

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE BRITISH  
FEMALE ENSEMBLE DRAMA 1995-1998

VICTORIA BALL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

QUEEN MARGARET UNIVERSITY

2007

## Abstract

This thesis focuses upon a distinctive form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction, that of the British female ensemble drama, that has proliferated across televisual schedules since the late 1970s and which has received little academic attention.

Although not a discrete genre, the female ensemble drama is nevertheless identifiable as a distinctive form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction that is largely written and/or produced by women, which diegetically focuses on particular communities of female characters and which is predominantly aimed at female audiences. The purpose of this text-based analysis of the female ensemble drama is to engage with a central concern of feminist television criticism, that of the gendered identity of this particular media form and the constructions of gender within it given its association with women at these three sites of production, text and audience.

While I provide a historical overview of the development of this form of drama in relation to its textual precedents I isolate a particular moment in the history of this form of drama, that of the late 1990s, for closer analysis. Firstly I isolate the late 1990s to provide knowledge and understanding of the way in which the ‘feminine’ identity of this form of drama has contributed to its academic neglect within this socio-cultural period. Secondly I provide a close textual analysis of the constructions of ‘women’ within three female ensemble dramas in order to engage with and explore the textual negotiations they embody surrounding discourses of feminism and post feminism, de- and re-traditionalization in this particular period. While these themes have begun to be addressed in feminist television criticism they have largely been explored in relation to constructions of femininity in American dramas. This analysis then, allows for an exploration of these discourses in relation to a regional form of British drama.

It is through investigating the academic neglect of this form of drama; providing a historical, thematic and aesthetic overview of the female ensemble drama as well as a detailed analysis of three of the female ensemble dramas of the 1990s that I contribute knowledge and understanding of this particular regional form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction to the field of Feminist Television Studies.

*Keywords: Television studies, television drama, ‘feminine-gendered fiction’, discourse, feminism, postfeminism.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me during the process of writing this thesis.

My sincere thanks to my supervisory team; my Director of Studies Dr Jill Marshall and Supervisors Dr Michael Stewart and Dr Christine Crossen for the encouragement, support and enthusiasm they have shown towards me and my research project over the past four years.

Thanks also to the School of Social Sciences, Media and Communications, Sheila Adamson and Linda Welsch, the library and print room staff at Queen Margaret University for their assistance throughout this research project.

Special thanks to my own female ensemble Nana, Mam, Dorell, Fiona and Vanessa for sustaining me over the years; to my big brother Steve, to Dad and Jim, to Phil, Donny, Alan, Anne and Brian, Bryan and Lynne, Kathy and Darren for their understanding at many a missed family event.

Thanks also to Gareth, Majella, Camille, Viv, Dan and Christine for their encouraging texts and reassuring words. Thanks also Mel and Frank for being good friends and for helping with the images.

Last but not least I would like to thank Craig for his continual support, selflessness and good humour through the highs and lows of this research project.

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## Introduction

As an undergraduate student of Communication Studies in the mid to late 1990s my education in and knowledge of feminist approaches to gender and the media developed alongside my taste as a television viewer for a specific form of British finite serial drama which appeared regularly on my terrestrial television screen. I refer to this, drawing on a term first coined by Charlotte Brunsdon in her article: 'Not Having It All: Women and Film in the 1990s', as the 'female ensemble drama' (2000: 174). Inclusive to this category are dramas such as *Band of Gold*, (Granada 1995) *Real Women* (BBC 1998), *Playing the Field* (TAP 1998) and *Daylight Robbery* (Hewland International 1999). In making the female ensemble drama the focus of this study, this thesis is centrally concerned with issues of identity and representation, and more specifically with the 'feminine-gendered' and social class identity of the female ensemble drama. I will explore each of these points in turn.

### Identity and representation

In the field of Media and Cultural Studies, the concepts of identity and representation are key concepts which allow us, as social subjects, to explore the relationship between ourselves and the positionalities we occupy within the social world along axes such as nationality, ethnicity, social class, community, gender and sexuality (Woodward 1997: 1). Identity as Katharine Woodward (1997) argues in *Identity and Difference*: 'gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the way in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not' (ibid: 1-2). In this thesis, informed by a social constructionist perspective, identities are perceived as being culturally constructed rather than biologically given or innate; constituted through

language and discourse.<sup>1</sup> That is, the meanings of terms such as ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘femininity’, ‘masculinity’, ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ are historically and socially specific: mediated through cultural representational systems which position us as subjects. As Woodward argues:

Representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and of who we are. [...] [T]hese symbolic systems create the possibilities of what we are and what we can become. Representation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the questions: who am I?; what could I be?; who do I want to be? Discourses and systems of representation construct places from which individuals can position themselves and from which they can speak.

(ibid: 14)

This thesis is then concerned to utilise the female ensemble drama as a case study through which to explore the cultural meanings that are constructed and circulated regarding the terms ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ in this specific context of the 1990s with specific reference to their social class dimension; those which inform the positionalities that are offered to ‘women’ to take up and from which they can speak.

A key factor underpinning this study of the meanings surrounding ‘woman’, ‘women’, ‘femininity’ and ‘class’ rests on the awareness of the way in which identities are forged through the symbolic marking of differences from one another within culture. As Woodward has argued drawing on the research of anthropologist Mary Douglas, ‘the marking of difference is the basis of culture because things - and people – are given meaning in culture (via representational systems) by being assigned to different positions within a classificatory system’ (ibid: 29). One prime way in which difference is produced is in relation to binary oppositions, such as woman/man, working class/middle class. As Hall has argued ‘it is only through its relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what is called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of an term – and thus its ‘identity’ – can be

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<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Foucault’s usage of the concept, Hall defines discourse as ‘a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment. [...] Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But [...] since all social practices entail meaning, and meanings shape and influence what we do – our conduct – all practices have a discursive aspect’ (1992: 291).

constructed' (1996: 4). Similar to research by academics such as Rutherford (1990) Hall (1992, 1997) and Woodward (1997) this thesis is concerned to explore the way in which identities are not only forged in relation 'to what they are not' but also the way in which 'the opposing terms such as woman/man, femininity/masculinity, working class/middle class are differently weighted so that one element in the dichotomy is more valued or powerful than the other' (Woodward *ibid*: 36). More specifically as a feminist-inflected study of the female ensemble drama, one that draws on previous discursive feminist studies of gender and the media, such as those by Geraghty (1991, 2003, 2006), D'Acci (1994), Macdonald (1995), Brunsdon (1981, 1997) and Gledhill (1987, 1997), this thesis is concerned to explore the gendered and social class meanings constructed about 'feminine' identity given the way in which, historically, it has been positioned as the subordinate Other to 'men' and 'masculine' values within western culture, and because such positionalities and cultural values have become naturalised and appear commonsensical within culture (Brunsdon, 1997:3).<sup>2</sup>

Similar to the Foucauldian feminist studies of Geraghty, D'Acci, Macdonald, Brunsdon and Gledhill this thesis is concerned with the way in which language and discourse are not only constitutive of a particular person or object, constructing knowledge of that subject, but secondly, and following on from this first point, the way in which the meanings they produce are bound up with the power relations of a particular culture. From this perspective media constructions are not neutral constructions but are dynamic sites for the exploration of specific power relations of a culture in process. To borrow from Annette Kuhn (1997) in 'Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory': 'since the state of the discursive formation is not constant, it can be apprehended only by means of inquiry into specific instances or conjunctures' (1987:347). However, I want to challenge the 'top-down' model of media and cultural production that this statement implies by seeing both cultural texts and the cultural exchange between text and social reader as working hegemonically, that is as sites for the negotiation of meaning (Gledhill, 1988:67). From this model, as Gledhill

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Derrida has illustrated, power operates between the two terms involved in the binary opposition in such a way that there is a necessary imbalance of power between these two terms, so that one is the norm and one is positioned as the 'Other' (Derrida 1981:41).

argues: ‘meaning is neither imposed or passively imbibed, but arises out of struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience’ (1988:68). These occur across three sites: institutions, texts and audiences. Taking this particular model forward into my own study then it is to recognise as with D’Acci’s study of *Cagney and Lacey* that the cultural process is one in which ‘meanings are in constant tension, in which [...] television, its programs, its viewers, and its historical and contexts are sites for the negotiation of numerous definitions and discourses, with certain ones achieving more power or “discursive authority” at specific moments and for specific participants’ (D’Acci, 1994:3). It is one that recognises that culture itself is always in process; a constant negotiation and ‘site of struggle’ between conflicting ways of constructing the world.

The female ensemble drama provides a useful case study through which to explore the cultural meanings and negotiations surrounding the intersection of gendered and classed identities given its status as a form of ‘feminine-gendered fiction’: that is, a form of fiction that is associated with ‘women’ at each stage of meaning production. While this group of dramas do not represent a discrete genre, with each drama having its own generic affiliations such as crime drama (*Band of Gold*, *Daylight Robbery*) and ‘soap drama’ (*Real Women*, *Playing the Field*), as finite serial dramas they are distinct for being that television rarity, that is prime-time texts that are largely written and/or produced by women; which diegetically focus on particular communities of working-class female characters outside of the genre, and thus parameters, of British soap opera, and which, according to Brunson, are predominantly addressed to female audiences (2000: 169). This feminist-inflected analysis of the female ensemble drama, or FED as I will refer to them throughout the majority of this thesis, explores the ‘feminine-gendered’ identity of this particular media form in relation to three questions laid out by Christine Gledhill (1997) in ‘Genre and Gender’. That is, similar to Gledhill’s feminist-inflected exploration of ‘women’s genres’, this thesis firstly and centrally asks how is ‘feminine-gendered’ and social class identities constructed within these texts? (and what positionalities are offered for audiences to take up?). Secondly this thesis asks how does the ‘feminine-gendered’ and social class identities impact on this cultural form which

does the constructing? And thirdly this thesis asks: how does the ‘feminine-gendered’ and social class identities impact on the way in which it is perceived in our culture? (Gledhill 1997: 345).

While these questions explicitly reiterate the focus of this thesis on issues of ‘feminine-gendered’ identity, they more implicitly also address issues of *class* and ‘feminine-gendered’ identity. As earlier research by feminist Media academics<sup>3</sup>, have firmly established, areas of culture tied to ‘the feminine’ (problematically termed ‘women’s culture’, ‘women’s genres’ and ‘women’s fiction’), have not only been marked out as gendered in comparison to the masculine norm but where they have also been *classified*; enjoying only low cultural status and critical denigration because of their association with ‘women’ and ‘femininity’. Drawing on the discursive approaches of feminist television academics such as D’Acci, Brunsdon and Geraghty, this thesis is concerned to revisit these classed and genderd issues and explore them in relation to the FED of the 1990s.

While one aim of this thesis has been to provide knowledge and understanding of the way in which the FED’s identity as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction has contributed to its academic neglect in the context of the 1990s, the second related aim of this thesis, in light of its marginalised status, has been to provide knowledge and understanding of the emergence and proliferation of this tradition of drama historically in Britain. Some initial digging around this form of drama, for instance, uncovered a longer broadcasting history of the FED consigned to the televisual archive. This includes those dramas of the 1970s and 1980s that predated the texts which first flagged my attention such as *Within These Walls* (LWT 1973-1978), *Angels* (BBC 1975-1983), *Rock Follies* (Thames 1977-1978), *Tenko* (BBC 1981-1982, 1984), *Widows* (Euston 1983, 1985, 1995), *Making Out* (BBC 1989-1991) and *Rides* (BBC 1992-1993). In this thesis considerable

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<sup>3</sup> This includes the body of work that has accumulated around soap opera as a ‘woman’s genre’ including Tania Modleski’s (1979) ‘The search for tomorrow in today’s soap opera’, Charlotte Brunsdon’s (1981) ‘Crossroads’: notes on soap opera, Dorothy Hobson’s (1982): *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera*, Ien Ang’s (1985): *Watching Dallas*, Christine Geraghty’s (1991): *Women and Soap Opera* as well as the research that has accumulated around melodrama including essays in Christine Gledhill’s (1984) edited collection: *Home is Where the Heart* and ‘women’s literature’ such as Janice Radway’s (1984) *Reading the Romance* and Tania Modleski’s (1982): *Loving with a Vengeance*.

time is devoted to exploring both how this particular form of drama has emerged and indeed proliferated in relation to certain broadcasting and socio-cultural shifts given its critical marginalisation.

The third aim of this thesis, similar once again to previous feminist studies of 'women's genres', is to provide a detailed analysis of the constructions of women *in* the FED as 'feminine-gendered' fiction from the 1990s. Indeed constructions of 'women' and 'femininity' within 'women's genres' have been privileged within Feminist Media Studies criticism historically (Brunsdon, D'Acci and Spigel 1997: 1-16) precisely because they are one of the few, marginalised areas of culture that have been addressed to women specifically. In this respect these forms of fiction have been distinctive fiction for the way they have 'historically taken its female audience seriously, addressing women as active – if only as active *consumers* – rather than passive objects of spectacle' (Rowe 1995: 81).

Feminist academics in the subject area, have argued, for instance, that 'women's fiction' differs in two key ways from mainstream (and for the most part male-aligned) fiction. Firstly, contrary to 'male-centred' mainstream texts, the narratives of 'feminine-gendered' fictions are significant for the way in which they 'are motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point of view (Kuhn 1987: 339).<sup>4</sup> Secondly, 'feminine-gendered' fiction has been distinct for the way in which it has given space and expression to the discourses associated with 'the feminine' in patriarchal culture. Indeed, while feminist theorists have been cautious and critical of the way in which forms of 'feminine-gendered' fiction have re-instated and thus re-naturalised the association between 'women' and values constructed as 'feminine' in culture, they have nonetheless been perceived as significant for giving space and expression to areas of culture tied to 'the feminine', given their marginalisation and denigration within western patriarchal culture. The quintessential 'woman's genre' of soap opera has received a considerable amount of feminist academic attention in this respect for the way it has made visible a key concern of the second wave feminist

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<sup>4</sup> A point that is reiterated in the accounts of Modleski (1979); Brunsdon (1981); Gledhill (1988) and Geraghty (1991).



movement, that of the everyday conditions of ‘women’s’ lives in the home (Brunsdon, D’Acci and Spigel 1997: 6).

The FED as a form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction is particularly significant to explore in terms of the constructions of ‘women’ because of the coding of the majority of its female characters as working-class. This is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, because of the tendency historically within feminist television studies to focus on issues of gender representation rather than a sustained analysis of how constructions of gender intersect with aspects of identity such as class.<sup>5</sup> The FED is particularly significant in this respect because it remains one of the few dramatic sites on television, outside of the genre of soap opera, which allows an exploration of the meanings constructed about working-class ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ in the 1990s. Therefore the analysis of working-class characters within this thesis allows us to explore and address the marginalisation of working-class women at the level of television representation and feminist television criticism.

