 944), but also to confirm the gendered complexity of generic TV traditions displayed in the series. The novel aspect of focusing on the marginalised female figure is complemented by the similarly novel and much-praised dogged silence and restraint characterising Alicia (and which Leonard argues contributes to the series' feminist credentials), in the scene governing the power dynamics between husband and wife. If the cold open serves as Alicia's complex portrayal it is unusual precisely

because it lacks any dialogue or other verbal confirmation from her. It relies on wordless performance, visual narration, and a characterisation technique conveyed via character action (Alicia attempting to remove lint from Peter's suit and the slap which in this context is less a melodramatic trope and more a characterisation method) – to the soundtrack of the male protagonist's speechifying. These stylistic choices demonstrate how the series emulates cable television's 'cinematic' filming methods, and they tap into the discursive dualism of 'average' TV fare's 'feminine' verbosity and image-driven highbrow drama. The aesthetic novelty is a consequence of the gendered novelty of characterisation which associates powerful silence – and accompanying dominance of visual 'cinematic' aesthetic – with the female protagonist, while verbosity – a traditionally feminine/feminising trait of disdained TV genres – dominates our first impression of the male protagonist. Initially, this reversed setup describes the bloated politician–meek housewife scenario, but the premise (her centralisation and the dynamic between her constraint and the unfolding narrative) makes full use of the medium's and the form's gendered associations to achieve the 'quality' effect. The cold open's stylistic choices set up the terms on which the series positions itself as subtle and sophisticated television rising above the level of average network offering, and thus indirectly mobilise those features which in Nussbaum's assessment help differentiate it from the suspicious stain of 'cheap melodrama' and other feminine television.

Critics also routinely evaluate the programme's storytelling, characterisation methods, and aesthetics in comparison with contemporaneous series seen as its peers in terms of institutional origin, theme and genre, and gendered representation and cultural value. As such, it is mainly the hit ABC shows produced by celebrated TV writer Shonda Rhimes's production company Shondaland, like *Scandal*

(2012-) and *How to Get Away with Murder*, that become reference points for what *The Good Wife* is not. While both debuting a few years after *The Good Wife*, the terms on which their differences emerge further illustrate the ways in which the series navigates gender and its associated television traditions. Shondaland dramas' cultural importance revolves for critics around the interconnected dynamics of race and gender in political/legal drama; and these representational methods contribute to the series' understanding as exceptional, accounting for the occasional 'quality' label. Yet *Scandal*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, and other Shondaland output are at the same time considered *otherwise* fitting into female-targeted TV melodrama and soap culture (Leonard 2016, 8) with their fast-paced plotting, emphasis on romance and sex, narrative twists relying on scheming galore, and the attendant emotionality and verbosity. It is this type of television with which contrasted, *The Good Wife* becomes for critics a laudable anomaly for network TV. For a somewhat reversed demonstration, consider Neil Kirkpatrick's review (2015) of the seventh season episode 'Cooked', in which he laments the series' increasing reliance on intrigue as a gradual shift from cable-like narration towards Shondaland's and other network shows' 'fast-burning and twisty' (ibid.) plotting.

If *The Good Wife* gains 'quality' credentials in its negotiated difference from programmes that thematically resemble it but are deemed too reliant on established TV formulas, this difference involves a complex relationship to network television's 'feminine' reliance on verbosity and displayed affect. Again, the measured silence characterising Alicia comes to bear on the programme's aesthetics and its reputation as sophisticated TV complimenting viewer intellect rather than emotional involvement, in contrast with Shondaland shows' critical and academic evaluation. In her investigation of the dynamic between fan practices and Shonda Rhimes's authorship, TV scholar Anna Everett (2015)

celebrates the latter by highlighting a defining emotionality and its effect on audience engagement in *physical* terms. Her description of the typical Rhimes drama as 'ultrafast-paced, frenetic, and head-spinning storylines, as well as mind-blowing and off-the-chain plot points that mesmerize audiences every week' (ibid., 36) speaks to a connection between these shows' mobilisation of narrative-emotional excess and the cultural understanding of 'body' genres where centralised physicality and sensation is mimicked in audience reaction.

Linda Williams' (1991) work, as ever, is instructive here. Theorising melodrama as one of the 'body' genres that Carol Clover (1987) identified in horror and pornography, she finds that all 'low' genres fall under the expressive mode of melodrama, 'encompass[ing] a broad range of films marked by "lapses" in realism, by "excesses" of spectacle and displays of primal, even infantile emotions, and by narratives that seem circular and repetitive' (Williams 1991, 3). While this description already proffers a connection to 'feminine' television forms' narrative practices, and especially to those of the Shondaland stable, it is the link drawn between low cultural value and an 'over-involved' spectatorship that further confirms the similar context in which Shondaland series are positioned. If 'the success of these genres is [...] measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen' (ibid., 4) then their cultural value stands in reverse connection with this success because of the 'apparent lack of proper esthetic [sic] distance, a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion' (ibid., 5). Everett's description of the intense fan culture phenomenon around Shondaland shows stresses viewer involvement in similar terms, while locating its cultural importance in the democratising, racially-socially inclusive interaction of fan communities and 'author':

Clearly, it was not only Rhimes herself who was yearning for the kind of brazenly postmodern, culturally reflexive, and visually tantalizing

expressions of America's singularly pluralist societal composition, historically erased from mainstream television, that Shondaland consistently delivers to its gobsmacked or astounded viewers without apology. Like fans of horror and slasher films, who enjoy being scared in the dark, Rhimes' fans relish the hypersuspended disbelief that motivates their real-time tweets of delighted shock and awe. (Everett 2015, 36)

The mention of horror fandom similarly caught up in physical over-involvement links this discussion to Williams' theorisation of 'body' genres, which she also interpreted as placed low in genre hierarchies for centralising female bodies caught up in intense displays of physical action/reaction. But when Everett insists that Rhimes's oeuvre fits the bill of 'quality' television, underlying her discussion of authorship–fandom–media reception relations lurks an unease with considering the programmes in relation to 'low' and 'feminine' TV genres: she cites *Scandal's* 2014 win of the Peabody Award as a triumph that finally 'helped to quell somewhat unfair dismissals of *Scandal* as mere soap opera' (ibid., 40). Everett's project strives to save Shondaland programmes for the quality brand according to the terms advocated by industry and reception discourses – here for their gendered-raced political progressiveness, cult fandom, and discursive authorship – overlooking the loaded problem of cultural value in television culture and the attendant academic debate.

Nonetheless, questions of 'feminine' entertainment and associations with melodrama do underlie *Scandal's* journalistic assessments. In a think piece considering the series' race and gender politics, Nussbaum frames this in a context she calls the show's 'post-racial fantasy' and a connected lack of cultural prestige (2012b). That is, at a time when race politics and 'diversity' are central talking points in public discourses, these tend to invoke other, more prestigious, series since *Scandal* is 'the

type of show the TV digerati don't care about: it's network, it's formulaic, and it fits squarely in the feminine junk drawer, with *Grey's Anatomy*, chick lit, and women's magazines, where few consumers go looking for artistry or deep meaning' (ibid.). Whether Nussbaum assesses correctly *Scandal's* neglect in journalistic discussions of race politics is beside my point; but her argument demonstrates Shondaland programming's cultural position as low quality, feminine television. Crucially, Nussbaum cites *The Good Wife* as counterexample that for her tackles race in a more complex manner; again tapping into the terms on which this programme signals its distinctive status on network television, struggling to redefine its relationship to the codes of 'feminine' entertainment.

The discursive contrast between these female-centred network dramas then involves a gendered body-mind dualism in relation to preferred modes of audience engagement and related genre conventions: *The Good Wife's* sophistication involves a negotiated distance from melodrama's displayed embodied affect. Despite thematic-formal similarities, the series is regarded as profoundly different from its network neighbours, celebrated for a cool intellectuality found sorely lacking in the others. This discursive difference mostly hones in on Shondaland shows with their proximity to Williams' 'body' genres in terms of a feminine display of sensation and emotion, inviting audiences to connect to them on these bases. *The Good Wife's* courting of viewer intellect is epitomised in its female protagonists' intellectuality and powerful reticence, describing both Alicia and most of the appearing female attorneys, politicians, and even clients of the law firm. Further, the series often brings this characteristic into play in emphasised contrast with the trope of female garrulousness and emotionality as *masquerade*. The programme is lauded for bringing in memorable guest stars playing opposing counsel whose courtroom tactic involves a

performance, carefully emphasised as such, of stereotypical femininity, like attorneys Nancy Crozier (Mamie Gummer) performing the ingénue or Patti Nyholm (Martha Plimpton) the overwhelmed mother (Miller 2016, 13). Portrayals of restrained female behaviour and their oppositional relationship to these masquerades of femininity – enacted in Alicia’s recurring ‘eye roll’ reaction shots in court scenes – contribute to the series’ ‘quality’ reputation, also being contrasted with expected generic conventions per Nussbaum (2014).

Expectations of feminine self-presentation provide fertile ground for extended commentary on the series, demonstrating the high stakes with which these feature for establishing its prestige credentials. The second season episode ‘VIP Treatment’s procedural storyline gives an example of this, also useful for analysing the series’ self-distancing from melodrama conventions and mobilising the ‘feminism’ theme, both as feeding into individualised narratives and as political discourse (Miller 2016). The episode revolves mainly around a case-of-the-week: high-profile masseuse Lara White (Natalie Knepp) walks into the law office accusing a (fictional) celebrity philanthropist of sexually assaulting her during a massaging session just a few hours before, and looks for legal representation from Alicia. The episode recounts the events of a few hours, revolving around whether Alicia’s bosses Diane and Will will take up the suit at all, and works this out in a series of backroom debates.

Given the subject matter, this plot predictably focuses on issues associated with popular media treatments of sexual violence like women’s agency, challenged credibility, sexuality as political issue, the power relations of those involved and so forth. Here these concerns emerge because the accused man (never shown in person and thus remaining a symbol, ‘the most beloved Democrat in America’) is also a Nobel Peace Prize winner famous for his advocacy of women’s rights in Africa. The plot foregrounds popular feminism not only as a focus of

individualised narrative but as politics, especially since it concentrates narrative tension on Diane's status as powerful liberal feminist public figure. It revolves around her moral conundrum between believing the wannabe client and ruining a feminist organisation's work by exposing its celebrity figurehead as, potentially, a rapist.

The exposition already demonstrates how the series mobilises politicised feminism as narrative device to generate its 'smart' status. I deal with the question of feminist politics and cultural value in the next section, but the detail I want to highlight here concerns Lara's portrayal, and the series' relationship to melodrama's expressive modes, that this signals. If the series strives to shake off the taint of 'cheap' melodrama by configuring its plot as primarily a political issue, then this becomes overdetermined through Lara's portrayal as an excessively calm and eloquent woman. This is presented from the moment she first appears as an oddity given the circumstances, and intensifies the theme of credibility and character authenticity circulated in media treatments of real-life sexual assault scandals which the episode thematises. Further, this makes Diane's dilemma especially poignant, creating the narratively fruitful irony where 'the' feminist is the sceptical one about a woman's credibility who accuses a powerful man of sexual violence. The exchange between Diane and Lara in which this struggle culminates speaks not only to this narrative conundrum and associated moral-political dilemma but to the series' own stakes in generating a tension between generic expectations and women's portrayals:

Diane: Miss White, don't take this the wrong way but given that this happened five hours ago, you seem remarkably calm.

Lara: I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take that the right way.

Diane: Take it as the first of a long line of hard questions.

Lara: Would it make a difference if I was crying?

Diane: You were sexually assaulted. Wouldn't that make sense?

Lara: When I was kicked out of college, I cried for an hour, then I stopped, and I never cried again. That's who I am. But if it helps I wish this had happened to somebody who cried a lot.

Delivered with bone-dry sarcasm and a wry smile, the last line taps not only into expectations of female behaviour given the subject matter but, in terms of genre conventions, the associations of 'women's issues' melodrama and its characterisation and plot tropes. Lara's derisive description 'somebody who cried a lot' evokes melodrama's excess as 'body' genre in Williams' terms, and signals the distancing the programme performs, while also adding a personalised clarification for the character's un-melodramatic behaviour via a summary backstory. The need for this explanation signals the continued discursive importance of the personal/political dualism which crystallises here both as an issue of television storytelling and as an historic framework of feminist thought. The plot negotiates between television's established method of individualising-privatising 'issues' and efforts to politicise them. Generically, this surfaces in a negotiation between the heritage of 'women's issues' melodrama excess and contemporary quality drama's 'sophistication'. Lara has an intimate melodrama backstory that has evolved into 'intellectual' drama. That this 'evolution' revolves around the programme's overall refusal to employ tropes of a disdained femininity is underlined in the scene by the immediate cut to Alicia's face after the last line. To boot, Lara is interviewed by Diane and the name partners; Margulies has no lines throughout the scene and rarely has any reaction shots. The final cut to her medium close-up signals that while Alicia is there only as silent observer, her presence is vital to the scene's effect. The exchange between Diane and Lara is presented in reverse-angle single shots, yet Lara's last utterance is completed not by Diane's reaction shot but rather Alicia's, articulating a special resonance between them (Figures 5.25 and 5.26).



Figure 5.25



Figure 5.26

Her visually emphasised stare at the client on which the scene ends confirms the similarity between the procedural plot's heroine and the programme's star. This partly refers to the obvious parallel of the two women's involvements in high-profile sexual scandals; but in the context of the preceding exchange it also highlights Alicia's by then customary depiction as similarly refusing to conform to expectations of 'feminine' behaviour, replaced with 'excessive' silence. As discussed, the programme makes great efforts to create a link between these expectations of femininity and genre traditions; thus a refusal to abide by the rules of one speaks to the struggle to shake off associations of the other.

The programme then counters the ‘excess’ of melodrama in terms of displayed affect with an equally ‘excessive’ refusal of emotive performance. However, this signifier of the melodramatic mode remains prominent via scarce outbursts of emotional-physical performance (what Anna Everett calls the ‘WTF’ moments characterising Shondaland series [2015, 38]). *The Good Wife*’s storytelling uses strategically placed and memorably grand displays of character breakdown which gain their significance from their scarcity and the sometimes season-long build-up to them. Positioned at distinct and accentuated points of the whole series’ narrative, they dominantly involve physical expressions of grandstanding and anger. The pilot’s slap is an example; others include Will storming into Alicia’s office and knocking the items on her desk to the floor in the season five episode ‘Hitting the Fan’ after finding out that she had been plotting to abandon the firm. The title indicates the binary of slow-burning tension and outbursts of crisis, signalling their ‘plot device’ employment as self-reflexive smartness. Similarly, the same season’s game changer episode in which Will is killed in the courtroom is titled ‘Dramatics Your Honour’ – the metatextual admittance of relying on melodrama twists highlights the series’ constant negotiations of expressive modes.

Another instance of enacted excessive emotionality occurs in the season seven episode ‘Iowa’ in which campaign manager Eli Gold (Alan Cummings) admits to Alicia that years ago he erased a voicemail from her phone in which Will professed his love. This is an example of serial memory: viewer attention is rewarded by recalling an unresolved conflict from six seasons ago. Mobilising a textual feature of ‘quality’ narration in a storyline embedded in domestic melodrama (the love triangle plot for Nussbaum accounts for a ‘feminine’ address), the sequence following the confession juggles the requirements of both forms. It struggles to express the adequate affective response this

moment invites, while keeping at arm's length the associations of 'melodramatic' performance and *mise-en-scène*. Eli's confession is followed by Alicia's signature measured silence and composed 'Get out', turning into a physical expression of anger: knocking over a chair, shoving away a table. The following sequence balances the moment's heightened emotional stakes via mobilising comedy and drama, in this mixed mode offsetting 'sophisticated' drama and melodrama aesthetics via dialogue-free performance. Alicia, visibly struggling to hold back an outburst, slowly takes a stack of dishes out of the kitchen cabinet, and sorts them into two piles by checking the inscriptions on the bottom. She then picks up the pile of cheaper china and flings them one by one at Eli, chasing him out of the apartment (Figures 5.27 to 5.29).





Figures 5.27 to 5.29

The emphasised calculatedness of physically enacted female anger transforms a classically (melo)dramatic trope into ‘sophisticated’ slapstick in Margulies and Cummings’ comic double act, and tellingly this mixture is only present when the female protagonist performs anger toward someone else. Once Eli is gone and Alicia loses her diegetic audience, the tone turns purely serious, but continues to work out the tension between the character’s composure and physical enactments of emotional upheaval. The following sequence in which she returns to an open suitcase and continues packing, then flips it around before collapsing on the bed screaming complies with melodrama tropes, and is arguably an anticipated payoff for a seven-year long audience hook (Figures 5.30 to 5.32).



Figures 5.30 to 5.32

The previous examples of expressions of anger mobilised character interactions, suggesting a correlation between 'quality' aesthetics and the diegetic *performance* of 'melodramatic' anger. This parallels

Leonard's interpretation regarding the series' treatment of mediated sexual behaviour: for her, the programme expresses scepticism *vis-à-vis* notions of a 'sexual truth' in public dissections of sex scandals through its main character's exaggerated opaqueness (the 'ethic of quiet refusal') and through its emphasis on *performance* (i.e. inauthenticity) of 'sexual explanations' in public (2014b, 953–56). If this stance informs both the 'feminism' and high cultural status of the series, the scene in which Alicia enacts (as opposed to performs) an emotional breakdown is a break with this trend, since it provides us with an exclusive insight into her emotional turmoil – this at a cost of aesthetic superiority, operating in full-on melodramatic mode. The episode's critical reception bemoans precisely this dualism, seeing the bedroom breakdown's over-the-top feminine melodrama as uncharacteristically direct, at odds with the usual subtlety of the series' aesthetics. The *Vulture* critic's dismissal of its handling of performance is representative, finding Margulies' signature 'subtle acting' irreconcilable with this 'over-the-top reaction', effecting what 'just feels like melodrama' (Anon. 2016).

The analysis of the minutiae of this sequence gives an indication of the issues with which the series struggles around cultural value, genre, and female subjectivity. It also exemplifies the ways in which it problematises gendered affect in its link to television forms and narrative traditions. The programme navigates this by segmenting its serialised and procedural storytelling between the protagonist couple, and into this feeds the discursive 'straddling the line' between cable television's high-concept storytelling and network TV's standard episodic narration with their respective cultural positions. Yet as these two aspects constantly bleed into each other, so does the series aspire to complicate the associated genderedness of these narrative forms. Alicia's centrality to the legal procedural aspect with its case-of-the-week formula, while roughly fitting into traditions of female-centred

television dramas, becomes upset via character portrayal, but also confirming its tropes of femininity and affect. The prestige drama aspect and empowerment-procedural-for-the-ladies aspect merge in the initial function Alicia performs within the law firm: a draw for high-profile clients with her connections and reputation as a politician's wife, her position extradiegetically connects these narrative strands. But this function extends pragmatism since, as established early on, her professional skills are enhanced by her exceptional empathy toward clients which the firm exploits – the procedural plot emphasises the heroine's emotional availability counterintuitively manifested in restrained behaviour (empathetic silences, curt but sensitive utterances). This emotional availability blends with her portrayal as politician's wife refusing melodramatic excess, using silence 'as a strategy of power rather than compliance' (Leonard 2014b, 955). This way, the series builds a mixture of gendered storytelling practices that meet in the titular figure's portrayal, determining the programme's genre associations and position in the 'quality' brand.

The female heroine's portrayal revolving around silence and its relationship to power and affect determines then the series' reputation as sophisticated television, embedded in genre hybridity. Another aspect of this 'sophistication' is the cynicism with which the serialised narrative treats legal and political institutions, understood in journalism as a rare signifier of grown-up entertainment in a sea of infantilising popular culture. When *Slate* critic Willa Paskin (2014) calls the series 'television for adults' for its 'unprecedented depth and cynicism' in addressing corruption and political power, she draws on terms frequently employed by critics to justify contemporary television's artistic value, namely programming context and associated narrative-aesthetic methods. Similar to Nussbaum, she heralds the ways the series exploits the constraints of network television, but unusually

discusses these features as more mature, i.e. more intelligent, than cable drama's modes of address. However, while the series 'understands power as both a more subtle and insidious force than series like *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad* do', its prestige is forever tainted by its procedural form (ibid.). Paskin inscribes onto the values of programming context the dualism of infantilising popular culture versus 'mature' art, involving notions of complexity and intelligence. But here it is cable television, rather than (as could be expected) network drama, that falls short of a 'mature' address of issues of morality and power.

