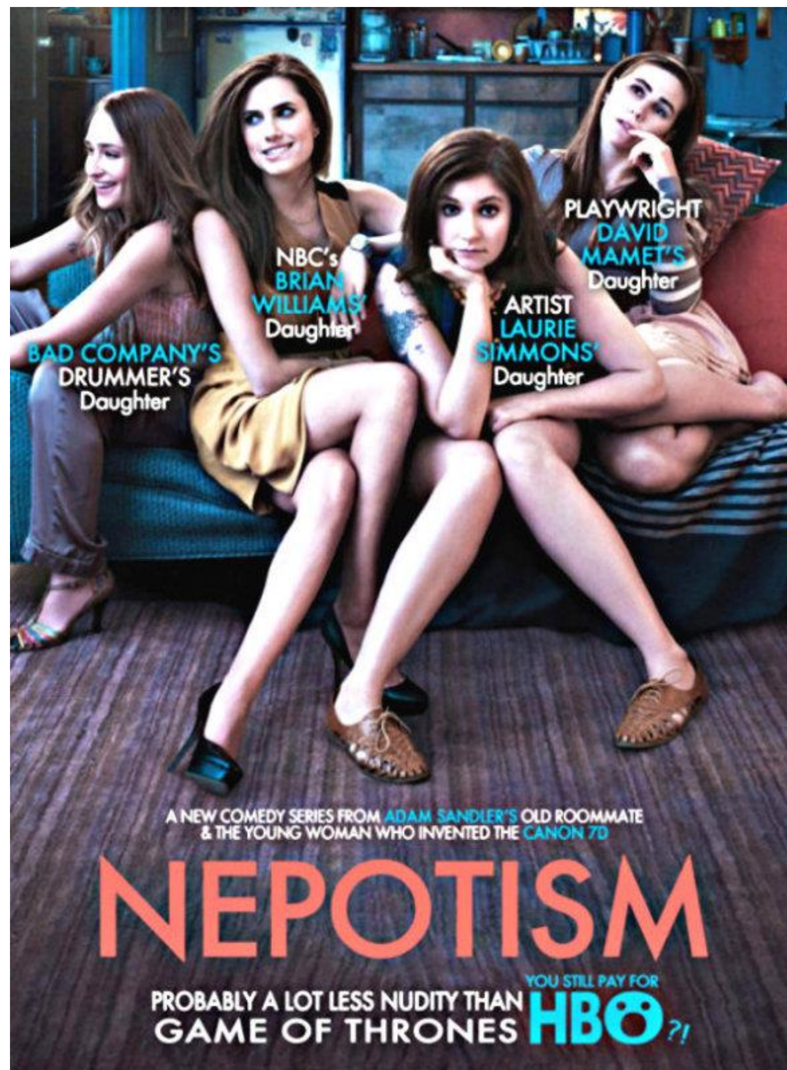
MA Thesis Utrecht University
Department of Humanities, MA American Studies
S. Darweesh – 4007859
Prof. Dr. S. de Leeuw – Supervisor
25/08/2014

Codes of Conduct



Understanding paratextuality and how the critical reception of *Girls* uncovered ideological codes in American culture

Table of Contents

Introduction 3

1. Television and American Culture 9

2. The Paratext of *Girls,* or: Lena Dunham Is Not Pretty Enough 17

3. *Girls*: a show 'by us for us' 29

Conclusion 37

Bibliography 41

Introduction

On September 15th, 2013, The Huffington Post published a much read article on the state of young Americans titled "Why Generation Y Yuppies Are Unhappy." Written by an unnamed author from the online collective Wait But Why, the article uses various stick figures, color schemes, and other visual tools, which resemble what one might find in a children's book, to detail why the current generation of young people seem unhappy with their lives. The author introduces us to the fictional Lucy, who is part of Generation Y, also known by the name "Millennials." Millennials are those who were born 'between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s' and who, throughout the article, the author refers to as 'Gen Y Protagonists & Special Yuppies, or GYPSYs. A GYPSY is a unique brand of yuppie, one who thinks they are the main character of a very special story' (Wait But Why 2013). The author argues that Americans who grew up during the Great Depression and World War II were obsessed with financial security and modeled their lives on this obsession. They raised their children, the Baby Boomers, with these ideals of monetary stability in order for them to have a better and easier life than they had. When these ideals were accompanied by economic prosperity in the United States during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, Baby Boomers turned out more successful than they had anticipated and they raised their children accordingly, 'with a sense of optimism and unbounded possibility' (Ibid.). Thus, 'Baby Boomers all around the country and world told their Gen Y kids that they could be whatever they wanted to be, instilling the special protagonist identity deep within their psyches' (Ibid.). This led to Gen Y yuppies becoming 'wildly ambitious,' 'delusional,' and 'taunted' by social media, which provides a permanent comparison point to showcase one's own inadequacies. The significance of this article lies not just in its subject matter, but also in the fact that it was "liked" on *Facebook* by an impressive 1,159,948 people. This made it the second most discussed article of that month (Corcoran 2013).

The subject of Millennials has been a widely written about subject, especially in the last few years. With the Great Recession of 2007 shocking the world economy and the resulting high unemployment rate, mounting student debts and rising city rents creating panic, the position and fate of the current generation of young adults has been on the collective American mind. This preoccupation has also been reflected in many American popular culture texts. In writing an article on the feminist leaning website *Jezebel* about a Pew Research Center study that showed an increasing number of Millennials who end up living with their parents after

college, author Callie Beusman accompanied her piece with a picture not of actual young people in America, but of the four main characters of the HBO television show *Girls* (Beusman 2013).

When *Girls* premiered on April 15th, 2012, it was expected to carry what seemed like the sole responsibility of depicting the lives and experiences of young women in the current socio-economic and cultural climate of the United States. So much had already been written about the show's concept and creator prior to its first airing that its actual content, a show about the discontent of four recent college graduates who are finding their way in Brooklyn, New York, almost seemed like an afterthought. The fact that it is produced, directed and written by a young woman who also plays the lead character in the show, makes it singularly exceptional in the current American television landscape.

The polarized online media coverage of creator and star Lena Dunham started in earnest when Emily Nussbaum wrote a glowing cover story on *Girls* for the March 25th issue of *New York Magazine* just a few weeks before the show premiered, declaring it and its star 'a gift' (Nussbaum 2012). This certainly was not the first time Dunham had gotten online press for her work. As soon as she won the South by Southwest (SXSW) narrative feature prize in 2010 for her second feature film *Tiny Furniture*, articles on the star seemed to pop up everywhere online. She did not only act in, but also wrote, directed, produced and edited her own work, hired her actual family and friends to play her fictional family and friends, and was only 23 years old when she won what is considered the Best Picture prize at SXSW. She is also a woman, a rarity among filmmakers, and she writes about the trials and tribulations of women from her own background: white, privileged and New York City born and bred. The reception of the star and her film were mostly glowing, with critics praising her writing and directorial powers. In fact, the reviews were not merely positive; they were rhapsodic. The late film critic Roger Ebert declared that anybody who can make a film as good as hers and successfully direct family members to depict passive aggression and discontent, 'can direct just about anybody in just about anything' (Ebert 2010). Peter Travers from *Rolling Stone* called the film 'the work of a filmmaker with a stunning future' that 'gets under your skin' (Travers 2010). These critics did not seem to simply be writing as an assignment for work. They seemed like fans, gushing over the star and using excessive superlatives to praise her work.

Nussbaum in fact admits to this in her article. She writes, 'from the moment I saw the pilot of *Girls* (…), I was a goner, a convert. In an office at HBO, my heart sped up. I laughed out loud; I "got" the characters—four friends, adrift in a modern New York of unpaid internships and bad sex on dirty sofas' (Nussbaum 2012). Online journalism and blogging has changed the motives of writers. Even though Nussbaum was writing for a print publication,

many of the online content concerning itself with both positive and negative criticisms of *Girls* and Lena Dunham is written at the suggestion of the writers, who wish to write about subjects close to them. This has resulted in the publication of successive articles on the subject, written by the same writers and thus creating a pattern of polarizing opinions.

If much of the positive online commentary on *Girls* can be categorized as having a certain fan element to it, the vitriol against it can certainly be deemed antifan writing. The antifan as a separate category in fan studies was first introduced in 2003 by Jonathan Gray. In an article published in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Gray describes antifans as those viewers who 'strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel,' but who engage in the text with the same or more enthusiasm as a fan (Gray 2003, 70). A fan is categorized as someone 'who invests time and energy into thinking about, or interacting with, a media text' (Booth 2010, 11). Critics are not merely antifans of a popular culture text; they are often professional writers from a certain socio-economic, highly educated background who deem it necessary to be informed when articulating strong opinions which can be read worldwide. The views that will result from studying these perspectives will therefore be specific to that background. However, the fact that their views are based on a deep knowledge of analyzing cultural texts, gives their perspective a certain weight that the average television viewer does not possess. While the role of the antifan will not play a central role in this thesis, its structure will be used to analyze the position of some critics' firm dislike of the show.

The construction of a dialogue that surrounds a pop culture text, but is not necessarily designed by it, is called a paratext. The term paratext was first introduced by literary theorist Gérard Genette in 1987. In his 1991 article "Introduction to the Paratext" Genette argues that a text 'rarely appears in its naked state, without the reinforcement and accompaniment of a certain number of productions, themselves verbal or not, like an author's name, a title, a preface, illustration' (Genette 1991, 261). He continues,

> One does not always know if one should consider that they belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to present it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to make it present, to assure its presence in the world, its "reception" and its consumption (Ibid.).

He calls these productions 'the paratext of the work' (Ibid.). The paratext of a certain text is

thus 'set up around the work's perimeter, controlling access to the nucleus, so to speak. All of us must pass through them, and so their role is often sorely undervalued' (Gray 2003, 72).

The importance of the paratext in analyzing television has become more apparent in recent years. Gray argues,

> While much analysis of texts is steadfastly stuck to close reading, if we can show that people engage in distant reading, responding to texts that have not been viewed, and more importantly if we can track exactly how the anti-fan's text or text stand-in has been pieced together, we will take substantial steps forward in understanding textuality and in appreciating the strength of contextuality (Gray 2003, 71).

As Gray further argues, 'Media talk has colonized a considerable amount of everyday speech, and by studying fan to antifan (…) relationships and discussion, we could better appreciate how this talk feeds back into the text, inflecting its meanings, and possibly accentuating or de-accentuating its content, political or otherwise (78).