My analysis of the constructions of working-class women in the FED is framed by the research of Beverley Skeggs’ (1997) in *Formations of Class and Gender* and how working-class female identity have been the ‘Other’ to the middle class norm. Drawing on Skeggs’ use of the critical concept of respectability as ‘the most ubiquitous signifier of class’ (1997:1), I explore how these texts negotiate middle class discourses of respectability which have historically informed working-class women’s identity in Britain to secure their moral legitimisation.

However, while my study shares the concerns of feminist studies of ‘women’s genres’, my particular way of framing a discussion of these texts, as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction rather than as ‘women’s genres’ is one which registers shifts in feminist approaches to the analysis of gender in media forms in light of the influence of

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<sup>5</sup> Some early research which did explore representations of gender and class include Gillian Skirrow’s (1985) ‘Widows’ and (1987) ‘Women/acting/power’ and Julie D’Acci’s (1987) ‘The Case of Cagney and Lacey’ and (1994) *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. However paralleling the critical neglect within feminist television studies of issues of gender and class there has been until recently a similar neglect of issues of gender and race. An early piece of research which did however address issues of representations of gender and race is Jaqueline Bobo and Ellen Seiter’s (1991): ‘Black feminism and Media Criticism: *The Women of Brewster Place*’.

postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism on the subject area in recent years.

### **Shifts in feminist approaches to forms of fiction addressed to ‘women’**

The influence of postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism has made feminist academics increasingly self-reflexive of their own critical discourse, regarding their ability to speak on behalf of ‘women’ and the realisation that feminist criticism itself constructs and produces, rather than simply analyses a series of positions for ‘women’ (Brunsdon 1997: 192). Early second wave feminist approaches to media texts have then been critiqued by postcolonial and postmodern feminists (hooks 1984; Nicholson 1990) for their false universalism. As Gill has summarised, the charge against it [second wave feminism] – paradoxically – was similar to a criticism it made of male-dominated knowledge: ‘namely that it started from the experience of a group of privileged, First World, middle class, white women and proceeded as if their experience of womanhood were universally shared’ (Gill 2007: 26). Black feminist academics such as Karen Alexander (1984), Pratibha Parmar (1984), Michele Wallace (1990), bell hooks (1992) and Lola Young (1996) have argued, for instance, that the universalism of white middle-class feminist approaches to the media is illustrated in both the choice of texts that are studied as ‘women’s genres’ within textual analysis and indeed the respondents that participate in feminist ethnographic studies. Both of these types of study have been found to marginalise and exclude black women’s voices and experiences.

My own study of the FED has been formed in relation to these shifting paradigms of Feminist Media Studies in the wake of the impact of postcolonialism, postmodernism and poststructuralism on the subject area. Centrally, my use of the term ‘feminine-gendered fiction’ rather than ‘women’s drama’ to describe the FED is employed to avoid the problems associated with earlier feminist approaches that I have outlined above. However, whilst my discussion of the FED as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction is one that accommodates the recent shifts in feminist approaches to the media, as the term ‘feminine-gendered fiction’ also suggests, it is one that reinstates the importance of a gendered analysis of media forms. Indeed, it is one which resists the

more extreme implications embedded in these more contemporary theories regarding female identity and the relationship between feminism and 'women': namely, the dissolution of the category of 'woman' and concomitantly the place from which to offer criticism as a feminist research student. As Macdonald states:

Worrying whether we have any right to offer criticism as 'women', when 'women' may be an essentialist, patriarchal category that denies difference within it, becomes stultifying rather than helpful. While women vary greatly in their temperaments, social needs, outlooks and aspirations, they do nevertheless share a collective identity in terms of their relative lack of power vis-à-vis men in western society. Like the 'brotherhood' of the trade union movement in the nineteenth century, the bonding arises out of, rather than predates, the group's adversarial position. Without a category of 'women' (structurally disadvantaged to 'men'), it is hard to see from what position one could argue for the inadequacies of current constructions of femininity.

(1995: 38)

Following Macdonald, the category of 'woman' is upheld in this thesis not to deny differences between 'women' but rather to be the basis from which to explore what they continue to share; that is, their 'collective identity in terms of their relative lack of power vis-à-vis men in western society' (ibid).

There are several reasons why using the FED as a case study through which to explore the gendering of particular cultural forms is pertinent at this particular historical moment. Centrally, these reasons stem from the fact much of the earlier feminist television criticism has given critical attention to the gendering of cultural forms and, more specifically, forms of fiction traditionally associated with 'women' in *pre*-feminist contexts. Conversely then, this particular study is formed in relation to exploring this issue in relation to the FED which has emerged and proliferated in a *post* second wave feminist context.

### **Shifts in cultural constructions of 'women' and 'femininity'**

Firstly, exploring constructions of 'feminine' gender within the context of the late 1990s is not only interesting but significant because this is the decade in which, as McRobbie (2006) has argued in 'Postfeminism and Popular Culture', feminism is acknowledged within the cultural landscape as having been 'taken into account' (2006: 61). By 'taken

into account', McRobbie argues how the 1990s was marked by the wider circulation of feminist values across the landscape of popular culture: 'in particular magazines, where quite suddenly issues that have been central to the formation of the women's movement, like domestic violence, equal pay, workplace harassment, were now addressed to a vast readership' (ibid), and where feminist values were increasingly taken on board within a range of institutions, including law, education, and to an extent medicine and the media. As she notes, there was a keen interest in the 'quality' and popular media to construct narratives of female success in a post second wave feminist context by drawing on high profile achievements of women and girls in these sectors (ibid).

Indeed it is not only McRobbie who notes how there has been a wider narrative of feminism being 'taken into account' in the media during this period. The 1990s was, for instance, popularly hailed as 'the decade of women' in which a 'genderquake' took place. According to Naomi Wolf in *Fire with Fire*, this decade saw a fundamental shift in power from men to women (1994: 19). Such discourses cannot only be found in cultural commentaries but have also informed government sponsored publications. The opening paragraph to the British Demos' 1994 publication: *No Turning Back: Generations and the Genderquake* states, for instance:

Throughout the western world old certainties in work and family life are disappearing. Traditional definitions of what it means to be a man or a woman are fading. One reaction to these changes is despair, and there are no shortage of people warning of imminent moral and societal breakdown. Many are looking for someone or something to blame, whether it be single mothers, feckless fathers or the legacy of the 1960s but the real issue behind much of the renewed concern about the family and community is if anything simpler than they suggest. It is that we are in the middle of an historic change in the relations between men and women: a shift in power and values that is unravelling many of the assumptions not only of 200 years of industrial society, but also of millennia of traditions and beliefs.

(Wilkinson 1994: 1)

This 'sea change' reported to be taking place in cultural and social life is further illustrated in a context in which discourses of the 'feminization of employment', the 'feminization of culture' and 'girl power' sit alongside the 'crisis of masculinity'. Within such discourses 'men' and 'masculinity' are reported to have not only become de-

centred from the powerful place granted to them within culture as the norm which defines everything else, but in which gendered identities have become more fluid. 'Women' are able to adopt a lifestyle associated with 'masculinity', such as 'laddettes' and 'men' are able to take pleasure in cultural activities previously associated with 'women', such as fashion and grooming.

Indeed, such discourses circulating in the popular media have been reiterated in contemporary academic publications exploring media and constructions of gender. David Gauntlett (2002) for instance, in *Media, Gender and Identity*, asserts that 'femininity', whilst seen as a 'nice thing' for women traditionally, is increasingly irrelevant or optional for women today' (2002: 10-12). As well as being informed by discourses of postfeminism, such contemporary approaches to the media's constructions of gender are increasingly influenced by theories of reflexive modernization and the concept of individualization that underpin the sociological accounts of Anthony Giddens (1992) and Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002). For such theorists a growing individualization is a feature of the 'risk society' of late modernity in which the certainties of tradition no longer hold sway, which have particularly destabilising effects on gender relations and identities. Indeed, processes of individualization are viewed positively by theorists such as Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim for the way in which they perceive them to liberate social subjects from their traditional gendered positions and inscribed roles. Increasingly in this context such theorists argue 'individuals are called upon not only to create their own certainties and forms of authority but also to create and invent their own self identities as individuals' (Adkins, 1999:120).

From this view point governed by processes of individualization the 'normal biography' becomes the 'elective biography', the 'do-it-yourself biography'. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1992:3). Self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists of sustaining coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choices as filtered through abstract systems where 'lifestyle' takes on a particular significance (Giddens, 1991:5):

The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. Of course, there are standardising influences too – most notably, in the form of commodification since capitalistic production and distribution form core components of modernity's institutions. Yet because of the 'openness' of social life today, the pluralisation of contexts of action and the diversity of 'authorities', lifestyle choice is increasingly important in the constitution of self-identity and daily activity.

(ibid)

However, in this thesis I follow feminist media academics such as McRobbie who takes a more cautious approach to the formation and constructions of identity in this 'post-traditional', post-feminist context of late modernity. For McRobbie, while the arguments of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim appear to fit very directly with the kinds of scenarios and dilemmas facing the young female characters in the narratives of contemporary culture who 'must become more reflexive in regard to every aspect of their lives' (2006: 66), she argues that embedded within these same theories is also a real evasion of the ongoing existence of deep and pernicious gender inequalities which affect older women of all social backgrounds but also young black, Asian and working-class women more acutely. As she argues: 'Beck and Giddens are inattentive to the regulative dimensions of the popular discourses of personal choice and self-improvement. Choice is surely, within a lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint' (ibid). I would also add that such perspectives of a liberated social context also overlook the more contradictory and reactionary discourses surrounding gender that circulate in British culture, whereby as Rosalind Gill (2006) in *Gender and the Media*, argues

... confident expressions of 'girl power' sit alongside reports of 'epidemic' levels of anorexia and body dismorphia; graphic tabloid reports of rape are placed cheek by jowl with adverts for lap-dancing clubs and telephone sex lines; lad magazines declare the 'sex war' over, while reinstating beauty contests and championing new ironic modes of sexism; and there are regular moral panics about the impact on men of the new, idealized male body imagery, while the re-sexualization of women's bodies in public spaces goes virtually unremarked upon. Everywhere, it seems, feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated.

(Gill 2006: 1)

Following both McRobbie and Gill, in this thesis I argue that similar to the theoretical construction of the liberated subject within Giddens's, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's accounts, media constructions of the 'liberated woman' are similarly marked by the evasion of ongoing gender inequalities. So while they are hailed as constructions of the successes of feminism, they are also, as McRobbie argues, marked by the undoing of feminism (ibid: 63) or as Gill argues a repudiation of feminism (ibid: 1).

In agreement with both Gill and McRobbie, I am centrally concerned with the way in which discourses of postfeminism provide an unproblematic 'narrative of progress' (Harris 2006: 1) for 'women' and 'feminine' values in the context of late modernity. More specifically I am keen to address a particular paradox: that is, if the spaces and discourses associated with 'women' and 'feminine values' now occupy a more culturally central position and revised status, why have 'feminine' forms of drama such as the FED remained the subject of critical neglect? Indeed, why have feminine forms of drama, as I will explore in chapter one, continued to be critically and popularly denigrated?

Therefore this thesis is centrally concerned to explore 1990s' constructions of 'feminine' gender, given the shifts in constructions of 'women', 'femininity' and feminism that were taking place in this context, but also given what Gill refers to as the 'loss of confidence' within Feminist Media Studies in making analysis of such ambivalent and ambiguous media constructions in this same period (Gill 2006). This loss of confidence, however, is not only attributable to the proliferation and fragmentation of cultural signifiers of gender but also the accompanying jokey and ironic approach to constructions of gender and sexuality in a context in which feminism is perceived to have been 'taken in to account'. To illustrate this point, McRobbie cites the Wonderbra advert from the mid 1990s which showed the model Eve Hertzigova looking down admiringly at her substantial cleavage [Fig 1] which was accompanied by captions such as 'Hello boys' and 'Or are you just pleased to see me?' As McRobbie argues, the advert in a sense takes feminism 'into account', by showing it to be a thing of the past by provocatively 'enacting sexism'. However, as McRobbie also argues, it is one that sees the undoing of feminism by its suggestion that sexism no longer exists in

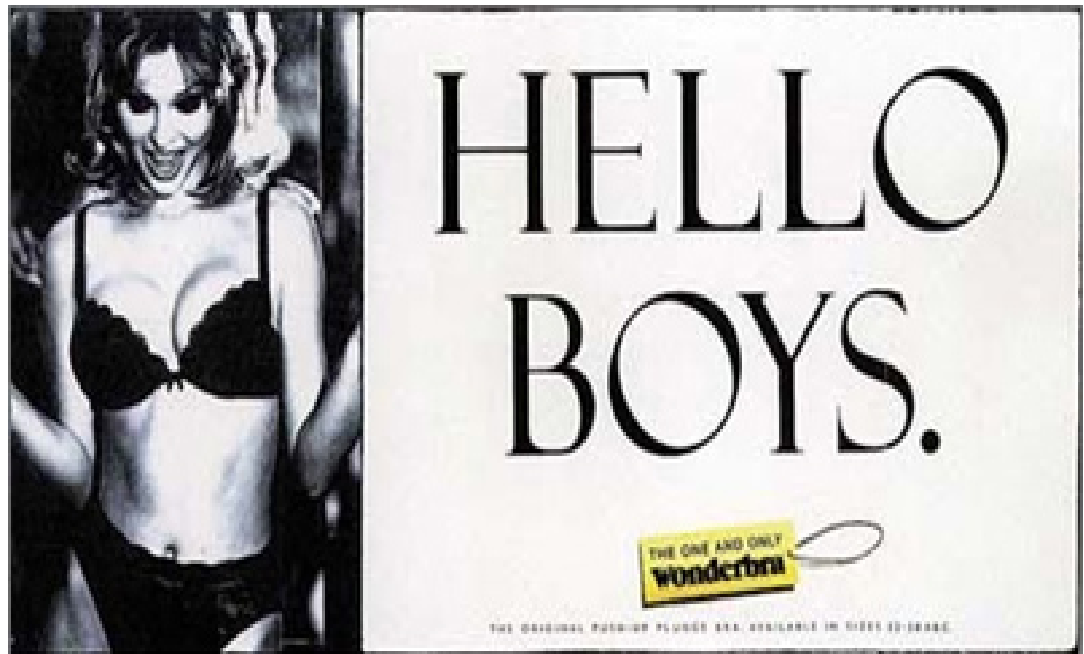


Figure 1: Postfeminist subjectification or objectification?



this postfeminist period and more perniciously, by reinforcing the association of feminism with political correctness and puritanism:

Everyone and especially young people can give a sigh of relief. Thank goodness, the advert seems to say, it is permissible, once again, to enjoy looking at bodies of beautiful women. At the same time, the advertisement also hopes to provoke feminist condemnation as a means of generating publicity. Thus generational differences are produced, the younger female viewer, along with her male counter-parts, educated in irony and visually literate, is not made angry by such a repertoire. She appreciates its layering; she 'gets the joke'.

