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Viewing as if in a Female Network: Towards a Reparative Reading of Post-Crash Female- Centred US TV Series

By

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work and it has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere.

Marija Laugalyte

Abstract

This thesis explores and advocates for an imaginative and creative way of viewing screen texts where the purpose is to come up with *alternatives* for the images and narratives onscreen. This approach involves a deliberate focalisation at the level of viewing that solicits the liberation of characters from the images and narratives onscreen by way of considering what *could* be onscreen instead of what *is* onscreen.

Focusing on my own viewing activity as the object of study, and my feminist commitments, I direct this strategy to post-crash US female-centred television series of the 2010s. I do so to experiment with this viewing strategy more generally but also to consider what alternatives I can come up with, and how I can come up with them, to resist the images and narratives of the individualistic white working-woman who is so often placed as the symbol of feminism in popular culture. Using *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), *Girls* (2013-2017), *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016), *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019) and *The Bold Type* (2017-) as the series on which I experiment with this strategy of imagining alternatives, I do so in relation to my feminist commitments whereby I hope to bring new awareness to the relationship between viewer and the text.

Because of my particular use of this strategy (to imagine feminist alternatives to the screen) and because of where I find the most relevant examples of it (the work of Ned Schantz), I have named this strategy ‘viewing as if in a female network’, an adaptation of what Schantz calls ‘reading as if in a female network’ (2008). I use Schantz’s proposed way of reading as a jumping off-point to articulate and develop my own, I argue, more radical way of viewing texts.

This reading is also proposed as an antidote and alternative to forms of feminist academic analysis focused on critiquing gender representation; this mode of viewing proposes instead imagining what is lacking. Like the reparative reading style of Eve Sedgwick which introduces hope and joy into a text, this speculative reading focuses on constructing and producing nourishing alternatives to the screen where, as a feminist viewer, I am unsatisfied with what is on the screen. Thus, this thesis asks and illustrates what an imaginative viewing practice looks like that 1) addresses the pre-domination of whiteness and capitalist ideologies and 2) on the level of

reception, repairs the damage through imaginative departure from the screen by way of considering alternatives to the screen, i. e. what might be onscreen instead.

The results of this experimental study includes 1) a ‘toolbox’ of different ways that this strategy can be implemented that I offer to other viewers to take up and use; 2) the alternative images, narratives and meanings I conceive of by using this strategy that I call “viewing as if in a female network”; and 3) the address of the ethical questions and issues that arise when this viewing strategy is employed. I argue that this practice is a politicised strategy of viewing, especially when aligned with one’s political commitments and when our offscreen alternatives are conceived in line with our preferred visions of the world.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is not a product of a single individual academic, but of a network of academics, friends and family. As my supervisor Rachel says – writing is not done in isolation.

With this acknowledgement, my gratitude goes to my supervisors Dr. Rachel MagShamhráin and Dr. Armida De La Garza. Your engagement with the ideas and the writing in this thesis has brought it to interesting and exciting places, and your guidance has taught me about academic rigour and intellectual curiosity. Working with you both has been stimulating and transformational.

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Finally, a very special thank you to my family: Danguole, Vytas and Ignas. Your support and encouragement in my academic pursuits is not taken for granted. Labai ačiū jum.¹

I dedicate this thesis to my female network.

¹ Lithuanian for ‘thank you very much to you’.

Introduction

This thesis explores a strategy of viewing screen texts in which, rather than focusing on what is on the screen, the viewer considers the alternatives that could be on the screen instead. Consider the following example: writing about the film *Pillow Talk*, a film revolving around phone calls between the heroine Jan and the male antagonist/hero Rex, Ned Schantz laments the limited opportunities for relationships that the narrative/screen offers to Jan. It seems that the only opportunity Jan has for intimacy is the manipulative and duplicitous Rex. But in his reading of *Pillow Talk*, Schantz does not only critique the restrictions Jan faces, he also offers an alternative when he remarks: “Jan never talks on the phone with a woman!” (66), the alternative being Jan on the phone with another woman. I find this moment in Schantz’s reading of *Pillow Talk* striking and noteworthy: Schantz’s sees certain images of Jan that he feels are lacking in regard to his feminist commitments and he wonders about seeing alternative images that would be more in line with those commitments. This consideration is both a critique of the heteronormativity of the film as well as an offering of a possible alternative to the image of heteronormativity onscreen. What I am interested in in this thesis is precisely this viewing strategy where an alternative to the screen is imagined, especially in line with one’s political commitments. I want to inquire into the uses and implications of this kind of viewing strategy, and what forms it may take in this thesis.

I consider this strategy of viewing best used in regard to screen texts, rather than the page. Unlike words on a page which the reader uses to conjure their own image of what might be happening, the image on screen is arguably more fixed, making the idea of imagining alternatives less ambiguous. Because of this, the screen is arguably the preferred medium for this reception strategy of searching for alternatives: it is when we are thinking about the concrete image on the screen that we can conceive of its alternatives. An example of how this strategy of conceiving of alternatives is best suited to the screen is the practice of racebending. Racebending is a practice in the production of cultural texts where the skin colour of characters in adaptations is reconfigured, making white characters have another skin colour or non-white characters be white. This practice is often used in the mainstreaming of whiteness by

mainstream film production companies who cast white actors to play non-white characters, or it is used to undermine the dominance of whiteness by fans who populate their fan art with non-white versions of their favourite characters. And it is only in visual mediums where racebending works with full force because it is only with visual mediums where characters bodies are represented where a specific skin colour must be chosen. Racebending works most clearly where the medium is pictorial because it must depict skin colour, as opposed to words on a page that may leave up to the reader to decide the ethnicity of characters themselves. Thus, this kind of fixity of the screen allows me to focus on the idea of finding alternatives *to* the screen, as opposed to interpretation *of* the screen, a distinction I hope will become increasingly clear in this introduction. Furthermore, racebending is another example of this idea of conceive of alternatives in our viewing activity, similar to how Schantz conceived of an alternative to the images of heterosexuality in *Pillow Talk*. Just like Schantz who conceives of an alternative for an image that supports heteronormativity, with racebending there is the possibility of coming up with alternatives for the dominance of whiteness onscreen.

Of course, this strategy can also be applied to the page where we can consider alternative plots, words, happenings, descriptions and so on. For instance, Slavoj Žižek applies this reading strategy to the page when he rewrites the ancient Greek tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles. With radical left political commitments, Žižek imagines an alternative to the prolonged debate between Antigone and Creon, the play's protagonists and figures of political power. In his rewriting of the play, the chorus – usually relegated to the background – steps forward into centre stage and announces their intent to overthrow the established rulers and to stage a revolutionary uprising. This is Žižek's preferred version of the play where the elites are overthrown and ordinary people take power into their own hands. But while this example illustrates the applicability of this strategy of finding alternatives to all kinds of mediums, my focus remains on the screen text. Taking from John Desmond and Peter Hawkes' understanding of screen representation as fixed (as opposed to the unfixed suggestive language of the printed word) (34), I base my focus on the screen on this understanding of the screen's image as more concrete than words on the page. And this concreteness is important for conceiving a strategy that comes up with alternatives.

Also, in this thesis my particular interest is in how this strategy can be used at the level of viewing, i. e. reception, rather than in production of texts such as adaptations or fan art. The viewing activity being my focus, I am invested in giving importance to the *act of reception*, especially the creativity of reception. Even if fan art or the creation of adaptations follow this creative viewing strategy, I am nevertheless privileging the act of meaning-making at the level of viewing the text in this thesis, the act of viewing and imagining alternatives to the screen being my interest.

I deem this practice especially significant because it can be, and often is (as per the examples given), aligned with one's political commitments and thus is a politicised strategy of viewing. And like Schantz's consideration of an alternative in line with his feminist commitments, I too prioritise my feminist vision to inquire into this strategy. Specifically, I implement this viewing strategy alongside my personal and academic interest in how the working woman and feminism are portrayed on the television screen and how these might be reimagined and portrayed differently if popular culture's close relationship with capitalist values, sexism and white-centricism were overturned and satisfactorily addressed. Thus, in this thesis I implement this strategy of searching for alternatives for a specific purpose: finding alternatives to images of mainstream feminism and the working woman (often the figurehead of feminism in popular culture) in post-crash US female-centred television series of the 2010s. A specific interest and the privileging of certain political commitments of mine, in other words the subject matter of my viewings, allows for more focus on exploring the viewing strategy itself throughout this thesis. Deciding on the what, allows more room for exploring the how. The focus on these particular series and on my interests in feminism and images of women and femininity in these series, as well as the feminist commitments I privilege, also satisfies my own personal, political and academic self. Furthermore, though I choose this particular body of texts, my commitment in this thesis is foremost to exploring the viewing strategy in question, rather than making claims about the texts that I view and write about.

The name I give to this viewing strategy is "viewing as if in a female network" to account for my feminist commitments as well the speculative nature of this strategy. This name may strike one as being too narrow as a description of a viewing strategy

that is about coming up with alternatives to the screen. However, I maintain that the particularity that the term “female network” brings is important to this thesis because “viewing as if” on its own, without stating or intimating a political commitment, means the viewing strategy is open to all kinds of ends. The “female network” works as a metaphor to guide the “as if”, which, on its own, could theoretically be used for the worst kind of politics too, including viewing “as if in a Nazi world”. Because of its meanings of relationality, connectivity and multiplicity, as well as its overt foregrounding of women, I find the “female network” metaphor to be particularly useful for thinking about feminism beyond individualist forms of feminism that pervade contemporary screen culture. Thus, at least for this thesis that uses this strategy for feminist purposes, I maintain the importance of the title “viewing as if in a female network”.

Importantly, this name is an adaptation of and tribute to what Schantz calls “reading as if in a female network” in his book *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature* (2008) which I have used as a springboard for this thesis. In this book, Schantz challenges himself and the reader to approach the English novel and Hollywood films “as if in a female network” (*Gossip* 4) and to use one’s resources to foreground female networks in texts where they appear only in the cracks and margins of the text. He critiques, invents new interpretations of events, challenges accepted understandings of plots and characters and *imagines alternatives* to the events of well-known stories about women, all with the aim of bringing to our attention the female network that operates beneath the patriarchal surface of the text. My interest then, is in zoning in on the strategy of coming up with alternatives and exploring and experimenting with this strategy to see what viewing in this way might look like and what are the implications of this way of viewing. Thus, I take Schantz’s “reading as if in a female network” and switch “viewing” for “reading” and refocus my attention from the “female network” to the “as if”. It is this “as if” that best describes the strategy of finding alternatives to what is onscreen. However, I retain the “female network” as it is an important guiding metaphor for my “as if” viewings.

To carry out this inquiry into the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy, I use myself as the object of study. Thus, I am the viewer in question who is going to

implement this viewing strategy; this thesis is not based on the viewings of others. This thesis is an experiment in the author's own viewing and an offering of the insights gained from implementing this viewing strategy.

Viewing: Some Approaches to the Screen Text

Across literary, film and television studies a variety of ways of viewing and reading texts has been employed, studied and theorised. My own proposal and exploration of "viewing as if in a female network" is just one inquiry into a way of viewing among other such inquiries into how texts are viewed or read. And the plethora of work that exists on this question addresses both how the casual viewer/reader approaches texts as well as how the academic does this. For this thesis, the most important theorisation of how we approach texts has been articulated by Eve Sedgwick through her paranoid/reparative dichotomy. In her 2002 essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You", Sedgwick diagnosed the dominant form of academic analysis as "paranoid" (fearful). This type of reading or viewing (previously written about by Paul Ricoeur in his study of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as the "three masters of suspicion" [33] and then later by Rita Felski under the term "suspicious" reading) emphasises a critical stance towards all texts where the reader assumes that they are always at risk of being duped and taken advantage of. Thus, when reading in the paranoid mode, the reader is on guard and focuses on critiquing the text for its shortcomings. Sedgwick sees the critical paranoid reading as insufficient because it paralyses and fails to provide hope to move beyond critique to something that is sustaining and nourishing. In opposition to the paranoid mode, Sedgwick articulated an alternative approach she called "reparative": "a reparative impulse [is] additive and accretive. [...] it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self" (149). She sees the reparative as more joyful and subversive than the paranoid. Though Sedgwick's text tackles the question of how texts are approached in the academic humanities, it also addresses how the non-academic viewer may view texts as well. Thus, I use Sedgwick's dichotomy not as relegated to academia only, but as applicable beyond academia too (critical viewings pervade everyday forms of viewership too).

I claim that Sedgwick's paranoid/reparative dichotomy is important to this thesis because I see "viewing as if in a female network" as a strategy of reparation in Sedgwick's sense. I take here "reparation" to mean the production of meanings that are in line with one's political commitments and that give rise to hope when viewing texts, as opposed to paranoia arising from critiquing how texts do not measure up to one's political commitments. This means that this viewing strategy goes beyond critique and is instead about producing something that is hopeful. This is significant in light of the interest in academia to go beyond critique in our approach to texts. As Rita Felski points out, "[m]ore and more critics are venturing to ask what is lost when a dialogue with literature gives way to a permanent diagnosis" (*Uses* 1), diagnosis being that aspect of critique that operates in that suspicious/paranoid framework, pinpointing and laying bare the power relations that structure the text (Ricoeur; Sedgwick; Felski "After Suspicion"; Felski and Anker *Critique and Postcritique*; *Uses of Literature*). I see "viewing as if in a female network" as being a strategy of viewing that moves beyond this "diagnostic" impulse. "Viewing as if in a female network" can be seen as having both paranoid and reparative (in Sedgwick's sense) elements, but it is the reparative aspect, I claim, that is noteworthy in this viewing strategy. The reparative being the imaginative production of alternatives to the screen, alternatives that repair the shortcomings of the text from the point of view of one's political commitments.

Sedgwick's division of the paranoid and the reparative approach to texts is, however, only one way to think about how we make sense of texts. Other ways of viewing that have been conceived and discussed in scholarship should also be mentioned here because the question of different ways we relate to texts has been an important one before and after Sedgwick in various fields that deal with the text and its audiences. In this section, I offer a review of scholarship addressing different ways of approaching texts, a review that is in no way exhaustive. Through this review I also intend to differentiate "viewing as if in a female network" as a particular way of engaging texts different from what has already been written about, as well as to show how "viewing as if in a female network" relates to these other ways of approaching texts. Like Sedgwick, I do not make a hard distinction between how scholars approach texts to create theory and perform academic analysis versus how viewers approach texts outside of academia in everyday life. I am interested in the overlap

between viewing that happens in these two spheres – the academic and non-academic. In Sedgwick's words, there is no desire here to "draw much ontological distinction between academic theory and everyday theory" (145) when thinking about how viewers relate to texts.

Thus, moving onto one of the most seminal works on different ways that audiences view texts is Hall's encoding/decoding model. Here, Hall's interest is in how the "encoding" of a message into a text in its production does not necessarily correspond to its "decoding" by an audience member on the side of reception. In other words, the meaning intended by the creators of a text, is not necessarily the meaning that the reader/viewer of the text will receive. Thinking about this possible rupture, Hall offered three ways that the audience member may decode a text's message. First, the viewer may do a "dominant" or "preferred reading" where the reader takes the same meaning from the text that was intended by the creator of the text. In Hall's words, "the viewer takes the connoted meaning [...] full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded". Here, the viewer is "operating inside the dominant code" (515). Second, the viewer may decode within a "negotiated code or position" which "contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements" (516). This means that the audience member interprets the text in accordance with the producer's intentions only partly. The audience member also creates their own meanings not intended by the producer's intentions here. Hall's third way of viewing uses an "oppositional code" where the viewer reads the text in a completely different way than how the producer of the text intended the text to be read. In the oppositional reading, it is "possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a globally contrary way". To illustrate what oppositional reading looks like, Hall gives the example of a viewer who "listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but 'reads' every mention of the 'national interest' as 'class interest'" (517). Hall's negotiated and oppositional viewings highlight the importance of paying attention to how the audience member strays from what may be the intended or authoritative meanings and interpretations of texts.

Hall also argues that the type of readings an audience member performs depends on how their cultural background and social positioning aligns with those of the

producers of the texts. If the creator's and receiver's cultural backgrounds and social positioning differ, it is more likely that the audience member will derive meanings that were not intended by the producers of the text. This insight underpins scholarship addressing how gender, sexuality, race and class determine oppositional and negotiated readings. For instance, bell hooks formulated her concept of the "oppositional gaze" based on black female audiences who were excluded from production positions, and even usually from the screen, thus forming very different ways of viewing and making sense of the screen. hooks writes that black female audiences "had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs [their] presence as absence, that denies the 'body' of the black female" ("The Oppositional Gaze" 468). hooks argues directly with Laura Mulvey ("Visual Pleasure") who conceived only two ways women could look, either in a sadistic or a masochistic position in which the viewer either identifies with the objectifying male or the objectified woman. But hooks noted that, in fact, "[m]ost of the [black] women [she] talked with felt that they consciously resisted identification with films" ("The Oppositional Gaze" 469). Thus, hooks observed how the difference between black female audiences and the producers of texts led black female audiences to view in resistive ways. Based on this experience, hooks then formulated what a "critical female spectatorship" might entail, defining it as "a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking" and "create alternative texts that are not solely reactions" ("The Oppositional Gaze" 473) by using their own "history" as "counter-memory" and by "using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" ("The Oppositional Gaze" 475). In fact, both Hall and hooks conceive of "oppositional" ways of viewing in terms of reframing what is on the screen to counter "dominant ways of knowing and looking" (475).

"Viewing as if in a female network" is in some ways "oppositional" in Hall and hooks' sense because it opposes what is given onscreen and because it is, I would argue, not a "dominant" way of "looking" in hooks's terms. However, "viewing as if in a female network" as I propose here is not so much about, in Hall's words, "retotalis[ing] the message within some alternative framework". The "message" that Hall refers to is the meaning that is taken from what is on the screen. It is a matter of interpreting the screen. "Viewing as if" is about replacing the scenario on the screen

with something else in our imagination, it is about inquiring into what we might see instead of what we are seeing. In addition, though the insight that resistive viewings arise from the misalignment of audiences' and producers' backgrounds and social positioning, in this thesis I do not inquire into this matter. My interest is instead on what a certain strategy of viewing might look like, what forms it may take and what are the implications of using this strategy, rather than inquiring into how its use aligns with the viewers background and social positioning (in this case my own, since it is my viewing activity which is the object of analysis in this thesis).

In the fields of feminist media, television and film studies, feminist scholars also explored resistive forms of viewing, especially in reaction to Mulvey's gaze theory which did not leave the female audience member hope for any kind of feminist or self-sustaining way of viewing texts and which also erased non-white spectators (hooks "The Oppositional Gaze"; Evan and Gamman 26-28). Mulvey conceived of gender relations as being reproduced rather than resisted by the viewer as her interest was in the 'spectator'. The 'spectator' here is a concept used to describe the way that the text constructs its ideal subject, a position actual audiences can conform with or resist. Subsequent scholars moved away from the use of the 'spectator' concept to think about how actual audience members related to the screen text instead, as well as problematising the way in which Mulvey conceived of the spectator position. Regarding the latter, Mulvey's conception of viewing was much too deterministic, leading others to point out that, for instance, viewing is much more problematic than the oscillation between identifying with the 'passive' female character or the 'active' male character as Mulvey argued (Doane; Clover; hooks "The Oppositional Gaze"; Evan and Gamman). Mary Ann Doane, for instance, complicated the idea that women's identification with female characters was straight and uncomplicated. Doane argued that not necessarily do women identify with femininity as an essentialised quality, as implied by Mulvey, but that they may identify with the "masquerade" and "transvestism" of femininity, in other words, with its performance. In other words, Doane argued that the viewer can identify with the *performance* of gender as opposed to gender as something essential; embracing the markers of femininity in its performative sense, the female viewer can be liberated from gender as an *essential* quality. This conceives of the viewer as being much more knowing and savvy than the viewer of Mulvey.

Working on soap opera audiences, Mary Ellen Brown also formulated another way in which audiences could view that would not reproduce patriarchal logics. Her proposal was the mobilisation of “feminine discourse” to move away from “dominant discourse [that] seeks to construct reality and structures of feeling for women in ways that suit the dominant view of reality”. Brown argued that through the use of “feminine discourse”, materialising in the form of gossip, the female viewer is able to construct reality “in terms of her perceptions of the social order in which she is subordinate”. This “feminine discourse” then is available to be used “as subordinate groups choose to use it—to create meanings for themselves” (3-4). Doane’s ‘masquerade’ and Brown’s ‘feminine discourse’ give names to different ways that the viewer may approach texts that do not reproduce patriarchal ideas but rather prioritise a more feminist vision of the world.

Queer studies has also been preoccupied with resistive ways of viewing texts that rely on “subversive or nonhegemonic articulation” that “reposition[s] texts outside the borders of heteronormativity” (Dhaenens *et al.* 344-335). This interest has arisen from historical accounts of queer audiences and how these audiences “engaged with texts in complicated and creative ways, mobilizing a queer way of looking, or, the “queer gaze” (Cavalcante *et al.* 3). This “queer gaze” can be seen initially in Susan Sontag’s thinking about camp as a sensibility that entails “a Camp vision” or a “[c]amp way of looking at things” (277). According to Katrin Horn, “camp’s form and function” is “an excessively stylized parody and in-group humour, capable of intervening in naturalized and naturalizing discourses of gender and sexuality, while granting access to otherwise oppressive systems of meaning- and pleasure-making” (15). And then there is José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of “disidentification”: the “survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Here the viewer performs “disidentification” with “damaged stereotypes” on the screen and instead recycles them into “powerful and seductive sites of self-creation” (4). Both the “camp vision” and “disidentification” are about a negotiation of the text that threatens one’s own non-normative existence by reformulating that text on the level of viewing in such a way that makes it possible to draw from it some kind of pleasure and sustenance. This reformulation, in the context of LGBTQ viewers often

relies on the application of “subcultural experiences and knowledge” (Evans and Gamman 37). This point is important so that we do not essentialise any kind of looking. For instance, “the lesbian gaze” is particular not because of any kind of essentialist qualities, but because “lesbian viewers bring certain subcultural experiences and knowledge to the reading of specific texts” and it is this subcultural knowledge and experience that “may give these women a different perspective” (Evans and Gamman 37). Again, I see a connection between “viewing as if in a female network” and these queer gazes because both are determined to draw pleasure, hope and sustenance from the cultural artefact, especially when it may not readily provide these to the viewer. But again, the major difference between “viewing as if in a female network” as I conceive it and these queer gazes is that, like the oppositional gazes as described by Hall and hooks, these queer gazes work on the level of reconceptualising what is *on* the screen. I, on the other hand, am interested in a way of viewing where the question is: what might be on the screen that is not.

Another way of approaching texts is the fan’s approach where viewers form strong attachments to a particular text and expend considerable energy viewing, re-viewing, talking about and creating other texts about that initial text of importance. Fandom also involves the formation of communities around these texts, the text acting as the commonality that ties all the fans with the same attachment to one another. Lawrence Grossberg argues that these kinds of fannish affective attachments generate the kind of “energy and passion” that creates potential for “a range of political possibilities” (465) as they “direct our investments in and into the world” and “tell us where and how we can become absorbed [...] into the world – as potential locations for our self-identifications and with what intensities”. Importantly, the fannish relationship to texts has something of the political because “[t]his absorption or investment constructs the places and events which are, or can become, significant to us” (461) as well as charging the fan with energy so that they are “capable of going on, of continuing to struggle to make a difference” (465) while tied to a community of other fans. (Beyond fandom described thus, there is also anti-fandom and non-fandom which are “distinct matrices of viewing and textuality” (Gray 65) that are somewhat at odds with the fannish approach but still operate within fannish logics.) The politicised understanding of fannish attachment, as argued by Grossberg, aligns with my own thinking about how what viewers do with texts and how viewers view

is significant on a political level. Another connection between the viewing strategy I am advocating and exploring in this thesis and fandom is how both practices engage texts in very creative ways. Hellekson and Busse point out the “as if” nature of fan art when they observe, “[a]nyone who has ever fantasized about *an alternate ending* to a favorite book or *imagined the back story of a minor character* in a favorite film has engaged in creating a form of fan fiction” (1; emphasis added). However, though there are important connections between this “as if” strategy and fandom—I am more interested in this creative “as if” strategy of viewing that, I propose, can be used by viewers on any text that they come by, as opposed to the fan who engages creatively with their particular text of attachment. I am thus interested in a viewing strategy that can be brought to any text, whether there is an attachment to the text or not.

Overall, the difference and significance of this imaginative viewing strategy that I am proposing is that “viewing as if in a female network”, or viewing to find alternatives, breaks away from interpreting what is on the screen and instead is about inquiring into alternatives to the screen. And although this strategy is already employed by fans in their intense engagement with texts of attachment, and has been written about in fandom studies (Jenkins; Hellekson and Busse), I am more interested in this activity of engaging with texts whatever the level of attachment to the text. It is the very activity that I am interested in, rather than the kind of texts this activity is performed in relation to.

Furthermore, I see this strategy as a politicised activity, not only because I privilege my political commitments as I conceive of alternatives to the screen, but also because I see the effort to produce alternatives that are not actually present as subversive and full of political potential. It is this productive aspect of the strategy that speaks to a creative and productive instinct that works to reimagine and rethink our world as it is. An instinct I claim is important both for the casual viewer and the academic viewer writing academic texts.

Viewing is Political: Feminist Media Scholars on Soap Opera Audiences

The idea that viewing television texts can be and often is a politicised activity has been written about widely. Many studies of how viewers/readers make sense of texts show how they resist rather than adhere to conservative meanings. Viewing as a resistive or political activity has been a special interest of feminist scholars working on soap operas and its audiences. This scholarship highlights how viewing this genre is politically implicated and can and often does include resistance to gender, class and race ideologies. In this section I focus on feminist scholars working on soap opera viewership and show how these feminist authors conceive of the act of viewing as a political and resistive activity. This body of research on soap opera audiences offers an account of how viewing is already politicised and how complicated the question of ‘resistive’ viewings may be.

To explain how feminist media scholars went about arguing for the politicised nature of soap opera viewing, it is necessary to look at what previous scholarship they were addressing. First, these scholars addressed the Frankfurt school who saw audiences of cinema and television as being brainwashed by “mass culture” and as consuming culture passively. Feminist work on soap audiences challenged this idea of the passivity of audiences. Instead, following the Birmingham school and Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model of viewing, these feminist scholars found politically charged and resistive strategies of viewing in soap opera audiences. Furthermore, the diminishment of everyday viewers as passive and easily brainwashed by the Frankfurt school was especially used, according to these feminist scholars, in a sexist way to diminish popular genres enjoyed by women audiences. For instance, Modleski recounts the type of criticism targeted at soaps:

If television is considered by some to be a vast wasteland, soap operas are thought to be the least fertile spot in the desert. The surest way to damn a film, a television program, or even a situation in real life is to invoke an analogy to soap operas. In the same way that men are often concerned to show that what they are, above all, is not women, not “feminine,” so television programs and movies will, surprisingly often, tell us that they are not soap operas. (78).

And Brundson similarly notes in her work on female audiences and the screen texts marketed to them that she has “always been conscious of the way in which what women and girls like is somehow worse than the equivalent masculine pleasures” (2). To turn attention to female audiences and the texts marketed to them is then a

politicised move in itself in its defiance to such sexist academic ideas. And the kind of viewing that these scholars find and theorise as they turn to soap operas and other female-orientated texts also then foregrounds the “non”-passivity at play in female audiences’ viewing of these texts.

Second, this feminist media scholarship addressed feminist film theory that used psychoanalysis to think about the female ‘spectator’ position as constructed by the text. Feminist research on the resistive soap opera viewer turned to studying actual audiences to test and complicate the spectator positions that were conceived through psychoanalytic theory alone. As previously noted, the ‘spectator’ is that position which the text constructs for the audience member to inhabit and defines the way the viewer views and relates to the screen text. Because feminist film theory contended at the beginning, starting with Mulvey, that the text does not create a position for the female/feminist viewer, like it did for the male, much of feminist film theory that followed was concerned with theorising the female spectator. Mulvey constructed the female spectator as a position that was very limiting and oppressive for the female viewer to occupy. Though Mulvey’s work on the female spectator was heavily critiqued, it proved fruitful for further research on female spectatorship, such as Doane’s much more liberating strategy of viewing with a “masquerade” sensibility that could be employed by the female spectator, accepting the femininity on screen, but only as a fabrication. However, even though the work following Mulvey in feminist film theory found more liberating positions for the female viewer to take in their viewing of screen texts, this theory was still confined largely by its reliance on abstract psychoanalytic theory. A major criticism of such abstraction is that it ultimately led feminist film theory to overlook whiteness as a major aspect of the cinema screen and viewer relation, as argued, for instance, by hooks who pointed out the whiteness of Mulvey’s female spectator position.

The feminist scholarship on television audiences then set out to examine actual audiences to see how they fit or did not fit the theorised spectator positions. These scholars (Press, Ang, Brown) carried out qualitative audience research to complicate how viewers were previously theorised, taking a more ethical approach of allowing actual viewers to speak for themselves, rather than thinking of viewers theoretically. This opened opportunities for new insights about how viewers in fact resist the

“spectator” positions constructed for them by the texts. For instance, Mary Ellen Brown found that though the television constructs the television spectator as a consumer, a position in which the viewer’s purpose is to purchase the commodities advertised during television adverts, the audience she studied instead used gossip to connect with other viewers and created communities based on speculation about plots and characters. They broke out of the spectator positions constructed for them by the television medium and remade their viewing to be about exchange of pleasurable conversation with other audiences members: “soaps which are designed to reinforce existing social practices which isolate women and encourage them to buy as a source of pleasure, instead promote a woman’s community which gets pleasure from itself. Women (and on occasion, men) then, create their own discourse and their own pleasure from the text” (10).

Andrea Press in her own study of soap opera audiences across class and generational lines also showed how audiences resisted gender and class ideologies, ideologies which, according to the spectator concept, viewers do not resist but adhere to (as per Mulvey). And following Hall’s decoding/encoding model, Press focused on how the meanings made by soap opera audiences depended on their social positioning. One of her findings was the striking differences between how working-class and middle-class women interpreted and resisted soap opera characters in her study: “middle-class women use explicitly feminist imagery to describe characters working-class women criticize specifically for their lack of independence” (75). Press confirmed that how the audience relates to class, race and gender ideology on screen depends on the audience’s own social positioning. Press’s research showed in practical terms that resistive and critical viewings by audiences are in this way common place and, in fact, that resistive viewings are embedded in social positioning (a somewhat paradoxical idea). In this way, Press’s work confirmed in practical terms Hall’s theorisation about negotiated and oppositional readings being based on how audiences’ social positioning and cultural background align or misalign with those of the producers of the texts.

These researchers also questioned the binaristic idea that viewers either take pleasure in watching soap operas and through this pleasure are inculcated into ideology or else they resist this pleasure through critical viewing and thus resist this inculcation,

as put forth by the Frankfurt School (for an example of the Frankfurt position, see Adorno). Instead these feminist media scholars argued that pleasure should be theorised beyond this ideological function and be taken seriously in and of itself (Ang “Feminist Desire” 185). Pleasure in itself, because it sustains and makes life liveable, makes viewing these series an important thing in itself. As Ang articulates, “it is impossible to live solely with the feeling of discomfort” and furthermore,

[w]e cannot wait until the distant Utopia is finally achieved: here and now we must be able to enjoy life – if only to survive [...] any uneasiness with the present, with the social situation in which we now find ourselves, must be coupled with an (at least partial) positive acceptance and affirmation of the present (*Watching Dallas* 133-134).

For Ang, the soap opera’s “[f]iction and fantasy [...] function by making life in the present pleasurable, or at least livable”, and this does not “exclude radical political activity or consciousness” (135). So, even though Ang found that the pleasure that audiences take from *Dallas* did not exactly correlate with feminist ideas or politics (“feminist fantasies are totally absent from *Dallas*” [*Watching Dallas* 130]), this, she contends, does not reduce the importance of viewing the soap because it provides sustenance for its audiences. Brown’s “feminist discourse” viewing of soap operas, as discussed previously, also challenges this very idea that pleasure and ideologically conservative viewings go hand in hand. Brown argued that to enjoy a genre of ‘bad taste’ in fact meant that audiences resisted the cultural hierarchies imposed by patriarchal logics that dictated ‘good taste’ (2). Furthermore, not only did this scholarship on soap opera audiences challenge the idea that taking pleasure from soap operas did not necessarily align with being brainwashed into ideology, they also showed that pleasure is an indicator of other things besides ideology. Modleski (101; 15) and Barrett (57) argued that we cannot simply think about viewing popular screen texts such as soap operas as either accepting or resisting ideological meanings, but that the pleasure of watching soaps indicates how these texts dialogue with actual lives and experiences of its audiences. Modleski (101; 15) concedes that these texts resolve their narratives usually in conservative ways, but, as Barrett argues, rather than dismissing these texts and pleasures, it is useful to reflect on and understand what taking pleasure from the viewing of a text indicates about women’s actual lives (Barrett 56).

In terms of my own resistive strategy of the “as if” viewing proposed in this thesis, the feminist scholarship on soap opera audiences shows that accepting what is on the screen is not necessarily devoid of political or resistive inclinations. My purpose in engaging with this body of scholarship is then to position the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy as another kind of resistive and politicised way of viewing that makes no claims for replacing any kind of “passivity” or complacency of viewing that engages what is onscreen. I merely conceive *viewing as if in a female network* as one politicised way of viewing among others. And my purpose in examining and experimenting with the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy is to consider the particularity of this strategy and to explore how this strategy may be used. The strategy’s specificity, however, is not unconnected from the concerns of feminist scholarship on soap opera viewers. For instance, this strategy is how I can come up with more radical alternatives for those conservative resolutions that Modleski and Barrett are concerned with. In moments of dissatisfaction with such conservative resolutions, the strategy can be used to consider a more radical resolution, an alternative to what is on the screen. In a similar vein, and adding to Ang’s thinking about the pleasure of watching soap operas as sustaining for its audience even if these pleasures do not align with their feminist politics (*Watching Dallas* 130), the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy intervenes and attempts to align our pleasures of watching screen texts with our feminist political commitments.

Genesis of this Thesis’ “Viewing as if in a Female Network” and How it Departs from Its Origins

As I have already stated, the strategy of searching out alternatives to screen texts, which in this thesis I am calling “viewing as if in a female network” in accordance to the feminist commitments that I prioritise in my viewings, originates with discovering Schantz’s invitation to “read as if in a female network” in his book *Gossip, Letters, Phones: The Scandal of Female Networks in Film and Literature*. To summarise again, by “reading as if in a female network”, Schantz challenges himself and the reader to approach the English novel and Hollywood films not at face value, but by searching out these texts’ female networks that may not be readily obvious, at least not on the surface of the text. To achieve this, Schantz compliments

his feminist critique of texts and his unconventional interpretations of events and characters with an inquiry into the alternatives of images and plots that superficially only show “women beset by patriarchy” (3). For Schantz, tracing “female networks” works to shatter patriarchal logics of the texts: “[i]magined as transmitting sympathy and strategy to women beset by patriarchy, female networks threaten the gendered circulation of meaning and power in a masculine culture” (3). Throughout his book, Schantz draws on all of his resources to shatter these “masculine culture” meanings by constantly putting them into question and offering alternatives as guided by the “female network” metaphor – a metaphor that begs the reader to return “insistently to the forgotten interests of female characters to explode easy assumptions about plot [...] and character” (4). Because I also retain the “female network” metaphor in the strategy of viewing I focus on in this thesis, I must draw a clear distinction between Schantz’s “reading as if in a female network” and my “viewing as if in a female network” to make clear my own contribution to knowledge.

As I have already noted, while Schantz employs a range of strategies to “read as if in a female network” including critiquing the misogyny of texts, challenging accepted understandings of plots and characters and *imagining alternatives* to what takes place in the texts, I zone in on the strategy of coming up with alternatives. Thus, this strategy of finding alternatives is the primary concern of this thesis, and while I retain the “female network” metaphor of Schantz to guide my search for alternatives, I want to give more importance to the “as if” of the “as if in a female network” – what I maintain articulates that practice of searching out and of conjuring up alternatives to the screen. With this thesis, I want to ask what it means when we approach a text “as if”, what forms may it usefully take and what kind of meanings can the “as if” create? When “viewing as if in a female network” is employed with the emphasis being on the “as if”, the idea is such that it is the *offscreen* where ‘female networks’ (or the more radical) reside, rather than onscreen. And so, when we “view as if in a female network”, we are considering the alternatives to the screen, the offscreen, our imaginations, because (at least according to this conception) it is there that the radical meanings can be found. This is what the “as if” does: it signals that we are dealing with something that is not on screen, but we view “as if” it was. Thus, this thesis is still very much about the “female network”

(Schantz's focus) as it uses this metaphor to guide my search for alternatives, but my own work is much more interested in the "as if" and its particular function.

Another way that I depart from Schantz that is noteworthy is that I move from his focus on the mediums of novel and film and focus instead on television series. The sole focus on a screen medium is important for my development of "viewing as if in a female network" as a distinct strategy that is about coming up with alternatives. Focusing on a screen medium only – the television screen – I am able to put the "as if" into full operationality. As already noted, unlike words on a page which the reader uses to conjure their own image of what might be happening, the image on screen is arguably more fixed, making the idea of imagining alternatives more clear. Reading the page already requires the use of imagination to come up with the images and visuals for the words read, thus to discuss "viewing as if in a female network" in terms of reading the page is arguably a more ambiguous task. When viewing a screen, on the other hand, we are already supplied with certain images and visuals, and the idea of alternatives to those concrete images already supplied onscreen is then more easily defined. This zooming in on the screen (as opposed to working with both the screen and the page) and the emphasis on the "as if" (as opposed to the "female network") then functions to help distinguish that what I am concerned with is the activity of searching for alternatives to what is onscreen, as opposed to interpreting what is on the screen. The focus on the screen and the "as if" also highlights that, though Schantz and his search for female networks serves as an important origin of this thesis, the female network is secondary to my focus, though nevertheless crucial to focus my search for alternatives.

Another Element: "Viewing as if in a Female Network" and Following Technology Onscreen

Another major aspect of Schantz's work that I adopt in this thesis is his focus on communication technologies onscreen to "read as if in a female network". In this regard, the first question to answer here is why Schantz follows technology for female networking, and the second is why I retain this focus in this thesis. To address the first question, Schantz focuses on the letter, the telephone and email to consider how female characters are connected and disconnected onscreen and on the page. In Schantz, onscreen communication technologies extend gossip, that ultimate

form of 'female discourse' (Brown; Schantz Chapter 1). Even when Schantz is considering films where technology obstructs communication for women, technology in these cases is the only method of communication, whose obstruction means no communication for women at all. For Schantz, communication media within screen narratives are understood as channels and conduits through which female connections are either made, sustained or broken. The spaces of the narrative are conceived in this reading as dominated by patriarchal power dynamics, whereas technology, which is able to short circuit these spaces (both literally and figuratively), allows female characters to have agency. In this Schantzian understanding of tele-communication technologies on screen, technologies serve female characters' (re-)negotiation of patriarchal space by transecting and transversing space in a non-physical way – through the wires and signals of technology. In other words, the female network implies the connection of women to other women based on technological means of communication rather than a spatial co-existence / co-habitation. It allows a sort of non-Euclidean geometrical rearrangement of gender relations. This new space-without-dimensions provides heroines with escape routes from genre and narrative conventions and strictures that would otherwise have them trapped in heteronormative romantic destinies and isolated from other women (Schantz 62-63). Where the narrative funnels female heroines into these singular destinies, love (in its heterosexual form) and death, following technology can provide escape routes, leading to some undefined or undetermined destinies, if only the reader uses their imagination to consider such leads and take them seriously. However, because technology can also impede female characters' agency, depending on the vision or ideological trajectory of the text, and on the intentionality of the act of viewing / reading, the feminism here is potential and not kinetic. Thus, by following the Ariadne thread of technology, Schantz can determine if a text (and also the reading of the text) is sympathetic or unsympathetic to its female characters. And he can also use following technology onscreen to ask about the presence of female networking where it might not be so obviously present in the text.

To answer the question of why and how I retain Schantz's focus on following technology onscreen I give two reasons. The first reason, though perhaps secondary in importance, is that retaining this following of technology's representation and

invocation onscreen gives the strategy of “viewing as if in a female network” focus. By retaining it, I can give my attention to experimenting with and using this strategy of viewing, rather than deciding what to use this strategy on. The second reason I keep this focus, and it is the main reason, is that following technology onscreen as employed by Schantz, as we saw in the example of *Pillow Talk*, is one way in which alternatives to the screen can be conceived. Communication technology onscreen invites us to consider that which is absent from the screen by way of, for instance, the ringing telephone that we see in the *mise-en-scène* which connects us to an elsewhere offscreen. This elsewhere – the other side of the telephone line – is in fact an alternative to the screen, an alternative to what we see. The question of who is on the other line and where they might be, as they are not on the screen, moves us to consider that elsewhere, that offscreen space. And thus, the representation of communication technology has an important meaning in terms of this strategy of searching out of alternatives because ‘technology’, I claim, is not reducible to actual technological objects but has a metaphorical dimension when represented on screen as well. Thus, the onscreen telephonic device can metonymically stand for communication as such, or connectivity, but also for possibility. Think of the unanswered telephone at the start of *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984). Inasmuch as it may or may not result in a connection, the telephone becomes the symbol of possibility itself. Who is calling? From where? These questions are never answered in the film, but such questions open up that other space, that offscreen, for the audience’s imagination. Again, the screen here plays an important part. If we understand screen representation with Desmond and Hawkes as fixed in its representation (as opposed to the unfixed suggestive language of the printed word) (34), then the telephone as a screen image opens up that fixed space, by connecting what we can see with what we usually cannot (the split screen of phone calls in some films being an obvious attempt to shut off that unfixed unscripted space). Thus, I claim that this specific metaphoricity inherent in the telephone onscreen, but applicable to other communication technologies onscreen too, makes following this technology onscreen extremely fruitful for the strategy of “viewing as if in a female network” as technology both determines what is on the screen but also opens the onscreen to other possibilities which the viewer can bring to the text. Schantz does not explicitly articulate this, but his focus on the telephone in film underlines its

special importance as a disruptive screen image and technology. It breaches the space shown on screen, linking it to a non-contiguous space, just as it both connects and separates the speakers.