In order to understand the paratext of *Girls*, this thesis will employ Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding principle, which is the most prevalent theory in reception studies. Reception studies entail 'studying the interpretive contexts which frame and inform a viewer's understanding of the media' (Hills 2006, 93). Instead of conducting interviews with the general viewing public, I will combine Hall's theory of encoding and decoding meaning with Gray's theory on antifans in order to unravel the paratext of *Girls*. The sources this thesis employs are limited to online journalistic writing on reputable websites. Blogs written on fan websites, commentary written in response to articles and message boards are avoided. The criteria by which these blogs are selected are that they must have a foundation in journalism, they must be widely considered as having produced professional writing or there must be a clearly stated reason for their inclusion in this thesis. For example, *Vulture* is the entertainment website for the print publication *New York Magazine* and all of its writers are widely respected cultural journalists. On the other hand, an online article on the website *Hairpin* is discussed in this thesis even though the website is run and edited by some non-journalists, but the article was used and linked to by so many other blogs, that it became part of the conversation of *Girls* and is therefore featured here. I have attempted to read every single article written on *Girls* that appeared online in the weeks leading up to and following the premiere of the first episode in 2012. The accelerated nature of the Internet facilitated the creation of something resembling a running dialogue, whereby critics wrote articles in response to other articles and referenced each other

in their writing. Thus while it is unlikely that every online-written word on *Girls* is represented in this thesis, the method of research regarding the paratext involved a close level of scrutiny of all analyses that influenced the direction in which the paratext was headed. It should also be noted that I have watched every episode of the first and second season of *Girls* more than once in order to develop a context with which to justify analyzing certain episodes, plot points and instances of dialogue over others.

The online "buzz" surrounding the start of the first season was remarkable for its fervor and the level of polarization it resulted in. These responses had occurred before the first episode had even aired, which makes it fertile ground to build an analysis of paratext on. Both seasons saw an incorporation of certain online criticisms in the dialogue and storylines of the show, which Dunham has admitted to in interviews, and marked a change in the content of the paratext. Unlike most textual or paratextual analyses, the show under discussion here is still on the air as of this writing. *Girls* has finished its third season in 2014 and has been approved for a fourth and fifth season to air in 2016 and 2017 respectively. The paratext that is discussed in this thesis is limited to the start of the first season in 2012 and the start of the second season in 2013.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will examine the rise of the television in American culture, the growing importance of the television critics and the theoretical frameworks that surround the concepts of the critic as antifan and the creation of a paratext. By analyzing Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding and theories that support this thesis' assertion of the importance of the paratext, this chapter will form a theoretical foundation on which the analysis of *Girls* is built and will attempt to show the ways in which television informs American culture. The second chapter will focus on the paratext itself. The paratext will be analyzed in detail in order to uncover the ideological views that are embedded in the online-created paratext of *Girls*. The third chapter will focus on Lena Dunham as a public figure and the role she played in the creation of the paratext. The chapter contains an analysis of the show itself and studies the ways in which the paratext influenced the artistic text of the show in an attempt to understand the relationship between textuality and paratextuality. The conclusions from these chapter will answer the question of what views the outpour of criticism of *Girls* reflect in contemporary American culture and provide a better understanding of the role of the paratext.

The combination of television and the internet has resulted not only in an onslaught of critical online commentary, but it also reveals a great shift in the way people articulate ideas and their involvement with a pop culture text. 'Like other forms of mass or popular culture,'

cultural scholar Laura Stempel Mumford argues, ‘television plays a significant role in teaching and maintaining the political and social status quo’ (114). Television can no longer be separated from the cultural make-up of American society. The upheaval and breadth of literature created in the aftermath of *Girls* makes it a prime case study for an investigation into the motives and effects of the little investigated paratext and the nascent views it promotes about the state of American social and cultural society.

1. Television and American Culture

The medium of television in America is a part of American popular culture. Popular culture is a tricky concept to define and, like most aspects in cultural analysis, a strict definition is elusive. Traditionally, popular culture has been seen as contrary to high or "elite" culture. While high culture would include activities with relatively high cost such as the opera or ballet, popular culture products market to the masses and are therefore seen as inferior. Many philosophers and critical thinkers have weighed both sides of this coin, from the theories of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the manipulative effects of what they call the 'factory' of popular culture (1944) to Walter Benjamin's theory in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), which states that mass production does not have to be a negative characteristic of certain forms of art. Yet it has become increasingly difficult to separate high and low culture or to designate popular culture wholly into that latter category:

> Obviously, from a literary point of view, a comic book cannot compare with a novel by Hemingway or Dostoyevsky. But such comparisons are both unfair and misguided. Scholars who study popular culture are not concerned primarily with aesthetic matters; instead their interest is in the role that popular culture plays in society – the ideological messages contained in popular culture, the way popular culture socializes young people, (…) and so on (Berger 1995, 161).

Not only has American popular culture proven to be a worthwhile gauge for the state of American society, but the evolution of technology, such as the rise of the internet and the changing formats of television, is continually blurring the lines between popular and high culture. At the center of popular culture are television and the accompanying discipline of television studies. In his seminal book *Television Culture*, John Fiske defines television as 'a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures' and defines culture as 'the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society' (Fiske 1987, 1). What are the ways in which television informs American culture?

The notion of a separate stage for television studies within cultural analysis is common, though its road to legitimation as a field of study has been turbulent. Television was thought to be a lowly cultural medium, thus generating negative connotations and notions of cultural deterioration at the hand of its growing relevance in American culture. In his book *Tele-Visions:*

An Introduction to Studying Television, scholar Glen Creeber tracks the birth of television criticism to the writings of members of the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, when German Marxist intellectuals like the aforementioned Horkheimer and Adorno fled to America to escape World War II (3). They found themselves shocked by 'what they saw as the profound commercialization of the media,' claiming it 'revealed the extreme commodification of culture in an industrial capitalist society' (Ibid.). Television, they argued, 'was highly ideological and simply worked to promote the interests of Western capitalism' (Ibid.). In her book *Television Criticism* Victoria O'Donnell quotes her previous 2006 book with G.S. Jowett, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, for a definition of ideology:

> [It is] a set of beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as ways of perceiving and thinking that are agreed on to the point that they constitute a set of norms for a society that dictate what is desirable and what should be done… Ideology contains concepts about what the society in which it exists is actually like. It states or denies, for example, that there are classes and that certain conditions are desirable or more desirable than others. An ideology is also a form of consent to a particular kind of social order and conformity to the rules within a specific set of social, economic, and political structures. It often assigns roles of dominance or subordination to gender, race, sexuality, religion, age, and social groups (O'Donnell 2007, 153).

The type of analysis done by the Frankfurt School was called "qualitative analysis." Critics were speculative, 'allowing room for personal interpretation, theoretical issues and subjective conjecture in its investigation of culture' (Creeber 2006, 4). However, as television sets became a staple in many American homes, it gained importance within American culture. So too did the study of television. Qualitative analysis thus gave way to "quantitative analysis" in the '40s and '50s, as media scholars called for a more scientific approach to studying television in order to give their findings more weight (Ibid.). While the Frankfurt School had argued for a passive role of the viewers, that they were simply receiving and absorbing the dominant ideologies present in commercially driven television programs, scholars using quantitative methods argued that the viewer was much more active in creating meaning out of a televisual text. During the 1970s scholars analyzed television through critical theory, 'using semiotics and other methods to analyze issues of power and ideology' (Ibid.). At the same time, the field of Cultural Studies was emerging in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, in which 'the representation of gender, race and class were particularly prominent, reflecting a growing concern in the cultural significance

of the medium as a whole while also allowing the study of television to explore its own historical, generic and theoretical tradition' (Ibid.). A sociological aspect infiltrated the field in the 1980s as the growing importance of television resulted in the rise of audience studies in determining textual meaning. Thus television studies does not consist of one theoretical discipline, but was constructed as a hodgepodge of existing methods in other fields in order to create its own interdisciplinary method of study.

The dominant model with which television scholars now study televisual meaning in audiences is Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. Television establishes cultural meaning through the codes it exchanges with the viewer. John Fiske explains the concept of codes as follows: 'codes are links between producers, texts, and audiences, and are the agents of intertextuality through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitutes our cultural world' (Fiske 1987, 4). Interaction in every culture reveals certain codes that contain meaning. The way people dress, for example, is encoded. This can then be stereotyped in television by having a character wear certain clothes, like expensive designer items, to communicate something specific about their character, such as superficiality. The most important codes in television are the cultural conventions and ideologies they communicate. Fiske explains the encoding and decoding of ideology as follows:

> The conventions that govern the representation of speech as "realistic dialogue" result in [for example] the heroine asking questions while the hero provides the answers. The representational convention by which women are shown to lack knowledge which men possess and give to them is an example of the ideological code of patriarchy. Similarly the conventional representation of crime as theft of personal property is an encoding of the ideology of capitalism. (…) [These] meanings constitute the *common sense* of a society (6, original emphasis).

Fiske argues that 'what passes for reality in any culture is the product of that culture's codes, so "reality" is always already encoded, it is never "raw"' (5).

The model for encoding and decoding meaning from television was envisioned by prominent British scholar Stuart Hall, who was a part of the influential Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. It was Hall who 'recognized that audience members are not passive but rather active consumers who decode symbols and representations and make their own meaning (O'Donnell 2007, 154). Hall successfully argued that the meaning that a viewer decodes from a text is directly influenced by the social and cultural situation of that viewer. Thus, cultural

products do not have one absolute meaning, but mean different things to different people. In his seminal 1979 essay "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Hall argues:

> (…) It is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated – transformed, again – into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no "meaning" is taken, there can be no "consumption." If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect (Hall 91, 1993).

Synchronicity occurs when the intended meaning of the cultural text, the encoding, is the same as the meaning that the viewer decodes. O'Donnell writes: 'if the image/discourse is representative of the dominant ideology and the viewer's social situation is not, then there is tension resulting in a negotiation between the viewer and image/discourse' (O'Donnell 2007, 154). Viewers do not automatically accept the preferred meaning of the cultural text, but create their own meaning through the filter of their personal circumstances.

However, the message of a certain popular culture text also "hails" someone 'as if it were hailing a taxi' (155). O'Donnell writes:

> By responding to the call or "hail," a viewer recognizes the social position that has been constructed in encoding the image/discourse, and if the viewer's response is cooperative, the intended meaning is adopted, and the viewer has constituted herself or himself as a subject (Ibid.).

Hall described a subject as 'a social construction wherein the viewer recognizes that she or he is being addressed or summoned by the hail and decodes the image/discourse accordingly. Thus, television viewers may be hailed as conformists or sexists or patriots' (Ibid.). The way in which the viewer decodes meaning is therefore indicative of that person's worldview. The viewer's interpretation of television reveals their cultural and social views.

Hall argues that there are certain social positions that the viewer may occupy. 'Unless they are wildly aberrant,' writes Hall, 'encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message' (Hall 2006, 100). He argued for these limits within the dominant, oppositional, and negotiated positions of the receiver. 'The dominant position is decoded by the viewer who accepts the dominant or intended meaning. On

the other hand, the oppositional position is in direct opposition to the dominant meaning, and an opposite point of view is decoded' (O'Donnell 2007, 155). The most common position is when the image/discourse and the viewer negotiate meaning. The negotiated position is a completely open category for viewers who primarily fit into the dominant ideology but need to resist certain elements of it. Negotiated positions are popular with various social groups who tend to question their relationship to the dominant ideology' (Ibid.). The exchange between the encoding of meaning by *Girls* and the critics' decoding through their own socially bound environments, is crucial to understanding how that show specifically reflects American culture. This will be discussed in detail in chapter two.