Paskin's writing poignantly displays the common belief that quality TV overwrites historic understandings of television's cultural status as immature and feminine entertainment, further feeding into cultural studies' debates around value judgements of arts and media. To support her argument about *The Good Wife* as 'television for adults', she cites *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott's seminal article 'The Death of Adulthood in American Culture' (2014), a lengthy elegy over the demise of paternalistic maturity's legitimacy in contemporary popular culture. Uniting the status of convergence media culture under the umbrella of an increasingly dominant 'juvenile' aesthetic, Scott juxtaposes this with this media's transitional gender politics, finding these processes intertwined. Described as a 'frontier', they culminate for him in television's cultural shift whereby prestige male-centred dramas codify the fall of patriarchy, while virtually every other TV phenomenon participates in digging its grave. Since Scott lends great importance to popular feminism's simultaneous triumph – not least via the ubiquity of female-centred TV comedy and dramedy – his argument is another example of processes described in the previous section whereby post-recessionary Western culture narrativises itself as a crisis of patriarchy and a consolidation of female independence and subjectivity. With its link between immature culture and triumphant feminism, Scott's article

expresses the grown-up/immature divide's associated genderedness that continues to underlie cultural criticism, as feminist scholarship previously demonstrated (see Chapter 2).<sup>35</sup>

Scott's article incited a wide array of commentaries, repeatedly pointing out its elitism and masculinism (Kalick 2014, Bustillos 2014, Sternbergh 2014). In this light, Paskin's reference to the article as underscoring her reading of *The Good Wife* as member of the endangered group of 'grown-up entertainment', is especially contradictory. Scott leaves no doubt about the connection between popular feminism's emergence and the 'crisis of adulthood' associated with patriarchal authority and television's generic legacies: he pits the 'gloomy-man, angry-man, antihero dramas' against the half-hour comedy and dramedy as spaces where feminist discourses flourish (Scott 2014). When he argues that these generic formulas accommodate 'female rebellion', he also articulates this as resistance against prestige drama's 'serious' and 'mature' modes of expression. Consequently, Paskin placing *The Good Wife* into this nexus means that she has to abandon the chain of associations on which Scott's writing is founded: if the programme is one of the remaining few examples of mature TV while showcasing female subjectivity and dramatising its relationship to social power, then this is at odds with the idea that the 'feminist' attack on traditional patriarchal authority espouses 'juvenile' modes of expression. Her gesture thus assures that the programme is understood as 'masculine' entertainment whose treatment of social power's seductive appeal is even subtler than that of male-led cable dramas.

*The Good Wife* once again becomes an anomaly in television culture: it concentrates on politicising female subjectivity and treating feminism as

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<sup>35</sup> Tellingly, the film magazine *Sight and Sound* referenced Scott's piece in its 2014 end-of-year poll of best UK film releases to support leading film critics' lament of the 'eclipse of what we think of as adult themes' and a growing 'attachment to childhood' in Hollywood cinema, concluding that 'mature' art has relocated to prestige TV drama manifested in the trio of *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Sopranos* (Romney 2015). Here, television has become the last bastion of cinema's best values, outperforming not just its own medium but cinema itself.

part of the political intrigue, but complicates the generic associations and performance traditions that this seemingly invites via mobilising the 'quality' text's aesthetics. This aesthetic and political 'subtlety' lands it for Paskin in that disappearing cohort of adult *and* patriarchal entertainment that Scott eulogises. Evidently, the feature contributing to the series' importance for its supporters, namely a feminine-coded address married with the distancing from melodrama's generic conventions, makes it uncategorisable for popular cultural criticism's sensemaking of gendered TV trends.

### **1.B *Orange Is the New Black***

While *The Good Wife's* awkward position in quality television discourses stems from the intertwined contexts of institutional background and gendered generic practices, for *Orange*, the notion of 'uncategorisability' is not simply a consequence of these contexts but an integral feature of the show's inception and publicity. Its flagship status for Netflix's foray into original programming bears down on every aspect of the show's political economy, effecting that its cultural status in the convergent media landscape is inseparable from Netflix's brand building strategies generally. When Netflix executive Ted Sarandos calls *Orange* 'pioneering' and 'iconoclastic' to defend its aesthetics (see previous section), this description applies to the company's own self-positioning in the industry as reformer of convergence-era television.

The touted innovative aesthetics, distribution models, and viewer engagement notwithstanding, these strategies still tie Netflix to existing television culture, as TV scholar Anthony Smith (2015) demonstrates. His overview of industry, journalistic, and scholarly discourses around Netflix challenges their combined efforts to position it as innovative in every aspect of its original programming production and distribution,

such as the promotion of autonomous viewing practices as opposed to television's linear scheduling, and its effects on storytelling methods. The discourses that Smith problematises, especially those lauding Netflix as evolutionary in convergence media for its production, distribution, and consumption models, which distinguish it from the cable/network context, are not new. They evoke the rhetoric mobilised in the late 1990s and early 2000s to celebrate the appearance of premium cable TV's, and specifically HBO's, business model and branding strategies for its original programming. Tellingly, Netflix positions HBO as its main competitor both in terms of economic prowess and generational and aesthetic innovation (Spangler 2014; Jenner 2016, 261). The rhetorical contradiction Smith describes is also familiar from this era, scrutinised in still-ongoing academic debates around the television industry's efforts to re-define 'quality'. Smith demonstrates that despite Netflix's and its media reception's insistence that it 'invent[s] a new art form' that is 'not quite TV and not quite film' (VanDerWerff 2015b), its programming's narrative strategies do adhere to traditional TV storytelling conventions while accommodating a changed consumption context. Similar to HBO's case then, whose status as forerunner of quality programming presupposed the surrounding force field of 'average' television, Netflix's position as cable and network television's progressive 'other' assumes their presence as complementing competitors.

The similarities between HBO and Netflix regarding branding strategies and reception have been noted in scholarship (Jenner 2016), but less has been written about the commonalities in the ways in which their first flagship series were segmented into respective gendered interests. Just as HBO established its reputation with two programmes (*The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City*), both transgressively representing the complexity of contemporaneous cultural identities within two different

sets of gendered generic contexts, so did Netflix develop its 'iconoclast' status with the double bill of *Orange* and *House of Cards* (2013-). Accordingly, these two series' cultural significance has become marked in the interconnected areas of gendered address, aesthetic novelty, and genre hybridity. However, while HBO's reinvention of the 'quality' brand involved the term's masculinisation, Netflix prominently targets affluent young female viewers, which complicates the dominant ideal of 'quality'. While both programmes are marketed as trendsetting and exceptional, in terms of establishing the programming platform's cultural cachet it was *Orange* that Netflix eventually heralded as the series securing its position in the high-end programming market, even though *House of Cards*' launch preceded *Orange*'s by a few months. This is clear from the ways Netflix set up a hierarchal relationship among its programmes in terms of popularity and buzz marketing. The strategy is boosted by the company's secretiveness about its viewership statistics and viewer preference patterns by demographic, while competitors' ratings data are publicly available (Matrix 2014, 125). Lacking these numbers, the public must rely on Netflix's communication, which frequently asserts in nebulous language *Orange*'s primacy in the ratings and its popularity among millennials (Spangler 2014, Kafka 2013, Hanson 2014). The latter contributes to the show's reputation as surprise 'word-of-mouth hit' (Harvey 2014) thanks to its popularity on social media, reportedly outperforming *House of Cards*' following base on Twitter and Facebook (Wallenstein 2014).

Complemented by the enthusiastic critical reception, *Orange*'s novelty feature, namely the focus on diverse femininities in hour-long format and in a tone deemed unusual for female-centred narration, contributed to Netflix's hyped status as exceptional in the otherwise saturated quality television market. While *House of Cards* fits into the quality paradigm with its antihero male protagonist, goal-oriented

narrative, milieu of national politics, polished aesthetics, promotional reliance on Kevin Spacey's name recognition as the production's top-billed star, and the evocation of a literary quality ('Shakespearean' is a moniker mobilised both by the programme and critical reception), *Orange* does not display these familiar signifiers of aesthetic superiority. Netflix promotes the programme as subversive precisely via this contrast, highlighting the unprecedented focus on multiple female subjectivities in a rhetoric around social realism and political critique associated with the prison setting, its dramatising of race, class, and sexual identity politics, and the initial lack of name actors in the cast. Female address, the politics of representation, and social awareness are the signifiers singling out the series in the field of exclusivist television.

Consider the promotional article commissioned by Netflix in 2014 on *The New York Times* website, timed to coincide with the series' season two launch and mimicking the format of an investigative report that addresses institutional issues of women's incarceration in the US (Deziel n/d). For a piece of native advertising, most conspicuous about the article is its obfuscation about the show or programmer it sells: *Orange* and Netflix are mentioned only once in the lengthy article, name-dropped once with ostensibly no promotional intent. This and a small banner on top of the page are the only hints that this is a sponsored advert. The writing style applies techniques characteristic of investigative journalism to put forward its argument around women's incarceration, combining 'human interest' stories and a general examination of policies and their shortcomings supported by statistics. Considered by marketing experts the debut of a new type of multimedia campaign strategy (Moses 2014), this advert places the series in the context of a politically-socially argumentative aesthetic tradition associated with a prestige newspaper, and highlights an aspect of the

drama that mobilises ‘social awareness’ rhetoric in order to increase viewer interest.<sup>36</sup>

Promoting *Orange* as female-centred and politically subversive entertainment compliments other aspects of Netflix’s branding policies, most characteristically its popularisation of online binge-watching culture, termed by Sidneye Matrix the ‘Netflix effect’ (2014). Her examination of Netflix’s branding strategies around binge-viewing connects these with young consumers’ (or ‘screenagers’) use of digital media platforms. She challenges media discourses positioning the binge-watching phenomenon as potentially problematic youth consumership due to its associations with physical-mental passivity (‘couch potato culture’) and exposure to inappropriate (mature) content. Countering this historically familiar moral panic rhetoric via audience research, she demonstrates a ‘participatory cultural citizenship’ among millennial audiences using social media (ibid., 134).

Matrix’s considerations of generational discourses around digital media consumption and binge-watching also reveal a connection to a history of gendered rhetoric about mass culture. With the term ‘binge’ etymologically originating in the description of excessive drink and food consumption, it ‘suggests some form of shameful indulgence, and a lack of control’ (Ramsay 2013), whether describing drunkenness, eating disorders, or compulsive shopping sprees. Couched in discourses around consumer citizenship, this association is linked to the terms in which cultural critics analyse identity in late modern capitalist societies, which according to feminist scholars (Joyrich 1996, Petro 1986, Brunson 1997) betray a gendered understanding of consumer identities (‘feminine’ passivity, uncontrollability, indulgence but short attention

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<sup>36</sup> Promotional methods highlighting the series’ social-political relevance started to become dominant only around season two’s launch, that is, *after* audience and critical buzz hailed *Orange* as a novel text of women’s representation. For more on the ways in which *Orange*’s promotional strategies capitalise on issues that the series problematises see DeCarvalho (2015).

span etc.). Without engaging with gendered implications of the cultural distrust toward binge-watching, Debra Ramsay's examination evokes these earlier discussions around gender and hierarchal cultural values applied to different media (2013). She laments that the intensive consumption of literature or classical music is never called 'bingeing', since these art forms have higher currency in cultural hierarchies than television (ibid.)

Jenner quotes Ramsay in arguing that binge-watching as cultural phenomenon in fact derives from DVD box set culture (2016, 265), which contrastingly is associated more with cult television and a 'valorisation (...) of (...) texts as symbolically bounded and isolatable "objects" of value' (Hills quoted in Jenner 2016, 265). Here the operative term of consumption is 'marathon viewing', a more respectful description of watching multiple episodes of a series as Ramsay notes. To return to Matrix's analysis of surveys among teen audiences, the binaries she pinpoints and complicates fit into these oppositional hierarchies around media consumption practices. Notions of a 'mediated culture of instant gratification' (the online availability of a programme's entire seasons) and 'guilty pleasure' viewing are demonstrated with a quote from a teenage girl who admits to 'eat[ing] that sappy teen drama up like it's my Grandma's spaghetti' (Matrix 2014, 130), which Matrix counters with increased viewer control, and fan activities like criticism and interpretation (ibid., 133). These (problematized) oppositions are reminiscent of the terms in which A.O. Scott's (2014) apocalyptic vision of grown-up culture's demise betrays its value hierarchies: it may not be a wild guess to assume that Scott would share the worried rhetoric around binge-watching culture as a feature of the 'immature' mediasphere's increasing dominance. And as noted, his influential think piece openly links generation and gender politics.

When Netflix incorporates binge-watching culture into its brand identity as preferred mode of audience engagement, it simultaneously strives to upset the existing implications of a 'lazy' consumption culture. The role it assigns to *Orange* as purveyor of this effort, and its direct address to the millennial female audience base, speak to the binge phenomenon's underlying genderedness. The series' 'quality' moniker is generated around the text's 'socially aware' epistemology, which in turn engenders viewer engagement practices aiming to complicate notions of a passive and infantilised viewer culture. These dynamics become focused on binge-watching whose cultural relevance is controlled by Netflix: the company markets its products as 'instant gratification' and escapism (especially in its sexual connotations as seen in the teen slang use of 'Netflix and chill') while also tactically upsetting this by simultaneously promoting the programme's political 'iconoclasm'.

Just as Netflix manoeuvres its entrance into the quality television business with contested distribution and consumption practices and with *Orange's* gendered subversions, difficulties of categorisation emerge in the programme's other attributes as well. As noted, this surfaces poignantly in its nomination process for the Emmy Awards. Here, *Orange's* form as hour-long drama/comedy, evidently clashing with expectations of a female-centred generic address, confuses the industry's self-applied categorisation models that function to facilitate evaluation. Yet another aspect of the ways in which *Orange's* 'iconoclasm' involves a gendered assessment of its merits is Netflix's own marginalisation of the series on its online interface as female-targeted entertainment. Sarah Arnold calls this Netflix 'ghettoising' both the 'strong female lead' trope and the targeted, presumably female, audience (2014). Arnold challenges Netflix's touted liberation of the viewer from scheduled broadcasting traditions – frequently accused of imposing ideals of taste and cultural value – by showing how its

algorithmic personalised recommendation system similarly imposes a viewer identity enabled by demographic analysis:

... the consequence of such personalised viewing is the eradication of diversity. (...) [T]he navigation model offered by Netflix (...) leads to a narrowing of views, perspectives and identities. (...) However unintentional it may be, the recommendation model, coupled with its 'ghettoising' of women, results in a mode of address that assumes the masculine and marginalises the feminine. (Ibid.)

Arnold demonstrates this by noting that the recommendation system suggests programmes categorised under the header 'strong female lead' once the viewer finished watching *Orange*, while not offering 'strong male lead' type programming upon finishing *House of Cards*. This undermines appeals to personalisation and scientific objectivity in the algorithmic method's "'truth claim" about audiences' (ibid.), highlighting Netflix's gender-coded address stemming from the social audience's pre-existing demographic categorisations. The streaming platform's production of a 'ghettoised' female audience as one homogeneous taste group betrays its unease in positioning *Orange* as figurehead of the company's novel programming and business model; originating in the choice of packaging these as 'feminised' configurations of cultural value.

Even though *Orange* is considered one of Netflix's signature series, it nevertheless carries the moniker 'female-centred' in a way that, while capitalised on for its 'iconoclasm', also encapsulates a suspicion about how and to whom it is to be marketed. This is also evident in the series' media reception that on the one hand celebrates it for its representational politics and for catapulting Netflix into the quality TV market; it is 'a bull's-eye with the sort of premium-cable space the distributor is eager to carve out with its original efforts' (Lowry 2013). On the other hand, media discourses frequently engage with the assumed problem of *Orange's* female-centredness and address,

evidenced in articles aimed to convince male audiences to watch the series despite this: pieces like ‘What Men Can Learn from *Orange Is the New Black*’ (Dockterman 2014) or ‘5 “Girl Shows” That Guys Should Be Watching’ (Outlaw 2013) both argue for the series’ accessibility for male audiences by highlighting features that help situate it in discourses about prestige drama, either by comparing it to HBO’s prison drama *Oz* (1997-2003; Dockterman 2014) or by the reassurance that ‘This is no *Sex in [sic] the City* fashion show’ (Outlaw 2013). These examples demonstrate again the discursive connection between aesthetic evaluation practices and a gendered address within the ‘quality’ discourse.

The specific ‘feminisation’ strategy in the ‘quality’ category – women in central roles and dramatisations of gender politics – works then as a site of tensions, inscribed onto questions of established generic, aesthetic, and narrative conventions. Similar to the other examined programmes, much of *Orange*’s notoriety as something ‘other’ than its peers is linked to the textual-discursive upsetting of these conventions, which, again, follow from the *politicised* centrality of women and their allocated televisual spaces. Just like for *30 Rock* and women’s sitcom/ comedian comedy/ satire, *Parks* and women’s sitcom/ comedian comedy/ mockumentary, and *The Good Wife* and melodrama/ political drama/ legal drama, this female presence disturbs the masculine-coded format’s generic signifiers where this disturbance becomes a problematised focus both of the text and the programme’s political economy. For *Orange*, contestations over the show’s cultural position and its decoding revolve around the dubiousness of situating its female-centred themes in a dramedy format that is hour-long instead of the tried-and-tested half-hour length of female-targeted quality programming.

As shown in earlier chapters, the form I call postfeminist dramedy developed by the end of the 1990s as a female-targeted televisual template of focalising changing gender scripts in America. Popularised by its Urtext *Sex and the City*, this is also the format in which the tonal mixture of 'blue' comedy and melodrama allows for transgressively thematising changing sexual mores. While Showtime's replication of the format does not necessarily concentrate on themes of 'risqué' sexuality in *Sex and the City's* style, shows like *Nurse Jackie*, *Weeds*, *The Big C*, and HBO's *Enlightened* and *Girls* still use the template to explore female subjectivities whose portrayal offers a dramatised clash with assumed norms of white middle-class femininity. Central protagonists' summary descriptions undergird this, such as: nurse with a pill addiction, weed-dealing widow, wife and mother who starts to behave bizarrely after her cancer diagnosis, and career woman experiencing a nervous breakdown. In *Girls'* case, the *Sex and the City* formula's generational and tonal updating similarly offers a politically committed focus on female subjectivity (for a comparison between the two series see Winch [2013]). Additionally, the ways in which the programme and media discourses focalise central star Lena Dunham's body as transgressive both anatomically and as sexual agent, also drive home the point that female transgression is the issue at stake here. 'Idiosyncratic femininities' (in terms of individual difference) is then the common operative description determining the programmes' generic-aesthetic properties as half-hour dramedies. While genre-mixing is an expected trait for the expression of such transgressions in quality television, the half-hour format's predominance speaks to an assumed closeness of these themes to the comic mode. The half-hour length is historically connected to sitcom, a legacy that may have been upset with the dawn of convergence-era television and its generic hybridities, but the female-

centred half-hour dramedy's popularity reveals a tight link between gendered address and longstanding format paradigms.

The discussed controversies around the 2015 Emmy nomination process indicate as much, with the Television Academy codifying the connection between episode length and generic traits – paradoxically in an effort to address the increased complexity of television's genre traditions. The new category system's task was to eliminate the issue of genre precisely for its contemporary elusiveness, using episode length instead as a presumably more objective classification method. Thus when media debates translated the decision back into genre terms, this illuminated the continued hold of the connection between generic address and episode length, all linked to taste hierarchies. The decision ties generic descriptors to television series whose status as pioneering revolves around their mixed tone and hour-long episode length in media discourses (Viruet 2015). That cultural hierarchies between drama and comedy govern tensions around the new nomination process surfaces in the industry's and critics' explicit agreement that the drama category is more competitive than comedy, which Viruet also mentions discussing *Orange's* case (ibid.). When the Academy panel ruled that only *Orange* had to compete in the drama category from the petitioning series, not only did this formalise industry confusion over the programme's generic standing – the Screen Actors' Guild Awards and the Golden Globe Awards both continue to nominate *Orange* as comedy –, it also diminished its chances for winning the Emmy, the most coveted award in the TV industry. In the drama category, *Orange* counts as an outlier too light to compete with dark prestige dramas, not least *House of Cards*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> One of the reasons Netflix prefers *Orange's* classification as comedy is to avoid competition in award seasons with *House of Cards*, its other prominent nominated series (Viruet 2015). This again shows a strategic split linked to gendered generic address and marketability that governs the company's choice of its pair of signature series.