In fact, this metaphorical aspect of technology, where technology means possibility, is not my own conception but has been articulated by Martin Heidegger in “The Question Concerning Technology?” (1954). Here, Heidegger explores the meaning of the term technology which he understands as being synonymous with possibility / impossibility. Looking at the Greek root *technē*, from which the word technology stems, Heidegger notes that the original term invoked both a “bringing-forth” (318) and a “reveal[ing] whatever does not bring itself forth and does not yet lie here before us” (319). Heidegger continues,

Whoever builds a house or a ship or forges a sacrificial chalice reveals what is to be brought forth [...] This revealing gathers together in advance the aspect and the matter of ship or house, with a view to the finished thing envisaged as completed, and from this gathering determines the manner of its construction. Thus what is decisive in *technē* does not at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of means, but rather in the revealing [...] It is as revealing, and not as manufacturing, that *technē* is a bringing-forth. (319)

This “revealing” of technology, Heidegger points out, is that quality of technology that brings us to awareness of what is possible / impossible to bring into being. This is significant because technology not only defines and brings to our attention the world as it is (whether in reality or on screen), but also opens up for us other possibilities that have not yet been made manifest, but which nevertheless may yet come. Moreover, ‘viewing as if in a female network’ is itself then a technology in a Heideggerian sense, inasmuch as it can be used to ‘reveal’ alternatives to the screen.

Thus, to sum up my choice to retain Schantz’s method of following technology onscreen and on the page, I find this following of technology onscreen to be one way in which I can come up with alternatives to the screen. And I also find a focus on technology to be a useful way to focus and limit the scope of what I pay attention to in the texts. The final point to be made in relation to my following of technology onscreen is that, although I use this strategy throughout this thesis, it is by no way necessary for imagining alternatives to the screen. There are many ways to do this,

and in this thesis I consider only some of the ways this can be done. My hope is that the reader of this thesis will, in fact, come up with their own ways of “viewing as if in a female network” as well as trying out my methods.

Another important issue to be addressed in this section is how this way of thinking about technology onscreen, where the metaphoricity of technology helps to facilitate feminist readings, is very different to how other feminist scholarship conceives of the meanings and materialities of technology. Specifically, I am referring here to feminist work in the field of feminist techno-science studies that sees technology as being aligned with masculinity and reinforcing the patriarchal gender order. A quick review of this work will be useful to highlight the meanings of technology as highlighted by this scholarship. Rosalind Gill and Keith Grint summarise this work into three perspectives: 1) eco feminism, 2) liberal feminism and 3) the historical and cultural perspective of the construction of technology as masculine (4-11). I elaborate on these to note what other meanings technology onscreen brings forth. I do not contend with these in my *viewing as if in a female network* in the proceeding chapters, but it is worth contending with such meanings here to flag that they may inevitably crop up if we follow technology onscreen.

In short, eco-feminism understands technology as “an example of the way in which men try to dominate and control both nature and women”, understanding women as more in tune with “emotions, intuition and spirituality” (4-5). This perspective is problematic because it essentialises women and falls into the trap of “biological determinism” (5). The liberal feminist perspective of technology sees technology as neutral and separate from society and considers women’s integration in the technical fields as an important way to rectify gender inequality relating to technology (6). But this view is problematic because, among other things, it does not think critically about technology in and of itself (7). The third “more historical” perspective argues that women’s exclusion from technology is due to “the historical and cultural construction of technology as masculine” (8), thus taking into account how technology is always already gendered, rather than being some kind of cause of gender inequality. In this view, “[m]asculinity and technology are conceived of as being symbolically intertwined, such that technical competence has come to constitute an integral part of masculine gender identity and, conversely, a particular

idea of masculinity has become central to our very definition of technology” (8). In this account, the division of labour during the industrial revolution and the early stages of capitalism in the West “laid the foundations for male dominance of technology” (Wajcman *Feminism Confronts* 21)”.

As I have already stated, I do not contend with these meanings in the following chapters. Rather, more in line with the line of thought I am pursuing is the feminist techno-science work that is interested in how women were “*not* entirely alienated from technology” (Grint and Gill 3). This body of research highlights “those female inventors and technologists” who have largely been erased from our narratives about technology. In this more hopeful vein, Wajcman has also argued for the necessity of feminism to reclaim technology and to reshape technology away from its embeddedness in patriarchal ideology: “[i]t is important not to underestimate women’s capacity to subvert the intended purposes of technology and turn it to their collective advantage” (*Technofeminism* 163). An example is given by Mary Celeste Kearney who notes that although initially, the telephone was conceived and marketed as a technology for the purpose of business communication (578), it was quickly appropriated by housewives for the purpose of socialising while being bound to the home and domestic duties. This line of thought aligns more closely to the kind of meanings that interest me regarding technology in screen narratives.

The abundance of images of women using technology, which I and Schantz rely on to do our “as if in a female network” readings/viewings, is also a manifestation of the gendered user/producer binary where women are more likely to be positioned as the users and consumers of technologies whereas men are more likely to be positioned as their creators. In other words, the same technological objects are constructed differently in terms of gender depending on whether we think about the use of these objects versus their production. I take this point from Cynthia Cockburn and Susan Ormrod’s work on the microwave oven. These authors showed that when the microwave oven was being used by women to cook with, it was a mere cooking utensil, but when the microwave needed to be fixed, it was a “technology” to be handled by male engineers (Cockburn and Ormrod 98). This gendered user/producer binary explains the abundant images of women alongside technologies of communication and domesticity that, though portraying women with technology, can

circulate in popular culture without threat to the patriarchal gender order (these women are only users and consumers after all!).

As a final comment on my retaining of Schantz's strategy of following technology onscreen, I want to add that technology is in no way an arbitrary focus because technology is central to both the construction of screen narratives as well as our understanding of ourselves as human beings. Regarding screen narratives, Tom Gunning has shown how technology cannot be easily disentangled from what constitutes a film narrative, though this applies to television series too. Gunning writes that modern technology – the telephone, the telegraph, the train – help “to naturalize film's power to move through space and time” as the jump cut and parallel editing are introduced and become linchpins of narrative cinema (187). Unlike the singular shot of the cinema of attractions, the narrative cinema takes on the simultaneity of two or more locales, mirroring the logic of the two-party telephone call that brings two locations together in time. This also requires the telephone to be onscreen to connect these two different locales. This structuring of narrative film also involves inevitably the gender order. Gunning shows how technology that sutures narrative together does so in gendered ways, mostly reinforcing the gender order in Hollywood films, but sometimes subverting it. For instance, in his focus on *The Lonely Villa* (1909), he observes that technology and its malfunctioning both castrates the male and creates crisis in the narrative, but also that the functioning of technology enables the male character to save the day by bringing order at the end of the film. Here technology both determines and undermines gender roles and expectations by conferring and withdrawing agency from the male character, and in so doing, also affects the agency of the female character (188, 192-193). Though in more contemporary examples, these agency-conferring and agency-withdrawing qualities of technology may be more complex, my point is that technology on screen is more than the sum of material objects with certain practical functions for the characters and for narrative exposition. As Gunning implies, technologies are the fulcrums around which gender ideologies are reinforced or subverted. Thus, technologies are not easily disentangled from the other aspects of screen narratives that interest me in this thesis, and for this reason it makes sense to keep Schantz's technology-tracing method.

Similarly, technology is central to our conception of being human. Technologies are not just what humans, characters or narratives use, they co-constitute our very humanity and our identities. This idea has been written about under the term of “Homotechnicus” coined by José M. Galvin to express the idea that humans and technology cannot be considered as distinct from one another (“On Technoethics”). The term reformulates “Homo sapiens” to better describe the “evolving condition of human beings intertwined within an advancing technological society” (Luppicini 5). In this way technology has a special function in relation to gender relations and identity: technology is everywhere, rapidly expanding and evolving and encroaching into every human sphere and activity, co-constituting us as humans, and moreover as gendered humans. Thus, the argument could be made that a focus on technology is inevitable. It is largely by technology that modern society and the modern human being coheres. And because humans are always gendered, the means of production of gender relations have to be thought in terms of technology because of its ubiquity and fundamentality as well. So, though following technology in a text may appear to be a random strategy, I would argue that technology plays an important role in narratives, conceptions of humans/the self as well as of gender, and so is significant for a feminist reading.

My Interest in Female-Centred Television and the Working Woman

Why then use the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy on female-centred television series? And especially for thinking about television’s “working woman” and feminism onscreen? This choice of focus depends on my original interests when beginning the PhD. Initially, this doctoral project wanted to examine the “working woman” as represented in a particular corpus of screen texts that were selected both because of the specific period in which they were made, which was one of both shifts in screen consumption (rise of Netflix) and radical economic exigencies caused by the 2008 crash, and because any act of feminist scholarship in the present seems to demand that we come to terms with the mainstreaming of feminism as it occurs in and through these popular screen manifestations.

My initial idea was that there appeared to be a change in the post-crash female-centred television series at the level of the text, with a newly intensified focus on

women in relation to work, as opposed to an earlier concern with women in romantic relationships. This shift from heterosexual romance to the ‘labour market’ as locations of fantasy could be conceived of as a re-investment where “the idea of ‘romance’” is “deflected away from the sphere of love and intimacy and instead projected into the idea of a fulfilling career” (*Be Creative* 90) in times of increased attention on the financial and the economic, as was the case after the financial crash of 2008. Although this re-investment can also be conceived as a strengthened entwinement of both heterosexual romance and the labour market, as Lagerwey *et al.* have observed about post-crash female-centred television series based in places of work that sexual intimacy and heterosexual romance increasingly happens with work colleagues (par. 18). What is important here is that this intensification of attention on women at work and the labour market, conceived quite narrowly in these series (in terms of profession as well as the race and class of the characters) was my main interest as I began conceiving what this thesis would be about.

My decision to look at the working woman and feminism in specifically television texts (a nomenclature that is admittedly somewhat outdated, given modern cultural consumption practices), rather than film, was then due to a sense that it was television that had a central role in the circulation of this morphing femininity. In addition, Hollywood cinema, though not lacking in its female-centred genres, did not seem to compare to the output and critical esteem enjoyed by female-centred texts in television in the post-Netflix age. (This has been at least my own general sense about the 2010s cultural climate.) Television would appear, especially in the age of streaming and binge-watching, to be one of the predominant modes of circulating ideas of what it means to be female as well as what it means to be feminist. But this has in fact been true not just in the post-crash but for the past few decades, if not for the past half-century. This sense that television has been key to circulating mainstream ideas of femininity can be found throughout feminist television scholarship. For instance, according to Ashley Sayeau (2007), television may in fact be the medium taking women’s politics most seriously (53). Bonnie Dow claims that television’s role lies in, among other things, “mediating social change, in reproducing assumptions about women’s ‘appropriate’ roles, and in appealing to and constructing a subjectivity for women as a television audience” (*Prime-Time* xix). Similarly, Negra has noted that “it has been television that has proven itself perhaps

most adept in codifying a broad set of ideological concerns about femininity, agency, domesticity, and work through narrative formulae” (21). Given this emphasis on television’s relationship with images and narratives of femininity, female-centred television series formed an ideal corpus of screen material for the investigation of the representation of ‘working women’ in popular culture.

But after some time of considering representations of the “working women” in female-centred television series of the post-crash era, my interest turned to how I view these representations, especially as a feminist academic who grows increasingly critical and dissatisfied with popular culture’s representations of women and feminism. The question I began to ask was: what alternative representations of “working women” or women or feminism would I like to see? What might be the alternatives to the screen images and representations I am critiquing?

Discovering Schantz’s proposal to trace female networking in well-known texts where such networks may not be so obvious, and where all of the reader’s resources are channeled towards putting isolated female characters in touch with female networks, was a turning point that somewhat answered my dissatisfaction with mere critique of representation. Understanding Schantz’s way of reading as wildly imaginative and unconstrained by the text led me to hone in on the idea of viewing texts where I in fact take leave of the text and consider what its alternative might look like. In other words, Schantz made this question a legitimate one for me because he was already asking it himself.

Once invited to use my imagination and resources to “network” with my “working women” onscreen, I as a viewer become implicated in the “female network”. Turning attention to my own viewing and away from merely critiquing the screen led me to questions such as: how do I make meanings of these texts? Is how I view just as important as what I view onscreen? If so, what are the implications for me as a viewer? Do I critique the screen, or do I do something else as well? Such questions made me, the viewer, and what I do visible. In this sense, the “female network” metaphor which I retain in this thesis is not just for guiding the kind of alternatives I come up with, it also conceives of the viewer as being part of this network, implicating how I view the texts of my choice and making *that* the focus. And my response to this implicating has been to focus on the strategy of finding alternatives

to the screen so as to do right by, according to my political commitments, myself and the “working women” and other characters onscreen.

In other words, the ‘female network’ metaphor plays the function of defining this thesis and this way of viewing as being about the relationship between me, the viewer, and my chosen texts. The network is not just onscreen but also encompasses me, the viewer, as well as the texts that I view. Moreover, even though I engage in depth with television texts in the following chapters, this thesis’ primary commitment is to the viewing strategy and exploring what it looks like and how it can be used, rather than making statements about the texts I use this strategy on (though textual analysis is of course inevitably a part of this dissertation too as it is a stepping stone to “as if” viewings).

Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, Popular Feminism and Individualism

Contemporary US female-centred television series of the post-crash period and the contexts in which they are made and viewed are theorised under the terms postfeminism, neoliberalism and individualism (Gill “Postfeminist Media Culture”; McRobbie *Aftermath*; Negra *What a Girl*). In the 2010s, another logic to have emerged that is significant to the series I examine is an individualised form of market-value driven feminism (Lagerwey *et al.*; Leonard). In this section, I define postfeminism, neoliberalism, individualism and this market-driven mainstream feminism and explain why an understanding of these matters for these series as well as how I implement “viewing as if in a female network”.

First, ‘postfeminism’, a term used to refer to the intensification of gender norms as it coincides with individualism of late capitalism is perhaps the term requiring the most attention. It is a term of significance especially for scholarship on female-centred popular culture and culture marketed at female audiences in the last few decades (prominent critics of postfeminism include Rosalind Gill, Diane Negra, Angela McRobbie, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Sarah Projansky). Key to post-feminism is a disavowal of the previous waves and achievements of feminism and a rejection of the “feminist” label itself based on the assumption that the goals of feminism and the eradication of gender oppression have been achieved (McRobbie *The Aftermath* 1-2). With this presumption, the postfeminist ‘sensibility’ (Gill conceives of postfeminism

as a sensibility that pervades culture rather than a theory to conceptualise with [“Postfeminist Media Culture”]) sets up norms of affluence, whiteness and heterosexuality as goods to be aspired towards (Negra *What a Girl* 9-10). Such norms are, of course, presented not as prescriptive but as options to be freely chosen (though this is hardly the case, as the term “norm” implies) (McRobbie *Aftermath* 1; Gill *Postfeminist Media* 153-154). Thus, in postfeminism women are solicited to reject a political view of gender and to adopt competitive individualism to empower the self through the labour market, consumerism and “choices” that enable the realisation of one’s “best self” that is in accordance with aspirational norms of gender, race and class. The “viewing as if in a female network” strategy I employ here then is used to go beyond postfeminism which TV heroines are implicated in onscreen.

Neoliberalism, then, in the most general sense, can be understood as, “a troubling worldview that promotes the ‘free’ market as the best way to organize every dimension of social life” (Ouellette 225). On the institutional level, this means allowing markets to be the deciding forces which lead to the defunding or privatisation of public spaces and facilities. Neoliberalism erases ideas of the public and collective well-being and replaces these with values of self-responsibilisation and self-sufficiency. Operating in the framework of neoliberalism, notions of interdependence and the political are absent. The logics of individualism run through neoliberalism as well as the aforementioned postfeminism. As noted by Gill and Scharff, “both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of individuals as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves” (7). Furthermore, Gill and Scharff note that “the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of postfeminism” and that, in fact, neoliberalism is already gendered like postfeminism because “[t]o a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen” (7). It is worth expanding on neoliberalism for the purpose of this thesis because it describes well some of the phenomenon of late capitalism that pervade the logics of the series we are working with in this dissertation. ‘Neoliberalism’ describes that phenomena that more radical

politics aim to subvert and overthrow, or at least counteract with other values and ideals that are not money and individual orientated. This is the nature of my own political commitments that I prioritise in my use of the “viewing as if in a female network”: I want to consider what alternatives I can imagine that do not reinforce neoliberal logics.

In the 2010s, with the heightening awareness of inequalities brought about by the 2007-2008 recession, various forms of feminism have also emerged and though these speak to an increased awareness of the political, the most visible forms of feminism are in fact continuous with the logics of postfeminism and neoliberalism (Gill “Post-postfeminism?” 612; Banet-Weiser 154). Sarah Banet-Weiser has termed this most visible feminism “popular feminism”. Though describing a return to a political understanding of gender, this form of feminism maintains competitive individualism as the primary means of operating in an unequal world (Banet-Weiser 154). As Banet-Weiser notes, “[t]he feminist visions that come into dominant view in the current moment are shaped by the same affective politics that shape postfeminism: entrepreneurial spirit, resilience, gumption”, and furthermore, “these discourses of post- and pop-feminist empowerment are intimately connected to cultural economies, where to be ‘empowered’ is to be a better economic subject, not necessarily a better feminist subject” (154). This mainstream market-driven feminism then is one of the phenomena that I use “viewing as if in a female network” to reroute, and to instead foreground more radical feminism where relationality rather than individualism is privileged.

These different terms attempt to explain the current cultural climate by highlighting different aspects of post-crash female-centred television series and their contexts. Generally, the term ‘postfeminism’ theorises the heightened gender norms of late capitalism, ‘neoliberalism’ is used to conceptualise heightened marketisation of everyday life and privileging of individualisation, and “popular feminism” (Banet-Weiser) is used to consider how feminism has been highjacked to reinforce postfeminist and neoliberalist logics. Each term is important because of its prominence in feminist research on contemporary media of the 21st century. However, one important commonality running throughout these terms that is perhaps more important for this thesis than any one of these terms on their own is

‘individualism’. Postfeminism, neoliberalism and popular feminism are all rooted in the understanding of the individual as a self-sufficient and self-serving entity, responsible for determining one’s own life. Individualism is problematic for feminism because, as Marilyn Friedman observes, while feminism asserts a social construction of the self where we are in relation to one another and to our environment and culture, “[a]bstract individualism considers individual human beings as social atoms, abstracted from their social contexts, and disregards the role of social relationships and human community in constituting the very identity and nature of individual human beings”. In this individualism, Friedman goes on to say, “[s]ometimes the individuals of abstract individualism are posited as rationally self-interested utility-maximizers” or “they are theorized to form communities based fundamentally on competition and conflict among person vying for scarce resources” (286). It is this individualism which I am most interested in overcoming by implementing the strategy of “viewing as if in a female network”. And it is precisely in opposition to this pervasive individualism that I find the “female network” metaphor particularly useful for feminist viewings of screen texts when looking to imagine alternatives to what is on the screen. The “female network” metaphor with its associations and connotations of relationality, multiplicity and connection can be mobilised against this individualism. To view television series of the 2010s “as if in a female network” in this thesis then means to imagine alternatives to the postfeminist, neoliberal and market-driven feminism on screen, and to imagine what scenarios, stories and images would instead support a relational and political vision of gender that replaces individual striving. To employ this viewing strategy also means to go beyond the criticism of postfeminist, neoliberal, market-driven feminism and individualism on screen in which TV heroines are implicated. It means to attempt to find or create some kind of alternatives.

It is important to note here that I am not claiming that there is a lack of images and narratives of female relationships onscreen. Many current female-centred popular culture texts in fact foreground female relationships. For instance, the television series I focus on in this dissertation foreground female relationships. And Alison Winch has observed that in the post-crash era, “[i]ncreasingly, the traditional feminine fantasy of the perfect man providing financial security and a happy ever after ending is no longer wanted or tenable in a precarious economic climate where

women hold more power in the workplace. Instead, the focus is on the loyalty of girlfriends” (90). However, the mere representation of female relationships is not necessarily an image of anti-individualism as expressed in Winch’s suspicious question: “[i]n such a culture where the focus is on the individual, why is there a proliferation of locations within the media that place primary emphasis on female sociality?” (2). I contend with Winch that many of these representations, that constitute what Winch calls ‘girlfriend culture’, often serve the agenda of individualism. According to Winch, in ‘girlfriend culture’ we can see how “neoliberalism penetrates the intimate relations between women” (2).² She argues that “mutual surveillance” (28) creates a female affiliation that is really about women’s surveillance of other women under the guise of friendship and “empowerment”. This means that female friendships can serve the purpose of regulating how women act, behave and look to fit into norms and individualistic aspirations. In chapter four, where I employ “viewing as if in a female network” on the series *The Bold Type*, my aim is to find alternatives to the images of female friendship onscreen because this friendship acts as a girlfriendship by maintaining each friend as an exceptionally successful and attractive woman. My intention here is to “view as if” *The Bold Type*’s female friendship did not serve this purpose. Here, the “female network” metaphor provides an alternative to this girlfriendship, as well as to postfeminist, neoliberal and popular feminism logics as I maintain that the “female network” and its connotations of relationality moves us towards ideas of flourishing beyond individual success and happiness. Using the “female network” metaphor is then a good way to come up with alternative images and narratives to female-centred television series whose imbrication in capitalism and dialogue with feminism produces images and narratives that are mostly of liberal individualised financial independence and careerism. The “female network” metaphor brings with it

² Neoliberalism here refers to the dominant ideology or world view that prioritises and promotes the “free” market as the best way to organise every aspect of human life (Oullette 224). This means that, in tandem with the deregulation and privatization of institutions at the level of government, there is a cultural trend or sensibility which promotes monetary profit, self-governmentality, self-responsibilization and self-expertise for individuals so that the need for dependency on government bodies is minimised. The neoliberal subject, then, is one who internalises such logic of self-sufficiency and self-regulation and strives for individualised happiness and success through self-discipline and maximisation of every aspect of life, while severed from notions of community and the political (Oullette 225).

meanings of plurality rather than singularity, and this is much closer to constituting a political existence than the individualism of “girlfriendships”. Thus, the female network metaphor signifies in this thesis a route out of the lone island of individual striving and projects of self that seem to over-determine texts and ways of making meaning.

I hope that in this section I make my political commitments clear for this thesis. I claim that if “viewing as if in a female network” is to be a radical way of viewing female centred television series, if this way of viewing is to go beyond postfeminism, neoliberalism and popular feminism – which only reinstates capitalist and market-driven “empowerment” – then the kind of alternatives I search for in this dissertation should theoretically re-route this dominant logic of choice-driven individualism in contemporary texts.

Clarification of Approach

It is important to clarify exactly what I am interested in doing in this thesis as well as explaining what I am not doing. It is also important to clarify how I go about performing, inquiring into and experimenting with “viewing as if in a female network”. To begin this clarification section, I first want to define what I mean by ‘viewing’, a term I use throughout this thesis. In the more general sense, I use ‘viewing’ to simply mean something similar to ‘reading’. That is, approaching a text (specifically a narrative screen text) and making sense of what it signifies. However, the term “viewing” takes on a different meaning in the strategy of “viewing as if in a female network”. When “viewing” becomes “viewing as if”, no longer does viewing mean viewing images onscreen. Rather, it becomes a strategy of seeing something that is actually not onscreen. “Viewing as if” is akin to imagining images and narratives, it is about seeing something ‘in the mind’s eye’, rather than viewing a screen in front of the eyes. Thus, “viewing” here also refers to “imagining”, rather than seeing. Imagining does not equate to seeing. Seeing implies seeing what is present, already there. Imagining is invoking what is not present and not there. This means that the kind of “viewing” I am referring to in “viewing as if in a female network” is a laborious kind of viewing where images and characters are reimagined and imagined anew.

Next, I want to clarify that in this thesis I am concerned with the act of viewing and the interrelation between my viewing and the texts I discuss. Thus, my interest is primarily in the relationship of viewer and text, and especially it is interested in a particular kind of viewing (the strategy of finding alternatives to the screen which I call in this thesis *viewing as if in a female network*). Because my interest is in a way of viewing, I am not interested in performing textual analysis of television texts, in other words, making statements about the texts. At the same time, though the purpose of this thesis is not textual analysis, I nevertheless engage in textual analysis to arrive at my primary goal of “viewing as if in a female network”, as I already mentioned, this is inevitable. The viewing strategy proposed in this thesis both depends on and takes leave of the texts and my analysis of them; the strategy in question must consider what is onscreen to arrive at its alternatives.

I should also clarify here that I am not interested in analysing the specificity of the television medium or its platforms. Though I am only concerned with the television text, as opposed to film, video games, websites, etc., my use of this one medium is only at the textual level. In other words, I use television series as texts on which I can use the strategy of “view as if in a female network”. I do not ask questions about the specificity of the television medium, its various platforms or the television industry and all that the specificity of ‘television’ as a medium and industry may imply.

Finally, I am not interested in performing qualitative analysis of how actual audiences view texts. This means that I explore this way of viewing only through my own viewings and by giving an account of how I explore and experiment with this viewing. Thus, when referring to the ‘viewer’, it is me and my own viewings that I am concerned with and am interested in analysing. This means I cannot make claims about how other viewers view or do not view, and neither can I make claims about the use of “viewing as if in a female network” by other viewers (except for when I observe such viewings inscribed in textual artefacts, as in the examples at the very beginning of this introduction). Qualitative audience research that examines how actual audiences, that is material people, relate to texts would centre on different questions than the ones I ask in this thesis. I am interested in thinking about this viewing strategy’s potentialities and the different uses and directions this viewing

strategy could be taken, rather than inquiring into how this viewing strategy is already utilised or not by other audiences. If I speculate about how other viewers may view or interpret something, I want to make clear that this exists purely on the level of speculation whose purpose is to further the main aim of this thesis. It is in no way a claim to how other viewers view. And in fact, I try to abstain from such speculation wherever I can because of the problematic nature of this. Thus, in this thesis I cannot speak on behalf of other viewers and make any claims about how other viewers view, and neither do I want to.

Using myself and my viewings as the object of analysis, I can gain deeper understanding of the strategy I experiment with in this thesis and its uses because I can study my feelings, thoughts and the questions that arise for me that I could not access if I were to study other viewers. The auto-ethnographical aspect of how I examine this imaginative viewing is useful, I claim, because it allows a more in-depth look at this strategy because of access to a viewer's (my) interiority. Self-examination also ensures that I make no absolute claims to objective truth about how this strategy might be employed more generally, by other viewers besides myself. This is something I want to avoid because the only viewing I am examining is my own, and also because the purpose of this viewing strategy is not to come up with some kind of objective truths, but to formulate fabrications.

Thus, what I am highlighting here is that in this thesis I am interested in a kind of viewing that is possible and which I claim is evidently taking place from looking at Schantz's work and other cultural artifacts such as fan productions. I advocate for this strategy simply because I want to highlight and pay attention to its importance. The purpose of this thesis is to build this viewing as a strategy, as a tool kit. And the way that I do this is by focusing on my own viewings as the object of analysis, using this focus to build up a way of viewing. Thus, what I am doing in this thesis is inquiring into and experimenting with a way of viewing that I deem important, that I claim deserves attention. In this respect, this thesis could also be thought of as a manifesto: the statement I am making is that perhaps we should view in this way, if we do not already do so.

The findings of this thesis are then the strategies I come to as I experiment with what this strategy of viewing entails and by doing so construct a toolbox for "viewing as if

in a female network”. I form it as an offering to the reader of this dissertation as something to take seriously and something to take up and use (without assuming that my reader does not view in this way already). The findings also include the questions and issues that arise as I implement this strategy of viewing.

The way I go about this research process of inquiring into and experimenting with the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy must be explained here also. The way I go about this inquiry and experimentation is by selecting one or two television series per chapter, giving an account of the series’ onscreen images and narratives, and then giving an account of the different ways that I employ “viewing as if in a female network” in relation to that series, noting the kinds of alternatives that I come up with (though these are of lesser importance than the process of “viewing as if”), and finally addressing the questions and issues that arise as I experiment with the viewing strategy in question. In each chapter I focus on a particular issue that I want to find alternatives for using the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy. These are 1) the dominance of whiteness and middle-class subjectivities, 2) individualism and 3) a focus on the labour market. Thus, more specifically, when I am giving an account of how I experiment and explore what “viewing as if” may entail, I do so in relation to each of these issues. For instance, in Chapter Two on “viewing as if” whiteness was not central, I ask exactly what kind of alternatives I have to produce in my viewing so as not to reproduce the white-centric screen. Focusing on one issue per chapter, I look for opportunities where the “as if” can be enacted, I explore what alternatives might be the “solutions” to that issue and I consider the different ways that I can approach finding alternatives to that issue. To narrow my focus further and to make use of the potential that technology onscreen holds for this strategy of viewing, I direct my attention mostly to instances in the text where technology is onscreen. However, if I come across moments onscreen which inspire an “as if in a female network viewing”, I do not hesitate to stray from the focus on technology.

If there is a charge here that this is a somewhat haphazard method of approaching my texts, I do not think that any actual application of method is void of chance, spontaneity and serendipity. I embrace the resourcefulness and haphazard approach of the “viewing as if in a female network” which is itself, inevitably, a viewing approach dependant on all the resources and inventiveness that the viewer can

muster. Indeed, this search for alternatives is not done in a systematic way – through the application of some system or theory – but uses all of my resources as a scholar: I draw on other scholarship, on Schantz’s readings, on my own experiences with viewing screen texts and anything else I can get a hold of that will help me in coming up with alternatives to the screen. In other words, my method is resourceful. And in drawing from a variety of sources to formulate my alternatives, I also come up with a variety of ways to employ this strategy of viewing. In other words, I articulate throughout the dissertation the different forms that this “viewing as if in a female network” can take as I conceive them. I highlight these different ways of “viewing as if in a female network” at the very beginning of each chapter and then gather them all up together in the conclusion of the dissertation. These then are offered as a toolkit for other viewers to take and to use, to *view as if in a female network*.

My interest throughout the dissertation is also the politicisation of this way of viewing. On one level, this way of viewing can be easily conceived as politicised because as I come up with alternatives to the screen, I am constantly prioritising my feminist commitments and thus basing my alternatives to the screen on my preferred feminist vision of the world. But on another level, the very act of thinking about alternatives to what is onscreen has political potential in its resistance to and rejection of what is given on the screen, what is readily available. The everyday, the straightforward, the common sense is often not seen as political, just something that is, that is essential and not constructed or contingent. I see the screen in a similar way. If we simply accept or only critique what is on the screen, we accept its inevitability. Instead, I propose that to truly challenge the constructedness of the screen, it is necessary to go beyond critique and to re-construct the screen, to imagine its alternatives. This in itself is a radical act. And I champion that we do so in accordance to our political commitments so that those alternative screens in our minds eye would better match our preferred organisation of the world. The resistance and rejection of the screen and a search for its alternatives foregrounds the screen, like the everyday or the common sense, as something that is one way, but could be another way. This ‘might be otherwise’ is the political that rejects necessity and the essential, highlighting the fabrication of that which we think is natural. This is what I mean when I claim that “viewing as if in a female network” is a politicised strategy:

by considering alternatives to what is on the screen, especially in accordance to our political commitments, we engage in political rather than essential logics. We think about how we might reorganise the screen, but also our world.

Selection of Corpus

In this thesis I engage with a number of US post-crash female-centered television series that address in various ways questions of being a modern working woman and that position themselves as having a feminist sensibility (though *Gilmore Girls* arguably does not position itself as a feminist text). My method of identifying particular series to examine in this thesis, and within those series particular moments for close reading and “viewing as if in a female network” relied on following the representation of communication technologies, especially moments where the technology-gender relationship seemed to be foregrounded, and especially where this technology-gender relationship was portrayed in interesting ways. To illustrate, in Chapter Three I focus on the ‘phone throw-away’ in the *Gilmore Girls* revival as a moment on which to perform “viewing as if in a female network” to conjure some alternatives to the screen because I see the “phone throw-away” as an interesting instance of the technology-gender relation. I find this instance fascinating because it comes across as a contrivance of the plot, but it is ideologically continuous with the trend of ‘retreatism’, a vein of postfeminism theorised by Negra in her writing about the original run of the *Gilmore Girls*. While this method of focusing on ‘interesting’ moments in the text may seem subjective and may be contested as such, subjectivity is an inextricable part of this research. In this thesis, I make a virtue of the given of subjectivity: the foregrounding of the subjective position of my (feminist) viewing assists in giving space to other viewings and thus importance to the production of various kindred interpretations (and alternatives!) by different viewers. My subjective viewing leaves room for other subjective viewings. We might consider these various viewings produced by others as being part of the ‘female network’ too, these various viewings producing multiplative as opposed to authoritative viewings. And as Schantz notes, to ‘read as if in a female network’ means to resist “speak[ing] singular messages” and to embrace “forking claims of female networks” (57).

Because ‘interesting’ moments of the technology-gender relation are so pervasive throughout popular culture, selecting the particular instances to zoom in on in this thesis depended on these instances intersecting with the focus of each analysis chapter: the dominance of whiteness and middle-class subjectivities in Chapter Two, individualism in Chapter Three and a focus on the labour market in Chapter Four. Thus, the series of *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls* was selected based on its instances of the gender-technology relation as it plays out in terms of the dominance of whiteness. The *Gilmore Girls* revival and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* were selected based on how instances of the gender-technology relation function in terms of individualism and the separation of women from one another. And finally, I selected *The Bold Type* because of how its technology-gender relation played out in relation to the labour market.

Furthermore, if my selection of television series for analysis differed, it would have not, I imagine, made a significant difference to my general conception of the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy or my insights about the significance of *viewing as if in a female network* post-crash female-centred television in the 2010s. The issues I address in this thesis are after all pervasive throughout this body of series, and US popular culture more generally. At the same time, the particular series chosen have inevitably shaped the discussions and arguments made in this thesis, even if I contend that they are interchangeable with other female-centred television series.

Summarising My Proposal of “Viewing As If in a Female Network”

To summarise my proposal of “viewing as if in a female network”, this is a strategy which 1) is about viewing screen texts and inquiring into alternative images and narratives to the ones that are onscreen and 2) coming up with alternatives to the screen that are in line with feminist commitments. I am claiming that viewing screen texts where there is in fact a breaking free from the text and a venturing beyond the screen is an important way of viewing that deserves attention, especially where such viewings are paired with political commitments, especially feminist commitments. This way of viewing forces me to think what I would prefer to see, what concrete representation would be more in line with my preferred feminist vision of the world.

However, although the primary way that I conceive of this strategy as being about alternatives *to* the screen, I also want to stretch and consider all the various ways that I can conceive of what looking for alternatives might mean. This means that some of the ways that I look for alternatives, and some of the alternatives that I find, cross the boundary of the distinction I make between ‘alternative *to* the screen’ and ‘*interpretation of* the screen’. This is because I want to explore and experiment with different ways that I might conceive of what an ‘alternative’ is in relation to the screen. By doing so, I privilege the viewers resourcefulness to view ethically and creatively, sometimes sacrificing the strict distinction I outline at the very beginning of this Introduction. This distinction still matters to orient the general trajectory of this way of viewing texts. But it is also useful to explore and expand this strategy. And perhaps also necessary to put the clarity of the distinction into question as well.

One of the functions of this strategy more generally is that it forces me to move beyond mere critique and to instead produce something as a viewer. I see this as a reparative way of viewing in Sedgwick’s sense: not only does this way of viewing questions that which it is given (paranoid), it also inquires into how the screen could be otherwise so that it would bring hope and nurturance (reparative). In terms of viewing texts, this is a resistive form of viewing, and because it inquires into concrete alternatives, this viewing strategy is productive: it produces images and narratives, even if they are only in the ‘mind’s eye’.

This study’s importance lies in its offering and consideration of a feminist viewing strategy that helps us to navigate feminism, screen images and narratives and the contemporary context of a text’s production as well as our own political commitments. Most importantly, it considers the practicality and usefulness of readings that go far beyond what is inscribed in the text. This is done not by turning to fan production to examine how such readings are transcribed into fan objects, or infidel adaptations, but by considering such imaginative readings at the level of the reading / viewing activity itself.

Chapter Summary

In Chapter One, I ‘network’ with feminist scholarship focused on female-centred television series to determine some of the dominant continuities that run throughout

female-centred television series and that are at odds with my political commitments. This feminist scholarship discusses how much of popular culture, including female-centred television series, falls short of feminism. As with the reparative reading of “viewing as if in a female network” that I am going to perform in the subsequent chapters, this scholarship supplements a deficit on screen through critique. The shortcomings of television series that this scholarship observes and that I focus on in this thesis, as I already noted, include: the dominance of 1) whiteness and middle-class subjectivities, 2) individualism and 3) the labour market. Thus, here I focus on the paranoid dissatisfactions of feminism with these texts, before I go on to repair these texts (on the level of my viewing) by way of “viewing as if” in the chapters that follow. Thus, in Chapter One I first take the time to expand on each of the three issues listed so that in the proceeding chapters I can focus on how these continuities manifest in my selected series of focus and, most importantly, employ the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy to find alternatives for these continuities. By considering the pitfalls that this feminist media scholarship identifies in the texts, I create points of focus that the *as if viewing* can reroute.

In Chapter One, I also address two further matters. First, because one of the main strategies I use to *view as if in a female network* is following technologies onscreen, I address the specific contemporary technologies of the 2010s that my *viewing as if* follows: the smartphone and social media. All media and technologies have their own specificities and functions that spill over onto the page or onto the screen. In the case of the smartphone and social media, I show how these technologies carry with them meanings that support mainstream ideas of individualism. This means that while I may use following technology onscreen to find alternatives of relational logics, I might still have to contend with meanings of individualism that adhere to smartphone and social media technologies. Second, I address the question of whether “viewing as if in a female network” is an academic or a non-academic way of approaching screen texts. I also consider what level of knowledge and engagement is necessary for *viewing as if in a female network* in an entertainment landscape characterised by personalised consumption and different degrees of engagement. I do so to consider what is at the core of this viewing strategy if this strategy can be usefully employed both inside and beyond academia.

In the next three chapters (Chapters Two, Three and Four), I put “viewing as if in a female network” to work. The first analysis chapter, Chapter Two, is about *viewing as if in a female network* as a way to reroute whiteness and to re-center marginalisation of non-white characters on the level of our viewing. If whiteness is one of the dominant continuities in female-centred TV series, then in Chapter Two I must interrogate what opportunities there are for using the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy as I conceive it to find alternatives not only for meanings, images and narratives around gender but also race, or rather, around the intersection of gender and race. Focusing on the series *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*, I put the strategy of *viewing as if in a female network* in the service of searching out of alternatives for the marginalisation or erasure of non-white characters. By magnifying and amplifying those characters outside the dominant positionality (whiteness, middle-class, heteronormativity and able-bodied-ness) through alternatives, I reckon we make the text, through our viewing, more plural – something that is crucial for feminism. The specific strategies I develop in this chapter to achieve this goal include, first, the strategy of following technology onscreen, a strategy I use throughout Chapters Three and Four as well, and already explained earlier in this introduction. In this chapter, following technology bring us to marginalised non-white characters and gives the “as if” viewer an opportunity to consider what kind ofscreen worlds is the marginalised non-white character engaging when they are on their phone or on their social media. The second strategy is taking the trivialised seriously. By employing this strategy and investing attention into that which was previously dismissed, I can infuse something with new meanings, images and narratives, or at least legitimate doing so. I employ this strategy alongside the first by taking seriously the technophiles’s technology. With this strategy of *viewing as if* the trivial was important, I begin to expand this strategy of searching for alternatives *to* the screen. This inevitably bleeds into viewings that imagine alternative *interpretations of* the screen, rather than keeping my viewing only to coming up with alternatives *to* the screen. But again, what matters here is keeping a focus on the idea of alternatives in our viewings, even as they take different forms. The third strategy I develop is that of ‘recasting’ so that I decenter whiteness in my viewing as I view “as if”, for instance, a white character was in fact African American. When doing this, I maintain, what matters is the questioning

activity itself, rather than the answers it produces. The fourth and last strategy explored in this chapter is *viewing as if* sincerity was parody and vice versa to take seriously female and non-white characters as opposed to the authority-bearing white male characters. I argue that these strategies constitute or at least work towards an ethical strategy of active viewing that counters the whiteness of the TV series and gives the viewer direction on how to send sympathy where it is most required.

Moving on from questions of race, Chapter Three considers the political valence of emphasising relationality instead of individuality in our viewing of popular culture texts. Female-centred television has been widely critiqued by feminist media academics as exemplifying postfeminism and as locating ideas of successful femininities in individualist “empowerment”. Even relationships between women have been read as functioning in the service of the individual in such female-centred popular culture (see Winch). Using this as an issue that the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy must tackle, this chapter focuses on using this strategy to draw out and imagine alternatives where collective sensibilities would be foregrounded. In this chapter, the “female network” metaphor comes to the fore and becomes key because it connotes relationality and connectedness between women. Focusing on *Gilmore Girls: A Year in The Life* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, this chapter develops two specific strategies of finding alternatives. Besides following technology which I also employ and develop further in this chapter, other strategies I develop in this chapter includes viewing “as if” morality was a non-issue, especially where female characters are framed as morally questionable. With this strategy, I ask what meanings come to the foreground when morality is replaced by other ways of looking, when the ‘devious’ is seen as productive in some sense, here the feminist sense. Specifically, here I conceive of the alternative of seeing through a technological lens as opposed to a moral lens. The second strategy I develop here is imagining alternative endings to endings where female characters are separated from one another. Instead, I come up with alternatives where the female friends stay together. In this chapter I also consider how *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* itself models ways of *viewing as if in a female network* that benefits my *viewing as if in a female network* efforts and shows the importance of paying attention to texts which already may be instructing me to view in aberrantly creative ways, and to find alternatives for what may be habitual. I also consider this to be a strategy that will usefully fit in

the toolkit of “viewing as if in a female network” in the spirit of privileging the resourcefulness and creativity of this viewing strategy. Then, the kind of strategies that *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* teaches me to adopt include 1) viewing *as if* fabrication was more important than “truth”, 2) to view *as if* cultural hierarchies did not matter and 3) to consider alternative interests and sympathies than the ones that the text suggests I adopt.