In recent years, the growing significance of cable television channels has created an unquestionable hierarchy of aesthetics. Television shows such as *Mad Men* (2007-), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-2008) are continually ranked as the best television programs of all time and are seen as quality television, as opposed to shows on broadcast television, such as *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-) and *NCIS* (2003-). The latter two shows were the most watched series in the 2012 – 2013 television season (Schneider 2013), which adds to the notion that populist art forms are inferior. With the growing significance of the Internet in American culture, the role of the television critic has grown into a well-respected profession and is ubiquitous on an ever-increasing number of culture-oriented websites. Defining popular culture is thus becoming more problematic and its position as a worthwhile art form more determined. So too is the case for the television critic, an occupation which had to climb up in respectability, especially in relation to many other forms of cultural criticism, yet has gained great prominence in recent years.

The profession of the television critic has a long and rich history. Victoria O'Donnell writes that 'journalists began writing television criticism in 1946, when Jack Gould of *The New York Times* and John Crosby of the *New York Herald Tribune* began reviewing television program content' (O'Donnell 2007, 4). In those days reviews had to be written after the episode had aired since all television shows were live. This lasted until the comedy *I Love Lucy* was made on film, which allowed shows to be recorded and enabled television critics to write and publish their reviews before a show had aired (4-5). By the end of the fifties however, 'press critics such as Robert Lewis Shayon, Jack Gould and Gilbert Seldes spoke in increasingly antagonistic ways about Hollywood commercialism, blaming networks as well as regulators for their irresponsible management of the public trust' (Spigel 1998, 65). This was in reaction to the notorious Quiz Show Scandals of the fifties, 'in which producers and sponsors were accused of rigging the games by feeding answers to contestants before the shows' (Ibid.). Television

critics were in the awkward position of acting as part of the publicity machine of television studios on the one hand, while trying to build a respectable subset in journalism on the other; they were often called 'hacks and hypocrites' and were seen as 'the "whores" of the newspaper trade' (66).

Unlike film and theater critics, television critics were particularly maligned, both within the journalism field and by television studios:

> While all other labor at the press operated in and through the same ambivalences and contradictions, the peculiar nature of a journalist who "provided" information about "entertainment", who spoke of private industry as if it were imbued with public purpose, who evaluated mass culture through a classical tradition of criticism, all of this made the TV critic especially vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy, and particularly in need of defense. TV critics at the time wrote voluminously about the need to define what it meant to be a critic and the need to legitimate themselves as respectable sources of knowledge (Ibid.).

Their double duty as objective journalists on the one hand and clogs in television studios' public relations machine on the other, brought forth the conclusion of 'the impossibility of writing about mass culture from within its own institutional spaces' (Ibid.). These musings resulted in 'the transformation from journalist to scholar' in the 1960s (70).

This transformation was not only the result of changes within television criticism, but was aided by cultural changes during that time. There was a 'primary shift in cultural sensibilities' whereby the 'increasing problematization of high and low culture' occurred, 'as well as the increasing legitimation of popular culture in university curricula' (77). For example, 'in the art scene, toward the end of the 1960s, various critics associated with the avant-garde distanced themselves from the elitism of museum art' (Ibid.). At the same time, the youth culture movements of the sixties 'grew up at a time when leftist intellectuals – eager to strip the academy and art world of its old guard elitism – defended the study of popular culture,' which elevated 'popular culture as a form of intellectual currency' (79).

The sheer volume of popular culture coming out of the United States after the 1960s and its continuing significance in Western society is unique to the United States: 'the project of American culture studies had to be distinctive because the culture, intellectual and otherwise, in which it was embedded was distinctive' (Carey 1997, 4). Todd Gitlin argues in the book *Cultural Studies in Question* that this growth of the importance of American popular culture

was not simply the result of a growth of scale of the popular culture market after World War II, but 'that from the 1960s on, the young have come to define themselves by their taste' (Gitlin 1997, 26). He continues: 'in part, too, the bulking up of popular culture and the connected phenomenon of celebrity stem from the declining grip of the institutions that traditionally imparted identity to the young: occupation, class, religion' (ibid.). Television studies as a discipline emerged after these changes, in the 1970s and 1980s, 'from three major bodies of commentary on television: journalism, literary/dramatic criticism and the social sciences' (Brunsdon 1998, 97). Today the average American spends a staggering twelve hours a day staring at a screen, be it television, a phone screen, tablet or computer (Williams 2013). Thus the role of the television critics evolved from its original form in print media to an ever-increasing number of websites and blogs in which popular culture criticism has taken a central role.

In order to understand the implications of the criticisms for and against *Girls* specifically, a detailed synopsis of the show is required before discussing the paratext in chapter two. In the first season, viewers are introduced to Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) and her group of twenty-something friends. Hannah comes from a middle-class upbringing; both her parents are teachers and she attended Oberlin College in Ohio as a Creative Writing major. She now lives in the expensive Brooklyn, New York with her college roommate, Marnie Michaels (Allison Williams). While Hannah often expresses her desire of being a writer, she starts the series off as an unpaid intern at a publishing house and has been living off her parents since finishing college two years earlier. She has a self-described dysfunctional sexual relationship with the emotionally closed off Adam (Adam Driver), who is accused of using her for sex, while she craves more. In the first episode, Hannah's parents visit her in New York and tell her that they are no longer providing financial support. This brings Hannah's story in motion as she struggles with paying the bills and avoiding any paying job that does not match up with her desire to be a writer. Along the way her sense of her own specialness clashes with the responsibilities of "adult" life.

Marnie seems like a very responsible and well put-together girl. She works in a Manhattan art gallery and is the only one of her friends who has a job that matches her desired career trajectory. She is often dismissive of her friends, who she feels do not have their life in order, and is perceived as condescending by the other girls. The first season sees her dating her college boyfriend Charlie, while struggling to figure out if the life she craves is the life she *wants* to have or what she believes she *should* have. Jessa Johansson (Jemima Kirke) briefly attended Oberlin, where she befriended Hannah and Marnie, but left soon after to travel the

world. She is British, often described as bohemian, and has a disregard for social conventions. In the first episode Hannah and Marnie throw Jessa a welcome home party. Hannah is excited to see her, but Marnie has always disliked her careless attitude. Jessa's free spiritedness and irresponsible personality often clashes with Marnie's straight-laced opinions. Shoshanna Shapiro (Zosia Mamet) is Jessa's younger, American cousin. Shoshanna views her life in New York as if she were a real-life *Sex and the City* character, looks up to Jessa's come-what-may attitude, talks an inordinate amount, and generally tends to get on her friends' nerves.

Lena Dunham does not adhere to traditional good guy/bad guy stereotypes, which has led to the creation of rather polarizing main characters. There is no clear distinction between good or bad actions. The result is that the characters do not exhibit traditionally desirable character traits most seen in female protagonists. Every character is morally ambiguous and often unlikeable in a way that few other shows with lead female characters are. The words that have been used to describe Hannah range from selfish and self-involved to reductive and insufferable. The fact that many critics called the show emblematic of the generation depicted therein illuminates some of the views critics hold on that particular generation. Specific criticisms about other aspects of both the production and storylines of the HBO series demonstrated the underlying conceptions that critics hold of American culture in general and youth culture specifically.

2. The Paratext of *Girls,* or: Why is Lena Dunham So Fat?

When HBO premiered *Girls* on April 15th 2012, the first episode was watched by 872,000 viewers (Andreeva 2012). While this is a respectable viewership number considering the low-concept premise of the show, a group of female college graduates living their lives in New York City, it certainly does not hold up against other HBO staples such as *Game of Thrones*, which premiered to 3.8 million viewers (Ibid.). Yet despite this seeming lack of mass interest in the show, *Girls* managed to create something for itself that is arguably much more important for a cable television show than ratings: buzz. Prior to its premiere *Girls* had received an incredible amount of press coverage, mostly occurring online, and seemingly every American blog in existence weighed in to give its two cents about the concept of the show, the characters, the actresses who play the characters, and the prolific writer, director, and star of the show, Lena Dunham. These dialogues outside the artistic text itself are called paratexts.

Gérard Genette developed his concept of the paratext around literary works, but his theory is exceedingly applicable to television. In his 1991 article "Introduction to the Paratext" Genette describes the paratext as 'the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public' (261). Its positioning serves as a 'threshold (…) which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility either of entering or of turning back' (Ibid.). Thus a televisual text does not only constitute the artistic product of the author, in this case Lena Dunham, but also encompasses 'introductory sequences, "spoilers" and ads, newspaper, magazine or web articles, merchandise and the very buzz or media talk that surrounds any given programme' (Gray 2003, 72). Viewers often have to digest the paratext of a work before actually viewing the artistic text itself.

In analyzing the reaction of a portion of the audience, in this case professional television and cultural critics, one can uncover the views that audience reflects of the specific subset of American culture featured in *Girls*. In his article "New Audiences, New Textualities: Antifans and Nonfans," Jonathan Gray writes: 'while by no means an archangel of incontrovertible proof, reception research offers us valuable insights into consumption and decoding, and offers us the opportunity to round out theories of the media and their place in society with empirical observation' (Gray 2003, 66).

The specificity of the audience, professional critics, should be kept in mind throughout this chapter. Not only does the viewpoint of critics reflect their specific socio-economic background, as is the case with any form of audience research, but professional critics are also

influenced by the publications in which their work appears. By positioning critics into the model of fans and antifans as presented by Jonathan Gray, the critical texts can be grounded in a structure which allows a focus on the content instead of their context. For example one of the advantages of fan research is that the researcher can avoid screenings 'and with them the nasty aura of the positivist laboratory study' (Ibid.). This applies to critics, as they get sent screenings of episodes in advance which are viewable from any location they desire. Furthermore instead of viewing a critic's educational background as unrepresentative of a general viewpoint, the fact that they are specifically educated to interpret cultural texts makes them excellent candidates to reflect on a popular culture text and glean cultural views from that reflection. The risk of a specific interpretation due to preference or taste is lessened when the viewer has been taught to critically analyze.

Due to the fact that a televisual artistic text is ongoing, building from episode to episode as opposed to the more closed off nature of a finished book or film, Stuart Hall's theory of the 'dominant,' 'oppositional,' or 'negotiated' reader position is incomplete. As Gray argues, 'television offers the added complication of partly and differently read texts, demanding that we add the dimension of fan, anti-fan and non-fan to that of dominant, oppositional and negotiated' (2003, 68). The non-fan and negotiated positions are not discussed here as television critics are inherently close readers. The concept of the antifan is thus used as a guideline rather than occupying an integral role to answering the thesis question. The content of the online-created paratext surrounding *Girls* was very specific and often gendered. By combining theories on paratext with Hall's model of encoding and decoding and positioning critics as fans and antifans, the criticisms of *Girls* will be deconstructed to reveal the cultural values embedded in the paratext.

In order to make an assessment of the gender implications in the sheer volume of online activity surrounding Dunham and *Girls*, it is necessary to construct a theory on the cause of the criticisms for this particular show. When *Girls* premiered in 2012 it was certainly not the first television series created by and starring a woman. In fact, TV from 2011 onward can be seen as a time of female driven TV shows: there was *30 Rock* creator Tina Fey, *New Girl's* Liz Meriwether, *The Mindy Project's* Mindy Kaling, *Suburgatory's* Emily Kapnek, *Up All Night's* Emily Spivey, *2 Broke Girls'* Whitney Cummings, *Nashville's* Callie Khouri and of course Shonda Rhimes, who is the creator of the female driven *Scandal, Grey's Anatomy* and the now canceled *Private Practice*. This list leaves out all other TV shows that star strong women but are created or co-created by men, such as *Parks and Recreation*, *Homeland*, *Enlightened*, *Nurse Jackie*, *The Good Wife, Revenge* and *Veep,* to name a few. All the shows listed here have

supporters and detractors, but none reach the same volume of commentary as that which surrounds *Girls*.