The series' promotion also favours the comedy description, as evidenced in a tongue-in-cheek tweet on *Orange's* official Twitter account reacting to the ruling. The post reads 'Drama Category? We got this...' and includes an embedded video showing a season one scene in which fan favourite character Suzanne 'Crazy Eyes' Warren (Uzo Aduba) recites a monologue from *Coriolanus* to a stunned fellow inmate ('Orange Is the New Black' 2015). The choice of scene is characteristic of the series' self-promotion as generically subversive, here through tweaking the meaning of 'Shakespearean' frequently applied to male-centred prestige dramas (including *House of Cards*). This possibility comes from its slippery position as drama/comedy linked with a transgressive cultural position. This is intensified around both the fictional Suzanne – a popular black female character who functions as tragicomic jester figure, quoting Shakespeare in a widely circulated comic scene –, and around Aduba who, as frequently highlighted in media commentary, is the second actor ever after Ed Asner to have won Emmy awards for the same role both in the comedy and drama category (Donnelly 2015).<sup>38</sup>

Lack of industry accolades and discourses around them have become a pivotal site on which the series' treatment of gender, genre, and cultural value are publicly negotiated, and assumed problematic to reconcile with existing paradigms. If *Orange's* attraction as 'quality' TV lies in its politicised examination of the US prison industrial complex and women's incarceration via focusing on individualised stories of diverse womanhood, this topic sits uncomfortably within the hour-long comedy/drama format per industry judgement. Emmy nomination controversies suggest bluntly that *Orange* needs to either be half-hour

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<sup>38</sup> The difference between Aduba's and Asner's wins, overlooked by commentaries, is that Asner's wins for the role of Lou Grant in two different generic categories were due to the fact that he was nominated for two, generically different, programmes, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Lou Grant* – I examined in Chapter 2 this character's prominence in MTM's two prestigious series and how it exemplifies the 'quality' discourse's historic development in terms of genre and gender. In contrast, Aduba won for the same series in 2014 and 2015.

long to secure a familiar generic position or lose the comic tone tied to diverse womanhood to be considered full-on drama.

Issues of tone connected to a gendered focus are also the subject of Emily Nussbaum's analysis and advocacy of the series (2015). This article is especially relevant for my argument as it contrasts *Orange's* cultural work with acclaimed prestige drama *Show Me a Hero* (2015), an HBO miniseries produced by celebrated TV *auteur* David Simon. In many aspects following in the mould of Simon's earlier series *The Wire* and *Treme* (2010-2013), the miniseries exemplifies the ideal of a complex TV drama, providing a point of reference for unpacking issues of tone, gender, and cultural value in Nussbaum's comparison-and-contrast analysis.

Recounting the story of a housing desegregation scandal in the city of Yonkers, NY in the late 1980s, *Show Me a Hero* is the quintessential authorly text, conceived in Simon's familiar politically argumentative initiative to discuss race as a social class issue in America, expressed via documentarist aesthetic. Nussbaum argues that the 'social issue' interest of Simon's work 'with plots torn not from the headlines but from the op-ed page',<sup>39</sup> might form a great part of Simon's *auteur* status but this approach is not that rare in television culture. In fact, it is prevalent today in less respected forms like 'comedies, shows aimed at women and teens, [and] sci-fi', of which she calls *Orange* 'the most striking example' (2015). Nussbaum's argument recalls historic notions of television's political-social responsibility to reflect 'reality', steeped in the medium's assumed immediacy. But as discussed, convergence-era trends shift cultural value onto aesthetic-narrative complexity, while television's traditional pursuit of a 'difficult knowledge' and political realism is re-focused onto less-revered programming foregrounding diversity rhetoric and/or female presence, exemplified in *How to Get*

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<sup>39</sup> Shades of Netflix's native advert in *The New York Times* (see above).

*Away with Murder's* Annalise Keating. The basis on which Nussbaum compares *Show Me a Hero* and *Orange* is a shared appeal to political advocacy, or a 'mission to educate and to illuminate' (ibid.). The difference of their critical evaluation and categorisation lies in a gendered governance of generic-aesthetic address: the former displays signifiers of quality drama, i.e. 'realism, male protagonists, big-name Hollywood directors', the latter a 'tonally perverse' genre hybridity that leaves the TV Academy puzzled (ibid.).

Nussbaum details the two series' different aesthetics, outlined in the 'realistic drama' versus 'vaudevillian comedy/drama' dualism, but there is an even more demonstrative difference between their modes of expression tied to gendered traditions. As part of their efforts to narrativise political advocacy, both series use raced and classed femininities inscribed with political meanings. As Nussbaum comments, the inmates of Litchfield 'are demographic cousins of the women on *Show Me a Hero*'; the difference being the formers' portrayals as 'blown up, not life-size' representations (ibid.). But *Show Me a Hero's* reputation is not tied to centralising previously neglected *femininities*; instead, it is the series' treatment of race and class as sites of tensions in American society that critics herald in its subject matter. Yet its storytelling allocates a gendered and generic coding of narrative strands to make its socially conscious argument, an aspect that remains unexamined in critical reception. The plotting structure repeats methods Simon used in earlier series by employing parallel storylines around characters representing different social strata, producing a tableau of a community observed in its complexity. The central story of Yonkers Mayor Nick Wasiczko (Oscar Isaacs), battling local government to get new low-income housing built in white middle-class neighbourhoods, is contrasted with micro-stories of black and Latina women living in the projects, functioning as illustrations of racially

segregated communities' lived realities that politicians only argue about in the abstract. The multiple focus characteristic of *The Wire* and *Treme* is here separated along gendered lines, Wasicsko's privileged white masculinity pitted against victimised raced femininities.

The series then works out race and class issues via an unacknowledged gendering that feeds into aesthetic modes allocated to these multiple storylines: there is a clear effort to associate Wasicsko's story with codes of tragedy, while the women's stories operate in the melodramatic mode. These strategies fit with Simon's earlier work, but as Linda Williams' analysis of *The Wire* demonstrates, both that series and its producer's commentaries struggle to shake off associations with melodrama (2014). Williams' re-considered concept of melodrama helps ameliorate this tension, positing that its definition is not tied to feminised excess but to portraying moral struggles and fights against fate.<sup>40</sup> But Williams also proposes that some storylines of *The Wire* do exhibit features of classic tragedy, particularly in Stringer Bell's (Idris Elba) and Frank Sobotka's (Chris Bauer) stories as 'important members of their community who try to make change but when fate overcomes them, they accept it' (ibid., 103). For Williams, the crucial difference between melodrama and tragedy lies in protagonists' differing relation to justice, fate, and victimhood: *The Wire* is an 'institutional melodrama' in its outrage at an unjust social system, via stories of socially vulnerable individuals defenceless against a 'predetermined fate' (Williams 2014, 104). These stories are in contrast with Bell's and Sobotka's tragic stories, yet the latter are embedded in 'a larger melodrama that seeks justice and that is governed by the outrage that so little justice exists for the poor and the black' (ibid., 104).

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<sup>40</sup> Jason Mittell incorporates this definition into his concept of 'complex' serial television to prove the paradigm's political progressiveness and to fend off accusations of its 'masculinism' (2015, 233–260) – see next section.

A similar generic struggle characterises the multiple storylines of *Show Me a Hero*, clearly delineated between Wasicsko's central narrative and the victimised black and Latina women's parallel micro-stories. The title openly communicates the discursive intent to interpret *his* story as tragedy: coming from the F. Scott Fitzgerald quote, 'Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy', the text makes this literary reference explicit via a character's utterance, also repeated in critical reception. The generic struggle then becomes a feature of the text's meaning, complementing Simon's own struggles to associate his oeuvre with this genre to signal its political-aesthetic superiority. And Wasicsko's story *can* be interpreted via Williams' concept, making him a prototypical tragic hero in his attempts to change fate (hubris), in his 'tragic knowledge' i.e. his recognition of the full picture's significance (ibid., 104), and in his acceptance of his struggles' failure, expressed via suicide. The series negotiates between portraying the tragic hero's exceptionalism and institutional melodrama's operation. Unlike *The Wire* however, it inflates the tragic hero's narrative importance: Nussbaum finds that the women's stories suffer from a 'peripheral quality' (2015). This negotiation between tragedy and institutional melodrama betrays gendered oppositions, a feature never this prominent in Simon's earlier work – Williams remarks that *The Wire* exhibits a 'hard dominant masculinity' and even misogyny (2014, 161), demonstrating that its institutional melodrama inscribes its political argument onto male protagonists' stories. When *Show Me a Hero* uses raced female suffering to articulate its meanings, it does so by simultaneously centralising the male hero's individual tragedy in a way that is more pronounced than it ever was in *The Wire*.

As such, Nussbaum's comparison not only codifies oppositional tonal and gendered strategies tied to 'educational' quality texts but starts to unearth a specific generic function of raced womanhood. In the contrast

between these two texts, *Orange's* 'iconoclasm' emerges from its outrageously comic tone and sexual explicitness making it inappropriate for classification as 'authentic' message drama: '[w]ith its scenes of shower sex, [the series] has got the side eye from those who prefer their prison politics straight, so to speak' (2015). Yet recall McHugh's analysis of *Orange's* title sequence highlighting a documentary realism that may well be regarded as aesthetic signifier of a 'straight politics' (2015). 'Realism' becomes a key word in paratextual material as well, witnessed in series creator Jenji Kohan's statements about *Orange's* mixed generic tone: 'dramas that are only dramatic are a lie, because life isn't just a drama and if you're reflecting reality, part of it should be humorous. When you have just a dry hour, I don't think it's reality' (Fienberg 2013). For the hour-long serial, realism as an aesthetic mode to exhibit 'social awareness' becomes especially fraught with definitional tensions when it comes to centralised raced femininities. In *Show Me a Hero*, prestige drama's educational ambition places raced women in relatively side-lined melodrama contexts as narrative support to the male hero's tragedy, cumulatively producing the 'social realism' intent. In *Orange*, reversing the narrative focus results in a 'realism' that embraces grotesque and sexually explicit comedy. This on the one hand helps promote the series in an existing female-centred generic paradigm – the half-hour dramedy with which Kohan herself is associated via her work on *Weeds*. On the other, this strategy is in conflict with the allocation of high cultural value in 'quality drama' discourses, as *Show Me a Hero's* generic-aesthetic negotiations demonstrate. These tensions ultimately stem from the uncertain location of socially marginalised femininities within quality television's generic traditions: if their centralised presence signifies political progressiveness, i.e. a 'serious' message as benchmark of cultural worth, it is also entrapped in the

struggles over how their specific 'realism' can be allocated a mode of expression and at what cost of cultural value.

## **2. Female-centred prestige drama and (post)feminism**

In the previous chapter I argued that foregrounded gender politics in *30 Rock's* and *Parks'* 'comedy of distinction' produced an acute nervousness in media discourses about their interpretation, surfacing in competitive comparisons. Moreover, critical debates inscribed onto Tina Fey's and Amy Poehler's 'feminist' star personas their respective comedies' gender politics. The journalistic question 'who/which series is the better feminist' originates from the comic form's specifics: comedian comedy's transparency between 'author' and performed alter ego invites this condensation of attributed meanings onto the comedian. The 21<sup>st</sup> century popularity of 'feminist' female comedians in US television shows that the form is well-suited for its cultural significance to be configured in a political meaning. This owes to its status as relatively 'low' genre, the unique relationship between authorship and performance, and the assumed negotiation between its aesthetic aim (funniness) and feminism's 'serious' political aim. In short, the two comedies' understanding in cultural consciousness as quality television hinges greatly on their modes of engagement with feminist politics, concentrated onto their comic stars' celebrity personas.

If these comedies' cultural significance involves the ambiguous critical interpretation of their emphasised gender politics, then this is in contrast with the hour-long female-centred drama's allocation of cultural significance in critical debates. Rather than centring on notions of an adequate feminism, critical and industry discourses reveal more confusion about the televisual forms and appropriate programming contexts of *The Good Wife* and *Orange*. This is not to say that gender

politics do not feature in their evaluations at all; but the way these two series upset the perceived norms of 'quality' television surfaces primarily in critical-institutional unease about their aesthetic location. I also do not imply that genre is not a contested issue for *30 Rock* and *Parks*, since the two comedies undoubtedly struggled to situate themselves in relation to gendered comedy traditions. But they are still firmly positioned as quality comedies in critical evaluation and genre description; the two dramas however, while critically acclaimed, occupy more contested generic spaces. *The Good Wife* straddles the apparently hierarchal expressive modes of network and cable television, also struggling to shed the taint of melodrama and the 'ladies' empowerment procedural' label (Nussbaum 2014). *Orange* upsets the half-hour dramedy formula and the sincere tone of 'message drama', resulting in award season controversies. While all four case studies are objects of critical and institutional contestations originating in their foregrounded gender politics, for the hour-long series this primarily closes in on how to place them in categories of genre and programming context.

The programmes' treatment of postfeminism's and feminism's relationship derives from genre traditions too, namely from the female-led half-hour dramedy's influence on the four series (and other female-centred programming) as immediate ideological precursor. A.O. Scott's discussed rhetorical link between feminism's and immature culture's 21<sup>st</sup> century triumph emphasises *Sex and the City's* significance for American culture's gender politics: he calls the programme 'in retrospect the most influential television series of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century' (2014), responsible for female-centred half-hour dramedies' and comedies' ubiquity – but avoids mentioning female-centred prestige drama. Comedies appear to be traceable back to the millennial half-hour dramedy and gain on this basis cultural significance; but this

lineage is less easy to establish for hour-long series like the ones I analyse. I argue that the critical-institutional unease around their generic categorisation partly originates in their contested relationship to this formula. The aesthetic choice to narrativise female subjectivity in 'sophisticated' and masculine-coded forms, rather than in half-hour dramedy format creates this unease and relative marginality. Moreover, the two comedies both use the opportunity to reference historic predecessors (female-led sitcoms) to establish generic validation, which is a less viable avenue for female-centred prestige drama due to the form's scarcity and lack of ascribed significance in American TV history. For the comedies, genre provides a reliable framework, and it is rather the specific insertion of gender politics into it that incites critical debates; female-led drama has no such framework to fall back on, evidenced in discussed ambiguities of genre categorisation.

While form is a contested issue for these two series in critical discourses, there is more consensus about their significance as politically novel programming, an agreement deriving from their categorisation around the 'strong/complex female lead' and her discursive importance. The trend variously called feminist or female-centred quality programming, in which female protagonists' narrative centrality signifies 'feminism', lends programmes the aura of political novelty and thus 'quality'. It is this category into which *The Good Wife* and *Orange* fit with no critical uncertainty, and via which their cultural value is most recognised (O'Keeffe 2014, Blay 2015). Due to the category's defining aspect – the centrality of a type of fictional figure – issues of genre and expressive modes are not priority for this discourse apart from celebrating the breadth of genres in which she is present (ibid.).

The 'complex female lead' is then indeed a complex figure in that in her cultural status several ideological and aesthetic presuppositions

converge. As symbol of a triumphant feminism and diversity on television, she accounts for a representational realism that lends programmes novelty value. This figure provides proof for critics that the masculinist paradigm of quality television has met its challenge; if Annalise Keating is a female Walter White, then this makes *How to Get Away with Murder* a *Breaking Bad* for women (O’Keeffe 2014). The ‘strong female character’s signifying power outranks issues of generic and aesthetic positioning, and becomes the main carrier of prestige for prime-time drama. In a presumed evolutionary trajectory, she becomes charged with increasing responsibility for an identity politics connected to issues of gender, race, class, and sexuality. This ascription of political progressiveness then follows a trajectory that in feminist scholarship’s terms can be described as struggling to overcome the postfeminist ethos to embrace intersectionalist feminism. Amanda Lotz’s concepts (2007, 2014) apply this logic to a certain extent: her cultural optimism about television’s increasing engagement with ideals of a feminist representational model feeds into her work on ‘quality’ television’s development, and corresponds to media criticism’s reliance on the ‘strong female character’ as proof of this narrative of progression. A case in point is O’Keeffe’s article (2014) about the ‘TV renaissance for strong women’, which draws on quotes from Lotz to lend academic authority to its argument. However, this concept attaches little importance to issues of generic-aesthetic practices and value hierarchies in its rhetoric about political innovation.

The understanding of the ‘strong female character’ as purveyor of feminism is also prominent in scholarship primarily engaging with ‘quality’ television as aesthetic object; an approach dominant in Jason Mittell’s influential book *Complex TV* (2015a). Mittell’s work provides insight into the ideological divide in academic theory about the quality TV category and its relationship to gender politics. He looks at the

specifics of the ‘narrative complexity’ phenomenon, the term he coined for his seminal article on the subject (2006). As such, this examination concentrates on the aesthetics, or as he terms it the *poetics* of storytelling in convergence television, a concept building on literary theory and film studies models. He sets up this approach in a dualism with the analytic focus on what is often called the *politics* of television. Mittell describes the shift in television scholarship since the 1990s as a transition away from a primary interest in issues of representation, political economy, and identity (i.e. politics). This millennial development has led to what Lury calls the ‘aesthetic turn’ (2016, 120), or a preference for examining how television texts express formal innovations, i.e. poetics (Mittell 2015a, 3-4).

In the chapter ‘Evaluation’ (ibid., 206-232), Mittell engages with the academic debate on ‘quality’ TV, arguing that excessive scholarly focus on the term and its problematic nature is an unproductive dead-end because it shuts off possibilities of evaluation based on aesthetic achievements – hence his suggestion for the description ‘complex TV’ instead, which for him does not imply evaluative hierarchy but is rather an apolitical designation of a narrative trend. His argument attempts to mediate between the groups debating the primacy of aesthetic versus political analysis in television scholarship (see Zborowski 2016). Nonetheless, he agrees with Sudeep Dasgupta (2012) who advocates for shunning Bourdieusian critical concepts about ‘quality’ TV and ‘quality’ audiences. Dasgupta finds it a patronising and elitist position from academics like Newman and Levine, Jane Feuer, or Michael Kackman to assume a direct correlation between ‘the people’ (social audiences) in need of ideological defence and the TV texts they presumably consume. The debate Mittell engages with forms along the lines of poetics versus politics in television scholarship, similar to the discipline’s earlier periods, and his intervention intends to do away with this framework by

avoiding issues of 'quality' or 'antilegitimation' discourses and by 'return[ing] to questions of aesthetics and value to open up the possibilities of evaluative criticism of popular arts' (2015, 215).<sup>41</sup>

I find it representative that Mittell's endeavour to offer a 'pure' aesthetic evaluation of television texts devoid of ideological complications relies on political interpretation in one particular area: genre and expressive mode. The chapter 'Serial Melodrama' (ibid., 233-260), concentrating on genre blending, explores complex narratives' predominant use of the melodramatic mode. Mittell engages with melodrama's cultural standing as excessively feminine, admitting that he used to refute the view that this mode has any influence on complex serial drama with the latter's 'intellectual seriousness, measured production style, and claims to authenticity and realism' (ibid., 244). As he admits, Linda Williams' (2014) argument changed his position, which as discussed finds melodrama's defining feature not in emotional excess but in the construction of moral oppositions. From this originates for Mittell the 'engaging emotional response to *feel* the difference between competing moral sides as manifested through forward-moving storytelling' (2015, 244, italics in original). It is via Williams' analytical framework that his intellectual and affective appreciation of 'complex' texts gains academic validation, such that having a 'good cry' over *The Wire*'s pathos is both a non-gendered reaction and also disproves claims that the programme operates in masculinist realms of signification (ibid., 248).

Mittell then embraces melodrama's ubiquity in prestige drama drawing on Williams' structural analysis, also setting out to disprove the widespread agreement in media theory that complex drama's formal aspects derive from soap opera. He supports this by a detailed investigation of daytime soaps' and prime-time dramas' different

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the debate see Nannicelli (2016), Logan (2016), and Piper (2016).

historic production models and textual characteristics, concluding that in lieu of any formal or production background link between the two there is no evidence that 'contemporary serials "masculinise" the soap opera form' (ibid.). It is rather the melodramatic mode that for him informs television storytelling, and 'the pervasive spread of serial melodrama has added an effeminate layer to traditionally masculinist genres such as crime dramas, espionage thrillers, and science fiction' (ibid.). He sees in this gendered genre mixing a politically progressive potential that breaks down gendered barriers of televisual traditions and viewing experiences, per John Fiske's description in his seminal book *Television Culture* (2011 [1987]). Mittell demonstrates this in the way melodrama, as 'effeminate' mode, pervades television, and also in the way traditionally masculinist genres accommodate female characters.

Mittell's example for the latter is *The Good Wife*, whose narrative operation he sees as 'complicating its gendered appeals' through mixing serialised and procedural narration via the central character, 'merging the familial, professional, romantic, and political, often within a single story thread, and exploring how these threads connect with the emotional and rational choices of its female protagonist' (ibid., 258). His interpretation celebrates the series for a feminist progressivism following from its narrative choices; for him the 'complex female character' carries an ideological import whose meaning cannot in fact be interpreted outside of the ideological. This is clear from the figure's centrality to the issue of genre-mixing in 'complex TV's development, whose importance he links here to a feminist appeal. As such, 'complex TV's otherwise non-ideological, purely aesthetic examination relies on a strand of feminist media theory to apply the narrative of progression and democratisation of viewing experiences:

Male viewers weep at the sentimental melodrama of *Friday Night Lights* or *Lost*, female fans celebrate female power and analytic intelligence featured on *Alias* or *Veronica Mars*, and all viewers feel the affective interconnections of *The Good Wife*'s personal and professional realms – such viewing experiences problematize strict gender dichotomies, offering sites of fluidity and empathy, however imperfect and partial, that seem consistent with feminist critiques of gender norms. (Ibid., 259-260)

Mittell's advocacy of redirecting academic focus on poetics becomes sidetracked around the question of genre and gender, as he engages here with a selection of feminist media analysis. This itself need not be a problem given feminist theory's contestations over this connection, but it throws into dubious light the claim of non-ideological engagement since the investigation's rhetoric seems to gloss over an ideological bias masked as focus on aesthetics. The 'complex female character' is an ideological term mobilised to support 'complex television's meaning as aesthetic term, laying bare 'complexity's own ideologically laden nature, much like 'quality's.