Finally, Chapter Four focuses on the centrality of the labour market to the identity of the television heroine in the post-crash 2010s. My position here is that the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy should offer these heroines and ourselves other ways of being and viewing besides romanticising work and productivity, and also doing this without reverting to heterosexual romance. Focusing on only one series in this chapter, *The Bold Type*, I formulate two strategies for finding alternatives to the romance of work. The first one is ‘finding protest’ where I focus on cracks in the fantasy of labour, or “viewing as if” there is protest to the romance of work, where arguably it is difficult to find it. The second strategy I formulate in this chapter is focusing on images rather than dialogue, where the image and the dialogue can be read as contradicting one another. In other words, when the dialogue folds the heroines into fantasies of labour, I “view as if” the dialogue was muted if the image offers us something more radical. I view as if the sound were muted and let bodies speak instead. In this chapter, I also include a discussion on how my own habitual viewing of these series veers into enjoying the romance of labour, and how this habitual viewing of mine necessitates the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy I argue for in this thesis.

Chapter One

Networking with Feminist Academic Scholarship and Speculating Whether As *If* Viewing for Academia or Beyond

Introduction

I have now established that this thesis is about: a kind of viewing that fully embraces imagining alternatives to the screen and that, by focusing on my own viewing as the object of analysis, I inquire into and experiment with this strategy of viewing for feminist purposes. Before employing this strategy on my chosen texts in the following chapters, I first use this first chapter to elaborate on my choice of texts, the female-centred television series. I do this to explain the kind of concerns and questions that surround this body of texts from the point of view of feminist media scholarship, and I do so by leaning on scholarship of feminist media studies. An understanding of the concerns and questions that this body of scholarship raises will further clarify my own political commitments that I have already begun to outline in the introduction and which I lean on to come up with alternatives to the texts.

In this chapter I also address the specific technologies of the 2010s that my *viewing as if* follows as a thread: the smartphone and social media. Both technologies are not simply technologies of connection, they also operate as technologies of the kind of individualism I claim *viewing as if* ought to reroute. I consider how this complicates our following of technologies onscreen to find alternatives when we need to contend with technology's meanings of, not only connection, but also individualisation and isolation. Finally, having produced an academic engagement with other scholarship on my chosen texts and addressed the attendant meanings of contemporary technologies, I finish this chapter by asking whether the *as if* viewing strategy is for academia or for everyday forms of viewing. Regarding this strategy, I ponder whether these two camps must be considered distinctly at all and the level of knowledge and engagement necessary for *viewing as if in a female network* in an entertainment landscape characterised by personalised consumption and a variety of attention and inattention levels. I consider such questions to conclude that this strategy of viewing is not just an academic method of analysis but a strategy of reading and viewing that is open to all (a point already made through the examples of *as if* viewing given in the introduction of this study).

Defining Female-Centered

As already noted, I focus my *viewing as if in a female network* on US female-centered television series from a particular period. Female-centred television series have already been identified as a somewhat specific and discrete corpus by Bonnie Dow in the mid-1990s who names this category of texts “woman-centered shows” (xvii), drawing on Judith Mayne’s nomenclature of “woman-centered narrative” (82). Much has changed in television culture since Dow’s *Prime-Time Feminism* of 1996. For instance, at the time of writing, as she puts it:

Conventional wisdom in the television industry held that a woman could not carry a drama. To a considerable extent, this belief still seems to hold sway. Today, women are visible in popular ensemble dramas [...] but they are still outnumbered and upstaged by male characters [...]. As of this writing, there are [only] two dramas on prime-time television centered on female leads. (xviii)

Post *Sex and the City*, and post-Crash, it seems incredible that just 24 years ago, the only non-sit-com prime-time female-centered television series Dow could think of were *Murder, She Wrote* (1984-1996) and *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993-1998).

While my own work deals with material post-SATC and hence comes from a very transformed world and television landscape, it still bases its structure on Dow, dealing with specific programmes as case studies on which I perform my own experimental viewing. As Dow argued, the approach of focusing on a single case study per chapter allowed her to:

...consider the programs discussed [...] to be interesting and important *in themselves*, as well as for the generalizations they reveal about the construction of feminism for audiences [...] Each program [...] is noteworthy for its place within the trajectories of television history, feminist history, and the evolution of televisual representations of feminism. Each is also important to analyze for its own unique appeal and its distinctive rhetorical strategies. (*Prime Time* xviii)

Though my focus is not to make any kind of claims about the shows themselves and how they relate to their historical contexts, I do mostly adhere to this strategy of choosing one or two case studies per chapter.

Moreover, it should be noted that when writing in an age of abundance for the female-centered series, there is a problem with this approach of selecting all the important series of a certain period of time for attention. It would go far beyond the remit of any dissertation to devote a chapter to all the important series of the post-crash to ask how I would view each of them “as if in a female network”. So, the problem of selection, including where the field is expanding and changing at a rate of knots, is a big one. Focusing on the representation of technology has somewhat solved the problem of selection. As I have already explained in the introduction, each of the series analysed here represents the gender-technology relation in an interesting or peculiar way. The body of texts chosen are preoccupied with ideas of modern womanhood, womanhood in an era of huge technological change, and each articulates ideas of what it means to be female in relation to that change. The very hypervisibility of smartphone and social media technology in particular in these series becomes, to an extent, a major signifier of modern womanhood – the “homotechnicus”. And so, a focus on technology aids with selection (this function that technology plays for me must be distinguished from technology’s other function in this thesis where its metaphoricity provides opportunities for “viewing as if in a female network”).

As in Dow’s analysis, my chosen texts do not in and of themselves necessarily advance the cause of feminism and benefit the lives of actual individual women, even when they are framed as being feminist. And it is the shortcomings of these texts, in the feminist sense, which are the focus of my viewing strategy with which I intend to come up with better alternatives. Though I maintain that such shortcomings are at the forefront of these texts for the purpose of making the case for “viewing as if in a female network” which requires a certain fixity of the screen, I do admit that the series in question are ultimately ambivalent, and not necessarily consistent in their message or politics. I recognise that the series both evince continuities that are anti-feminist and at the same time can be viewed as containing within them kernels of feminist potential. This is after all dependent on how the viewer interprets the screen. Furthermore, by necessity, with so many stakeholders and such a long duration, a series cannot be said to have a meaning or a politics in the singular, even if it has certain tendencies. For instance, in her 1982 book *Loving with a Vengeance*, Modleski contested the claim that popular culture targeted at women, such as soap

operas and romance novels, is determined by ‘simple’ patriarchal meanings. She wrote, “it should be heartening to feminists to know that, contrary to many male critics, women writers of popular fiction have indeed registered protest against the authority of fathers and husbands even while they appeared to give their wholehearted consent to it” (15). In this way, the meanings of what is a huge corpus of texts are determined not *only* by heteronormative, capitalist etc. ideology. Popular texts can be seen as announcing hegemonic logics while also hosting other meanings. The “coexistence of polarities” posited by Jean E. Kennard as the key to feminist (“polar”) interpretation highlights how ambivalence and oscillation between different positions, politics and ideologies is central to these texts and our feminist readings of them. Moreover, even if we were to imagine that a text can be produced with one message or ideological position in mind, what the spectator or reader takes from the text might be entirely different as argued by Stuart Hall. In light of Hall’s conceived division between the encodings by the producers and the decodings by audiences whereby neither group is totally in control of the meaning, to speak of fixed meanings becomes increasingly difficult.

Because of the multiplicity of meanings that can be extracted from these texts, what becomes important is the kind of strategies of reception adopted. It is in the act of reception then that textual politics can be rerouted, at least when I have no power to change the actual text at the level of production. In this sense, the following chapters offer a lesson in “teleliteracy” (Bianculli), a lesson in *how we can* approach these texts, rather than in what the texts are as things in themselves. Why then focus on the more conservative tendencies of these series to begin with? Because the strategy of coming up with alternatives, which is the primary focus of this thesis, is best put to use in countering those images and narratives that are lacking, that we are dissatisfied with and wish to replace. By this I mean that when I implement and experiment with this viewing strategy, I use it to counteract those images and narratives which I deem are insufficient in terms of my feminist political commitments.

In the following section, I expand on the insufficiencies or continuities within the series, namely the dominance of whiteness, individualism and the fantasy of career goals. These are the continuities I focus on in the proceeding chapters where I

consider alternative images and narratives for such continuities. To identify and expand on these continuities, I rely on feminist scholarship on female-centred television series.

In general, the feminist media scholarship that I engage with in this chapter argues how the images and narratives of female-centred television series largely support whiteness, individualism and the centrality of the labour market as a space of empowerment and feminism for women. The position this scholarship often takes is that, in these series, the logics of postfeminism, neoliberalism and popular feminism operate to produce ideas of individualistic success and happiness based on, what Lagerwey *et al.* have called, “market logics” (n. p.). In other words, this scholarship usually fails to find hope for more radical forms of feminism in these series. For instance, writing on post-crash dramas, Lagerwey *et al.* contend that though post-crash female-centred television series depart from their postfeminist predecessors, they nevertheless reproduce “class and race privilege” that is elsewhere seen in “celebrity feminists”. And while the word feminist may be attached to these series in marketing material or in conversation, the heroines’ trajectories, such as in *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *The Good Wife* (2009-2016), are merely “‘bootstrap’ feminist success stories”, and worryingly, the heroine’s “accomplishments” usually depend upon “supporting characters who, with troubling frequency, are people of color [sic]”. (Lagerwey *et al.*’s article is representative of the kind of arguments made in feminist scholarship on female-centred television series.) A quick overview of what this body of scholarship does is given by Charlotte Brundson and Lynne Spigel:

[It] consider[s] the meaning and politics of post-feminism in relation to feminism, particularly with regard to issues of generational politics between the ‘waves’, the backlash against feminism, the problems of race, sexuality and class that traditionally haunted feminist movements, and the general question of global justice and citizenship in patriarchal social structures (13).

To engage with this scholarship is to engage critically with female-centred television series and to *view as if in a female network*, not by naively celebrating just any representation of women’s connection, transgressions of traditional femininity, or female “empowerment”, but to engage with the concerns of contemporary academic feminism suspicious of the kind of postfeminist female “empowerment” that dominates media and popular culture. If, as Dejmanee observes, “empowerment” is

“an empty signifier applicable to whatever issue, product or behaviours need to be sold to women, as dictated by social, cultural and economic conditions” (120), then mere female agency is not a cause for celebration. Feminism lies elsewhere. And the viewing strategy I employ in the following chapters might profitably reroute these unfavourable continuities to arrive at that elsewhere-feminism.

I am especially interested in how this scholarship addresses the figure of the ‘working woman’, and how her various incarnations through time in television series have become a kind of screen shorthand for all feminist progress, tying acceptable (or digestible) forms of feminism inextricably to the workplace. This scholarship notes the limitations of that figure which tethers feminism to women at work and gauges its success by individual successes and achievements.

The lesson of this scholarship is that female-centered television series do not have a straightforward relationship with feminism. It is often the case that representations of women that are presented and self-present as ‘progressive’ have, in fact, what can be considered a conservative and sometimes even harmful logic that, far from subverting the status quo, actually reinforces it. It is this general observation that is necessary for a shift to a non-naïve *viewing as if in a female network*. Entering into dialogue with the female network of knowledge produced by feminist scholars also then equips me to navigate those ideologies that are propounded by the texts as being ‘liberational’, ‘empowering’ and even feminist, while they actually merely reproduce traditional representational violences.

Finally, the insights of this scholarship can be framed as the results of “paranoid reading” as defined by Sedgwick: they are identifications of the insufficiencies of these series and representations. These insights are important for me because I use them as jumping off points for finding alternatives to that which is criticised. Furthermore, this literature review allows me to determine what exactly it is that my *viewing as if in a feminist network* needs to reroute in order to move from the paranoid reading to the reparative. Of course, I can only move into the reparative mode on the basis of the paranoid readings of others. The literature review in this chapter, forming as it does a basis for my work, is then itself an act of networking.

The Continuities of Female-Centred Television Series

Whiteness and Middle-Class

The first continuity to observe is the dominance of whiteness in these series. As already noted, the ‘working woman’ heroine in the female-centred television series is predominantly white, middle-class, able-bodied and conventionally beautiful. This means that the hyper-visibility of this demographic of “whiteness and the middle class” is privileged as “ideal subjectivities” (Banet-Weiser 154). The dominance of this demographic has been widely observed (for instance in Lotz *Designing* 173; McRobbie *Aftermath* 71; and Lagerwey et al. n. p.). In the current television landscape of streaming services, there are a number of series led by non-white heroines – *Scandal* (2012-2018), *The Mindy Project* (2012-2017), *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-), *Dear White People* (2017-), *Insecure* (2016-), *She’s Gotta Have It* (2017-2019), *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017) and *Jane The Virgin* (2014-2019) – though compared to the number of series led by white heroines, there is hardly reason to celebrate. Likewise, series led by working-class heroines are also few and far between. Notable exceptions include *Nurse Jackie*, the resurrection of *Roseanne* for one season in 2018 and the single season *Working Class* (2011). Speaking to the kind of sensibilities that pervade the current television series landscape, Lagerwey and Nygaard have identified the racist underpinnings of post-crash series led by “white women in emotional distress or facing mental illness” (“Liberal Women” n. p.). Calling these series “horrible white people shows”, the authors argue that the focus on the white middle-class as psychologically compromised acts to “foreground a supposedly precarious, threatened, middle-class whiteness” while distracting “from the plight of minorities most impacted by Trump’s policies and broader political agenda” in the US where these series are made and based.³

The centering of the white middle-class position and the erasure of more precarious positionalities in these series reinforces what bell hooks has called “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” (“Cultural Criticism” 7). In fact, the series, in their

³ Though the “horrible white people shows” moniker describes television of the Trump era, Lagerwey and Nygaard’s description of this trend nevertheless speaks to the longer unlikeable character trend that gained popularity in the late 2000s.

framing as feminist, reinforce this power structure while allowing concessions to a few women who are white and middle-class. In light of this foregrounding of a very specific and privileged position to the detriment of a more equal attention to women of all kinds of backgrounds, I keep in mind that my viewing of texts does not need to reproduce this kind of attention to the white middle-class position. By *viewing as if in a female network* I can try to draw out those positionalities that are so often made invisible or marginalised in female-centred television series.

Individualism

The second tendency of female-centred television series that I focus on is their subscription to a “grammar of individualism”, which is a feature of postfeminist culture more generally (Gill “Postfeminist” 158). Gill notes that with this grammar of individualism, the cultural and the political are erased, and we become autonomous agents free from the co-determinants of our environment. Instead, “every aspect of life is refracted through the idea of personal choice and self-determination” and no act or event can be reasoned on the grounds of “inequalities or power imbalances” (159). In this logic, liberation becomes a matter of the choices the individual makes, but it is precisely this individualisation of liberation that forecloses a feminism whose aim it is to transform society.

In the 2010s post-recession environment, where there is a “heightened awareness of capitalism’s hierarchies and deficiencies”, there is renewed awareness of structural power imbalance in female-centred television series which is expressed through their “disenchantment with political institutions” such as law and government (Lagerwey *et al.* n. p.). But even where lip service is paid to structural inequality in these series, the response to inequalities operates on the logics of individualism, rather than undermining this discourse. Inequality and power hierarchies that become harder to deny in the post-recession period are in fact reconciled with individualism in these series by means of a discourse of resilience. For Lagerwey *et al.* who focus on post-recession female-centred drama - *The Good Wife* (2009-2016), *Homeland* (2011-2020), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Girls* (2012-2017), *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015) among others – this is a “thematics [...] critical to the narrative operations” of these texts (n. p.), but it is a thematic that pervades popular culture

more widely. According to Gill and Shani Orgad, resilience is “the capacity to ‘bounce back’ from difficulties and shocks”, tasking individuals with navigating the hardships of life alone by sheer will power and hard work. The promise is that by resilience anyone can achieve stability and financial security, if not success. Through television, smartphone apps, self-help books and magazines, this discourse increasingly addresses middle-class women “as ideal subjects of resilience” (480). Because this discourse normalises the “sexist, racist damage traditional white supremacist patriarchy inflicts on white women and people of color [sic] as the ultimately innocuous damage that they are individually responsible for overcoming” (James 7), collective action or an imagining of how it could be otherwise is foreclosed. This kind of dynamic where systemic inequalities are recognised but the solutions proposed are individualised are also the logics of ‘popular feminism’ in the post-crash era in which, “gender inequalities” are recognised but the solutions offered are “mainly neoliberal” (Banet-Weiser 154-155).

Reflecting on this problematic manifestation of the individualised working woman which has served as an expression of feminism across the decades, Dow has remarked that

[t]he white, urban, single career woman is a problematic feminist figurehead, and not simply because it limits our understanding of the multiplicity of women who figure in feminism. This formulation also overlooks a crucial component of feminist politics: its collective nature. Feminism is about women *together*, not alone. (par. 12 “Women Together”)

Here, not only does Dow highlight the glaring flaws of mainstream feminism, she also suggests where we might look for alternatives to mainstream feminism’s singularity and individualism: in something more collective, in the relations between women. This does not mean that just any representation of female collegiality should be celebrated as feminist in a more radical sense – I have already pointed out Winch’s observation of how individualism permeates the representation of female relations in pop culture (2). But this does not preclude searching out and imagining relations that support a radical feminism’s critique of society and concomitant desire for society’s re-organisation. Along similar lines, Martha Nochimson has argued that criticism of *Ally McBeal* focusing on “Ally as a role model was inappropriate in a show in which the feminism was located not in Ally, but between characters, in new

relational paradigms” (29). So here too I want to consider shifting our focus toward the ‘relation’. If feminism’s location lies in relationships and not in the individual, then I posit that *viewing as if in a female network* is a *feminist* strategy particularly because of its emphasis on the ‘network’.

To add to Nochimson’s observation about the importance of the ‘relation’ for feminist analysis, I also add that how the viewer relates to the text and the character also matters. In other words, feminism can be located not just in the text, but should also be located in how I, the viewer, view the text; feminism should be located in the viewer-text relationship. The strategy of “viewing as if in a female network” then, as an ethical and accountable strategy of viewing, works to bring feminism into the viewer-text relation.

The Labour Market

The last continuity I work with in this thesis is that of the labour market whose prominence in popular forms of feminism, and thus in female-centred television series, can be traced back to the time of 1970s Second Wave feminism. Writing about this time, Dow points out that feminism was embraced by the press and media in selective ways that were designed to render feminism palatable to the status quo. She writes that although “press accounts make clear that second-wave feminism was not monolithic”, they nevertheless divided the movement into two camps: the “reformist” and the “radical”, and positioned the former as being the more reasonable position while framing the latter as too extreme, all the while ignoring the differences between groups within these two camps (*Prime Time* 27-28). Through this divide, the media legitimated some of the concerns of feminism, while marginalising if not ridiculing others. As Dow notes, referring to work by Susan Douglas,

Wage disparity, discriminatory laws, and the low percentage of women in certain professions were easily documented with statistics, were understandable in terms of basic American values like equal opportunity, and were located in the public sphere, which reporters saw as the realm where legitimate news resided. The critique of sex roles, the patriarchal family, and the false consciousness created by the mythology of romance and heterosexuality were treated with much more skepticism and, often, outright ridicule (*Prime Time* 186-189).

This legitimisation of feminist concerns about women's participation in the 'labour market' on the one hand, and the delegitimisation of feminism that tried to imagine alternative ways of organising society, even at the level of the private sphere of intimacy, then played out, and still does, in female-centred television series. As observed by Dow, television "interpret[s] social change and manag[es] cultural beliefs", and in the case of female-centred television series, they formulate narratives about "what it means to be a 'liberated woman'" (*Prime Time* xv).

It was the liberal and reformist feminism that foregrounded issues of equality and equal-opportunity in the labour market which led to the visibility of the white middle-class 'working woman' which increasingly replaced the previous housewife figure of the 1950s and 1960s heading series such as *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), *Bewitched* (1964-1972) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-1966). According to Dow, it was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) that constituted this break because, first, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was a "departure from the 'goodwife' character type" that had previously dominated "domestic sitcoms", a popular television form of the time; and second, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* "expanded the limited parameters of the single adult woman comedy", especially because it "liberated single-woman sitcoms from narratives dominated by husband hunting" (prior to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *That Girl* (1966-1971) also starred a single working woman, but her primary aim, which she attained, was marriage). The novelty of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was that Mary was "single by choice" and "saw her job as a career rather than a stopgap on the journey toward marriage" (*Prime Time* 34). From this point on, the career and the labour market increasingly becomes a stage for female liberation because it is seen as freedom from the trappings of the housewife role. Though this is somewhat turned on its head during the flourishing economy of the pre-crash late 1990s and 2000s when becoming a stay at home wife as a matter of choice becomes an ultimate signifier of modern womanhood (the spirit of this idea is expressed in a well-known moment of *Sex and The City* (1998-2004) where Charlotte, one of the four main characters, announces over and over again "I choose my choice!" after quitting her prestigious job to stay home ["Time and Punishment" season 4 episode 7] – her declaration can only be meaningful and significant when it is understood as reversing the 1970s narrative of female liberation as pursuing a career).

From the 1970s to the present, woman-led series can be seen to circle around this question of whether liberation for women really is a matter of work and having a career, with different answers given at different points in time. For instance, as Susan Faludi notes in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), feminism in the 1980s suffered a backlash in public opinion and the media, subjecting the ‘working woman’ figure to increased pressures to revert to domesticity, or at least, to downsize her career. As Faludi ironically remarks about the discourse of this time, feminism, it seemed, had made women who “pursued their own professional dreams” miss out on the “female adventure” (2). According to Faludi, the ‘working woman’ was the prime target because she represented the gains of feminism, and the backlash was expressed on television in dwindling support for this figure: adult women more generally were being replaced with “victimized girls” in a “new breed of action-adventure series” in the 1985-86 television season (156). This was followed by a 1987-88 season in which “only three of twenty-two new prime-time dramas featured female leads—and only two of them were adults” (155). After the backlash period, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, *Sex and the City* played a central role in redeeming the working woman on television, but this time her work was not framed in terms of feminism, but rather as facilitating her consumerist lifestyle (Dejmanee 121-122). *SATC*’s women work not because work is a feminist end in itself, but because it empowers them to be exuberant consumers. Nevertheless, as Dejmanee notes, “the career” remains “the focal point of meaning, narrative and identity” in female-centred television series from the late 1990s onwards. Parallel to *SATC*, another stream of series – *Gilmore Girls*, *Providence* (1999-2002), *Judging Amy* (1999-2005) –, described by Diane Negra as ‘retreatist’, showed heroines choosing to adopt a quaint downsized life, in some cases leaving behind a prestigious career for work that was more traditionally feminine. Here work and traditional feminine roles of care labour and domesticity are reconciled through a “[a] protagonist whose paid professional work never drifts too far from the skillset associated with familial domesticity” (17). Finally, in the current landscape, work in female-centred television series becomes a matter of survival. Lagerwey *et al.* have noted of female-centred television dramas that have proliferated in the early 2010s that “economic stress” in these series leads the heroines to “devote all available energy to the demands of their jobs or other matters central to their survival” (n. p.).

In all scenarios, whether positively or negatively negotiated, work is an important question central to the TV heroine's identity.

But this focus on the heroine's participation in the labour market forecloses radical feminism's concerns of how culture and different aspects of the world and how it is organised, including the labour market, can be rethought and reinvented. Radical feminism with its emphasis on "consciousness-raising" brought women together to "share their personal experiences and feelings about being women in a male-defined and male-dominated culture" (Dow *Prime Time* 64), in other words, to come into awareness of the present state of things and thus open opportunity to question that state of things and perhaps reimagine it. This was the starting point for radical feminism's reimagining of, or will to reimagine, patriarchal culture, rather than, or as well as, finding equality within it. If these series locate the question of liberation in participation in the labour market, the political question of whether we would be better off in a society organised in a different way is made somewhat invisible. It is this foreclosing of reimagining the state of things that I address through my *as if viewing* as this strategy, acting as a tool for radical feminism, challenges the state of the world, and the state of the screen, by coming up with alternatives.

The dominance of whiteness, emphasis on rugged individualism and the centrality of the labour market are all continuities within female-centred television series that I aim to reroute through *viewing as if in a female network*. It is these aspects of female-centred television that narrowly define what we are invited to see as the embodiment of successful and desirable womanhood. And it is these strictures that the *viewing as if* strategy hopes to escape.

Although the heterosexual paradigm is also a mainstay in these series, I do not focus on the romantic plot because, as noted by Lagerwey *et al.*, the series of the 2010s "either downplay or otherwise marginalise traditionally "feminine" emotional concerns such as intimate domestic relationships". The authors observe that, in marked contrast to pre-crash series such as *SATC* in which the question of heterosexual romance was central, "the sites of deepest intimacy in these [post-crash] series tend to be located in the workplace, in friendships of great complexity and depth, and in ill-considered or ill-fated sexual relationships with co-workers" (n. p.).

This gives me cause to shift my attention away from the heterosexual paradigm or the romance plot in these series, and to focus on the other tendencies that I have outlined in this chapter. Thus, I focus on whiteness in Chapter Two, individualism in Chapter Three and the prominence of the labour market in Chapter Four as I employ the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy for the purpose of rerouting the images and narratives of these continuities.

These “continuities” generate certain narratives that make up a popular feminism based on competitive economic subjectivities, and they preclude more radical representations of feminism constituted by women’s coalitions and political projects, especially those transcending racial and class cleavages. As Winch observes, “neoliberal postfeminist culture prizes a competitive edge” which fuels the “drive for hypervisibility in the quest for the distinctive self-brand” and which “negate[s] the self” and “destroy[s] potential political solidarities” (195-196). The drive for this hypervisibility that pushes a particular vision of what the successful female subject ought to aim for, Winch notes, is “anti-connectivity” (2), and forecloses on a rethinking of our world. To combat such meanings, I reject the seductions of the economically motivated popular feminism in these series and employ the *as if viewing* strategy to consider what narratives and images of a more genuine feminism might look like.

Technology of the 2010s

Now to address another specificity of my research focus: the meanings attending contemporary technologies of smartphones and social media platforms. Schantz, who considered letters, phones and email, was writing before the explosion of smartphones and social media platforms and their current ubiquity. For Schantz, pre-smart phone and social media communication technologies are technologies more of connection rather than disconnection. When Schantz is considering communication technologies in his own study, the pre-2010s technologies either enable or hinder female networking depending on the text’s sympathy, or lack thereof, towards the heroine. But the communication technologies that Schantz writes about do not have attendant discourses of isolation and separation that the technologies of the smartphone and social media have attached to them. Both smart phone technology and social media platforms have reputations of reinforcing individualism as well as

connecting people. These newer technologies have a dual-facet, both isolating and hopelessly imbricating us with each other. Hunter Hargraves writing on the function of the smartphone in the series *The Good Wife* observes that “whereas landline telephones are specific to group settings (the family home, the office) or even to the public (for pay), mobile telephones are personal in nature. Like recent technological developments in television, the smartphone allows for individualization within one’s network” (116). Through the smartphone’s customise-ability and its multifunctionalities of self-surveillance and self-management (the smartphone is a calendar, alarm clock, step-counter, to do list, email, the news, music player, camera, social media platform and any other function that comes in app form) the device turns our attention back on ourselves and our behaviour. Though the smartphone as a communication medium retains relationality, it also fortifies our desire to be what Winch calls “the perfect self” (2-3). Gill has written in depth about how “digital and media cultures” have come together with “post-feminist modalities of subjecthood” resulting in “a novel and extraordinary powerful regulatory gaze on women” (“Surveillance” n. p.). Especially through apps and functions that regulate the body (what it does and how it looks) the smartphone facilitates the internalisation of surveillance. This means that following the smartphone in female-centred series must reckon with these devices as the means of regulating the heroine as an individual, though conformist, subject as well as connecting her to others in a liberating and radical way. There the ‘cell’ and the hive of the smartphone are always both at work, often against one another.

Social media too has this double function of connecting and individuating, onscreen and off. More specifically, social media exacerbates “issues of connection, intimacy and belonging” (McGill 69) by directing our gaze towards the kind of commodities and lifestyles that will garner us social and cultural capital. This is an observation Mary McGill makes in reference to Instagram’s ‘influencer’ culture which “provide[s] sought-after insights into the kinds of products and skills necessary to embody ‘successful’ femininity” (70), but permeates more ordinary social media use such as users’ documentation of fancy meals at restaurants, gym selfies, pictures of social outings and holidays abroad. This kind of “best life” documentation of ‘correct’ consumption that renders subjects desirably visible draws attention away from intimacy and towards the further reproduction of this kind of consumption. In

female-centred television series then, where consumerism and aspirational lifestyles already enjoy a privileged position (Dejmanee 121-122), meanings of individualism and competitive status-seeking hinders my use of social media onscreen to find alternatives of female connection that is not about this aspirationalism. In Chapter Four, I grapple further with contemporary communication media's impulse to individualise its users within the network as this manifests in *The Bold Type*.

Academic Analysis versus Casual Engagement: Who is the *As If* Viewer?

Because this thesis is concerned with a strategy of viewing – as well as its championing – in an academic context, i. e. a dissertation, it is necessary to expand on what kind of viewing this is. I need to clarify if this is an academic viewing strategy for the purpose of writing research or if it is a strategy intended to be taken up and used in casual everyday viewing at all degrees of engagement and for all kinds of purposes. I want to clarify this because the literature review I have included in this chapter outlines some of the feminist scholarship about female-centred television which has required academic engagement on my part. Does every instance of employing this strategy of finding alternatives to the screen according to one's political commitments require a literature review? Speculating on this, I do not think everyone who takes up this strategy will or does put this amount of work and energy into coming up with alternatives for the screen. Indeed, the literature review in this chapter satisfies the requirement of a dissertation to clearly outline my own political commitments so that it is clear for my reader the kind of alternatives to the screen I am after. But this strategy of viewing exists beyond academe, as proven in the example of racebending fan art in the introduction of this thesis.

But it may be worth to consider the differences and similarities between academic and more casual viewing to account for the fact that this dissertation as an account of exploring and experimenting with this strategy of viewing is likely to be markedly different from other instances of the use of this strategy, which after all may only remain in the mind and not amount to any other text (research, adaptation or fan art). After all, my interest is ultimately this strategy as performed at the level of the viewing activity. By reflection, speculation, and leaning on what other scholars have to say, I consider in the rest of this section how this strategy of finding alternatives

may be employed differently in the context of academia versus the context of casual everyday viewing.

First, academic viewing for analysis is markedly different from casual viewing in terms of intensity and outcome. This is a general distinction between the intensity of academic analysis versus the “flow” (used here in a different sense to Raymond Williams’ idea of flow) of more casual viewer engagement in an age of “Netflix and chill” – a slang phrase for casual sexual relations, but here loosely encompassing all kinds of viewer distractions. This general distinction begs the question of the academic’s viewing practices and how that intensity of gaze relates to the consumption practices of audiences more generally. An academic will watch deliberately, in different order, singling out scenes, taking them out of context, placing them in others, making written notes on static pages about the movement of images on screen. This is a translation and adaptation process that can radically transform meanings. The slow and meticulous viewing and analytical practices of the academic may, on the one hand, be dynamic because the depth of scholarly attention means a deep interaction with the text and its intertexts and contexts; but, on the other hand, academic attention can arrest the flow and order (or disorder in a YouTube-fragmented viewing culture) of “normal” consumption, and in that change of tempo and intensity, potentially generate a plane of meaning that deviates significantly from more casual viewing practices. Moreover, the academic’s viewing practices are generally taking place in a space of enormous privilege. Academe is not everyday.

At the same time, however, such a categorical distinction of how academics view for research purposes does not reflect the much more complex realities of both academic and casual viewers. The consumption of television cannot simply be divided between the academic and the casual viewer. As Jonathan Bignell points out in his 2004 *Introduction to Television Studies*, there are different degrees of attention and involvement when viewing television content. He draws here on Jeremy Tunstall’s 1983 analysis of media involvement which distinguished between “primary, secondary and tertiary” levels of engagement by the viewer. These move from intense concentration (primary) through to minimal engagement while performing other activities. As Bignell puts it

[c]learly the level of involvement in television makes a lot of difference to the meanings that viewers can make of what they see and hear. Television in contemporary culture is so deeply embedded in the routines of everyday life that the viewer's involvement with it can vary enormously. When studying television it is important to remember that there will be a whole spectrum of ways in which actual viewers engage with programmes (264).

Likewise, from the perspective of the shows' creators, as Hilmes *et al.* suggest, there is an awareness "that different viewers will watch them in radically different ways" (26). "You can now choose to watch a tv show at your convenience [...] and even better, you can select the way you do it: one or two large helpings, or one per night, or one per week, or any combination" (28). With technological innovation in entertainment consumption practices in the internet era – Netflix, box sets, streaming, illegal downloads, online players, hand-held devices, iPads and iPhones – viewing practices multiply and so diversify the type and quality of engagement and attention given to programming. This begs the question of the level of engagement needed for employing this strategy of finding alternatives to the screen. If intense engagement is important, then this viewing strategy may be particularly well-suited to the kind of "passionate and committed" (35) viewing cultures that Mittell writes have come about with "complex television" – programming in the 21st century that, because of their "narrative complexity" (18), audiences "watch" and "rewatch", usually "in strict chronology" and often "collectively document their discoveries with a group of strangers" (2-3). However, my sense is that intense engagement with the text itself is not as important as a will and imagination to draw out alternatives to the screen, whatever the level of attention, and, as such, this strategy is for everyone. A willful and imaginative viewing of a text could even be considered distraction in itself because, through active and willful viewing, we distract ourselves from what is on the screen by imaging alternatives to the screen. Thus, my claim is that what this thesis is offering is not just an academic study of a way of viewing screen texts; it is offering up a strategy for viewing both inside and outside academia. It is not just about in-depth knowledge of theoretical questions or methodical explorations and experimentations. This strategy of finding alternatives is such that it can also happen spontaneously and in any kind of viewing context.

In terms of the specific feminist commitments I prioritise and expand on in this thesis, backing them up with academic writing by others, I am not claiming that to hold such feminist commitments requires in-depth knowledge of academic feminist theory. Feminism is now somewhat mainstream in the period in which I am writing and exists in myriad forms, not just the kind of popular feminism that is criticised as a disguised postfeminism, as Banet-Weiser and Gill claim it so often is (154; “Post-postfeminism?” 612). One can find examples of anti-capitalist critique that can be considered part of non-individualistic feminism in 2010s mainstream media. Consider the feature on Karl Marx in *Teen Vogue* making the case for critiquing capitalism (www.teenvogue.com/story/who-is-karl-marx). In the current landscape that, as Lagerwey *et al.* have noted shows signs of “heightened awareness of capitalism’s hierarchies and deficiencies” (n. p.), it is no surprise that anti-capitalist feminism makes its way into colloquial feminisms as well. As observed by Catherine Dale and Rosemary Overell, “[f]eminism circulates” in the 2010s landscape in “academic discussions, popular think pieces, and Twitter storms” and in so doing “its discourse has [...] become more and more fragmented” and “contradictory” (2). Admittedly, this energetic circulation of feminism through various channels has sometimes meant the reduction of feminism to “catchphrases”. But despite this feminism’s imperfection and commodification, as Dale and Overall argue, “it feels important to acknowledge that feminism has always been grounded in the material and the everyday”, meaning that “this material orientation needs to account for and engage with the ubiquity of the commodity in the current context” (3). After all, the slogan of the second wave, “the personal is political”, draws attention to how politics reside not just in the public sphere but also in the domestic and in the consumerism that, in part, shaped and shapes women’s lives. It resides in the everyday. Thus, I contend that if another viewer wishes to *view as if in a female network*, prioritising similar feminist commitments as I do in this thesis, they would not require perfect knowledge of academic feminist theory, and neither would they have to produce perfect feminist meanings, escaping commodification every time. I contend that it is enough to approach the text with a feminist toolkit of any combination of feminist theories, insights, outlooks and critiques, as well as a willingness to labour and draw out alternatives to the screen that support feminist meanings. (Labour here seems to fall into the trap of women-at-work, but is conscious of this.)

And what about the phenomenon of viewers increasingly responding both in real time and at leisure to what they view in communities of appreciation or criticism via Twitter, Facebook groups etc. while watching? (Buschow *et al.*; Deller; Harrington *et al.*). In this sense, the “network” of “network television” and the “network” of female networking take on new meanings. So does the multiplicity of the alternatives to the screen that this network of viewers may imagine and put out via social media platforms (speculatively speaking). As Henry Jenkins argued back in 2006 in his landmark work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, “consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content” (3) which results in creative and connected forms of consumption of cultural texts. According to Jenkins, “[c]onsumption has become a collective process” in which we “pool our resources and combine our skills” (4). This highlights the opportunity for making all kinds of “as if” viewings reach a wider audience and for putting these viewings into dialogue with one another. However, the kind of networking involved in convergence culture is not necessarily to be looked at as an automatic good. Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg warn that,

mainstream industries, including the whole gamut of white collar employment, now rely on participatory tenets to compel more work from any participants in online culture. Blurring the distinctions between labour and leisure will not help scholars or indeed any participants in online culture to meet the challenges of this environment (567).

A thesis advocating for a strategy of viewing where alternatives to the screen are produced, and then considering the circulation of these alternatives on social media cannot be easily separated out from this environment where consumers of media double as producers, creating their own content online and thus concomitantly offering their free labour to media corporations. This strategy does not easily escape this late capitalist exploitation of leisure and labour of the audience member. Nevertheless, I forge ahead with this formulation of *viewing as if*, even if it participates in the kind of exploitative consumption-production (or “prosumption” [Toffler 1980, 267]) dynamics because it holds importance for training feminist imaginations, for rethinking popular culture and perhaps even our world. In this sense of reimagining and rethinking the world, the strategy in question could also be

thought of as turning labour against itself. Through reimagination, it ceases the reproduction of the screen and the world as it is, and it creates something else, something new.

Conclusion

Writing about mass-produced genres for women, Modleski has described the function of these texts as addressing “needs and desires” of its audiences, much of them “unconscious”, and resolving these “in generally conservative ways” (xvi). The tendencies of female-centred television series I have outlined in this chapter play a similar role, harnessing audience desires and funnelling them towards aspirational subjectivities reliant on affluence, whiteness and, to use Winch’s term, “normative distinctiveness” (3, 46). In this way, 2010s female-centred television series uphold dominant currents of the wider logics and ideologies of the post-crash cultural landscape. This is not to say that other meanings, even ones that subvert this kind of dominant individualism, do not come to the fore. As Amanda Lotz has argued about an earlier batch of series, “[i]t is impossible to argue persuasively that these series are either feminist or antifeminist because of their contradictory nature and their sophisticated use of narrative devices, as well as the complexity of their textual form and the programming context in which they circulate” (*Redesigning* 98).

I now turn my attention to my own viewing and my use of the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy. Focusing especially on the presence of continuities in and among the series – whiteness and middle-class subjectivities, individualism and the importance of the labour market – in the following chapters I show how I use this strategy to come up with feminist alternatives. Although I do this in the context of an academic thesis, meaning that this viewing strategy benefits from my inclusion of research about the context, history and theory of my chosen texts and my political commitments, the strategy in question is not in itself academic.

Chapter Two

As If the Margin was the Centre: Viewing to Decentre Whiteness in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) and *Girls* (2013-2017)

Introduction

In this chapter I finally inquire into and experiment with employing the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy, and I do so for the purpose of rerouting the dominance of whiteness. This means I put the strategy of *viewing as if in a female network* in the service of searching out of alternatives to the marginalisation or erasure of non-white characters who are usually neglected by the text’s I focus on. I prioritise addressing this dominance of whiteness before anything else, specifically in *Parks and Recreation* and *Girls*, because of the importance of addressing race when addressing gender. Too often when white scholars do not address race, the discussion becomes about white people under the guise of being about an abstract and universal, though gendered, subject. To avoid this oversight, I begin by addressing this dominance of whiteness.

The first way I put this strategy into play is by following technology. As I have explained in the Introduction of this thesis, I take this particular strategy from Schantz, and I employ it throughout this thesis. In this chapter, I use the metaphoricity of technology to find alternatives to the domination of whiteness of the screen. Following technology leads me to two figures, the white technophobic male and the non-white technophilic character. Because my purpose is to decentre whiteness, I side with the technophilic character and use their technologies, which the white technophobe looks down on, to elaborate on these characters, which the narratives themselves fail to do. Following their technological devices, I am able to ask what is on their screens that is absent from our screens? What worlds and relationships are they engaging with, that the audience of the series is prevented from seeing because of the screen’s interest mainly in the white characters? The alternatives here manifest in such inquiry into those technologies whose contents hide storylines and elaborations of these marginalised non-white characters.

I use following technology alongside another strategy which is to take the trivialised seriously. Doing so legitimises inquiring into something, makes something worthy of attention and unpacking. In this chapter, I use this strategy on the technophile’s technologies which the technophobe dismisses. This strategy is not necessarily overtly about finding an alternative to the screen, but it does in fact legitimise giving

attention to something and this opens up consideration of alternatives. Taking the trivialised seriously opens up exploration and a widening of the trivialised that is unavoidably about investing something with new meanings, images and narratives. As I have already flagged in the chapter summary section of the Introduction, I do this to take *viewing as if in a female network* in different directions and consider its different potentialities (even as it bleeds here into acts of interpreting what is on screen as opposed to coming up with alternatives to the screen).