One reason for this attention on *Girls* is the fact that unlike the shows mentioned above, *Girls'* supporters have been extremely positive in their commentary of the show, to the point where critics seemed to be responding not only to the show itself, but also to the show's supporters. This argument is reinforced by research done on the fans and antifans of other cultural texts, which demonstrate that antifans will often materialize in opposition to a rabid fanbase. This is the case for pop culture phenomena such as the *Twilight* series and personalities like Taylor Swift. In an article on the antifandom of *Twilight*, writer Jacqueline M. Pinkowitz explores an anti-*Twilight* website and argues that one of the main reasons for its existence is that 'it feels compelled to voice (…) its opposition to the claim that the *Twilight* saga is good literature (…) because of the popularity of the books and the uncritical devotion of its fans' (Pinkowitz 2011). Similarly, the rhapsodic early reception of *Girls* can be seen as having helped fuel a form of antifandom over its perceived inaccuracy of the foundation of the critics' support.

As Emma Straub put it in an article on the popular culture website *Vulture*, 'How does one begin to watch a show that has been hyped this much?' (2012, April 16). The hype surrounding the show materialized before the first episode had aired and was sustained with seemingly little effort from HBO or the show itself. The running online dialogue on the merits of the program created what Gray calls a filter 'through which we must pass' (Gray 2010, 3). He argues:

> Today's version of "Don't judge a book by its cover" is "Don't believe the hype," but hype and surrounding texts do more than just ask us to believe them or not; rather, they establish frames and filters through which we look at, listen to, and interpret the texts that they hype (Ibid.).

Thus viewers of the show, bloggers, and journalists all had a filter that had wrapped itself around the show, through which viewers saw the content of the program.

The branding of the show was constructed in part by HBO, the television cable network that aired the show. HBO had traditionally had a 'masculine quality brand tradition' (Nygaard 2013, 371), with its most critically acclaimed programming consisting of shows like *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *Deadwood*, which were all created by and starred men. HBO's tagline was "It's not TV. It's HBO" and the 'contrasts with the network's current lineup, which includes the expensive, flashy, gangster series *Boardwalk Empire* (2010–

present) and the sexy vampire drama *True Blood* (2008–present),' were almost antithetical to the content of *Girls* (Ibid.). The two established HBO shows were also more easily 'branded and marketed under the HBO "quality" brand, being tied to auteurs Martin Scorsese and Alan Ball, respectively,' whereas *Girls* was the creation of a young unknown woman with only one feature under her belt (Ibid.). However, as competition was looming in the form of other cable networks such as Showtime and FX, HBO started to feel the pressure for the need for innovation. Taylor Nygaard argues that,

> Showtime's success is particularly important to understand why HBO wanted to take a risk and develop *Girls* with Dunham in the face of all this competition. The premium network became incredibly popular by producing programming with strong, complicated, female leads. While some critics have poked fun at Showtime's formula for creating shows about "Ladies with Problems," the formula earned the network a load of Emmy nominations, beating HBO for the first time, while almost doubling its subscriber numbers, especially among women. In contrast, HBO had lost much of its appeal to women, especially younger women, after the gargantuan success of *Sex and the City* faded (Ibid.).

Dunham's first feature *Tiny Furniture* had been specifically hailed by critics 'for its honest and raw depiction of young womanhood, particularly in relation to sex, ambition, and parental relationships' (Ibid.). With the name *Girls*, a 'staggeringly ambitious series title' (Bell 2013, 363), the suggested scope and depth of the show became highly anticipated. Thus before the first episodes had been filmed, HBO started branding *Girls* as a show by women, for women, creating buzz that instilled a considerable amount of expectation in the media and, more specifically, in the field of television criticism.

The initial critical response to *Girls* was extremely positive. On *Vulture* Amanda Dobbins tracked the online commentary of popular cultural websites on the subject of *Girls* prior to its premiere in April of 2012. She starts her timeline with the mention of the reviews of Dunham's film *Tiny Furniture* in 2010. Dunham's first big journalistic profile was during this time, for *The New Yorker,* and was written by Rebecca Mead. It is an exceedingly positive profile, comparing Dunham's first film to the critically acclaimed television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and the Woody Allen classic *Manhattan*. The reviews that preceded the premiere of *Girls* two year later similarly started out extremely positive. Tim Goodman of *The Hollywood Reporter* called *Girls* 'one of the most original, spot-on, no-missed-steps series in recent

memory.' At *New York Magazine* Emily Nussbaum writes that the show 'is like nothing else on TV.' On the popular blog *Hitfix* Alan Sepinwall wrote, '*Girls* is not your average television show — it may, in fact, be the best new HBO comedy since *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.' Proponents of the show and its creator were not simply supportive, but made grand statements about its quality and influence.

When taking a closer look at the gender makeup of the critics of *Girls* it seems as though the online fans of the show are more often male, while the antifans who respond to them are overwhelmingly female. A useful source in determining the gender makeup of critics is the review aggregation website *Metacritic,* which lists the reviews of films, television shows and games that appear in esteemed publications and on websites and blogs. It should be noted that there is a difference between reviews on the one hand and think pieces or blog posts on the other. While the first is, in this case, an article written for the purpose of critiquing a television production, the latter two are written with a cultural or sociological angle. Both can contain elements of the other, but *Metacritic* only registers reviews, without including other critical articles. In the case of *Girls* the gender disparity as registered by *Metacritic* boils down to thirty reviews of the first season. Eleven of these reviews were written by women, which included the reviews that were more negative. For the second season twenty reviews appear on the website, four of which written by women. This is not a particularly revealing fact. There are in fact more male writers working in media journalism than there are female writers, but it certainly deserves mention when trying to ascertain the reason for such a swift, female driven backlash.

The antifan-critics whose writings on *Girls* and Dunham were most influential, in the sense that they gained widespread attention and responses, were predominantly female. The first of many pieces of writing on the racial homogeneity of *Girls* starts with *The New York Times* reporter Jenna Wortham's article "Where (My) Girls At?" on the blog *The Hairpin*. Here Wortham argues that the girls on *Girls* feel 'alienating, a party of four engineered to appeal to a very specific subset of the television viewing audience, when the show has the potential to be so much bigger than that. And that is a huge fucking disappointment' (Wortham 2012). This notion of high expectation versus a perceived disappointing reality is a running theme in many of the female antifandom surrounding the show. Wortham's article was followed by more anti-writings of *Girls*, from the *Atlantic*, *Think Progress*, *Racialicious, The Daily Beast, The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times* among others, with only the latter article written by a man. It should be noted that some of the most vocal supporters of *Girls* were female, such as *The New Yorker's* Emily Nussbaum, and some of the harshest criticisms of the show, such as *Gawker's* John Cook, were male. However, the gender disparity between the early

predominantly male writers' enthusiastic reviews of *Girls*, with titles such as "HBO's 'Girls' Is the Best New TV Show of 2012," and the responding female-authored criticisms, show a gendered view.

Looking at the paratext through Hall's encoding/decoding paradigm reveals the cultural views that underlie the arguments for and against *Girls*. O'Donnell writes, 'the term "code" comes from the study of semiotics. A code is a system of signs that is able to communicate meanings' (O'Donnell 2007, 156). John Fiske identifies certain technical categories within television that encode meaning. While Fiske developed his approach to cultural codes in relation to textual analysis, the paratext can be viewed as a text onto itself, allowing for the adoption of Fiske's codes into paratextual analysis. In *Television Culture* Fiske divides the codes of television into three levels which spill into each other: reality, representation and ideology. Reality includes 'appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc.' (1987, 5). Conventional representational codes 'shape the representations of, for example: narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, casting, etc.' (Ibid.). Reality and representational codes reveal ideological codes, such as 'individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, capitalism, etc.' (Ibid.). Within the paratext of *Girls*, critics honed in on specific reality and representational codes from which they then decoded specific ideologies. The most prominent reality, representational and ideological codes present in the paratext of *Girls* are analyzed below.

The environment in which *Girls* is set, an aspect of Fiske's codes of reality, was a prominent feature in discussions of the show and revealed several ideological codes. In the case of *Girls*, the setting of Brooklyn proved immensely important in the eyes of the critics. Fiske argues that the 'physical differences in the social codes of setting and dress are also bearers of the ideological codes of class (…)' (Fiske 1987, 10). The New York borough of Brooklyn connotes hipster culture, gentrification, and expensive housing. In a March 2014 article on the gentrification of Brooklyn, noted *New York Times* critic A.O. Scott titles his piece "Whose Brooklyn is it Anyway? Tracing Urban Change in Brooklyn from 'Kotter' to 'Girls.'" Scott's article discusses a documentary by Spike Lee on the negative changes in Brooklyn do to ever-growing gentrification. He traces the change from the 'old Brooklyn,' which consisted mostly of lower class black Americans, to the 'new Brooklyn.' Scott argues,

> The new Brooklyn is easily mocked — and almost as easily embraced — as a utopia of beards, tattoos, fixed-gear bikes and do-it-yourself commerce. Everyone is busy knitting, raising chickens, distilling whiskey, making art and displaying the fruits of this

activity in pop-up galleries and boutiques (…). “Brooklyn” might as well be a synonym (…) for the sweet, silly, self-important, stuff-white-people-like Gestalt that the television series [*Girls*] has come to represent (Scott 2014).

The fact that the show is set in Brooklyn brings with it all the meanings that the culture at large associates with that specific geographical location, most specifically a white, upper middle social class.

Another aspect of codes of reality that was prominent in the paratext was the behavior of the characters, specifically their perceived unlikeability. The characters, and Dunham’s character Hannah specifically, are described by critics alternately as spoiled, entitled, morally ambiguous, narcissistic, clueless, selfish, brusque, promiscuous, and empty-headed, among other terms. These criticisms are not only aimed at the characters, but at Dunham herself, whose identity is often conflated with Hannah by the online media. Unlikeablity in television is certainly not a new concept. The presence of the antihero, a main protagonist who lacks traditional qualities prescribed to heroism, is more pronounced than ever in present-day television. Interestingly these characters are almost exclusively male. Yet Tony Soprano, Don Draper and Walter White are considered some of the greatest television characters ever created. The same qualities listed above that critics negatively accuse Hannah and her friends of, can be steadily applied to these three men. The difference is that these characteristics fall in line with the established ideology of what a man can and should be. Furthermore, while Dunham and her character are extremely conflated, critics do not accuse Vince Gillian of criminal tendencies because he created a show about drug dealing or accuse Matthew Weiner of having loose morals because Don Draper is a chronic philanderer. Women in fictional media texts must adhere to far more boundaries in their characterization than men. While other aspects should be taken into account in comparing *Girls* to other television shows, the particular critical argument of unlikeablity seems laden with sexism.