(ibid: 64)

So unlike the earlier period of the 1970s in which Feminist Media Studies was formed through its 'angry repudiation' of sexist media discourse, for the feminist academic to be critical of the ironic discourse prevalent in the contemporary period is to be positioned as one who is failing to get the joke; one who is out of step with current, contemporary sophisticated gender discourses, and therefore one who is aligned with an outdated 'puritanical' second wave feminist discourse.

It is in relation to this context, in which there has been a pluralisation and fragmentation of constructions of women in the media and a loss of confidence within Feminist Media Studies of how to approach such constructions, that this study is situated. To reiterate, I will investigate through a textual based analysis (I use textual analysis to encompass both the analysis of academic texts and media texts), the meanings which are circulating and indeed which have gained discursive authority about 'women' and 'femininity' at this particular cultural moment and what these can tell us about how gender is thought about in the contemporary period.

In attempting to make sense of this postfeminist landscape and so make interpretations regarding discourses of gender in relation to this cultural form, this study follows McRobbie who draws on Judith Butler to argue that this current cultural landscape is one characterised by a 'double entanglement' (ibid: 60). That is, forms of fiction are produced within a context that sees the co-existence and negotiations of neo-

conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (ibid).

In this thesis I am concerned to explore how this ‘double entanglement’ has contributed to both the critical neglect of this form of drama as well as how it informs the constructions of female identity within them. Rather than using the term ‘double entanglement’ to discuss both the neglect of the FED in the late 1990s and the constructions of identity within these texts, I will explore how they are marked by what Lisa Adkins, in her account of reflexive modernity, refers to as de- and re-traditionalization. That is, where:

[Reflexive modernity] involves not a simple detachment or disembedding of individuals from social categories such as those of class and gender; but also re-embedding processes in circuits and networks in which new, yet traditional – or re-traditionalized – rules, norms and expectations are at issue.

(2000: 260).

In this thesis I will frame an analysis of both the critical neglect of these texts and the constructions of ‘women’ within them as one which sees the co-existence and negotiation of processes and discourses of de- and re-traditionalization.

### **Structure of this thesis**

This thesis is divided into two sections: firstly contexts (chapters one and two), then case studies (chapters three to five). Chapter one (‘Broadcasting and critical contexts’) is concerned to address the first aim of this thesis, namely to provide knowledge and understanding of the way in which the FED’s identity as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction has contributed to its cultural undervaluation and critical subordination. Therefore whilst this chapter has strong lines of continuity with previous feminist studies of the gendering of media forms, the focus of this chapter explores how in this instance this neglect and undervaluation takes place in a critical context in which narratives of ‘feminine’/feminist progress pervade the cultural sphere through the discourses of the ‘feminization of culture’. This chapter provides an opportunity to investigate such narratives of progress

given that the FEDs of the 1990s were produced during a socio-cultural period marked by the ‘feminization of television’. I will illustrate that while the cultural values associated with the feminine have come to dominate prime-time television, the hierarchy of cultural values has remain undisturbed.

In exploring this issue, this chapter also provides an opportunity to explore feminist responses to postfeminist discourses of success in and through the discourses of the feminization of television. I privilege Brunsdon’s research in this chapter for three reasons.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, not only is Brunsdon, along with Rachel Moseley, one of the few feminist academics to engage so directly with the discourse of the feminization of television within this period via her research as part of the Midlands Television Research Group, but secondly because she is also the only academic, feminist or otherwise, to discuss the female ensemble drama of the 1990s and concomitantly its production in relation to the feminization of television. This second reason becomes more significant when a third factor is also taken into consideration: Brunsdon’s status as a prominent figure of British Feminist Media Studies, one whose research has repeatedly engaged with the issue of the gendering of the cultural canon and one whose earlier research findings permeate throughout this thesis. Therefore whilst I privilege Brunsdon’s account given these contexts, her account is also significant to explore because of the way in which her explanation of the feminization of television is one constructed as a postfeminist victory for women. As I will argue, through painting the feminization of television as one of a postfeminist narrative of success for women Brunsdon’s account not only re-traditionalizes women in relation to the spaces and discourses traditionally associated with ‘the feminine’, but colludes with other (male) reactionary accounts of the feminization of television as marking the ‘dumbing down’ of television in this period. While I subsequently trace how academic television dramatic criticism is further

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<sup>6</sup> In particular I draw on two articles in which Brunsdon engages with the feminization of television. These are ‘Not Having it All: Women and Film in the 1990s’, In Murphy, R (2000) (ed.) *British Film of the 90s*. London: BFI and her slightly later 2003 article: ‘Lifestyling Britain: The 8-9 Slot on British Television’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6 (1): 5-23.

constructed in this period in relation to issues of ‘quality’, value and taste I go on to mark out my particular way of making critical evaluations of the FED.

While chapter one is concerned to fulfil the first aim of his thesis, that of how its ‘feminine-gendered’ identity impacts on how it is perceived and valued within culture, chapter two (‘Text and social contexts’) is concerned to fulfil the second aim of this thesis: providing knowledge and understanding of the emergence of this tradition of drama historically in Britain in relation to other textual and social shifts. Primarily I explore the development and proliferation of the FED since the 1970s in relation to other fictional forms, namely ‘heroine television’ and ‘Must-see TV’ and I contextualise it in relation to the de-traditionalizing process of this period. While mapping out how the FED embodies similar characteristics to other forms of texts which have also emerged during this period, it also suggests ways in which they differ, given their focus on particular groups of women. As well as providing a historical overview of these texts, I map out the thematic and aesthetics properties of these texts and the issues that I will address in the case study chapters regarding the text’s constructions of community, ‘life politics’ and feminism/postfeminism. I subsequently map out how I will approach the texts via the discourses of de and re-traditionalization.

In chapters three to five I fulfil the third and final aim of this thesis: providing a detailed textual analysis of the construction of female identity within three of the FEDs of the 1990s. I provide an original interpretation of the first series of *Band of Gold*, *Real Women* and *Playing the Field*. I explore each of these texts in relation to their own textual negotiations surrounding discourses of de- and re-traditionalization in this period. Starting with the earliest of the three texts and working towards the present, the case studies also provide a particular overview of the direction in which the FED as a form of drama was heading in the later 1990s.

## Chapter One

# Broadcasting and Critical Contexts

### **Aims and objectives of chapter one**

The aim of this chapter is to provide knowledge and understanding of the academic neglect of the FED as a type of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction in the context of the 1990s. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the purpose of this analysis is to account for this neglect within a de-traditionalized postfeminist media culture in which the values associated with ‘the feminine’ have come to dominate British television.

In order to account for the academic neglect of the FED within this feminized context, this chapter is divided into two parts. In part one I contextualise the production of the FED within this particular broadcasting context as part of the broader feminization of television. Firstly I explore the way in which Charlotte Brunson, a well-known and respected feminist academic, attributes the feminization of television to women in order to paint a post-feminist narrative of progress for women and ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction within this period. However, while I illustrate how Brunson’s account is flawed by contrasting her account with other academic research of this broadcasting period, I will also show how it colludes and overlaps, however inadvertently, with the more pessimistic and damning (male) accounts of the feminization of television. As I will illustrate some accounts (of male industry representatives, academics and male journalists) refer to the feminization of television to signify the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting within this period and the ‘dumbing down’ of television.

Within this context I will argue that while the feminization of television marks a reversal of the values that have come to dominate viewing schedules, this reversal is one in which the foundations of the gendered hierarchy of cultural values have remained unchanged, something which has contributed to the academic neglect of the FED. I will

subsequently argue that rather than the discourse of the feminization of television being one of a postfeminist narrative of progress for women it rather sees the re-traditionalization and re-naturalization of the relationship between ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘the feminine’.

Building on the discussion and the issues raised in part one of this chapter, in part two I illustrate how the FED has been neglected within academic dramatic criticism precisely because of its status as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction that is representative of the feminised flow of British television. In short, I will argue that the FED is the kind of television drama that dramatic criticism is defined against in this period. I will review, for instance, that while the deregulation of television and the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting has promoted issues of programming ‘quality’ to the top of the Media Studies agenda, these debates have drawn on and reinforced very narrow and elitist definitions of ‘quality’ that the field of Television Studies (and Media and Cultural Studies more generally) has attempted to negate. I will illustrate this point through reviewing the three most dominant forms of drama that have been valued within academic dramatic criticism: that of ‘serious drama’; ‘Must See TV’ and ‘Must-She TV’. I will argue that these forms of drama have been valued precisely because they negate the values inherent within popular forms of drama such as the FED.

In concluding this chapter, I will argue that similar to previous forms of fiction that were produced within *pre*-feminist contexts, the critical neglect of the FED in a *post* second wave feminist context can be attributed to academic criticism which reaffirms the hierarchy of cultural values by privileging those texts associated with masculine and middle class tastes and preferences.

While my textual-based analysis of the FED is largely informed by a discursive framework that I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, in concluding this chapter I will engage with my preferred way of approaching and making critical evaluations of the aesthetic properties of this ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction in light of the preceding material. Therefore while this chapter is concerned to address how its gendered but also social classed identity has contributed to its critical neglect it also establishes a framework

through which issues of quality and value will be discussed in the analysis of the FED as a form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction in chapters two to five.

## **Part One: Broadcasting contexts**

### **The feminization of British television in the 1990s**

In her 2000 article 'Not Having it All: Women and Film in the 1990s', Charlotte Brunsdon identified a shift in British television in the 1990s; namely the increased visibility of women on television across a range of dramas, singling out the female ensemble dramas such as *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* as examples of this shift (2000: 168).

Attempting to account for the production and more 'culturally central' positioning of 'feminine-gendered' fiction such as the FED, Brunsdon argues they form part of the 'feminization' of television schedules in this period (2000: 169). Drawing on two articles which have discussed the feminization of evening schedules, Andy Medhurst's 1999 article 'Day for Night' and Rachel Moseley's 2000 article 'Makeover Takeover on British Television', Brunsdon argues that the feminization of British television is partly composed of programmes or genres that have moved to the evening from the daytime schedules, 'always the domain of the housewife, the mother with children, the retired and the hobbyist' (2003:7). In this respect the female ensemble drama represents one strong current in this trend, that of 'the escape of strong female characters from their traditional televisual place on daytime and soap opera into prime time' (ibid: 168). The second dominant trend representing the feminization of television is the rise of the 'power genre' of the decade in the area of factual entertainment programming; that of the rise of lifestyle visible through the 'flood of make over and cookery shows on the 8.00-9.00 slot' (ibid: 177) that have displaced forms of variety and

masculine-identified programmes within this slot, such as ‘serious’ documentary (Brunsdon 2003: 7).<sup>7</sup>

Indeed it is not only ‘feminine genres’ that have shifted from day to evening on television but also, as Brunsdon’s, Moseley’s and Medhurst’s accounts chart, the discourses and spaces associated with ‘women’ and ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction. The makeover or transformation narrative that has long been a staple of feminine beauty culture and a central feature of women’s magazines and the ‘woman’s film’ is, as Brunsdon, Moseley and Medhurst point out, a key trope in lifestyling television. In these evening programmes however the transformation narratives and aestheticization of the self is extended to that of the home, garden and food.

Similarly there is also the privileging of the domestic spaces associated with feminine forms of fiction in lifestyling television where, as Medhurst argues, ‘our dreamscapes have become domesticated – we now look for fantasy and escape in our back gardens and on our dinner tables’ (ibid: 27). This concern with the domestic also translates into a concern with the personal and emotional reactions of people involved in the public reveal of the makeover shows and concomitantly a tendency of these texts to draw on a melodramatic aesthetic to build dramatic tension in their narratives (Moseley ibid: 237/244).

As Moseley argues, ‘feminine values’ have not only displaced but have also infiltrated ‘male’ programming in the 8-9pm slot through the ‘softening up’ of ‘hard’ programming, such as the ‘soaping’ and ‘celebrity lifestyling’ of the documentary and current affairs programming as in the recent spate of hybrid docu-soap shows (ibid: 231).

While Moseley’s and Medhurst’s descriptions of the feminization of the evening schedules within factual entertainment programmes has corroborated, to this extent,

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<sup>7</sup> Here Brunsdon notes: ‘A six monthly sample of programmes in the 8-9pm slot at the beginning of the decade [1990s] has shown that the early 1990s boast no more than two or three cooking/gardening and consumer programmes (in total per week), but by the end of the decade this is more like seven or eight.’ (2003: 7).



Brunsdon's account of the feminization of the evening schedules, her claims of the feminization of television drama parallel the research findings of Robin Nelson.

In his 2000 article 'Performing (Wo)manoeuvres: The Progress of Gendering in TV Drama' Nelson, similarly to Brunsdon, notes an increased visibility of women in television dramas such as the FED and the 'professional woman drama', such as *Prime Suspect* (Granada 1991) and *Silent Witness* (BBC 1996-) so that 'the foregrounding of women's experience is almost commonplace in the 1990s' TV drama series' (Nelson 2000: 62). However in his earlier 1997 publication *Television Drama in Transition* he notes a more general shift in terms of dramatic form whereby series and serials, inclining to the 'feminine' format of soaps operas, 'have undoubtedly displaced the single television play as TV drama's dominant mode' (Nelson 1997: 1). Nelson uses the British television drama *Heartbeat* (YTV 1992-) as an example of this new breed of 'flexi-narrative drama', which draws on the multi-narrative, multi-character and cliffhanger format of soap operas. Similarly to shifts in the area of factual entertainment programming, Nelson argues that an additional feature of this new breed of 'flexi-narrative drama' is the way it echoes 'advertisements and pop video in deploying signifiers of their intrinsic "values and lifestyle" aesthetic appeal rather than in any referential sense to denote the "real"' (ibid: 24-25).

In summary, then, across accounts of both factual and fictional entertainment genres, the feminization of television is closely linked to the discourses and spaces associated with 'the feminine', that of consumerism, aestheticization and the private world of emotion and feelings, dominating evening television schedules.

Having schematically reviewed the features which characterise the perceived feminization of television with this period, in this next section I will focus specifically on the reason Brunsdon identifies as contributing to the feminization of British television; that of the inroads women have made into the public world of employment and the impact of the second wave feminist movement. As I argued above, I review this account in order to problematise it.

## Problematizing Brunsdon's account of the feminization of television

The inroads women have made into the public sphere are constructed within Brunsdon's account as contributing to the day-for-night makeover of television on two fronts.