The third way that I “view as if in a female network” in this chapter is the strategy of ‘recasting’ where I de-center whiteness in my viewing by considering the possibility of a character on the screen not being white. Here, I face two issues: 1) an inevitable reliance on stereotypes when I use my imagination to recast white characters into non-white characters as a white academic and 2) the possible charge that what I am doing is excusing the text’s whiteness by taking responsibility to recast the text in my viewing. In respect to this strategy, I also address the important issue of what it actually means to ask a question such as ‘what if this white character was in fact not a white character’. I. e. I ponder what exactly it is that I do when I ask this kind of question and attempt to answer it. To conclude on ‘recasting’ as a strategy of viewing where the goal is to find alternatives, I argue that the importance of this kind of inquiry is at the level of the activity itself rather than the answers I come up with. In fact, definitive answers to questions such as ‘what if character x was in fact character y’ are most likely to be problematic. Yet, I maintain that this incessant speculation matters in a white-centric popular culture. This viewing practice emphasises the importance of plurality of bodies and voices that, I propose, constitutes an ethical form of viewing in which we bring “margin to centre” (I borrow this phrase from bell hooks’s *Feminist Theory: Margin to Centre* [1984] in which she brought to centre black feminist writing that had been ignored by white feminists). Here, “margin to centre” involves not only drawing attention to those characters at the margins of the text (marginal in the sense of being secondary characters and being not white). Margin to centre also means bringing identities who are offscreen altogether into the field of vision, seeing the unseen, the real ghosts of the screen.

The final strategy of this chapter is *viewing as if* sincerity was parody and vice-versa. This way of employing a search for alternatives serves to take seriously female and non-white characters as opposed to the authority-bearing white male characters. By alternating between these two ways of understanding the screen, I am considering different ways that this search for alternatives can be conceived.

Following Technology and Finding the Technophobe

The first strategy I put to use is following communication technology onscreen and using its metaphoricity to find alternatives to the screen. The first thing that I observe as I follow technology onscreen is the recurrence of a technophobic white male character in a number of female-centred television series. Namely, I find him in *Parks and Recreation*, *Girls*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, *Gilmore Girls: A Year in The Life*, *I Love Dick* (2017), and *The Bold Type*.

Following the thread of technology to the technophobic male is in fact following it to its disappearing point, its ostensible erasure, as here the invocation of technology occurs through its disavowal. Thus, the first type of representation of the technology-gender relation I consider is this invocation of technology where technology is overtly disavowed and made absent.

The white male technophobe type includes Ron in *Parks and Recreation* when he throws his computer monitor into the garbage disposal upon learning that Google Earth knows his home address ("The Trial of Leslie Knope" season 4 episode 9), as though the virtual world could be brought to a halt by the destruction of a single piece of its physical machinery. This type, and a more subtle manifestation of technology disavowal, can also be seen in Luke in *Gilmore Girls* and the "no mobile phones" sign in the recurrent setting of his diner (Fig. 5). His technophobia is especially heightened in the post-crash revival of the *Gilmore Girls* where he, like never before, shows off his incompetence with communication media, worn as a badge of honor. Another such technophobic character is Adam in *Girls*. In one scene, Adam presents himself as not knowing how to work an iPhone when his girlfriend Nathalia brings him to an Apple store to purchase him one ("Together" season 2

episode 10).⁴ Once the phone is in his hands, Adam shakes it primitively as if to show he does not know how to work it, and indeed, perhaps he does not know. He reinforces this truth or performance by pronouncing Siri as “Shiri”. Ron, Luke and Adam are clearly marked out as technophobes, but not all instances of this figure are so overt. Dick in *I Love Dick* can be characterised as a technophobe as well, though he is less clearly so. He does not reject technology explicitly, but he shares characteristics with the other technophobes I mentioned here which signify a kind of distancing from modernity and the technological more generally. One such shared characteristic is that all four characters engage in work that involves molding natural materials. Adam, we are told in the pilot of *Girls*, supplements his income through woodwork and in several episodes we see him at work in his apartment (Fig. 6); Luke is also able to craft things from wood and often does handyman jobs for the protagonists of *Gilmore Girls*, often seen hammering their wooden porch decked with his tool belt; and Ron shows off his pieces of woodwork throughout the show, often speaking about woodwork fondly as a “manly” hobby, alongside other “manly” things such as whisky, meat and being alone (Fig. 7). Dick, though not a woodworker (I try to avoid seeing euphemisms in all these scenes), is an artist who makes sculptures from gigantic (of course!) pieces of stone. All of these characters work with natural, hard materials that cannot be moulded by hand alone. All four characters are coincidentally also disillusioned with mainstream life, never showing enthusiasm about ‘progress’ and instead maintaining a serious, if not sarcastic and sometimes sardonic demeanor. They wear variations of browns, earth tones, denim and checked lumberjack shirts. These colours conjure associations with nature, the natural and the outdoors while distancing these characters from trendy or lavish clothes that would align more with city life and consumerism. Adam’s style may be sleeker and less outdoorsy but still retains the seriousness and sombreness of Luke, Ron and Dick’s no-fuss styling, that is when he is not shirtless – and often he is. This way of dressing or undressing as well as the other attributes of these technophobic characters create associations with nature and nostalgia for ideals of masculinity, such as the silent cowboy type (Fig. 8), or the rugged working-class masculinity of outdoor work, such as lumberjacking or coal mining. In other words, masculinities

⁴ This is in fact a deleted scene that can be found on YouTube, “Exclusive: HBO ‘Girls’ Deleted Scene Pits Adam Against Siri” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=5PU3-taIE).

unencumbered by the technologies and commodities of the city. Their curmudgeonly rejection of the fancy fripperies of the internet age is on the one hand supposed to confer on them an authenticity that more tech-savvy characters lack, but also marks them out as dinosaurs, accidental jokes in a world that has moved on without them.



Fig. 5 Luke and his 'No Phone' sign in *Gilmore Girls*.



Fig. 6 A shirtless Adam in *Girls*.



Fig. 7 Overalled Ron in *Parks and Recreation*.

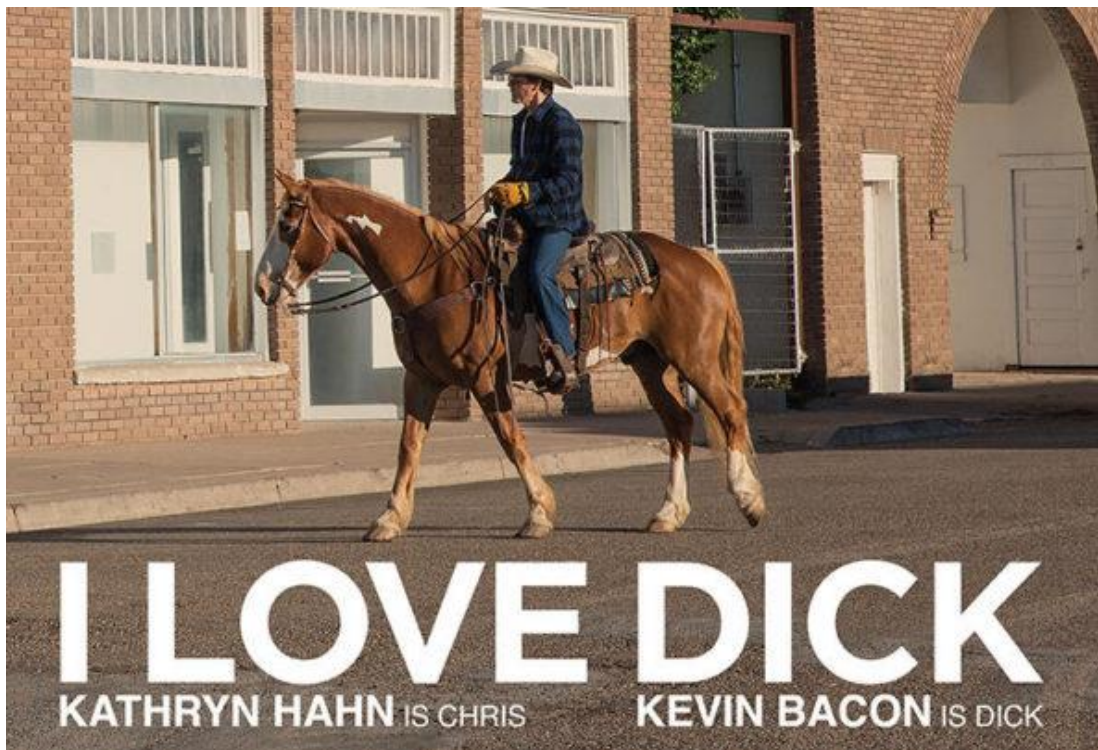


Fig. 8 Promotional poster for *I Love Dick* with Dick in his usual cowboy-like attire, on a horse.

It is as though the moment new communication media become popular and fill the mise-en-scènes of screen texts in the 2010s, the technophobic white male character

emerges to shut down these technologies and the individuals using them. However, the technophobic sentiments of Adam, Ron, Luke and Dick are, of course, not new to the iPhone / social media age. Lynn Spigel and Mark E. Wildermuth have written about the perception that communication and entertainment technologies feminise and domesticate men, and Jean Hamming and Jack Boozar have observed a resistance to new technologies as part of a general anxiety about the increasing commodification of everyday life. Most relevant for my argument is perhaps Jameson's position on the "horror of multiplicity" and the "unimaginable synchronicity of other people" (259) which he noted specifically in relation to the geographical city, but which new communication media re-surfaces with force once again. In the age of new communication media, we can imagine that the Jamesonian figure, caught in a conflict between the inevitable plurality and simultaneity of other people, desires no interruptions by the phone's ring, beep or notification; this figure longs for singular experience that can be achieved in solitude, or at least the quieter existence of disconnection.

The technophobe most often manifests as a white heterosexual male character in contemporary media and popular culture more generally, not just in female-centred tv series, and is an identity category laden with meanings for feminist analysis. The white straight male, for instance, is the ultimate position of racial, gender and heteronormative privilege. This identity position also signifies the oppressive forces of the patriarchy, capitalism and white supremacy as they play out on women. Critiques of the straight white male position of course predate the 2010s but have been brought into sharp relief by various media events and social media campaigns, especially #MeToo, #OscarsSoWhite, #WhiteLivesMatter and #TimesUp. But in this dissertation which I use for *viewing as if in a female network*, this figure is merely a manifestation of the white male privilege that my viewings must reroute. And his technophobia merely reinforces the importance of the alternatives, of those elsewhere, that he rejects alongside technology.

Following Technology and Finding the Non-White Technophile

Alongside the white male technophobe, following technology also leads me to the non-white *technophile*, his Other and inverted self. Examples of this technophilic

character include Tom and Donna in *Parks and Recreation*, Josh in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and Kat in *The Bold Type*. I designate these characters as technophiles because in shows where some characters are shown to be using new communication media more than others, non-white characters are often the most avid users. For instance, in *The Bold Type*, a show about the offices of the fictional *Scarlet* magazine, it is the bi-racial Kat who is the social media editor.

The binary set up of the white technophobe and the non-white technophilic character may have something to do with the proliferation of social media platforms in the 21st century. These act as public spheres, arguably amplifying a range of voices that have hitherto lacked a platform. For instance, mainstream media and academia both celebrate Facebook and Twitter as ideal platforms for democratic speech that invite everyone to participate *and* denounce these platforms as spaces that silence people and incite hate speech, putting us into echo chambers of our own political leanings. These platforms are seen as simultaneously limiting the diversity of voices we are exposed to *and* as spaces of unprecedented multiplicity of voices where we too are invited to participate in this chatter. In this chatter, the participants may include social justice warriors (or SJWs, an acronym usually used pejoratively to describe individuals with left-leaning political views interested in promoting social justice for marginalised people), the alternative right (or alt-right, associated with misogyny and white nationalism), feminists, misogynists, racists, a-politicals, fans and anti-fans, and of course corporations and advertisers too. The smartphone then makes this chatter mobile (giving it further reach) and available to us wherever we go, exploiting our tendencies to be distracted and satisfying our desire to participate or just to spectate.

One narrative about social media's plurality and multiplicity manifests in accounts of conflict, real or imagined, between, on the one hand, feminists, SJWs, trans activists and other left-leaning political activists and, on the other, misogynists, racists and the alt-right. The internet's left here desires to include more and more voices in the public realm, especially voices that belong to women, trans people and non-whites. The internet's right, on the other hand, comprised largely of white heterosexual males, want to close down voices not resembling their own. Ron, Luke, Adam and Dick express a similar kind of anxiety through their disavowal of communication

media technologies.⁵ The anxiety is generated by the tension between difference and sameness, cacophony and monologue, individuals and crowds that information technology has crystallised like never before.

In *Parks and Recreation*'s episode "Sex Education" (season 5 episode 4), one of the storylines clearly illustrates the racial divide between the technophobe and the technophile and this issue about whose voice is going to get a platform and be heard. In this episode, the technophobe Ron tries to help Tom, the non-white technophilic character, to disconnect from a compulsive engagement with social media. Ron takes Tom to his remote lakeside cabin that has no electricity and is "far away from civilisation". They spend their time chopping wood (again, I reject any euphemism), fishing and sitting by campfires. Meanwhile, Ron suggests different ways that Tom might purge his desire to be on social media. However, Ron's attempts at separating Tom from technology are unsuccessful. Tom ends up sneaking away with Ron's car to buy a new phone in the nearest supermarket. On the way back, he crashes the car while tweeting (causing a road accident while tweeting and driving was what obliged Tom's technology detox in the first place).

At the very end of the episode, Tom tells Ron how to interpret his technophilia: "I spend a lot of time looking at screens because recently a lot of things in my life aren't going that great. So I would rather play Doodle Jump than think about that". Ron forgives Tom for crashing his car, on the condition that Tom will help fix the car, and on two further conditions:

when you do get your phone back, you will not stare at it when you are talking to another human being, look a man in the eye when you are speaking to him. And secondly, if you ever need to discuss your problems with someone, find Leslie, she lives for that crap.

Here, Ron, the technophobic white male, is given the authority to teach Tom a lesson in social interactions. Especially ironic because ruggedly independent Ron himself consistently evades communicating and being with others. Even though Tom explains the reasons for his technophilia, Ron evades asking Tom more about his

⁵ The trope of the technophobic male and what it signifies has been registered and explored in previous scholarship (Hargraves; Hammings; Spigel; Boozer; Dicken and Lausten). The figure has in fact appeared with frequency in Hollywood films of the 1990s when computers became a popular consumer technology.

unhappiness by maintaining that Tom needs to learn better social etiquette and by redirecting Tom to Leslie who can perform the care labour of listening to Tom and helping him with his problems. His addition of “look a man in the eye” is significant too. It coheres with the authority role Ron has put himself in and the position he is put in by virtue of his maleness and whiteness. “Look a man in the eye” as a rebuttal to Tom’s looking at his smartphone screen seems to be mere annoyance on Ron’s part that he is not getting the attention and respect he desires. However, it also invokes a kind of gaze that is placed over and against screen-looking: it is the male gaze pre-Mulvey, which imagined itself as un-duplicitous and innocent of power, but of course was neither.

In this moment, it is clear that the text wants to position Ron as the voice of reason and authority. Tom acquiesces to Ron and apologises at the very end of the episode and we see no further resistance from Tom. The technophobe as he relates to the question of authority is crucial here because new consumer communication technologies present opportunities for self-representation that challenge media institutions dominated by the white male who so often speaks for and over other identity categories. White male technophobia, then, cannot be conceptually divorced from this fear of technology as used by women and non-white people for empowerment.

But not only does Ron reassert his authority in this episode, he also forecloses any exploration of Tom’s character or any inquiry into what is going on with Tom. Ron privileges his own interpretation of Tom as not following good old-fashioned conversation etiquette, rather than prioritising Tom’s explanation of himself – that he is distracting himself from unhappiness. It is only “secondly” that Ron addresses Tom’s interpretation of himself and his screen attachment (Tom’s desire to be on social media due to “things in [his] life [not] going that great”). But Ron’s acknowledgement of this interpretation of Tom’s behaviour only goes so far as redirecting Tom to Leslie, the female protagonist of the show and the character who typically does the majority of the care labour for other characters.

The lesson Ron teaches Tom about social etiquette is one that effectively silences Tom. Not only does it deny Tom’s own interpretation of why he is compulsively on social media, Ron’s insistence that Tom’s use of new communication media is only

“staring at screens” also forecloses the possibility that Tom’s engagement with screens may also involve communication with important people in Tom’s life and other potentially significant experiences. If we agree that social etiquette is the lesson Tom must learn, what communications, relationships, experiences of Tom’s are we closing down? In addition, the supposed insulting feminisation of non-white Tom in his portrayal as media addict, if to be “manly” is to disavow technology, should not be overlooked.

The other non-white character in *Parks and Recreation*, Donna, also happens to be an avid Tweeter. In the case of Donna, her “staring at screens” is not criticised by the other characters. However, as in Tom’s case, there is an unwillingness to develop the character and to follow potentially interesting leads. In the episode “Flouride”, the employees of the Parks and Recreation department decide each other’s ‘spirit dog’, the dog that best suits their personality. Everyone struggles to pin down Donna to a dog until the very end of the episode when it is decided she is a cat. Donna’s colleague April justifies this choice by describing Donna as “temperamental”, “unpredictable”, “complex and hard to read”. She adds, “you make people work before you let them in, but if they put the time in and prove that they care, then you open yourself up to them”. Here, April reveals the show’s failure to explore Donna’s character. “Temperamental”, “unpredictable” and “complex” seem like poor substitutes for actual detailed exploration of Donna’s motivations and desires as a non-white female character. These descriptors serve not to reveal a complex figure but to effect Donna’s marginalisation in the series.

In fact, in a show that is so character driven, a show acclaimed for its unique and idiosyncratic characters, Donna is perhaps the character who is least developed in the show. For instance, though we are privy to Donna’s rich dating life and her desirability, we only know about this aspect of Donna because Donna herself refers to her dates and ex-boyfriends throughout the show, mostly through side comments. However, we never get to see her actual dates onscreen, except for Joe whom Donna marries in the last season, and whom we meet only in the second last season. Because Donna’s dating life is invoked predominantly in Donna’s and other characters’ dialogue through remarks peripheral to the main storylines of the episodes, such recollections serve as a quick shorthand for Donna’s character

development, in place of having fully fledged episode storylines where Donna actually goes on such dates onscreen. Through verbal shorthands, Donna is excluded from being central to the episodes' storylines, the drama of the show: her characterisation is not part of the drama, and those characterisations themselves are unsatisfactory in terms of detail. In fact, when April calls Donna "complex", "unpredictable" and "temperamental", really these are failures of real characterisation and just a set of otherings.

April, however, simultaneously indicates that reading Donna is a problem and that it requires effort from the viewer. April tells us that Donna is "hard to read", that she "makes people work", and that others must "put the time in" and "prove that [they] care", then Donna will open herself up to others. Both simple othering and invitation to 'read harder', April brings attention the labour necessary to centralise a character that is otherwise marginalised in a text. Unlike Ron who does not put the labour into understanding Tom, April flags that reading / viewing is "work" and is "hard".

Perhaps Ron knows this too and it is because he is unwilling to do this work with regard to Tom that he directs him to Leslie, a woman who will do this care work of listening. Both Leslie and April acknowledge the difficulty of reading characters (and texts). It is the white male character who refuses to acknowledge that there is anything that needs to be read carefully and with attention, and perhaps with imagination. In his dismissal Ron obfuscates the labour underpinning meaning-making and by doing so reinforces the fantasy of singularity of meaning that upholds his authority and the centrality of his voice. What better way then to counteract such a singular authority than to imagine alternatives to the screen, especially by imagining alternatives where Donna and Tom are the centre of stories and narratives.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that in *Parks and Recreation* it is the non-white body that is misread, refused reading, requiring work to be read and not read at all. The lack of ease around reading Tom and Donna foreground the whiteness that dominates the grammar and logic of the text. It is because of this silencing of these non-white characters that I deem it necessary to view them *as if in a female network*, considering how they may be brought to centre by considering alternatives to the screen.

Centering The Technophile's Network: Taking their Devices Seriously

If Tom and Donna are non-white characters whose inner lives and relationships are rarely explored by the text, but are often shown to be on their phones and on social media, one way to bring these characters to the centre is to zoom in on their marginalised or dismissed engagement with communications media, to bring Tom's "staring at screens" and Donna's tweeting to the front and centre no matter how much the text suggests this does not need attention. I can imagine these characters' phones as portals to experiences and communications with others that Tom and Donna have but that are not explored by the narrative itself, as wormholes to an off-screen world. Interestingly, the white protagonists use of communication media – the contents of texts, calls, social media posts, etc. – are often revealed to the audience. For instance, in the pilot episode of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Rebecca's texts are shown onscreen (see Fig. 9). But when such contents are not revealed to the audience, especially in the case of the marginalised non-white technophile whose media engagement acts as background, not as material for the drama, I am presented with a resource to populate these 'lesser' engagements with meaning. For instance, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, Valencia and Heather, the only two non-white female characters in the show that feature regularly, are often shown on their phones. They are represented as women who are on their phones constantly, but their engagement with this media is only used to characterise them superficially as certain kind of modern women, not to explore the rich drama of their lives. Josh, the Filipino male technophilic support-character of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is portrayed similarly: often with a phone in hand, but only to depict him as a certain kind of character, the type that is always on their phone (Fig. 10). A similar tactic could presumably be applied to all characters in the background of a scene who are talking with each other, but whom we cannot hear. In fact, the viewing-as-if method, once engaged with, starts bringing all types of 'irrelevancy' to the fore. See the women behind Josh in Figure 10 below, for instance.



Fig. 9 Rebecca in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. Her text is revealed to us and is thus part of the drama of the episode.



Fig. 10 Rebecca sees Josh in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* for the first time. He is on his phone, but this is not further expanded on and made part of the drama.

When attention is brought to the technophile's engagement with technologies by the narrative only to trivialise it as technophilic and without other significance, I can use

the *as if viewing* strategy to work against this trivialisation by either reading the trivial as important, or by imagining accusations of triviality as a deliberate attempt to obfuscate meaningful and perhaps even radical uses of this technology. This gives us reason to consider what might be happening with these characters when they engage with their phones. What else might be going on that the screen does not show us?

Moreover, the technophile's engagement with these technologies at the expense of, what Ron calls, "look[ing] a man in the eye" or, more generally, paying attention to the surroundings and space of the *mise-en-scène* can also be viewed as protest against the whiteness of these shows. If the *mise-en-scène* is dominated by white characters, then these characters may prefer to be on their phones and on social media, rather than engaging with the white world around them, as the physical space of the world they occupy onscreen does not have the technophile's best interests at heart anyway. If Tom is not looking "a man in the eye", then his gaze is elsewhere, and if we engage 'as if', our gaze can follow. To view the technophile thus is to recognise that these characters are not colour-blind to the racialised arrangement of the *mise-en-scène* they inhabit. They prefer communication media that offers portals out of the *mise-en-scène* to alternative universes. Here communication media provide ways out of the singular space represented on the screen, that is dominated by whiteness. They indicate other physical spaces offscreen as well as signifying the spaces of relations and communications that are not bound to physical space, spaces constituted by social relations rather than geometrical dimensions. Affirming the technophile's phone as signifying these Other spaces means acknowledging Tom and Donna's engagement with this media is not trivial nor escapism. This engagement is Tom and Donna's scepticism about what the limited space of the *mise-en-scène* can offer them. They are choosing other kinds of spaces via technologies that are not made visible by the screen but which are there, undeniably there (for that is the trick of the virtual). The least we can offer them is our suspended disbelief in these alternative spaces, if not imagining what these spaces and their contents may look like. Whatever Ron might want us to think about Tom's, and perhaps Donna's, engagement with screens, these engagements have a function for, and are in the interests of, these technophilic characters.

Another Strategy for Bringing Margin to Centre: Recasting

What if I go further with the *as if viewing*, not only centering the communications of marginalised technophiles, but *viewing as if* these texts were not dominated by whiteness? What if I view the marginal as central by transforming the identities at the centre of these texts? By this I mean, *view as if* male characters were female, white characters were black, “able-bodied” characters had disabilities? This is a proposal for a kind of trans-reading. This does not involve being blind to gender, racial or class identity. It is not a proposal for post-identity categories. The Latin for the *trans*- prefix is ‘to go beyond’.⁶ Like in transgenderism or transsexualism, to *go beyond* gender or sex means to disregard or reject the given male or female category, and to adopt the other, or another, or both.

This switching of identity is in fact a kind of adaptation of one of the ways that Schantz *reads as if in a female network* which is the switching of genres. What this means is that Schantz reads x genre *as if* it was y genre, i. e. reads a romance film as if it was actually a horror film, and then considers what insights arise from doing this. Schantz’s strategy involves posing questions such as what if this horror film were turned into a rom-com? A question that exposes the violence of the horror film and shows how both horror and the rom-com are just two different strategies of trapping and silencing the heroine: one through death and the other through the romance destiny. But this genre switching can also help the hypothetical reader or viewer imagine the heroine finding her female network or some alternative unprefigured destiny. For instance, to use this strategy, I can ask: what if I switch the telephone call to someone else rather than the killer in *Scream*? What if I engage in a little disruptive telephony, like a sympathetic exchange operator? Perhaps, it is Sydney, the main heroine of the film, that is on the other line to Casey instead of the killer? I am told Casey sat next to Sydney in English class; perhaps they are friends? In which case they make plans to go out *Sex and The City* style. Perhaps *Scream* turns into *Scream and The City*?

⁶ See entry for the ‘trans’ prefix in the online *Oxford English Dictionary* www.oed-com.ucc.idm.oclc.org/view/Entry/204575?rskey=FNcpVg&result=4#eid.

But in my adaptation of Schantz's strategy, I think about switching identity instead of switching genre. What can be achieved by switching identities? Christine Gledhill has noted that genre and gender are two entities which cannot be easily separated. Focusing on gender and genre, Gledhill notes that gender works through genre and vice versa, or more precisely that "gender gets into genre" (x). What is the difference between switching genres and switching identity then, if the two work inseparably through each other? And could this not be said about race as well as gender? As the website Film Reference succinctly summarises:

Among their conventions, genre movies feature standard ways of representing gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Into the 1980s, genres and genre movies remained almost exclusively the cultural property of a white male consciousness, the center from which any difference regarding race, gender, and sexuality was defined and marginalized. In all the action genres, it was white men who performed heroic deeds and drove the narrative. In every type of action film, women and visible minorities assumed subsidiary and stereotyped roles, serving such narrative functions as helper or comic sidekick for the heroic white male. (n. p.)

This may somewhat simplify the case and not acknowledge the many exceptions to the rule, but it nevertheless captures the general trajectory of how genre and race work through each other, at least in high-concept Hollywood film. In television series where genre conventions are at times more difficult to pin down, because of the unwieldiness of the long form, approaching the text from the point of view of identity may also be a way to approach television genre and racial conventions.

Importantly, to adopt an imaginative viewing strategy where I wilfully swap out identities for other identities in my viewing is to prioritise ethics. This does not mean that I assert that any kind of *as if viewing* is ethical. An ethical *viewing as if* exists where I take responsibility for how I view and read texts in relation to different bodies and their avatars that exist in those texts, in relation to exclusions and hypervisibilities. My concern about identity within this subjunctive strategy of viewing-as-if then is perhaps best described by Schantz when he describes fiction as "a doubly suspect sympathy machine, giving cause for worry about not only those it spits out, but also those it takes up and works over" (5). Thus, if my "as if" viewing is concerned with the racial identities that the screen text, in the words of Schantz, 'spits out', then posing the question *what if* characters at the margins of the screen or

in the offscreen are brought to the centre of the screen seems, at the least, useful to interrogate for the purpose of counteracting such ejections.

The Lineage of Viewing and Recasting

The kind of reading and viewing that high-handedly recasts identities is not my own invention – I have already briefly noted in the Introduction of this thesis the example of racebending as it figures in fan art and screen adaptations. The idea of recasting has a long lineage and appears in various guises across the production and reception of texts. Consider *A Room of One's Own* and how Virginia Woolf imagines the life of Shakespeare's sister, ultimately speculating about a female Shakespeare and how she would have fared as a creative and talented person in the Elizabethan era. "Let me imagine" begins Woolf, "since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith" (52). By *reading as if*, Woolf considers the very different roles and conditions that women occupied in the Elizabethan period in contrast to men. She notes that unlike Shakespeare, Judith "was not sent to school", meaning her reading and writing would have been discouraged by her parents who knew "the conditions of life for a woman". And when Judith would have run away from her father who begged her to marry a "son of a neighbouring wool-stapler" to try her hand at the theatre, the men of the theatre would have "laughed at her face", because, as the theatre manager asserts, "no woman [...] could possibly be an actress" (53-54). Her speculation about this female Shakespeare is just one of the thought experiments Woolf performs to arrive at the argument at the centre of *A Room of One's Own*: that the labour of the private sphere, seen as being women's domain, has led to women's financial and temporal impoverishment, which is the reason for the historical suppression of women writers.

This identity switching is also becoming increasingly common in the production of contemporary screen texts. Consider the female cast of the *Ghost Busters* remake (2016) (Fig. 11), the casting of Jodie Whittaker as the doctor in season 11 of *Doctor Who* (2005-), the remake of Norman Lear's television series *One Day at A Time* (2017-2019) with a Hispanic family, and the recasting of the 2014 *Annie* with the

African American Quvenzhané Wallis. Prior to these recastings of the 2010s, films also used identity crossing as subject matter of their plots. Characters took on identities that were not their own, crossing into other genders and races, as in *Some Like it Hot* (1959), *White Chicks* (2004) and *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993). However, these switches (like the girl-as-boy in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*) are ultimately resolved in a reinforced status quo.



Fig. 11 Promotional Poster for *Ghost Busters* remake.

In terms of reception, *viewing as if* this identity were that one, exists as an established creative and political practice of watching favourite screen texts. An example of this is [this](#) Twitter thread where the comedian Corin Wells recast *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) with black actors (Fig. 12). This is an example of racebending, a term I explain at the beginning of the Introduction of this thesis. Other examples of racebending include African actress Noma Dumezweni's casting as Hermione in the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* as well as fan art of black Hermione [Fig. 13]).⁷ (Similar practices include queering of texts such as

⁷ For more examples see Wikipedia's entry for 'Racebending' en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racebending.

the “Voyager Visibility Project” that imagines Star Trek’s characters to be homosexual rather than straight.)⁸



Fig. 12 Corin Wells’s Twitter thread recasting *GOT*.

⁸ The Voyager Visibility Project is an “offshoot of the lesbian and gay sf group, the Galaxians” lobbying for inclusion of gay and lesbian characters (Pearson 14).



Fig. 13 Fan art of *Harry Potter*'s black Hermione (image courtesy of dellbelle39.tumblr.com/)

Wells' Twitter thread also shows that with social media dissemination, this practice of imaginative viewing can and does leave material traces more broadly so that recastings in production and recastings in our private viewings are not always easily separated. For instance, Wells' twitter thread is both a viewing strategy and a recast text itself. In the social media era where television series producers and show creators have easy access to audience and fan responses to their television shows, such social media posts become texts from which these producers and creators can and do draw inspiration for subsequent episodes and seasons (Geller). In this feedback loop, imaginative strategies of private viewing may potentially transform canonical texts. However, even if this audience-author feedback loop did not exist,

and even if audiences did not Tweet their imaginative viewing practices, as Wells did, this kind of wilful re-viewing by re-casting is still important.

Within the texts themselves, this bending of identities is also present, suggesting that they invite their own recasting. In *Gilmore Girls* for example, when the traditional and conservative Mrs. Kim learns that her daughter Lane is living with two boys she panics and runs to fellow mother Lorelai who is a “cool” mom but respects Mrs. Kim’s upbringing of Lane. Lorelai advises Mrs. Kim to regender them and think of Lane’s housemates as girls. Mrs. Kim goes back to her daughter’s house greeting Lane’s male roommates with “you are girls”. Only this imaginative strategy can give Mrs. Lane the peace of mind she needs to stay and have tea at her daughter’s new home (season 5 episode 1).

In the show *Atlanta*, episode “B. A. N.” (season 1 episode 7), such identity crossing is made a subject of the fictional talk show *Montague* which covers a story on a “trans-racial” teenager who identifies as a “35-year-old white man from Colorado” and goes by the name of Harrison Booth. Through this fictional exposé, we are introduced to a character who asks those within the world of *Atlanta* and viewers of the show to read this character *as if* he were white and to read him according to his wishes, a request inherent in being transgender. “Pre-surgery”, Harrison requests that he be read not according to his visible body, but according to the identity position Harrison wishes to (or does?) occupy. Though a comedic situation, how can I not take Harrison seriously when he says:

I’ve always felt different. I’d go to the store, the movies and just be thinking to myself, why am I not getting the respect I deserve? And then it hit me, I’m white. And 35.

When Harrison brings to light that reading him as a “35-year-old white man from Colorado” is a matter of reading him with “the respect [he] deserves” he highlights for us that reading in terms of ethnic identity produces a specific kind of effect. His insistence that people read him as white, while his body is marked by his black skin, foregrounds how identity is not necessarily just bound to bodies, but rather acts as a kind of lens or frame by which we view and categorise bodies, our own included.

However, Harrison’s reading and then embodying of a 35-year-old white man from Colorado is one based on other assumptions and stereotypes, just like those the other

characters use to read Harrison. If we see identity as a lens used in reading or viewing bodies, it seems that these lenses are always constituted by ideas, associations, clichés, stereotypes and generalisations. Here it is based on the generalisation that white men are given more respect. Harrison's reading of a 35-year-old white man from Colorado also assumes that this type of person is homophobic and transphobic, leading him to assume this position for himself as a way of accessing privilege. Similarly, the other participants of *Montague* assume that Harrison must be very progressive and left leaning in his political views, including being for transgender rights, because of his radical choice to be trans-racial. They are shocked to learn that Harrison is in fact anti-transgender. The shock of the talk show participants shows that while they have been using the lens of the trans-racial identity to read Harrison, Harrison has been using the lens of the 35-year-old white man from Colorado to read himself. This illustrates that the as-if is rendered impotent if thought of as a simple swap, overwriting colour with whiteness. This merely leads to *viewing as if* x stereotype was y stereotype. And there is a lesson for my own recasting strategy here: there is no value in asking what if a white protagonist of a show was in fact black, if the only implications I am able to draw out are based on stereotypes. This is an unsatisfactory way of centralising identities that I deem require attention.

Turning to my own experimentation and exploration of recasting identities in my *as if* viewings, what then does it mean to *view as if* marginal identities were central? Does it mean simply asking how a text or my viewing of a text would be different if the characters were of other gender and ethnic identities? What assumptions do I have that lead me to ask such questions and can I rid myself of these? And what kind of results may I come up with when I ask such questions? I want to both consider how exactly this viewing brings to the centre that which is marginal, as well as what I am doing when I am performing this centering in my viewing. I also want to ask what such questions facilitate and when they are problematic. To answer some of these questions, I first outline and discuss some qualms I have about using this strategy and then I go onto experiment with this strategy on the series *Girls* and consider what recasting *Girls* can do.

Some Qualms

Before experimenting with this recasting, I want to address my anxiety about undertaking such a viewing strategy as a white academic. One worry I have about my proposal for this recasting viewing is that it will be mistaken for a recommendation that the viewer should take responsibility for compensating for the text's failures. Another concern is that this might be taken as an interpretative equivalent of "blacking up" or cultural appropriation. In respect to both concerns, this is not my intention. Instead I am thinking about how I can put this strategy of finding alternatives to use in a reparative sense when I am faced with "a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain", what Sedgwick calls, "certain selves or communities". My question then is how can I go about "extracting sustenance" from the objects of that culture in regard to those "selves and communities" (Sedgwick 150-51) that have been largely erased from the text. This is not about putting the onus on the viewer to see diversity where it is lacking in order to fix the text, or to pretend that those avatars that should be present in the text are there when they are patently absent. Instead, this viewing is about experimenting with how I may resist a text's vision of the world and how I can exercise my own political imagination by envisioning how the world/the screen would look like according to my own preferred political version of the world. And so, here, I am interested in thinking about white supremacy in US popular culture and how I can use popular culture as the arena in which I confront my own thinking about race and how I can actively shape that thinking to imagine alternatives.

My anxiety about proposing such a viewing strategy also has to do with proposing imaginatively recasting race identities as a white academic. As I have already noted in the previous section, I fear that such a recasting can too easily fall into imagining identities in stereotypical ways because it goes beyond my lived experience. To go towards finding a solution for this issue of falling into a reliance on stereotypes or generalisations, I propose that what is necessary here is to focus on decentering whiteness rather than thinking about what non-white characters might mean in this act of substitution. I make this claim because the white academic's role must be to interrogate whiteness and the way that other identities are constructed through the lens of whiteness. As hooks advises, "only a persistent, rigorous, and informed

critique of whiteness could really determine what forces of denial, fear, and competition are responsible for creating fundamental gaps between professed political commitment to eradicating racism and the participation in the construction of a discourse on race that perpetuates racial domination” (*Yearning* 94). Thus, the onus must be on decentering whiteness rather than coming up with definitive alternatives that will only pin down racial identities as stereotypes. This might mean that *viewing as if* to recast whiteness simply entails incessantly asking questions such as: what if this white character was in fact non-white? What if this white heroine was black? What if there was a Syrian immigrant character in this all-white US citizen character show? Or what if all the white characters were Asian-Americans? In other words, putting into question the given whiteness of the character on the screen without necessarily coming up with implications of this alternative. In this way perhaps I as a white viewer concerned with the racial dynamics of screen texts can move towards repopulating the text on the level of my viewing so as to question the centrality of whiteness, the centrality of my own avatars onscreen. As a white viewer whose white privilege often exempts me from having to think and be aware of how race shapes my own identity, I should especially be concerned with race onscreen, especially the centrality of whiteness and how I can decentre it.

A Recasting Viewing of *Girls*

So, what if I *viewed as if* the cast of the show *Girls* was black? *Girls* has been heavily critiqued for its whiteness, especially because it is set in Brooklyn, an area of New York known for its cultural and racial diversity (Shepherd n. p.). I see this criticism of *Girls* as an invitation to “view as if”, specifically by using racebending for reparative purposes, rectifying the lack of diverse bodies in *Girls*. Employing this “viewing as if” strategy would not only address this criticism about *Girls* not reflecting Brooklyn’s population demographics but also the domination of whiteness of the text, at least at the level of my viewing. I conceive this implementation of the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy as a political / ethical stance in which I send resources to the characters who need it most. In this case, it means sending sympathy to characters who are not even onscreen but are nevertheless present, not least because of their invocation by a criticism that identifies their non-presence. By

sending resources to characters that need it most, I also send resources to myself by viewing in line with my political commitments.

Thus, as I have said, what is important in relation to this strategy is that I ask questions such as: what if Hannah Horvath was black? And to do this for the purpose of destabilising the given whiteness of the character and the centrality of whiteness in the show. But for the sake of experimentation and exploration of this strategy, I want to forge ahead and see where such questioning might take me when I attempt to answer such questions. I may fumble and come to dead ends, to stereotypes and embarrassing limits of my own imagination, but giving an account of such experimentation is useful to see what happens when I do attempt to answer the questions of recasting.

Straight away, then, I am confounded by the question of what it means to consider recasting Hannah Horvath, the white millennial female protagonist of *Girls*. What does it entail to ask: what if Hannah Horvath was black? Am I asking what if Hannah's body was not white but black, and what the significance of this would be? Am I asking how the show would be different if Hannah was black? Am I placing whiteness and blackness against each other, as a binary and mutually exclusive pair? How would I read black Hannah differently? How would the show be conceived differently, for instance, in its marketing? Would the show still be critiqued as only being about privileged millennials? Would the emphasis shift to class and gender? Some questions that are more specific to the contents of *Girls* might be, for instance, what would happen if Hannah the millennial *writer* was black? And what if Hannah Horvath, *one of the least liked characters on television*, was black? To answer each of these questions is beyond the remit of this thesis, so I will tackle only the last two for the purpose of laying bare what answering such questions look like.

Question 1: what would happen if Hannah the millennial *writer* was black?

Firstly, there are a slew of famous female characters who are writers on television. Think Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and The City*, Liz Lemon in *30 Rock* (2006-2013), Rory in *Gilmore Girls* and its revival, Jane in *The Bold Type*, Rebecca in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (who in the finale of the show realises her passion for song writing) and Jane in *Jane The Virgin* (2014-2019). Only in *Jane the Virgin* is the female writer protagonist non-white, and in fact, she is the only non-white female author in US

television series that I can think of. If there is a lack of female writers of colour on the television screen, what does it mean to *view as if in a female network* to bring black Hannah, the millennial writer onscreen on the level of my viewing activity? What difference does it make?

One implication of this is that I do not have many examples of non-white writer characters to draw on for imagining black Hannah, and because I do not want to rely on my imagination as a white academic, I may have to be more resourceful and draw on examples from further afield than other television series. For instance, I can rely on my personal knowledge of other texts to recast imaginatively black Hannah and draw on hooks's memoir *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life* (1997), a book I have read and that comes to mind as an example of an account of a black woman author. And I can consider the kind of concerns hooks had about her writing life to think about what kinds of concerns might black Hannah have as a writer. For instance, near the beginning of the memoir, hooks speaks about her attempts to reconcile a writing life with a romantic relationship: "I relied on the solace of knowing that after long hours spent quietly writing I could walk out of my study and find sweet and familiar companionship" (xvi). Thus, one way of *viewing as if* is to draw from other texts, just like the creative process of text production relies on previous texts to produce something new. This is noteworthy, imagining and recasting requires this network of intertextuality. Intertextuality is not only the process by which texts are created but also how we make sense of texts (Fiske *Television; Understanding*; Barthes *Image*; Ott and Walter). Brian Ott and Cameron Walter, rephrasing Fiske, succinctly summarise intertextuality as "the way audiences unconsciously create meaning by utilizing their vast knowledge of cultural codes learned from other texts to read a particular text" (429). To draw on other texts, other images of black female writers is one of the ways to imagine black writer Hannah. Intertexting with hooks is perhaps not necessary; I can draw from my imagination and from my experiences to recast as well. But putting the pen of authorship into the hands of an actual black author is in a way also a gesture against my "blackening up". It passes the act of inscription symbolically into Black hands. However, the problem here is that I imply that all black female writers will somehow be similar. After all, I could have drawn from Carrie Bradshaw's concerns about her own writing life to imagine black Hannah, or I could have even drawn on white Hannah that is already onscreen. I do

not see a way to resolve this and find an alternative way to imagine a black character where there is none, and it is because of such stereotyping that I maintain that this strategy of recasting is best used simply to incessantly ask questions, without relying on any definitive answers.