Lena Dunham’s body and overt sexuality on the show, which is a mixture of codes of reality in terms of behavior and codes of representation in terms of casting, are also frequently discussed. In Rebecca Mead’s extremely positive profile of Dunham, the writer also manages to include mention of Dunham’s body in the very first paragraph, describing her as not having ‘the body of a Girl Gone Wild. (…) She has pale, ample thighs and a generous belly; greenish tattoos spiderweb her arms and back. Her blithe willingness to disrobe without shame caused an outburst of censure from viewers’ (Mead 2010). Mention of Dunham’s body and sexuality is a frequent staple of subsequent commentary on the show. On *Slate*, Katie Roiphe writes,

‘Lena Dunham is a little chubbier than the women we usually see in sex scenes on television’ (2012). At the *New York Post* Andrea Peyser is more direct, describing Dunham as a ‘fat chick’ with ‘dimples ugliness’ (2012). The aspect of the representation of and adherence to a certain body type and “look,” especially in women, is not new, nor is it particularly insightful. The idealization of thinness is a pervasive trend in body imagery that is perpetuated in every single form of media, from commercials in the subway to the cinema. While Dunham is considered plus-sized, she does not hold back on showing nudity and sexuality in the same manner that other (male) show runners depict their aesthetically approved female cast members on a weekly basis. The particular unfamiliar physical representation of Dunham’s character thus caused a considerable amount of commentary from critics, revealing just how pervasive the current obsession with thinness is in American culture.

With *Girls* Dunham goes against the ideological codes embedded in American culture by creating characters who are thoroughly unlikeable and showing her body and sexuality without commentary or embarrassment. John Fiske argues:

> These codes and the televisual codes which bring them to the viewer are both deeply embedded in the ideological codes of which they are themselves the bearers. If we adopt the same ideological practice in the decoding as the encoding we are drawn into the position of a white, male, middle-class American (or westerner) of conventional morality. The reading position is the social point at which the mix of televisual, social, and ideological codes comes together to make coherent, unified sense: in making sense of the program in this way we are indulging in an ideological practice ourselves, we are maintaining and legitimating the dominant ideology, and our reward for this is the easy pleasure of the recognition of the familiar and of its adequacy’ (Fiske 1987, 10).

The fact that many critics comment on or criticize these characteristics reveals a cultural ideology through which they decode the text as being jarring. Americans are saturated with images of thin women and their passive sexuality to the point where characters who are not thin and who actively seek sex and are in control of their sexuality are immediately noticed. In their writings these critics reveal how deeply embedded these ideological codes really are.

As previously mentioned, the casting of *Girls* features prominently in the paratext of the show. Fiske argues that ‘the actors and actresses who are cast to play hero/ines, villain/esses and supporting roles are real people whose appearance is already encoded by our social codes’ (8). He continues:

> But they are equally media people, who exist for the viewer intertextually, and whose meanings are also intertextual. They bring with them not only residues of the meanings of other roles that they have played, but also their meanings from other texts such as fan magazines, showbiz gossip columns, and television criticism. (…) These dimensions of meaning (…) are more important in the casting of hero/ines than of villain/esses (8-9).

Critics often mentioned Dunham's background; she is the daughter of a highly respected photographer, Laurie Simmons, and a successful painter, Carroll Dunham. She was born and raised in New York City and attended a liberal arts college. She was deemed, in short, privileged. The other actresses that were cast as the friends of Dunham's character Hannah Horvath were all children of privilege: actress Zosia Mamet, who plays Shoshanna, is the daughter of famed American playwright David Mamet; Allison Williams, who plays Marnie, is the daughter of one of the biggest newscasters on American television, Brian Williams; and Jemima Kirke, who plays Jessa, is the daughter of Simon Kirke, the drummer for the band Bad Company. It is curious that these criticisms were deemed relevant to the content of the show, seeing as actors such as Charlie Sheen, Nicholas Cage, and Michael Douglas come from more famous families yet their work is not questioned within this same discourse. The sexism in these specific criticisms can only be speculated at, but it is certainly an aspect of the paratext that should be kept in mind. There was a mixture of excessive praise for Lena Dunham's work on one hand and a dismissal of her interpretation because of her personal context on the other.

In the case of the criticisms against *Girls*, the casting occupied a large space within their meaning-making. Lead actors Lena Dunham, Zosia Mamet, Allison Williams, and Jemima Kirke were not known prior to their casting. In fact, it was Williams' first acting job, Kirke's second, Mamet had done a handful of television guest roles, and Dunham had made a few short films in college and had released one feature film, the aforementioned *Tiny Furniture*. The actors were judged, almost exclusively, on the social circumstances regarding their upbringing. The fact of their social backgrounds was decoded as privilege by critics and they seemed to reflect that privilege onto the meanings of the show. On April 16th 2012, a day after the premiere of the first episode, critic John Cook of *Gawker* described the show as 'a television program about the children of wealthy famous people.' In all subsequent recaps of the episodes, Cook refers to the characters exclusively by who their famous parents are, describing events by writing, for example, 'Laurie Simmons's daughter's best friend is Brian Williams' daughter.'

If ‘characters on television are not just representation of individual people but are encodings of ideology,’ an argument can be made that the current cultural sphere rejects an ideology of racial homogeneity (Fiske 1987, 9). What is, and continues to be, a running theme throughout criticisms of the show, is the lack of racial diversity in the cast. This line of dialogue started with the aforementioned Jenna Wortham article “Where (My) Girls At?” written on April 16th 2012 on *The Hairpin*, followed a day later by *Girls* writer Lesley Arfin’s tweet, ‘what really bothered me most about [the film] *Precious* was that there was no representation of ME.’ In response, writer Elspeth Reeve of *The Wire* denounced the comment on April 18th, writing: ‘even when succumbing to the temptation of a one-liner, most of us manage to avoid sounding like racists.’ That same evening, Arfin deleted the comment on Twitter, posted an apology, and then deleted that apology (Read 2012). The next day articles on the issue of race were posted on several prominent websites. On *Jezebel* Dodai Stewart argued:

> Does *Girls* have the right to be all-white? Of course. But we, the public, have the right to critique the insular, homogenous world a young woman with the good fortune to have her own TV show has chosen to present. Because it's exclusionary, disappointing, unrealistic, and upsetting. And it perpetuates a sad trend.

On the blog *Racialicious* Kendra James linked the lack of racial diversity to Lena Dunham’s education at Oberlin, the prestigious liberal arts college, which James also attended. ‘Of the twenty or so courses offered within the Cinema department (…) there are zero offered on African-American film, Latino film, LGBTQ Film, African film, and East Asian film,’ James writes. ‘There are, however, seven classes you can take on the European film tradition.’ She continues,

> Not only do I work with a WOC [woman of color] who attended high school with her, I have friends who went to high school with both her *and* her younger sister and, because my friends consist of Latinas, Asians, Blacks, *and* whites, I know her life couldn’t possibly have looked as white as the posters for *Girls* (which is semi-true to life; she calls her character Hannah “another version of herself”) would have you believe.

With the turn of the focus to the lack of diversity, critics started taking the show and what it presented very personally. On April 20th Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote an article on *The Atlantic* where she shifts the responsibility for the lack of diversity on the television channel HBO: ‘My

question is not "Why are there no black women on *Girls*," but "How many black show-runners are employed by HBO?" This is about systemic change, not individual attacks' (2012).

Speaking of African American representation in popular culture, Victoria O'Donnell quotes author Daniel Bogle: 'When there is an absence of programs about African Americans, Bogle wrote, "black viewers felt that television was not fully and fairly representing them, not saying who they were and what their lives were like"' (O'Donnell 2007, 171-2). An argument could be made for the same occurrence with *Girls* among critics. There was a distinct disconnect between the excessively high expectations of the show prior to its premiere, do to a lack of similar programming, and the disappointing reality of the parameters of a half hour comedy with twelve episodes a year. As Dodai Stewart wrote on *Jezebel*, 'If *Girls* was merely a terrible show with zero potential, none of this would be up for discussion. Part of the problem is that the creator, Lena Dunham, and the premise — a kind of more realistic *Sex and The City* — have so much potential.' On April 22nd, *Girls* aired its second episode. Within the span of one week over a dozen articles had appeared online about the subject of diversity, among other topics, on *Girls*.

It remains startling that out of all the white television shows and productions on air in the United States, such as *Two and a Half Men, How I Met Your Mother, 30 Rock, Modern Family* and nearly all other television programs, most of which receive considerably higher viewing numbers than *Girls*, the latter is the show that gets publicly skewered for it. Jon Caramanica at *The New York Times* argues it is because 'unlike the Brooklyn-bohemian demimonde of *Girls*, the worlds of those shows [listed above] are ones that writers and critics — the sort who both adore and have taken offense at *Girls* — have little desire to be a part of' (2012). The subject matter and setting of *Girls* more closely correlates with the lives and circumstances of the same journalists and bloggers who criticize the show. Both Dunham and Hannah are writers operating in the city and borough where many of the aforementioned critics reside. The aim and volume of the criticisms has seemed decidedly personal, a defense of turf.

A blog post on the satirical website *College Humor* points out the hypocrisy and sexism of some of the arguments made against Dunham. The posting's title is "If People Talked About *Seinfeld* Like They Talk About *Girls*" and writer Mike Trapp takes the role of a generic *Girls* critic and critiques *Seinfeld*:

> The whole thing just seems SO self-indulgent. *Seinfeld* stars a comedian named Jerry Seinfeld who plays a comedian named Jerry. Wow. Really, Jerry? He also created the show and writes it. It's like he can't give up control of anything. (…) Do you think he's

> funny? I don't think he's funny. Like, the critics say it's a funny show, but the comedy is kind of weird. And nothing ever HAPPENS. It's just these privileged white people (and I mean, they're ALL white) living their lives in New York. The only non-white characters are wacky immigrant cab drivers and soup vendors. (Trapp 2013).

Girls is currently the only popular American television series that stars an actress who is considered average looking or even plus sized by Hollywood standards, but has an active sex life on the show and often appears naked in it.

When the many writings on the show are seen through the lens of fan and antifan discourse, the reasons for the sheer volume of commentary on the show can start to be unraveled. The reviews of the show and of Dunham and her abilities in particular kicked off a trend whereby many male reviewers deemed the show a revelation. These critics were not merely positive in their writings, but they made grand statements about the premise of the show and Dunham's ability to represent all women in the characters she had created. As often happens when people are excessively enthusiastic about a popular culture text, a backlash occurred in the form of female criticisms, not only of the show itself, but of the rapturous reviews that accompanied it. These writings were predominantly authored by female writers who took offence to their male counterparts deeming the show representative of their lives and the lack of racial diversity in particular received an incredible amount of attention and criticism. While this cause and effect basis, coupled with the divisive premise of the show itself, sheds light on the mechanics by which this context surrounding *Girls* and Dunham was created, the fact remains that American society in general, and online media journalism in particular, is a sexist sphere, revealing the patriarchy inherent in its construct. There are countless critically acclaimed characters on television that are extremely unlikeable in their actions, but are equally respected by viewers. Characters that come to mind are Don Draper in *Mad Men* and Walter White in *Breaking Bad*. Yet it remains an uncomfortable sight to see young women portrayed as unlikeable. Women have to be everything to everyone, all the time, and this principle is also applicable to representation on television. It remains to be seen if this will change in the coming years as more female driven television shows gain notoriety and people of all gender and races tune in, in the hopes of seeing themselves reflected back.