Further, Mittell ignores in his examination two intertwined areas both vital to an approach considering gender politics in genre and television theory. First, as noted, while he draws on some feminist work on television and gender, he only references that which supports his rhetoric of progressivism, resulting in a neglect of the postfeminism debate dominating the last few decades of the field. Ignoring this also means that Mittell does not engage with feminism's historic presence in television, a crucial area in feminist scholarship for discussing notions of progression/co-option. As shown throughout the thesis, the postfeminism/feminism issue has had a structuring importance for the field even before (and regardless of) the post-millennial 'quality' television debate. I do not argue that this issue is equally problematic in Mittell's chosen examples, or that these series are uniformly reactionary

in their ideological meanings, or even that he should employ a feminist critical approach, but rather that declaring all 'complex TV's genre mixing progressively feminist, and invoking a fitting selection of feminist theory to do so, oversimplifies issues that otherwise structure the discipline. In the effort to demonstrate an aesthetic evolution allegedly devoid of ideological implications, Mittell does invoke political debates (those around gender) to chart this evolution. The fact that he only depends on this methodology when discussing genre correlates with industry and critical contestations around my drama case studies' genre categorisations. This illuminates again that for serialised drama, aesthetic evaluations of genre continue to be an area especially fraught with ideological implications around gender.

The other issue Mittell eschews is cultural circulation's signifying processes affecting 'complex TV's contextual positioning. For instance, when he demonstrates why its narrative features could not have been derived from soap opera, he dismisses the term's discursive dominance. Declaring that 'soapy' is an inaccurate description of a prime-time TV text might be factually correct but he avoids considering not just popular and industry usages of the term but also the ways in which 'complex TV' aesthetics often explicitly rely on it. Fittingly, scholarship has investigated *The Sopranos* for its textual reflection on soap opera (Donatelli and Alward 2002), and journalistic think pieces about serialized drama's links to the form's narrative traditions and affect (e.g. Lyons 2015b) are products of a culturally ingrained chain of signification. When Mittell dismisses these phenomena as factually misleading, he ignores arguments that he advocated in his earlier book on television genres, which saw genre as a cultural category produced in a discursive formation operating within industry, audience, and cultural practices (2004). This avoidance also leads him to draw on Williams' concept on melodrama in a way that mitigates *her* earlier work's significance. While

Williams' more recent concept does demonstrate the melodramatic mode's structural ubiquity, it does not dismiss its cultural connotations as 'bad object' due to its centrality in female-targeted and female-centred entertainment but engages with this link's ideological implications.

Mittell's application of Williams' concept comes off as an effort to reconcile the melodramatic mode with 'complex' TV's operation in a way that simultaneously removes connotations of a suspicious femininity (such that crying over a 'masculinist' drama becomes both the true appreciation of its complexity *and* proof of the text's feminist progressivism), recalling earlier periods' academic contestations over the gendered meanings of television genres. Lynn Joyrich's (1996) scrutiny of cultural critics' engagement in the late 1980s and early 1990s with postmodernity, television, and melodrama as their prime expressive mode comes to mind, detailed in Chapter 2. Here I want to highlight Joyrich's problematisation of the ways in which critics like John Fiske attribute to male-oriented TV dramas a disruption of the medium's oppressive gender norms. This discussion is all the more relevant since as mentioned, Mittell also references Fiske's framing of television genres as polar opposites along gendered lines to argue that 'complex TV's formal features progressively overwrite this state (Mittell 2015a, 251). Joyrich is sceptical of Fiske's celebration of *Miami Vice's* (1984-1990) 'anarchic' self-liberation from 'traditional meanings of gender by opening up the program to the postmodern pleasures of spectacle and style' (Joyrich 1996, 92), which for him is 'the ultimate political act' (Fiske 1987, 24 cited in Joyrich 1996, 93). Her criticism highlights what Fiske's analysis of style overlooks, namely the social and ideological context in which the TV text is situated, concluding that

[t]he problem with this view [the 'purity' of a non-ideological pleasure in style] lies not only in its reductive notion of ideology as a

force which can simply be evaded or separated from pleasure and the formation of identity, but also in its misreading of the marketplace. (...)

(...) The same may be true of television's own repeated male displays: far from marking the end of gender and power divisions, TV's masquerades – a response to the discursive constructions that put television and its viewing subjects in their (feminised) place – contribute to these very disparities; indeed, the primary thing often masked in such male masquerades is the desire to be rid of femininity itself. (Ibid., 94-95)

By referring to Joyrich's criticism of leading TV theorists' one-sided application of gender theory, my aim is not to reproduce it, i.e. I do not intend to disprove Mittell's reading of 'complex' television as progressively feminist. After all, my own reading of *The Good Wife* argued that the female character's centralisation has fundamental consequences for mixing television forms and modes in ways that upset these forms' gendered meanings. But rather than apply ideological determinism to such genre rearrangements, I contend that their emergence and contestations around their cultural value are inseparable from the postfeminism/feminism debate's current visibility (see Chapter 1). Mittell's reliance on a gender politics framework for his argument about recombined television forms' aesthetic novelty points to this inseparability. But his nominal effort at a 'poetics only' approach renders TV texts' explicit negotiation of generic hierarchies' genderedness invisible, such as *The Good Wife's* struggles with melodrama and its connotations with a suspicious feminine excess, and the programme's own ambiguous standing in industry and critical discourses. Mittell mobilises a definition of melodrama that helps him limit the question of ideological and cultural context to an argument about progression linked to aesthetic innovation.

Mittell's position and methodology are representative of broader trends in a television scholarship historically divided along the lines of the poetics/politics approach; but the 'quality' television phenomenon has thrown this trajectory into even sharper relief. Fiske's analysis of 'postmodern' TV genres strived to prove aesthetic innovation linked to 'progressive' gender politics in an era when television still carried the stigma of aesthetic dubiousness. Joyrich's rebuttal to Fiske and other cultural critics readjusts the political focus, stressing that examining TV texts' political-ideological work is not a supplement to charting aesthetic developments but intrinsic to understanding them. I argue that the academic divide's problematic nature is even more pronounced in *this* period's paradigm of prestige television precisely because, as will be shown through the case studies, a significant segment of serial dramas are products of the aforementioned discursive struggles between postfeminism and popular feminism. While this discursive contestation's visibility in popular culture is undoubted in feminist scholarship, its ignorance in academic studies of 'quality' or 'complex' television suggests this literature's invisibility in the wider field. The two programmes' cultural position as exceptional in (and for) their programming contexts is embedded in promotionally and textually foregrounded gender politics, promptly moving them to the centre of analytical attention in feminist scholarship. Meanwhile, they are mostly considered outside of this field if the ideological context, i.e. prestige drama's genderedness, requires it. This helps sustain the gendered split of the poetics/politics divide present in television culture and reproduced in scholarship.

*The Good Wife* and *Orange* are both representative examples of the ways in which post-recessionary prestige drama centralises contested gender politics projected onto issues of genre categorisation. This is prominent in the industry and media focus on the two programmes'

formal volatility and contradictoriness, and in Mittell's account in *Complex TV* that frames the question of genre blending in a progressive gender politics, an approach elsewhere not dominant in his book about narrative complexity. These formulations rely on the 'strong/complex female lead' and her fixed ideological importance governing this programming's cultural novelty and 'complex' genre treatment. Yet academic feminism shows that if this figure expresses complex female identity, then her ideological importance is not exhausted in a 'feminist' influence on genre complexity but involves historic and highly mediated negotiations of feminist politics' presence in popular culture. More specifically, she reflects the postfeminist cultural paradigm's changing context, problematised via the post-recessionary resurgence of a popular feminism and its contestations. Similar to the examined comedies which centralise these contestations in the relatively respected forms of satire and mockumentary, thus elevating this dialogue's discursive prestige, the examined hour-long series narrativise this politics in the high-end serial's framework. Lending prestige to gender politics works however more ambiguously here, coming to bear on negotiations of genre signifiers, and testifying to the serialised drama form's especially fragile dependence on gendered ideals of cultural value.

### **2.A *The Good Wife***

The series' use of the 'complex/strong female lead' overlaps in her signification with the 'independent woman' figure, a symbol in US culture of the achievements of the women's liberation movement. The latter term encompasses historic feminism's most visible and recognisable critique of patriarchal society in white and middle-class womanhood, and denotes in this figure an era's changing gender

politics. As such it has become a somewhat outmoded expression, yet one that is still prevalent for making sense of female identity in popular culture, of which television is an especially favoured area given its discursive amicability to women's representation. This comes to the fore in the four-part PBS documentary *America in Primetime* (2011), in which each episode focuses on the evolution of a character type of American TV. To contextualise my argument, I provide a short analysis of the documentary's first episode here, titled 'Independent Woman', not least because it references *The Good Wife* extensively; as such it provides a useful platform for unpacking how American television's reflection on its own character type's evolution makes sense of the show's gender politics.

The episode charts the figure's historic development starting from the post-war period across a variety of scripted programmes and institutional contexts via interviews of influential creative personnel, and showing representative footage of the programmes. It provides useful insight into the industry's self-reflexive circulation of its cultural influence on American identity politics, and its implied significance for shifting gender politics. Its trajectory describes a progressive development of representation that finds its final completion in *The Good Wife*, supported by a curious structuring method: the otherwise historically linear narrative opens with a detailed discussion of *The Good Wife* before moving on to its timeline's origin point, the post-war period's portrayal of the white middle-class housewife. After this, the documentary offers a whistle-stop tour of TV series corresponding to the narrative of growing female independence and character complexity, its rhetoric appealing to social realism via links with American socio-political reality. For instance, footage of women's liberation movement rallies supports the discussion of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* cultural importance. Magazine and newspaper clippings

are used throughout as referential illustrations to gender discourse themes; the headlines in focus often highlight the word 'feminist' in a context of debate. *Roseanne* is contextualised in relation to class difference and the 'realities' of motherhood, and to Roseanne Arnold's controversial star persona. *Sex and the City's* appeal to women's sexual liberation is discussed as a response to broadcast television's strict content regulations and its operation as 'business', as opposed to premium cable's 'freedom' from these constraints.

Into this presentation of the 'independent woman's televisual history blends the contemporary term 'complex female character', the former evoking links with an historic and referential feminist politics, the latter a focus on individualised identity politics in fictional storytelling. In this context, singling out *The Good Wife* as culmination of the 'independent woman's diachronic evolution – placing it in the front of the documentary's narrative; both outside of linear history and an endpoint to it – produces a slipperiness of the series' attributed meaning. That is, its discussion by creators and stars asserts the programme's political 'realism' in referring to real-life political sex scandals,<sup>42</sup> and invoking postfeminism's 'choice' debates for the character's inception. At the same time, co-creators Robert and Michelle King frame this in a primary interest in ethical dilemmas of the socio-political world: here, the terms of female independence and 'work-life balance' merge with the examination of the workplace as highly politicised space, complicating the 'independent woman' trope. 'Alicia really is consistently trying to do the right thing, and it's just difficult because so much is being thrown at her,' says Michelle King. The documentary illustrates her words with a scene from the programme where Eli Gold tries to involve Alicia in a scheme to get rid of her workplace rival Cary Agos (Matt Czuchry). Viewers of the series can easily associate this with its general focus on

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<sup>42</sup> For more on this, see Leonard (2014b, 2016).

political machinations around and outside of Alicia's storyline, providing both its viewing pleasures and critical approval. The series' producers interpret the 'independent woman' figure in a way that foregrounds ethical-political dilemmas affecting the presentation of identity politics.

Here, the series' broader cultural work comes into play, lauded in media reception for a critical take on institutional politics and law. This aligns it with a popular model of prestige television that reflects a public scepticism with these institutions, in series like *House of Cards*, *Veep*, *True Detective's* second season, or producer David Simon's output. Because of the high cultural currency of this institutional scepticism, attributed with intellectual sophistication, *The Good Wife's* focus on political scheming associates it with this programming type. Yet, the 'independent woman's centrality complicates both her meaning and the configuration of this political scepticism. That is, if this figure is associated with women's economic and psychological empowerment, then centering the narrative on her involves questioning the meaning of *this* character. As noted, the narrative often brings into play a liberal feminist politics as an extant force of organisational lobbying: in presenting political variables and influences, the series calls on the terms and traditions of liberal feminism as one of the factors that put the 'independent woman' heroine in a nexus of social power relations (Miller 2016). This emphasis on the complicated social-political forces affecting the character creates the series' slipperiness of meanings. The complexity of these forces provides its high cultural value, at the expense of the 'independent woman's ideological fixity as sign of feminist progression: the series' celebrated concentration on institutions and politics diverts the individualised identity politics towards an interest in the web of political power relations in spaces of American governance, law, and business. Yet the 'independent woman'

has crucial bearing on this interest for her centrality in popular culture's contestations of feminism and postfeminism.

The middle-class white woman is a preferred figure onto which popular culture tends to project ideas of shifting gender roles, from the post-war housewife to the postfeminist career woman. Feminist scholarship has shown how postfeminism imagines women's gain of (some) social power in *this* figure's successes, an image that by the 1990s had become ingrained into American cultural consciousness. This narrative of economic success and upward mobility contributed to the dissociation of a generation of young women with feminist politics in the 1990s. Lynn Spigel attributes this partly to television's role in promoting the idea of that present's 'enlightened' gender scripts (1995). In a survey project, Spigel interviewed American female college students about their notions of 'women's progress' to see how television's canonised images inform these. She finds that the medium's own perpetuated centrality to shaping popular memory is linked to her students' unease with discussing feminism as still relevant political factor:

Almost all students agreed that we are now living in an age of enlightenment where women have more choices and more career opportunities. Within this construction of the present, the past served as a comparative index by which people could measure their relative liberation. In this regard, television reruns and nostalgia shows might well have served the purpose of legitimation because they provide us with pictures of women whose lives were markedly less free than our own. (...) Television thus served as a central form of legitimating the present.

(...) [F]or some women, faith in progress seemed to close off the need for a feminist movement in the present. (Ibid., 27-28)

Spigel's study describes a connection between television's representational politics and how real-life women in the 1990s interpreted these to make sense of their own present's gender scripts.

This is in retrospect a symptomatic iteration of postfeminism's cultural work.

To the extent that what Spigel shows here is representative of that period's popular discourses affecting a generation of young educated women (e.g. dissociation from feminism, belief in gender progress, 'having-it-all' rhetoric), it is indicative that three of my case studies centralise fictional women that can be seen as part of this generation, now in their late thirties and early forties. Liz Lemon, Leslie Knope, and Alicia Florrick, the central characters of three network series about women at the workplace, fall into an age bracket that affiliates them with Spigel's examined demographic group. With the caveat that this argument blends the real with the fictional, the three protagonists can be imagined as representative portrayals of early 1990s postfeminist womanhood, now fifteen-twenty years older, drifting out of the age group that female-targeted consumer culture prioritises.

Positioning these characters in workplace narratives that struggle to speak to political (including feminist) and institutional matrices affecting their social identity, has crucial consequences. First, it reconfirms popular culture's fascination with the shifting meaning of the affluent white career woman figure who possesses some social power gained at the height of postfeminism's cultural dominance, continuing to interrogate her identity as gendered and sexual subject.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the three series' foregrounding of social, cultural, and political forces as variably oppressive or confounding betrays a tendency to question the diachronic trajectory of identity and institutional politics promoted in

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<sup>43</sup> The four series' industry backgrounds are indicative of their preferred affiliations with specific fictional womanhoods and target audiences. The three network series focalise the 'mature' career woman at the workplace; contrastingly, the online streaming service invests in a story that initially focuses on a young 'postfeminist' woman, then gradually mitigates her role as subversive gesture, conceiving a 'future' of progressive television storytelling that aligns itself with the future of television distributing and consuming practices. Network television can be contextualised in this relationship of generational conflict as negotiating its growing bad reputation, struggling to survive in the post-network economy: it continues to invest in a figure to whose mediatisation it has largely contributed, but now problematising her cultural meanings in a way that confirms broadcast television's cultural relevance via mobilising institutional and character scepticism.

Western societies. The most relevant example here is the treatment of late 1990s liberal feminism: problematised by feminists as a realised political force, the programmes explicitly take institutional gender politics to task. In this regard *30 Rock* and *The Good Wife* are ideological cousins for their overt scepticism about the realities of a 'visible' feminism.

The institutionalised liberal feminism in question is reminiscent of what McRobbie analysed in her seminal unpacking of 'gender mainstreaming', i.e. the incorporation of some feminist concerns into governmental and global institutional policymaking in the late 1990s under the banner of the elusive 'human rights' discourse (2009, 152). She argues that this development removed the movement's 'radical' aspects, especially those that could be deemed problematic for feminism's absorption into late capitalist institutions, such as postcolonial feminism or the critique of dualistic gender difference. Drawing on Mizejewski's (2014) work, I showed in the previous chapter how *30 Rock* enacts its scepticism about this 'mainstreamed' version of feminism in both Liz Lemon as parody of the uninformed (postfeminist) feminist possessing some social power, and in commenting on the ways in which political ideals play out in the nexus of corporate capitalism and television culture. Further, all four of the examined series thematise the problematic relationship of 'gender mainstreaming' to race discourses and postcolonialism, with the network programmes narrativising this as a matter of labour relations in the white-collar workplace. This is clear in *30 Rock's* and *Parks'* mockery of race relations, repeatedly bringing this into connection with gender politics.

*The Good Wife* often channels its criticism of 'realised' feminist politics through Diane's character; I indicated previously that the series often contrasts her political ideals and their institutional presence via backroom discussions and deals. On the one hand, the programme

promotes a discursive affiliation with political second-wave feminism via Diane's figure, as analysed in detail by Miller (2016, 10-11): she is a member of EMILY's List (a political action committee devoted to helping elect pro-choice Democratic female politicians into office), and is repeatedly involved in legal cases challenging her gender politics. Ideological convictions and their complications dominate her storyline even when it depicts her private life, as seen in her marriage to Kurt McVeigh (Gary Cole), a hyperconservative Republican. Further, the list of featured guest stars portraying female lawyers and influential political figures whose politics determine their narrative significance includes Maddie Hayward (Maura Tierney), a feminist businesswoman and Democrat, and in one much-promoted instance Gloria Steinem, cameoing in Alicia's daydream to persuade her to run for State's Attorney ('Dear God'). On the other hand, the presence of liberal feminism is imbued with the same scepticism that characterises the programme everywhere, which, like *30 Rock*, is also linked with a criticism of race relations. Black female characters tend to be foregrounded in these instances, such as in a storyline that focuses on Diane and Cary's condescending post-race attitudes as corporate bosses in season seven ('Lies'), or in the multi-episode portrayal in season three of systemic racism in the State's Attorney's office run by Peter Florrick, both plots using the affected black female lawyers to voice this criticism.

If these instances feed into the series' cynicism and even paranoia about the state of affairs in American politics (a stance characteristic for a strand of prestige drama), then centralising a female figure recognisable for her multiple meanings in the culturally projected history of gender relations throws into relief the question of her utility. How can the character function in this double bind that mobilises both a gendered success story in the 'independent woman' figure and also political scepticism, including the history of feminism? The central figure's

specific paratextual and textual positioning is informative here. The above quote from co-producer Michelle King indicates the character's function as not just the scorned political wife's fish-out-of-water story, but as an intensification of the dynamic between protagonist and environment. As narrative centre, Alicia is a 'blank page' on which different forces (in the form of surrounding characters and their convictions) try to leave their ideological mark. Her signature Sphinx-like reticence works then not only as gendered generic statement (see previous section) but as the preferred presentation of a figure whose significance as plot device lies in her lack of ideological affiliations.

The producers' comments are further reinforced by their other remarks interpreting the character's function, coming to the fore in their frequent description of the show as 'The Education of Alicia Florrick'. This unofficial subtitle has featured at pivotal points of the programme's production history: upon the fan and critical upheaval following the killing off of love interest Will Gardner, the producers' open letter defended the twist by describing the show with this expression, here explaining his removal by implying that unlike Alicia's, his presence was not essential to the show (Anon. 2014). They once again used it, this time on Twitter in a series of posts, after CBS announced the programme's cancellation in its seventh season ('GoodWifeWriters' 2016). This communication is especially telling because it also re-emphasises earlier 'authorly' statements about the narrative's closed nature, envisaged at its conception as a seven-seasons long exploration of Alicia's 'education':

Telling the story of the Education of Alicia Florrick is the creative dream of a lifetime. It was always our plan to tell it over 7 seasons. We wanted the story to have a beginning, middle, and an end – that's the only way actions can have real consequences – and it's the reason we had episode titles count up from one word to four, then

back down again. (...) We're excited to celebrate the final 9 eps and bring the story to its natural conclusion. Here's a spoiler: the last episode will be called 'End.' (Ibid.)