But again, for the purpose of experimentation, I forge ahead and explore further what answering what black Hannah the millennial writer might do for *Girls*, or for me the viewer. Let's consider what kind of figure is the female writer in female-centred television series. First of all, the writer figure on television seems to be a type that especially warrants an exploration because of her special relationship with the audience (since this thesis is concerned with this character-audience relationship). This is particularly evident in the character of Carrie Bradshaw in *SATC* where her writing also acts as voice-over narration. Access to this interiority and authorship creates a more immediate relationship between the viewer and Carrie than the other characters in the show. Especially because of the private nature of her writing which looks at themes of love and sex. Hannah's writing does not double as voice-over narration and most of it is an on-screen mystery besides comments from other characters who describe her work as funny (her parents) or 'good' but pretty much about nothing (Hannah's boyfriend Sandy [and only black character in *Girls*] in season 2 episode 2).⁹ Hannah herself talks about her writing as being the voice of her generation "or a voice, of a generation" (pilot), a moment ripe with irony though also somewhat prophetic considering the impact of *Girls* and the infamy of the show's creator Lena Dunham. Whether the onscreen author's writing is or is not made available to the viewer of *Girls*, she is a pen-wielding (or keyboard using) character that signals a kind of agency, expression and creativity. She is creating worlds on paper or on her laptop that the audience may or may not have access to. If this writing is never revealed onscreen, it is nevertheless present, waiting for its exploration by other narratives or by the audience's imagination. Here writing acts like communication technology onscreen, as portals onto something else, as signals

⁹ Sandy (played by Donald Glover) is Hannah's African-American boyfriend at the beginning of the second season, appearing after *Girls'* first season was critiqued for its whiteness, first by Jenna Wortham on the online [The Hairpin](#) and subsequently by others. He only lasts until the second episode. But what if we zoomed in on Sandy? Could this be another way of *viewing as if* the margin was the centre? This is another *viewing as if* strategy for sending sympathy to characters who need it most, though I do not expand on it here because of practical reasons of space and time.

to offscreen places that are also possible onscreen futures. (It is interesting then that both communication technologies, which I have argued also act as such potentialities, and Hannah's writing are trivialised by other characters). Now, what if it is Black Hannah proclaiming herself to be the voice of her generation, rather than the white Hannah Horvath played by Lena Dunham? Or perhaps she specifically does not do so knowing that white supremacy might make it more difficult for her to establish herself as a writer. Or maybe like hooks, who discusses her readers' yearning for her dissenting voice, Black Hannah will become widely read. Perhaps her voice will too be dissenting, or maybe not. Again, I have no answers to the questions posed here, and the speculations here also remain as such, without continuation. Perhaps to ask questions such as "what if black Hannah the millennial writer was black" can only lead to speculations, and maybe such speculations are the point, are what matters.

What else can be explored in relation to the writer figure in female-centred television that may lead to some kind of insights about recasting black Hannah? A critique of the typical manifestation of the female writer in female-centred film and television is that this figure glamorises precarious work and promotes a neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity. Pamela Thoma, for instance, writes about how the female writer in postfeminist television and film provides yet another subject position where postfeminism and precarity can be enacted: "[i]n postfeminist culture, it is now often the case that professional or commercial writing enables the self-work that is increasingly required in the neoliberal global economy's labor market" (125). This position she writes allows surveillance by the self as well as the audience because "writing facilitates the overt display of self-work via the extensive use of a first-person mode" (126). In addition, even though there is a certain cultural capital connected to this work, many commercial writers work under the conditions of the gig economy with neither stability nor benefits (124).

Recasting therefore does not only entail imagining Black Hannah the writer and what this means about her relationship to the viewer of the show, as well as the kind of agency and self-expression available to her. It also includes imagining Black Hannah in paradigms that are ultimately equally exploitative for white and black characters. It is to bring her into the paradigm written about by Angela McRobbie who warns

about the romanticisation of creative but precarious labour (*Be Creative*) of which writing for a livelihood is such. It is also to show her in a self-surveillance, self-governing subject position aligned with postfeminism and neoliberalism. This recasting then, though resisting the dominance of whiteness, inevitably still works inside the parameters of dominant structures. This point is important because it highlights that all I can do by recasting is imagine, for instance, a black body in place of a white body, but I still have to reckon with other paradigms that constrict and hinder a feminist vision and version of things. This highlights that this is not a utopian form of viewing in terms of the resulting narrative. To write Black Hannah into the labour precarity of White Hannah doesn't resolve the racism of the text, let alone labour precarity. But it does change something. After all, at the level of my viewing, I have black Hannah instead of white Hannah.

Question 2: what if Hannah Horvath, *one of the least liked characters on television*, was black?

Imagining black Hannah as occupying the unlikeable character type so pervasive in post-crash television, which white Hannah embodies, leads me to a similar reinstating of black Hannah in an ideologically fraught position. Again, there are not many non-white unlikeable characters. *Insider's* article "The 47 most unlikable TV characters of all time" (Renfro), lists only one non-white unlikeable character. While this "unlikeable character" type has been celebrated by Milly Buonanno and Margaret Tally, as I have already pointed out in Chapter One, other academics criticise such character types by calling the series they head "horrible white people shows" and see the function of the unlikeable white character as being to draw attention away from invisible and marginalised non-white characters. In this light, the horribleness of white characters which may give the appearance of criticality about white privilege, in fact is just another way to refocus on whiteness. So what would it mean then for Black Hannah to occupy a position of unlikeability? Would it necessitate a conceptual reformulation of character unlikeability in terms of race? Perhaps. Would she be an affront to respectability politics which black women must reckon with? Would unlikeable black Hannah be ratchet (hip hop slang for unruly) and thus in some sense more transgressive than her white counterpart? Would it

garner for Black women the privilege of being unlikeable, or does it just reinscribe the same problem in reverse?

Again, I conclude here with questions. It seems that asking “what would happen if white Hannah was in fact black Hannah?” can only generate more and more questions. But this in fact affirms my position that it is this very inquiry and question asking process that is valuable in this strategy of recasting on the level of viewing. I can attempt to answer those questions to try to come to more definitive and concrete alternatives, but it is ultimately the questions that are the important results. This means that it is the process of looking for alternatives, rather than coming to some kind of definitive alternatives, that really matters when employing this strategy. Thus, what I find is that by asking questions such as ‘what if x character was y’, all I can do is speculate about how I would understand the show, or how the show might be marketed differently, if it were recast by racebending. I can also speculate how my analysis of the show would differ, i.e. how imagining the presence of non-white characters alters my conclusions about the white-centric series in question. And perhaps, such speculation is the point.

To conclude on this experimentation with *viewing as if* white Hannah was black Hannah, the aim here is to counter the marginalisation or erasure of non-white bodies in the narrative at the level of viewing. It resists acceptance of dominant representations. Such use of imagination makes one an unruly spectator, meaning I do not abide by the parameters set out for me by the “filmic subject” position (Oudart 35), the position that offers a blueprint for what it means to view a film or television series, and one traditionally constituted by paying attention to what is onscreen and not considering its alternatives.

Failure of the Technophobe’s Singularity: Switching Parody and Sincerity

Allow me to consider here again the connection between technology and this *viewing as if* strategy, especially in relation to the technophobe character which I have come across by following technology onscreen. (Previously, in the Introduction of this thesis, I have considered how technology in the Heideggerian sense connotes possibility and in this way is significant for the imaginative strategy of *viewing as if* that is all about the possible alternatives that the viewer may come up with.) What I

want to point out here is the conceptual connection between the strategy of finding alternatives to the screen and technology. And I point this out and discuss it here for the purpose of articulating one more strategy for *viewing as if* to decentre, this time, the technophobic white male specifically, or any white male who profess themselves to be the purveyors of authoritative meanings. Thus, the conceptual connection between the strategy of finding alternatives to the screen and technology is that both are involved in fabrication and labour. The imaginative, subjunctive viewing strategy of the *as if* requires the expending of effort for the purpose of imaginative creation of other images and narratives than those present. With the “viewing as if in a female network” strategy, the images and narratives in front of me are abandoned and I labour to produce something else. This kind of unruly departure from what is on screen very obviously brings out the creativity of meaning making and forcefully undermines the idea that texts have singular authoritative meanings. This strategy, in other words, hopefully troubles ideas of meaning, truth, common sense and the natural because viewing a text now is very obviously a laborious process and it should highlight that in fact all meaning making is a process of fabrication and labour, even when I as a viewer do not fabricate alternatives but merely make sense of what is onscreen.

Technology is also about the performance of labour, labour that is delegated to the non-human, the technological. Technology does work for people. For example, the telephone does the work of compressing time and space so that people no longer have to travel to speak to someone face-to-face or need to write and post letters. The laptop performs a variety of functions that makes various tasks easier and quicker to do, such as online shopping, email and writing documents. Technology also creates more work for people: someone must invent technologies, fabricate them, repair and learn how to use them. Technology both requires labour from people and performs labour for people. It is a redistribution of labour. As it labours for humans, it helps humans to fabricate and change the world, to imagine and create new things and ways of being and so on.

Here the technophobe’s desire for the natural – indicated by his disavowal of technology – can be read as also being a desire for singular meanings and for ‘truth’. The technophobe, as I see it, is reliant on a fantasy where the world has been

predetermined by “nature” or some singular truth, rather than human artifice (which technology can be seen as symbolising). His preference for the pre-technological indicates this desire for a ‘simpler’ world uncomplicated by fabrications of the modern world. Here the artifice of the world and the potentiality of things to be otherwise is mystified. Similarly, this insistence on singularity and the natural seems to me to suggest an investment in the idea that the meanings of texts also hold meanings that are singular, effortless and natural, i. e. that the meaning of a text resides within the text alone and not in the relationships between the text and its audiences. For this reason, I champion the strategy of ‘viewing as if in a female network’ as a feminist reading / viewing that must emphasise labour, fabrication, wanton imagination and effort (and perhaps technology too!) as necessary for creating new and better meanings in the reading / viewing of texts.

Turning now to the series to articulate the strategy I have in mind, it is funny to note that although the technophobe might be all about this singularity, ironically, he himself does not feature in texts as the purveyor of singular straightforward meaning. What I mean by this is that the technophobe’s position is not necessarily to be taken seriously in these texts. For instance, the comedic moment when Ron throws out his computer monitor in the garbage disposal after finding out about Google Earth is there to be laughed at, not to be taken seriously. This invites a double meaning: the sincere and the parodic. The decision whether to laugh at these white male characters rests entirely with us. As Maureen Turim argues, “[t]he line which separates celebration from satire in American culture is perniciously thin” (101). This makes me wonder about using parody as an alternative way to view the screen, where we initially viewed it seriously, and vice versa.

To elaborate on this point, I return to *Girls* as a prime example of a text where the singularity of the white male is put into question, technophobe or not. More generally, *Girls* is a show which rarely reveals its political stance on the topical and sometimes controversial issues it portrays. Perhaps this refusal to clearly position itself morally or politically is one of the reasons why *Girls* has provoked such hostility, because the text itself revokes its own powers of authority, instead brandishing an unashamed ambiguity.

In *Girls*, this ambiguity is used to put male authority into question. It is unclear how characters that conventionally hold authority status are depicted in *Girls*, whether they are depicted as holding authority, or if that authority is depicted parodically. For instance, in “Only Child” (season 3 episode 5) one of the titular ‘girls’ Marnie, feeling lost and dissatisfied with her life, goes to Ray for guidance. Throughout the show Ray presents himself as highly educated and in possession of the voice of reason. Based on this reputation, Marnie asks Ray to tell her what is wrong with her, in other words, to reveal to her her own flaws. In so doing Marnie confers authority on Ray. Marnie’s request is reluctantly accepted by Ray who tells Marnie that she is “extremely judgmental”, “unbearably uptight”, that she thinks she is “better than everyone”, that she uses people, and that she is “a huge fat fucking phony”. Marnie, of course, does not take this well. But how is this scene to be read? I may agree with Ray on Marnie. Perhaps, his judgement of her character is a stand-in for the audience’s judgement. Indeed, I may concur with Ray that Marnie is “annoying”. But what about the scene’s invocation of all the other representations of women as annoying? This is not a singular representation without context, and as a feminist viewer, I am keenly aware of this. And what about the recurrence of not taking the side of the female character, instead automatically aligning with the male character? (Consider Emily Nussbaum’s observation in her article “The Female Bad Fan” that fans were dedicated to the anti-hero Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) regardless of his immoral actions but viewed his wife Skyler with contempt for her comparably minor transgressions). Can I really read at face value Ray’s response to Marnie’s request and accept the authority Marnie confers on Ray? Firstly, the request in itself is so flattering that it is difficult to take seriously. Perhaps, therefore it is necessary to *view as if* Ray’s response is parodic of the authority-conferred white male character, to “view as if” *Girls* is making fun of this character type rather than invoking him sincerely? If parody, as Jameson writes, is “inscription of the past in the present” that surfaces “historical tensions” (in Hutcheon xii), can I instead view Ray’s response as being out of time? Ray whose type I recognise as generic man, unchanged since the beginning of time is here re-invoked in the era of #MeToo in *Girls*. Sincerely? Surely not. Here I re-read the #Time’sUp hashtag as a call to laugh at such untimely behaviour of men.

As for Marnie, perhaps I can send her my sympathies instead. After all, she does seem to be having some kind of quarter-life crisis. Series like *Girls* that are charged with ambiguity demand *viewing as if* because they eschew singular meanings: I can easily ask ‘what if this serious moment was to be viewed parodically?’ because it is not clear in the first instance if this scene intends to be taken seriously. In fact, it is *Girls* itself that teaches me, the feminist viewer, to view in this playful way. And I can use texts like *Girls* which invite parodic viewing on other texts too, asking what meanings are created if I look at sincere texts as parodies and vice versa. Such playful viewing may unhinge our own habitual tendencies to abide by the authority of a text.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored strategies of viewing that undo the dominance of whiteness in much of female centred television where non-whiteness is relegated to the margins of the text or the offscreen altogether. Because non-white characters in my texts of focus here can be categorised as technophiles, following technologies and their use has led me to think about how focusing on these characters and their technologies, which suggest portals to elsewhere, can be made central to our re-viewings. The strategy of taking the technophobe’s technology seriously has also helped me to open up inquiries into that which has been foreclosed by the text, and in this way, I have also opened up spaces into alternatives. I have also considered an even more imaginative tactic of viewing by recasting identity, by racebending our acts of viewing. By incessantly inquiring what the text would look like repopulated by non-white characters, I claim I enact an ethical way of relating to the characters banished to the margins or the offscreen altogether. My final strategy suggests weaponising textual ambiguity against authority by *viewing as if* the text were parodic, and especially mobilising parody as a viewing strategy that undermines authority in the text. These strategies of viewing are achieved through laborious viewing, by coming up with alternatives to the screen, by re-directing sympathy and interest to the margins. My call here is for the legitimisation of such *as if viewing* as a valuable way to approach screen texts whose whiteness, I claim, should be viewed and rerouted with intention at the level of the viewing activity.

Chapter Three

Finding Alternatives to Individualism and Disconnection: Female Networking with the *Gilmore Girls* Revival and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*

Introduction

In this second chapter of employing and experimenting with this strategy of coming up with alternatives to what is on the screen, I focus on rerouting images that support meanings of individualism. Individualism under capitalism has been a long-standing concern of feminist media scholars who focus on how feminism is infiltrated by individualism to produce ‘postfeminism’, and now also ‘popular feminism’ (see Introduction). Rather than promoting collective efforts in the shaping of our world, postfeminism (and popular feminism) privileges the concern of how individual women can find paths to the good life and to ‘empowerment’ (more on this general idea can be found in Negra *What a Girl*; McRobbie *The Aftermath*). Besides noting this problematic emphasis on individualism, feminist media scholars that critique postfeminism in this way also work to uncover the power structures and interests behind discourses offering such ‘empowerment’ to the modern woman, revealing how these discourses often conceal patriarchal, racist and classist logics. Such uncovering tactics puts this scholarship in the camp of Sedgwick’s paranoid classification.¹⁰ My intent then in this chapter is to go beyond the paranoid observations of problematic individualisms by imagining images and narratives of their alternatives, and I do so in relation to *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*. I begin by looking at the *Gilmore Girls* revival and consider how its female networks are both facilitated and cut off by communication media onscreen and by the narrative’s own postfeminist machinations. I then consider how we can produce alternatives to the individuating trajectory of the text. Then I turn to *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and again look for alternatives to female relationships that go beyond serving normative individualism.

The strategies that I use in this chapter includes, once again, following the leitmotif of technologies. This time I do so to locate connections and disconnections between

¹⁰ To be clear, I am not suggesting that writers who critique postfeminism are completely void of a reparative mood. For instance, after critiquing postfeminist girlfriends, Winch ends her book by thinking about conflict as a productive state for relationships between women and especially for feminist relations. In this way Winch offers a re-reading and re-construction of something that is often seen as negative, i. e. she turns it into something positive. She does not simply negate and deconstruct. However, the majority of such works are written in the paranoid vein, and this is what I want to challenge. I want to consider what it would mean to write feminist cultural criticism as much as possible *not* in the deconstructive paranoid mood, while retaining alertness to what is violent and harmful.

women who are otherwise spatially separated from one another and then use the metaphoricity of technology onscreen to find alternatives of relationality and genuine connection between women. One of the specific ways that I think about technology here is as nodes in the text which provide forks in what I might call the narrative road. Though the screen chooses one option, the presence of technology (or its rejection) signals that there are alternatives the narrative might have followed. I discuss this way of thinking about the text and its onscreen technology in my discussion of the “phone throw-away trope” in this chapter.

Besides following technology, I also come up here with two other ways of finding alternatives. First, I conceive of viewing “as if” morality was a non-issue, especially where female characters are framed as morally questionable or immature. In this way, I look for alternatives to the moral vision, entertaining how I might view something that is typically “devious” as instead being, in some sense, “productive”. I ask what alternative vision can be used, and thus what alternative meanings can I arrive at when morality is replaced by alternative ways of looking. Specifically, here I conceive of the alternative of seeing through a technological lens as opposed to a moral lens. Like some of the previous chapter’s strategies, this way of finding alternatives can also be conceived of as interpretation. But again, my purpose is to stretch and consider all the different ways that the strategy of finding alternatives may be conceived and implemented, even as imagining alternatives *to* the screen bleeds into interpretation of what is onscreen.

Another strategy I experiment in this chapter is considering alternative endings, especially where female characters are separated from one another in the text. Instead, I come up with alternatives where the female friends stay together.

I also make the case that *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* offers models of *viewing as if in a female network* that I can learn from and use in my creation of alternatives to the screen (much like I learnt from *Girls* in the previous chapter to use the series’ ambiguity to view sincerity parodically). I consider this kind of learning from the text itself, when it teaches its viewer to view creatively, to be another strategy of *viewing as if* because of its potential to propel the viewer into imaginative and unbound viewing. The actual strategies I see *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* as teaching me then include 1) viewing as if fabrication was more important than ‘truth’, 2) viewing

as if cultural hierarchies were turned upside down, and 3) considering alternative interests and sympathies to adopt to the ones the screen imposes on me.

At the end of this chapter, as I explore the strategy of alternative interests and sympathies, I also address the issue of imposing my alternatives on to the screen and what implications there are when I presume that these alternatives are in the characters' 'best interests' as well as my own.

Overall, in this chapter I am committed to scenarios I consider to be most beneficial for a feminist worldview, where relationality is privileged over individualism. In other words, I perform a reparative viewing where I *view as if* individualism did not dominate in female-centred television series so as to render the text more nourishing for myself and my feminist commitments. Importantly, I am interested here in finding alternatives to Winch's girlfriendships, those manifestations of female friendships onscreen where "girlfriends support each other in striving for [...] the perfect self" (2). Here the metaphor of the "female network" serves the purpose to find relationality beyond surveillance and discipline. Thus, viewing both the *Gilmore Girls* revival and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* "as if in a female network" in this chapter, I show how feminist alternatives can be generated by embracing fabrication and channelling sympathy to our female characters in our viewing.

Gilmore Girls' Female Networks

Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life (2016) is a mini-series and sequel to the original *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) about the relationship between single mother Lorelai (Lauren Graham) and her daughter Rory (Alexis Bladel). In the pilot of the original series, the audience learns that Lorelai had Rory when she was sixteen, the show presenting this narrow age gap between mother and daughter as allowing them to be best friends. The show then continues focusing on these two women's lives as they pursue desired livelihoods, romantic relationships with men and friendly relations with neighbours in the fictional small town of Stars Hollow where they live. Episodically, the show also updates us on Lorelai's fraught relationship with her own parents who are helping to pay for Rory's schooling. The end of the original run of *Gilmore Girls* sees Rory graduate from Yale and begin a career in journalism. The

‘revival’ then is a kind of update of the *Gilmore Girls* characters’ lives ten years after the original run ends.

However, in this discussion of *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* (2016), I am not going to focus on the mother-daughter relationship at the heart of the show. Rather, I am interested in the non-familial female relationships and what happens to these in the revival (and what could happen to them instead). It is worth to bring Schantz up here because this chapter shares Schantz’s concern for female connection and because in this chapter I draw on Schantz’s ideas about how technology connects and disconnects female characters. For Schantz, female networking among women who are not bound together by family relations, but who come together in other ways, is constant and pervasive, but the ubiquity of these relationships is not necessarily at the forefront of texts. Schantz’s whole thesis is that, sometimes, to recognise these relationships, it is necessary to view in very imaginative ways, with “extravagance or overimagination” (4). Otherwise, it is necessary to be attuned to the perilous nature of such connections which are easily severed by machinations of patriarchal logics. Uninterested in their heroines’ well-being, the narrative most often breaks up female networks. And it often does so, Schantz observes, by blocking the technologies that enabled them in the first place, so that the heroine as a singular individual reverts to serving patriarchal values and male characters uninhibited by female connection.

I turn to Schantz’s explanation of what happens with female networking in texts because this technological break-up of the female network happens in the *Gilmore Girls* revival when Rory and the professional women she connects with initially for work purposes find each other intolerable, leading them to go their own ways. This severing of professional connections means having to find work that is more individual: Rory decides to write a memoir about her and her mother. Though both the original and the revival in many ways foreground the relationship between women, following technology through the revival demonstrates that the revival narrative propels these women into individualistic lives devoid of collaborative contact with other women. Thus, by following technology in this series I come to points in the show where women’s relationships with each other break down, and thus, I am left with moments which I deem would benefit alternatives. And in fact,

the alternatives to this individualisation and isolation of the women are already suggested by the show itself: the pursuit of collaborations and projects with other women. This is a real possibility for Rory as it seems that the only thing hindering such relational work is Rory's and the other women's 'unlikeable' demeanours.

The Phone Throw-Away

My primary interest in thinking about Rory's professional relationships with other women revolves around the 'phone throw-away' scene in the episode "Spring" which I come to by following technology onscreen. This scene presents us with a moment of individualism which I can counteract by coming up with an alternative of relationality, an alternative where female networking continues rather than discontinues. So then, what is at stake in the "phone throw-away" scene in the *Gilmore Girls* revival?

The trope of the 'phone throw-away' was coined by Zachary Pincus-Roth who observes it across female-centred popular culture from *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), through *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) to the first *Sex and The City* film (2008) (n. p.). In the *Gilmore Girls* revival, this trope occurs when Rory throws two of her three phones into a waste bin after a frustrating job interview with the female CEO of an up-and-coming online magazine *Sandee Says* (and a potential female networker for Rory). Even though we are told that the titular Sandee allegedly plans to overtake the *Huffington Post*, Rory is not impressed by *Sandee Says* because of its lack of cultural cachet and prestige that Rory pines for and associates with *GQ* and *The New Yorker*. At the same time, Rory's lack of preparation for the interview makes Sandee rethink her initial desire to hire Rory and so Sandee cuts the interview short. As Rory is about to leave the building, Sandee calls Rory on her phone to tell her that she is not getting the job. Frustrated, Rory tells Sandee she did not want the interview in the first place. Following this conversation, Rory promptly throws two of her mobile phones into the bin (Fig. 14). We then cut to Rory opening the front door of her Stars Hollow home and lugging all of her belongings inside. Rory moves back home to reassess her career plans away from the bustle of the city.



Fig. 14 Rory's phone throw-away after she is turned down for the *Sandee Says* writer position.

This is not the only professional collaboration between Rory and another female character that goes awry, however. Prior to this interview, Rory had been exploring writing a memoir with and about Naomi Shropshire, a fictional renowned feminist and environmentalist based in London. Although Rory is excited about this project at first, this promising endeavour also falls through as Rory becomes increasingly exasperated with Naomi's changeability and lack of focus fuelled by her daytime drinking habit. Their collaboration turns into a vexatious ordeal for Rory, and eventually for Naomi as well who ends up pulling out of the project.

In fact, both Sandee and Naomi annoy Rory and vice versa. Sandee and Naomi, as well as Rory, are shown as unappealing and difficult characters who cannot work easily with one another or presumably with others more generally.¹¹ When it comes to Rory, the show seems reluctant to imagine her having a desirable career within an

¹¹ Many online articles critique the character of Rory, mostly for her self-centredness and bad judgement: Koty Neelis's "Rory from 'Gilmore Girls' Is Actually the Worst" (2016) in *Vice*, Jenny Rogers's "Rory Gilmore is a Monster" (2016) in *The Washington Post* and Sydney Gore's "Controversial Opinion: The 'Gilmore Girls' Should Only Come Back if Rory Doesn't" in *Nylon*.

urban landscape and with other collaborating women. Rather, if she is to succeed, she will do so alone. Rory's disposal of her phones supports this female professional individuation, cutting the cords between these women and any possibility of future relationships they might sustain remotely through the use of their phones. Ultimately the 'phone throw-away' is the moment at which the individuating trajectory of *Gilmore Girls* becomes visible.

But not only does this phone throw-away disconnect professional collaborations between women, the phone-throw away also signals the dissolution of Rory's personal career ambitions. In the very first episode of the revival, "Winter", Rory is shown to have three phones – her work phone, her phone for friends and family, and a phone for when she is in Stars Hollow. These help Rory to manage her multi-faceted life. She is a busy nomadic graduate trying to forge a career in journalism while traveling between London, New York and Stars Hollow, balancing the competing demands of work, friends and family across oceans. She is constantly making and receiving international phone calls which supposedly allow her to balance work, family, and romantic life. The three phones become a metaphor for Rory having or at least trying to have it 'all'. And it is this 'all' that Rory supposedly gives up on or loses with the phone-throw away and her move back to Stars Hollow.

In the next two and final episodes after this return home, Rory finds various reasons to stay, even though, at first, she is adamant that her return is only temporary. Rory's clothes mark the transition from busy city career woman to a small-town resident: her smart, professional cuts and bold, dark and metallic colours (which at first make her stand out in Stars Hollow) are replaced by conventionally feminine pastels and softer fabrics (as Rory's relocation and personal transition coincides with the seasonal change from Winter to Spring). In the finale of the show, Rory reveals to her mother that she is pregnant. Though Rory does not disclose what she has decided in relation to the pregnancy, there are indications that Rory will stay in Stars Hollow, give birth to yet another Gilmore girl, and bring her up in the quaint community, just as her mother had brought her up.¹² The narrative of returning home and increasingly feeling at home that follows the phone throw-away, not to mention the pregnancy,

¹² Laura Bradley notes that in the *Gilmore Girl* world, every character who has experienced an unplanned pregnancy has carried it to full term (n. p.), indicating conservative gender politics.

then is diametrically opposed to Rory's former career aspirations and their urban setting.¹³ Rory's techno-retreatism indicates a disavowal of the vision she has had for herself as a successful international writer in the original series, a vision, in which Rory presumably would juggle a demanding job, moving between cities, and her relationships in Stars Hollow, a web held together by her use of new communication media in triplicate.

This trajectory of the *Gilmore Girls* revival that jettisons Rory back to Stars Hollow starkly contrasts with the original run of the series which focused on Rory's schooling and dreams of becoming a foreign correspondent. Though this volte-face may come as a surprise given the original's characterisation of Rory as a highly ambitious and career-minded young woman, Negra has described the original *Gilmore Girls* as actually having exactly the same retreatist impulse whereby women's urban career ambitions are exchanged for small town living. Negra dubs this trend 'retreatism' and sees it as an aspect of pre-recessionary postfeminist culture when postfeminism was more aligned with traditional femininity. She describes retreatism as a "[r]omanticization of female withdrawal from the working world" (*What a Girl Wants?* 25) that "conjoin[s] self-discovery with the rejection of the city" (19). But this retreatism does not sit as easily in a post-recessionary landscape whose postfeminism is in fact geared towards fantasies of the intensifications of work, ambition and individualism for women. As observed by Lagerwey *et al.*, "[a] post-financial crash sensitivity to economic stress seems to have reduced the credibility of the retreatist plot" (n. p.). Indeed, the revival's retreatism brings a certain melancholy where Rory seems fated to live out the intergenerational Gilmore girl destiny rather than to break free of it, something she had been striving for through her professional ambitions. But if Negra is to be believed, the seeds of the revival's retreatism were already planted in the original *Gilmore Girls*, suggesting that female ambition and departures from the sleepy Hollows of their families were always fated to fail.

¹³ Rory's return to a more traditionally feminine lifestyle has been written about profusely online; some examples include: "Does it Matter if Rory Gilmore is the Worst?" by Esther Zuckerman and Erik Adams, "Gilmore Girls' Depressing, Regressive Ending: Was it Fine?" by Kaitlyn Tiffany, Loren Grush and Megan Farokhmanesh in *The Verge* and "That *Gilmore Girls* Ending Was Fitting, but Frustrating as Hell" by Laura Bradley in *Vanity Fair*.

Disengagement of the Phone Throw-Away

So how then can I view this individualising melancholy trajectory of the text reparatively, *as if in a female network*? To do this, I ask: what if the phone had not been thrown away? In the *Gilmore Girls* revival, as well as the other screen texts Pincus-Roth observes containing this trope (*The Devil Wears Prada*, *Gossip Girl* and the first *Sex and The City* film), the phone throw-away signals a particular kind of individuation and even empowerment that is unleashed by liberating oneself from previous ties and bonds, in Rory's case this being liberation from professional ties with other women. But the kind of individualism that the phone throw-away instates is problematic beyond mere women's ties to other women. It also gestures at how female characters are cut off from all kinds of situations in the name of 'empowerment'. Here the phone throw-away and its function of disengagement is highly evocative if we are to use the metaphor of 'female networks'. At its feminist best, the female network's purpose, with its connotations of connectivity and the technological, ought to engage and connect so as to distribute and redistribute resources and information among its networkers. To disengage, to be cut off, escape and isolate means not to have resources and information and to have to labour alone for resources and survival of the self.

So, for instance, in the film *Sex and The City* where Pincus-Roth finds the phone throw-away, the trope signals a new beginning for Carrie as a single woman after her on-off love interest Big fails to show up on their wedding day. Upon learning that Big is not coming to the wedding, Carrie drops her phone, not deliberately but as a result of this shock. This moment of a phone's departure from Carrie's hand follows a call from Big telling her that he is not coming to their wedding. As the phone cascades down her gown in slow motion the camera closes in on the device. But this first phone-drop only signals Carrie's romantic loss and the beginning of her mourning for the failed relationship, or at least failed wedding and marriage. It emblematises Carrie's disappointment and humiliation at Big's rejection, marking Carrie's entry into a depressive state which will last until the real phone throw-away, i. e. a throw away that is intended by the heroine and not accidental, later in the film. When Carrie finally decides to let go of her sadness about the abortive wedding and resolves to restart her life afresh back in New York, she marks this moment by

throwing her phone into the ocean. This second phone throw-away marks the end of Carrie's mourning and her relationship with Big. In other words, the phone throw-away frees Carrie from previous binds and allows her to reinvent herself as a single woman in her 40s (at least until the very end of the film when Big returns and Carrie takes him back, resuming the on-off relationship dynamic).

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy's relationship with her phone intensifies the morning after she is employed at *Runway* under the editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep), specifically when she gets a 6am call and is told to be at work "right this second". As we cut to Andy rushing to work with coffees for the office in hand, she gets yet another call. Then, once she gets to the office, she is told she must "man the phone at all times" and that all calls must be answered. As the weekend approaches to Andy's relief ("thank God it's Friday, right?" she says to Emily who has been training her, Andy soon learns that this does not mean her phone will now be silent. Her weekend dinner with her father is interrupted by her boss Miranda who demands that Andy continue work for Miranda. The phone represents how Andy relates to her job at *Runway* but is also the very mode by which Andy is controlled by work and the cause of Andy's other relationships unravelling. As observed by Andy's boyfriend, "the person whose calls you take, that's the relationship you are in". The film's 'lesson' seems to be that though Andy has protested throughout the film that she has no choice but to follow Miranda's orders and take all her calls, it has, in fact been Andy's choice all along to dedicate herself wholeheartedly to Miranda and *Runway* at the expense of other people and connections in her life. The phone throw-away at the very end of the film thus signifies Andy's realisation that she does have a choice and the choice she now makes is to leave her career at *Runway*. An alternative ending without the phone throw-away might have been one where Andy remains and affects change in the work culture of *Runway*. The film's negation of the telephone and liberation of Andy from its tyranny, forecloses other better connections too.

Lastly, *Gossip Girl*'s phone throw-away occurs near the beginning of the series with the following voice-over: "the ultimate insider has become a total outsider" ("The Wild Bunch" season 1 episode 2). The phone throw-away trope along with this voice-over sets up the premise of the series: a young socialite Serena returns to New

York after some time away and is no longer satisfied with continuing as before in her circle of friends which she now sees as concerned only with money and other superficialities associated with New York's elite. Rather than settling back into her old life with her popular high-class friends from New York's Upper East Side, she yearns for a more "genuine" existence. The phone throw-away here signals Serena's commitment to relinquishing the superficiality of her old life, a life of status and wealth, even while being physically situated in that very life, among those very people.

In each of these texts, the 'phone throw-away' signifies new beginnings away from previous bonds. These assertions of independence are suggested as a way of resolving dissatisfaction with a situation. The female protagonist in each of the above texts resolve the particular problem they have by disconnecting from the situation, rather than acting on it to affect change in the situation. The phone throw-away expresses an escape, a rupture, a fleeing from the physical space of the situation by rejecting the technology which connects to that situation. In this sense, the phone throw-away is an updated version of the walk away in an era where mere physical distance is not enough to disconnect. It signifies severance and opting out, opting for aloneness and apartness and self-exclusion and exceptionalism rather than staying where one can potentially affect change on the situation at hand, a much-needed alteration. In relation to femininity and how this trope relates to power, the phone throw-away also denotes a passivity in the female characters. The female character's power is not used to affect change in a situation, merely to flee it. This is significant because this trope is portrayed as 'empowering' for the female character. But this kind of 'empowerment' may in fact be a feminist shortcoming of the text, mystifying alternative, and perhaps more productive, ways of enacting power. To 'empower' oneself through the phone throw-away then is to embrace individualism, choice and supposed freedom, only then to be confronted with the impossibility of building collective alternatives because one finds themselves isolated. Thus, the phone-throw-away is a by-passing of the possibility to world-build. By throwing away the phone, construction of alternative ways of relating and acting collectively is thwarted. This is not to say that individualism per se is bad, but to wonder why this impulse is allowed to override relational ways of being in female-centred screen texts.

Subjunctive and Reparative Reading of *Gilmore Girls*

So, how do I view *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* differently having foregrounded Rory's disengagement with her urban career pursuits where possibilities for working with other women abounded? How do I draw out meanings alternative to the retreatist individualism that appeared to be Rory's fate, a retreatist individualism that leaves her both without the realisation of her ambitions and without professional female affiliation? If I deem the text to be lacking, do I end on this note of criticism or can I offer the text an imagined otherwise; can I imagine an alternative ending or future for Rory?

My suggestion is that I turn to the phone throw-away as a moment of potential, a forking in the narrative road. Though in the *Gilmore Girls* revival the phone throw-away shows disconnection onscreen, this moment can also be viewed as a bifurcating point in the narrative where things could turn out otherwise, where connection can be sustained rather than discontinued, where the line divides into two different routes. I can wonder how the revival would have continued and ended if Rory did not throw out her phones. In other words, rather than following Rory back to Stars Hollow, I follow the phone, her hand-held avatar along a parallel track. I can then ask: what if Rory forged ahead with her project with Naomi and began work at *Sandee Says*? What if the female characters and I as a viewer looked past these character's "unlikeable" surfaces? What if I considered what other qualities the characters might have, that are not shown onscreen? What if I focused on other qualities of these female characters besides what has been deemed their insufferableness? This subjunctive inquisition can serve as a supplement to the paranoid mood. This is what I argue the active viewer can offer the *Gilmore Girls* revival and other phone throw-away moments.

To view as if a connection between female characters was sustained rather than dissolved is not a random choice for *viewing as if in a female network*. This kind of eventual disconnection between female characters pervades many female-centred popular screen texts, even those that have foregrounded female affiliation and/or feminism through the course of the series. For instance, *The Good Wife*, where women are depicted as working and together climbing the career ladder at a law firm culminates in the finale with the protagonist Alicia betraying her law firm partner,

mentor and friend Diane. In *Broad City*, a show about two inseparable slacker friends living in New York City, the female friendship is spatially dislocated in the finale when Abi, one of the friends, moves away to pursue her artistic education. In *Girls*, the protagonist Hannah also moves away from New York City in the finale, and all of the girls referred to by title are shown to be embracing their own individual lives separate from one another. Because of this insistence that in female-centred series the ending must entail the separation of its female friends, we can assume some deeper anxiety about a happily ever after that might include the maintenance of spatially close female affiliation. The phone throw-away then, as with the final ‘move away’ of *Broad City* and *Girls*, exhibits resistance to portraying an ending in which women remain together. However, unlike the ‘move away’, the phone throw-away severs the channels of communication that might facilitate re-connection in an increasingly mobile world, making the disconnection of the phone throw-away all the more final.

In such instances, both the phone throw-away and the move-away provide me, the viewer interested in coming up with feminist alternatives to the screen, with forking points where alternatives can be considered. What if Alicia remained on friendly terms with Diane in *The Good Wife*? What if Abbi and Ilana of *Broad City* both remained in New York? What if Hannah in *Girls* did not move out of Brooklyn? What if these women grow together and not apart? What would those alternative endings and futures of togetherness look like? Furthermore, rather than escaping situations through the phone throw-away or the move-away, can these characters engage the situations they are in and use their power to affect those situations. Does female character growth need to involve a spatial movement from a situation, or can this growth come about through a character transforming the situation they are in? Can screen women act politically rather than with dramatic finality?

Viewing as if *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*

In opposition to the *Gilmore Girls* revival, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* embraces communication media as well as female networks. The series is about Rebecca, a lawyer who embarks on a retreatist narrative, moving from a well-paid job in New York to West Covina in California. Initially, the motive to move, or at least the one that is suggested, is love, as Rebecca’s decision follows a chance encounter with her

ex-boyfriend from her teenage years who, though having lived in New York for some time, is moving back to West Covina. Unhappy with her life in New York, Rebecca decides to do the same. But while *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* begins as a retreatist narrative in Negra's sense, it undoes the retreatist logic through the course of the show, meaning that traditional ideas of gender are mostly undermined by the show, rather than reinforced. Indeed, the series repeatedly undermines stereotypes of traditional femininity that center on romance, marriage and motherhood, and instead gives serious attention to relationships between female characters instead. It is such latter relationships that are the focus of my examination of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and my *as-if* viewings of it.

But if female relationships that I prioritise in this chapter are already onscreen, why still employ the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy? The answer to this question is that, as I show in this chapter, though the series foregrounds "female networking" in various ways, even in the technological sense of the women networking through and with technology, in other ways the series suppresses these relationships and ultimately portrays them as something to outgrow for women. I employ a close look at *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* to find this more disappointing trajectory in the show, and then I employ and develop strategies to consider what alternatives would legitimise female relationships, rather than ultimately undermine them.

Expanding on My Reading of, and Dissatisfactions with, the *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* Screen

As a matter of elaborating on how I view the screen of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, before employing the strategy of alternatives, and of articulating my dissatisfactions with the series, I take a moment to expand and clarify these points before moving on to employ *as if* strategies. Thus, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, as already noted connection between women is pervasive onscreen. And much of this connection revolves around technology and scheming. This is mainly because Paula (played by Donna Lynne Chapman) is a computer savvy working mother who directs her computer skills and scheming tendencies towards forging a bond with Rebecca (Rachel Bloom). This bond is created and sustained through Paula and Rebecca's attempts to seduce Josh Chan, Rebecca's high school sweetheart and her motivation to move to West Covina, unbeknownst to him. Paula is infatuated by Rebecca's gesture of moving cities for

love and is inspired to help Rebecca to win Josh back. This leads them to hatch various schemes to attract Josh's romantic attention. Their schemes, which are by definition deviations from the everyday order of things, require technological practices that also deviate from everyday uses of technology. Thus, hacking becomes a frequent activity in the networkers' plots. We see Paula hacking into Rebecca's computer, Valencia's photo stream and West Covina's cell tower system, among other security cracks.

The other form of technologically facilitated female networking that can be found in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is cyberstalking. Cyber-stalking is used in the show not so much to maintain the female network of Paula and Rebecca, but rather to extend the female network to include other female characters. Paula is first shown as cyberstalking Rebecca in the pilot after they initially meet, then Rebecca cyberstalks Valencia (Gabrielle Ruiz), Josh's girlfriend in season one. By season two there is a musical number called "Research Me Obsessively" about cyberstalking where both Valencia and Rebecca stalk together Anna (Brittany Snow), Josh's new girlfriend. Both practices, hacking and cyberstalking deviate from the regular and intended uses of technologies and are usually considered wrong, and are even criminal. However, when such deviant behaviour serves female connection, attention should be given to the agentic ways that these women transgress the everyday and the ordinary to forge new and radical connections.