3. *Girls*: a show ‘by us for us’

The hype that surrounded the first season of *Girls* and the subsequent nitpicking by bloggers and viewers alike was incredibly extensive and made it nearly impossible for viewers who were interested in watching the show to bypass the paratext and simply enjoy the show without context. In fact, the paratextuality and textuality of the show became intertwined to such a degree, that much of the action and dialogue on *Girls* directly correlates to some of the criticisms discussed out in the previous chapter. In his book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* Jonathan Gray argues that the paratext is not situated outside the media text but is in fact part of it and actually creates the meaning of the text. He thus emphasizes the importance of not using the word “text” as suggesting that a film or program is the entire text, but defining it as being ‘a contingent entity, either in the process of forming and transforming or vulnerable to further formation or transformation’ (Gray 2010, 7). In the case of *Girls* this chapter will demonstrate that the paratext surrounding the show had a direct influence on the dialogue and storylines of the characters, creating a metatextual narrative and a dialogue between the method and content of Dunham’s encoding and the critics’ decoding. The paratext discussed in the previous chapter and the show as an artistic text are not separate entities nor is it a one-way street of influence from the text to the paratext; both influence each other in tangible ways. Having closely watched the episodes of the first and second season more than once and going off online recaps and critical reactions to certain episodes where available, this chapter will demonstrate the intertextuality of the text and the paratext of *Girls*.

Lena Dunham contributed to the paratext surrounding *Girls* in several ways that were not related specifically to the storylines of her show, most obviously in the title she chose. While there were several television shows run by and about women, none were meant to represent young women and none were so clearly about simply *being* a woman and the tribulations that surround that fact. Within the first few episodes the show deals with gendered issues, such as emotionally abusive boyfriends, the stigma of casual sex, sexually transmitted diseases, an abortion, sexual harassment at the workplace, and body image issues. This prompted many critics online to expect that a show called *Girls*, not “A Girl” or “Some Girls,” was aiming to represent all girls. While this was arguably an unfair expectation of the critics, it prompted many online articles to criticize the show for under representing certain groups of women, most notably women of color, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In the article “I'm Not the Ladies!”: Metatextual commentary in *Girls,*” Maša Grdešić notes that the title inspired unrealistic expectations from the audience. ‘Surely, *Girls* does not and cannot represent the experience of all young women,’ Grdešić writes, ‘but it seems the viewers didn’t take this into account and expected to see a reflection of themselves in the show’s characters’ (356). She continues:

> The desire to see *Girls* as universal comes from a specific type of reading and interpretation of the series. Both the viewers that recognize themselves in the show, and those that feel left out, approach the fictional narrative in the same way: evaluating its quality by comparing it to the “reality” of their own lives. Both groups understand realism as a literal reflection of reality rather than an artistic convention which constructs its own reality (Ibid.).

The fact that there are not many female auteurs in American television causes programs with that criterion to be burdened by higher expectations of satisfactory representation than the average show on television. In choosing a title with such a wide net of reference, instead of a title that would reflect the plot of the show more accurately, such as “Brooklyn Girls” for example, Dunham chose to open the show up to some obvious criticisms of representation.

The theory that Dunham actively engaged with the paratext and let it influence the artistic text is supported by the fact that certain scenes in the first few episodes contain metatextual dialogue. This suggests that the expectation of a presumed paratext was great to such an extent, that Dunham felt the need to preemptively respond to criticisms through her show. During the writing process for the first few episodes, *Girls* as an active television show on HBO had not been created yet and the paratext in the form of critical reactions did not exist. Regarding the title, a scene in the third episode of the first season comments on some of the criticisms one might theoretically have with a show called “Girls.” On the show ‘*Listen Ladies! A Tough Love Approach to the Tough Game of Love* is a fictional advice book on dating that Shoshanna quotes to help Marnie with her relationship problems. The title prompts Hannah to ask: ‘Who are the ladies?’

> Shoshanna: Obvie, we’re “the ladies.”
> Jessa: I’m not “the ladies.”
> Shoshanna: Yes! You’re “the ladies!”
> Jessa: I’m NOT “the ladies!” (Bell 2013, 363; *Girls* season 1, episode 3)

Grdešić argues: 'It is as if the series itself expected a similar reaction. Who are the girls? I'm not the girls! You can't force me to be a girl! At least not the kind of girl the series shows: white, privileged' (Grdešić 2013, 356.). Grdešić points to another scene in the series premiere wherein Hannah utters an oft quoted line in criticisms of *Girls*. She tells her parents: "I don't want to freak you out, but I think I may be the voice of my generation. Or at least *a* voice. Of *a* generation" (*Girls* season 1, episode 1). 'In this way,' Grdešić argues, 'the series acknowledges the expectations set by the media and confesses its own inability to meet them' (356-7.). Here, even the anticipation of a certain paratext directly influenced and was made a part of the content of the artistic text.

Another metatextual aspect of the show is the fact that Hannah is attempting to write her memoir throughout the first season and keeps a diary to support her writing. Thus while *Girls* is often seen as a somewhat realistic memoir of auteur Lena Dunham, Dunham's character in that memoir is writing her own memoir. When Hannah's parents tell her they will no longer support her financially and that she needs to acquire a paying job, Hannah objects that she is a writer and in order to write about her experiences, she has to 'live them first' (357). Since she cannot get a paying writing job, her parents should support her until she has enough writing experience to write something that will sustain her financially. These metatextual occurrences in the show blur the lines between fiction and reality and enhance the idea of *Girls* as an autobiographical text, thus prompting some critics to review it as such.

The most expressive example of Dunham's interplay of her show with the paratextual commentary of critics is the ninth episode of the first season. Emma Straub at *Vulture* called it 'one of the most direct episodes to dates — direct in that it confronts the issues that viewers and critics have had of the show, and of Dunham herself. And instead of making any apologies, the show raises its middle finger and sticks out its tongue simultaneously' (2012, June 11). In the episode, titled "Leave Me Alone," Hannah and the girls are invited to the launch party of a book written by Hannah's college rival. While Hannah has had to scramble for money to pay the bills and has continued to be unsuccessful in getting her writing off the ground, her rival has managed to get a book deal. She runs into her old professor at the party who invites her to a reading with the request that she read some of her work. She is reluctant at first, but relents and picks an essay about an ex-boyfriend from her memoir. She is then dissuaded from using it by both the condescension of her rival when mentioning the subject matter of her memoir, every-day life, as well as her friends. In particular the character Ray, who becomes her boss at the coffee house she applies for in the same episode, mirrors many criticisms leveled at the show by critics. In

explaining what her essay is about, Ray ‘supplies her with a list of “real things” she should write about:’

> Ray: Cultural criticism. How about years of neglect and abuse? How about acid rain? How about the plight of the giant panda bear? How about racial profiling? How about urban sprawl? How about divorce? How about death? How about death? Death is the most fucking real issue. You should write about death. That’s what you should write about. Explore that. Death. (Grdešić 2013, 357; Season 1, Episode 9).

Anna Holmes argues in *The New Yorker* that Ray sounds ‘not unlike some of the show’s harshest critics, professional and amateur, who didn’t seem to know how to react to Dunham’s precisely observed, knowing depiction of intimate connections between young women’ (2012). Grdešić argues that the episode ‘posits as its theme the triviality of Hannah’s essays as well as the triviality of the show itself, but also refers to the status of women’s (popular) culture in general’(2013, 357). In *The Feminist, the Housewife, and the Soap Opera* Charlotte Brunsdon argued that ‘women’s popular culture has been marginalized and criticized as aesthetically less valuable, trivial, and sentimental from the perspective of “high” culture and “masculine” popular culture’ (Ibid.). Thus when Ray asks Hannah, “What in the world could be more trivial than intimacy? Hmm? Is there anything real you can write about?,” it mirrors critics who ‘blithely dismiss matters of concern to a great many women’ (Holmes 2012). Holmes continues: ‘the passions provoked by the show—among both critics and admirers—suggest something both refreshing and a little startling: that a pop-culture product that focusses mostly on women and intimate, sometimes gruesome details of their lives, is still considered a provocation’ (2012). In the end Hannah is convinced of the inferiority of her original subject matter and writes a ‘new and vastly inferior piece about a guy she met online who died because death is, as everyone tried to convince her, a much more important subject than intimacy’ (Grdešić 2013, 358). Her new piece is not received well and it is made clear by the end that she should have read her original essay.

Concurrent with this back and forth between Dunham and the critics, Dunham was doing several interviews with American media organizations in which she directly addressed some criticisms and put forth her point of view. In an interview on the radio program “Fresh Air” on May 7th, 2012, Dunham was asked about the arguments online journalists and bloggers had made about *Girls’* racial homogeneity. ‘I take that criticism very seriously,’ Dunham said (Fresh Air 2012). ‘This show isn't supposed to feel exclusionary. It's supposed to feel honest,

and it's supposed to feel true to many aspects of my experience. But for me to ignore that criticism and not to take it in would really go against my beliefs and my education in so many things' (Ibid.). About the specific accusation that it made no sense for a show set in the racially diverse New York to be all white in its representation, Dunham responded as follows:

> I wrote the first season primarily by myself, and I co-wrote a few episodes. But I am a half-Jew, half-WASP, and I wrote two Jews and two WASPs. Something I wanted to avoid was tokenism in casting. If I had one of the four girls, if, for example, she was African-American, I feel like — not that the experience of an African-American girl and a white girl are drastically different, but there has to be specificity to that experience [that] I wasn't able to speak to (Ibid.).

While receiving praise for admitting that there was indeed a lack of diversity, this interview spawned further criticisms as people argued that it is a writer's job to write from the perspective of others. For example J.K. Rowling, a middle-aged mother, was able to write from the perspective of a teenaged boy wizard.

As Lena Dunham's celebrity profile rose to prominence, the criticisms of the show and criticisms of Dunham herself started to conflate and became more personal. When it was reported in October 2012 that Dunham had landed a book deal worth more than 3.5 million dollars, there was hardly any objective reporting on the matter. The esteemed *Washington Post* posted an article with the title "There is no God — Lena Dunham has a $3.5 million book deal." On *Gawker*, John Cook chose the sarcastic headline "Congratulations to Multimedia Brand Lena Dunham on Her $3.5 Million Book Deal." The young woman who had created and played a young woman who dreams of publishing a memoir, was now publishing a memoir. Dunham herself has commented on the sense of envy present in the headlines featured above:

> Dunham: I also get the whole narrative of like, "25 years old, has their own show, has a movie on Criterion Collection." It's irksome for some people. It would irk me if it wasn't me experiencing it. I try not to be covetous or envious of other peoples' success, especially with women in film. What's good for one of us is good for all of us (Rosen 2012).

The fact that Dunham's demographic veers so closely to the writers critiquing her show, adds another layer to the metatextual aspect of *Girls'* paratext. In January of 2014 the cast and

producers of *Girls* participated in a panel at the Television Critics Association press tour, where critics were given the opportunity to ask questions while the cast and producers could promote the new season of *Girls*. A critic for *The Wrap* made the following statement:

> Critic: I don't get the purpose of all of the nudity on the show, by you (Lena Dunham) particularly and I feel like I'm walking into a trap where you go, 'Nobody complains about the nudity on *Game of Thrones*,' but I get why they are doing it. They are doing it to be salacious and titillate people. And your character is often naked just at random times for no reason (Blum 2014).

