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## 16 Afterword: *Girls*: Notes on authenticity, ambivalence and imperfection

Rosalind Gill

This interesting collection makes a valuable contribution to the growing body of literature about *Girls*, and the wider popular cultural engagement (in journalism, on social media) with the HBO series, currently numbering five seasons. Discussions have focussed on the racial politics and exclusions of the show (e.g. Stewart, 2012; Wortham, 2012; Watson, Mitchell, & Shaw, 2015); on class, work and generation (e.g. the normalisation of unpaid internships as the entry-level route into employment for young people in North America (Lowrey, 2013; Shade & Jacobson, 2015); on questions of Lena Dunham's reflexive 'auteurship' and the 'political economy' of the series as flagship in HBO's attempt to attract a youthful, college educated, female audience (Nygaard, 2013); and – of course – on the issue of how the series is situated politically and ideologically in relation to feminism (Fuller & Driscoll, 2015). This collection develops some of these arguments, whilst also generating new work centred on education (Witherington, chapter ?) and the role of music in *Girls* (Sergeant, chapter ?). Mostly, however, it foregrounds an overlapping but slightly different set of issues centred – as I see it - on the body, sex and intimacy, and postfeminism. It is on these themes that I reflect in this concluding essay, as well as on questions of authenticity, vulnerability and imperfection. I draw on my readings of the chapters that make up this book; various forms of media by and about Lena Dunham, including her memoir *Not That Kind of Girl*; and my own engagement with the show.

### A 'PRODUCTIVE IRRITANT': MAKING 'POSTFEMINISM' CRITICAL

A few years ago Imelda Whelehan (2010) wrote an article that asked why postfeminism had become so 'boring' and expressed her 'frustration' and 'ennui' with the term. The activity of analysing postfeminist cultural texts, she argued, can quickly become tedious since 'the

message requires little unpacking and lies prominently on the surface of these narratives' p. 159). It is interesting, then, to read this current collection in which the notion is so prominent. For many of the contributors *Girls* is both a feminist and a postfeminist show, and one that makes both terms live again. As Sean Fuller and Catherine Driscoll (2015) have put it, in *Girls*, feminism refuses to recede into the past:

*Girls* is a story about girls who are both products and the subjects of feminism, incorporating validation, problematization and critique of the forms of education, work, sex and romance currently available to girls. And it is a story about the important role played by popular culture in the history of disseminating feminism and keeping it at the forefront of debating our 'contemporary anxieties' (p. 261)

Yet it is also a show shaped by postfeminism – an idea that Fuller and Driscoll (2015, p. 253) regard as a source of 'productive irritation'. It remains a key term within feminist media studies - one that is highly contested, speaking to a wide range of different issues and topics, its very 'overload' signalling that there is something worth fighting about. If this volume is anything to go by, if the term didn't exist it would have to be invented, since it is used to index so many different things- a zeitgeist, an ideology, a sensibility, a set of assumptions, a particular kind of subjectivity, a relationship, etc. This proliferation of different conceptualizations is certainly irritating, but might it also be (pace Fuller and Driscoll, 2015) productive?

For Whelehan, *Girls* is interesting precisely because it is *not* just another 'quality postfeminist text' but rather encourages surface readings that are then undermined by the representational strategies deployed on screen. It thus 'makes the activity of feminist critique interesting once more' (Whelehan, Chapter 3). It is this very complexity of *Girls* that captures the imagination of many writers. For Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant (2015, p. 988) the show

performs 'a feminist engagement with postfeminism'. They argue (Grant & Nash, Chapter 5) that *Girls* allows a rearticulation of postfeminism for a millennial generation. It remains part of a neoliberal refashioning of contemporary femininity, but one that is changing significantly. Their analysis implicitly suggests the need for *periodizations* of postfeminism (see DeJmanee, 2015), to acknowledge the way that it is transforming. They suggest adding an interrogative to the word - post?feminism - to symbolise that 'feminist engagement is multiple and shifting and that the breadth of issues involved in feminist identification is much more complex today' (Grant & Nash, Chapter 5). Another productive engagement with the term is found in Catherine McDermott's use of Lauren Berlant's work to argue that postfeminism is a relation of 'cruel optimism', tying women to hopes or desires that cannot be met (see Chapter 4). For McDermott what we see in *Girls* is an 'enactment and unravelling' of conventional postfeminist fantasies, which points viewers to critical understandings of the way that feminine desires have been directed toward 'patently false promises'. Stephanie Genz's chapter also directs us to the need to continue to work with and develop the notion of postfeminism (see Chapter 2). Responding to Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker's (2014) challenge to think about postfeminism in relation to recession and austerity, Genz argues that:

