

## “I’M NOT THE LADIES!”: METATEXTUAL COMMENTARY IN GIRLS

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Major television network shows created, written, directed or produced by women are still extremely rare. It is no wonder then that HBO's new comedy series Girls, created, written, directed, produced, and starring Lena Dunham, was met with high expectations both from media critics and the audience. Since shows that accurately fit the definition of women's genres (Annette Kuhn 1984) are few and far between, and none of them likely to live up to the task of being all things to all women, disappointment and criticism inevitably ensued. Girls is no exception.

One of the main objections directed at Dunham's show is concerned with its "lack of diversity" (Tambay A. Obenson 2012), and therefore focuses on the issue of representation. The title of the series may be partly to blame because it misleadingly promises to deal with girls, all girls, regardless of their race, sexual orientation, level of education, financial opportunities, and place of residence. Surely, Girls does not and cannot represent the experience of all young women, but it seems the viewers didn't take this into account and expected to see a reflection of themselves in the show's characters. Some of them were thrilled in recognizing themselves in the representations on offer, hailing the show as being "FUBU: for us by us" (Emily Nussbaum 2012, online). Others were outraged for being "erased from the narrative," informing Dunham, "I exist" (Kendra James 2012, online).

Indeed, the show "takes as its subject women who are quite demographically specific---cosseted white New Yorkers from educated backgrounds," but it is debatable whether it "then mines their lives for the universal" (Nussbaum 2012, online). The desire to see Girls as universal comes from a specific type of reading and

interpretation of the series. Both the viewers that recognize themselves in the show, and those that feel left out, approach the fictional narrative in the same way: evaluating its quality by comparing it to the "reality" of their own lives. Both groups understand realism as a literal reflection of reality rather than an artistic convention which constructs its own reality (Christine Gledhill 1997).

As the marketing campaign for the series makes clear, Girls doesn't mean "all girls" but rather makes use of the dichotomy between girls and women. Taglines "Living the dream. One mistake at a time" and "Mistakes that girls make" are based precisely on this difference in meaning: girls are not yet women, they are younger, less mature, less experienced, and more prone to experimentation. Of course, this doesn't necessarily apply to all "real" young women, but growing up, developing, and searching for an identity is certainly a part of the semantic field of the word "girl." Hannah thus tells her parents, "I am busy trying to become who I am" (Season 1, Episode 1), and Kathryn warns Jessa, "You're doing it to distract yourself from the person you're meant to be" (Season 1, Episode 9).

However, what makes Girls interesting is the fact that it anticipated the criticism regarding the issue of representation and already addressed it within the narrative in the "Listen Ladies!" scene. Listen Ladies! A Tough Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love is a fictional advice book on dating which prompts Hannah to ask, "Who are the ladies?," and Jessa to declare, "I'm not the ladies! ... You can't force me to be a lady" (Season 1, Episode 2). Neither Hannah nor Jessa want to be one of the "ladies," while Shoshanna, who doesn't have enough romantic or sexual experience to insist on her own particular position, tries to convince them that they most certainly are. It is as if the series itself expected a similar reaction. Who are the girls? I'm not the girls! You can't force me to be a girl! At least not the kind of girl the

series shows: white, privileged, a slacker like Jessa who assures the nannies in the park that she is just like all of them and even proposes they start a union. However, as the whole scene makes clear, she is nothing like them because she has nothing to lose---except her employer's children. Refusal to participate is therefore already inscribed in the narrative itself, from Hannah and Jessa's unwillingness to be one of the "ladies" to the nannies' skeptical attitude towards Jessa's attempt at fitting into their world.

Similarly, one of the most quoted lines from the pilot simultaneously embraces and mocks the role of the spokesperson for her generation that the media attributed to Dunham (Nussbaum 2012). Forcing her parents to read her book of essays which is only a few pages long, Hannah says, "I don't want to freak you out, but I think I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least a voice. Of a generation" (Season 1, Episode 1). In this way the series acknowledges the expectations set by the media and confesses its own inability to meet them. Metatextual comments such as these indicate the text's awareness of potential criticism and function as a warning to critics and viewers that, high expectations aside, Girls cannot present anything other than the particular experience of a few fictional girls.