Firstly, the makeover of evening schedules is attributed by Brunsdon to producers and schedulers attempting to address the relatively affluent working-women's audience. Discussing the proliferation of the FED across evening schedules, for instance, she argues that since the later 1970s, women have been recognised as a differentiated audience for film and television where 'advertisers and schedulers have been increasingly interested in high income, high-spending career women, the women who might be thought to have it all' (ibid: 169). Similarly, in attempting to contextualise the rise of lifestyle television in relation to shifts within both British society and the television industry in the 1990s, Brunsdon duly frames these texts as appearing against the more general lifestyling of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century British culture and home-ownership but also in relation to the relative affluence of female viewers 'in light of the continuing expansion of the female entry in to the work force and inroads women have made into the professions' (ibid: 8). Here, Brunsdon argues, women have become more attractive to advertisers and schedulers in this period as a result of the move to multi-television set households and the arrival of satellite with its masculine-identified sports and film channels that have led to a diminution of family viewing (2000: 169; 2003: 8).

In her earlier 2000 article, Brunsdon argues that the need to address a female audience has also led to an increase in women in the audio-visual industries. Discussing the production of the FED, for instance, Brunsdon argues 'there is the coincidence of the culture industries to innovate with the long march through the institutions of female writers, directors and producers' (ibid). As she continues:

That is the demand for new product can be partly met by the difference of the imagination of concerns of both an older generation, such as Kay Mellor or Sally Potter, who have finally secured some kind of recognition, and a younger generation, brought up with the concerns of 1970s feminism to some extent taken for granted.

(ibid)

Secondly, then, as this last quote makes clear, the feminization of television is also attributed in Brunsdon's account to the inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries. However, whereas in this earlier article Brunsdon attributes the inroads made by women into the audio-visual industries as one dependent upon the attractiveness of the female audience to advertisers and schedulers, in her 2003 article concerning lifestyle television, Brunsdon rather suggests that it is the inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries which has dictated programme content. In lifestyle television she notes how shifts to legislation<sup>8</sup> enabled a substantial increase in independent companies producing for television which, in turn, has meant that the 'feminine' personal taste and preferences of their female producers make it to the screen: 'Many of the lifestyle shows are made by independents, many are fronted by women and many have production teams with quite high proportions of women' (2003: 8).

Comparative to her discussion of the FED in the area of television drama, then, the genre of lifestyle is representative of a 'multi-layered feminization'; in this instance 'the professionalization of what were previously domestic skills':

... while hobbyism was dominated by men<sup>9</sup>, lifestyle is full of white, educated, middle-class women. The labours of second wave feminism are beamed back at us – in a way as paradoxical as Mrs Thatcher – through the legions of rather bossy white women, earning good money, by telling us how to transform the domestic sphere.

(2000: 8)

In reviewing Brunsdon's account of the feminization of television I want to argue that embedded within it is a 'narrative of progress' not only for the positioning and status of 'feminine-gendered' fiction ('more culturally central positioning'), but concomitantly 'feminine' cultural values (the privileging of 'feminine' tastes and preferences of female

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<sup>8</sup> The legislative shift which Brunsdon is referring to here is the introduction of the 25 percent rule in 1992, in which 25% of the programmes commissioned by broadcasters had to come from independent producers.

<sup>9</sup> By 'hobbyism' Brunsdon is referring to a set of texts from the 1960s and 1970s such as *Clothes that Count* (BBC 1967) and *Gardeners World* (BBC 1972) that can be perceived to be forerunners to lifestyling programmes (2001: 54).

producers/female viewers), and lastly female producers and writers within the audio-visual industries ('rather bossy white women, earning good money, by telling us how to transform the domestic sphere'). In the next passage I address some of the key problems with this narrative of progress which Brunson constructs. I will discuss how this 'narrative of progress' is flawed in three ways.

Firstly, I will illustrate how Brunson's account of the feminization of television is centrally flawed in the way it attributes the feminization of television to the inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries. Drawing on recent research in the form of the British Film Institute's *Television Industries Tracking Study*<sup>10</sup> and the Skillset Census<sup>11</sup> as well as research by feminist television academics such as Jane Arthurs and Therèse Daniels, I will illustrate how women - and particularly white women - may have made some significant inroads into the television industries but that this does not suggest a female take over and thus makeover of television, or that gender equality has been achieved in the television industries.

Secondly and most centrally, I will address how Brunson's account of the feminization of television is too narrow in its association with women at every level of the televisual process. I will argue that Brunson's account risks essentialising women in relation to 'feminine values' and fails to contextualise the feminization of television in relation to wider shifts that are taking place within the British social landscape within this period; that is, in relation to the more general feminization of culture as well as how the 'feminine' content of such texts is used to address a diverse range of audience segments in an increasingly competitive broadcasting context.

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<sup>10</sup> The British Film Institute's *Television Industries Tracking Study* is a longitudinal study which began in 1994 to investigate how the changing conditions of the television industry had affected individual careers in television production. The BFI study is based on data collected via diaries and questionnaires from a panel of 436 production personnel, drawn from all age groups, a range of sectors, programme genres and programme-making centres in the UK. There were three reports which were produced from the project. These included two interim reports produced in 1995 and 1997 and a final report in 1999 (1999: 9).

<sup>9</sup> The Skillset Census 2004 reports on how many people are employed and how many freelancers they used in particular occupation groups and job roles on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2004, and what proportion were women, ethnic minorities and disabled. It is estimated by the census that a total of 159,600 people were working in the audiovisual industries on the day of the census but that a further 50,000 freelancers were active but were not working on the day the census was carried out (2004: 10).

Thirdly, I will review how Brunsdon's optimistic account of the feminization of television, one that implies a shift in the status and positioning of 'feminine-gendered' fiction and thus, by extension, 'feminine' cultural values, is one contradicted by the largely negative journalistic and academic response to the feminization of television which reinstates the traditional gendered hierarchy of cultural values.

In focusing on these aspects of Brunsdon's account however the purpose is not to undermine one of central figures of Feminist Television Studies. Rather given that Brunsdon is one of the few academics to engage so directly with the feminization of television and the FED's relationship to it, her account provides an opportunity to tease out some of the problems with attempting to positively align the feminization of television with women. The purpose of reviewing and problematising Brunsdon's account is to provide a broader and more 'balanced' account of the female ensemble drama's positioning as 'feminine-gendered' and female-authored serial drama within the discourse of the feminization of television.

#### 'Women's' positioning in the television industries

Brunsdon's optimism regarding shifts in women's positioning in the audio-visual industries is illustrated in her 2000 article. Using findings from the British Film Institute's *Television Industries Tracking Study* which suggests that despite more women entering audio-visual industries, women can still not 'have it all' (that is, career and children) Brunsdon passes over these findings to concentrate on the gains that have been made by the women who are 'managing to have something' in the audio-visual industries 'at the end of what could be seen as feminism's century' (ibid: 167). Taking the films and television programmes made by and about women in the 1990s such as *Orlando* (Potter 1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Chadha 1993), *Stella Does Tricks* (Giedroyc 1996), *The Girl with her Brains in her Feet* (Bangura 1997), *Under the Skin* (Adler 1997), *Band of Gold*, *Real Women* and *Playing the Field*, Brunsdon uses these success stories as being representative of the broader inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries. However in so doing, I would argue, Brunsdon bypasses the

significant levels of inequalities that still exist for 'women' as a group as well for specific groups such as Afro-Caribbean and Asian women in the television industries.

#### *Racial inequality in the television industries*

According to Skillset's 2004 census, although women are still under-represented within the audio-visual industries as a whole, where they form 38% of the overall workforce in the UK<sup>12</sup> (2004: 14), broadcast television and cable and satellite television are two out of the eight sectors where women's presence equals that of men<sup>13</sup> (ibid). However, figures from the same census illustrate how it is mainly white women who have taken up these positions, given that 'ethnic minorities' only represent 7% of the total audio-visual industries workforce. Mirroring broader trends of women's positioning in the industry, one of the highest areas of representation for 'ethnic minorities' is in broadcast television (9.1%) but their marginalised status is illustrated more clearly when occupational grouping are taken into account. In this instance the highest proportion of 'ethnic minorities' are to be found as cinema cleaners (24%) (2004: 16).

Moreover a brief survey of some of the significant appointments made in the television industries in the 1990s illustrates that it is largely white women who have made some significant advances. It was in the 1990s, for instance, that Jane Root became the first female controller of a BBC channel (BBC2) and Dawn Airey became the first female head of a commercial network (Channel 5), to be succeeded by Jane Lighting on her move to BSkyB in 2003. Currently, there is also a female BBC director of television, Jana Bennett.

As texts largely written and produced by women, the FEDs provide a useful case study of the ethnocentricity of television production, where all but one of these texts have been written by white women: *Band of Gold* and *Playing the Field* written by Kay Mellor; *Tenko* written by Jill Hyem; *Making Out* written by Debbie Horsefield; and more recently *Bad Girls* and *Footballers Wives* written and produced by Eileen

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<sup>12</sup> This can be compared to the position of women in the whole of UK workforce where women make up 46% of the workforce in 2004 (2004: 14).

<sup>13</sup> Women represent 50% of the broadcast television workforce and 57% of cable and satellite workforce with women's presence in Independent Television Production falling just short of this at 43% (2000: 14).

Gallagher, Maureen Chadwick and Ann MacManus. To date only the Asian writer/actor, Meera Syal, has managed to break through in this area with her own three-part Asian female ensemble drama *Life Isn't All Ha Ha Hee Hee* (BBC1 2005).<sup>14</sup>

Claire Tylee in 'The Black Explorer: Female Identity on British Television' in 1992 puts into sharp perspective the marginalisation of non-white (and award winning) dramatists on BBC television whereby the promising screening of Syal's *My Sister-Wife*, Jackie Kay's *Twice Through the Heart* and Winsome Pinnock's *Bitter Harvest* on television in 1992 has not seen a further opening up of work of these groups (2000: 99). Indeed, as Tylee's article outlines, even these plays were commissioned under 'special conditions' of 1992 which saw the commissioning of work connected to black experience because of the 'so-called Columbus anniversary' (ibid.).<sup>15</sup>

This brief survey illustrates a point raised by Theresa Daniels (1998) in 'Television Studies and Race' that there is a great need to address issue of race and media industries (as well as race and media texts) due to the small number of studies that reflect both the fragile relationship that black workers have to the broadcasting institutions, but also the marginalisation of black experiences within academic media studies (ibid: 133).

#### *Gender inequality in the television industries*

Clearly, as the discussion above illustrates, (white) women have made some substantial inroads into the audio-visual industries generally and the television industries specifically. In this section I will explore the extent but also the limitations of the inroads women have made into the television industries in light of shifts to broadcasting regulation and policy since the late 1980s: that of equal opportunities regulation and the casualisation of the workforce.

Firstly, then, the inroads women have made within the broadcasting industry can be set against the Equal Opportunities initiatives that were developed in the 1990s. Jane

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<sup>14</sup> Syal has also managed to secure some recognition within commercial television with *Goodness Gracious Me* (BBC 1998-2000) and *The Kumars at No.42* (Hat Trick Productions 2001).

<sup>15</sup> The 'Columbus Year' of 1992 marked 500 years since the 'discovery' of the New World which led to the black diaspora.

Arthurs (1994) in her article 'Women and Television' states that the BBC has had a formal policy of equal opportunities since 1975, but little was done as a consequence of this until the latter half of the 1980s 'when support for equal opportunities became more of a priority for the European Community, the Government and at top managerial levels in broadcasting' (1994: 93). Concomitantly in Britain the Broadcasting Act of 1990 made it a requirement that the Channel 3 licence holders promote equal opportunities to be monitored by the ITC (Independent Television Commission).<sup>16</sup>

However, although equal opportunities initiatives have aided the positioning of women within the audio-visual industries, equal representation has still not been achieved. The BFI report, for instance, found that men were more likely than women to be in managerial and executive producer roles, as well as company owners.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, according to the Skillset census, there is still a gendering of the roles within the audio-visual industries with women having the highest representation in traditional 'feminine' occupations such as make-up and hairdressing (93%) and costume/wardrobe (74%), and some of the lowest representation in areas of camera (10%) and lighting (9%)<sup>18</sup> (2004: 14-15).

It is also in relation to equal representation that we can compare the advances women have made into the higher ranks of television personnel with those of their male colleagues. The vast majority of 'top jobs' in broadcasting both now and retrospectively in the 1990s are held by men: Mark Thompson replacing Greg Dyke as the Director General of the BBC in 2004; Charles Allen taking over as Chief Executive of ITV in 2003; and Andy Duncan becoming Chief Executive of Channel Four in 2004.

Income is a further and significant area in which equal opportunity initiatives have not succeeded. The BFI study showed that women consistently earned less than men. These levels were found even when factors such as age and employment type

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<sup>16</sup> Channel Four along with independent producers were excluded from this policy, just as the proportion of broadcast programming was to increase to a minimum of 25% from independent producers during this period (Arthurs 1994: 93).

<sup>17</sup> Out of the small 15% of its sample who were independent company owners, men were twice as likely to own them as women: 18% of men compared to 9% of women (2004: 18).

<sup>18</sup> The occupational group where women are the least represented is in processing laboratories (8%) (2004: 14-15).



were controlled. There were more women in lower income brackets<sup>19</sup> even in producer and director fields where women slightly outnumbered men.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, advances made by women in the audio-visual industries can be contextualised in relation to the shifts in broadcasting regulation and policy in the 1990s which saw a casualisation of the audio-visual workforce. The restructuring of the industry within the 1990s in effect saw companies become more flexible and cost-effective by shedding permanent staff and increasing the proportion of programme-making and attendant services bought in from independent companies and freelance labour (Arthurs 1994: 98). As we have seen, Brunson has suggested that it is the strong female presence in the burgeoning independent production companies that has contributed to the feminization of television. While the BFI's *Interim Television Industry Tracking Study* (1997) for instance, reported that in the mid 1990s the number of freelance workers increased generally<sup>21</sup>, it also found a greater proportion of women (48%) in the sample to be working freelance compared with men (39%) (1999: 18).

Although the casualisation of the labour force has aided women's positioning within the audio-visual industries, it has also been found to have more ambivalent consequences for women within the television industries. Problems raised with freelancing for women in the BFI study, for instance, included job security and unpredictability of income. Significantly, 83% complained that maternity and paternity pay had not been adequate when on short-term contracts (1999: 28) and higher proportions of women working in television were found to be single and childless by comparison to their male co-workers (1999: 14). One diary respondent, a female freelance researcher without children from the BFI's interim report of 1995, claimed for instance: 'There isn't any room in the television industry at the moment to want both [children and career]. There is no maternity leave. When you are working freelance,

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<sup>19</sup> 14% of women compared with 6% men were reported as earning less than £10,000 and 25% men were reported as earning over £50,000 compared with only 4% of women (1999: 21).

<sup>20</sup> Though the study shows that producers and directors earned between £30,000 and £50,000, there were more men earning these salaries than women (39% compared with 33%) (1999: 21).