I suggest that the larger cultural climate and ethos of neoliberal postfeminism needs to be recalibrated and reassessed in the aftermath of the boom and bust economic model. Certainly if late 20th and early 21st-century postfeminism was marked by optimism, entitlement and the opportunity of prosperity, such articulations have become more doubtful and less celebratory in a post-2008 recessionary environment where the neoliberal mantra of choice and self-determination is still present but becomes infected with the experiences of precarity, risk and the insistence on self responsabilisation.

What is striking about this and almost all the engagements with postfeminism in this volume is their attempt to hold onto and develop the term – that is to make it more productive both for analysing *Girls* and more generally. To these contributions I would add some of my own. First, the need to use postfeminism as a critical term. I argue that postfeminist media culture should be an *object of analysis* rather than a position or a perspective. In this sense, I see myself as an analyst of postfeminism rather than a postfeminist analyst – something that brings a clear critical intent to our projects, and avoids some of the confusion that besets some discussions. Second, and in line with several authors here, I believe we need to use the term with far greater specificity- whether that applies to generation, to class, to historical periods or to place. A key strength of recent writing about postfeminism has been its development in relation to intersectional perspectives that do not simply assume that postfeminism interpellates only white, straight and middle class women, but instead asks how race and ethnicity, age, sexuality, and nationality are constituted in postfeminism. The work of Jess Butler (2013), Simidele Dosekun (2015) and Isis Giraldo (2016) has been central in challenging assumptions about both the whiteness and westernness of the concept, whilst a growing body of work has examined its classed dimensions (Nathanson, 2013; Negra & Tasker, 2014) and challenged its apparently exclusive focus on youthful luminosities (Jermyn & Holmes, 2015; Whelehan & Gwynne, 2014). There should be more productive engagements between queer theorists and analysts of postfeminism, but this is beginning (Ferreday, 2008; McCann, 2015; Flood & Gill, under review). These developments are valuable in interrogating the ‘reach’ of a postfeminist sensibility and in delineating its variable and changing forms of address- thus helping to facilitate greater rigour in our use of the term.

Another part of this project involves specifying the nature of the relationship between postfeminism and other key terms – most notably perhaps feminism and neoliberalism. An

early definition of postfeminism was of 'an emerging culture and ideology that simultaneously incorporates, revises and depoliticises many of the fundamental issues advanced by feminism' (Rosenfelt & Stacey, 1987, p. 77). How does this definition hold up today? Is it appropriate to define postfeminism only in relation to feminism – what about in places that seem to be marked by a postfeminist sensibility but have not been through the 'waves' of feminism that this model assumes? How might postfeminism be understood also in relation to neoliberalism? And how should we understand the recent upsurge of feminist writing, activism and cultural production of which *Girls* forms a part? Does the renewed visibility of feminism in the UK, US, and elsewhere call into question our older critical vocabularies – including the term postfeminism? More concretely, if we take for granted Angela McRobbie's (2009) key argument about the *entanglement* of feminism and postfeminism then how can we refine our analytical tools in order to unpack and specify the different forms this may take? It is crucial that our conceptualisations are dynamic enough to be able to take account of the way that postfeminism changes. I have suggested elsewhere (Gill, 2016) that contemporary postfeminist logics may, in fact, operate through a celebration of feminism, rather than its repudiation (see also Rottenberg, 2014, on neoliberal feminism)