The key feature of the show, however, is that it does not employ more radical metatextual devices that would transform it into a true metafiction, but introduces all such commentary exclusively through the plot. It is obvious from her earlier work that Dunham is no stranger to metafiction: her web series Tight Shots (2007) focuses on a group of students cohabitating in order to make a movie, Creative Nonfiction (2009) consists of two narrative levels, the first, which deals with Ella, a student writing a screenplay and the second, which brings parts of her screenplay to life , while Tiny Furniture (2010) features Aura's and Jed's YouTube videos, her mother's

diary from the 1970s, and a scene in which Aura films herself reading passages from her mother's diary. In Girls, Hannah's tweets, her diary, and her essays are incorporated into the main narrative, but their function is more actional than thematic (Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan [1983] 2002, p. 93). Instead of becoming an autonomous narrative analogous to the main storyline, Hannah's diary primarily advances the action: it plays a crucial role in Marnie and Charlie's breakup, and passages from it become lyrics to "Hannah's Diary," a song performed by Charlie's band (Season 1, Episode 4).

Other, more pronounced metafictional elements in the show stem from the fact that Hannah is writing her "memoir." Everything that happens to her has the potential to become a part of an essay in her book. She informs her parents she can't write more essays because she has to "live them first" (Season 1, Episode 1), and so--in a metafictional turn--the show becomes material for her memoir and at the same time her memoir itself. Moreover, it is as if the memoir itself starts to dictate the events, especially in the episode "Hard Being Easy," when Hannah tries to seduce her boss "for the story," and Adam asks her to watch him masturbate, also "for the story" (Season 1, Episode 5).

One of the key moments of the series is the episode "Leave Me Alone," which posits as its theme the triviality of Hannah's essays as well as the triviality of the show itself, but also refers to the status of women's (popular) culture in general. Women's popular culture has been marginalized and criticized as aesthetically less valuable, trivial, and sentimental from the perspective of "high" culture and "masculine" popular culture, and also as apolitical from the standpoint of feminist criticism (Charlotte Brunsdon 2000). In this episode Hannah takes part in a reading organized by her former professor and decides to share a piece about Phil the Hoarder

(Season 1, Episode 9). Marnie finds the essay "whiny," while Ray supplies her with a list of "real things" she should write about:

Ray: Cultural criticism. How about years of neglect and abuse? How about acid rain? How about the plight of the giant panda bear? How about racial profiling? How about urban sprawl? How about divorce? How about death? How about death? Death is the most fucking real issue. You should write about death. That's what you should write about. Explore that. Death. (Season 1, Episode 9)

As Anna Holmes accurately states, Ray sounds "not unlike some of the show's harshest critics, professional and amateur, who didn't seem to know how to react to Dunham's precisely observed, knowing depiction of intimate connections between young women" (Anna Holmes 2012, online). "What in the world could be more trivial than intimacy?" Ray asks Hannah (Season 1, Episode 9), foreshadowing the complaints of the show's critics, who "blithely dismiss matters of concern to a great many women" (Holmes 2012, online).

In the end, Hannah doesn't read her essay because it "seemed really stupid" and "trivial" (Season 1, Episode 9), but writes a new and vastly inferior piece about a guy she met online who died because death is, as everyone tried to convince her, a much more important subject than intimacy. Although it is made clear that reading the essay on intimacy would have been the right thing to do, even Hannah herself firmly states that she has "bigger concerns" than being a good friend to Marnie (Season 1, Episode 9) and "actual things" she would like to achieve besides being Adam's girlfriend (Season 1, Episode 10). Instead of having her life revolve solely around intimacy---her main goal being "a boyfriend with a luxury rental" (Season 1,

Episode 9)---Hannah is also strongly driven by her desire to become a writer and find her own identity through creative expression.

As the examples of metatextual commentary make evident, the series is highly self-conscious and attuned to potential criticism, and therefore deeply political as well, bringing to the fore some of the major issues of feminist cultural studies. Potential criticism may already be inscribed in the narrative, but Lena Dunham's responses to actual criticism---especially her decision to address the question of racial diversity (Obenson 2012)---demonstrate that she is also sensitive to the opinions of her social audience. As a cultural product, the show takes part in the circuit of culture, and is now returning "once more to the moment of production" (Richard Johnson 1996, p. 85) after being "open to public evaluation" (1996, p. 88). Public reception will surely have a strong effect on the second season of Girls. One can only hope that Dunham addresses these objections without compromising her own artistic integrity, unlike Hannah, who listened to her friends' bad advice and decided not to read a perfectly good essay.

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