'Quality' drama's valorisation of grand narrative, seriality, linear and goal-oriented storytelling, and implied authorly presence feeds into the producers' interpretation, mitigating those aspects of storytelling that align it with 'traditional' television, i.e. procedurals' repetitive yet open-ended plotting. The grand narrative here denotes the 'independent woman's character study who, owing to her blank page status as privileged ex-housewife, functions less as 'complex character' and more as catalyst of her social world's ideological-ethical complexities. Prestige cable drama's fascination with character complexity and concentrated psychological study of exceptional antiheroes is then reorganised in the balance between social world and central character, a development that follows from network television's aesthetic-narrative constraints. In Mittell's analysis of cable drama's antihero, the 'complex' aesthetic is matched with the focus on a protagonist 'whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted or negative moral allegiance' (2015b, 75). Alicia is not an antihero in this sense, yet the issue of moral corruption through social power is at stake in *The Good Wife*, providing the programme's primary cultural distinction. Cable drama's focus on exceptional and morally 'hideous men' (ibid.) is countered here with her exceptional (initial) morality. In performance this translates into the character's signature silence that, as Leonard theorises, also speaks to a refusal to play along with media culture's scrutiny of public figures' sexual life (2014b, 955).

The series' focus on Alicia Florrick's moral compass and 'relative morality' (ibid.) then describes a trajectory in which these shift in a process of 'education' via her encounters with social-political forces. This foregrounded dynamic between individual and social world evokes

the literary tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. The Kings' preferred description of the series, appealing to a certain artistic status, confirms as much, considering that *Bildungsroman* translates as 'novel of education' or 'formation'. This loose form has been popularised in Anglo-American literature and modern media as the coming-of-age story, concentrating on a young person's emotional-psychological maturation over a longer period of time. But the producers' terminology shows an ideological connection to earlier literary iterations of the genre, especially the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German novel such as Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (2011 [1924]). In its German incarnations, the *Bildungsroman* was a form allowing the presentation of a society's ideological complexities by focusing on a young protagonist's years-long 'journey' through its various spaces and via the protagonist's meetings with characters embodying specific ideological convictions (Slaughter 2011). The protagonist is then both central to their story and also negotiates a mere functionality: while their moral-emotional maturation is at stake in the narrative, this is often more interested in presenting the social environment they move through. As such, a tension dominates in the form between the hero's personal psychology and the social world's depiction, such that in its modern versions, the problematic reconciliation between the two surfaces in parody and a 'perversion' of the hero's portrayal. In an extreme example, the protagonist in Günter Grass's *Die Blechtrommel* (1984 [1959]) lives his whole life in a three-year-old boy's body, refusing to grow up (Slaughter 2011, 94). *Der Zauberberg's* protagonist Hans Castorp is a parody of German philistinism, a bland and sober member of the middle class without any worldviews and opinions, taking the expression 'blank slate' to the extreme (Pongs 1984, E.H.V. 1970). *The Good Wife's* cultural work and its producers' appeal to artistic significance recalls the satirical-parodistic *Bildungsroman's* interpretation in literary theory: both the

notion of 'education', and the denotation 'good wife' as reference to a trivial female role, work in the satirical mode.

*The Good Wife* producers' ambition to cultural distinction then appeals to an established narrative tradition already widespread in popular forms, but rarely so reliant on its literary origins. The network drama competes with cable serials' discursive distinctiveness by projecting the antihero's 'complex' (a)morality onto the social world, presenting it through a 'naïve' protagonist's educational journey in the *Bildungsroman* tradition. As valorised modes of expression, cynicism and irony dominate these forms. In *The Good Wife* this is two-tiered, applying to both the described social world and the protagonist's cultural meaning as gendered subject. Both the title and the circulated subtitle signal an emphatically sarcastic interest in the 'wife' as television culture's stock figure who represents the medium's historic femininity and an associated 'blandness' of character. Alicia Florrick is extremely familiar from American culture (housewife, mother, career woman, Hillary Clinton allegory [Leonard 2014b]), and this familiarity includes millennial television's subversion of her meanings. That is, in the figure's ironic evocation and complication, the programme builds on female-centred dramedy's portrayal of the 'difficult mom' (Scott 2014). But the genre in which the figure is centralised here throws into sharp relief this portrayal (high-end legal-political drama rarely dramatizes domestic femininity at its narrative core), via the dialectic between her morality and the portrayed political culture's corruption.

De-familiarising the 'housewife' is then a fairly established trend for post-millennial television, but the political theme and generic environment reconfigures it as an ideological tug-of-war over her meaning and cultural utility. In the focus on 'The Education of Alicia Florrick', the opening up the narrative to the *Bildungsroman* formula (individual vs social-political world) provides an avenue to negotiate the

requirement of 'character complexity' and bland morality in order for the fractious encounter between character and 'complex' social world to work. The concentration on the figure and her cultural meaning's complexity is also what differentiates the series from the two analysed comedies' portrayal of the 'mature' career woman: both embedded in the workplace comedy tradition, they disperse narrative attention among the group of ensemble figures, of which the central comedian is an integral, albeit prioritised, member. The programmes' titles also indicate this: while the comedies designate a workplace, *The Good Wife* is explicit about its fascination with the central character's 'archetypal' meaning. In contrast, consider Tina Fey's statement (see previous chapter) that rather than providing the career woman's singular viewpoint, *30 Rock* enacts its 'issue'-based satire in the ensemble comedy where each character stands for a particular ideological stance, of which Liz's middle-class white feminism is an emphasised but nonetheless equalized one. But *The Good Wife's* intense interest in the central character requires that she is an outsider: she is portrayed as liminal to any ideological conviction, including a political feminism, and the series' commentary on politics and the protagonist's identity emerges from this liminality.

Following from her overdetermined meanings as symbol of an historic femininity, the confrontation between Alicia and the social world inscribes this prominently onto issues of the above analysed liberal feminist politics, postfeminism, and, entangled in all this, the generational politics of feminism's 'waves' (see Miller 2016, 10-15). That is, *The Good Wife* is engaged with Alicia's social status as 'mature' career woman and mother in her forties, and with the awkward categorisability of this age and position both in terms of its affiliation with feminism and in its location in cultural imagination. 'Alicia's gender politics are in constant negotiation' as Miller posits (ibid., 14), their

meanings offered via her interactions with the numerous supporting female characters who function primarily in their relative fixity at odds with her shifting identity.

Diane is a clear contrast figure and questionable mentor, a childless second-wave feminist with explicit ideological convictions, and possessing a great deal of social power.<sup>44</sup> A quote from Michelle King in a *New York Times* article highlights the interest in examining intergenerational relationships between women in a way that avoids portraying the older, and more powerful, career woman as a 'bitch' (Hoffman 2011). This qualifier evokes the established narrative formula of inscribing generational difference between women onto a confrontation of their relationship to feminism and preferred routes to social power. In these narratives, theorised in scholarship as postfeminist, the older woman signals the dangers to femininity and morality in her villainous or contradictory acquisition and (ab)use of power, as seen in the influential film *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) (Rowe Karlyn 2011, 92–97; Winch 2013, 104-105). Glenn Close's star text and career path also build on this postfeminist suspicion of female social power, in roles like the aforementioned Marquise de Merteuil in *Dangerous Liaisons*, *Fatal Attraction's* (1987) pathologised single career woman Alex Forrest, Cruella DeVil of *101 Dalmatians* (1996), and the duplicitous and influential lawyer Patty Hewes in the television series *Damages* (2007-2012), the latter especially concerned with generational conflict and the symbolic avenues of morality Patty's figure offers up to a young female lawyer.

In the context of gendered generational conflict, Diane's character seems to fit formula, but also eschews it (as per King's authorial statement) by *not* being portrayed as villainous 'bitch'. Yet in the

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<sup>44</sup> Additionally, as Miller shows, the series translates its explorations of different types of feminism and femininity into a fascination with fashion as 'surface area' (ibid., 9), which for Diane means a preference for large power necklaces and 'flamboyant' clothing (ibid., 11).

dynamic between Diane and Alicia, generational tension and distance are still dominant. This is linked to the question of feminist generations given both Diane's portrayal as feminist lobbyist, and Alicia's extradiegetic understanding as symbol of a postfeminist 'retreatist' (Negra 2004) generation. However, the millennial configuration of postfeminist generational conflict mostly concentrates on young femininities and often narrativises it in teen-targeted genres (Rowe Karlyn 2011). Prestige drama's 'grown-up' aesthetic, and in it, Alicia's portrayal as mother herself and as 'mature' woman shifts this trope's meanings. The popular debate about the utility of generational and biological rhetoric (i.e. mothers versus daughters) for feminism's history clearly informs the portrayal of Alicia and Diane's relationship then, but eludes dramatising a 'toxicity' of historic feminism in the way that a strand of mainstream cinema does (Bowler 2013, 191–92). This follows from the series' hyperfascination with its protagonist's complex cultural meaning, emerging from the interplay between her symbolic simplicity (American television's housewife figure, the politician's scorned wife), her shifting position in the workplace environment, and the show's commentary on the 'good wife' figure as existing through her mediatisation in political discourse ('Saint Alicia').

A story arc from the third season illuminates the dynamic of the 'flexible feminist flow chart' (Miller 2016, 13), initiated by supporting character Caitlin D'Arcy's (Anna Camp) narrative and by the character relations that her appearance inspires among the three women. Caitlin is a newly hired junior associate who has a short career at the firm, spanning between the episodes 'Marthas and Caitlins' and 'Long Way Home'. Her figure is used, as customary for the series, to further refine the titular character's symbolic meaning. In 'Marthas and Caitlins', Alicia is assigned with hiring a first-year associate, and the interview process presents a scenario where she has to choose between two women

signalling two archetypal femininities ubiquitous in American popular culture: the homely, smart, and brown-haired Martha (Grace Rex) or the blonde, pretty, and seemingly superficial Caitlin, who is also equity partner David Lee's (Zach Grenier) niece. Alicia prefers Martha (she identifies with 'Martha'-ness) but Lee and Will force her to hire Caitlin. Upon complaining to Will about the immorality of nepotism, he informs her that when she was hired at the firm, she was also a 'Caitlin' competing against a more qualified 'Martha' – meaning it was not her talent or qualifications that landed her the role but her friendship with Will, and David Lee had approved her hire at his request and in exchange for Will's later vote for the niece. This inscribes onto the familiar dualistic imagery of women's sexual desirability the cutthroat intricacy of patriarchal office politics (the women are not hired for their desirability but for their connections with male bosses at the firm), both reinforcing the symbolism of female 'types' in their iconographic allusions and also upsetting their meanings by throwing Alicia's identity into the mix, unsettling *her* position.

If the twist exemplifies the series' much-celebrated sophisticated cynicism, 'wafting over you finely in a way that only *The Good Wife* can provide, that wonderfully bitter outlook on how to get ahead in life' (Sims 2011), then it dominates in every further aspect that involves Caitlin's presence in the narrative. It also continues to relate to Alicia's signification both diegetically (the character's self-reflection) and in the extratextual shifting of how the viewer should interpret her already self-referential figure. In the next few episodes, Alicia mentors Caitlin, whose initial image as vapid blonde quickly disperses as the plot constantly confirms her professional skills and quick wit. Yet public performances of femininities continue to inform her storyline and the two women's working relationship, culminating in the episode 'After the Fall'. The case-of-the-week sees Alicia battling against Nancy Crozier in

court, the attorney notoriously enacting a naïve young femininity to manipulate judges' and juries' sympathies. As discussed, the series showcases masquerades of femininity and other performed personas in the courtroom (Miller 2016, 13), signalling its critique and Alicia's distance from them in her similarly showcased signature eye-rolls.<sup>45</sup> But if we are to understand Alicia's professional performance of self as more 'authentic' than that of her opponents', then this episode complicates this, inscribed onto other women's performances of femininity. Alicia is losing the case because the young male judge is enamoured of blonde-haired Crozier's ingénue act, ignoring the older, deep-voiced, and brown-haired Alicia's arguments. In a new tactic, she makes Caitlin argue in court, deploying her young, chirpy blondness against Crozier's. Caitlin quickly catches on and hyperperforms the role under Alicia's tutelage and silent approval, and a battle of female stereotypes ensues between the two attorneys for the judge's sympathy (Figures 5.33 to 5.35). Diane is also present at Caitlin's big moment, and when she eventually wins the case, this earns her a promotion.



Figure 5.33

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<sup>45</sup> The protagonist's signature eye-roll is another common trait of Alicia and *30 Rock's* Liz Lemon, and for both a self-referential punchline expressing the character's exasperation at and ideological distance from her environment. Both underline the two series' lauded sarcasm and pessimism about the social world, signalling the discrepancy between her 'authenticity' and the environment's hypocrisy.



Figure 5.34



Figure 5.35

It is *de rigueur* by this point in the series to incorporate into the legal world's depiction the intricacies of institutionalised sexism and women lawyers' navigation of it by assuming a type of recognisable femininity, and this plot uses it to complicate the protagonist's distance from this strategy. The frequent assurance that this kind of posturing is beneath Alicia (via eye-rolls for instance) as an aspect of her morally sound character, is undermined when she uses Caitlin as her proxy, a tactic that still effects Alicia's sympathetic character portrayal as clever puppet master. She mobilises a masquerade of femininity in another woman to professional ends with success, and is not taken to task for it: while the programme avoids constructing a scenario where Alicia herself performs inauthentic femininity, it involves her in the strategic mobilization of one in a way that allows her to continue with the

disapproving eye-rolls in later episodes. If the programme's aim is to portray Alicia's 'education' as a gendered initiation process into the ways in which politics and social power corrupt, it is also at pains here to limit this corruption to an extent that keeps her in a liminal position to everyone else's corruptness as a matter of semantic jugglery.

Centralising female lawyers' performance of feminine 'authenticity', the episode also continues to position them in a generational interrelation. Alicia's mentorship and manipulation of Caitlin involves a generational aspect that puts the older woman in a role that invokes Alicia and Diane's relationship. As Miller writes, 'TGW doesn't offer much in the way of solidarity or sisterhood for its female characters' (ibid., 12), a sentiment dominating the three women's relationship. But the 'good wife's inscribed/complicated meaning again effects an elusiveness of her ideological role, demonstrated in the next stages of Caitlin's storyline. Due to Caitlin's quick promotion, Alicia starts to see her in the next episode as a professional threat, complicating the already ambiguous mentor-protégé dynamic. Competitiveness surfaces in Alicia's growing paranoia about her job security in the recessionary workplace *vis-à-vis* a younger female lawyer with her talent, connections, and popularity. The programme's signature paranoia and cynicism translates here into the protagonist's own, but remains a subjective and thus unreliable relation. That is, the *mise-en-scène* and narrative highlight Alicia's suspiciousness about Caitlin's potential danger in a way that forebodes a misunderstanding, since her portrayal outside of her connection to Alicia remains neutral.

In Caitlin's final episode 'Long Way Home', the underlying theme of competition becomes explicit. Following an incident that can be interpreted as Caitlin stealing Alicia's ideas and spotlight, Alicia confronts her via an oblique threat thinly disguised as mentor's advice. Alicia subsequently finds out from David Lee that Caitlin has given her

notice thanks to her 'mean girls act'. If the plot has so far hinted in prestige drama's subtle fashion at the uncertainty of character morality (was Alicia right in her paranoia or did she bully Caitlin into leaving?), then the resolution shifts these questions to the plane of gendered identity and generations of feminism articulated in the interactions among Diane, Alicia, and Caitlin. Guilt-ridden, Alicia tries to convince Caitlin to stay, upon which she reveals that the real reason of her leaving is not their conflict but her personal life: she is pregnant and getting married. As Miller notes (*ibid.*, 13), the discussion among the three women recalls the postfeminist choice rhetoric: against Diane's explanations about the company's generous maternity scheme, Caitlin declares that her life plan is 'to be a mom'. The utterance is positioned as the episode's comically shocking highlight. Alicia later apologises to Caitlin, admitting that office politics 'tend to make people paranoid', thus confirming that in this instance, the series deployed its characteristic cynicism and paranoia to mislead the audience. This conflict was in fact about (post)feminist generational discourse around lifestyle and identity, with Caitlin declaring that

I *want* to choose. Maybe it's different for my generation but... I don't have to prove anything. Or if I have to, I don't want to. I'm in love.

This conflict and utterance would not be out of place in an *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) episode, the legal series considered the quintessential signifier of 1990s postfeminist popular culture's relationship to feminism's historic relevance in the workplace (Hermes 2006), and by its feminist critics described as shifting the concerns of feminist politics onto issues of individual choice. Caitlin's 'choice' monologue could work as a summary of *Ally McBeal's* ending, which saw Ally giving up her career for full-time motherhood. In this context, Alicia's character history recalls even more prominently a postfeminist past, picking up fifteen years later from where *Ally McBeal* left off. For Bonnie J. Dow

(2002), *Ally McBeal*, and most American TV centrally concerned with gender politics, represents the movement as 'lifestyle feminism', i.e. as narrative quest for the individualised heroine. But postfeminism especially turns feminist concerns into an issue of personal happiness, thus deflecting questions of institutional power and, fittingly for *Ally McBeal*, putting feminism on trial for allegedly complicating women's personal lives, i.e. traditions of romance and marriage (ibid.).

Critical responses to the Caitlin twist were mixed, either dismissing it for a datedness or celebrating it for tackling the apparent real-life issue of young educated women dropping out of the workforce to become housewives (Bosch 2012). Harnick (2012) lauded the swift elision of a storyline of women's competition, noting that its suspense relied on viewer recognition of this narrative tradition, toying with its possibility. The *AV Club* reviewer's analysis is perhaps most telling for bringing the series' general tone in connection with this plot: celebrating the twist as 'refreshing'-ly innocent and idiosyncratic in the otherwise cynical and disillusioned world of *The Good Wife*, it also ascertains its rootedness in a conservative ideology with Caitlin going away to 'liv[e] a life that belongs in a goddamn oil painting' (Sims 2012).

Both *Ally McBeal* and *The Good Wife* betray then a continued fascination with the singular female lawyer figure and her gendered meaning, encapsulated in their titles. But if *Ally McBeal* centralised the issue of postfeminist 'choice' throughout its dramedy narrative, *The Good Wife* as recessionary political-legal drama parodies it as *passé* cultural phenomenon; a treatment that for its critics speaks to the series' ideological novelty.

The Caitlin storyline's resolution then works as an oddity for its gender politics, a blatant callback to the millennial postfeminist 'retreatism' trend discussed by Negra (2004). And again, following from the

programme's broader ideological and generic aspirations – painting a socio-political tableau of Chicago's legal world as cynical 'education' of a symbolic female figure – it is Alicia's diegetic position and identity that are at stake. Diane represents the second-wave feminist's familiar standpoint, commenting on Caitlin's decision 'I'm not sure the glass ceiling was broken for this', also comparing Caitlin's life choices to Alicia's: 'She'll be back in fifteen years. Like you.' Alicia disagrees, and the two women's shifting generational relationship continues to remain uncertain.<sup>46</sup> Diane assumes that their shared social position as working women allows here for an ideological union with Alicia who distances herself from this. But if Caitlin represents a postfeminism that is similar to the 1990s postfeminism of Alicia's backstory, then this connection is also limited due to the protagonist's present as 'mature' working mother with fiscal problems: the exchange between Diane and Alicia moves on to Alicia's requested pay raise, and reminds viewers both of her relative financial hardship and the firm's recessionary struggles. Alicia's figure continues to stay liminal to diegetic ideologies and identities, a suitable central figure for the *Bildungsroman* narrative.

Sims' (2012) reference to the 'refreshing' lack of cynical scheming that makes the twist so out of place further confirms the series' primary ambition to depict the various ways in which the world of law and politics is immoral and petty; a characterisation allowing for the theme of gender politics and feminist generations to be discussed as collateral damage in institutional politics. It is in this contrast in which the centralised symbolic *female* character allows the series to generate narrative tension around political morality. The 'refreshing'-ness that the critic describes comes from the discrepancy between the Caitlin storyline and this episode's other two plots, the case-of-the-week and

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<sup>46</sup> Caitlin comes back sooner than that, namely in the series' final season, as a divorced working mother, this way 'eventually punished for [her postfeminism]' as Miller notes (2016, 13).

the serialised political narrative, both depicting the moral murkiness of their respective social spaces.