## THE AFFECTIVE AND PSYCHIC LIFE OF POSTFEMINISM

Analysis of postfeminist culture would also be enhanced by more careful attention to its affective and psychic life – that is the way it is taken up and lived (or resisted), and comes to shape the kinds of subjectivities we inhabit, and our emotional landscapes. Whilst not using this psychosocial vocabulary, nor drawing on any audience research, this volume offers several instructive discussions for those of us interested in the relationship between culture and subjectivity. Several contributors note that *Girls* breaks with what some see as more optimistic iterations of postfeminism (Negra & Tasker, 2014; see also Genz, Chapter 2). I am not sure that I would ever have characterised postfeminism as an optimistic sensibility, since

it has been so tied to individualism and to repudiating the need for radical social transformation. However, I accept that some iterations – particularly those connected to girl power (Harris & Dobson, 2015) – were at times celebratory, glossy and shiny – though often marked by a sense of brittleness.

Akane Kanai (forthcoming) has done important work on the affective features of postfeminism, arguing that ‘Young women are subject to intensified requirements to demonstrate resilient individuality whilst also enacting a pleasing, approachable femininity’. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild’s work she argues that neoliberal or postfeminist ‘feeling rules’ shape how young women are allowed to be and to feel, inciting them to deal with difficulties through ‘humorous, upbeat quips’ in which pain and struggle must be rendered into ‘safe, funny “girl friendly”’ anecdotes. As I have argued elsewhere (Gill, 2008), it is clear that postfeminist regulation not only shapes conduct, but also psychic life: it produces a ‘structure of feeling’ in which women must disavow a whole range of experiences and emotions – notably insecurity, neediness and anger. In my analysis of sex and relationship advice in *Glamour* magazine (Gill, 2009) – targeted at middle-class, heterosexual women in their 20s – a similar demographic to the young women of *Girls* – I showed the double-bind in which women were placed: relentlessly scrutinised and apprised of all the different ways in which they could get things *wrong*, yet treated with contempt if they were to admit to feeling anything less than completely confident all the time. Advice warned: ‘Don’t EVER ask us if your bum looks big in anything because you’ll sound needy and desperate, which is one of the biggest turn-offs for any man’ (See also García-Favaro, 2017). As Shani Orgad and I (2015, p. 339) have argued, ‘if confidence is “the new sexy” than insecurity is the new ugly’, presented as a toxic emotional state for women, who must put forward a happy, upbeat facade all the time regardless of how they actually feel.

*Girls* breaks with this. There is an emphasis upon failure, disappointment, and vulnerability in *Girls* that is quite different from many other postfeminist texts – even from the confessional style of something like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996). The 'postfeminist masquerade' (McRobbie, 2009) is cracked and tarnished in *Girls*. Rather than 'Anita Harris' "can-do" girls, they are girls who should be able to but don't', Fuller and Driscoll argue (2015, p. 257). Instead vulnerability is allowed – even celebrated. *Not That Kind of Girl*, Lena Dunham's (2014) autobiography, makes a fetish out of failure. Subtitled 'a young woman tells you what she's "learned"' it immediately marks itself out from other postfeminist memoirs or conduct manuals through its inversion of familiar narrative strategies that move from confusion to wisdom, loneliness to happy relationships, or which express a desire that others should learn from the author's experiences. The chapter on dieting, for example, starts with Dunham's fear of being anorexic, moving on to her spell as 'the world's least successful occasional bulimic' (2014, p. 87), followed by several tedious pages of itemized food consumption: '2 sips of ginger ale', 'one quarter of a peach' etc., and ending abruptly with a one line note saying: 'I went totally nuts and ate all the things'. This is the antithesis of 'self-help' and successful 'makeover'. There is no growth, no self-improvement, and no metamorphosis into responsabilised neoliberal adulthood. Indeed, the book jacket tells us that Dunham is already anticipating her 'future shame at thinking I had anything to offer you'.