<sup>21</sup> Peaked at 52% and dropped to 43% in 1998 in their final study (1999: 17).

you are working month to month. Suppose I am working 8 to 10 at night. How does that fit in?’<sup>22</sup>

From the same report, a female independent producer argued that the work culture has also remained male: ‘The same pay for twice as much work, anti-social hours, no maternity pay or nurseries – it is becoming again a young man’s industry’ (ibid). Whilst the final report from the BFI in 1999 stated that the gap between the marital status of women had decreased overall, 29% of women remained single compared with 13% of men (1999: 13). Although the report details a similar decrease in the number of childless women with that of men, final figures show that over half of the women had no children compared with only a quarter of the men (1999: 14).

In this section, then, I have reviewed the inroads women have made in the media industries by reviewing findings from the BFI *Tracking Study*, the Skillset Census and research by media academics. I have drawn on these various sources of research to put into perspective Brunsdon’s rather utopian claims of the inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries. Whilst this research suggests that the number of women in the industries has increased, it also suggests that this is largely in relation to white women. More generally, the inroads women have made into the television industries need to be contextualised in relation to the broader picture, that is in relation to an industry which is still dominated by a male working culture with more men in positions of authority.

## Essentialism

In this section I want to address the second way in which Brunsdon’s account of the feminization of television is problematic. I want to suggest that the ‘narrative of progress’ it suggests for the more central cultural positioning of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction is one which is reliant on a fixed, essentialist model of gender rooted in biology. This can be seen in the way in which Brunsdon’s discussion of the feminization of television, particularly her later 2003 article on lifestyle television collapses and, as I

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<sup>22</sup> Maggie Brown, ‘Media women work too hard to have children’, *The Independent* 5 December 1994: 7. Brown is reporting on a presentation to launch the BFI *Television Industry Tracking Study*. *The First year: An Interim Report* (1995) London: BFI.

have explored above, exaggerates the inroads women have made into the audio-visual industries and the production of feminine content, thereby over-determining the relationship between 'women' and 'feminine values' at each stage of the 'multi-layered feminization' of television.

According to Brunsdon's model, for instance, the feminization of television consists of females in the audio-visual industries producing 'feminine' content (their personal tastes and preferences) of television texts for female viewers (also their tastes and preferences). In so doing, Brunsdon's account of the feminization of television replicates the problems associated with earlier studies of 'women's genres': to recall Geraghty, 'the assertion of a common sensibility between women and a set of values sustaining us simply because we are women' (1991: 197). In this instance Brunsdon not only draws on universal, essentialistic conceptions of gender but also naturalises the relationship between 'women' and 'femininity'.

To ghettoise women in this way in terms of producing only 'feminine' interest programmes Brunsdon ignores programmes made by female producers such as Jana Bennett, who in 2000 was awarded an OBE for services to science broadcasting with such texts as *Back to the Floor* (BBC 1998), *Meet the Ancestors* (BBC 1998), *The Human Body* (BBC 1998) and *Walking with Dinosaurs* (BBC 1999), or indeed male writers who write for 'feminine' texts such as soap opera. This includes, for instance, Paul Abbott who used to write for *Coronation Street* (Granada 1960-).

I would argue Brunsdon's over-determined and over simplistic account replicates the more reactionary and ill-informed accounts of the feminization of television from the popular press. Below, for example, I quote at length two particular accounts of the feminization of television by male television critics that appeared in the same year as Brunsdon's later article with which similarities to her account can be discerned:

Within the world of broadcasting, it has also been an open secret that television is predominantly a female medium. That is not to say that men don't watch it; of course they do. But the heaviest viewers tend to be women and the programmes which regularly get the highest ratings usually have more female than male viewers, notably the soap operas which dominate the Top Ten. Consequently, broadcasters have tended to put more effort into catering for women than men. Now, however, something new is happening. From being a mere tendency, the feminization of television is turning into a rout. Wherever you

look - terrestrial broadcasting or the new cable and satellite channels, analogue or digital, news programmes or commercials - women and women's interests are favoured. [...] Female presenters are replacing males, and material traditionally regarded as being of particular interest to men is downgraded or side-lined. [...] At the same time, many of the top male attractions - sports such as soccer and boxing and virtually all first-run movies - are being spirited away to specialist subscription channels or pay-per-view networks. Thus, while the quantity of women's favourite viewing goes up on the free terrestrial channels, men have to pay through the nose for the programmes they used to get for nothing. [...] The acceleration of this process may have something to do with efforts made in the past few years to promote women to the top jobs in TV. Of course, British broadcasters should give women equal opportunity - but they should also give men equal programming.

(Dunkley 2003: 30)

My wife keeps leaving me for other women. They either work in Holby City, drink in the Rovers Return or are Footballers' Wives. And I'm not the only one. All over the country men are becoming marginalised in their marriages and viewing opportunities as women dominate the TV. The latest round in the battle of the sexes has been well and truly won by women. Welcome to PMTV. There was a time when all television seemed made for men: there was sport, comedy, cowboy films, and all the Top Gear cars were driven by men. Now, most of the major channels are run by women, and it's difficult to get a programme made if it's not got the word "wife" in it. While E4 broadcasts a "reality show" from a hair and beauty salon, mainstream programming is dedicated to houses, gardens, kitchens, relationships, affairs, soaps and Pre-Menstrual TV comedies. The cast of PMTV is both massive and mighty. For once, however, it isn't the Americans who are to blame. They make programmes such as *Friends* and *Sex and the City* which appear to be gender-specific but which both sexes enjoy. The nearest we have got to that in Britain is *This Life* and *Cold Feet*, but they were both couples TV, a different thing altogether. [...] The stranglehold of PMTV is so intense I can tell you the exact times of all the soaps and the hospital dramas; forget passive smoking, this is passive watching.

(Brown 2003: 5)

Dunkley and Brown not only reinstate, similarly to Brunson, viewing preferences in terms of gendered dichotomies, but also similarly to Brunson, attribute these shifts to the gendered shifts taking place behind the screen. Moreover, whereas Brunson reinstates essentialist notions of gender to show the new female power in and over television, Dunkley and Brown draw on this same line of argument to illustrate how this new female power is marginalising and displacing the spaces and discourses associated with men and male viewers on contemporary television. In this way Brunson, Dunkley and Brown essentialise women and reinforce commonsensical ideas which see women ruled by their bodies and emotional dispositions. These accounts reduce women and

women's interests to traditional 'feminine values' of the personal sphere and domestic concerns and emotions.

While I will defer addressing the value judgements that are also present in these accounts until the subsequent passage below, for now I want draw on accounts that counter these assumptions and challenge Brunson's, Dunkley's and Brown's account of the feminization of television.

#### *De-essentialising programme-making*

Responding to Chris Dunkley's exasperation at the feminization of television on *Woman's Hour*, for instance, Hilary Bell, a Senior Commissioning editor for Channel Four, claimed that the gender of the commissioner/programme maker is not a significant factor in the types of programme that are commissioned but rather that programmes are commissioned on the basis of what appeals to a broad based audience: '...we are employed to spot trends. We are employed to gauge the temperature of the times and to provide programming that reflects that. It's quite odd, I've never, ever questioned my sex nor the sex of colleagues of mine. It just doesn't feel relevant.'<sup>23</sup>

Rejecting Dunkley's claims of the feminization of television, Bell listed other more 'male' orientated programmes that were shown in the same period such as *A Touch of Frost* (YTV 1992), *Salvage Squad* (Wall to Wall TV 2002), and *The Premiership* (ITV 2001-2004), a list to which could be added texts such as the SAS drama *Ultimate Force* (Bentley Productions 2002) which starred Ross Kemp, or detective series such as *The Vice* (Carlton TV 1999-2003). Sue Summers (2003) in 'Has TV Had a Makeover?' also addresses this point in her journalistic response to Dunkley's article, arguing that Channel Four and BBC2 were still producing programmes that could be appealing to men, including the documentary *Our Friend Saddam* (RTL 2003), hobbyist programmes such as *Car Junkies* (BBC2 2003) and political satire programmes such as *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* (Vera Films 1999-) (2003: 12).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hilary Bell speaking on *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, March 4 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Similarly Whannel (2000) has detailed how the 1990s saw a spate of programmes which were aimed at men and which saw a reassertion of sexist masculinities in their embodiment of a reactive laddist discourse similar to that of 'lads mags' such as *Loaded* of the same period in texts such as *Men Behaving*

In interviews with producers and commissioning editors, Summers also found that it was in fact young men in the 16-24 age group who are ‘the Mecca’ for television producers because they bring in more expensive advertising revenue (ibid). In this vein Jane Root, most associated with BBC2’s ‘feminine’ ‘wall of leisure’, is quoted as saying that some of her biggest successes have come from targeting men: ‘I realised we had to have a car show back on BBC2, so I put all my energy into making *Top Gear* work. It’s not personally the show I’d watch [...] but in a job like this, you have to be a professional’ (ibid).

It is also from a professional point of view, divorced from a biologically driven model, that it makes good commercial sense to target women in the increasingly competitive broadcasting climate of the 1990s. This is particularly so, given the difficulty of television producers to attract the young male audience to evening schedules and given the relative affluence of women as consumers of evening programmes, as Brunsdon argued. It is here that I would place texts, such as the FED and lifestyle programmes such as *Nigella Bites* (Pacific Productions 2001) which have a more identifiable address to female audiences. This I would argue is discernable from their focus on female identity. However I would argue that they also remain ‘open’ enough to appeal to a wider diversity of audience segments. This is a point I will explore in the next section.

So far in this section I have argued that female producers of television should not be ghettoised as producing only ‘feminine’ texts, according to some biologically driven imperative, but as television professionals that produce texts they think will appeal to a wide and diverse audience; in this instance, texts that appeal to female and male audience segments.

In this vein I want to argue that Brunsdon, Dunkley and Brown confuse two separable shifts that occur in the 1990s; namely the inroads women have made in the television industry, with ‘feminine’ programming which leads to their over-determined and essentialist accounts of the feminization of television. What these accounts fail to

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*Badly* (ITV 1992; BBC1 1995-1999), *Fantasy Football League* (BBC2 1994-1996) and *They Think It’s All Over* (BBC 1995-) (2000: 292).

address is firstly the coincidence of the inroads women have made into the industry and the shift to a ‘feminine’ consumer-led approach to broadcasting due to the increasingly competitive and unstable context of the 1990s (Corner, Harvey and Lury 1994; Nelson 1997; O’ Sullivan 1998; Ellis 2002; Cooke 2003).

In relation to this latter point, the increasing competitive climate can be contextualised in relation to technological and cultural shifts such as the introduction of infotainment and multiple TV sets in homes, shifts in work and leisure patterns, the decrease in family viewing and the increased competition from the proliferation of cable and satellite packages, the introduction of a fifth terrestrial channel (Channel Five) in 1997 and the deregulation of television with the Broadcasting Act of 1990<sup>25</sup>, all of which have encouraged producers (female and male) to draw on these established ‘feminine’ formats and tropes through which to appeal to and engage a broader audience.

Secondly, and following on from this point, the ‘feminine’ content of lifestyle texts and soapified ‘flexi-narrative’ dramas should not be viewed as texts which are produced solely for female audiences but are discernable as part of a more general feminization of contemporary consumer culture (Adkins 2001: 469). Drawing on the accounts of Baudrillard and Felski, Lisa Adkins in her 2001 article ‘Cultural Feminization: “Money, Sex and Power” For Women’ argues:

In particular, the characteristics of consumer culture – including the sovereignty of the sign, appearance, image, and style, the predominance of surface, simulation, and masquerade; the authority of the consumer; and a dedifferentiation of the social, involving, for example, a domestication of the public sphere – have all been understood to concern such a feminization, not only because of an “ongoing interpellation of women as consumers” (Felski, 1997: 136) but also because the dominant aesthetics and practices of consumer culture – for instance, style, surface, image, simulation, and masquerade – are understood to be closely associated with the feminine, indeed to concern the very fabric of the feminine.

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<sup>25</sup> The 1990 Broadcasting Act was the culmination of Margaret Thatcher’s efforts to apply free-market principles to broadcasting. Its most contentious clauses included the renewal of ITV franchises by competitive tender, awarding new contracts to the highest bidder in a multi-million-pound auction. The Broadcasting Act also introduced a quota for independent production on the BBC and ITV, extending the free-market philosophy which lay behind the establishment of Channel Four as a publisher-broadcaster (Cooke 2003: 161).

(ibid: 674-675)

The feminization of culture, then, marks the way ‘the feminine’ ‘has become the world’ not only through the de-differentiation of public and private spheres within this context, but also through the feminization of masculinity in this same period. This latter shift is discernable through the ‘increasing representation of masculinity as a sign – as a signifier of desire, pleasure and difference – in contemporary culture that is, in the representation of masculinity in terms traditionally associated with the representation of femininity’ (ibid). Drawing on the research of Margaret Gullette, Adkins points to the way in which some men in this context increasingly perform the corporeal aesthetics of femininity through the emergence of male cosmetics and perfumes, the normalisation of the ‘male makeover’ and the growing male market of plastic surgery (ibid: 675-676).

Arguing along these lines, Moseley takes a different position from that of Brunson regarding the ‘daytime-ization’ of the evening television schedules.<sup>26</sup> Rather than marking a feminization of evening television which suggest an address to female viewers, for Moseley the proliferation of these texts represents an un-gendering of the discourses and spaces that have traditionally occupied daytime and prime-time British television (2000: 239). For Moseley, then, the prime-time home and make-over shows suggest a mixed gender address through their blending of ‘feminine’ interior design, taste and domesticity and ‘masculine’ DIY skills, and the teaching-learning-sharing out of those tasks<sup>27</sup> (2001: 35). Drawing on Nixon (1996) and Mort (1996), Moseley argues this ungendering process is suggestive of a more general cultural shift in which men are now addressed as consumers of fashion and style (2000: 239-241) as evidenced in the way ‘men are on display in these texts as shoppers and make-over subjects, as consumers of fashion and grooming products, as cooks, as citizen-consumers engaged in

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<sup>26</sup> Andy Medhurst was the first to coin the term ‘daytime-ization’ in his 1999 article ‘Day for Night’ in *Sight and Sound* 9 (6), pp 26-27.

<sup>27</sup> For Hilary Bell, Dunkley’s article misses this latter point; that times have shifted from the 1980s when ‘there were distinct boundaries between what interested men and what interested women’ stating that television has responded to shifts in interests in which ‘women are just as likely to go off and have adventures, like Ellen MacArthur, and men are just as likely to worry about the style of their trainers’ (ibid).



the care of the self' (2001: 35). Drawing on the accounts of Adkins and Moseley, I want to argue that 'the blurring of gendered discourses and spaces means it is no longer proper to talk about 'feminine culture' in quite the same way as it was fifteen to twenty years ago' (2000: 239).