The case revolves around a client, acquitted wife killer Colin Sweeney (Dylan Baker), a recurring character notorious for rotten sexual and social mores. While critical reception dubbed Sweeney *The Good Wife's* resident Hannibal Lecter for his sophisticated monstrosity, superior intellect, and intimate emotional connection to Alicia, the series is also at pains to demonstrate her personal distance from the sexuality he represents, depicted as perverted and predatory (which Lecter's portrayal lacks). At stake here are the ethical questions presented by fulfilling professional duties in institutions of the law, and negotiating the hyperbolically opposed sexual and other mores between client and attorney. While this dilemma is a favoured theme in cinema's narrativisation of the legal world (Lucia 2005) – see 1990s Hollywood dramas *The Devil's Advocate* (1997) and *Primal Fear* (1996) – television's episodic seriality and the centralised female protagonist both complicate ideological consequences. Because the series dramatises the above detailed issues of feminism as political factor and generational identity, this viewpoint feeds into its depiction of the legal world's, and the client's, rottenness. Sweeney's is a paternity case, an ex-colleague suing him for sexual harassment that had resulted in a pregnancy. The details of the case, characteristically for the series and its Sweeney plots, depict both parties as ethically and sexually depraved: Sweeney insists during a discussion that the sexual encounter had been consensual and oral only, to which David Lee offers (correctly) that she might have used a turkey baster (implying that she spat his semen into it to later artificially inseminate herself). Lee's suggestion is followed by Diane's world-weary remark: 'And so it devolves: from hopes, ideals, dreams, the glory of the law, to a turkey baster'. Diane is often used as the voice of disillusionment with the realities of the legal world's

morality, embedded in her portrayal foregrounding her left-leaning liberal convictions and the second-wave feminism that motivated her career choices. The series mediates a suspicion about the world of law and politics through the contrast of her established liberal feminist politics and this world's disappointing 'realities'.

Additionally, the same episode's serialised political plot concerns the aforementioned accusations by Geneva Pine (Renée Elise Goldsberry), a black Assistant State's Attorney, of racist favouritism at the State's Attorney's office, and similarly verbalises a discord between ethics and office politics. Pine dresses Cary down for having been unfairly promoted to Deputy State's Attorney over more experienced, and non-white, ASAs who had been sacked for errors Cary himself had made. At the end of this scene, she voices her disgust over Cary's spinelessness for accepting the promotion in a sarcastic tone and wording similar to Diane's: 'That's right. It's a bad economy for ideals'. Both of these remarks construct an idealised past with which contrasted, the present's 'realities' of law and politics are found wanting, emerging from themes of feminist and race politics. Especially in Diane's case, given her prominent status in the ensemble cast, the repeatedly expressed frustration with the law keeps the discursive 'women's empowerment' narrative around the series ambiguous, into which feeds the sarcastic 'education' context circulated by the producers.<sup>47</sup>

According to its critics, a great deal of the series' viewing pleasures originates from its exploration of how systems of the law are semantically manipulated such that '[b]attles between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law come up again and again' (Yuan 2012). The programme's ideological novelty, accounting partly for its 'quality'

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<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the producers explain the series' final scene that mirrors the pilot's cold open – Diane slaps Alicia for a betrayal – as completing Alicia's 'education', defining this as a process in which 'the victim becomes the victimizer' (Ausiello 2016). Alicia's moral corruption is complete once she openly betrays the (already ambiguous) feminist sisterhood (see Conclusion).

status, combines the critical examination of American political and institutional culture and the female lawyer's centralisation – including the history of feminist politics she evokes – in this critical viewpoint. The conflict between individual and institutions is a favoured popular cultural narrative, and its gendered implications became more foregrounded upon second-wave feminism's cultural impact. By the 1980s and 1990s, confronting patriarchal institutions of law-making and -practising with the female lawyer figure was a popular theme in American cinema. Cynthia Lucia's book *Framing Female Lawyers* (2005) examines the cultural anxieties this subgroup of films expresses both about the idealised vision of the law and the increased inclusion of women lawyers in its institutions, connecting this with cinema's aesthetic traditions. She finds that the 'woman lawyer' film cycle negotiates oppositional ideological tendencies: first, that 'the law is a stable, immutable force beyond the reach of transitory political and cultural influences' (ibid., 3), second, this is upset by a set of political-cultural factors allowing women's appearance in its institutions. As such, feminist politics clashes here with traditions of law and patriarchal culture, into which is inscribed psychoanalytic theory's symbolic meaning-making (the Lacanian law as word of the father) (ibid., 12). These two opposing tendencies produce the 'uneasy acceptance of women in law', negotiated in these films by positing *her* as symbolic problem to be resolved (ibid., 3).

Women in legal film drama then signal a 'crisis of patriarchy', a term familiar from journalistic discourses about prestige male-centred TV drama, here describing the symbolic equation of the law with male institutional power which the female lawyer figure calls into question. However, '[i]n foregrounding the status of the female lawyer, these films displace overt interrogation of patriarchal power and its uses, by placing the female lawyer on trial, interrogating *her* role as woman and

as lawyer' (ibid.). Lucia contrasts these films with those centralising male lawyer protagonists, and finds a structuring difference in the ways they dramatised the law/justice discrepancy, a theme that the lawyer film typically interrogates. When cinema's male lawyers restore the balance between justice and law by putting the latter to its proper use, they simultaneously resolve the crisis of patriarchy inherent in the initial imbalance (ibid., 159). In contrast, the female lawyer struggles with a lack or ambiguity regarding professional competence (usually paired with personal incompetence), signalling her inherent inability to acquire 'the father's law' (ibid.). Thus, she not so much resolves the law/justice imbalance but is its root cause as 'a destabilising presence who frequently is shown to subvert justice through her excess' (ibid., 20).

Lucia considers the cinema context crucial for the 1990s 'woman lawyer' film cycle's ideological work. If the female lawyer poses an epistemological problem for the law, hers is an *exceptional* presence, an anomaly that needs investigating as such. This meaning conforms to cinema's dominant narrative form 'which places individual agency above collective agency or action' (ibid., 21). Thus, the way in which female presence is 'singular/"symbolic"' (ibid.) within the law, is especially well-suited for cinematic narratives, two systems Lucia combines under the umbrella of a patriarchal operation that negotiates popular feminist discourses: "'success" for the female lawyer (...) [means a] "'right" to gain access to both these systems as lawyer and as protagonist' (ibid.). The lack of a 'female collective' in these films highlights her exceptional-exclusive status within male-dominated organisations (ibid., 22). Cinematic narrative's discursive masculinism underlies this argument with its linear narrative, single focus, and closed ending, making it especially suitable for speaking to this theme. Lucia briefly notes that scripted television focalising lawyers and law firms is less amenable to such ideologies due to its narrative traditions: the

medium's usage of ensemble casts and episodic storylines allows for a 'far less intensive interrogation of the female lawyer' (ibid., 238).

Lucia's concept is useful in unpacking television's use of the legal theme and the female lawyer's centralisation in relation to a discursive feminism. A conspicuous issue is cinema's single character focus versus television's ensemble cast, which Lucia theorises as a crucial reason for the latter's less intense interrogation of its female protagonist. Yet scripted television's tradition of narrativising an evolutionary course of women's social roles has been a lucrative strategy for establishing the medium's cultural status; the character-focused 'independent woman' programming is ubiquitous across forms and genres. Negotiating episodic ensemble storytelling with the single character focus is network TV's specificity with its wide audience target favouring upscale women viewers, and with its mixed serial and episodic structure allowing for the thematisation of socio-political concerns without resolution (Lotz 2006). Thus, television's fascination with the singular 'independent woman' speaks to narrative and ideological differences between the two media's treatment of the 'woman and law' theme. The woman lawyer may be an anomaly in the dual patriarchal systems of cinematic narratives and institutions of law, but this anomaly is trumped by the relative prominence of the 'career woman as political symbol' theme in television.

Nonetheless, woman lawyers, as Lucia also remarks, are usually members of an ensemble cast in both procedural and serialised series. In this regard, *Ally McBeal* and *The Good Wife* are somewhat exceptional for their centralisation of a singular female lawyer, and for their cultural status connecting them both to popular feminist and 'quality' discourses. Both series investigate their central character's identity in the legal framework to an extent that allows for Lucia's concept to be mapped onto their cultural work. As discussed, *Ally*

*McBeal* represents for Bonnie J. Dow the extreme privatisation of feminism's political role; the title character is a career woman who 'searches her soul *a lot*', and the show is more concerned with dramatising this than legal issues, making it the quintessential postfeminist text (2002, 261, italics in original). The series' episodic formula resolves the tension between the legal world and the gendered central character's function, such that legal cases thematise a concern of gender politics reflecting the heroine's own soul-searching about romance, changing gender scripts, lifestyle choices etc. In this regard, the series' tone is closer to *Sex and the City's*; the journalism framework allows for Carrie to muse over similar concerns. The two series, as Joke Hermes observes, together signalled a new moment in television culture as 'key agents in establishing the era of quality popular programming, or "must see" television', and as key texts of postfeminism in their use of introspective discourses around gender roles (2006, 79). Lucia's notion that female lawyer films put women, and indirectly feminism, 'on trial' within the law/justice discourse is relevant for *Ally McBeal's* postfeminism too: the series' examination of the heroine's curious social position as single career woman propelled the narrative forward, utilising the public and 'objective' domain of the law as an instrument to scrutinise women's 'lifestyle' issues. *Sex and the City's* use of journalism and *Ally McBeal's* use of legal discourse served similar ends, signalling a hierarchal dynamic between investigating the gendered self and professional labour relations, the latter insofar mobilised as to express the former's concerns. The 'feminisation' of legal discourse then, with its disruption of the boundary between the 'feminine' private and the 'masculine' public domain (Cooper 2001) still keeps the dualism intact under the governance of postfeminism and its valorisation of gendered self-surveillance.

If *Ally McBeal*'s 'lifestyle feminism' privatises the public and patriarchal domain of the law via the dramedy framework and its focus on the female lawyer's emotional journey, then *The Good Wife*'s appeal to 'quality drama' status is based on the tactical probing of these dualisms. Mapped onto this is *network* drama's hybridisation of episodic and serialised narratives; the centralisation of a recognisable female character as catalyst for both legal and political plots aims to upset their hierarchal connotations. As per Leonard's analysis (2014b), Alicia Florrick gains her significance in the reflection on her figure as media creation, throwing this issue into relief both within the diegesis and in the interconnection between fiction and the viewer's recognition of political and television culture. Within the diegesis, this emerges via the tension between 'authentic' self and its sexualised mediation in politics, a storytelling device that Leonard argues insists on the 'fundamental unknowability of personal desire and sexual exchange' (ibid., 946). This insistence reinforces the central figure's 'enigmatic' character, suitably aligned with 'quality' drama's emphasis on image, sparing distribution of information, and relative lack of verbal confirmation.

Extradiegetically, the titular character already operates, even before the text's commentary on the private and the mediatised/public, as a multiply signposted reflection on American television's portrayals of respectable womanhood, involving in this the housewife figure's prominence for popular feminist politics' history. Alicia's inception as overdetermined commentary on her 'media-created' nature is familiar from *30 Rock*'s treatment of the 'urban career girl' trope – both series establish their 'quality television' status through a critical reflection on mediatised femininity and its consequences for women's precarious command of public and professional spaces. If commentary on mediatised femininity undergirds both programmes' 'quality' standing on network television in the respective genres of legal drama and

workplace comedy, then it is not too far-fetched to find a further common feature: their problematising of a sexual 'truth' as ideological motivation. *The Good Wife's* defence of the 'unknowable' sphere of sexuality can be paralleled with *30 Rock's* extradiegetic confirmations that Fey, as female comedy 'author', refuses to enact sexual desirability unless it is in the grotesque comic mode, a less 'realistic' representation than the dramatic mode. As shown in Chapter 4, Fey articulated this insistence, which has become an integral part of her star text, in the chasm between *Sex and the City's* introspective concentration on female sexuality, and *30 Rock's* ideological self-distancing from it via political satire and via creating women's physical comedy that tackles the pretty/funny dualism. The issue of female sexuality is for both series a question of the boundary between the private and public, informing the female-centred 'quality' text as politicised reaction to the postfeminist circulation of female sexual agency. This also fits with network television's institutional constraints regarding sexually explicit content, a vital component in the cultural distinction between the kinds of 'quality' that cable and network television are sanctioned to produce.

*The Good Wife's* narrative device to enact its politics of 'refusal' is to place the action in institutions of law and national politics, with the result that the rhetorical boundary between such dichotomies as private/public, private/political, feminine/masculine, emotion/intellect, justice/law, and so on is shown to be affected by cultural paradigms similar to the scorned and retreatist housewife's mediated image. If for Lucia the 1990s female lawyer film negotiates the contradiction of woman/law in a closed narrative trajectory that defends the ideal of an immutable and patriarchal justice system against the disruptive force of changing gender politics, then broadcast narration's episodic structure is especially well-suited to enact a reverse course: a prominent aspect of the series' narrative hook is its investigation of the endless ways in

which the law is a fickle and fluctuating system. In its case-of-the-week plots, the series notoriously highlights the fine curiosities of the American legal system and its shortcomings, and narrative pleasure is derived from the ways in which its practitioners navigate its semantic traps and loopholes. This narrative interest provides the series' fit with network TV's circular and endlessly recyclable storytelling formula; a tradition also accounting for the medium's low reputation and gendered connotations. Interconnecting this theme with the serialised political plot via the female protagonist associates political institutions with the same suspicious and endlessly recyclable fickleness. Further, the recurring reference to a nostalgia for an idealised past of political-legal justice is, as shown above, embedded in feminist, and occasionally race discourses. This maps onto the law/justice divide a present/past divide, and an attendant dualism of gender politics – the glorious past of second-wave feminism versus the disappointment with its contemporary involvement in political scheming.

Discourses around political and legal institutions are profoundly gendered in *The Good Wife*, best exemplified in the law firm Lockhart & Gardner's carefully gender-balanced makeup with its symbolic consequences for the protagonist. Often referenced as the 'mom and dad' of the firm, Diane and Will are overdetermined figures of network TV's historic representation of polarised American worldviews and identities – the other two network series I analyse also operate with lead figures in similar capacities. For *The Good Wife*, this contrasts Diane's second-wave feminism and disillusioned legal idealism with Will's cocky and opportunistic masculinity, both portrayed sympathetically for their command of the law/justice dynamic, as they symbiotically navigate the firm through the economic crisis. But unlike the comedies' centralised pairing (with the female protagonist on one pole), Alicia is an outsider to this dynamic, yet instrumental to both

sides' ideological and narrative relevance. Her connection to Will mobilises the romance narrative, fuelling its intimate melodrama component whose affective significance looms large for the programme's critical estimation as women's entertainment (see Nussbaum's comments). The connection between Diane and Alicia is professional, and concerns feminist generational politics at the workplace, underlined with the pragmatism of their interactions. Will's drastic removal from the drama further emphasises this difference of relationships – his absence continues to inform the melodrama in terms of intimate character portrayal, and shows the Diane-Alicia dynamic to be crucial to the character's final estimation as corrupted by social power. In her overdetermined symbolism – as commentary on mediatised femininity, postfeminist womanhood, a historic 'blandness' of American womanhood in the housewife figure, the career woman etc. –, Alicia's character enacts an outsider function that allows her an intermediary position among narrative forms and modes, realms of the private/public, and ideological divisions of gender politics. Ultimately, she is a fitting symbolic figure for network television's response to industry-driven reconfigurations of masculine-coded 'quality' drama.

## **2.B *Orange Is the New Black***

Piper Chapman (Taylor Schilling), *Orange's* central protagonist fulfils a symbolic position similar to Alicia's in that she mediates a shift in women's representational traditions. This political function contributes to the programme's novel generic hybridity (what Mittell terms complexity) and the programme provider's brand identity. Most of those female-centred American series that became iconic for an unconventional portrayal of women protagonists operated in this vein (*The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Roseanne*, *Cagney and Lacey*, *Sex and the*

*City, Ally McBeal* etc.), registering a 'past' of women's representation with which the protagonist's 'progressive' identity dialogued, and this provided the text's narrative-aesthetic strategies and cultural value. In *Orange* however, the symbolic progression for which critics commend the series reverses this narrative tradition: it is the protagonist herself who denotes a 'past' of representational politics. Like Alicia Florrick, whose titular description evoked ironically a traditional trope of women's portrayals, Chapman functions as conduit between 'outdated' stereotype and 'subversive' gender politics. This comes from the tumultuous encounter between the protagonist and her new social environment, but while *The Good Wife* focuses attention on the protagonist's shifting identity ('the education of Alicia Florrick'), paratextual discourses around *Orange* insist that Chapman's narrative function is exactly that, a function: her identity is insofar important as it contrasts with a 'realism' of social context represented in the ensemble cast. While the subtitle 'the education of Piper Chapman' would work for *Orange* as well, the two programmes use the protagonist differently as signifier of a mediatised and 'outdated' femininity. If *The Good Wife* and its producers promise a disruption of women's established portrayals located in the singular protagonist herself, *Orange* finds narrative-political novelty in using Chapman's 'stereotypical' figure to disrupt historic portrayals of *other(ed)* women and their stigmatised social world. The narrative strategy underlines this, using multi-threaded and flashback storytelling to gradually mitigate Chapman's symbolic centrality.

As previously shown, 'realism' is a key term in producer statements to highlight the programme's cultural significance, exemplified in Jenji Kohan's reference to genre hybridity's role in this. For programmes operating in mixed genres, notably when blending comedy and drama, authorly explanations routinely invoke a 'realist' intent by referring to

an artistic necessity that maps the opposite poles of 'comic' and 'serious' modes onto a presumed referential reality. In her statement 'dramas that are only dramatic are a lie, because life isn't just a drama' (2013b), Kohan challenges highbrow drama's connotation between 'realism' and 'seriousness' to demand cultural recognition for 'authored' dramedy. The hierarchal status of comedy and drama is at stake here again, which for *Orange* involves the physical comedy and sexual explicitness around othered female bodies. The defence also refers to the cultural confusion surrounding *Orange* for its generic 'perversity' (Nussbaum 2015) or, in Netflix programming chief Ted Sarandos' terminology, its 'iconoclasm' that both precludes it from institutional recognition and produces its cult status.

The slippery genre description and its discursive link to 'realism' are then intertwined with the programme's gender politics, expressing an 'iconoclastic' transition between prevalent portrayals of women and a 'realism' of a stigmatised social environment. A quote from Kohan is again exemplary, namely her ubiquitous metaphor for Chapman as her 'Trojan horse', i.e. serving as point of identification for upscale female demographics prioritised by the television industry, and facilitating through her fish-out-of-water story the discovery of a diverse social world:

In a lot of ways Piper was my Trojan Horse. You're not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women, and Latina women, and old women and criminals. But if you take this white girl, this sort of fish out of water, and you follow her in, you can then expand your world and tell all of those other stories. But it's a hard sell to just go in and try to sell those stories initially. The girl next door, the cool blonde, is a very easy access point, and it's relatable for a lot of audiences and a lot of networks looking for a certain demographic. It's useful. (Kohan 2013)

Onto the tension between a typified womanhood and a multiplicity of diverse femininities can be mapped a tension between postfeminism and popular feminist discourses criticising pre-recessionary media's gender treatments for the narrow focus on the 'lifestyle' politics of a privileged womanhood. 'Quality' television's narrative requirement of a Big Idea – promising both overarching linear narration and the possibility of open-ended and circular plots – is grounded here in this use of popular feminism. *Orange* dramatises a clash between a mediatised postfeminist, and consequently 'unreal', femininity with a 'realism' of femininities, which locates differences between 'real' and 'unreal' in embodied and demographic signifiers (class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, gender, age, body image). Promotional paratexts, like Kohan's quotes, emphasise this grand narrative of a political collision of femininities, also involving in it the dualism of the singular 'author's political-aesthetic progressiveness and television industry's conservatism.

As customary for the 'quality' brand, authorship discourse is essential to the programme's publicity, predominantly conceived in the author's ideological resistance to industry constraints, and demonstrating the text's unique attributes in the ways in which the creator's singular vision dissents from average medium-produced fare. This is routinely expressed in the art-versus-television dichotomy that creators of male-centred prestige dramas reference; at the same time praising the *laissez faire* attitude of cable channels like HBO that provide them with artistic freedom. These communications court the host network via the 'author's expression of their need and receipt of artistic licence, strengthening the symbiotic link between the programme's marketed singularity and the network's unique brand identity. For *Orange* however, publicity discourses entail a narrative of political *distance* between host network and authorly intent (i.e. Chapman's protagonist

function was a necessity for network commissioning). In this, they presume an audience whose consumption practices are affected by their political awareness and ideological resistance to the cultural industries' capitalistic directives. Gender politics govern this ideological resistance, reproduced within the programme's grand narrative: Kohan's promoted opposition to industry standards corresponds to the postfeminism-feminism tension inscribed onto the Chapman versus prison-as-social-environment plot. Chapman stands for an 'industry standard' mandatory postfeminism, and the prison's inhabitants speak to Kohan's subversive, 'authorly', and feminist narrativising of diverse womanhoods and critique of the prison industrial complex, themes otherwise excluded from television's traditional narration.