## AUTHENTICITY AND IMPERFECTION

Wallis Seaton (Chapter 11) argues that a significant part of Lena Dunham's 'brand' is her failings – which are foregrounded in the show through Hannah's character. Seaton argues that irony and self-reflection permeate the show, even being used to attack the quality of Dunham's writing via a storyline (Season 4, Episode 2, 'Triggering') that has Hannah at a writing workshop being pulled apart for her 'privilege', 'stunted feminist ideas' and

‘insensitivity’ . Dunham’s Instagram feed also asks that we accept her failings – taglined ‘doing her best with what she’s got’ - even in relation to the problematic racial politics of the show. Arguably, Hannah’s racist ‘colour blindness’ – when she is dating Sandy and claims, ‘I never thought about the fact that you were black once’ – ironically and reflexively presents her/Dunham for mockery (McCann, Chapter 7) – a bold move particularly in the wake of the extensive criticism of the show for its ‘hipster racism’ (Watson, 2015).

More broadly it is clear that the persona of Lena Dunham/Hannah Horvath is constructed around marketable authenticity as her ‘self work becomes a branding exercise aiming to produce a saleable identity that can be traded and consumed by others’ (Genz, Chapter 2; see also Banet-Weiser, 2012). Everything that happens to her becomes material for her book. All her relationships and experiences are commodified – or, in the parlance of the sharing economy, ‘financializable’ – she is willing to act out her boyfriend’s rape fantasies, to proposition her employer and to ‘do a whole bunch of coke, and just write about it’. It is all ‘good material’. Here – as in Dunham’s memoir – imperfection is also to the fore – breaking the hold of ‘the perfect’ which some have argued has become a defining feature of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2015). It is interesting to consider whether this offers some kind of critique or challenge – or whether postfeminism is flexible enough to absorb and re-signify imperfection – as we have seen for example in the more accessible forms of ‘cool’ on offer in the tropes of ‘love your body’ messages (in advertising, magazines, and reality TV). Melanie Waters (Chapter 6) dubs it ‘imperfect feminism’.

*Girls* is also striking for the way it may challenge the ‘postfeminist melancholia’ eloquently discussed by Angela McRobbie, centred on the normalization of female distress – low self-esteem, self-harm, eating disorders, etc. As McRobbie (2009, p. 112) argues, these have come to be regarded as ‘predictable, treatable things to be managed medically rather than subjected to sustained social scrutiny’. She suggests that ‘popular culture is asking young women to get

used to gender melancholia, and to recognise themselves and each other within its terms' (p. 115). *Girls* certainly features plentiful examples of female distress, perhaps also normalising these – or at least treating them as unremarkable within the universe of middle class, white twenty-something life in New York City. But this doesn't produce the 'illegible rage' McRobbie discussed. On the contrary, disappointments, confusion, and hurt are made legible all the time – not glossed over or sanitised, but repeatedly highlighted. This is especially clear in relation to sex (discussed below). It is also notable at times that the show actively *refuses* feminine pathologisation and shaming of women - particularly in relation to abortion, an issue explored well in this volume (e.g. Grant & Nash, Chapter 5; Waters, Chapter 6; Kissling, Chapter 15).

Dunham's vulnerability is often so raw that it is painful to witness – something also evident in the important contemporary BBC drama *Fleabag*, centred on another unhappy young woman, which deserves scholarly attention alongside *Girls*. Dunham's (2014) autobiography opens with the phrase: 'I am twenty years old and I hate myself' and goes on to explain that 'I cover up this hatred with a kind of aggressive self-acceptance'. This dynamic animates the book – it is what Emma Renold and Jessica Ringrose (2011) would call a 'schizoid' femininity – lurching between excoriating self-hatred and defensive cheerfulness from one moment to the next. Dunham (2014) writes of 'the perverse, looping thoughts that come unbidden: I am hideous. I am going to be living in a mental hospital by the time I am twenty-nine. I will never amount to anything.' But then in the next sentence: 'You wouldn't know it to see me at a party...In a crowd I am recklessly cheerful...I dance the hardest, laugh the hardest at my own jokes, and make casual reference to my vagina, like it's a car or a chest of drawers' (p. xii). The complexities of these affective dynamics urgently require study.