So far I have reviewed Brunson's, Dunkley's and Brown's essentialist model of the feminization of television. Running contrary to their claims, I have instead proposed that the feminization of television marks the de-gendering of spaces and discourses associated with 'the feminine' in order to appeal to a diverse range of audiences within an increasingly competitive and uncertain context of broadcasting. To this end I have concentrated on these shifts by using the example of lifestyling television. In the following passage, however, I want to explore a similar de-gendering process that has taken place in forms of television drama noted earlier by Nelson, that of 'flexi-narrative' drama in order to appeal to a wider array of differing audience segments. Exploring such shifts to dramatic form in the following section is a useful way through which to situate and explore the FED's own particular dramatic form.

*The de-gendering of soap opera and the rise of the 'flexi-narrative' drama*

It is somewhat ironic that in a socio-cultural period marked by the 'feminization of television', that it is the quintessential 'feminine' genre of soap opera, which has become de-gendered or 'de-feminized' (Root 1986: 72) in order to appeal to as wide and diverse an audience as possible within this period.

This de-feminization of soap opera began in the late 1970s with the success of American prime-time serials in Britain such as *Dallas* (1978-91), *Knots Landing* (1979-1993), *Dynasty* (1981-1989) and *Falcon Crest* (1981-1989) which proved popular with female as well as male audiences through the introduction of central male characters and the centring on sensational storylines about wealth and sex.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the de-

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<sup>28</sup> The introduction of US prime-time texts such as *Dallas* in Britain were marked as signalling this 'dumbing down' of broadcasting in the 1980s. This is illustrated by Alistair Milne, then Director General of the BBC, who infamously referred to 'Wall to Wall *Dallas*'. As Root argues 'Milne's phrase implies that the Southfork saga is not so much a highly popular American-style soap opera as an unending strip of mass produced carpet; bland, identical throughout the roll and purchased by the yard' a type of programming that is 'too comfortable and too soft' (1986: 54-55; 66).

feminization of soap opera is also discernable in British with the newer soaps of the 1980s, namely *Brookside* (Merseyside TV 1982-2002) and *EastEnders* (BBC 1985-), which have attempted to appeal to their traditional female audiences but also to male, gay and teenage audiences through the inclusion of a more diverse range of characters, a diversified content which broaches contemporary social issues and an increase in physical and violent action (Buckingham 1991; Geraghty 1991). In his Huw Weldon Lecture in Cambridge, Mal Young, the Head of BBC Drama Series, claimed that in a time of massive change for television, it is only soap opera which cuts across social boundaries (Huw Wheldon Lecture 1999). BARB 1996, for instance, showed soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* to figure strongly in both female and male top 20 programmes (Hill and Gauntlett 1999: 218).

As I stated earlier in this chapter, the conventions of the continuous serial have also fed into the development of more hybrid ‘professional dramas’; that is, serials which combine the structure of soap opera with that of the content of police, legal and medical programmes (Feuer 1984: 27). These are texts which Nelson notes appeal to a wide variety of audience segments through the use of the ‘flexi-narrative’ form, a term Nelson uses to denote ‘the fast-cut, segmented, multi-narrative structure which yields the ninety-second sound and vision byte form currently typical of popular TV drama’ (1997: 24).

The flexi-narrative form, developed by MTM productions with *Hill Street Blues* (MTM and NBC 1981-1987) in America, has then also become an industry staple. It has been adopted by British texts such as *Casualty* (BBC 1986-) and *The Bill* (Freemantle Media/Thames Television 1984-), which follow the multi narrative, multi character and cliff hanger format of soap operas with increased pace through the use of ‘cinematic device[s]’ of intercutting and juxtaposing the different narrative strands (Nelson 1997: 24). As Nelson states: ‘It is through presenting a wide range of characters and issues to reflect a broad spectrum in story-lines rapidly inter-cut that one half-hour or fifty-minute programme can attract and sustain interest, domestic distractions notwithstanding’ (1997: 33).

To extend its appeal to different audiences, or audience 'segments' as they are referred to by the culture industries (Nelson 1997: 16), Nelson states that, unlike soap, the flexi-narrative informed dramas introduce new characters and narrative strands in each episode of a series whilst a number of regular characters (smaller than in soaps) are involved in unresolved narratives which give continuity across episodes (1997: 34). 'Blurring the distinction between the series and serial', Nelson states, 'affords schedulers the joint advantage of an unresolved narrative strand (involving regular characters) - a cliffhanger to draw the audience to watch the next episode - and a new group of characters and self-contained stories in each episode' (1997: 34). According to Nelson, any narrative does not need to be 'action packed' given the pace at which the stories are intercut. However, he goes on to argue that the flexi-narrative form appeals to both male and female audience segments through its combination of the allegedly 'masculine' preference for action and narrative resolution with a supposedly 'feminine' fluidity and open-endedness in storytelling with an emphasis on human interest (1997: 39).

It is in relation to the soap opera-isation of television drama in this period that I want to situate the FED of the 1990s. Indeed as finite serial dramas, one whose narratives evolve around the interweaving of long running stories around a familiar set of characters, the FED more closely resembles traditional British soap opera. However similar to prime time 'flexi narrative' dramas such as *Prime Suspect* (Granada 1991), *Cracker* (Granada 1993-1996), *Inspector Morse* (Central 1997-2000), *Peak Practice* (CIT 1993-2002), *Taggart* (Scottish Television Enterprises 1983-), *Heartbeat* (Yorkshire Television 1992-) and *London's Burning* (LWT 1988-2002) (Carson and Llewellyn-Jones 2000: 8) the FEDs of the 1990s are marked by hybridity.

For instance, there is a hybridity of generic conventions in FEDs such as *Band of Gold* which draws on the conventions of soap opera and the traditionally 'masculine' crime genre. Similarly *Playing the Field* mixes the traditional 'feminine' focus on the personal and emotional lives of its central female characters with their preference for more 'masculine' activities through their affiliation with the amateur woman's football team. In contrast to her argument in terms of the feminization of British television, Brunson does acknowledge that in the instance of *Playing the Field* the central trope of

the women's football team 'is attempting a quite complicated audience address, invoking class loyalties and traditionally male pastimes to invite in a male audience' (2000: 175). However, and once again, I would argue that such hybrid texts to some extent actually move us beyond a discussion of male and female interests, given that the trope of a female football team is also potentially appealing to women in a decade marked by ladettism and given the popularity but social marginalisation of women's football historically.

In this section I have reviewed how the feminization of television more accurately marks a de-gendering of spaces and values traditionally tied to 'the feminine' at the level of the text. In so doing I have contextualised the production of the female ensemble drama serials within these shifts. Below, however, I want to return to a third problem with Brunsdon's celebratory account of the feminization of television. Specifically, whilst Brunsdon's account of the feminization of television is suggestive of a narrative of progress for the status and positioning of women and traditional (and subordinated) 'feminine values', this claim is largely contradicted by the negative critical reception that the 'feminization' of television has received across the public domains of academic and journalistic criticism.

### Cultural Value

Although the feminization of television represents the way in which 'feminine values' that are usually subordinated in Western patriarchal culture have come to dominate television programming, this movement has not been matched by a reversal of the gendered value judgements attached to femininity and masculinity within this culture. The continuing denigration of areas of culture tied to 'the feminine' can be inferred from journalistic criticism, such as that cited earlier by Dunkley and Brown, within this period.

Dunkley's and Brown's accounts, for instance, not only reinstate gendered dichotomies but also reinstate the 'masculine' norm as the superior subject position from which they judge the 'feminine', and thus by extension 'inferior' shifts on television. This can be discerned from their demeaning description of the way that they perceive

women and 'women's interests' have come to dominate television through terms such as 'Giryvision' (Dunkley, 2003:30) and 'PMTV' (Brown, 2003:5). As I have already discussed above, this not only reinforces the association of 'woman' in relation to bodily metaphors but also with the traditional metaphors of earlier television criticism. Terms such as 'triviality', 'passivity', 'stranglehold' and 'rout' are reminiscent of earlier academic accounts of the feminine identity of television such as that put forward by Stephen Heath in *Representing Television*. In Heath's account, for instance, the flow of television is one characterised as 'feminine' through connotations of saturation, excess of availability, proximity and absorption, from which it is the male critic's task to achieve 'separation and 'critical distance' (1990: 297).<sup>29</sup>

In this way, the over-determined accounts of Dunkley, Brown but also Brunson serve to extend the metaphors and qualities that align television as the 'bad cultural object' of mass culture with 'the feminine' (Huysen 1986; Root 1986; Petro 1986; Brunson 1990; Modelski 1986; Joyrich 1996). Indeed, Dunkley and Brown are not alone in their critiques of the feminization of television. The former director general of the BBC (1982-1987), Alistair Milne, for example states:

I have nothing against women — I've worked with them all my life...It just seems to me that the television service has largely been run by women for the last four to five years and they don't seem to have done a great job of work... I told him [Michael Grade, the new BBC Chairman] I thought the programmes were terrible...There was no innovation. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

(Milne 2004)<sup>30</sup>

Academic accounts analysing the shift to programming within this period have been just as pessimistic. As Moseley states, these debates have been characterised by a shift in media from 'serious' and worthy programming to the 'whimsy' of lifestyle television

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<sup>29</sup> Thornham and Purvis provide a historical overview of the way in which the flow of television has been characterised as a feminine flow stretching from Raymond Williams (1974) to Baudrillard (1985) (2005: 9).

<sup>30</sup> Alistair Milne (2004) as quoted on BBC NEWS (2004): 'Ex BBC Boss slates 'dumb' shows' [online]. Available from <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/entertainment/3725954.stm> [Accessed August 24 2006].

(2000: 233). This distinction is evident too in academic accounts such as that by Steven Barnett and Emily Seymour who, in *A Shrinking Iceberg Travelling South* (1999), argue that the feminization of television is embattling the ‘quality’ genres of documentary and current affairs.

In this context, the feminization of television characterised through the ‘feminine’ production of ‘softer’ programming, the recycling and hybridisation of established ‘safe’ formats, the appeal to the senses over the mind, the privileging of the personal over the overtly political, the focus on spectacle and melodrama over the ‘real’ is one associated with the ‘dumbing down’ of television in the 1990s, eroding its public service values in its address to the consumer over that of the citizen. However, two points made by Arthurs (2004) in *Television and Sexuality* are pertinent from which to critique this position. Firstly, that it is ‘dependent on a narrow conceptualization of citizenship that derives from a puritan form of left wing critique that is suspicious of [...] entertainment as a distraction from ‘real’ politics’ (2004: 12). As she argues, this is no longer convincing in the wake of new social movements such as feminism and their politicization of the private sphere in which politics and relations of power have come to be understood as being embodied in the most intimate relationships and quotidian aspects of everyday existence and subjectivity (ibid). Secondly, and as I have noted above, this line of argument is problematic because it ‘depends on a hierarchy of taste that masks the preference of a male elite in the guise of a universal value’ (ibid). Myra Macdonald has made a similar argument in ‘Rethinking Personalisation in Current Affairs Journalism’ in relation to the perceived ‘dumbing down’ of current affairs journalism:

One recurring assumption is that the shift towards the personalization or a growing reliance on human interest automatically substitutes emotion for analysis and impedes the insights into social and political agency that form the prerequisite for democratic intervention. This evaluation rests on binary oppositions, originating from the time of enlightenment thought and sustained by Habermasian thinking, which elevate principles of abstraction and rationality over instantiation and affectivity, without full consideration of how these might translate into communicative success within differing media.

(2000: 251)

Brunsdon's account is doubly troubling in this respect because her particular characterisation of the feminization of television which she attributes to the feminization of the television industry, is made within an academic article which attempts to engage with the 'the low critical esteem in which contemporary lifestyling programming is held' (2003: 6). Indeed, Brunsdon recognises the sense of *déjà vu* which surrounds the debates regarding the feminization of television and the deterioration of programming standards in the 1990s and which returns us to debates within the field of television studies in the early 1980s (ibid: 16).

Brunsdon does, then, also attempt to engage with the negative characterisations of programming shifts such as that of lifestyling television. Drawing on Medhurst's description that lifestyle offers only tokenism outside of white and middle class suburbia, she argues 'something more positive' can be said 'about the varieties of people these shows construct as ordinary Britons' (ibid: 17). Pointing to the mix of gay, black, Asian, as well as mixed race couples who appear on these lifestyling texts that didn't appear 'on television 25 years ago' Brunsdon argues that if the lifestyling of television is suggestive of a 'dumbing down' of television, 'it seems to me that there has also been a pluralling up' (ibid: 18). In this respect, rather than eroding the public servicing principles of British broadcasting, lifestyling television, Brunsdon argues, also 'represents a greater attention paid to the study of everyday lives, and a broader definition of what cultural broadcasting might consist in' (ibid: 18).

However, having made these comments, Brunsdon concludes her article by reinforcing the hierarchy of gendered cultural values. Whilst asserting the need to engage more with issues of evaluation within Media and Cultural Studies, so that finer distinctions can be made about which texts are 'good' and 'bad' within lifestyling television, Brunsdon's own evaluation of two lifestyling texts (*Real Gardens* and *Ground Force*) privileges 'the more explicitly instructive (realist) *Real Gardens*' (Channel Four 1998-2000) over the more showbiz (melodramatic) *Ground Force* (BBC1 1998-2002) (ibid: 19). That is, evaluations are made in Brunsdon's analysis which privilege values aligned with the masculine; those of realism and instruction over the values aligned with 'the feminine' with its suggestion of entertainment and melodrama.

This is not to suggest that there is a problem with her analysis and, indeed, it serves to illustrate that ‘feminine’ texts do engage with ‘masculine’ values such as realism. However, the primary example she uses to illustrate the good and worthy examples of lifestyle television does little to shift perceptions of texts which embody ‘feminine’ values, but rather serves to reinforce gendered values embodied within some texts.

In this section I have problematised Brunsdon’s optimistic account of the feminization of television, one that implies a shift in the status and positioning of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction and thus by extension ‘feminine’ cultural values, by reviewing the largely negative journalistic and academic responses to the feminization of television which reinstates the traditional gendered hierarchy of cultural value. While I have once again drawn on accounts of lifestyle television to illustrate these points, in part two of this chapter I will discuss how the FED has been the subject of academic neglect because of these same issues. More precisely, I will argue that it is because of its ‘feminine’ status, and therefore being representative of the feminised flow of television attributable to the ‘dumbing down’ of television, that the FED has been largely absent from academic studies of dramatic fiction.

In part two of this chapter I will address further these issues of cultural value and how it is the ‘feminine’ identity of the FEDs that have contributed to their academic neglect. I will subsequently review some recent research that provides a framework for approaching and making evaluations of these popular feminine dramas.

## **Conclusions to Part One: Broadcasting Contexts**

In this first section I have explored shifts in prime time television in relation to the ‘feminization of television’. I have argued that shifts in programming, particularly the rise in lifestyle genres and the soaping of television genres, are less a move to programmes catering solely for women and ‘women’s interests’, but rather are representative of the un-gendering of spaces and discourses associated with ‘the feminine’ within this period. Following Adkins and Moseley, I have argued that the hybrid nature of these texts at the level of narrative, aesthetics and representation are



suggestive of a wider cultural shift in which conceptions of gender are becoming more fluid rather than represented in terms of polarised oppositions.