Dunham responded by saying, 'It's because it's a realistic expression of what it's like to be alive, I think. And I totally get it. If you are not into me, that's your problem, and you are going to have to work that out with whatever professionals you've hired' (Ibid). Responding to an unrelated question later on, executive producer Jenni Konner said the following:

> I literally was spacing out because I'm in such a rage spiral about that guy that I literally could not hear. I'm so sorry. I really don't mean to disrespect you. I just was looking at him and going into this rage, this idea that you would talk to a woman like that and accuse a woman of showing her body too much. The idea, it just makes me sort of sick, and so I apologize to everyone (Gonzales 2014).

This incident was widely reported on, with critics weighing in on who was right and who was wrong. The paratext of *Girls* had become self-sustainable and kept the dialogue about the show running even when the show was not on the air. Anything Dunham or anyone associated with the program said, became part of the paratext of *Girls*.

When the show was off the air, the existence and use of social media added another layer to the growing personal aspect in the paratext. With a Twitter presence that includes 8.552 tweets since 2009 and 1,67 million followers (Twitter), Dunham is in constant dialogue with viewers of the show. In an interview with *The Huffington Post*, Dunham credited Twitter for pointing her to the fact that the show had an all-white cast:

> Dunham: We really tried to be aware and bring in characters whose job it was to go "Hashtag white people problems, guys." I think that's really important to be aware of. Because it can seem really rarified. When I get a tweet from a girl who's like, "I'd love

to watch the show, but I wish there were more women of color." You know what? I do, too, and if we have the opportunity to do a second season, I'll address that (Rosen 2012).

This quote was given before the dialogue had reached the scale discussed in the previous chapter. Dunham's presence on social media further blurred the lines between a focus on the personal and a focus on the work within the paratext. Dunham's personal life became fodder for media outlets, as she started a relationship with the guitar player for the band "fun." and was featured in photos on Twitter and Instagram with famous friends such as Taylor Swift. Dunham was no longer simply the creative mind and star of her television show. She had become a popular culture text of her own.

When the second season of the show premiered on January 13th, 2013, the criticisms of racial homogeneity on the show were immediately addressed in the dialogue of the characters. While there was much critical feedback to the second season, it did not reach the volume of online criticism the first season inspired. This was apparent in the artistic text, with the second season lacking metatextual aspects with regard to the paratext beyond the first few episodes. In the second season's first episode the audience is introduced to a love interest for Hannah, Sandy, who is an African American Republican. His first scene shows Hannah and Sandy having sex on a couch, during which the following dialogue is spoken:

Sandy: 'You wanted this.'
Hannah: 'I wanted this so bad.'
Sandy: 'And now you're getting it.'
Hannah: 'Now I'm finally getting it.'
Sandy: 'It's about fucking time.'
Hannah: 'It's about fucking time' (Season 2, episode 1).

As some critics mentioned after the episode aired, this seemed to be in direct response to the negative commentary the show had received online. While the character of Sandy only remained a part of the series for one more episodes, the paratext had clearly become a part of the textuality of the show, continuing the back-and-forth between text and paratext in the first season.

As *Girls* starts its fourth season in January 2015 and having already been renewed for a fifth season, it can no longer be classed as being merely a television show:

> [It] has become a litmus test, a battleground, a debate-prompter, a symbol of both progress and exclusion, a repository for a whole host of expectations, an icon of a certain kind of privileged existence and a beloved talisman of those who finally feel recognized. HBO likes its shows to have a certain amount of buzz, but *Girls* has gotten the kind of hype (some of it on this site) that can turn attention into a buzzsaw (Ryan 2013).

With the arrival of Dunham's memoir in the fall of 2014, at least two more seasons of *Girls* on the way, and the probable arrival of new controversial television shows, the paratext of *Girls* will continue to be molded in different ways. The paratext of *Girls* is not only an important part of the viewing experience of the show, it has become thoroughly intertwined with it.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate the power of television in reflecting popular culture, using the exorbitant critical reaction to *Girls* as an example of the possible scope of that reflection. By engaging in close reading of the paratext of *Girls* and in analyzing the intertextuality with the artistic text itself, certain ideological codes were unraveled. The first chapter examined the medium of television, the changing influence and methods of television studies, and the assertion that American television reflects values in American culture. Within popular culture, no medium offers a more thorough reflection of the culture in which it exists than television. While the road to legitimizing television studies within cultural analysis was bumpy, the growing role the television set inhabited in the average American home made it impossible to continue a cultural analysis without including television. Stuart Hall revolutionized the study of how viewers make meaning out of televisual texts with his method for encoding and decoding, a model that serves as the template for television studies to this day. As show runners encode meaning onto their televisual texts, a negotiation of meaning takes place as audiences decode meaning from the text that is based on their personal views and circumstances. These will alternately follow or diverge from the intended meaning of the auteur. The growing relevance of television also birthed the profession of the television critic and, as the Internet became the ubiquitous 24/7 information highway it is today, television criticism has become part and parcel of the television viewing experience. While Genette's notion of the paratext was intended for the study of books and included reviews in newspapers and magazines, the Internet's position as fertile ground for cultural criticism widened the paratextual scope to considerable size.

Girls proved to be a multifaceted case study for the argument of television's ability to reflect and expose ideologies in American culture. Never before had a televisual text about contemporary young Americans received the level of scrutiny that the rise of the Internet could provide and sustain. By limiting the scope of the paratext to the critical analyses of online cultural journalists and writers, and to those aspects of the show that were prominent in the running online dialogue, the second chapter unraveled the cultural ideologies present in that dialogue. Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding, which has been used to analyze the ways in which viewers decode meaning from televisual texts and what that meaning entails, was combined with Jonathan Gray's theory of fans and antifans in order to shift to an analysis of *Girls'* online critical reception and the meanings that were decoded. The intensity and scope of

the reactions that *Girls* elicited were found to be due to several reasons, some of which can be explained by positioning the critics as either fans or antifans. In antifan theory, negative reactions to a popular culture text can be created as a means of opposition to what is viewed as excessively high praise. The fact that proponents of *Girls* made grand statements of the show's "genius" in portraying real characters shifted the focus of critics from an analysis of the aesthetics of a new television show to an issue of how representative the show was of reality. This prompted many to observe that *Girls* was in fact leaving out a considerable portion of girls around the United States in general and New York specifically.

By employing John Fiske's categories of reality, representational and ideological codes, the online-created paratext of *Girls* revealed several ideologies, most prominently of class, race and the patriarchy. The fact that *Girls* was criticized for being set in Brooklyn revealed a distaste for the socio-economic class the New York borough connotes and confirmed to some critics the negative stereotypes of privilege laid on American Millenials. The criticism of the unlikeablity of the main characters on the show revealed a gendered bias in online critical commentary of television series with a female lead as opposed to a male lead. Thus the pervasive notion that women are to be judged by a different set of standards than men, with the latter receiving a far wider scope of acceptable personality traits, was revealed in the commentary. The early focus on Dunham's unconventional appearance and the sexual nature of the show spawned debate on the ideological premise from which some critics expressed surprise at Dunham's nudity. It revealed the pervasive impact of images of thinness and conventional beauty in American culture, which would cause critics to interpret Dunham's version of sexuality as shocking. Women on television who show their bodies and display sexual activity should be aesthetically pleasing, the criteria of which are adjusted to the historical time-specific preference of men. The same principle applies to critics' complaints that the characters on *Girls* are unlikeable and who base their negative assessment of the show on that aspect. These arguments all reveal an ideology whereby certain characteristics that are regularly featured in fictional texts starring men are seen in a negative light when they are attributed to women. Don Draper can be a selfish man who makes the people around him feel bad about themselves, lies to everyone he knows and be called an antihero because of it, but when Hannah Horvath expresses the same tendencies, she is deemed "unlikeable."

The same criticisms of privilege that the setting of Brooklyn provoked was prevalent in the critical reaction to the casting of the girls on *Girls*. The actors were perceived as privileged because of their background and lineage, with critics decrying the supposed nepotism of the casting. While this reflected a distaste for what critics saw as bypassing actual American hard

work and sweat, it also revealed some critics' gendered perspectives on the show. After all, the film and television industry is filled with famous lineages, most prominently the families of Michael Douglas, Charlie Sheen and Nicholas Cage.

The most prominent dialogue in the paratext of *Girls* revolved around the issue of representation and race, revealing a rejection of traditional American views of the importance of whiteness. The overwhelming majority of popular shows on television today are created by white men and star white men and women. Yet the combination of the dearth of television shows today with *Girls'* subject matter and critics' subsequent high expectations of the show, caused a deep level scrutiny to be placed on this one television show. Here too an argument for sexism can be made in the way that critics analyzed *Girls* from the position of race, while popular shows like *Breaking Bad, House of Cards, True Detective, Game of Thrones, The Walking Dead*, and many more are not given similar racial parameters. Female critics especially placed great focus on the question of representation and found the show lacking. The accelerated rate in which voices were added to the running dialogue on the show, due to the nature of the Internet, caused some arguments to take on considerable size in a short amount of time. Thus the question of racial representation was tackled in succession by a slew of publications, an issue which inhabited a dominant role within the paratext of *Girls*. Not only did critics question the racially homogeneous world of Hannah and her friends, but they also commented on and criticized Dunham's perceived personal social environment and what many critics saw as a dangerous perpetuation of racial homogeneity on the show.

The third chapter examined the intertextuality of the text and paratext of *Girls* in order to provide a better understanding of the way in which both influence each other, specifically the influence of the criticisms discussed in the second chapter on the artistic text. Dunham herself contributed greatly to the paratext in specific choices she made in the narrative and dialogue of the show and in her function as a celebrity. Her choice of title created a set of expectations from the get-go, which were too great to put on one televisual text. She used the show to indirectly answer to some of the criticisms she suspected would arise and the criticisms that followed in the press, namely in the show's representation of race and the idea that its subject matter was not sufficiently important. As a public figure Dunham herself became a text with its own paratext that coexisted with the show and the paratext surrounding it. Her ubiquitous presence online and in interviews elicited reactions that blurred the lines between Lena Dunham the actress and show runner on the one hand and Hannah Horvath and *Girls* on the other. The latter was no longer needed to sustain and grow the paratext surrounding the show; the paratext was now sustaining itself and influencing the text.

With the continued growth of the role of the Internet in American culture, the field of television criticism is expanding. As Americans continue to spend an average amount of twelve hours a day looking at screens, a number which will presumably rise further in the future, the aspects of American culture that are reflected in films, television and online will grow. Thus analyzing television will continue its shift away from the televisual text as a closed text and toward the inclusion of the paratext and its individual study as a 'bearer/provoker of meanings.' How would audiences have decoded *Girls* if it had not been called "Girls" and if there had not been any online-generated paratext surrounding the show? The answer to that can only be speculated at and is perhaps irrelevant in the case of *Girls*. The paratext was imbedded in the show to such a degree, that the artistic value of the actually story became almost irrelevant. The questions of influence and intertextuality this thesis posed will become even more relevant with the continued rapid growth of social media and the growth of the direct dialogue between a show's creator and the audience that watches is. It will be interesting to see further research done on *Girls* in particular, especially after the show is completed. Time and perspective in years to come will shed more light on the reaction to and significance of *Girls* and its ability in uncovering cultural codes.