**BODIES THAT MATTER**

If issues of choice and reproductive rights centre feminist concerns in *Girls*, then another major vehicle for feminist expression is the body – particularly Hannah’s/ Dunham’s body. It has generated vast amounts of debate and commentary, much of it hostile, including multiple social media forums dedicated to attacking her nudity through what Breanne Fahs (2017) calls the ‘regulatory politics of disgust’ (e.g. *Put Your Clothes On Lena Dunham*). In a notorious interview with Dunham, TV critic Tim Molloy (2014) professed:

I don’t get the purpose of all the nudity on the show. By you particularly. I feel like I’m walking into a trap where you say no one complains about the nudity on *Game of Thrones*, but I get why they’re doing it. They’re doing it to be salacious. To titillate people. And your character is often naked at random times for no reason.

The – not even barely concealed – sexist subtext here was not an antipathy to nudity per se, but a judgment on Dunham’s unattractiveness and thus her ‘right’ to ‘exhibit’ her body. It is striking how even sympathetic coverage of Dunham speaks of her ‘exhibitionism’ – something she was asked about so much that she wrote a chapter about it in her book, remarking facetiously on being repeatedly called ‘brave’: ‘The subtext there is definitely how am I brave enough to reveal my *imperfect* body since I doubt Blake Lively would be subject to the same line of inquiry’ (2014, p. 105, emphasis in original).

Dunham’s response to Molloy’s question was to say: ‘It’s because it’s a realistic expression of what it’s like to be alive, I think, and I totally get it. If you are not into me, that’s your problem.’ Others, however, have read the presentation of Hannah’s body in ways that go far beyond realism. Jocelyn Bailey (2015) argues that *Girls* grants *subjectivity* to the female body in ways that are new for television. In turn, Michelle Dean (2014), in a much-cited piece from *Flavorwire*, calls Lena Dunham’s body ‘weaponized’. ‘Lena Dunham’s nakedness on ‘*Girls* is revolutionary and needs to be applauded, without reservation,’ Dean argued. ‘The show, by

consistently putting that ‘imperfection’ in front of us, is demanding that we interrogate our devotion to our beauty standards.’ Similarly, Whelehan (Chapter 3) contends: ‘Dulled as we are to the exposure of the nude female body on screen, we sure as hell wake up when that body doesn’t equate to the airbrushed and toned perfection we have come to expect’.

This is true, yet there is something troubling too in the hyperbolically positive reception Dunham’s body has received. On the one hand, its very shock value and putatively ‘revolutionary’ characteristics underscore the sheer force of bodily regulation to which women are subject. Yet, on the other, Dunham’s body is not *that different* from contemporary feminine ideals. As Deborah Thomas (Chapter 13) notes, it is ‘pale, a little pudgy, tattooed’. It is *not* obese, it is *not* disfigured, it is *not* disabled. It is in fact likely to be significantly smaller than the average American female’s body. In treating it as utterly extraordinary are we not in danger of reinforcing the very norms that it – mildly – challenges?

Rather like the ‘love your body’ (LYB) trope in Dove’s and others advertising – which has been extensively critiqued (Gill & Elias, 2014; Murphy & Jackson, 2011; Murray, 2012) – the commentary suggests that we are seeing something much more different and much more subversive than we actually are – minor differences are depicted as radical transgressions. This is seen more and more in media coverage of female celebrities more generally in which tiny gestures (e.g. going out without a bra or allowing a VPL to show) are treated as if they are ‘rad’ ‘badass’ attacks on the entire fashion-beauty complex as we know it (see Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017).

The resemblance in representational styles between *Girls* and LYB was underscored in the video the cast did in support of the Stanford rape victim/survivor in 2016. All four ‘girls’ were located in an empty, blank room, they were barefoot, presented as un-made-up, holding hands, and dressed simply in jeans and plain T-shirts. Each spoke in turn using phrases such

as ‘You have the choice to make things better’ and ‘You already have the power to create a safer, healthier environment for women’. The same words are flashed on screen in a simple white font. The video ends with each cast-member saying in turn, ‘Because she is someone’. It is an important video that speaks out against violence against women. But it is also strikingly similar to many of the commercial messages that make up the contemporary mediascape: ‘Because you’re worth it’ (L’Oreal), ‘You are more beautiful than you think’ (Dove), ‘This girl can’ (Sports England), ‘Awaken your incredible’ (Weight Watchers). It resonates aesthetically (the bodies, hair, and styling of the ‘girls’, the pared back mise en scene, the direct to-camera speech, the use of text) but it also resonates *politically* seeming to be part of a feminist-inflected yet individualist, neoliberal-friendly postfeminist framing (‘you have the choice’, ‘you have the power’, ‘just being there makes it better’). These sutures between feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberalism deserve much more attention – not least the way they seem to be figured through the apparent defiance and rebellion offered by particular bodies.