The show itself, as it progresses, portrays these activities as increasingly delusional and eventually Rebecca has a mental breakdown (the show also has a strong focus on mental health and explores Rebecca's mental illness throughout, this breakdown being part of this concern of the show). Eventually, to redeem Paula and Rebecca, technology and the technological practices facilitating the female network are abandoned. Transgressing everyday norms of propriety is replaced by a supposed maturation of the female characters, who become increasingly motivated to take up goals and projects that they can pursue individually (and legally): Paula embarks on realising her dream of becoming a lawyer while Rebecca focuses on improving her mental health and, at the very end of the series, discovers a passion for song writing. These shifts in focus away from technology suggest Paula and Rebecca are finally taking responsibility for their own lives. The female characters remain friends but

now operate primarily as individual labourers, whether in the form of pursuing a career as a lawyer (Paula) or a passion for song writing (Rebecca). They do this alongside each other, but these pursuits are ones of solo achievement rather than the shared project or scheme of season one which worked as an alternative to satisfaction-through-labouring. In the end, satisfaction as purposeful labouring in the form of individual work trumps in the text, with no imaginative explorations of shared forms of activity between women that may offer alternatives to the fantasy of finding one's passion and romantic heterosexual love. What is interesting here is that the characters' newfound and morally approved focus coincides with the cessation of a shared project.¹⁴

In this turn towards self-responsibility, as the series reaches its later seasons, technology is put to this purpose as well. Rebecca's use of Skype to contact her housemates Valencia and Heather (Vella Lovell) in "I See You" (season 4, episode 6) after they move out of West-Covina signifies Rebecca's learning to handle changing circumstances in her life. Similarly, her decision to go on "the dating apps" in the same episode is framed as a sign of Rebecca's growing security in herself. Importantly, Paula abandons her hacking and fabrication tendencies to use her laptop to study for her bar exams. Now, rather than using technology to meddle and scheme in extraordinary and unsanctioned ways and to escape the everyday, Paula uses technology in very ordinary ways to pursue aspirational and normative achievements. Technology in these instances is associated with Rebecca adapting to changes in her life and learning to live with her borderline personality disorder, and for Paula technology becomes the means by which she can begin a career.

Finding a passion or a career then becomes *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s happy ending. This ending could be seen as a realistic alternative to the romantic comedy ending in which the protagonist is (re)united with 'the one'. However, the ending of finding one's passion or embarking on a long-awaited career path is also a kind of fantasy, and in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, is framed as a happily ever after. This is clear in the very

¹⁴ In *Broad City*, similar scheming is performed by two close female friends whose friendship is, by the end of the show, labelled as 'co-dependant' and thus deviant. The separation of the two women then is a way to show character growth and this is where the show concludes. Communication technology, however, remains significant to the very end of the series and is shown as connecting the two women across states at the end of the finale.

final episode in which Rebecca must choose between three guys, but instead she chooses songwriting. And because Rebecca's realisation that songwriting may have been the thing she was searching for all this time comes after a trajectory of self-responsibilisation, in some ways finding one's passion becomes the ultimate responsibility, the final key to being a happy well-adjusted mature grown-up. I find this happy ending suspect, both because it too easily replaces the rom-com ending without really altering its substance, but perhaps even more so in light of the female network it displaces. Especially because these individual respectable and desirable passions suggest that previous collective scheming was immature and misguided. This makes me wonder whether this happy ending of finding and following one's passion is in fact no more than a kind of disciplinary discourse that looks on female connection unkindly and diverts its energies to a more singular destiny.

This impulse towards individuating female characters in these shows is in bad faith when the collaborative nature of television-making and its gendered nature is considered. For instance, in the 2018-2019 season, "[o]ffscreen, women comprised 31 percent of all TV creators, directors, writers, producers, EPs, editors, and directors of photography" (Montpelier n. p.), meaning that the work of women creating these television shows contrasts with the stories about women and their trajectories of individuation within these shows. Though not discussed in depth in this thesis, *Broad City* is a prime example of this individuated happy ending contrasting with its means of production. *Broad City* is the brainchild of two female comedians, Ilana Glazer and Abi Jacobson, and is about a friendship between two women who separate in the finale of the show to pursue further education and subsequent careers. But the project of the television series itself was a product of the collaboration between women, the result of women coming together, not drifting apart. Considering the collaborative nature of television series' creation, this fantasy of characters' going their own way then seems to come from an idealisation of individualism rather than from the experience of creating the series itself. It is even possible to consider that this romanticisation of individualism in television texts could be a deliberate obfuscation of female television creators' own labour process. Here I do not want to argue that female connection and collaboration is a feminist utopian solution and panacea for all dissatisfactions of modern life, or that

individuation or self-responsibilisation as a source of life satisfaction is to be condemned out of hand. Rather, I want to point out that in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* as well as in *Gilmore Girls* and its revival, and other female-centred series, individuation, self-responsibilisation, as well as the pursuit of individual projects coincide with the on-screen dissipation of female networks. This is an affirmation of liberal feminism that forecloses collective and therefore political forms of feminism that depend on the *relation* as opposed to the *individual*.

Finding the Productivity of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s Deviant Female Networking: Finding an Alternative to Moralising

Because female connection is already pervasive onscreen in the show, sometimes all I need to do is view this connection in a certain way to ensure that I recognise the joyful sustained collaboration between two women already present. Otherwise I am in danger of misrecognising and seeing as immoral or improper this connection, especially if I revert to using the moral lens. Because much of the connection and collaboration between women takes place in relation to scheming, hacking and cyberstalking in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, it is easy to view such activity as immoral and as needing to cease. And even though *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* can already be seen as a show that itself challenges, in some ways, the tendency to moralise, the ultimate trajectory of the show nevertheless leads its characters to endings very different to the scheming, hacking and stalking of season one. These are endings where responsibility for the self and one's happiness is paramount (thus I read this trajectory as endorsing a moral and individualising view of "coming-of-age" and character growth). And it is because of such endings that I challenge myself to adopt an alternative to the moral lens as I focus on and celebrate the deviant technologically facilitated connections between women in season one of the series. I view here *as if* the devious was in fact productive for feminism.

If I do not adopt such a strategy, then the alternative, the moralising trajectory of the series that comes into full force after season one, requires me to read the show as advocating for a self-maturation defined by taking responsibility for oneself, which entails goals and projects pursued on one's own. Most of the characters, but especially Rebecca and Paula, are shown to be on a trajectory toward taking responsibility for their own lives after their initial "irresponsible" scheming. But we

can also look at Rebecca and Paula's shared goal as expressing something important for feminism if we look for an alternative to this moralising.

A consideration of the word 'scheme' here opens up a way to repopulate Rebecca's and Paula's actions of season one with meanings other than morality. This is generally a word with negative and sometimes gendered connotations and articulates well Paula and Rebecca's activities on which their relationship is based at the beginning of the series. It also paints their relationship in a negative light. In the show, the first time that Rebecca and Paula's activities are labelled as 'schemes', is precisely when Paula decides she wants to stop this scheming which she now sees as an unhealthy obsession with Rebecca's love life ("Where is Josh's Friend?" season 2 episode 1). But the end of their 'scheming' also marks the point at which the two female characters start growing apart and become more involved in their own individual lives. For all the opprobrium implied by the framing, while they were scheming, Rebecca and Paula had a shared project and related to one another based on this collective and uneconomic pursuit. And this is what the scheme is here, in fact: a shared project or pursuit between the two women. If I am to *view as if in a female network*, I can focus instead on this meaning of the word, uncoloured by morality, as well as the relationality that this scheme allows, even though it is portrayed as devious by the master narrative. Is the representation of the women collaborating on a shared project not significant for a relational feminism, however apparently fantastic and inappropriate the shared project is? What I am suggesting here is to view against the habit of moralising so as to bring out the potential residing in what appears to be 'mere' scheming. And to advance this point further, perhaps it is the sheer pointlessness of the two women's shared project that holds political potential. It is entirely beyond the usefulness spectrum of latter-day liberal capitalism. It engages in the wasteful activity of cyberstalking to no end, and in a way, the male object of their shared desire is just a *tertium quid* uniting the two women.

Viewing the devious as productive is, of course, not an original idea. The patriarchal nature of so many cultural artefacts means that we cannot use the same tools of interpretation to feminist ends that were used to create and read those texts in a context unaware of its sexism and misogyny. The moral lens is often a tool of sexist

double standards. As Buonanno notes, “women have traditionally been expected to act and behave according to norms of femininity that enforced ideals of female innocence, goodness, nurturance and social conformity, just as men have traditionally been expected to be strong, dominant, combative and even rulebreaking” (*Television Anti-Heroines* 11). This is why Schantz is justified in calling for feminist reading practices that “license a little ruthlessness in others”, particularly in “female characters, the regular victims of masculine sadism” in narratives. Schantz too recognises the double standards that underpin the morality lens: “judging them [female characters] can no longer be our most pressing task” (33). So even though the actions of Paula and Rebecca’s schemes may be read as destructive, manipulative, escapist, and perhaps most importantly, a waste of time, the productive aspect of these schemes in another sense must also be considered.

Furthermore, the alignment of deviance with collective projects between women on the one hand, and character maturation with pursuing individualist goals on the other, poses the question of whether morality and responsibility are aligned with individualism in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and similar shows. If so, a relational feminist approach to screen texts would necessitate refusal of the moralistic lens that privileges individual self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Instead, another lens that allows for an appreciation of the relational rather than the moral must be taken up and used. This alternative way of viewing would have to privilege the fact that our two protagonists have a shared project and that their relationality is not a wholesome girlfriendship. One way of doing this is simply considering the deviant as in fact being productive. Otherwise, I can consider the technological practices of hacking and cyberstalking that characterise Paula and Rebecca’s female network also offers in some sense alternative ways of understanding and framing the scheming and the female connection. These technological practices give us a “technological” lens to view with. I would argue that by conceiving of the technological lens as an alternative to the moral lens, we can even surface some quite radical impulses in the show.

Viewing Technologically - Hacking

Hacking is the most important activity in Paula and Rebecca's schemes. Hacking overcomes security barriers to privileged knowledge so that Paula and Rebecca can manipulate a situation for desired results. Since the 1980s, hacking has been primarily seen as the rather male practice of overcoming security and cracking passwords and phallically inserting oneself into forbidden places. But in the 1950s and 60s when security measures were not a priority for computer systems, hacking was perceived as a more playful and prankster-esque practice that toyed with refiguring systems (Thomas ix-xi). Paula's hacking can be understood both in terms of the 1980s and 1950s definitions of hacking. As well as overcoming security measures to hack into phones and cellphone towers, Paula also reconfigures the storylines and events of the show itself, for instance the show's romantic plots. By hacking computers and phones, and her manipulation of the information that she obtains through her hacking, Paula gains some control over the events of the first season when she attempts to break up Josh and Valencia and make Josh fall in love with Rebecca. This dimension of Paula's character is described in the musical number "After Everything I've Done for You (That You Didn't Ask For)" where she enumerates all the ways that she has been working on the scheme behind Rebecca's (and the audiences') back:

Want to know all the things I've done for you?

I broke into Josh's old high school

and made copies of all his grades!

I bumped into Lourdes at Star Bucks

and insisted you be a bridesmaid!

I blackmailed Valencia's boss

so now I control when she teaches!

That's right!

I make all the Yoga class schedules!

There's no limit to where my reach is! ("Paula Needs to Get Over Josh!" season 1, episode 18).

These lines, and a lyric towards the end of the song – "you're nothing without me, and my creativity" –, paint her scheming as, above all, creative. Although tongue-in-cheek, it invites a re-framing of the female characters' activities. Furthermore, the

illicit practice of hacking, which creates a network (between the women) that shouldn't happen, offers itself as a specific structure of action which *viewing as if in a female network* can replicate: dismantling and refashioning systems, or, reconfiguring the screen. My point here is that I can use the technologies and the technological practices of the female network *within* the show as an alternative way to understand what is happening on screen, displacing the moralizing lens that I might adopt if I view without care. (I address further the idea of drawing from the text to guide *as if* viewings in the following section "*Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* Teaches How to View As If".) "Hacking" my viewing practices in this way, enables me to see Rebecca and Paula's scheming as the creative reconfiguration of the state of things, as much-needed fabrication that redistributes power and rewrites the female script. Again, I concede that here I blur the idea of the alternative *to* the screen with interpreting the screen differently. But this is for the purpose of considering the different ways I can conceive of "alternatives" and to put more tools into the toolbox of "viewing as if in a female network".

Viewing Technologically - Cyberstalking

Considering cyberstalking in a similar vein also allows me to see this recurring activity as allowing for more politically productive ways to make sense of the screen than the moralising lens. Typically, cyberstalking is considered escapist and shameful, even if it is a pervasive practice on social media platforms and, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, cyberstalking is mostly of an ex-partner or an ex-partner's new partner. Typically, the stalking of an ex or their new partner is framed through the untidy emotions of jealousy and loss. But emptying cyberstalking instances of these emotional associations (that are implicated in discourses of female emotional instability), I may draw out other meanings that signal alternative potentialities for the female hacker figure.

In the show, Rebecca first cyber-stalks Valencia in season one after their first encounter in a supermarket, and then Anna, Josh's new girlfriend, whom Rebecca and Valencia cyberstalk together in season two. In the first instance, when Rebecca first meets Valencia in "I Love Josh's Girlfriend" (season 1, episode 2), she is initially both intimidated and simultaneously infatuated by Valencia. On her return home, Rebecca friends Valencia on social media, and the next day at work Paula

finds Rebecca looking through Valencia's social media profile. Rebecca announces to Paula her resolve to become Valencia's friend. Paula argues that the reason Rebecca desires to be friends with Valencia is because she, in fact, hates her as the competition for Josh's attention, and that really Rebecca just wants to get closer to Josh. Rebecca denies this:

Rebecca: Josh says I can't be friends with her, but I really like her.

Paula: Hahaha, come on... you loathe her.

Rebecca: Um, no I don't.

Paula: Oh, okay let me tell you how this works. Women of equal sexual viability hate each other. Even if they pretend to like each other and that is how it has worked since the day vaginas were invented. See, you're like these two [pointing to a magazine cover]. You're Taylor Swift and she's Katie Perry [...]

Rebecca: Okay this is why I don't read this drivel, right, because it perpetuates the very misogynist myth that women can't get along. Right? Look at this cover: 'fem feud', 'girls fight', 'who wore it better?' It's like, who wore it equally? ('Josh's Girlfriend is Really Cool! Season 1 episode 2).

But who is to be believed? Is Paula right and Rebecca in denial, desperate to get closer to Josh through befriending his girlfriend? Or is Paula relying on an easily available narrative to describe Rebecca's behavior who in fact does want a friendship with a woman who she already has something in common with – the ex? As the episode progresses Rebecca does grow closer to Valencia before Valencia learns about Rebecca and Josh having dated in the past, at which point the two women fall out. However, the episode never turns into a story about women in competition with each other for a man as Paula had predicted. In a way, Josh is irrelevant, the McGuffin that brings the three women together, a network facilitator.

The second instance of cyber-stalking an ex takes place in the episode "Who's the Cool Girl Josh is Dating?". Here not only is Rebecca and Valencia cyberstalking Josh's new partner Anna, cyberstalking is also parodied in the musical number "Research Me, Obsessively". This is a song about spending 13 hours compulsively cyber-stalking an ex's new partner through their various online social media

accounts. Here, the ambiguity of what Rebecca (and Valencia) feel towards Anna is highlighted by their housemate Heather:

Valencia: What could she [Anna] possibly see in Josh Chan?

Rebecca: I really have no idea what he has to offer to someone like this.

Heather: You both dated him.

Rebecca: Yea, but we're mortals and she's like a fairy angel. What could she see in a guy from West Covina who still wears stichy [sic] jeans?

Valencia: And supermarket flip flops

Rebecca: And lives with his mother

Valencia: Yea, he's the worst. I once saw him bite off a toenail.

Rebecca: Well I mean he is very flexible and strong.

Valencia: And muscular.

Rebecca: And his skin colour, would you say that's like caramel? It's just so yummy.

Valencia: Delicious.

Heather: Well you guys just did a whole loop-de-loop there.

Rebecca: Anyway, I don't know, this isn't adding up, I think it's on us to get to the bottom of this.

Valencia: Yea, I mean just because we're over Josh doesn't mean we can let some trendy girl exploit him. It's not right!

(Who's the Cool Girl Josh is Dating?" season 2 episode 7).

Here, though they begin questioning Anna's dating Josh because she seems too good for him, they end the scene suspicious of her motives, with Heather drawing our attention to this volte-face. But whether positive or negative, Anna is the object of their interest.

In both instances of cyberstalking we are presented with an attraction or curiosity towards another woman in relation to which there is ambiguity of feeling, where the narrative has not solidified, has not yet become concrete. The ambiguity of the cyberstalking moment can be read as expressing a desire for a relation between women that cannot find its referent in popular narratives describing relations between women. The relation we see that can only be expressed by incoherence

onscreen then is open to interpretation. It is still as mutable as their feelings towards Anna.

In both hacking and cyberstalking I see the usefulness of considering the structure of these technological practices shorn of morality and popular narrative tropes. Focusing on how the technological structures action allows me to think about what is happening onscreen without interpreting it using narrative patterns that come most readily to mind. Instead, I use an alternative lens. Using hacking to understand the action onscreen allows me to view Paula's and Rebecca's scheming as creative reconfigurations of the romantic plot. By using the mechanics of cyberstalking to understand what is happening onscreen, I find a female character making contact with another female character. Making the effort to divorce these technologies and technological practices from habitual (moral) interpretations, I am left with actions and agencies to which I can attach meanings as reconfigured by me, the *as if* viewer, implementing alternatives in all the ways that I can conceive of them. As in the cyberstalking instances, I can retain the action and mechanics of connection but jettison the moralising frame of jealousy and female competition. Using the technological lens allows me to read these instances not as jealousy or envy but as women wanting to know and make contact with other women.

As a concluding point on this strategy of finding alternative ways to view deviant female connections, I want to highlight that by finding feminist potential therein instead, I abide by my commitments to circumvent Winch's more "wholesome", but violent, girlfriends. Winch's pervasive girlfriends perpetuate the sensibilities of postfeminism whereby "mutual surveillance" (28) creates a female affiliation that is really about women's surveillance of one another and individualism under the guise of friendship and 'empowerment'. To reroute such girlfriends I propose viewing deviant, but relational, female friendships shorn of the lens of morality, allowing a foregrounding of female affiliation that is not of the girlfriends' postfeminist kind.

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend Teaches How to View As If: Selecting the Right Sensibility from the Show to Use as Guide

The series overall has two tendencies, two trajectories that guide what happens in the show: the deconstructive/revealing tendency or sensibility, and the

fabricating/creative one. Let us look at the former first and tease out what I mean. Rachel Bloom, creator and star of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, has described the show as being about “the pursuit of happiness” and about asking “how do you figure out what you really, really want in your life” as opposed to “what other people expect you to want” (in Turchiano n. p.). This seems to describe the general trajectory of the show where, on various levels, character motivations are in a process of being constantly revealed and revised as distractions from what is really at the core of the characters. Moreover, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*’s very basis is highly self-referential, promising to deconstruct stereotypes – the title of the show itself promises to deconstruct the stereotype of a “crazy ex-girlfriend”. An example of this deconstruction is when *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* presents us with the narrative of a female protagonist who moves cities for love—a narrative that figures largely in earlier female-centered television series such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Felicity* (1998-2002). However, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, the motivation for the move – love – is undone when it is revealed to be an obfuscation of Rebecca’s ‘real’ search for fulfilment and escape from childhood trauma. Other stereotypes of women that center on romance, marriage, and motherhood are, in many ways, challenged in the show as well, usually by replacing motivations that support traditional women’s roles by motivations centering on female friendships and individual psyches. The premise of the show is that female-centered television series often stereotype women and their motivations and do not reflect women’s actual experiences or desires.

The clearest example of the series’ deconstructive tendency is Rebecca’s diagnosis of borderline personality disorder in season three, which leads to her realisation that her fixation on Josh was a symptom of an unstable mental state, a turn of events foreshadowed by the title of the show. Desire for a romantic relationship is “figured out” as being only a mask for Rebecca’s actual desire for better mental health. Another clear example of this impulse towards uncovering real desires and motivations behind female characters’ behaviour is resides in Paula’s friendship with Rebecca. First, Paula’s motivation to see Rebecca and Josh together is introduced as Paula’s infatuation with love stories, but as the season progresses, her interest in the love match is revealed as something Paula believes sustains her friendship with Rebecca. Josh is merely the cement between the two women. Towards the end of season one, when Rebecca no longer wishes to pursue Josh, Paula expresses her

worry that this pursuit had been sustaining their own relationship: “if we are not chasing Josh, then you’re not going to want to hang out with me anymore, I know it” (season 1, episode 16). Soon after this, Paula and Rebecca’s friendship is increasingly shown as Paula’s way to escape from her family life, another plot move towards uncovering ‘real’ motivations and the ‘real’ meanings of protagonists’ actions. But the truth or falsity of individual motivations or core problems is neither here nor there. What is important here is how the series has an impulse to uncover what lies beyond the surface, an impulse that is incessant and that never stops as each new depth becomes the new surface with each uncovering. The show constantly promises to reveal truths behind façades and stereotypes and continues in this vein until Paula finally finds satisfaction in pursuing a law career and Rebecca finds a peace of mind when she realises her passion for songwriting. The show ends here, but presumably, there will always be new deeper desires to reveal, new dissatisfactions to surface, meaning that the female characters are left in a trap of perpetual uncovering of ‘real’ desires. This cycle of uncovering what one “really really wants”, in the words of Bloom, is reinforced narratively by Rebecca’s and other characters’ visit to therapist Dr. Akopian (Michael Hyatt) during the show. It is the therapist who encourages characters to look within to overcome ‘superficial symptoms’ in order to make real and ‘deep’ psychological progress.

This movement of uncovering and revealing is not propitious for female networking in the series because it is this impulse that also coincides with the dissipation of the female network whose schemes are made to seem increasingly superficial and immature by this logic of uncovering and revealing. Because of this alignment, I reckon it is important to resist the revealing impulse.

The other impulse of the show is the fabricating impulse, and this impulse, I claim, serves as a useful model for my own *as if in a female network viewing*. This is an impulse towards fabricating other narratives and worlds as opposed to making do with the screen narratives the female characters are stuck with. This sensibility is reflected in the scheming of Paula and Rebecca in season one, whose scheming creates something new, puts something new in motion. This is akin to spinning a new story, a new narrative strand or a new subplot. This sensibility of fabrication via the female network holds potential for feminism because this fabrication arises from

women's relations to and collaborations with other women rather than the kind of individualism, heteronormativity and aspirationalism that only leads to the production of normative lives and conventions. If the female friendship does not veer into the territory of Winch's girlfriendships, then there is radical potential.¹⁵ By embracing this sensibility of fabrication, I join the web of women on screen who are weaving the fabric of the show, harkening back to images of the female Fates spinning new destinies. In doing so, rather than pursuing supposedly 'real' and non-superficial desires, I, as part of the female network of season one, then too rely on and celebrate fabrication and artifice, privileging the idea of fabrication as the way to make meaning, rather than the idea of 'uncovering' or revealing meaning, truth and 'real' desire. Here, the female network offers this alternative impulse of fabrication that can displace the revealing/uncovering impulse that not only leaves the heroines in a perpetual state of unrest, but also leads them towards increasing individuation.

In this respect, here technologies and technological practices implemented by Rebecca and Paula take on their significance for me. Technology's artifice, without the pretense of having any claims to the natural, supports the female network's creativity. Wilson has noted that we can look at technology as "attempts to shape the physical world" (13). Seen in this light, the technologically facilitated female network and the scheming of Paula and Rebecca take on a world-building quality that I view as being about creating alternatives that cannot be reduced to the genuinely 'real' realities of the therapist, but are endless. Viewing the uncovering and revealing impulse in reverse, the revolutionary nature of female networks celebrate the formations of the spontaneously artificial, with only tenuous ties to reality, to what already is. I claim this escapist impulse is key for feminism. The focus on the creation of something new, fantasy, new worlds, and imagination is an impulse that liberates feminism from returning to the binds of 'reality', of being

¹⁵ I use heteronormativity to refer to the primacy given to monogamous relationships between women and men and their common sense status as opposed to other relationships, such as homosexual, non-monogamous heterosexual relationships, or platonic relationships. Through my usage of "heteronormative" I argue that in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, relationships between women are in tension with the heteronormativity of romantic relationships between male and female characters. I use heteronormative and not heterosexual because the latter term's opposite term is homosexuality, which is not the focus of this chapter, while heteronormativity has no opposite as noted by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, 548), and is rather a reference to the unique place of normative heterosexuality. For more on the concept of heteronormativity see Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry*, 24 no. 2 (1998).

‘realistic’. The claims of ‘reality’ and being ‘realistic’ can easily lead back to established ways of thinking that find their inexorable logics in the language and culture of patriarchal norms. Thus, I claim that it is better to hold stubbornly onto the seemingly escapist fabrications of the female network of season one in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* rather than to give into the later seasons of the show that claim these fabrications to be superficial and solicit us to champion the characters in becoming increasingly responsible for their own happiness in individualised ways. After all, this responsibility only means the dissipation of this creative world-building energy of the female network.

This impulse to fabricate, to create new narratives as exhibited by Paula and Rebecca offers itself up as guidance for how this finding of alternatives strategy can be put to use, and for what kind of purpose. The show itself here gives us a model of embracing artifice and fabrication and creating new narratives that deviate from the world of the show in the form of schemes. Thus, *viewing as if in a female network* the show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, I find that there are texts that, if we focus on how they themselves embrace what Schantz calls “overimagination” (4), encourage our own aberrant viewings. They offer a vision of fabrication that I may draw on to fabricate and satisfy my sensibilities and political commitment when I find the narrative itself unsatisfying. Ultimately, the technologically facilitated female network of Paula and Rebecca provides with a relationship that encourages me to scheme and fabricate and come up with something new, with alternatives to the screen.

Another Model in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*: Taking Love Stories Seriously through Irreverence for Cultural Hierarchies

Another sensibility which can be found in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* that also serves me well in *viewing as if in a female network* is its irreverence towards cultural hierarchies. A worry when doing scholarship on female-centred popular culture is that such work may be seen as trivial and insignificant. Female-centred television series, like romantic comedies, are often viewed as the ultimate escapist fare, a guilty pleasure whose perceived escapist quality ranks closely to that of reality television. But the ‘escapist’ and ‘trivial’ charge more than anything serves to diminish cultural artefacts in which women exceptionally are central.

What I find in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* is that the female network of Paula and Rebecca (and Valencia and Heather and Anna) teaches me to challenge such devaluations. Paula, with her romantic infatuation especially does not discriminate between masculine and feminine interests. Her embrace of the often derided, stereotypically feminine interest in the romance plot can be considered as a challenge to devaluations of 'feminine' interests in light of Paula's use of the (often male) high-skill technological practice of hacking to facilitate the creation of such a plot. By using technology for this purpose, she shows irreverence towards the masculinisation of high-skill technologies which she puts in the service of the romance plot. Here Paula challenges a patriarchal value system that demeans femininity and positions the masculine as universal, a value system famously described by Virginia Woolf as dictating that "sport [is] 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'" (74). In this way Paula subverts a gendered hierarchy of values and interests. And this irreverence towards cultural hierarchies provides an alternative to valuing cultural hierarchies that I may also adopt in my viewing.

For me, a feminist media academic writing about female-centred television series, the lack of critical attention that this body of texts receives (in contrast with more male-centric texts) in the context of 1990s and 2010's television debates is a significant issue. Critics hailing the virtues of 'quality television', a label used to describe a range of series with high production values, cinematic aesthetics, and complex narratives (McCabe and Akass xix; Mittell 2) as well as explicit violence and overt sexual content (Leverette *et al.* 125), have often ignored female-centred television series. In fact, this label has been critiqued by feminist media scholars who have noted that male show runners and characters predominantly dominate discussions about what constitutes 'quality television' (Lagerwey *et al.*; Kelly; Nygaard and Lagerwey 106). For instance, both *Sex and The City* and *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) are innovative texts of the 1990s, but *Sex and The City* rarely garners the label of 'quality television' that *The Sopranos* enjoys. This disregard for certain television texts can in fact be seen as a disregard of television more generally as before 'quality television' like *The Sopranos* gave television a certain cultural caché in the 21st century, television was largely seen as a feminine object and thus low on the cultural hierarchy (Imre 392). Charlotte Brundson has also observed this gendering of the television set in various film narratives where male characters

conflate the medium with daytime soaps, a genre whose audience is assumed to be female (128).¹⁶ By embracing the medium of television, but more specifically female-centred television series that are excluded from the ‘quality television’ canon, one resists the cultural hierarchies that have often been dictated by a patriarchal logic. Taking my cue from Paula and investing unashamedly in the spectatorship of, and scholarly attention to, female-centred television then can be seen as a kind of irreverence towards cultural hierarchies that often works to exclude female networks and their stories.

I can use this strategy of irreverence towards that which is important in other ways too (I conceive this to be a kind of alternative too that closely relates to the strategy of viewing the trivialized as important as discussed in Chapter Two where I take seriously the technophile’s devices). Besides championing my focus on female-centred television series, I can employ this strategy on the contents of the text as well. For instance, because my concern in this chapter is to remain committed to connection between women that is unlike the girlfriendship described by Winch, I can use this attitude of irreverence to dismiss the importance of relations between women that do fit the girlfriendship dynamic onscreen. Such girlfriendships focus on supporting the individual and enables the individual woman to gain cultural caché and class mobility. Dismissing the importance of such aspirationalism, and traditional hierarchies of value more generally, I can focus on that which has been trivialized and *view as if* that were highly valuable instead. The alternative female network, of Paula and Rebecca in season one, operates in this sense without bowing down to cultural and aspirational hierarchies, especially in the case of Paula’s character who invests in the ‘trivial’ and uneconomic pursuit of nosiness.

¹⁶ Another instance of dismissal and trivialisation of “feminine” media can be seen in films and TV series thematising new communication media. Examples of these texts include *Ingrid Goes West* (2017) as well as in the dystopic television series *Black Mirror* (2011-) where social media platforms are both feminised and trivialised (or even villainised). With the dawn of the social media and smartphone era, these media have provided the possibility of self-expression and self-representation in public spaces on a new scale. This means that they have provided young women with a way to represent themselves, to express and to make their images public in an unprecedented manner. This phenomenon is examined by Mary McGill in her study on selfie culture. McGill argues that selfie culture and the broad participation of young women in these practices is a way for women to address the lack of control that they have over cultural representations of their gender (“Young Women”). Evidently, the use of this technology, regardless of its trivialisation by a wider public, is an example of irreverence towards more highly esteemed forms of cultural representations which exclude women and their agency.

Sending Sympathy and Characters' Best Interests

Crazy Ex-Girlfriend holds one more model that I look to for *viewing as if in a female network* for the purpose of privileging relationality. I find this model in how other characters treat Rebecca, the show's heroine, especially when she becomes a difficult character to like. She frequently makes bad decisions and often treats her friends unkindly (and can be put into the "horrible white" character camp as written about by Lagerwey and Nygaard). Yet Rebecca enjoys many forms of intimacy with various characters, and so the show sets an example for the audience, suggesting it repay this by receiving Rebecca with sympathy by portraying many of the characters doing just that, especially in moments where, conventionally, her actions would be judged harshly. For instance, in the episode "Josh's Ex-Girlfriend is Crazy" (season 3 episode 4), Rebecca's erratic behaviour leads her friends, concerned for her well-being, to band together and confront Rebecca's recent actions with an intervention. In denial about her mental well-being, Rebecca acts defensively and offensively, hurling personal insults at each of them. However, though her friends are visibly hurt, they show understanding towards Rebecca rather than judging her for her cruel behaviour. Here, I turn again to Schantz to consider how he would read such a scene and thus help me to draw out the model of *as if viewing* I sense resides here. For Schantz, to perform his own reading strategy – "reading as if in a female network" – means that the reader is "transmitting sympathy and strategy to women beset by patriarchy" (3) and finding "new ways of defining our interest in a heroine and new ways of imagining where her best interests could lie" (6). Indeed, the text does not always have the heroines, or my own, best interests in mind. Thus, does it mean that the alternative I should seek is to privilege such interests, rather than the ones that may be at the forefront of the text? The question then becomes how do I use the strategy of alternatives to make room for the heroines and my own best interests. And how do I know what these best interests even are?

To explore this strategy and these questions, I jump back to the *Gilmore Girls* revival and apply this kind of sympathy to Rory, especially as a way to interrogate the general consensus that Rory is insufferable. The main question to ask here is: if the foreclosure of the female network between Rory and Sandee, and Rory and Naomi, is based on these characters' unlikeability, should I not channel the

alternative of sympathy, to these characters that are so prevalently judged to be horrible by the narrative? Should I instead consider these characters' best interests? This re-focalisation that considers what the heroine wants, what her best interests are, what her experience is, might be the alternative to what the screen is offering. If the text itself marginalises and acts against the interests of the female character, as so happens in the *Gilmore Girls* revival, then this strategy is key to pulling the heroine's interests back into view.

But what does it mean to insist to view with the heroine's interests, or best interests, in mind? Is it not simply presumptuous to claim we know what such interests are? It is often difficult to even know what my own best interests are! So, what is this position about? Again, to attempt an answer to these questions, I turn to the texts I am examining as well as to Schantz for answers. In *Gilmore Girls*, this kind of meddling in another's wellbeing figures as a plot point in the mother-daughter relationship when Laurelai repeatedly confronts Rory's boyfriend of season three, Jess, who she predicts will break Rory's heart. Laurelai's warnings to Jess about hurting Rory are an instance of one character acting for another: Laurelai's acting on behalf of her daughter is based on her own beliefs about what are Rory's best interests. She does this at the risk of being an overprotective parent, the alternative being to allow Rory to learn her own lessons the hard way, including how to protect herself. But here, Laurelai is perhaps using the strategy of considering what are the best interests for Rory too, and having an interest in Rory's well-being, she intervenes. This intervention, importantly for this chapter, supports our search for alternatives to individualism which would prescribe minding one's own business and believing others should defend themselves. Laurelai's acting on behalf of Rory is an act operating on the logics that we act whenever we have the resources to act, whether that is on behalf of ourselves or on behalf of another. This is not a moralising prescription that we should always do what we believe to be good for others as for ourselves. Rather, Laurelai's action on behalf of Rory, helped by the fact that this is a mother-daughter relationship, involves action without the boundary separating self and other. The boundary between self and other is severed and thus action does not stop at the self, as it does with individualism. This question of crossing and not crossing of boundaries is what the as-if, in some ways, hinges on. The question of who am I to consider what are the best alternatives to the screen

becomes irrelevant with this way of understanding oneself and the other, and instead our considerations of best interests and alternatives become part of a process of a bigger collective negotiation of coming up with alternatives amongst a network of viewers and creators of cultural artefacts.

In fact, various characters engage in this kind of acting on behalf of another in *Gilmore Girls*. Luke, the diner owner who is also Laurelai's ultimate love interest, is criticised by his nephew Jesse for meddling in other people's lives and trying to help them. Emily, Laurelai's mother, constantly attempts to improve the status of her daughter which Laurelai consistently rejects as interference. Others acting on behalf of others is constantly a point of critique in *Gilmore Girls*, yet various characters do so anyway. *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*'s Paula is also a meddler, interfering in Rebecca's life in season one, yet this is what constitutes the female networking of season one.

This concept of meddling, though also problematic, is also productive for ethical viewing whereby we challenge individualism and its boundaries and think about how we relate to others. In his text, Schantz too wrestles with the problem of the idea of 'meddling'. In his discussion of Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and the interest that the titular character takes in other people's lives, Schantz does not have a final answer for "Emma's clumsy interactions" which foregrounds the "problem of taking an interest in other people". He only notes that these "clumsy interactions" allow us to ask politically and morally fundamental questions: "in whom should we take an interest, and how should we show that interest? What is the difference between kind attention and cruel interference? Between mercy and neglect? What are the limits of human empathy, identification, or generosity?" Finally, Schantz notes that "[a]ll of this is complicated [...] by the fact that our field of interest cannot be cultivated systematically, like a garden. Other people have a tendency to move about, to develop their own interests." (20). Schantz shows that viewing with the best interest of another involves engaging in problematic and perhaps unethical ways of relating to others. But more important, I claim, is that such intervention is crucial for a dialogic mode of viewing where such questions of my own agency, commitments, desires, as well as that of others can be engaged in relational as opposed to individualistic ways. And viewing these texts by directing whose interests I pay attention to can be conceived as an alternative, in that it can be used to replace

interests of characters which the text's narratives and images ultimately privilege. I can use interest and sympathy to view against the grain of the text's own invested interests and sympathies.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have surfaced the ways in which individualism pervades female-centred television and how this individualism can be counteracted. Viewing the *Gilmore Girls* revival, I have followed technology to observe how it holds together and breaks apart female networking, and how I can consider alternatives to the perpetual break down of female affiliations. Here following technology confirms the individualistic direction of the show, but also spurs me on to consider alternatives. Then, in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, I look at how the text teaches me to view as if in a female network, but to learn this lesson I myself must look differently in the first place. In this series, female connection is based on shared projects that are bound to negative valuations and failings of personhood which must be forsaken during the narrative journey for characters to develop and take 'responsibility' for the self and reach satisfaction in their lives. The season one female network transgresses the form of relating that is the girlfriendship, but this transgression is coloured by impropriety. As a viewer using the *as if in a female network* strategy, I must then view against this trajectory, discarding the moralising lens and the compulsion towards individualism in our narrative imaginary. I then find various other instances within the show itself that models for me how I can view as if in various different ways while privileging relationality and my feminist commitments. Thus, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* itself guides us in our *viewing as if in a female network* and shows how inspiration and motivation for this imaginative strategy can be usefully drawn from the texts we view.

Ultimately, this chapter has argued that to view against the individualism of female-centred television series requires an irreverence to common sense ways of viewing. Viewing against the individualising trajectory of both shows – by discarding moralising lenses, inquiring into alternative endings, and using other strategies modelled by the shows themselves – involves a labouring and fabricating effort. The efforts here then go towards a refutation of textual analysis approaches which claim to simply describe the contents as they are or were intended. I argue that there is no

use in stopping at viewings that claim to simply pay attention to the contents of the text and how the text frames those contents and how it fits into a cultural context. Instead, I champion going further and viewing creatively, actively and artificially, while adopting political and ethical approaches towards our avatars in our viewings.

Chapter Four

In Search of Alternatives to the Romance of Work and Productivity in *The Bold Type* (2017-)

Introduction

In this chapter, I *view as if in a female network* to come up with alternatives to the screen where there is a manifestation of the ‘romance of work’. Building on my discussion of the prominence of the labour market in female-centred television series in Chapter One, I use here the term ‘romance of work’ to foreground how the images and narratives of female-centred television series increasingly invest in work and the career as an ultimate fantasy for women. Though these heightened economic goals are often framed as empowering, the market logics of this career-focused fantasy, as opposed to finding and marrying ‘the one’, does not really provide a feminist vision. Therefore, in this chapter I *view as if in a female network* in relation to this fantasy of work. The career destiny limits the feminist imagination because the romance of work narrows the heroine to a certain way of operating in the text, defining the female character in terms of the labour market and capitalist values of individualism, exceptionalism, productivity, aspirationalism and upward mobility. This forecloses more radical or subversive forms of being, ways that are anti-productive in the capitalist sense. My interest in *viewing as if in a female network* in relation to the career fantasy then is about finding other ways of constructing modern subjecthoods and going beyond understanding myself as a worker (a producer and reproducer).

Another way to make this case for rerouting the romance of work is to take the famous *Sex and The City* scene below and to view it “as if”. In this scene, as it appears on the screen, the four women are having lunch and discussing their boyfriends, dates and marriage when Miranda, tired of talking about men – as the *SATC* women often do – exclaims,

That’s it. I’m out of here. All we talk about anymore is Big or balls or small dicks. How does it happen that four such smart women have nothing to talk about but boyfriends [. . .] it’s like seventh grade with bank accounts. What about us? What we think, we feel, we know. Christ! Does it always have to be about them? [. . .] Give me a call when you’re ready to talk about something else besides men for a change. (“Take Me Out to the Ballgame” season 2 episode 1).

Keeping this piece of dialogue in mind, what if I take Miranda’s perspective on her friends’ focus on men and apply it to the increasing focus on work in female-centred television series? The result would be this alternative speech: “that’s it, all we talk

about is work, careers and productivity. How does it happen that we are so concerned with work? What about what we think, we feel, we know outside of work? Christ! Does it always have to be about work?” In reconfiguring this piece of dialogue to reflect the post-crash cultural landscape and the “romance of work”, I am hoping to legitimate using the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy to come up with alternatives for such a fantasy and its attendant necessity of being productive.

In taking on this challenge, I formulate two strategies for finding alternatives to the romance of work in this chapter. The first one is ‘finding protest’ where I focus on cracks in the fantasy of labour, or “viewing as if” there is protest to the romance of work, where arguably it is difficult to find. I do so by finding alternatives in the cracks of the dominant images and narratives, where an alternative is perceptible and which can be pulled through the crack and given attention so that it overrides more dominant aspects of the text. In *The Bold Type*, where the fantasy of work dominates on the screen, the cracks take the form of breaks in composure that break the fantasy of the heroines as ceaselessly productive workers.

The second strategy I formulate in this chapter is focusing on images rather than dialogue where the image and the dialogue can be read as contradicting one another. When the dialogue folds the heroines into fantasies of labour, I can “view as if” the dialogue was muted if the image offers us something more radical than the dialogue. Thus, here, I view as if the sound were muted and let bodies speak instead.