The notion of representational resistance as 'realism' is connected in publicity to the unordinary genre hybridity (hour-long comedy-drama); such that the 'seriousness' of highbrow drama is imagined as a conservative and inauthentic norm that needs updating. This generic 'complexity' is simultaneously positioned as feminine/feminist address existing outside of quality television's categories. If 'realism' links gender politics (postfeminism versus feminist resistance) with genre hybridity ('serious' drama versus dramedy), then its use is at odds with its discursive formation. Consider Nussbaum's article comparing the series' female characters with those of *Show Me a Hero*, and the difference in the two programmes' tone. *Orange* for her 'rejects realism', and she summons descriptors like 'tonal perversity', 'vaudevillian', and 'blown up, not life-size' female characters, to explain the series' generic indecipherability contrasted with the David Simon-esque message drama's 'educational' intent (2015). 'Surreal' is another word habitually used to describe the series' tone; for instance, the initial concept for the title sequence according to its production company's executive was meant to evoke 'the surreal contrast' between

Chapman's old and new lives (Anon. 2013). Not only does this qualifier, upsetting the connotations of 'real', inscribe this onto a clash between privileged and demographically 'othered' femininities; it also reflects on body and sexuality politics. The title sequence's aesthetic expresses the tension between 'real' and 'surreal' bodies: for McHugh it denotes a documentarist realism (featuring real, formerly incarcerated women), but the extreme close-ups of face details and skins evoke a 'surreal' closeness to the filmed subjects.

The 'progressive' representations of female bodies and sexualities in both the gender politics and genre recombinations of *Orange* are a contested notion in academic literature. As noted, McHugh's analysis briefly mentions as contrasting example *The Good Wife* to argue its reactionary postfeminism in the ways it uses female attire as signifier of social status, while *Orange's* uniforms eliminate the possibility of consumerist indulgence:

Alicia's business suits and apartment evidence a decidedly postfeminist ethos. *Orange's* generic setting, however, disallows any such production values, particularly related to mise-en-scene; instead, the inmates wear shapeless uniforms and live in close, spartan institutional quarters. (2015, 22)

McHugh traces oppositional ideologies between the two series: a postfeminist conservatism of female consumption against a progressive feminist politics of refusal. This verdict ignores different institutional, generic, and narrative contexts influencing the series' aesthetic choices, and which in themselves hardly presuppose a specific gender politics. (Additionally, the production values of a series do not necessarily correlate with the *diegetic* look and class specifications of costuming and sets.) But the dichotomy is again located in body politics, specifically in the costuming's symbolism as site of negotiated femininity and feminism (Miller 2016).

McHugh's argument about the significance of women's attire can be extended to the overdetermined contrast between the two shows' use of the female face as bearer of gender politics: Alicia's or Kalinda's 'Kabuki mask' faces, always in full make-up, denote impenetrability and limited decipherability, whereas *Orange's* title sequence with its extreme close-ups promises a revelation of 'truths' about its female subjects to the point of uncomfortable intimacy. These opposing meanings follow from the series' different production contexts and the avenues they offer for invoking a 'feminism' as source of cultural status. Leonard's study finds feminist *The Good Wife's* refusal of insight into the protagonist's sexual life, critiquing mediated attempts to arrive at sexual 'truths' around scrutinised female public figures. This notion of progressivism is embedded in the visual and thematic constraints of network television. Since the programme is situated in a double bind between its chosen theme (sexual scandal in politics) and institutional regulation of sexually explicit imagery, it uses this contrast by turning the ban into a politics of refusal, and explores the various power negotiations within the scenario. These negotiations are inscribed onto female characters' faces and costumes (as opposed to their corporeality), which extratextually include a struggle between the publicity value of the female star's (eroticised) image and the feminist 'power of refusal'. Consider promotional posters depicting Margulies in suggestive poses and lingerie at odds with the series' tone and aesthetic (Miller 2016, 9) or the symbolism of Kalinda's attire, her leather jackets and stiletto boots linking the notion of commanding female silence to fetishised female glamour (the dominatrix iconography). Contrastingly, Netflix's institutional approval of sexually and otherwise explicit content propels in *Orange* a discursive feminism that finds a suitable site of tensions in visually rendered body politics, which the prison environment makes especially fraught with ideological meanings.

Inseparable from these discursive negotiations is the issue of race and class involved in the constructions of a 'feminist' resistance. *Orange's* appeal to representational diversity involves a classed lack of accoutrements of glamorous femininity following from the prison setting, itself inviting discourses of social inequity and race and class relations expressed on the 'exposed' body. The previously discussed *How to Get Away with Murder*, and Annalise Keating's symbolic importance in critical discourses, offers another point of comparison: while that series is associated with feminine and middle-brow viewing pleasures, Keating functions as *embodied* revelatory realism of black femininity, securing the programme's political significance. The famous transition scene (getting rid of make-up and wig) also inscribes tensions between race and class and domains of the private and public: the series' spaces of privilege (e.g. the courtroom or classroom setting) dominate such that this 'revelatory' scene can only happen in the private, signalling secrecy and intrigue, feeding further into the series' world of scheming. This aligns with network television's narrative traditions (legal drama, plot-heavy narration); and as such the show's race and class politics are linked to the programming context's restrictions. The 'revelation' around the raced and classed female image centres on masquerade of the *face* but not of the body. The publicity and critical reception of *Orange* lauds it for a brutal honesty foregrounding the corporeal in its critique of the prison industrial complex. The series exploits Netflix's loose restrictions around explicit content by establishing its 'quality' aesthetic in the focus on a social space where a 'revelation' around culturally hidden female bodies is diegetically moot – yet is mobilised in the 'fish-out-of-privileged-water' story. In the prison setting, female bodies exist in a constantly transitory space between the private and the public, whereas Keating's 'revelation' happens in the darkness of her bedroom. The political

'realism' of race, class, and gender is inscribed onto the visual renditions of bodies, which are involved in Netflix's institutional configurations of the programme's 'quality' features.

Danielle Hancock (2016) argues that the 'othered' bodies of *Orange's* inmates correspond to Mary Russo's (1995) concept of the female grotesque. This concept is central to feminist media scholars' examination of the liminal and excessive female body in popular culture, especially in its subversive potential for women's comedy (Rowe Karlyn 1995b, Arthurs 1999). Hancock draws attention to the contradictory ways in which the first season of *Orange* mobilises the grotesque: it differentiates Chapman's classical, clean, 'bourgeois' body from those of the prison inmates, which are associated with a threatening abject physicality. Since Chapman functions, as reiterated by Kohan, as a middle-class audience's 'host' body, i.e. the viewer's 'adopted identity', the threat of intrusion that the surrounding grotesque bodies express is rendered a threat onto *this* audience. The text's emphasis on the physically overbearing presence of the women around Chapman reconfirms the distance between postfeminist femininity and 'othered' femininities, keeping *her* audio-visual portrayal aligned with codes of conventional femininity. The programme's seriality allows for gradually mitigating the grotesque's threatening aspect: although Chapman remains an 'isolated body', the other inmates' grotesqueness becomes contextualised via the explanatory flashback technique and the shifting narrative importance between them and the protagonist. Moving the other prisoners toward the narrative centre effects a portrayal of institutional victimisation, such that the grotesque turns from alienating character trait into a consequence of the 'monstrous' prison environment, generating audience sympathy for its victims (ibid.).

Hancock's observations are helpful for unpacking how the series' use of the grotesque feeds into its 'quality' status by being mobilised in the

postfeminism-feminism tension. If the difference of cultural-social status between protagonist and 'othered' inmates is located in the body, the distance between them can also be measured in their shifting ideological difference. The pilot's opening sequence revolving around Chapman's showering habits is, as Hancock remarks, characteristically linked to the physical ('I Wasn't Ready'). The flashback montage of 'blissful bathing scenes' (ibid.) appears as nostalgia-fuelled fantasy contrasted with the dank prison shower connoting 'harsh reality'. Chapman's subsequent exchange in the prison shower with fellow inmate Tasha 'Taystee' Jefferson (Danielle Brooks) is the viewer's first glimpse into her prison interactions. In this regard it is striking that Taystee not only violates Chapman's personal space but makes comments on her body's cultural connotations. Rushing Chapman out of the shower, she catches a glimpse at her breasts and exclaims 'You got them TV titties, they stand up on their own all perky and everything'. The dialogue puts into corporeal terms Kohan's comments about Chapman's inception as media fantasy, rendered so in the alien point of view of a black, loud, and large fellow inmate (see Figures 5.36 and 5.37). (While the performance emphasises Chapman's discomfort, a moment later we also witness that once on her own, she looks down at her breasts with a proud smile – the threat Taystee symbolises is thus tempered.) If Chapman is the viewer's 'adopted identity', then the narrative points out through the comment on her body that this is linked to television culture's iconographic traditions.



Figure 5.36



Figure 5.37

The 'TV titties' comment can be further contextualised in the image preceding the exchange: as Taystee enters the communal bathroom, the footage opens on a semi-naked nameless extra providing a visual on her large sagging breasts. The issue of mediated femininity versus 'reality' is then nuanced in the difference of what kinds of breasts are eligible for what kinds of narration: if Chapman's 'TV titties' are an anomaly in the prison environment, symbolising her postfeminist femininity, then the nameless extra's chest promises a 'realist' body politics via which the programme communicates its difference from cable television's practices of offering female nudity. Considering that Netflix positions HBO as its main competitor, and that HBO's marketed legacy of 'controversy' involves showing explicit sex and eroticised female nudity, *Orange's* visual rendering of female bodies poses a

challenge to these institutional practices right in the opening scene. If the beginning of the series mobilises the grotesque as alien threat to visualise the embodied difference of Chapman's postfeminist femininity from the others, it also communicates the female grotesque's 'otherness' as a consequence of its exclusion from the 'quality' TV trend.

Chapman continues to mediate in later seasons the tension between these femininities via body politics, aligned with institutional policies that position Netflix in a 'transgressive' contrast with cable TV culture, and corresponding to the postfeminism-feminism dichotomy. Consider the season three storyline in which she sets up an illegal business operation selling fellow prisoners' worn underwear online. Critical commentary noted that this plot completes Chapman's increasingly negative portrayal where the former underdog turns into a gang boss: she manipulates inmates into passing their underwear on to her in exchange for flavour packets that make the horrible prison food more palatable, keeping the business profits for herself. She becomes a prison queenpin doling out sophisticated punishment to those who cross her, establishing a social hierarchy by the misuse of her class and educational privilege. Her transformation is paralleled with the prison's privatisation plot in the ways in which inhumane labour practices of the corporate power structure exploit incarcerated women: it is the new prison job, sewing women's underwear in a sweatshop, that prompts Chapman's idea of the 'dirty panties' business. As Hancock notes, the critique of the corporate prison's victimisation of women uses the female grotesque, while Chapman's portrayal as villain maintains her iconographic distance from the physical aspects of prison life. If she was characterised in earlier seasons as different from the others with her 'clean' femininity, linked with her hipster entrepreneurship selling artisanal soaps, this portrayal now involves her exploitation of other inmates' physicality in a business venture. With her refined, white-collar

business smarts, she always recognises profitability of *other* female bodies, arching from merchandising obscure toiletries to a middle-class market to her small-time capitalisation on fellow inmates' 'leaking' bodies. Juxtaposing her narrative with that of the prison system's exploitative practices, her increasing villainy reaffirms the dichotomy between postfeminist protagonist and a 'feminist' portrayal of the others in their uneven social power. This produces a critique of the postfeminist female subject that connects her meanings to late capitalism's working mechanisms.

Chapman's villainy is then expressed in her economic exploitation of 'othered' women's bodies. Critical reception interprets her shifting portrayal, combined with increased narrative attention on other protagonists' plots and characterisations, as the creation of a female antihero similar to male antiheroes. Alan Sepinwall comments that 'Piper had been broken bad' (2015c), and Orli Matlow (2015) interprets the 'Piper as villain' theme in its interconnection with the series' political commentary on the prison industrial complex and the ways in which it further corrupts prisoners. This eventually results in a portrayal reminiscent of – who else's – Walter White's (Bryan Cranston) character trajectory: 'It may be panties instead of meth, but Piper's trajectory from where she started is growing just as stark as Vince Gilligan's famous "Mr. Chips-to-Scarface" paradigm' (ibid.).

Akin to *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Breaking Bad*'s iconic antihero is the template against which critics measure the female protagonist's 'complexity', but for both series, the female antihero's establishment is directly linked to an embodied femininity involving classed and raced identity politics. Further, critics' comparison ignores a difference between the cultural position of Walter White's and Chapman's villainy. Chapman's growing unpopularity among fans (noted by Matlow) is in stark contrast with the popularity and iconic status of Walt's Heisenberg

alter ego, evident in the figure's prominence in the series' merchandising strategies (Murray 2014).

Chapman's inclusion into the pantheon of 'quality' television's antihero paradigm is contingent on her inception as quintessential postfeminist woman, a definition that the narrative links to her physical depiction, and, by season three, to her 'antiheroic' rise to social power in prison. Because of the character's 'hipster' postfeminism, the nature of criticism inherent in *her* 'Mr-Chips-To-Scarface' trajectory yields specifically gendered results different from male-centred dramas. Abuse of unethically gained social power is a central concern to both series, which Matlow illustrates by matching up memorable lines like Walter White's 'I did it for me. I liked it. I was good at it. And (...) I was alive' ('Felina') with Chapman's 'I'm scared that I'm not myself in here... and I'm scared that I am' ('Bora Bora Bora'). In the ideological chain of associations around morality, this comparison offers a juxtaposition of the male-centred drama's discursive expression of a 'patriarchy in crisis' with *Orange's* expression of a 'postfeminism in crisis'. In this comparison, questions of fan popularity, narrative centrality of character, and genre hybridity gain further significance.

As argued, male-centred prestige dramas like *Breaking Bad* possess high cultural status for their successful recombination of televisual forms while offering compelling examinations of troubled 'patriarchal' male identities. The core contradiction within this paradigm is that while it denotes in cultural circulation a 'crisis' of traditional masculinities, it does so by mobilising cultural forms that leave the fictional male figure's ideological-narrative centrality intact. The popular cultural fascination with the psychological complexities of dominant masculinities, describing their cultural-social-ideological crisis, lays the foundation for a set of programmes canonised as attaining the highest achievement in contemporary television storytelling. This continues to normalise male

experience, however troubled, via dominant norms of aesthetic judgements.

Mittell (2015a) discusses the gendered dynamic between Walter and his wife Skyler White's (Anna Gunn) stories in *Breaking Bad* as linked to generic traditions: as a thought experiment, he first recites at length the programme's narrative arc from Skyler's point of view to argue that while the promotional-textual treatment foregrounds crime drama's masculinity, the text gradually emphasises *her* story of emotional abuse at the same time as Walt's 'patriarchal role and masculine prowess begin to crumble and erode' (ibid., 257). He adds that '[o]f course, it is not Skyler's story' (ibid., 256) and more importantly acknowledges that her 'presence serves as an irritant for some viewers' (ibid., 257). This is a tamed-down allusion to a social media controversy around Skyler's apparently too foregrounded narrative presence. The controversy, which critical responses challenged for fan discourses' blatant misogyny (Poniewozik 2013), eventually devolved into Anna Gunn's online bullying. The extent of the harassment led Gunn to write an op-ed in the *New York Times*, calling out gendered online vitriol that conflates fictional characters with the actors portraying them (2013). Setting aside Mittell's rhetorical mitigation of the incident and the gendered expectations of 'quality' drama forms that it signals in fan cultures, his final remark about Skyler's story betrays similar connotations between character gender and their suitable forms of storytelling: 'By considering Skyler's perspective, *Breaking Bad* functions in part as a "women's film" in reverse, told through the rationalizing perspective of the abusive spouse whom we only slowly grow to recognize as the villain' (Mittell 2015a, 257). As *supporting* character, Skyler participates in a masculine crime drama and is a minor player in a story concentrating on the troubled patriarch's complex identity; were *she* the central character, we would be in 'women's melodrama' territory centralising domestic

victimhood. To expand on Mittell's thought experiment, this type of drama would exist in a different programming context aimed at a different demographic and as such in a different relationship to the 'quality' paradigm, allowing to escape fan outrage at the insertion of her alien narrative into masculine crime drama.<sup>48</sup>

My consideration of *Breaking Bad's* gender dynamics and fan responses to them is occasioned by invocations of the series in *Orange's* critical analyses for making sense of Chapman's growing villainy. If her plot can be interpreted as 'postfeminism in crisis' akin to prestige drama's 'patriarchy in crisis', the textual interest in and fan responses to it betray a different attribution of cultural value. *Orange's* discursive feminism-as-quality involves mitigating the character's centrality to the narration, articulated textually (character flashbacks increasing fellow inmates' narrative significance, dialogue frequently calling out Chapman's class and race privilege) and paratextually as justified, since her villainy revolves around her social status. This stands in obvious contrast with male-centred prestige drama's obsession with the troubled patriarch's psyche, whose 'crisis' similarly signals a post-recessionary cultural interest in shifts in social identity. Fan discourses dismissing Chapman further confirm the text's explicit suspiciousness about its protagonist, counterintuitively making her case similar to that of Skyler White. The 'postfeminist' antiheroine's villainy does not echo the male antihero's in that *his* character trajectory is subject to thorough textual and cultural fascination. Rather, she starts from a space of social privilege for which both the series and fan discourses punish her by taking away her *narrative* privilege, coinciding with the diegetic time when her character reaches full antihero status (learning

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<sup>48</sup> Gunn's letter also cites as troubling trend the unpopularity of 'unhappy suburban wife' characters in other male-centred prestige dramas like Carmela Soprano (Edie Falco) of *The Sopranos* or Betty Draper (January Jones) of *Mad Men* (2013). Mittell's argument about the 'women's melodrama' positioning equally fits these characters, further signalling both cultural production's reliance on this gendered generic tradition and the similarly gendered value judgements of fan cultures' reception practices.

to navigate the prison space and asserting a higher status in its power structure). Lotz (2014) considers the male antihero quality drama's mobilisation of a laudable feminism for reflecting on patriarchal masculinities' grappling with historically shifting gender norms. Chapman's postfeminist antihero is similarly conceived in a political shifting of identities, and stands for the aforementioned 'past' of gender scripts linked to social privilege. But unlike in the male-centred prestige drama, this shift emphasises the gesture of turning narrative attention away from her and towards those overshadowed by her social-cultural-narrative centrality. *Orange* defines both its feminism and its 'quality' status by this gesture, linked to the politics of the female body. In this, it fulfils more literally the promise of 'crisis' for its examined system of privilege and cultural paradigm than does the male-centred drama.

## Conclusion

The goal of this thesis has been to demonstrate the emergence of a group of American TV programmes characterised by their use of feminism as historical movement and political force to establish their position in the post-millennial paradigm of 'quality' television. This combination, i.e. American television's association with feminist politics via specific programming forms, narrative traditions, audience targets, and publicity strategies, is a historically well-worn path for broadcasters to claim the cultural value of their scripted programming. But the changing cultural and technological context of the 'quality TV' discourse means that the most recent 'feminist quality TV' trend has tended to be understood as a reaction to, and consequence of, a preceding 'mainstream', masculine-coded prestige television on the one hand, and of a postfeminist cultural paradigm on the other. By the time of the completion of this thesis, the trend has solidified to an extent that its narrative patterns, characterisation methods, genre hybridity, details of production background (particularly the promotion of female authorship), and institutional positioning are recognisable signifiers of a subcategory of television both for journalists, academics, and audiences.

### The 'complex female character'

Symptomatically, the 'complex' or, increasingly, 'unlikeable' woman character is often claimed to possess such cultural influence as to have developed her own subgenre within English-language prestige TV. The American reception of the BBC3 comedy *Fleabag* (2016-), co-produced and released in the US by Amazon, provides a representative example. Both Stassa Edwards, the female-targeted entertainment blog *Jezebel's* critic (2016) and Emily Nussbaum (2016) praise the series as a novel

entry in the 'unlikeable woman' or 'bad-girl' comedy genre, updating the trope with an 'aggressive' tone (Edwards 2016). The journalists place considerable emphasis on how the comedy articulates the titular character's (Phoebe Waller-Bridge) moral ambiguity in terms of her conflicted relationship to feminism, quoting a line in which the heroine confesses, 'I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist' ('Episode 1'). Completing the litany of unflattering personality traits, the reference to feminism imagines the movement as another, albeit unattainably positive, identity marker. If Bonnie Dow describes millennial postfeminist television as 'lifestyle feminism' in that it provides 'a narrative *quest* for central female characters' to work on the self (2002, 261, italics in original), then this is an already failed quest for *Fleabag*: over before the narrative starting point, its failure fodder for comedy (see also Gill 2017).