It is also important to note that it is just one body that is focus of nearly all the discussion. The reception of *Girls* focuses disproportionately upon Hannah, and this is even more emphatic in discussions of embodiment. Yet the three other main female characters are slim and conventionally attractive, hardly deviating from current standards of feminine heterosexual desirability – a fact that rarely gets discussed. But there are established conventions of popular cultural texts allowing *one* character that is ‘different’ – a permissible transgression if all the others conform or ‘over-achieve’ in heterosexiness and/or if that body can also carry those meanings – as in the cases of Rebel Wilson and Amy Schumer. How ‘revolutionary’ is it to have one kooky hipster white female character who could be considered a few pounds overweight? Which bodies matter? And why does Hannah’s seem to matter more than the others?

Finally, it is perhaps problematic the way that Dunham's body is identified as 'carrying' the feminism of the show, as having its own subjectivity and voice. This raises questions about how and whether the body can speak, and, if so, how we read its utterances? In my view, we move onto difficult and potentially essentialist territory if we start to argue that some bodies are inherently subversive or transgressive and others – implicitly – compliant. Just as having a fat body does not necessarily signify a rejection of beauty standards or bodily norms, nor does having a thin body equate with acceptance and conformity. In fact, in many of Dunham's interviews and in her book she talks about her body as being what it is despite her attempts to discipline it. This suggests a need for caution in reading the body, as well as a need to interrogate the standard feminist inversions seen in debates about 'positive images' in which one set of 'problematic' representations is simply substituted for an alternative set that is assumed to be inherently more feminist (see Gill, 2007).

#### MEDIATED INTIMACY/AWKWARD SEX

In *Not That Kind of Girl*, Dunham wrote of her frustration with representations of sex in the media: 'Everything I saw as a child from *90210* to *The Bridges of Madison County*, had led me to believe that sex was a cringey, warmly-lit event where two smooth-skinned, gooey-eyed losers achieved mutual orgasm by breathing on each other's faces' (2014, p. 103) The effect of this, she argued, was destructive: 'Between porn and studio romantic comedies, we get the message loud and clear that we are doing it all wrong. Our bedsheets aren't right. Our moves aren't right. Our bodies aren't right' (p. 103). She wanted to produce something more 'honest', and this is arguably one of the most significant and ground breaking features of the show – extensively discussed in this collection. In *Girls*, sex is not stylish, nor beautifully-lit, nor artfully filmed. It does not – unlike so many other sitcoms or romcoms – feature actresses who have signed the now ubiquitous underwear contracts, which means that almost all sex scenes feature women wearing bras. At the representational level, this is a significant

departure producing sex scenes that seem authentic, clumsy and often awkward – challenging standard TV and Hollywood sex. But the attempts at verisimilitude do not end there: *Girls* also aspires to *emotional realism*, offering us what Grant and Nash (Chapter 5) dub ‘emotional and experiential fumbling’.

Issues of consent and desire and power are central to the sex in *Girls*, which demands that we engage with complexity and ambivalence. The depictions of sex are informed by – and also kick off against – several widely circulating and competing constructions of women. From one perspective, as Waters (Chapter 6) discusses, the show foregrounds the significance of pornography, particularly in shaping Adam’s desires. From another, Dunham is understood as a ‘provocateur’ in the mould of Catherine Breillat, her representation of sex a powerful form of ‘feminist critique’ (San Fillipo, chapter ?) Constructions are also arguably indebted to queer, as Christopher Lloyd argues (Chapter 14). Lloyd’s point is that the narrow socio-cultural demographic of the show – its whiteness, (upper) middleclassness and straightness – does not preclude moments of queer disruptiveness entering into the show. Indeed, he argues that queer theory has often failed to engage with the complex machinations of sexual acts and fantasies – but *Girls* does just this.