In this chapter I also face several questions and issues that arise as I explore, experiment and develop these viewing as if strategies. The first issue is that both technology and female friendships have been conceived in scholarship as upholding capitalist values and sensibilities and paradigms of postfeminism, individualism and neoliberalism. I then must contend with such meanings that attend technology and female friendships in the 21st century to make sure that I do not succumb to logics continuous with individualistic and capitalist paradigms. Confronting this issue also goes towards ensuring that I can articulate alternatives that do not support more of the same.

In this chapter, I must also face the issue of finding alternatives to the romance of work in regard to market logics that, in late capitalism, are all-subsuming. Capital in which our world is entrenched makes it difficult to conceive of alternatives because

it seems to encompass all aspects of life and all ways of being, making it seem inconceivable to go beyond such logics, especially when viewing popular cultural texts. Nevertheless, I find hope in the undefined and the unarticulated which, because of its inability to be objectified (made solid and concrete), I suggest cannot be commodified either.

The last issue I address arises in relation to the strategy of muting sound and *viewing as if* the image was silent. This way of viewing raises the question of whether I am violently ‘muting’ characters, i. e. silencing the other (even though they are a fictional other) when I disregard their dialogue because they articulate an ideology or a position I wish to break away from. The choice I face here is whether I silence the other and privilege theory, or whether I allow the other to speak and silence my theoretical concerns. This is a problem of the strategy of finding alternatives to the screen more generally as this way of viewing is based on constantly rejecting that which is given by the screen that contradicts my political commitments, and imposing one’s own visions and preferences on the screen instead. Though I do not have a definitive way to solve this dilemma, I propose that this way of viewing that makes no claims to objectivity but only aims to fabricate alternatives based on one’s own judgments is ultimately a dialogic form of viewing that puts one’s visions in dialogue with those of the text. Both the theoretical concerns of my viewings *and* the ideological position of the text (as voiced by the heroine’s I consider muting here) can be conceived as violent, thus I can only resolve this problem by suggesting that what matters here is the dialogic relationship at play between my visions and those of the text.

I conclude by reflecting on my own viewing inclinations to think about how my experience of writing a thesis but also, I suspect, a more general imperative to be productive and work, shapes my seeing of the romance of work in female-centred television series. Here I reflect on my experience of academic work which is bound with the activity of watching television, and how a felt daily requirement for productivity has seeped into my private viewing practices. It is this relationship between working and television viewing that leads me to draw out those meanings from television series that are relevant for my own daily life, that is, meanings supportive of work and productivity that reflect my work on this thesis. I do this to

consider how our own viewing practices shaped by our working lives play a role in the romance of work in female-centred television series in the 2010s, crossing that screen-viewer divide that this thesis more generally encourages to breach. If it is our own habits of viewing that co-structure such romances, then an active and politically charged practice of viewing is necessary to break out of the logics of female career-orientedness and productivity romances. This matters especially in this neoliberal historical context of precarity more generally in which certain forms of intimacy, especially those that are economically and aspirationally motivated, have congealed to foreclose other kinds of relating.

The Romance of Work in 2010s Female-Centred Television Series: Why Be Dissatisfied?

In *The Bold Type* episode “Feminist Army” (season 2 episode 1), one of the leading female characters of the show, Sutton, breaks off her romantic relationship when it threatens her career. Reflecting on her decision, Sutton tells her boyfriend Richard, “I am putting my money down on my career and believing that love will fall into place”. Though Sutton and Richard get back together after a few episodes, the sentiment informing Sutton’s thought process is noteworthy: it illustrates that the show sets itself up as championing women’s dedication to their paid work and careers. Another example of work trumping other interests in *The Bold Type* includes Kat who, having taken some time off from work at *Scarlet* magazine to travel around the world in the finale of season one, returns at the very beginning of season two, telling Jacquelin that while away she realised “everything that matters to me is because of *Scarlet*” (“Feminist Army” season 2 episode 1). In Chapter Three I already discussed how the career as a destiny for heroines manifests in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and the *Gilmore Girls* revival. In *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*’s finale, Rebecca chooses song writing over three guys (choosing a possibly lucrative passion over heterosexual romance), and Paula’s happy ending involves her obtaining a lawyer’s job in a prestigious law firm. In the *Gilmore Girls* revival where the fantasy of work is unattainable, even in the finale, the ending is staged as one of loss with a pervasive feeling of melancholia, rather than joy, which accompanies Rory’s announcement that she is pregnant. This strikes me as a loss rather than a gain for Rory because

having a child (reproductivity) possibly means compromising on her career dreams (productivity) which Rory has always privileged.

I have also noted in the previous chapter that in the finales of *Broad City* and *Girls*, the heroines embark on new careers or further education as part of their individuation, moving on from the female relationships that the narratives centred on. Besides accomplishing the individuation impulse of these series, as well as aligning with viewer's priorities and fantasies of desirable work and dream careers, these endings also play a part in structuring the arc of these character's lives. For instance, in *Broad City* and *Girls*, endings involving embarking on new careers or attaining desirable work follow narrative trajectories characterised by the difficulty of attaining such employment. In *Girls* in particular, it was this very premise of the impossibility of being contently employed that structured most of the events of the series: the show set-up was about the difficulty of finding employment as a millennial in the post-recession of 2007-2008 after graduating from college. Thus, the facile way that Hannah receives a job offer in a university at the end of the series jars with the difficulties she and the other characters endured in pursuit of desired work throughout the series. This inconsistency between the struggle to find satisfactory employment from episode to episode, and the effortless arrival of desirable work opportunities at the end of the series reveals how both this episodic struggle and this magical ending operate as narrative devices rather than (or as well as) a 'mirroring' of post-crash New York offscreen. The struggle of finding desirable work throughout the show sustains a longform narrative trajectory where characters endeavour and fail again and again to attain desirable work. The conclusion where desirable work is found then provides a happy ending to the struggle narrative. Of course, these narrative conventions also determine our own personal off-screen fantasies about attaining desirable work. Moreover, the conflation of embarking on a desired career with the happy ending offers a vision or a plan of a future, a destiny, that also fixes our attention from wandering towards and wondering about alternative futures, both for the protagonists and their viewer avatars. This future or destiny of the 'career' betrays the series' idea of what successful modern femininity looks like in the post-crash environment. Especially in *Broad City*, *Girls* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, where embarking on a career or a (potentially lucrative) passion is part of the maturation and coming of age of the heroines.

Even the slacking of the heroines in *Broad City, Girls* and in the *Gilmore Girls* revival (where Rory is depicted as an unprofessional and unprepared journalist) maintains ex-negativo the importance of work because, although slacking operates as an antithesis to work and so a kind of alternative, it is nevertheless bound to the logics of work. Slacking is only a stage before getting back to work, and in this way the primacy of work is also present when slacking is foregrounded. As Tiziana Terranova observes, “[i]n spite of all the contradictions of advanced capital [...] The potentialities of work must be kept alive, the unemployed must undergo continuous training in order both to be monitored and kept alive as some kind of postindustrial reserve force” (41). The position of the slacker is then a figure of “reserve” that, while unemployed, is in fact in training, either formally or informally, to become a passionate worker, or to channel its passions into work. As Peter Fleming observes of the slacker’s function in “corporate logic”:

Corporations are (by definition) hopeless at “creative cool” so they must go looking for it (e.g., “slackers”) [...] As a result, the “slacker” is put to work precisely through their labor of love and quest to be authentic. Once enmeshed in the corporate logic (something it was originally designed to avoid), it becomes difficult for the social entrepreneur to resist (123).

Perhaps most importantly, the unemployed as ‘slackers’, if bound to the logics of work while not working, cannot re-orientate their attention towards “experimental”, “nomadic”, or “antiproduktive life-styles” (Terranova 41).

These various representations of work and non-work are manifestations of what McRobbie has called “passionate work” (*Be Creative* 36). McRobbie sees this “passionate work” as describing a “style of working” (38) rather than any particular industry, though her focus is on creative industries such as fashion. In McRobbie’s words, “passionate work” is an attitude towards one’s life in which, “work takes precedence, and relationships occupy the second place in the agenda of ‘life planning’”. In other words, “[w]ork becomes akin to a romantic relationship” (3). Pinpointing this phenomenon as especially visible in the post-crash era, McRobbie argues that, where this discourse of “passionate work” is pervasive, “the idea of ‘romance’ ha[s] been deflected away from the sphere of heteronormative love and intimacy and instead projected into the idea of a fulfilling career” (*Be Creative* 91). Melissa Gregg writes similarly about this kind of idealisation of work, calling it

“romantic vision” (170). This sociological work is mirrored in scholarship on female-centred television series in the 2010s of the post-recession where, for instance, Lagerwey *et al.* observes that “market logics” have side-lined “other, previously distinct, value systems and worldviews” and eradicated “commitment to long-term romance and the conviction that stable heterosexual intimacy is an indispensable ingredient in women’s happiness” (n. p.).¹⁷

The idea of “passionate work” also de-politicises and individualises the idea of work by making work “[correspond] to one’s inner dreams or childhood fantasies” rather than understanding it in terms of “organised labour”. This facilitates the exploitation of workers in the kind of creative industries that McRobbie writes about, but also in any industry where the work is positioned as rewarding in itself. In the face of this romanticisation of work that emphasises the meaningfulness of the work itself, the importance of pay and other practical benefits may be minimised. For McRobbie this is worrying because this “severs a connection with past generations who not only had such protection (in the form of sick pay, pensions, maternity leave etc.) but also fought hard to get them” (13). In other words, if work is no longer seen as responsible for providing us with such security, workers will turn a blind eye to the precarisation of the labour force. In addition, this way of approaching work makes it a matter of social mobility where “having an interesting, possibly creative and ideally glamorous job” grants a young woman her “feminine status” and protects her from perceived “individual failure” (90), especially in more feminine industries such as fashion, as (supposedly) opposed to STEM fields or IT.

There are many other ways to approach the particularity of the current “passionate work” narrative and how it differs from previous narratives about work, both in scholarship and in popular discourse. Most crucially for this chapter, however, is McRobbie’s insight that work becomes just another fantasy that replaces previous ones, such as that of the romantic relationship. In this way, this new romance can be

¹⁷ Moreover, television’s inextricability from the economic system it portrays also calls attention to how popular representations of femininity and television’s representations of ‘working women’ are invested with capitalist ideology, even more so, I argue, than patriarchal meanings (though the two are not easily disentangled). Dow points out that “television’s programming’s ideological role is not incidental to its status as a commodity but, rather, is thoroughly implicated in it” (*Prime-Time* xix). The commodity status of television means that television’s representations are themselves also commodities, including its articulations of femininity and feminisms. This implies that an examination of the representation of women in a female-centred television series corpus must include a critical awareness of this economic / ideological dimension.

seen as a prescriptive life path, like heterosexual romance, that dictates what successful modern femininities look like. This model can be seen as narrowing and limiting what can be conceived of as worthwhile and meaningful in life and obstruct imagining and engaging in alternative and emphatically unproductive pursuits beyond work.

To consider how the romance of work is a limiting fantasy, it is useful to once again to turn to Schantz whose concern with the destiny of romance holds some parallels with my concern with the romance of work that also figures as a kind of destiny. In Schantz's *Gossip, Letters, Phones*, the romantic plot is seen as limiting the heroine's channels of intimacy, narrowing her connections to just one male suitor, as opposed to allowing her multiple connections with various other characters. Especially fragile or non-existent are her connections with other women which pose the ultimate threat to the suitor's claim on the heroine's attention. If I turn to the romance of work as equally limiting for the heroine, what does the romance of work limit? Does it narrow the heroine's perspective on the world, narrowing her gaze and purpose to the utilitarian and instrumental? Does it limit motivations and goals to that of work status and productivity? Does it reinforce work as an individualised choice as opposed to the understanding of work as "organised labour" as noted by McRobbie? Like the destinies of love and death, the career too creates a singular path for the heroine to take (eventually). In this case, what would it mean to bifurcate this path, to make it multiple and not singular? What would it mean to *view as if in a female network* for the purpose of offering alternatives to the career destiny? What does the comparison of Schantz's romance destiny and what we might call the work destiny of post-crash television precipitate? To attempt an answer to these questions, I turn to experiment with *viewing as if in a female network* in relation to the romance of work in *The Bold Type*, inquiring into what this might make possible.

The Bold Type's Girlfriendships at Work

The Bold Type centers on three young women – Jane (Kathy Stevens), Kat (Aisha Dee) and Sutton (Meghann Fahy) – who work for a fictional magazine *Scarlet* in New York City, and follows the ups and downs the three women experience in their professional and personal lives. The series begins with Jane's promotion from her

position as assistant to staff writer. Kat, also having started as an assistant, has already been working as social media editor for some time. And Sutton will obtain her desired job of fashion assistant mid-season one (“If You Can’t Do it With Feeling” episode 4 season 1). The pilot’s focus on how these women began at *Scarlet*, and the show’s focus on their promotions and career advancements in the first and following seasons, highlights the importance of career and work that underpins the show’s values. Moreover, their work in a fashion magazine speaks to the kind of passionate work in the creative industries that McRobbie writes about.

This primacy of work in these characters’ lives, and in their friendship with each other, mirrors a wider trend in 21st century popular culture where female intimacy is bound to the exigencies of economic life. According to Alison Winch, “the loyalty of girlfriends” now replaces the “traditional feminine fantasy of the perfect man providing financial security and a happy ever after ending” which is now “no longer wanted or tenable in a precarious economic climate” (90). This means that, to some extent, female intimacy offers a form of shelter against economic precarity, especially as this intimacy is often set on the stage of work or in relation to the question of employment. The issue here is that such intimacy so often takes the shape of Winch’s ‘girlfriendships’ where the relations between women are in service of postfeminist individualism, championing each woman’s individual success and happiness by willing her to achieve desirable but normative goals and “ensure[ing] that the self as competitive project is running successfully” (Winch 63). Though there may be much radical potential in female intimacy in the face of precariousness, in female-centred television series this potential is difficult to locate despite, and even because of, “the loyalty of girlfriends”.

In *The Bold Type*, the ‘girlfriendship’ manifests when the purpose of the friendship serves to uphold the logic of the romance of work. We can see this in how the women support each other in their professional lives as well as in their romantic lives, encouraging each other to make decisions to ensure each other’s normative successes, especially when it comes to finding and succeeding in work that the characters are passionate about. Writing about *SATC*, Winch writes that,

it is through [] conversations that [the *SATC* women] are able to contain and manage their emotions, and consequently maintain their poise and femininity. Because

incoherency and rage are indicators of victimhood, and serenity is an essential component of the ideal postfeminist woman (Negra, 2009), so girlfriends need to support each other in working through and controlling any potential abjection (66).

The same kind of conversation and support can be seen in *The Bold Type* where Jane, Kat and Sutton convene regularly to process their untidy emotions and thoughts about their work situations, as well as about their romantic lives, allowing them to maintain their composure for their work. This usually takes place in *Scarlet*'s fashion closet which, considering that it becomes the space of confession, friendship, intimacy and advice for the three heroines, suggests the heroines' total subsumption into *Scarlet* and its logic of work: live it and then write about it – all private experiences are potential content for the publication.

In various ways, *Scarlet* is indeed an ideal place to work. The magazine offices and the chief editor Jacqueline (played by Melora Hardin), who acts as a mentor to the three heroines, create a supportive space where these women can supposedly flourish professionally as well as personally. The *Scarlet* offices are portrayed as an ideal place to be employed, where the worker can make a real difference in the world and grow individually and professionally while remaining part of the *Scarlet* family. Employees can even leave *Scarlet* to explore different avenues and pursue other goals. For instance, Kat goes traveling and Jane leaves *Scarlet* at the end of season one to work for another more 'serious' online magazine *Incite*. Of course, both return to *Scarlet* before too long. It seems that this nurturing, supportive and meaningful environment of *Scarlet* makes being and doing outside of its scope meaningless. This locating of meaning within *Scarlet*, and meaninglessness beyond it, is most obvious when Kat returns from her travels and tells her boss that everything she cares about resides with *Scarlet*. Facing this investment of meaning in the workplace, what kind of alternatives may I turn to that hold meaning beyond work? And how can I introduce these alternatives into my viewing?

The dominant intimacies of the girlfriendship and the investment of meaning into the workplace in *The Bold Type* need not fully foreclose a more subversive potential which I aim to conceive of. The question then I must grapple with is: how do I view *as if in a female network* to escape the romance of work when the female connections I might have turned to instead of the "passionate career" destiny are in

fact an integral part of this fantasy of work? And how do I invest meaning beyond the spaces and time of work? Despite this difficulty, my aim in this chapter is to come up with alternative divergent and deviating female networks that “spend time separate from the logic of work” (Halberstam 19).

Keeping Up Composures

To begin developing the first *viewing as-if* strategy of this chapter – the strategy of viewing as if there was protest to the romance of work –, I begin by looking for the cracks in what seems like a seamless fantasy of an ideal workplace and work satisfaction. I formulate this strategy of finding protest in the text from Tania Modleski who unearthed resistance to the romance plot in soap operas, romance novels and other female-centred genres (*Loving* 15). Perhaps the best place to look for these cracks is in what the girlfriendship aims to maintain in *The Bold Type*: the women’s composure for work. This already suggests that, without maintenance, the composure will falter and break, thus it hints at where the weaknesses of this fantasy lie. Thus, I must search out and amplifying those breakdowns of composure and lend those malfunctions my particular attention. According to Negra, composure, the “affective hallmark of postfeminism”, contrasts with feelings of anger, melancholy, paralysis and ambivalence. In postfeminist logics, these are feelings displayed by “women whose lives are ‘off script’” (*What a Girl Wants?* 139). Composure itself in postfeminist culture proffers the ideal of control of the self and one’s feelings and emotions. McRobbie writing about ‘perfection’ in postfeminist culture notes a similar phenomenon which she describes as “the apparatus of the perfect”, something that hails women to self-discipline to attain “female success” but also obfuscates the “suffering” that is a necessary by-product of such discipline. Though this “illusion of control” is alluring, McRobbie warns it is “a mechanism unleashing new waves of self-harm” (“Notes” 4). Considering what composure achieves and the price of it, it seems necessary to reroute perfect composures.

Leaning on Negra and McRobbie’s conceptualisation of composure and ‘the perfect’, what does composure in *The Bold Type* look like? If I am referring to how the heroines of *The Bold Type* carry themselves during the stasis of each episode, the answer would be: vitality and high spiritedness. During periods of stasis and even after a conflict begins, these heroines are exemplars of vitality and energy. They

embody a kind of controlled energy, enthusiasm and focus that is perpetually channelled into either their work or into helping each other through various problems. Laziness or fatigue is absent. Instead, alertness and togetherness (as in “they have it ‘together’”) characterise how the characters carry themselves. A good example of the seemingly infinite vitality is when we see Kat in perfect spirits making breakfast for her friends after a night of no sleep in “The Domino Effect” (season 2 episode 6). Kat looks and functions perfectly, showing no symptoms of the tiredness that usually follows sleep deprivation. Another example of this infinite energy occurs in the finale of season three where Sutton is balancing a rigorous fashion design course and her job at *Scarlet*. While balancing these two workloads, she also takes on other gigs that present themselves as valuable career opportunities, such as designing a dress for a celebrity (“Breaking Through the Noise” season 3 episode 10). Of course, these are not just workloads but also opportunities and challenges. But here I am specifically interested in the price of these opportunities and challenges. Sutton for instance does not consider the availability of time or energy as she agrees to take on the extra project to design a dress, even though she is already pulling late nights just to keep on top of her regular work and design course. But even when Sutton’s workload seems to reach unbearable weight, armed with a good sense of humour, charm and can-do attitude, she welcomes the various workload increases without complaint. This is of course enjoyable as well as painful to watch. I can acknowledge Sutton’s unbelievable grit, admiring her ability to bear such workloads. Indeed, I enjoy watching this extremely capable woman turn her exploitation and overwork into something positive. Presumably, she, on my own tiered and limited behalf, is a fantasy of a time-transcending, boundless woman with none of my own shortcomings. More generally, vitality and good spirits serve all three heroines in their capacity as efficient workers at *Scarlet*.

But I also have pity and sympathy for Sutton’s exploitation as a fashion assistant at *Scarlet* who takes on professional training and opportunities not only to find and engage her passion but also to attain a better-paid position. In season one, it is shown that to become a fashion assistant Sutton took a pay cut from her previous position as assistant to the Executive Director of *Scarlet*. Thus, as I view Sutton’s work ethic I am also painfully aware that it is not just a compulsion but is also financially necessitated. Moreover, McRobbie’s invocation of the “suffering” involved in

upholding composure is important and also applies to *The Bold Type* characters. By including “suffering” in my understanding of composure, I get a sense of the implausibility of Sutton’s stiff upper lip and good-humoured charms as her workload piles up. Keying into the suffering that underpins composure gives me the sense that in *The Bold Type* the heroines are nearing a limit, a point where they will need to rest, to slack off, maybe explode with frustration, and yet they do not do so on screen. The composure in *The Bold Type* hides the suffering of overwork and the kind of anxiety that Gregg notes is an aspect of never-ending to-do lists. It also hides the potentialities of ‘switching off’. Moreover, it does so in a way that stirs in me admiration for the heroines, a desire for their successful femininities.

Perhaps it is relevant to note here that following the line of technology here would not be helpful because the smartphone plays an important role in helping the heroines to maintain their composes in *The Bold Type*. While in the previous chapters I used the strategy of following technology to conjure sought-after female networks and to de-centre whiteness, following it here to find alternatives to the romance of work and the upholding of composure would be difficult. Technology here bears meanings that lead deeper into the fantasy of work. Melissa Gregg has observed a technologically facilitated intensification of middle-class work where “[c]ommunication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence” (2). Calling this phenomenon “presence bleed”, Gregg notes that “firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply” in a technological landscape of mobile devices such as the laptop and smartphone which are used for work as well as for one’s personal life. “Presence bleed” is the “familiar experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations”, where the ‘9-5 office job’ bleeds out beyond its designations, and instead the focus is re-orientated towards a “‘to do’ list that seems forever out of control”. Besides the endlessness of work, Gregg also uses “presence bleed” to describe “the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours” as well as the “feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled” (2). Lagerwey *et al.* have already observed that “[f]emale characters’ home lives in the newer series [of the post-recession] are constantly being drawn into their work lives and vice versa” (n. p.). They see this development as a reformulation of

previous more conservative resolutions of “work-life balance” that culminated in “downsizing” rather than the current one of multi-tasking (n. p.). Following technology indeed leads us deeper into the irresistible logics and pleasures of work in *The Bold Type*.

The way that the smartphone appears in *The Bold Type* then, often seen in Jane, Kat and Sutton’s hand, helps the heroines to organise and execute their work tasks and maintain their productivity and efficiency. In one long shot in “Carry the Weight” (season 1 episode 10), we see the smartphone act as the gadget by and through which everything happens: in which everything can be monitored, with which everything can be done and everyone can be contacted. The shot begins with Kat walking around *Scarlet*’s open-plan office and looking at her phone, looking through different tabs and apps on her phone, which we also see on our screen: a guest list for a party, her calendar, *Scarlet*’s social media account and then a live stream of a live artist performance that Jane is doing a story on. After checking these tabs, she then types out a text to Jane about the livestream, who, as Kat sends the text, we see is actually standing right beside Kat. We see Jane is already checking the livestream on her own phone. The friends exchange a few brief words and Kat walks away. The camera stays on Jane and now we see what Jane is doing on her smartphone. Jane types a text to Jacqueline when, mid-text, a notification for an email appears on her screen. Jane opens the email to find that it is from *Incite*, the magazine she is interested in working for. (See the 8 images below showing this sequence, Fig. 15 to 22.) In this scene the smartphone demands, enables and allows hypervigilance, a heightened screen attention, guiding people from one task to another. The phone demands these characters behave as busybodies and ‘keep on top of things’. If technology manages and dictates these kind of hypervigilant composites of the *Scarlet* employees, then following technology to locate female networking that operates outside of work seems impossible. Technology fortifies the composites of the heroines which they use to advance their careers, thus the strategy of following technology will not work here.



Fig. 15

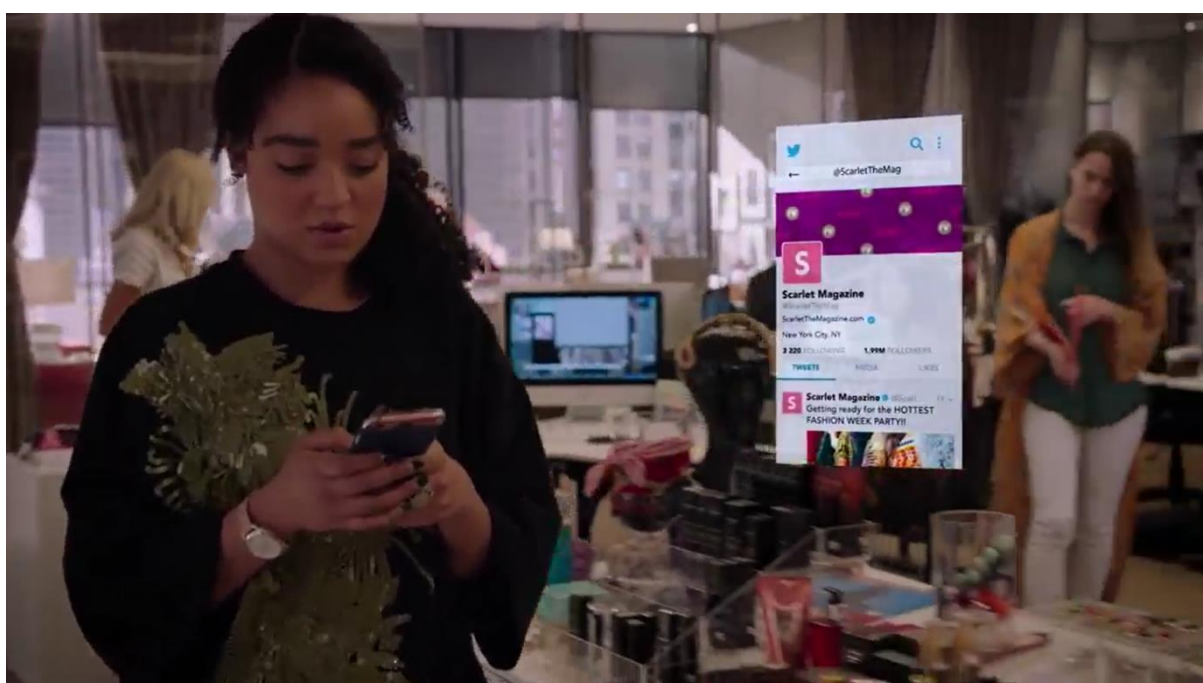


Fig. 16



Fig. 17

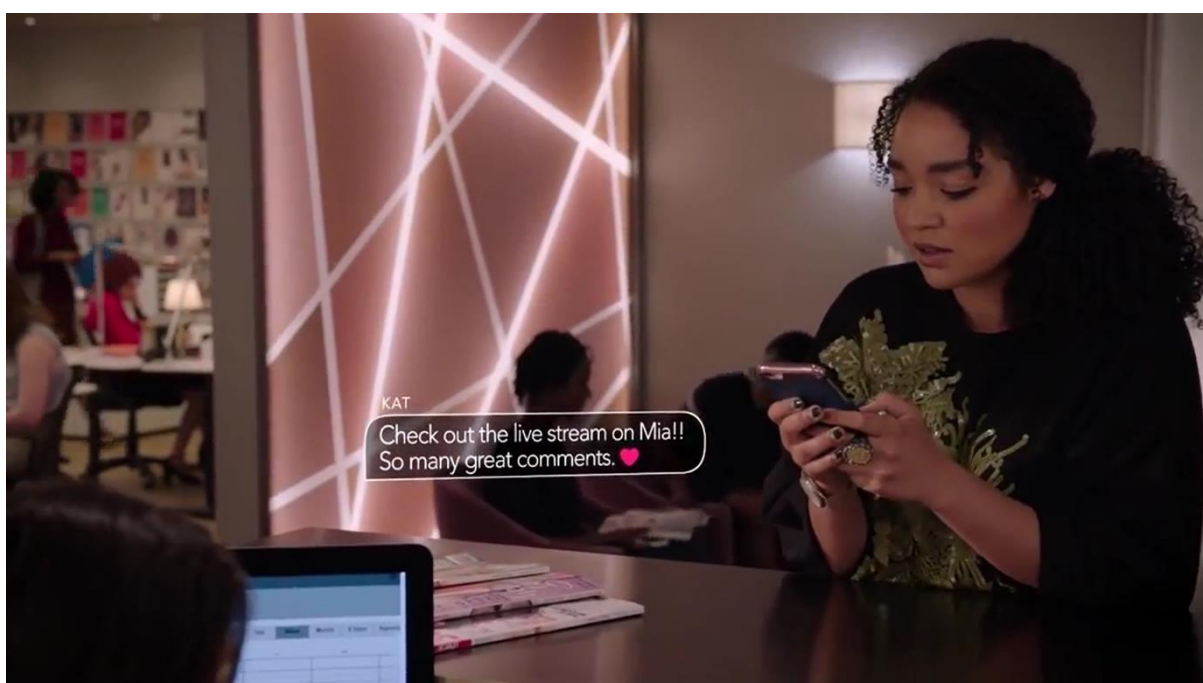


Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20

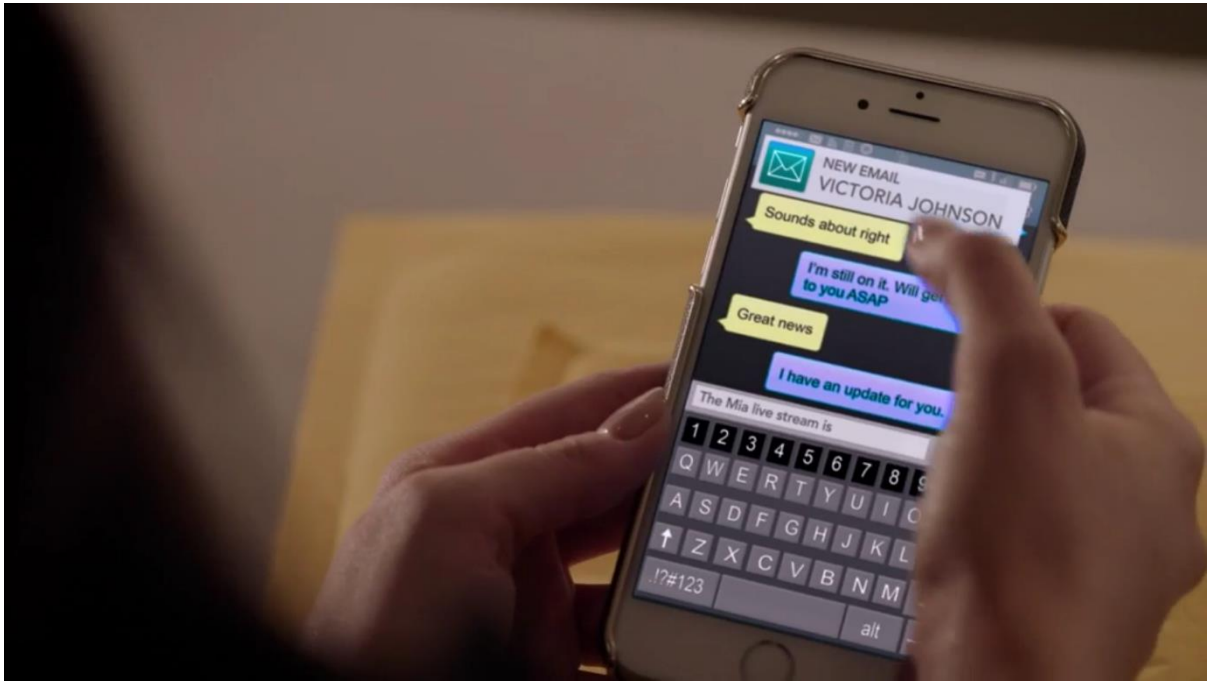


Fig. 21

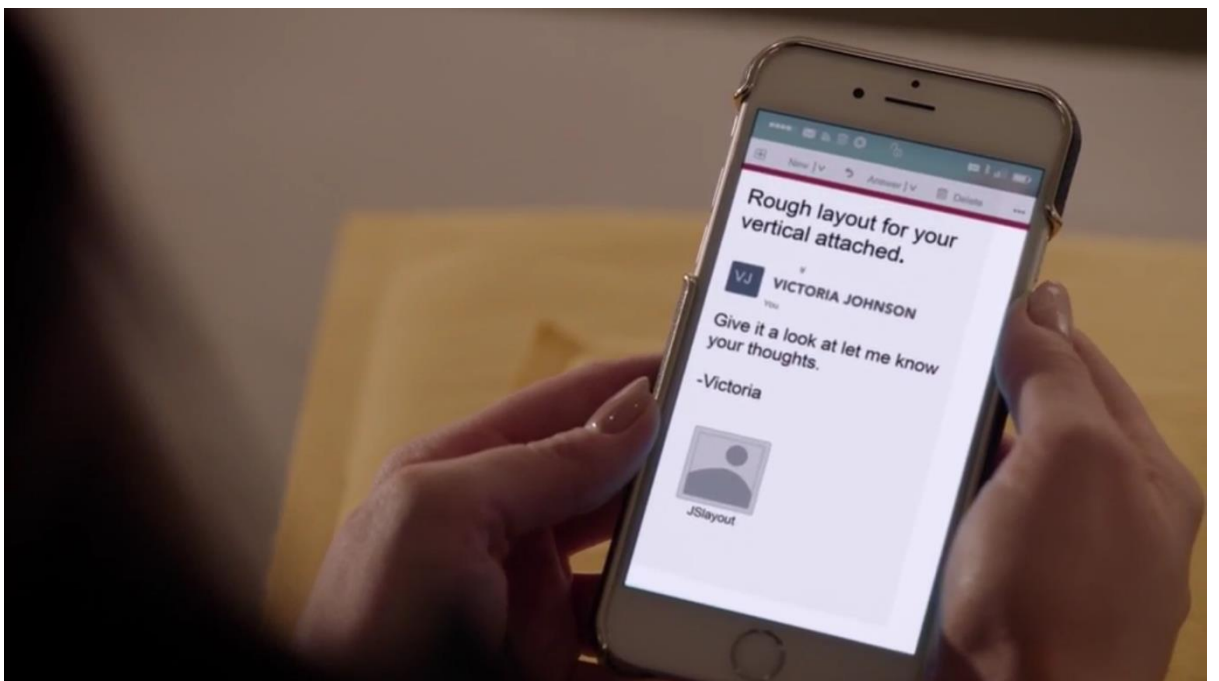


Fig. 22

So how then can I draw out connections between women that are not economically motivated in these texts? Where are those breaks of composure, if not in technology? Finding the strategy of following technology not useful, I rely on a more intuitive process and focus on two instances that strike me as offering an opportunity to foreground breaks in composites, and thus protest to the fantasy of work (and in

fact, the second one does feature technology). In the next section I turn to moments when control is lost, or where the heroines go “off script”, to find and amplify logics that are other to those of efficiency, productivity and postfeminist perfection.

Perhaps I can turn to the heroines’ displays of supposedly negative emotions and to signs that they are dissatisfied and lacking in passion for their work. In other words, I look for breaks in composure. These breaks are not few, of course. Narratively, they are necessary for generating points of drama through conflict. And of course, here I am specifically interested in breaks in composure where they hinder the heroines’ upkeep of productivity.

Jane and Kat’s Composure Breaks

The first break of composure I focus on occurs in the episode “Trippin” (season 2 episode 9) where Jane procrastinates about making an important decision regarding her health and future. Earlier in the show Jane had been diagnosed with the BRCA gene, a gene that raises the likelihood of Jane’s developing breast cancer and damaging her fertility. In “Trippin”, she must now decide whether she wants to have children because the BRCA gene is going to compromise her chances of becoming pregnant later in life. Though Jane’s new doctor boyfriend helps her research her fertility options and come up with a plan, Jane postpones looking at the plan and slacks off work instead, first to go drinking in a bar and then to go on a road trip.

As Jane avoids facing her reproductive future, she uncharacteristically loosens up and abandons her put-together demeanour and ‘type-A personality’ that ordinarily allows her perfectly to enfold herself in the logics of work. This loosening up involves plunging into pleasurable consumption such as drinking, eating and smoking weed. On the road trip, Jane eats ‘junk’ and comfort foods that are atypical on the show: sandwiches, fizzy drinks and cheesy crisps. Usually, the characters on the show eat salads and sushi and drink expensive healthy juices, coffee and alcohol. These more typical foods and drinks in *The Bold Type* signify the kind of “expressive and aspirational lifestyle[s]” that are based on “the capacity to select the correct consumer options” (2) which Winch notes is a key part of the postfeminist sensibility. The women can only maintain their desirable femininity through the correct kind of consumerism, and in terms of food and drink, this means consuming

without gaining weight, as well as to regulate one's body in order to adhere to ideal beauty norms. This kind of regulated and directed consumerism is also important for Jane's work in a fashion magazine – as McRobbie observes, jobs in the culture, fashion and media industries, as well as service sector jobs such as hairdressing and those in retail, “rely on an understanding of the attractive, well-groomed body as being a key part of the job” (*Be Creative* 90). McRobbie also adds that this job requirement in turn becomes “a mark of pride, a sign of self-responsibility and a way of ‘feeling good’ about the self”. But Jane is irreverent about the kind of regulated consumption that maintains her thin body in this episode, abandoning her strategic ways of being (and eating) that keep up her productivity as well as her appearance. And she shows no remorse, guilt or ‘feeling bad’ about ‘letting herself go’. In this break of composure, Jane is indifferent to the future or consequences of present actions. This new attitude in Jane is emblematic when Jane, while drinking martinis with a friend, decides to see how many olives she can fit inside her mouth simultaneously. When her friend asks why she is doing this she replies: “why do I need a reason to do anything? Can't I just live in the moment?”. This retort and her flagrant and pointless consumption in this episode mark a temporary recalibration of how Jane usually operates, no longer with her future in mind but living, as she says herself, “in the moment”. Indifferent to the regulation of herself that enables her desirable femininity and productive work ethic, she is on another register here, outside the closed logics by which she normally operates as a productive labourer.

But I do not see this recalibration as a simple hedonistic ‘live in the moment’ attitude associated with consumer Capitalism at its moments of excess. Here lies an alternative to the logics of work. Lauren Berlant has written about how the pleasurable consumption of food figures in another text about a relationship between women, this time a duo. In Mary Gaitskill's novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991), according to Berlant, “the consumption of food [...] can be read as establishing a regime of self-continuity”, while at the same time suggesting “an impulse to interfere with reproducing one's ‘personality’” (133). Put another way, “among other things, the practice of eating provides a way to negotiate one's incoherence while not organizing a personality to compensate for it” (135). This distinction between one's maintenance of a personality and other forms of self-coherence is important in thinking about Jane's situation because it is Jane's ‘type-A personality’ that makes

her a good worker and a successful young woman in different spheres of her life. This is not to say that it is specifically this type of personality that makes Jane a successful postfeminist subject, though it is a part of this success. Perhaps more important is the coherence of Jane's personality that allows her to operate successfully as a *Scarlet* employee, a friend and successful young woman more generally. Emre Merve has observed that, "[s]ince their efflorescence in the 1940s, personality tests have often been used to identify individuals as specific 'types,' initiating them into vast systems of social bureaucracy". Here thinking of oneself as an example of "more general and generic models of human beings" initiates you into a "well-ordered social whole" (65), but a "social whole" understood in terms of the labour market. Any interruption or divergence of personality then can be read as a threat to the stability of that social whole and, in Jane's case, the continuation of her productivity within it.

So why is it noteworthy to observe the "self-continuation" that the consumption of food suggests outside the production and maintenance of a personality? For Berlant, it signifies a repetition that holds the self together, in the sense of keeping one alive but also producing a sensual and psychic experience of continuity that "produces a countertemporality", something that Berlant describes as "the deep red areas on an infrared image" as opposed to the temporality of "narrative continuity" (137). This countertemporality

involves attempts to experience moments of negative density. Inhabiting such dense moments of sensuality stops time, makes time, and saturates the lived, imagined, and not- yet- imagined world. The impossible act the girls seek to repeat, for which food and eating serve as substitutes, merges will and repetition to produce something not uncomplicated or amnesiac, but something that as yet has no content, just inclination. What they achieve is not nothing; nor is it readable. Paying attention to what's absorbing marks a direction for the will to take. (137-138).

Berlant's promise that this consumption contains within it a radical departure from normative understandings of the self, such as 'personality', contains within it another form of self-coherence that offers me something to focus on in my attempt to make my way out of the romance of work as I view *The Bold Type*. By going beyond 'personality', I approach a kind of sensual form of cohering; this is not to be confused with mere sensuality, but holds within it potential for something "not-yet-

imagined” or another way of continuing the self beyond the imperative to work. In *The Bold Type*, Jane’s procrastination by way of turning to the time-halting pleasures of consumption puts Jane into a different relation to the world which is not a relation that supports her as a worker in a cellular hive of other individual workers. I do not want to argue that this is necessarily a practical or positive way for Jane to counter her relation to work, but it does offer a space of resistance to the romance of work and perpetual productivity. In a sense, if I can place the importance not on the “content” but on the “inclination” here, as Berlant suggests, to begin to focus on something else however vague it may be, I can find something beyond the logics and romance of work and productivity and begin articulating something else that, right now, is undefined.

The second instance of broken composure that I want to focus on and find an alternative for occurs when Kat struggles to maintain her upbeat energy after her girlfriend Adena breaks up with her in the episode “The New Normal” (season 3 episode 1). In this episode, we find Kat struggling to put on a brave face for work, for her friends and especially for social media which she must update constantly as the social media editor for *Scarlet*. Her difficulty in maintaining this composure at a time of painful emotions is especially evident when her cheerful expressions for the selfies she constantly takes quickly turn to dejection the instant she puts away her phone. Kat’s falling face in privacy is shown onscreen and is a crack in the composure Kat upholds for work. Unlike Jane, Kat does not procrastinate or escape the logics of work and productivity by going drinking or taking trips; instead she attempts to keep working, to remain composed. This struggle finally culminates in Kat’s release from composure whereby she expresses her painful emotions on social media for all to witness.