Bibliography

<u>Primary sources:</u>

Girls. Television series, 2012-present. HBO, USA.

<u>Secondary sources:</u>

Bell, Katherine. 2013. "'Obvie, We're the Ladies!' Postfeminism, privilege, and HBO's newest 'Girls.'" *Feminist Media Studies*, 13.2: 363-366.

Berger, Arthur Asa. 1995. *Cultural Criticism: A Primer of Key Concepts*. London: Sage Publications.

Booth, Paul. 2010. *Digital fandom: New media studies.* New York: Peter Lang.

Brunsdon, Charlotte. "What is the 'Television' of Television Studies?" In *The Television Studies Book*, edited by Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, 94-113. New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1998.

Carey, James W. "Reflections on the Problems of (American) Cultural Studies." In *Cultural Studies in Question*, edited by Marjorie Ferguson & Peter Golding, 1-24. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

Creeber, Glen. "Introduction." In *Tele-visions: An Introduction to Studying Television*, edited by Glen Creeber, 1-11. London: British Film Institute, 2006.

Fiske, John. 1987. *Television Culture*. London: Routledge.

Genette, Gérard and Marie Maclean. 1991. "Introduction to the Paratext." *New Literary History*, 22.2: 261-72.

Gitlin, Todd. "The Anti-political Populism of Cultural Studies." In *Cultural Studies in Question*, edited by Marjorie Ferguson & Peter Golding, 25-38. London: Sage Publications, 1997.

Gray, Jonathan. 2003. "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-Fans and Non-Fans." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.1: 64-81.

Gray, Jonathan. 2010. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. New York: New York University Press.

Grdešić, Maša. 2013. "I'm Not the Ladies!": Metatextual commentary in 'Girls.'" *Feminist Media Studies*, 13.2: 355-358.

Hall, Stuart. 1973. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, 90-103. London: Routledge, 1993.

Hills, Matt. "Television and Its Audience: Issues of Consumption and Reception." In *Tele-visions: An Introduction to Studying Television*, edited by Glen Creeber, 93-99. London: British Film Institute, 2006.

Mumford, Laura Stempel. "Feminist Theory and Television Studies." In *The Television Studies Book*, edited by Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, 114-130. New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1998.

Nygaard, Taylor. 2013. "Girls Just Want to be "Quality": HBO, Lena Dunham, and 'Girls' conflicting brand identity" *Feminist Media Studies*, 13.2: 370-374.

O'Donnell, Victoria. 2007. *Television Criticism*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Spigel, Lynn. "The Making of a TV Literate Elite." In *The Television Studies Book*, edited by Christine Geraghty and David Lusted, 63-93. New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1998.

Stanitzek, Georg. 2005. "Texts and Paratexts in Media." *Critical Inquiry* 32.1:27-42.

Internet sources:

Andreeva, Nellie. 2012. "New HBO Comedy 'Girls' Off To Decent Start." *Deadline,* April 16. http://www.deadline.com/2012/04/new-hbo-comedy-girls-off-to-decent-start/#more-257337

Berman, Judy. 2012. "Why Are We Taking Lena Dunham's 'Girls' So Personally?" *Flavorwire*, April 13. http://flavorwire.com/279527/

Beusman, Callie. 2013. "Hot Millennial Trend: Living with Parents, Shouldering Crushing Debt." *Jezebel*, February 8. http://jezebel.com/hot-millennial-trend-living-with-parents-shouldering-1002639574

Blum, Haley. 2014. "'Girls' producers defend Lena Dunham's nudity." USA TODAY, January 10. http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2014/01/10/girls-producers-defend-lena-dunhams-nudity/4410633/

Caramanica, Jon. 2012. "Broadcasting a World of Whiteness." *The New York Times* April 25. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/arts/television/hbos-girls-is-hardly-the-only-example-of-monochromatic-tv.html

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2012. "'Girls' Through the Veil." *The Atlantic*, April 20. http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/04/girls-through-the-veil/256154/

Cook, John. 2012. "'Small Girl Big Mouth': A 'Girls' Recap." *Gawker*, April 16. http://gawker.com/5902308/small-girl-big-mouth-a-girls-recap

Cook, John. 2012. "Congratulations to Multimedia Brand Lena Dunham on Her $3.5 Million Book Deal." *Gawker*, October 8. http://gawker.com/5949860/congratulations-to-multimedia-brand-lena-dunham-on-her-35-million-book-deal

Corcoran, Liam. 2013. "September's Social Stories – Gawker on top, Putin and Pope popular." *The Whip*, October 15. http://blog.newswhip.com/index.php/2013/10/septembers-social-news-stories

Dobbins, Amanda. 2012. "Anatomy of a Backlash: Tracking the Arguments About 'Girls.'" *Vulture,* April 16. http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/anatomy-of-a-backlash-tracking-the-arguments-about-girls.html

Ebert, Roger. 2010. "Tiny Furniture." *Rogerebert.com*, December 8. http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/tiny-furniture-2010

Fresh Air. 2012. "Lena Dunham Addresses Criticism Aimed At 'Girls.'" *NPR Radio*, May 7. http://www.npr.org/2012/05/07/152183865/lena-dunham-addresses-criticism-aimed-at-girls

Gonzales, Sandra. 2014. "'Girls' producers go on 'rage spiral' defending nudity." *Entertainment Weekly*, January 9. http://insidetv.ew.com/2014/01/09/girls-producers-defend-nudity/

Goodman, Tim. 2012. "Review: 'Girls' Is Brilliant Gem For HBO." *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 11. http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/bastard-machine/review-girls-lena-dunham-brilliant-HBO-298379

Gray, Emma. 2013. "Lena Dunham, Of 'Girls,' On Today Show: 'I Object To The Notion That Characters Have To Be Likable.'" *The Huffington Post*, January 8. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/08/lena-dunham-girls-today-show_n_2433968.html

Holmes, Anna. 2012. "The Age of Girlfriends." *The New Yorker*, July 6. http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-age-of-girlfriends

James, Kendra. 2012. "Dear Lena Dunham: I Exist." *Racialicious*, April 19. http://www.racialicious.com/2012/04/19/dear-lena-dunham-i-exist/

Lacob, Jace. 2012. "HBO's 'Girls' Is the Best New TV Show of 2012." *The Daily Beast*, April 12. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/12/hbo-s-girls-is-the-best-new-tv-show-of-2012.html

Mead, Rebecca. 2010. "Downtown's Daughter: Lena Dunham Cheerfully Exposes Her Privileged Life." *The New Yorker,* November 15. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/11/15/downtowns-daughter

Nussbaum, Emily. 2012. "It's Different for 'Girls.'" *New York Magazine,* March 25. http://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/girls-lena-dunham-2012-4/

Paskin, Willa. 2012. "'Girls' lives up to the hype." *Salon*, April 12. http://www.salon.com/2012/04/12/girls_lives_up_to_the_hype/

Petri, Alexandra. 2012. "There is no God — Lena Dunham has a $3.5 million book deal." *The Washington Post*, October 10. http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/post/there-is-no-god--lena-dunham-has-a-35-million-book-deal/2012/10/09/8c8c4ddc-1249-11e2-ba83-a7a396e6b2a7_blog.html

Peyser, Andrea. 2012. "You go, 'Girls' – far, far away." *New York Post,* April 16. http://nypost.com/2012/04/16/you-go-girls-far-far-away/

Pinkowitz, Jacqueline M. 2011. "'The rabid fans that take [Twilight] much too seriously': The Construction and Rejection of Excess in Twilight Antifandom." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 7. doi:10.3983/twc.2011.0247

Read, Max. 2012. "A 'Girls' Writer's Ironic Racism and Other 'White People Problems.'" *Gawker*, April 20. http://gawker.com/5903468/a-girls-writers-ironic-racism-and-other-white-people-problems

Reeve, Elspeth. 2012. "'Girls' Writer Responds to Critique of 'Girls' with Horrible Joke." *The Wire*, April 18. http://www.thewire.com/entertainment/2012/04/girls-writer-responds-critique-girls-horrible-joke/51314/

Roiphe, Katie. 2012. "Why Is the Sex on HBO's 'Girls' Such a Drag?" *Slate*, April 9. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/roiphe/2012/04/why_is_the_sex_on_the_new_hbo_show_girls_so_unfun_.html

Rosen, Christopher. 2012. "Lena Dunham, 'Girls' Star, On 'Labia Saturation,' Oversharing And Her Tattoos." *The Huffington Post*, April 9. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/09/lena-dunham-girls_n_1411470.html

Rosman, Katherine. 2013. "How Much Do People Watch TV Daily? First, Define TV." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9. http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB20001424052702303442004579123423303797850

Ryan, Maureen. 2013. "'Girls' Season 2 Review: Hannah And Friends Are Going To Extremes." *The Huffington Post*, January 10. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maureen-ryan/girls-season-2-review_b_2442932.html

Schneider, Michael. 2013. "America's Most Watched: The Top 25 Shows of the 2012-2013

TV Season." *TV Guide*, June 10. http://www.tvguide.com/news/most-watched-tv-shows-top-25-2012-2013-1066503.aspx

Scott, A.O. 2014. "Whose Brooklyn is it Anyway? Tracing Urban Change in Brooklyn from 'Kotter' to 'Girls.'" *The New York Times*, March 28. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/30/movies/tracing-urban-change-in-brooklyn-from-kotter-to-girls.html?_r=0

Sepinwall, Alan. 2012. "A smart, hilarious look at the lives of four New York friends." *Hitfix*, April 12. http://www.hitfix.com/blogs/whats-alan-watching/posts/review-hbos-girls-brilliantly-channels-lena-dunhams-comic-voice

Stewart, Dodai. 2012. "Why We Need to Keep Talking About the White Girls on 'Girls.'" *Jezebel*, April 19. http://jezebel.com/5903382/why-we-need-to-keep-talking-about-the-white-girls-on-girls

Straub, Emma. 2012. "'Girls' Recap: You're on Your Own, Kid." *Vulture*, April 16. http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/girls-recap-season-1-episode-1.html

Straub, Emma. 2012. "'Girls' Recap: Is Hannah the Problem?" *Vulture,* June 11. http://www.vulture.com/2012/06/girls-recap-season-1-episode-9.html

Trapp, Mike. 2013. "If People Talked About Seinfeld Like They Talk About Girls." *College Humor*, March 4. http://www.collegehumor.com/article/6874239/if-people-talked-about-seinfeld-like-they-talk-about-girls

Travers, Peter. 2010. "Tiny Furniture." *Rolling Stone*, November 11. http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/tiny-furniture-20101111

Twitter account of Lena Dunham. Accessed August 12, 2014. https://twitter.com/lenadunham

Wait But Why. 2013. "Why Generation Y Yuppies Are Unhappy." *The Huffington Post*, September 15. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/wait-but-why/generation-y-unhappy_b_3930620.html

Williams, Wayne. 2013. "Ever wondered how much time you spend staring at screens?" *BetaNews*, November. http://betanews.com/2013/10/17/ever-wondered-how-much-time-you-spend-staring-at-screens/

Wortham, Jenna. 2012. "Where (My) Girls At?" *The Hairpin,* April 16. http://thehairpin.com/2012/04/where-my-girls-at