Another co-existing construction is a more traditional one, personified by Marnie, who is depicted as not wanting to have sex with her boyfriend Charlie, yet doing so anyway. In one scene from the very first episode he asks her ‘what would turn you on right now?’ She replies: ‘what would turn *you* on?’ This might be read as a typical moment of ‘man-pleasing’ femininity, except that it is clear that the response derives from Marnie’s lack of desire for Charlie yet her ambivalence about ending the relationship. She continues to have lacklustre sex with him. This is seen again in the following episode where they are depicted having slow, missionary position intercourse and Charlie asks how it is. ‘It feels good...fine’ Marnie responds half-heartedly – the lexical correction from ‘good’ to ‘fine’ allowing the audience to

see clearly what Charlie cannot: that she is not really into him. As Frederick Dhaenens argues (Chapter 9), the difficulties of this relationship are presented in part as a consequence of Charlie's divergence from hegemonic masculine ideals – something that Dhaenens suggests is more troubling for the women than for the men of *Girls*.

The show has provoked controversy with its depictions of non-consensual sex – particularly in Adam and Natalia's relationship in Season Two. This is discussed with care and sensitivity in this collection (see especially Grant and Nash, Chapter 5; Waters, Chapter 6), and also raises questions about how a TV show is to represent the reality of sexual relationships – when those relationships are heavily freighted by gendered (and other) power relations – without being accused of making rape into 'entertainment'. Given that, according to the video about sexual violence discussed above, one in five women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime, and the vast majority of those cases will involve a man she knows, then to present sex as unproblematically consensual would be to misrepresent the many and varied forms of coercion that are sometimes involved – and end up presenting a misleading and inauthentic portrait of young people's sexual lives. This is what McCann (Chapter 7) discusses as 'the problem of representation' or the 'representational bind'. The politics of this comes down to not *if* or if not sexual coercion should be presented, but exactly *how* it is presented – which demands a much more subtle and complex engagement. Some of the arguments put forward in this volume begin that work – pointing variously to the show's ability to deal with 'the unspoken realities of women's sexual experiences' (Grant & Nash, Chapter 5) and to the significance of Natalia's experience being made available for the viewer to see and understand. As Waters notes, we see a close up of Natalia's face and 'in the space of a few seconds, her face registers a spectrum of emotions, encompassing surprise and discomfort, hesitancy and resignation' (Chapter 6). We also hear Natalia's 'no', and her experience is again centred when she tells Adam, with trembling lips, 'I really didn't like that'. The politics

of the scene are, as Waters succinctly puts it, ‘stubbornly resistant to tidying’, yet the show seems to break new ground in depicting the complexities of sexual dynamics, and women’s experiences of them. As Grant & Nash argue ‘the embodiment of feminine heterosexuality in *Girls* is experienced as an endless negotiation of objectification and subjectification that perhaps more closely reflects the experiences of young western women’ (Chapter 5).

Three other significant features of the representation of sex in *Girls* are worth noting too. First, the show accords women full sexual subjecthood, and takes for granted their sexual histories, without in any way narratively punishing or condemning them (‘all adventurous women do’!). This is still relatively novel and worth celebrating. Secondly, the show foregrounds women’s own desires and frames them in their own terms. In *Girls* there is no ‘missing discourse of desire’ (Fine, 1988); women are able to articulate their own desires, even when they differ from their partner’s (e.g. Hannah’s refusal to have anal sex with Adam). Thirdly, *Girls* breaks with the automatic requirement to place men’s sexual pleasure or judgments above those of women. *Sex and the City* has been heralded as ground breaking in its depictions of sex, but it still frequently did so on men’s terms - e.g. ‘if he goes up your butt, will he respect you more or less?’ as Miranda asked in Season One – showing the persistent force of the sexual double standard and the need both to please men sexually, whilst also not losing their ‘respect’. In *Girls*, by contrast, the heterosexual landscape is not only or singularly shaped by men’s desires and the need to please them. Taken together these features make for representations of intimate relationships that – while still disappointingly heteronormative – open up new spaces of hope, possibility and complexity.

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