Kat’s break in composure can be read as the need to feel and express her grief and loss and to take time and space to process the breakup. However, the demands of work necessitate that Kat keep up a cheerful demeanour that is understood as part of being a good worker, especially a female worker whose job it is to maintain a company’s social media presence. Her status as successful young woman and a social media editor requires this unbroken performance of positive emotions, and instead of abandoning this performance of successful femininity Kat more or less

maintains it. Kat does not take time off work and neither does she procrastinate from work; rather she perseveres, wearing a brave face for much of the episode. The difficulty of maintaining composure for Kat in these instances is only shown by Kat's melancholy facial expressions when she is alone, scrolling through pictures of her and Adena on social media.

But again, I should pause before wishing Kat would do otherwise and take some time off. For what purpose? To get over her heartbreak so that she could simply return to her normal self? The space and time Kat requires to process her lost relationship, and the break in composure that facilitates this space of grieving, can be looked at as something important in itself. Not something to be gotten over. I can view this space and time as a "countertemporality" in the sense of Berlant. Its temporality is unrelated to the day to day of the working week and does not require productivity, nor can it be subsumed back into it. As Berlant has argued about the countertemporality produced by the consumption of food, this space of grief and other negative emotions also generates potential for yet unimagined ways for relating and being in the world that are unproductive in the sense of work, but potentially productive in other senses. This is after all a space where we do not 'feel ourselves' and so may sustain alternative modes of existing and continuing the self outside of the strictures of 'personality'.

For instance, I can consider this space that Kat eventually enters into at the end of the episode to mourn her lost relationship, as a space in which Kat can recalibrate her attachment to Adena, but also perhaps other attachments, such as the attachment to work and productivity. For instance, what if Jane, instead of being driven to hyperactivity when she becomes unemployed in episode "The Scarlet Letter" (season 2 episode 3) entered this same state of loss and detached herself from the romance of work? To recalibrate one's attachments does not mean that one necessarily recalibrates to attachments that are better, more nourishing, sustaining and less harmful for oneself and others, but there is an opening, a potentiality, a possibility of change and transformation that may or may not be radical, may or may not lean slightly towards the better and the different.

But ultimately, Kat's release of composure at the end of the episode is harvested by *Scarlet* as content to be consumed by its audience. This happens when Kat

broadcasts her grief on her social media where her private feelings are reified for consumption. The loss of composure becomes something new and refreshing from what now seems tired and fake; what is hidden by composites becomes more interesting. For *Scarlet*, the break in composites even becomes productive. This is emphasised when Kat gives a speech on 'Being Queer in the Digital Age' where she manages to perform the speech with a cheerful demeanour but is reprimanded by her boss for the general and generic contents of her speech. The editor of digital, Patrick, who initially tasked Kat with giving the speech, critiques the speech as "impersonal". To this, Kat replies honestly, telling him she is heartbroken and a "hot mess". After hearing her out, Patrick responds that her honest confession should have been her speech: "people don't want perfection Kat, they want this, they want honesty". Here, however, dysfunction is not liberating, but co-opted as the Other within a system of composure. Later, towards the end of the episode, Kat stands in her bathroom having just washed her make-up off her face (Fig. 23). She takes out her phone and begins filming herself, speaking the following words:

We always post the perfect photo of ourselves, instead of showing what we are actually going through. So, this is the real me. Heartbroken, after breaking up with the only person that I have ever loved. And my life is amazing, it really is, but that doesn't mean that I am perfect, and it doesn't mean that I don't make mistakes sometimes, but I am getting there, I am figuring it out. And I think it's about time we started being more real with one another, sharing how we are actually feeling, and being there for one another.

Kat adds the hashtag #BeReal and posts this video to her social media. In the following scene, Kat finds out this video has started trending and others have begun to post their own #BeReal videos confessing the hardships they are facing, meaning that Kat, and therefore also *Scarlet*, gain an audience through her public display of vulnerability.



Fig. 23 Kat taking the #BeReal video in “The New Normal”.

Kat’s realisation that she can open up about her negative feelings without a negative impact on her work doubles as a realisation that it is this very vulnerability that gives her an advantage as a *Scarlet* employee. By showing (and marketing) her negative emotions, she can create new and ‘authentic’ content. At the end of “Trippin’”, Jane also turns her break in composure into a story for *Scarlet*. For *Scarlet*’s employees, all experiences become material for articles and social media posts, just fodder to the mill. Narrating experiences, whatever they may be, is productive in the economic sense here. Thus, for Jane, her break in composure that is a flight from work is only such until she puts her experience back into her article that “Ten Things To Do When You Just Can’t Anymore”. A title that, even though about procrastinating from work, still manages to invoke productivity.

The show itself is aware of how the employees’ entire lives become reserves for *Scarlet* to draw on in its production of content. The workers’ labour resides not only in the activity of writing but also in the shaping of their past experiences into narratives. This is the nature of work at *Scarlet* where writers predominantly write about themselves and use their own experiences for articles making the private public and productive. In the episode “The Breast Issue” (season 1 episode 6), Jane

expresses her anger at this kind of exploitation when Jacquelin pushes her to do a story that involves reliving childhood trauma. Jane “flips out” by shouting at Jacquelin “we’re just here to dance when you clap your hands and be your little writer monkeys here, to humiliate ourselves, to torture ourselves here for you”. Jane points out precisely how *Scarlet* profits from painful experiences, from emotions and trauma that the employees at *Scarlet* may not want to revisit, as she is being asked to do. But ultimately Jane feels bad for yelling at Jacquelin rather than angry at being pushed to do the story; understandably, because she does not want to lose her job.

But if *The Bold Type* teaches us anything, it is perhaps that a plethora of negative emotions that Negra had described as ‘going off-script’ in relation to the pre-recession landscape are no longer so ‘off-script’ for women. In the new context of online culture, negative emotions can be used for narratives about the self in the production of content. Because Jane and Kat can make all their experiences into a sellable narrative, it makes no sense for them to withhold certain experiences or emotions if these enable productivity. This ultimately means that upholding emotional composure is now irrelevant when emotions act as inspiration as well as material for a writer / social media editor.

Furthermore, Kat’s seeming public loss of composure that culminates in the #BeReal video may not be a break in composure at all, but simply a new form of composure in which controlled vulnerability is performed. This evolved composure is one which mobilises openness, transparency and vulnerability, a composure in which one extrudes one’s inner life, making this inner life public. This composure of revealing and opening up perfectly suits content-hungry social media platforms as well as magazines like *Scarlet*. Far from being ‘off-script’, this kind of vulnerability and the emotions associated with it can be displayed and narrated as part of a carefully curated postfeminist individualism. As Tisha DeJmanee observes of the postfeminist “turn to interiority” in the post-recession period, “the individualist, neoliberal demand for self-reliance” (120) now resides in “expressions of the authentic self” (120). Kat’s ‘turn inwards’ and away from the appearance of ‘having everything together’ then can be seen as finding a new, better form of individualistic empowerment that hinges on her transparency about her personal life through the use

of social media platforms. This makes her even better at her job, an even better working individual.

So how is this relevant for me, a viewer interested in coming up with alternatives to the screen? Specifically, a viewer here interested in coming up with alternatives to the romance of work? The all-encompassing logics of capital that co-opts everything in its wake, here through social media, seems to proclaim that there is no way to find alternatives to the market. The co-optation of the loss of composure in *The Bold Type* is a testament to this. Nevertheless, even though the heroines' breaks in composure are taken up and exploited by *Scarlet*, I maintain that these breaks in composure are still spaces where something else does exist, especially before these experiences are reified into tidy consumable narratives. While they exist in their pre-narrative form, these raw breaks in composure interrupt the focus on work, and exist as something else that cannot be commodified. And it is specifically the vagueness and indefinability of this 'something else' that gives this potential of uncommodifiability, I claim. Moreover, I see these breaks as protest to operate constantly as productive workers. And to amplify such protest is to consider an alternative to the dominant images and narratives of *The Bold Type*.

Female Networks in Girlfriendship Narratives: Privileging the Image, Muting the Sound

Hitherto, I have considered *The Bold Type*'s heroines' loss of composure to consider how to alternatives ways beyond the romance of work. Now, more specifically, I want to find alternative ways that women relate to one another that is beyond the logics of work. In other words, I want to find female intimacy beyond Winch's girlfriendships. The difficulty, I have already noted, is that female affiliation and work are very closely bound together in the show and that the trio – Jane, Kat and Sutton – are so easily classified as a girlfriendship. With such an interpretation holding importance in the current cultural landscape, how would the relationship have to be portrayed to escape this individual-prioritising work-focused category? What alternatives can we come up with in which this relationship operates beyond the logics of work? On reading Berlant's discussion of *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, I can offer one strategy of finding 'female networks' in contexts where girlfriendships seem to dominate.

Once again, I turn to Berlant's discussion of the final moments of *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (her analysis of the Gaitskill novel providing very useful ideas for considering alternatives to the logics of work). Berlant here describes the two heroines of the novel falling asleep in each other's arms after one of them has just suffered a violent sexual encounter. Berlant offers many interpretations of the scene, but the one pertinent to my own discussion is Berlant's description of the embrace as containing within it the kernels of a radical relation. Berlant writes about this embrace: "[t]o lean into the body of an intimate is a most personal thing. But what's personal about it is like the deep anonymity of sleepers finally disburdened of the weight of bearing themselves" (158). Here Berlant finds within the embrace another way for the women to hold themselves together and make themselves cohere, without 'personality' or other conceptions of the self as individual. The "personal" invoked by Berlant here is nothing personal at all in the individual sense. The personal here consists of being freed from the personal, from 'personality', from the upkeep of composesures. This embrace holds us together both physically but also metaphysically, it holds together our relation, but also our own selves, it helps us cohere and not come undone, and it does so beyond personality. It is communion.

In *The Bold Type*, both instances of the composure breakdowns also end in the heroines embracing (Fig. 24 and 25). However, unlike *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* where the two women fall asleep in the embrace, in *The Bold Type*, the women continue to talk. They consider what they must do next, that they must check in with their romantic partners, and contemplate how everything is going to get better or go back to normal. In other words, they narrate their way back into normality and composure, planning how to restart operating as their ordinary and orderly personalities. Yet, the images of the embraces onscreen show us the stillness of their bodies which are simply there together, not doing anything, simply being in proximity and holding one another like the heroines of *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*. The dialogue propels our attention to the futurity of productivity, but the images here act like those counter-temporalities mentioned by Berlant that are time-less, operating not as narrative but like those red spaces on an infrared image, with intensity rather than narrative trajectory. If I mute the scene and regard only the images, there I have a counter-temporality of my own making. The dialogue tells what the women will do, but the image shows what they are doing: just being together in each other's

embraces. Disregarding the narrating dialogue and, in effect, silencing the heroines who want to get back on track, to get on with their lives, composites, romantic relationships and their work, the image offers us something else, something new. These images then perhaps are where female networking rather than girlfriendships lie. And in their incarnation as silent stills here in this thesis, they are out of screen time and narrative time forever (Fig. 24 and 25).



Fig. 24 Jane and Kat embrace and sway to music in “Trippin”.



Fig. 25 Sutton and Jane lean into and embrace Kat at the end of “The New Normal”.

What is useful about giving precedence to the image over dialogue in these moments of embrace, is that while the intimacy remains in the act of the embrace, the kind of intimacy this is, as narrated by the dialogue, becomes contingent and re-inscribable. By privileging the image, the potentiality of the embrace is foregrounded while the plans and re-composing of the self that of the dialogue becomes replaceable. Now I can imagine alternative speech acts, alternative meanings for what is happening simply by turning off the sound and refusing re-entry into ‘normality’ by freezing the image. In the discussion of the ending of *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, Berlant finds significance in the fact that the two women fall asleep in each other’s embrace. This leads Berlant to offer a number of possible interpretations of the embrace. This multiplicity of interpretation highlights that any one of our interpretations can only ever be contingent and ephemeral, that the embrace is somewhat of an enigma and that it is best to leave the image without a narrative to fix its meaning. Perhaps this is also the best strategy to apply to the embraces in *The Bold Type*: to privilege the embrace and its potentiality rather than the dialogue that attempts to contextualise it in logics that I want to eradicate because they oppose my political and theoretical commitments.

But is this silencing of and disregard for these character’s voices potentially more violent than the logics they perpetuate? Is my desire for being and relating beyond the girlfriendship paradigm, the romance of work and the imperative of individualism worth the violence of silencing characters? In light of the strategy of considering where I should direct my sympathies and ask about best interests of characters explored in Chapter Three, is this muting completely out of line? And finally, is my desire for the radical more violent than on-screen paradigms that are also ultimately violent, but which our heroines profess to desire? Though this strategy of viewing does not want to disregard the desires and interests expressed by the characters, it also suggests that it is the theoretical and political commitments which we prioritise when we *view as if* that offers the best compass for directing us to those best interests, best for me the viewer and, thus, for my avatars onscreen. In the case of *The Bold Type*, theory sees the heroines as trapped in individualism and fantasies of the ‘good life’ (Berlant) and deems these fantasies and logics as not

being in the best interests of the characters. This is why I come up with the alternative of muting the characters onscreen, and why I look for alternatives more generally through viewing as if in a female network in all its various forms.

I do not have an answer to this dilemma but want to highlight this impasse as an important contradiction and concede the limits of the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy. Perhaps all I can do here is highlight the violence inherent in theory and political commitments as they force certain meanings to be privileged and give importance and value to some things and want to eradicate others. At the same time, what the heroines say during their embraces, those utterances they make, also operate along the lines of a certain logic, a certain position, a certain ideology. This too, like theory and political commitments enact a violence. If the dialogue of the heroines can be conceived as violent just as my political commitments and theories can be seen as violent, then perhaps there is no harm in pitting violence with violence. After all, I dedicate this whole thesis for overcoming those images and narratives onscreen which I see as unsatisfactory because of their logics and ideologies.

To conclude on this issue, perhaps the value of imposing my vision, my alternative, on the text resides in entering into a dialogue with the text and its positions. By *viewing as if*, what I am doing is putting my ‘theories’, political commitments and visions in dialogue with those of the text and those of the characters. Neither is to be privileged in some abstract sense, it is the dialogic character of this that matters.

The Romance of Work and Productivity in Habits of Viewing

My interest in the romance of work in female-centred television series has arisen not only from viewing these series and reading scholarship pertinent to critiquing and dissecting these television texts. It has also arisen from my own situation: having to produce a thesis and the concomitant pressure to be perpetually productive and to complete this work. It also arises from my own conflicting feelings about, and desire for, having an academic career and being a productive worker more generally. Before ending this chapter, I want to consider how the imperative for productivity has led me to adopt viewing habits while writing this dissertation that have led me to search out particular meanings, namely those of work and productivity. By this I

mean that my viewing, especially viewing of television series for relaxation or while procrastinating, rather than for analysis, has at times been shaped by my seeking out of energy and productivity onscreen that might move me to be productive in my own work, that would make me get up, stop watching and begin my writing / to do list. I have found myself viewing in this manner throughout the thesis-writing process, even while watching shows like *Gentleman Jack*, *The Good Wife*, *Younger* (2015-), *Parks and Recreation* and *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*.

With this form of viewing, that I have found myself engaging in repeatedly, it is both difficult to tear myself away from the screen to do work and impossible to view without searching out the productivity of the characters. This viewing mode produces an escapist mood, and at the same time drives one to search onscreen for motivation to work, though no moments of productivity within the television series actually move one to stop watching and actualise this fantasy of productivity. In this way, this mode of viewing is ultimately escapism into the fantasy of productivity, while at the same time escaping actual offscreen productivity and so is divorced from actual physical performance of work. This escapist form of viewing then seems to me to highlight the degree to which the romance of work is a fantasy in female centred-television series where productivity on the screen is not just prescriptive but rather something pleasurable to watch without necessarily ever acting on it. Watching in this way is a way to avoid work and at the same time is structured by a desire to work and be productive. And here in these thesis pages, it has been, in fact, converted into work.

But this way of viewing has not simply arisen from my own need to be productive in terms of thesis writing. It has also been shaped by the kind of composites I have noted in *The Bold Type*. The composites elicited by characters who operate productively inform this desire for productivity. In series such as *The Good Wife*, *Gentleman Jack*, *Younger*, *Parks and Recreation* and even *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, as well as *The Bold Type*, we see women who are always ‘on’, hypervigilant and getting things done. For instance, in *The Good Wife*, our heroine Alicia is a capable and successful lawyer working in the quick pace environment of a law firm. The high-pace environment means that Alicia and those around her work quickly and swiftly. The character of Kalinda, the law firm’s private investigator,

also moves effortlessly and ceaselessly from space to space, from task to task, making calls, coming up with solutions for problems and doing the lawyers' "dirty work" tirelessly. Towards the end of this series, I remember having a distinct desire to work and sense of potential energy. *Gentleman Jack* is another series in which the heroine of the show exhibits this energy and drive to work which is signified by, among other things, her quick gait and the observation that she skips lunch (the presumption is that she is too busy to eat at this time of day). In *Younger*, we also witness this high-paced activity which is set in the world of publishing. The heroine Eliza moves swiftly from one thing to another, whether it is work related or something to do with her personal life. Importantly, Eliza takes it all in her stride and performs the myriad of tasks cheerfully. She feels no need to escape, no need to sit and think, to be tired, etc. Seeing and being inspired by such productive women propels me to search out even more instances of productivity. Thus, the composites on the screen also constitute my way of watching them and our search for further onscreen moments of productivity.

I may be describing a very personal and peculiar experience of watching television, but I have found that during the course of writing this thesis this kind of desire for productivity *and* escapism has coloured much of my viewing. The irony of this is that watching to find inspiration to be productive is the very thing that has kept me from being productive. It induces stasis, something that seems at odds with its logic, as it compels me to work as well as keeps me from working.

What troubles me about this kind of habit of viewing is that it is an investment in a very particular and limited aspect of the text. Perhaps we can liken this investment in productivity onscreen to the investment in the heterosexual romance plot, the 'will they, won't they' plot which produces pleasurable viewing experiences but cause us to miss other more radical or subversive aspects of a text, and that also prescribes normative ways of being and living. This kind of limited and, I argue, normative investment in the text reinforces conventional aspects of the narrative – heterosexual romance plot and romance of work – and in this way limits the meanings we can take from the texts. This kind of viewing makes us utilitarian viewers interested foremost in our own productivity (or lack thereof).

I have come to adopt this kind of viewing against my better judgement. Indeed, this kind of viewing is a form of passive and habitual unthinking, even though it seems to be an active and directed form of viewing in as much as it focuses on work. I attribute its passivity and habitual nature to its conventional impulse to search out the meanings of ‘productivity’, rather than meanings of one’s theoretical or political commitments, namely here, viewing creatively to reroute whiteness, individualism and this very romance of work. My inclusion of this description of viewing in this chapter is designed to highlight how, first, viewing and drawing out meanings from texts can take different forms and can easily be directed inadvertently by conservative or normative values and pleasures; and second, it shows how effortful and wilful strategies of viewing such as *viewing as if in a female network*, such as viewings where we consider alternatives to what is onscreen, are important if we want to counter these more habitual states of viewing as I have described here.

Conclusion

This chapter has experimented and explored with the strategy of *viewing as if in a female network* in relation to the romance of work. This focus is useful and necessary for the post-crash climate that has relocated attachments and dependencies from heteronormative romantic relationships to work and female intimacy in the form of girlfriends. In contemporary female-centred television of the 2010s, though female intimacy may be at the forefront of the text, it generally exists to uphold a late-Capitalist individualism. The girlfriendship helps the girlfriends maintain their composure which in turn maintains the girlfriends as productive workers. This means I must come up with alternatives for such relations that do not support the drive to productivity. To do so, I use the break in composure that signals alternative ways of being in the interstices of these texts. I have also described my own habitual ways of viewing that have arisen from the daily necessity to be productive as I write a thesis and hold a part-time job. This habitual form of viewing of mine that enforces the fantasy of work and productivity confirms for me that *viewing as if in a female network* needs to go beyond these fantasies if it is to be useful politically: it must propel me to imagine other ways of viewing / reading texts as well as other ways of operating in the world that are not habitual and so utilitarian. The dilemma and contradiction this implies is that I need to work on my viewing in

order to escape the romance of work within these texts (and within me). Although my personal account of viewing may be quite idiosyncratic, it nevertheless shows how everyday life generates impulses to view in certain ways that often reinforce those fantasies and meanings that already seem to dominate our texts. And most importantly, it shows the necessity for finding wilful ways of viewing to foreground those meanings that, because of theory and our own thoughtfulness, I reckon should populate texts and the world instead.

Conclusion

What I have done in the chapters of this thesis is experimented and advocated for a type of viewing where, rather than the focus being on interpreting the screen, I focus on coming up with alternatives to the screen. And I have put this practice in use for feminist purposes, to come up with feminist alternatives for images and narratives of US post-crash female-centred television series where the ‘working woman’ is foregrounded. This approach privileges viewing that is productive and not just critical, where ‘productivity’ refers to the impulse to reconstruct that which criticism has merely deconstructed, where productivity refers to creating something new. In other words, I argue for a feminist criticism that is also reparative. Here ‘reparative’ has been adopted from Sedgwick’s work and means any approach to a text that does not merely observe the violences but also comes up with alternatives that makes the text an object of “nourishment” (128). *Viewing as if in a female network*, with its imaginative “as if” that propels to find alternatives, and its anti-individualistic “female network” metaphor that guides the alternatives I find, has functioned in this thesis reparatively for me by nourishing my feminist political commitments, especially as I have used this strategy to go beyond the disciplinary logic of capitalist individualism, and its gendered form, postfeminism. The more specific ways I have enacted, explored and experimented with this *viewing as if in a female network* strategy in the analysis chapters are summarised below.

The *Viewing As If in a Female Network* Toolkit

1. Following Technology to Find Alternatives

In Chapter Two and Three, I use the strategy of following (communication) technologies onscreen to surface alternatives by mobilising technology’s metaphoricity – its meanings of ‘possibility’ and connections to an offscreen. In Chapter Two, I use this strategy on centralising connections between characters that are otherwise marginalised or altogether absent in the text, specifically the non-white characters relegated to secondary and supporting (if not off-screen) roles whose relationships and interior lives are absent from the screen. These characters can be read as not receiving the attention and elaboration the more primary white characters

enjoy. Because these non-white marginalised characters are also, interestingly, technophiles, as opposed to the generally more technophobic white characters, I can wonder about the relationships they are engaging in when they are shown using their smartphones or when they are on social media. Following technology then becomes a way of imagining what is not included in the *mise-en-scène* but is nevertheless present via communication media devices that point to and connect to off-screen spaces: non-white characters' networks. In Chapter Three, by following technology to trace the connections of the white middle-class heroine and other female characters, I find that technology onscreen both sustains her collective projects and collaborations with other women (as in Rory's professional collaborations in the *Gilmore Girl* revival and Rebecca and Paula's scheming in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*), and is used to disconnect from and discard such endeavours between women so that the heroine can embark on solo projects (as in the phone throw-away in the *Gilmore Girls* revival). In instances where collaboration breaks down, following technology provides me with the opportunity to consider an alternative scenario where the heroine embraces the collective and collaboration with other women; I freeze the action before the throw-away, and imagine the relationship's continuing. Thus, more generally, in this chapter following technology conceives of technology as providing us with options or forks in the narrative road so that picking up the phone presents us with one scenario, and not picking up the phone presents us with another, just as we saw with the alternative options that arise with the phone throw-away trope where to throw away the phone gives us one narrative trajectory, and to retain the phone, another.

2. As If The Trivial was Important and Cultural Hierarchies Did Not Exist

In Chapter Two, I propose the strategy of taking seriously that which is trivialised. I do this in relation to the technophiles's technology which is seen as being of no importance by the technophobe. By taking such technologies seriously I am able to amplify and inquire into these technophilic characters whose storylines reside mostly offscreen. Taking seriously that which is given no importance opens up, therefore, space for inquiry and populating it with thought, and so giving it significance. Then in Chapter Three, I consider viewing with irreverence for cultural hierarchies, or viewing as if cultural hierarchies did not matter. Doing so here allows me to

privilege my feminist commitments and interests that may otherwise be dismissed as insignificant or low brow, a charge often thrown at female-centric objects. Both of these strategies are akin to two sides of the same coin, the first giving importance to the unimportant and the second dismissing importance, thus I put them here together in this toolkit.

3. Decentering Whiteness: Recasting Characters

In light of the marginalisation of characters who are non-white in US popular culture, and more particularly in my chosen texts, in Chapter Two I view “as if” whiteness did not dominate the text. I suggest that this fabricating and artifice-embracing strategy is approached by asking questions such as: what if this white heroine was black? What if there was a Syrian immigrant character in this all-white US citizen character show? Or what if all the white characters were Asian-Americans? The goal here is to centre non-white characters by coming up with alternatives to the white characters. I suggest that this strategy makes me accountable for how I reproduce whiteness when I do not somehow address it in my viewing, in other words, it propels me to consider the possibility of the texts and their whiteness being otherwise.

4. *As If Sincerity was a Parody / Parody was Sincerity*

Considering the ambiguity of *Girls*, in Chapter Two I have suggested using the indeterminacy of the text to act as though a representation, that otherwise claims to exert authority over the text, were parodic. Here I am considering viewing parodically and viewing seriously as alternatives I can switch back and fro. Specifically, I use this strategy on the ‘voice of reason’ as embodied by the white male character who uses this voice to undermines non-white and white female characters. What if this voice of reason were in fact viewed as a parody of itself and laughed at? By viewing this ‘voice of reason’ parodically, I undermine how this dominant character imposes his meaning on others. By laughing at him, I can instead take seriously the female and non-white male characters onscreen.

5. Viewing Against the Moral Lens: *As If Morality was Absent*

In Chapter Three, I consider what kind of alternative might I employ to moralising ways of looking and making sense of what is onscreen. I do this to address how

morality polices women's deviation from norms and denounces unruly connections between women. To accept the lens of morality without questioning its function in *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* specifically leads us to denounce the connection between Paula and Rebecca in season one and to justify their "growing apart" which is also framed as their maturation. In the *Gilmore Girls* revival, the collapse of Rory's collaboration with Sandee and Naomi is also justified based on each woman's moral failings (Rory is self-centred, Sandee is annoying, Naomi is a drunk). In both *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* and the *Gilmore Girls* revival then, we must force our gaze onto the lens and view the moral framing as suspicious in itself because of its insistence of foreclosing female networking. The strategy I propose here is to see and then disregard the morality lens, with its suggestion of righteousness, in favour of a naked unmediated view of connections the morality lens colours. Or to disregard the moral lens and view the devious as productive for feminism (or other purposes). I also suggest that technology can be used as a frame that replaces morality as well, where the focus becomes the mechanics of the action and relations onscreen, sterilising what is onscreen from moralising meanings. In this way, I hope, moral judgements do not enter the frame.

6. Alternative Endings

In Chapter Three I also use the strategy of alternative endings, especially where the ending of a television series coincides with the heroine embarking on her own journey away from her female friends, as in *Girls*, *Broad City*, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*, and even in the *Gilmore Girls* revival. The ending I am particularly interested in is where the female network is sustained, as opposed to the ending in which the heroine goes her own way. This is a political imagining that refuses to accept coming-of-age narratives as a process of women's individuation from one another.

7. Finding Tendencies in the Text to Guide As If Viewings

The last strategy I explore in Chapter Three, which is not so much a strategy of viewing to find alternatives, but still begs to be mentioned here, is drawing from the text's sensibilities which provide encouragement and inspiration for the viewer enjoined to come up with alternatives. For me, the viewer who is eager to go far beyond the text, to indulge in such creative acts of viewing, I find that *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* provides various models for me to draw on and employ on other texts and

Crazy-Ex Girlfriend itself. For instance, I find a sensibility of fabrication within the text that I can use to guide and motivate my departure from the narrative and images onscreen. Another model I find in this series is and an attitude of irreverence to cultural hierarchies, which I also find useful as an “as if viewing”. Thus, with this strategy, I pay attention to the screen itself, but for the purpose of finding models and encouragement to find alternatives to the screen. Drawing on other texts as inspiration for “as if” viewings in fact pervades this thesis as a testament of the intertextual nature of this overall viewing strategy. For instance, in Chapter Two on recasting in our viewing, before recasting the text, I turned to, among other examples, Mrs. Kim in the *Gilmore Girls* pretending her daughter’s roommates were girls instead of boys. Thus, one of the tools in our toolbox may be to be attentive to the texts themselves and how they encourage the viewer to find alternatives and to embrace wild departure from the text.

8. Alternative Interests and Sympathies

This strategy conceives of the screen as proposing certain interests and sympathies for the viewer to adopt, meaning that there are interests and sympathies that are also effaced by the text. In other words, the screen itself guides the viewers attention towards specific characters and dictates which characters are worth our sympathy and best interests. With this strategy of coming up with alternative interests and sympathies, I can re-orient myself in relation to which characters I prioritise as deserving of my sympathy and best interests. From my experience of using this strategy on the *Gilmore Girls* revival, it seems that this strategy is especially important for female characters who are portrayed as unlikeable and denounced as undeserving of the audience’s good will, as in the case of Rory.

9. Finding Protest: As If the Alternative to the Dominant was the Prominent

In Chapter Four, focusing on the fantasy of passionate work in *The Bold Type*, I have surfaced protest against the imperative of productivity in moments where the high-functioning productive body gives way and cannot carry the load of never-ending work. In these moments of protest, I also find alternative existential logics or modes of being. For instance, in *The Bold Type*, when Jane abandons her usual composure that ordinarily maintains her as a worker, she operates in an alternative temporality

that is not future based and relates solely and immediately to her body and her surroundings. Here she operates, not based on surveillance and calculation but pleasure and joy. I focus on this break in composure as an alternative to the romance of work. This looking for cracks in the dominant representations of texts that provides alternatives is what this strategy suggests. I see this strategy as another way of conceiving of alternatives because locating protest to the dominant representations in the text helps us imagine alternative trajectories, alternatives to the dominant.

10. Images Versus Narrative: As If The Sound was Muted/The Image Blackened

Lastly, in Chapter Four, I formulate the strategy of muting the sound, i. e. of considering the alternative of a soundless moving image and the difference this would make. More specifically, I consider the potential subversiveness of images of women physically embracing that are obfuscated by accompanying dialogue that situates the characters back in their heterosexual relationships and their work. Meanwhile, without sound the images of still female bodies in embrace speak of something else. Here I consider how in screen narratives I can look for female networking in images of bodies in communion by disregarding dialogue that disguises the subversive potential of these images and returns the viewer's attention to more heteronormative meanings. I see this strategy as adaptable to other instances of screen texts where the image evidently holds subversive potential, but sound precludes it, or vice versa.

A Reparative Feminist Viewing

These specific strategies that I have explored are just some of the potential ways to *view as if in a female network*, the list is not a definitive or closed one. I have used this strategy to come up with alternatives in my viewings that are in line with my feminist commitments, though the strategy of coming up with alternatives to the screen can be, of course, applied to any kinds of commitments. Furthermore, I invite both scholars and the lay feminist viewer to add to this list of wayward strategies. Indeed, I have addressed both the academic and non-academic viewer in this thesis because I conceive of *viewing as if in a female network* as important within academe and beyond it. In academia, the predominance of criticism in the paranoid style

(Sedgwick) makes the texts analysed a negative artefact by depleting it of hope. This rigorous criticism is of course crucial, especially at a time when, as Rosalind Gill has observed, “resurgence of interest in feminism” has deprived the criticism of postfeminism of “analytic purchase”. My assertion, however, is that beyond the criticism of texts as postfeminist and thus lacking any subversive or radical potential, the feminist academic and critic should also draw out those meanings from these texts that offer productive potential for feminism. In other words, feminist analysis should as a second step focus on repairing the texts it critiques, not in a naïve embrace of postfeminist elements, but to implant in them, or beside them, alternatives that move the feminist academic beyond the logics of postfeminism. As Schantz provokes us in relation to *Middlemarch* in his own readings when he tells us that we should ask “*not* what *Middlemarch* can do for us, but what we can do for *Middlemarch*” (146), so I argue with regard to female-centred television series and postfeminist media culture more generally that feminist academics too should do something for the texts, and by doing, do something for feminism. By this I mean employ imaginative ways of viewing that are reparative and that go beyond the text, by considering its alternatives. I claim this would usefully supplement the more paranoid analysis of postfeminist media culture. Beyond academia, *viewing as if in a female network* is already a part of fandom and the production of texts. One example I discuss in Chapter Two is the phenomenon of racebending characters in fan art. By racebending, these fans read “as if” the marginalised character here in fact was central to the text.

Regarding the feminist commitments that I adhere to in this thesis, that have frequently materialised in the form of concern for female characters, a *viewing as if in a female network* orientation is sorely lacking in popular reception. In the aftermath of the *Gilmore Girls* revival release, a plethora of articles appeared critiquing Rory as a morally bankrupt character, and not in the celebratory fashion that sees unlikeable women as an integral part of progressive representation practices (Liu). Examples of these articles included: “Rory from ‘Gilmore Girls’ Is Actually the Worst” (Neelis), “Rory Gilmore is a Monster” (Rogers) and “Controversial Opinion: The ‘Gilmore Girls’ Should Only Come Back if Rory Doesn’t” (Gore). In these critiques, writers express their surprise that Rory is now an insufferable character unlike her incarnation in the original run of the *Gilmore Girls* of the 2000s.

Neelis, for instance remarks, “Alexis Bledel’s character was an easy heroine to look up to in the early 2000s for those of us who also loved books, pizza, and concerning amounts of coffee [...] But once you step out of the fever dream of nostalgia and shitty viral listicles praising her, you realize Rory is terrible” (n. p.). Gore adds, “[l]eading up to its premiere, I committed to watching the entire series again. Not even halfway through the first season, it dawned on me how dreadful Rory Gilmore is. Seriously, she’s one of the most terrible characters in television history. How had I not noticed this before?” (n. p.). This harsh criticism of Rory in the revival applies the moral lens, which either extolls female characters’ virtues and moral perfection, or denounces them for their failings – another instance of the virgin / whore dichotomy –, and precludes audiences from sympathising or female networking with female characters. But more than that, the moral frame that denounces Rory is also one that ignores the failings of the text as a whole – its middle-classness, its whiteness, its affluence – and locates these failings instead in the Rory character. For example, Gore writes, “[s]he’s the epitome of white privilege” (n. p.). This might be a critique of how Rory universalises whiteness, perhaps, but it also strikes as a way to unload the whiteness of the text as a whole onto the character of Rory and make her a scapegoat. In this way, not only is sympathy withheld from Rory, the problem of whiteness is also individualised and seen as a moral failing in white characters as opposed to considering how “white privilege” structures the text as a whole. The point I am making here is that the feminism that I have centralised in my search for alternatives matters.

Overall, my championing of *viewing as if in a female network* in academia and in popular reception espouses this: coming up with alternatives to the screen for the purpose of imagining and building the world that feminism wants to see. With this thesis, I depart from Rebecca Liu’s contention that “[t]he problem is that so many of us want to see narratives of radical self-emancipation where there are none” (n. p.). (Here, Liu is writing about the reception of female-centred television series too.) Unlike Liu, I do not see this desire to see what is not there as a problem but rather as an impulse which moves us to imagine and negotiate what emancipation might look like. It moves us to envision or fabricate a future, and it is this act of envisioning that then allows us to move towards that future. This imagining and building will not be without its conflicts; nevertheless, I see *viewing as if in a female network* as a useful

orientation for drawing out nourishing radical meanings and as an important way forward for feminist cultural engagement. As the continuing publication of texts that invoke feminist “re-vision” (Lauretis 135) attests – Laura Mulvey’s *Afterimages* (2019), the feminist media journal *Other Gaze* –, there is still a need for what Teresa Lauretis has described as re-vision, “the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off” (25). With this thesis I have attempted to exercise my relationship with this “elsewhere” as it exists also in relation to popular female-centred television series. In doing so, I have explored how I can render these texts useful for feminism and its world-building project on the level of my viewing activity. This is perhaps especially crucial during a moment of popular feminism which dominates female-centred popular culture, but which fails to bring a feminism in its radical sense to its audiences. So I implore that feminist viewers bring it to the texts and to each other.

Postscript

As the finalising of this thesis takes place during the outbreak of the coronavirus, it seems necessary to end with some observations about how I might apply the *viewing as if in a female network* strategy to ideas of the “working woman” during this moment where gender, work and technology coalesce in a new way in the new conditions. Both work and technology’s use has been adapted in our response of ‘social distancing’ to fight the spread of the virus while attempting to continue ‘business as usual’: many jobs, if they have not been lost, are now done from home and communication media is crucial for this work as well as to mitigate physical isolation (we could say that we are connected like never before). But ‘gender’ also begs consideration during the current domestication of the privileged (being home-bound is a privileged position not available to, for instance, the homeless, refugees crossing borders and those who continue to work in grocery stores, pharmacies, hospitals, delivery services, and so on [Žižek “Slavoj Žižek”]).

Turning to articles such as *Tatler*’s “Why This Period of Isolation May Just Be the Ultimate Time to Become Thoroughly ‘Accomplished’” (Sampson), it is evident that beyond the public sphere of the labour market which has been the primary attention of mainstream feminism, traditional notions of gender pervade our ideas of leisure and free time. Sampson’s *Tatler* article, for instance, addressing its female readership, suggests our spare time be filled with activities that were the epitome of accomplished femininity in Jane Austen’s novels: needlework, painting and playing musical instruments. Such gender normativity in the *Tatler* article should perhaps flag that, in addition to the focus on the labour market, during this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, mainstream feminism should turn its attention to rethinking domestic spaces and time that is unoccupied by paid or domestic work, but is available for leisure. As shown by the *Tatler* article, this time and space is not easily separated from traditional gender norms for women.

But again, it is not just traditional gender norms that matter here but also economic norms. Besides the fact that Sampson’s suggested pastimes can be costly and have always been associated with privilege, these pastimes are also framed in terms of productivity – for instance it reminds us that Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* during

the Bubonic Plague in the 17th century. And then the article frames its suggested pastimes as those “accolades” that women were once necessitated to master in order to become “accomplished young ladies” (n. p.). Through these references to domestic confinement in the past, the article suggests that we also channel any extra free time we may have during coronavirus into becoming those “best selves” that are, as this article proposes, conceived of in terms of productivity and traditional notions of femininity. After all, the article’s suggestions cannot but be read as a warning against wasting time on *Netflix* or social media (Webber n. p.) – those technologies many have turned to for comfort and distraction, as well as connection and networking. In this way, what that “best self” stands for is limited by certain capitalist ideas about personhood (must be productive) and patriarchal understandings of women (the pastimes suggested are overtly framed as the epitome of past era’s femininity).

To counter media texts such as Sampson’s *Tatler* article which reinforces the kind of individualism that is both traditional and conservative, and which female networking works to avoid, perhaps using *viewing as if in a female network* can help to imagine another way of being during the virus outbreak. Perhaps, viewing-as-if, as a labouring and politically committed strategy of looking and imagining alternatives, can help to encourage the search for alternative inspirations and examples of leisure and work that took place in the past but that do not reinforce tiered gender norms and that do not re-establish productivity and “accomplished” femininity, but an elsewhere. And maybe, with viewing-as-if’s impulse to be imaginative, the future as well as the past can be drawn from to create this elsewhere. Perhaps viewing-as-if can draw inspirations from the past as well as the future to focus on, not individualist striving and accomplishment, but forms of networking, relating and being that sustain and nourish during the Covid-outbreak, as well as after.

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Insecure. HBO, 2016- .

I Love Dick. Amazon, 2017.

I Love Lucy. CBS, 1951-1957.

Jane the Virgin. CW, 2014-2019.

Judging Amy. CBS, 1999-2005.

The Mary Tyler Moore Show. CBS, 1970-1977.

The Mindy Project. Fox, 2012-2015. Hulu, 2015-2017.

Murder, She Wrote. CBS, 1984-1996.

Nurse Jackie. Showtime, 2009-2015.

One Day at a Time. Netflix, 2017-2019.

Orange is the New Black. Netflix, 2013-2019.

Parks and Recreation. NBC, 2009-2015.

Providence. NBC, 1999-2002.

Roseanne. ABC, 1988-1997, 2018.

Sex and the City. HBO, 1998-2004.

Scandal. ABC, 2012-2018.

She's Gotta Have It. Netflix, 2017-2019.

Star Trek. NBC. 1966-1969.

The Sopranos. HBO, 1999-2007.

Weeds. Showtime, 2005-2012.

Working Class. CMT, 2011.

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Films

Annie. Dir. Will Gluck, Sony Pictures, 2014.

Devil Wears Prada. Dir. David Frankel, 20th Century Fox, 2006.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Dirs. Howard Hawks and Richard Sale, 20th Century Fox, 1953.

Ghostbusters. Dir. Paul Feig, Sony Pictures Entertainment Motion Picture Group, 2016.

Ingrid Goes West. Dir. Matt Spicer, Neon, 2017.

The Last Airbender, Dir. M. Night Shyamalan. Paramount Pictures, 2009.

Late Night. Dir. Nisha Ganatra, Amazon Studios, 2019.

The Lonely Villa. Dir. D. W. Griffith, Biograph Company, 1909.

Mrs. Doubtfire. Dir. Chris Columbus, 20th Century Fox, 1993.

Once Upon a Time in America. Dir. Sergio Leone, Warner Bros, 1984.

Pillow Talk. Dir. Michael Gordon, Universal-International, 1959.

Ring. Dir. Gore Verbinski, DreamWorks Pictures, 2002.

Scream. Dir. Wes Craven, Dimension Films, 1996.

Sex and The City. Dir. Michael Patrick King, Warner Bros Pictures, 2008.

Some Like it Hot. Dir. Billy Wilder, United Artists, 1959.

White Chicks. Dir. Keenen Ivory Wayans, Sony Pictures Entertainment Motion Picture
Group, 2004.