However, I have also explored how the construction of shifts to broadcasting programming as one of a process of ‘feminization’ within academic and journalistic criticism not only suggests traditional discourses of femininity and masculinity are still very much circulating within contemporary British culture, but that in this instance traditional gendered values are used symbolically to represent the bemoaned state of British television. Here, it can be noted, rather than representing a utopian postfeminist victory for women, the characterisation of prime time television as one that has been subjected to ‘feminization’ in the 1990s is one which is rather more dystopian, one which is aligned with the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting and the perceived ‘dumbing down’ of television.

## **Part two: Critical contexts**

### **Issues of ‘quality’, value and taste**

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, while the aim of section one has been to contextualise the production of the FED as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction in relation to the feminization of British television in the mid- to late-1990s, the aim of this section is to address the subsequent academic neglect of the FED precisely because of its status as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction that characterises the feminised flow of British television.

I will review, for instance, that while the deregulation of television and the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting has promoted issues of programme ‘quality’ to the top of the Media Studies agenda, these debates have drawn on and reinforced very narrow and elitist definitions of ‘quality’ that the field of Television Studies (and Media and Cultural Studies more generally) have attempted to negate.

Drawing on research by Brunson, Mulgan and Geraghty, I review how paradoxically the reassertion of traditional and narrow conceptions of what constitutes ‘quality’ television has occurred because of the failure within the subject area to create a

critical culture in which more useful ways of making evaluations and conceptualising cultural value are openly discussed. I will illustrate this point through the case of television drama by reviewing two predominant types of television drama: the ‘serious drama’ and the American ‘Must See’ television drama that have been given critical attention because they conform to narrow definitions of ‘quality’ television. I will go on to review how the FED has been the subject of academic neglect within feminist television criticism because this area of study is similarly governed by the established hierarchy of cultural values and taste preferences.

The purpose of reviewing the academic neglect of the FED as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction is to illustrate the continuing marginalisation and denigration of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction within the academy in the context of the 1990s. The purpose of this review is to strengthen some of the key points that were raised in section one; namely the way in which in a post second wave feminist context ‘feminine values’ may have come to dominate television and indeed culture more generally, but where this inversion of gendered cultural assumptions is not one accompanied by shifts to the hierarchy of cultural value that inform Media Studies academic criticism.

Similarly to previous feminist studies of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction, I will conclude that the critical neglect of the FED is due to the gendered and classed hierarchies of taste and value that continue to pervade the field of Media Studies.

### **‘Serious drama’ as ‘quality’ drama**

As I explored in section one of this chapter, the ‘feminization’ of prime-time television has not been received positively by critics but is rather constructed as marking a decline in the standards and ‘quality’ of British television. As I have also reviewed the pessimistic judgements of the feminization of television put forward by male journalists and television critics, representatives of the audio-visual industries and Media Studies academics have been formed in relation to the established hierarchy of cultural values that reinforces and privileges cultural values associated with masculinity.

The re-instatement of traditional conceptions of cultural value within the context of the 1990s to infer the ‘quality’ of televisual texts needs to be framed in relation to

existing ways in which ‘quality’ television has been defined within Television Studies. Indeed, the fallback on traditional conceptions of cultural value to detect and infer the ‘quality’ of televisual texts can be contextualised in relation to a Television Studies that is ill-equipped to make evaluative judgements of ‘quality’ because these have been omitted from the subject area since its inception in the 1970s. While Christine Geraghty in her 2003 article ‘Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama’ provides six reasons for this situation. Two interrelated factors which she discusses are particularly pertinent to this discussion.

Firstly, the establishment of television as a worthy object of cultural study displaced the engagement with traditional modes of judgement in order to engage with the pleasure of media consumption. Secondly, and following on from this, making judgements of television, particularly aesthetic judgements, was seen in light of the impact of Bourdieu and Foucault to impose the cultural norms of the powerful (Geraghty 2003: 27-28). On the one hand, textual studies of television have largely taken an analytical and ideological (and latterly a discursive) bent or, as Brunsdon argues, the issue of what is considered ‘good’ television has been ‘side-stepped by concentrating on audience studies and what people watch’ (1997: 114).

However, as Brunsdon (1990) and Mulgan (1990) have argued, the refusal to engage with issues of ‘quality’ within the subject area on the grounds that, drawing on Bourdieu (1979), this was to impose the cultural norms and tastes of the powerful has ironically meant that only the most conservative ideas of ‘quality’ are circulating within television studies (Brunsdon 1997: 124/130).

Discourses of what constitutes ‘quality’ or good television have, then, tended to be narrowly defined in Britain by drawing legitimation from other cultural forms such as theatre, literature or music, or when television poses a privileged relation to reality. In relation to this latter quality, Brunsdon argues: ‘Thus sports, public events, current affairs and wildlife programmes are “good television” if we seem to get unmediated access to the real world, and are not distracted by thinking about television *as television*’ (ibid: 113). Taken together as Brunsdon argues:

Television (by implication, not itself good) becomes worthy when it brings to a wider audience already legitimated high-and middle brow culture. In this mode, television can be good as a potentially democratic, or socially extensive, transmitter.

(1997: 112)

That is to say, to allow Brunson to continue, ‘the dominant and conventional way of answering the question “What is good television?” is to slip television, unnoticeably, transparently, into the already existing aesthetic and social hierarchies’ (1997: 113). This is evident in the genre of television drama, a genre that is associated with the ‘respectable’ end of television (Caughie 2000: 2), where the dominant type of drama that has been perceived to represent ‘quality’ is that which falls within the above criteria, namely ‘serious drama’.

‘Serious drama’ is useful to explore for two reasons. Firstly, for the way in which it confirms existing hierarchies of cultural quality, taste and value but secondly, and following on from this first point, because this is the type of drama that has been lamented by academic critics as being in decline with the shift to a more consumer-led approach to broadcasting in the 1990s.

‘Serious drama’ complete with scare quotes is used by John Caughie (2000) in *Television Drama* as a shorthand to refer to a particular area of British television drama which, unlike the majority of television’s output, fits seamlessly into legitimised hierarchies of taste:

Just as the notion of the ‘legitimate’ came to serve as a way of distinguishing a culturally approved theatre from the popular theatre of melodrama and music hall, so ‘serious drama’ operates to mark off a ‘legitimate’ cultural territory within television from other areas which are not legitimated by the official discourses of cultural approval. Used in this way, the territory of ‘serious drama’ is undefined because it does not need to be defined: it is the shared currency of those who own the cultural capital. Stripped of its scare quotes, it is not a term which anyone would own up to or defend seriously in the circles in which they move – and yet the idea still seems to creep in like a code understood by like-minded people, signalling a sense of worth which is assumed to be shared [...].

(2000: 3)

‘Serious drama’ from this conception is one which is constructed in opposition to popular television. In this section I review two particular varieties of ‘serious drama’. Firstly, heritage drama which I review only briefly because, while it has been a dominant form in signifying ‘quality’ British drama, it is less relevant to this thesis. Secondly I will review what I refer to as the ‘progressive drama’ to outline its signifiers of ‘quality’ which have more relevance to this study.

### The heritage television drama

The British ‘heritage drama’, or the ‘costume drama’ as it has come to be described in the 1990s (Cooke 2003: 166), has occupied a significant place in the broadcasting schedules since the noticeable success of *The Forsyte Saga* (BBC 1967), *Brideshead Revisited* (Granada 1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (Granada 1981) and subsequently in the 1990s with productions such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (BBC2 1994), Charles Dickens’ *Martin Chuzzlewit* (BBC2 1994) and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (BBC1 1995).

This ‘Brideshead in the Crown’ form of heritage and costume drama has been perceived, particularly in the 1980s, to represent the acme of British ‘quality’ (Brunsdon 1990:42; Mulgan 1990; Caughie 2000 and Cooke 2003) through the embodiment of four ‘uncontroversial’ indicators of ‘quality’. Firstly, like some ‘serious drama’, the ‘Brideshead in the Crown’ form of drama gains legitimacy from being adaptations of classic English novels; secondly, from having attached to them the ‘best of British acting’; thirdly and following on from this second point, from being marked by high production values where the ‘money is spent according to upper-middle-class taste codes’ and fourthly as heritage export where these series ‘produced a certain image of England and Englishness (with little reference to the rest of Britain), in which national identity is expressed through class and imperial identity’ (Brunsdon 1990: 142-143).

Although this type of drama has subsequently been critiqued by academics for being ‘formally unchallenging’ (Brunsdon 1990: 143; Higson 1996; Caughie 2000), it has nevertheless received a significant amount of critical attention because of its embodiment of the ‘uncontroversial signifiers of quality’ and through the incorporation

of established taste codes; codes which contribute ‘towards the maintenance and reproduction of a literary and cultural heritage’ (O’Regan 2000: 304).

### The ‘progressive’ television drama

In this section I use the term ‘progressive television drama’ as an umbrella term to refer to the other types of drama, exclusive of heritage drama, which Caughie’s term ‘serious drama’ covers. This second form of drama is one which:

[...] derives from the theatre, and finds its classical form in the single play; a category which is associated with cinema, and finds its most recognisable form in a number of the films commissioned by Channel Four; a category which is more or less specific to television, and finds its forms in certain authored [...] series and serials.

(ibid: 7)

Firstly, similar to heritage drama, ‘progressive’ drama bears the hallmarks of ‘quality’ through its association with more prestigious cultural forms; in this instance the cinema, but most noticeably the theatre. Significant in this respect is the single play which has become synonymous with the ‘golden age’ (1965-1975) of television drama in slots such as the BBC’s *The Wednesday Play* and *Play for Today* series (Caughie 2000: 57; Cooke 2003: 66).

Secondly, progressive drama bears the hallmarks of ‘quality’ through the signifiers of artistic merit: that of authorship. Here, for instance, the single play or series and serials to which Caughie refers have become synonymous with a group of British auteurs such as Ken Loach, Tony Garnett, Troy Kennedy Martin and Dennis Potter.

Taken together, these two characteristics - its theatrical heritage and its authorship - signify a third marker of ‘quality’ status: as texts which bear the hallmarks of an avant garde modernist sensibility.<sup>31</sup> As Caughie has argued, while the auteurs did not identify

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<sup>31</sup> Modernism is a movement in the arts and religion that aims to break with traditional forms or ideas and which is associated with such artists as Pablo Picasso, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Bertolt Brecht. Modernism as John Storey (2001) in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* argues: ‘In spite of the fact that it often quoted from popular culture, is marked by a deep suspicion of all things popular. Its entry into the museum and the academy was undoubtedly made easier (regardless of its declared antagonism to “bourgeois philistinism”) by its appeal to, and homologous relationship with, the elitism of class society’ (2001: 148).

themselves as modernist artists<sup>32</sup>, this type of progressive drama can be seen as modernist through its embodiment of the principles of a Brechtian theatre: as a transmitter of political ideas which attempts to engage the audience through negating and disrupting the dominant aesthetics of television through the use of a non-naturalistic or ‘critical realist’ aesthetic (ibid: 153-154). As Dennis Potter himself describes:

Most television ends up offering its viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally revved notions of ‘reality’. The best naturalist or realist drama, of the Loach-Garnett-Allen school of instance, breaks out of this cosy habit by the vigour, clarity, originality and depth of its perceptions of a more comprehensive reality. The best non-naturalist drama, in its very structures disorientates the viewer smack in the middle of the orientation process which television perpetually uses. It disrupts the patterns that are endemic to television, and upsets and exposes the narrative styles of so many of the other allegedly non-fiction programmes. It shows the frame in the picture when most television is busy showing the picture in the frame. [...]

And it reminds the viewer, even as he [sic] lurches with a growl towards the off button, that he is at least watching a play, A Play, A Play...

(1977: 37)

Just as Brunson argued that ‘quality’ television is signified through its privileged relation to reality, progressive drama is ‘quality’ drama through its alignment with the dominant and celebrated British cinematic tradition of documentary-realism. As Sue Thornham and Tony Purvis in their 2005 publication *Television Drama* argue, just as British documentary film of the 1930s was conceived of as both art and ‘social truth’ (Grierson 1966: 215), so ‘quality’ television drama has been seen to embody both the creative vision of the individual artist and a politically oppositional and realist concept of “truth” (2005: 17). Crucially, ‘progressive’ drama is constructed as ‘quality’ television drama because of its socially engaged character and its embodiment of the ideals and official discourse of public service broadcasting in Britain: its commitment to inform and educate as well as to entertain its audiences. This form of drama then is

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<sup>32</sup> As Caughie argues, since the attraction of television is precisely its inclusiveness, its ability to attract the popular audience, for ‘matters of public relations and marketing’ television dramatists have preferred to appeal to their audience in the ‘soft tones of non-naturalism’ rather than through their association with a modernist aesthetic that is associated with an experimental, difficult and exclusive ‘high art’ (2000: 153).

constructed in opposition to popular naturalistic drama, such as the soap opera, which characterises the flow of television.

In summary, progressive drama is constructed as ‘quality’ drama within Media Studies academic criticism because of its negation of the qualities that are associated with television and which conform to the credentials of modernist art. Working through a critical realist or non-naturalistic aesthetic, ‘progressive’ television drama is ‘quality’ drama through bringing to a wider audience already legitimated high- and middle-brow culture.

However, ‘progressive’ drama characterised as ‘quality’ drama has not gone uncritiqued for the elitist values that it privileges and reaffirms. Or more specifically, it has been critiqued by feminist inflected accounts such as those put forward by Macmurrough-Kavanagh (2000) Hallam (2000) and Thornham and Purvis (2005) for the way in which it, as ‘quality’ drama, reaffirms the existing cultural hierarchy and the association with men and male values with high culture and by association women and ‘feminine values’ with debased forms of mass culture: in this instance, television.

### Problematising ‘progressive’ television drama as ‘quality’ drama

Reviewing academic appraisals of this particular variety of ‘serious drama’, such as those put forward by Gilbert (1980) and Brandt (1981), for example, Thornham and Purvis deconstruct the way in which these male academics present a narrative of the male auteur learning to move from being a servant of television or an apprentice within it, to being ‘its master’ (2005: 19). ‘In so doing’, Thornham and Purvis argue, the male auteur ‘creates a defined space for “art” within television, a solid space within its flow of television’ (ibid). Drawing on the debates between authors such as David Edgar, John McGrath and Trevor Griffiths in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Thornham and Purvis similarly review how their narrative is one concerning how effectively to intervene in the naturalised flow of television. As Thornham and Purvis deconstruct, what unites these writers, drawing on a phrase by Griffiths, is their attempt at the ‘strategic penetration’ of television (ibid: 20). Referring back to the way in which metaphors of ‘the feminine’ have been evoked in accounts of television, Thornham and Purvis argue



‘television drama becomes a subject worthy of [male] critical attention when it “masters” or “penetrates” that femininity’ (ibid).