Jason Mittell argues that quality comedy's characterisation of the antihero allows the audience to 'root[...] against them (...), watch[...] them fail for our amusement as well as laugh[...] at their boundary-pushing behavioural extremes' (2015, 75). In *Fleabag*, these faults and extremes are often rooted in the heroine's failed connection to a socially ubiquitous feminism, as Nussbaum notes describing a scene in which *Fleabag* and her sister visit a feminist seminar: 'A dignified older woman (...) asks the audience, "If you could lose five years of your life to have what society considers the perfect body, would you?" Everyone else stays still, but *Fleabag* and her sister shoot their hands straight to the ceiling' (2016). For Nussbaum, the sequence expresses the two characters' 'feminine masochism' (ibid.), but it also falls into the pattern I identified in *Orange*'s treatment of its central character Piper: both series establish the protagonist's postfeminist femininity to be scrutinised and critiqued by the narrative as basis of her 'unlikeability'

or 'complexity', presented in a social space in which this femininity equals an inappropriate and exceptional position (the above scene ends on Fleabag whispering into the awkward silence: 'We are bad feminists'). Traces of *30 Rock's* 'Liz Lemonism' can be detected here at least in terms of Liz's 'failed' or uninformed feminism, but *The Good Wife's* treatment of Alicia's character arc also falls into the pattern. Consider that the latter programme's most resonant (at least according to producer statements) gimmick of serialisation, namely the narrative and visual mirroring of the pilot's cold open with the last episode's final scene, grounds its affective resonance in the heroine's fall from grace in terms of female solidarity. When Diane slaps Alicia, this confirms that the protagonist's 'moral corruption' in the world of politics and corporate labour is complete by betraying a character whom the series portrays as robust symbol of a nostalgia for the virtues of second-wave feminism. This betrayal, just like the 'failed feminisms' in the other examples, is closely tied to a narrative of the private sphere (Alicia betrays Diane by destroying her marriage) or to the body politics central to postfeminism's cultural work.

Comedy and the half-hour dramedy have been the preferred narrative forms for this character-specific subgenre (due to the genres' historic amicability to 'authored' female performance), but some prestige dramas similarly use the tension between character and historic feminism as serialised arcs, as seen in *The Good Wife*. Nostalgia television set in the 1960s favours this route; consider *Masters of Sex's* references to second-wave feminism affecting the female protagonists' lives, or Amazon's *Good Girls Revolt* (2015-), a fictionalised account of the 1969-1970 class action lawsuit brought by female employees of *Newsweek* against the paper's gender discrimination practices. The much-ridiculed cable company Lifetime's first notable effort to fix its reputation as provider of female-targeted mediocre programming was

*UnREAL* (2015-), an hour-long series fitting into this pattern and killing several birds with one stone to secure industry prestige. Set behind the scenes of a fictitious dating reality show called *Everlasting*, *UnREAL* allows for the kind of self-referential and self-critical tone that has been a method of a number of series – at least since *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* – appealing to ‘quality’ audiences’ teleliteracy and presumed smart suspiciousness of the medium. The dating contest show setup satirises the kind of content associated with feminine viewing pleasures, the lifeblood of cable channels like Lifetime. Concentrating on the personal and professional drama among the (mainly female) producers, *UnREAL* also presents the central conflict as these characters’ corruption by the television industry, articulated as a betrayal of the feminist cause and, in the second season especially, of progressive race politics. Rachel (Shiri Appleby), *Everlasting*’s mid-level producer is an expert at manipulating contestants (or in insider parlance ‘producing’ them) in order to get footage and narratives associated with female-centred reality TV, and to shoehorn the participating women into the genre’s reductive character types. As noted by critics, she first appears in the pilot wearing a T-shirt with the slogan ‘This Is What a Feminist Looks Like’ (‘Pilot’), and has dropped out of college where she had read women’s studies to join the production team. The contrast between the TV industry’s sexist mediatisation of womanhood, and one of its mid-level female members’ political background as has-been feminist provides a central drama of gender politics. The series dramatises Rachel’s exploitation of the contestants’ personal lives to produce ‘good TV’ (a recurring phrase in the series used by showrunners and executives) by emphasising her failed feminism. The female protagonist then personifies an ideological clash between historic political feminism and ‘low’ television culture, in this way consolidating the programme’s cultural value; a setup somewhat familiar from *30 Rock*.

## **'Failed feminism', postfeminism, and cultural value**

The feminism that these programmes' protagonists fail to achieve is implicitly presented as a morally 'right' choice and social-political backdrop, in contrast with the fictional feminism that Dow describes in relation to millennial postfeminist television. Her critique stresses that the *Ally McBeal*-type dramedy strategically conflates personal affect and social policy to blame feminism for personal ills:

If feminism was supposed to make women's lives better, this logic goes, why are they unhappy? From my perspective, the central problem with this equation is that it confuses feminism with women's personal fulfilment (...). Feminism has never promised women happiness – only justice. (2002, 263)

While still connected to 'personal fulfilment', feminism is not a cause of the 'unlikeable' (predominantly white and affluent) female antihero's ambiguous morality; rather, *her* failure to live up to its expectations is. The areas in which the heroine fails demonstrate precisely where these expectations lie: female solidarity, body acceptance, resistance to mediatised femininity, social consciousness, and awareness of racial, class, and other privileges. The familiar rhetoric of 'choice' in postfeminism between career and domesticity, being single and marriage, motherhood and childlessness etc. has been critiqued by feminist scholarship as a false dualism, offering only the *appearance* of options by presenting issues of social policy as a matter of domestic decision-making. In contrast, these series' setup of their protagonists' failed feminisms offers a dualism (and choice) between 'good' feminist behaviour and 'bad' collusion with patriarchal institutions, played out in the heroines' intimate psychological portrayals. This reconfigured relationship between historic feminism and television's fictional women

protagonists merits further investigation for its consequences in gendered media discourses, but this falls outside the scope of the thesis.

As stressed throughout, the generic and aesthetic signifiers of 'feminist quality TV' are discursively formulated as a 'backlash' to the masculinism of the quality TV paradigm, evident in TV critics frequently comparing (often competitively) 'complex' female characters to iconic male roles, and the programmes' narration to those of popular prestige series. Nussbaum compares *Fleabag* to 'that tragicomic asshole Larry David' (2016); Maureen Ryan of *Variety* describes *UnREAL*'s set as 'Westeros, but with more headsets and walkie-talkies' (2016b) and the friendship between Rachel and her boss Quinn (Constance Zimmer) as 'one of the most complicated and fascinating bonds on TV, now that Walter White and Jesse Pinkman of *Breaking Bad* are gone' (ibid.). *Masters of Sex* and *Good Girls Revolt* have both been claimed to capitalise on, and function as the feminist correctives of, *Mad Men*'s cultural influence (Prudom 2016; Miller 2013). These rhetorical pairings of female- versus male-coded series produce the continued ambiguity in American television culture about the allocation of cultural value to the aesthetics of female-centred quality TV: they suggest that this programming exists primarily in relation to its 'mainstream' male-centred counterpart, and has evolved via its departure from the latter's gendered political signifiers. The rhetorical dualism allows for the celebration (and canonisation) of these female-centred series for their political significance, while leaving the terms on which aesthetic evaluation in the 'quality TV' era has developed unquestioned.

In a parallel process, institutional policies also promote a number of the discussed series as a response to current ideals of 'quality' in gendered terms, and frequently as a tool for re-branding the broadcaster's image. I have shown how Netflix made this a bedrock of its promotion of *Orange*, but CBS's promotion of *The Good Wife* was equally borne out of

a tactic to affiliate 'quality' with 'feminism'. As Miller shows, the channel recycled some of its strategies from its legacy of the 1970s female-led sitcom, this time via a dualism of cable TV's sexism and broadcast TV's political progressiveness. As such, CBS 'uses female characters in [*The Good Wife*] to deflect critiques of its rustic reputation by pointing out prestige television's rampant, old-timey sexism, characterizing the network and the show as more progressive, contemporary, and educated' (2016, 7). NBC used *30 Rock* and *Parks* in a similar capacity, as demonstrated in the Introduction and the detailed analyses. As noted above, *UnREAL* is reputed among critics as the series solely mandated with fixing Lifetime's bad reputation, and cleverly exploiting this reputation to produce quality drama (Lyons 2015a). Further, online streaming services have cultivated a form of half-hour dramedy that places identity politics at their narrative core and dramatises this in the American low-key independent, or 'mumblecore',<sup>49</sup> movie aesthetic (*Master of None* [2015-], *Easy* (2016-) *Transparent*, *One Mississippi* [2015-]), associating the companies with 'edginess' both in terms of aesthetics and politics.

### **Body politics and cultural value**

The utilisation of feminist and identity politics in the series analysed in this thesis also illuminates a tight but conflicted relationship between quality TV's genre conventions, gender, and body politics. Notable in the programmes' invocation of feminism as the basis of aesthetic exceptionalism is the significance lent to body politics, which is directly connected to their appeal to cultural value, and in turn to the media reception of this appeal. The generic exceptionalism of both *30 Rock*

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<sup>49</sup> A loosely defined term, 'mumblecore' describes for critics a trend starting in mid-2000s US independent cinema characterised by a documentarist aesthetic, the dominance of (often improvised) dialogue, and a thematic concern with young urban professionals' 'uncertainties regarding sense of self, finding one's place in the world, and the struggle to communicate, connect, and forge meaningful relationships' (Johnston 2014, 68).

and *Parks* affects the female comedians' use of physical comedy: paratexts articulated *30 Rock's* increasing usages of the female grotesque and the series' shifting tone toward cartoonish satire as a response to the postfeminist dramedy's oppressive dominance, and to the pretty/funny dilemma faced by the female comedian. But critical reception considered Fey's 'feminist comic' star text, popularised in glossy-magazine discourses as a negotiation between female glamour and humour, at odds with the grotesque femininity mobilised on *30 Rock*. This effected the series' problematic acceptance by critics both as feminist and quality television in the 'backlash' years of Fey's celebrity. *Parks'* more unanimous reputation as feminist quality TV stems from the series' change of tone after its first season, a change involving the downplaying of Amy Poehler's physical comedy situated in mockumentary's 'cringe' aesthetic, instead emphasising her verbal comedy and impersonation skills. As stressed, these changes in gendered bodily performance affected the two comedies' generic signifiers and their associated cultural value.

Body politics are a similarly pivotal issue for the hour-long programmes' 'quality feminism' too: as Miller (2016) shows, *The Good Wife* and its promotion use high fashion and the female ensemble's looks to articulate the series' production value and relationship to feminism, and I have demonstrated how the female face and masquerades of femininity serve symbolic functions both for 'sophisticated' aesthetics and gender politics on the programme. In the context of online television culture, *Orange's* touted 'iconoclasm' concerns its promoted realism around both the female body and genre conventions, the former strategically contrasted with premium cable television's gratuitous female nudity and, via Chapman's centralisation, with postfeminist femininity. In another example, the very premise of *Masters of Sex* is built around the connection between sexual and

feminist politics: charting the 'revolution' within the historic academic research of human sexuality, it connects this process to the cultural influence of the women's liberation movement.

Female sexuality and body politics continue to be pivotal yet contested areas for the 'feminist quality TV' trend then, given the body's centrality to visual arts and the historic debates surrounding representations of the female body. As shown, the programmes' tone and modes of expression, and their representation methods of the female body and sexuality are interrelated: dramatic series lend much significance to a discursively progressive 'realism' of dealing with the corporeal as claim to authenticity and exceptionality (see e.g. *Orange, Masters of Sex*). This applies to *The Good Wife* too in a reversed way: the institutional regulations of network television restrict a promotion of 'realism' around the female body, which the programme exploits by emphasising the *masquerade* of femininities among its female cast, complicating the dualism of artifice/reality.

For comedy, this connection is less straightforward due to the perceived conflict between funniness (the genre's prime signifier) and 'serious' or 'realistic' political intentions. The cultural understanding of seriousness as the norm of human expression lies at the core of this contrast. Since comedy and funniness are seen as deviations from this norm (and requiring clear signals to be decoded), the usage of the female body and sexuality in comedy as site of political meanings is bound to be controversial. I argue that this cultural ambiguity partly accounts for the emergence of what can be called the 'half-hour dramedy of identity/sexual politics' on cable and online platforms (*Girls, Transparent, One Mississippi, Master of None* etc.). In industry awards shows, these series fall into the 'comedy' category without exception, and this association follows from their production backgrounds especially in cases where they are developed from a well-known

comedian's stand-up persona (Louis C.K., Aziz Ansari, Tig Notaro). Yet they deal in a 'progressive' treatment of sexual and identity politics in a way that appears to require the dramatic tone's increased influence. *Fleabag* is perhaps a better example for this, given its explicit sexual comedy and its roots in women's stand-up comedy (Waller-Bridge wrote the series based on her stand-up character). The 'blue' comedy of women's sexuality is played initially for laughs but creeps toward psychological drama, and the series' narrative twist in the last episode reveals that Fleabag's cynical promiscuity is rooted in unprocessed trauma, explaining the increasingly dramatic tone. For critics, the seriousness with which these dramedies treat sexual and identity politics accounts for much of their cultural value, a seriousness expressed in tonal changes from the comic towards the dramatic.

### **The 'aesthetic turn' and feminist scholarship**

These summarised considerations of the thesis' findings and of their relevance in the wider landscape of mid-2010s American television serve to support my investigation's engagement with the academic debates, to which I finally turn. As stated, my argument has aimed to intervene in the ongoing discussion within television studies about TV texts' scholarly aesthetic evaluation practices. The 'aesthetic turn' has been met with suspicion in the academic community of cultural and media studies. My approach in this thesis has been to combine the methods of feminist media studies, aesthetic analysis, critical reception studies, industry analysis, and star studies for the examination of a current trend within 'quality' television culture to argue for the necessity of considering the interconnection of these aspects in order to tease out this trend's cultural significance. Mobilising feminist media studies alongside aesthetic analysis was motivated only partly by an

emancipatory gesture of, as Nygaard and Lagerwey phrase it, 'reclaim[ing] TV studies' feminist roots' (2016, 7). While I share the authors' concern that the debate sidelines the discipline, or rather, treats it as an obligatory constituent of social and political study, I find the role of feminist analysis in the debate more complicated than this suggests.

I demonstrated in Chapter 5 via the scrutiny of Jason Mittell's *Complex TV* how his championing of the aesthetic exceptionality of certain TV programmes draws selectively on feminist analysis to argue their *political* exceptionality as an auxiliary feature. Using tools of feminist media analysis in similar ways crops up frequently in the academic debate. A recent characteristic example can be found in James Zborowski's (2016) intervention into the discussion, which, as mentioned, offers a reconciliation between the 'TV aesthetics' versus 'media and cultural studies' approaches. Zborowski engages at length with the opposing arguments of the two camps' prominent representatives, and quotes a long passage from Jason Jacobs and Stephen Peacock's introduction to their anthology *Television Aesthetics and Style* (2013) to demonstrate the untenability of this divide. Jacobs and Peacock's passage discusses a scene from *Mad Men* that has a specifically gendered theme (centralising the 1960s housewife's subjectivity in a domestic dispute), in order to show that while the scene offers itself for feminist analysis, this would be 'critical hubris' (ibid., 13) because this method would not allow for capturing the scene's 'expressive *punctum*', i.e. aesthetic significance (ibid.). Zborowski exposes the false dualism, arguing that '[t]o analyse a text for its representations of particular dimensions of sociocultural identity and to treat it as an aesthetic object are different activities, but not necessarily mutually exclusive ones' (2016, 12). He goes on to claim that our understanding of the 'aesthetic achievements' of series like *Mad Men* or

*The Wire* can only be enriched by enlisting history, sociology, and so on 'as tools that might fine tune our ability to do justice to the[se] aesthetic achievements' (ibid., 13).

While Zborowski's point is laudable in its reconciliatory effort, it also lays bare a representative problem within the academic community's approach to the debate. In discussing this, I will set aside for now another issue with this argument, namely the prevalent and widely debated implicit assumption in the field that scholarly inquiry has a mission to 'do justice' to aesthetic achievement. Just like feminist media studies is by now at least sceptical about the academic usefulness of approaches used to prove a media text's feminist achievements (the feminist Ur-article per Charlotte Brunsdon [2005]), it is similarly unclear how aesthetic evaluation furthers existing scholarly knowledge and methods. This question has recently become a central point in the TV studies debate; for instance, the prestigious academic journal *Screen* devoted its Summer 2016 issue to examining it. But what I want to highlight in Zborowski's account is that the dialogue it joins invokes feminist analysis as an example to make its broader point about different academic approaches. This is a representative and tendentious method in the field, effecting that feminist analysis does not necessarily become ignored in the discipline (as Nygaard and Lagerwey warn) but is strategically put on display as a prominent mode of sociopolitical engagement, in the process mischaracterising its usefulness. This utilitarian logic is similar in both Jacobs and Peacock's, and Zborowski's positions despite their difference about feminism's role in aesthetic analysis, and recalls Mittell's strategy in *Complex TV*, in each case reducing feminist analysis to a toolkit gauging ('doing justice to') the text's political achievements (shades of Brunsdon's feminist Ur-article). Just like in Mittell's case, this reduction means that a whole set of

arguments prominent in the field become glossed over, ones that could derail this rhetoric of achievement.

In respect to *Mad Men*, we can note for instance that the series has been subject to the scrutiny of feminist scholarship as a product of postfeminist nostalgia television. Mimi White (2011) suggests as much when examining a promotional documentary for the series that introduces American women's social history in the depicted era, and thus places the programme's fictional women in 'historic/realist representation, despite their often stereotypical referents' (ibid., 157). The appeal to historic realism produces a contradiction for the programme's own relationship to its women characters, since it both positions them as types of mediated womanhood within its mythologising aesthetic artifice, and also associates them with discourses of social history. As a result, 'the very artificial (sometimes parodic) representations of women are turned into the stuff of history' (ibid.). Another example of feminist scholarship's incisive scrutiny of *Mad Men's* gender politics is Lynn Spigel's (2013) account, who claims that the programme's nostalgia rewrites the historic presence of second-wave feminism: while the series clearly deals in representing the era's gender politics, it never directly refers to the women's liberation movement, a move made even more conspicuous by constant textual references to *other* social-political events and by creator-producer Matthew Weiner's statements that his prime inspiration for creating the series was reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl* (ibid., 272). This way, Spigel suggests, the show imagines a prefeminist past that has organically led to a postfeminist present, without ever depicting the political struggles of actual feminist movements in the middle (ibid., 275).

White's and Spigel's accounts provide only two examples of the feminist criticism surrounding *Mad Men's* cultural work, and their arguments

around the slick aesthetic of nostalgia television in relation to its gender politics are at odds with the language of political-aesthetic achievement used by Jacobs and Peacock, and Zborowski. They also expose that 'treat[ing a TV text] as an aesthetic object' and considering their social, political, and even promotional context are not, or need not be, 'different activities' as Zborowski would have it, and combining them (along with other approaches necessitated by the text's cultural position) should not serve to further foster the already prominent processes of canonisation, but to understand the cultural forces underlying them. (To boot, a hypothetical investigation of the emergence of 'post-' or 'anti-'*Mad Men* nostalgia television like *Good Girls Revolt* and *Masters of Sex* would have to prioritise Spigel's and White's arguments over a mainly 'TV aesthetics' analysis.)

This thesis's aim has been not only to contribute to the 'TV aesthetics' debate but to expose its false dichotomies by demonstrating via the analysis of post-millennial 'feminist quality TV' the necessity of a synthesis of approaches. It could be argued that my examination of this particular group of texts and the cultural context in which they exist quite obviously calls for feminist media analysis alongside aesthetic study, and in fact could work without considering aesthetics and the issue of cultural value. But if we are to chart how the texts work in television culture, and how as a group they signal shifting trends around the cultural position of gender politics in the American mediasphere, these approaches cannot be divorced from each other. I believe that this applies to the examinations of most aspects and trends of the medium, but has become essential in the 'Peak TV' era. After all, television culture, and certainly 'quality' television culture was from the medium's beginnings conceived by the industry and its surrounding public discourses as a specifically gendered set of practices. Aesthetics-focused television scholarship, in its evaluation of formal-narrative

achievements, tends to mitigate or misinterpret the role of this genderedness and the relevance of feminist scholarship for its analysis. But equally, feminist scholarship, being as it is side-lined in television aesthetics, often ignores querying the role of form, aesthetics, and attendant cultural status in its ideological analysis of gender and television, instead prioritising judgements over TV texts' gendered progressivism or conservatism. The contrived rift between political versus aesthetic approaches to TV culture then still allows for a commonality between them: an increased conflation between 'analysis' and 'appreciation of achievement'. Television studies needs to reconsider its relationship to these approaches; otherwise it risks undermining its academic usefulness for unpacking the cultural forces that govern convergent-era television's meaning-making practices, eminently displayed in the 'quality TV' phenomenon.

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