Moreover, as Julia Hallam (2000) in ‘Power Plays: Gender, Genre and Lynda Plante’ and Madeleine Macmuraugh-Kavanagh (2000) in ‘Too Secret For Words: Coded Dissent in Female-Authored Wednesday Plays’ have argued, this version of ‘quality’ drama has not only marginalised women as writers historically within the TV industry itself but also within the critical institutions of the academy (Hallam 2000: 141). I will explore these two points in turn.

*The institutional marginalisation of the female dramatist*

Macmuraugh-Kavanagh argues that while *The Wednesday Play* series can be defined as a landmark in British television drama, it can also be seen as a male-dominated bastion of cultural elitism which is illustrated through the marginalisation of the female dramatists in its output (2000: 150). Macmuraugh-Kavanagh shows, for instance, out of the 176 plays transmitted between October 1964 and October 1970, only 16 were female authored and only 13 single female authored (ibid: 151).<sup>33</sup>

Attributing this fact to the male hegemony of media institutions, the area of ‘serious drama’ was also constructed as a male cultural practice given that historically it has been dominated by men at every level of the production hierarchy. Macmuraugh-Kavanagh states, for instance, how the male hegemony of *The Wednesday Play* which dominated the production hierarchies at the BBC further marginalised and demeaned the work of its female dramatists. She states that while male writers, whose work tended to refer to “public” contexts such as industrial unrest or social injustice, were awarded prestigious film treatment and found themselves in an elite, women writers, whose work seemed to refer to the private world, were (with the exception of Nell Dunn and *Up the Junction*) excluded from this and both they and their material were classified as inferior (2000: 155). Paradoxically, Macmuraugh-Kavanagh states that the elite film drama only rarely met with (male) critical acclaim and, although derided by the contemporary

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<sup>33</sup> Furthermore Macmuraugh-Kavanagh states ‘female contribution to the series actually dwindled during the course of its six year run, falling from a peak of four or five (of 32) plays per season in the period 1965-67 to none in 1969-70.

press, it was the female-authored studio dramas that consistently worked for audiences (ibid).

Despite critical acclaim, the constructions of women within this strand of 'quality', 'progressive', 'serious drama' have been just as limiting for 'women'. They have been presented consistently across this type of drama as victims, and 'agents of disruption' or have been excluded altogether 'so the focus is firmly on the interaction between male characters' (ibid: 153). It is through constructing 'women' as victims such as Cathy in *Cathy Come Home* or as threats such as Yosser's wife in *Boys from the Blackstuff* that, I would argue, the progressive television drama duplicates their antithesis: the 'bourgeois' realist text of the Hollywood cinema, with their positioning of women similarly to the latter as a symbol there to flatter or console the male patriarchal ego (Mulvey 1977).

#### *The critical marginalisation of female-authored drama*

As I have so far discussed, given that 'serious drama' is a predominantly male sphere of cultural production that marginalises women, academic criticism engaging and celebrating this form of drama as 'quality' drama duplicates the marginalisation of women at the level of cultural criticism.

As Hallam has recently argued, given that it is authorial innovation rather than generic renovation that is the 'keystone' of 'quality drama' within British academic criticism, this has privileged a discussion of this male-orientated drama over and above the female-authored drama which often works within popular generic and serials forms (2000: 141). This is illustrated with a brief glance at the contents of recent publications on the subject of British television drama including George Brandt's earlier edited collection, *British Television Drama* (1981), whose review of television writers are all male, and his later publication *British Television Drama in the 1980s* which marginalises the female dramatist. It is also evident, however, in John Caughie's (2000) *Television Drama* and Lez Cooke's recent *British Television Drama: A History* (2003), which duplicates the focus on male-orientated 'serious drama' and subsequently male auteurs.

In summary, 'serious drama' is a shorthand for signifying 'quality' male-identified drama in the contemporary period which reinforces existing legitimised hierarchies of male, middle class tastes and preferences. If in this section I have laboured the way in which 'serious drama' comes to stand for 'quality' British television drama historically, I do so because of the particular re-construction and reinvestment in this form of drama as 'quality drama' in the 2000s in academic criticism.

Indeed, the next passage I will address how shifts within this broadcasting context have reinforced the importance and significance of 'serious drama' as 'quality' British drama.

### Progressive drama as 'quality' drama in post-1990 academic criticism

The 1990s and 2000s have seen an incitement of academic discourse which reconstructs 'serious drama' as 'quality' British television drama, and which by extension replicates the marginalisation of more middlebrow and popular 'feminine-gendered' drama. Publications which reconstitute 'serious drama' as 'quality' drama in this period, for instance, include Brandt's later *British Television Drama in the 1980s* (1993)<sup>34</sup>; Bignell et al's 2000 collection: *British Television Drama: Past Present and Future*; and Billingham's *Sensing the City Through Television* (2000). This perspective also informs Cooke's (2003) selection of dramas which he discusses in *British Television Drama: A History*.<sup>35</sup>

This incitement to discourse with regard to 'serious drama', can be contextualised in relation to the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting in the late modern period that I touched on in section one.

As a precursor to the 1990s Broadcasting Act, the British government's white paper: *Broadcasting in the 1990s: Competition, Choice and Quality* in 1988 promoted

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<sup>34</sup> Brandt's (1993) publication also encompasses reviews of more heritage texts (such as the chapter on *The Jewel in the Crown*) but also reviews of popular texts such as *Inspector Morse* and *Brookside* which are legitimated because they share the properties of heritage drama (in the case of *Inspector Morse*) and with serious drama (in the case of *Brookside* which focuses upon the socio-political discourses of one particular storyline – that of Damon's YTS scheme).

<sup>35</sup> In introductory guides to television drama such as Creeber's (2001) *The Television Genres Book* a discussion of 'serious drama' takes precedence over more popular forms of drama, thus reinforcing traditional hierarchies of taste and value.

the issue of 'quality' to the top of the Media Studies agenda.<sup>36</sup> As Caughie has argued, putting the issue of 'quality' on the Media Studies agenda within this broadcasting climate provided an opportunity to give 'serious' texts 'sustained and critical attention', given that evaluation of such dramas had been treated with hostility in favour of the analysis of the production of meaning and pleasure in texts. As Caughie argues, 'for a television studies informed by critical theory and cultural studies, 'serious drama' belonged to the bourgeoisie, placing it in a territory which was just below the horizon, only visible in certain lights' (ibid: 6).

Secondly, the re-construction of 'serious drama' as 'quality' drama has also occurred because the same shifts to broadcasting in the 1990s have contributed to the displacement of 'serious drama', particularly the single play format. Indeed, reviewing these different accounts of television drama cited above, two broad themes emerge.

The first theme is one of loss. This characterises, for instance, the backward-looking, historical format of the majority of these publications and their elegiac, nostalgic yearning for this form of 'quality', 'serious drama' in the 'golden age' of television. This is captured most overtly in Cooke's recent history of television drama:

In this more competitive climate many broadcasters, including the BBC, were seemingly more than willing to give the public what they wanted, leading to accusations of a 'dumbing down' in broadcasting and a significant decline in the production of challenging, social issue drama for which British television was renowned in the 1960s and 1970s.

(2003: 162)

A similar tone is captured in Bignell et al. Despite the fact that the essays from Hallam and Macmurrough-Kavanagh in this collection challenge the narrow definitions of

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<sup>36</sup> The 'quality' of broadcasting was subordinated in the government's White Paper to that of market values and the 'freedom to buy, sell and publish' (Mulgan 1990: 5). While Brunson gives some indication of the press coverage of this issue (1990a) the paper has also seen an incitement to discourse in Media Studies research. As well as two articles by Brunson - 'Problems with Quality' (1990) and 'Aesthetics and Audiences' (1990) - there has been a growing body of articles and collections on this subject, for instance Mulgan (1990); Corner, Harvey and Lury (1994); Gripsrud (2000); Geraghty (2003) and an entire edition of *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (2001 Vol 4 (4)). Indeed as Mulgan (1990) and Harvey et al (1994) have stated, arguments about what 'quality in this period television means is related to the nature of broadcasting as an industry, the socio-cultural-centrality of television and the particular aesthetic-discursive character of the medium' (Corner et al 1994:1).

‘quality’ on which ‘serious drama’ is based, the overall tone is set in the Editors’

Introduction to the collection:

At its best, television drama has provided not only a window on the world, but also a critical interrogation of it. Its willingness to say ‘things that wouldn’t normally get said’, however, meant ultimately that it signed its own death warrant: it is no coincidence that the single play, the most radical form of television drama, disappeared from the schedules during the oppressively reactionary 1980s.

(2000: 22)

Underpinning the sense of loss that characterises these accounts, however, is not only the loss of the single play but also the sense of a displacement of a socially engaged television drama. This is succinctly articulated by Caughie in the introduction to his publication, *Television Drama*, where he reflects on his own narrative of loss:

If, as the book progresses towards the present, a sense of the elegiac creeps in, it is not an elegy for a lost Golden Age of Television Drama, but for the loss of that sense of engagement – the sense that television drama really mattered within the culture...

(2000: 1)

For Caughie and for Cooke, the concern in this particular context is the shift to a ‘postmodern’ mode of broadcasting which has displaced the sense of social engagement of modernist texts. In this way, Caughie shares the lament of other Modernists such as Jean Luc Godard and Frederic Jameson that the proliferation of audio-visual culture of the late twentieth century, ‘for which television has come to be emblematic’, has caused the lack of ‘monumentality in television and video’ and the ‘waning of value’ and ‘the dissipation of great works into the shifting sands of postmodern culture’ (ibid: 89). Indeed, while he accuses Godard’s attribution to television of the death of cinema as ‘telephobia’, he is nevertheless sympathetic to the modernist logic that underpins his argument:

And yet the ideal cinema which he memorializes belongs to a conception of art which it would be painful to abandon; art as that which goes beyond, which stakes out new territories of meaning, value, and experience, which refuses and subverts and transgresses, and which takes the audience where it has not gone before.

(ibid: 90)

Similarly, while Caughie defines Jameson's critique as a libertarian Marxist, memorialising the passing of a monumental culture as 'grotesque' given that it 'was erected, at almost every point in history, on a system of elite groups, social exclusion and cultural contempts' (ibid), he is largely sympathetic to the lines of his argument, where he continues:

and yet the levelling out of difficult unities, the absorption of hard works into a generalised culture fuelled by consumption, leaves little purchase for a conception of art which both aspires to commonality and makes a material difference.

(ibid)

Moreover, whilst he negates earlier in the book the suggestion that television is a postmodern medium, stating

I think that television has owned up too readily to the modernist case against it, it has accepted too quickly its place in the generality of a phenomenological – rather than an aesthetic – audio-visual space, and has accommodated itself too easily to a version of postmodernism which itself is always already too easy.

(ibid: 91)

Caughie later revises this stance and is swayed towards viewing television as *the* postmodern medium where he argues 'if television is viewed in its generality it is hard not to feel some sympathy for this position' (ibid: 163).

However, in both cases Caughie argues that it is possible in the area of television drama 'to be able to make some discriminations and to identify boundaries' (ibid) between 'modernist' monumental and 'postmodern' commercial texts. Significantly, however, these 'monumental' texts are not the drama found in the context of the 1990s but the monumental texts of an earlier 'serious', 'quality' television drama; the 'plays and serials which came out of the tradition between the 1960s and the 1980s which had precisely that relationship between art and a common culture to which politically informed modernism might aspire' (ibid: 91).

In slipping back into a discussion of drama in a bygone era to distinguish between progressive and commercial texts 'not yet absorbed into the differentiated text

of “television itself” but standing out from the general flow of television as particularities which mark out difference, defining new possibilities of meaning and taking the audience where it has not been before’ (ibid), Caughie does little to disturb the narrow conceptualisation of ‘quality’ that characterises television drama criticism whilst at the same time characterising drama of the late modern (‘postmodern’) period as devoid of similar examples of such ‘quality’.

The second discernable theme characterising these accounts of television drama is the celebration of serials and series from the late modern period, that of the 1980s and 1990s, that bear the hallmarks of the ‘serious’ ‘quality’ drama that Caughie outlined as characterising the period between the 1960s and 1980s.

This is most evident in Cooke’s overview, where he argues that in a context in which channel controllers and commissioning editors were increasingly concerned to ‘play safe and win audiences with tried and tested formats’, there were still a few ‘progressive producers, writers and directors [who] rose to the challenge of reinventing television drama in the 1990s, finding new ways to work the system in order to produce what Tony Garnett has described as “Trojan Horse” drama’ (ibid: 162):

Throughout history people like us have had to use existing structures and make them work for us as best we can. If forced to work in a particular form or genre, then we must try to subvert it, or put new wine in old bottles, or find ways of creating ‘Trojan Horse’ drama

(Garnett quoted in Cooke ibid)

Across the different publications there is a tendency to focus on a few dramas which reinstate the markers of ‘Trojan Horse’ ‘quality’ drama; Troy Kennedy Martin’s *Edge of Darkness* (BBC 1985), Peter Flannery’s nine part serial *Our Friends in the North* (BBC2 1996) and Tony Marchant’s  *Holding On* (BBC 1997). Indeed, like the earlier commentaries of ‘serious drama’ which mark its ‘quality’ through its ability to master and penetrate the naturalistic flow of television, ‘Trojan Horse’ drama across these accounts of television drama is celebrated for penetrating the postmodern flow of television.

In this instance, television drama criticism has tended to privilege a discussion of the authored serials and series which have attempted to carry on the work of 'serious drama', that is dramas that privilege a discussion of the political, the social and the rational over the personal, the psychological and the emotional.

By replicating the academic television criticism of the 1970s and privileging male-authored 'serious drama', contemporary academic criticism also replicates the marginalisation of female-authored drama within the academy. Indeed, it is significant that 'serious drama' in the 1990s remains associated with older male auteurs such as Ken Loach as well as a new generation of male auteurs such as Tony Marchant, Paul Abbott, Jimmy McGovern and Russell T. Davies. While women are granted more of a central role in some of this new generation of 'serious drama' such as *Our Friends in the North* and Abbott's *Clocking Off* (Red Productions 2000-2003) and *Shameless* (Company Pictures 2004-) in comparison to their forerunners, they are nevertheless afforded a limited repertoire similar to women in previous examples of 'serious drama'. Maggie, for instance, may be the central female character in *Our Friends in the North*, but I would argue that her narrative is still subordinated in comparison to the other three male members of the group and one who is characterised as a victim of domestic abuse and a self-sacrificing mother. Similarly, in both Abbott's dramas the characterisation of working-class female characters is stereotyped as being either sexually promiscuous (such as Yvonne Kolakowski in *Clocking Off*) or maternal matriarchal figures who keep their families together (such as Fiona Gallagher in *Shameless*).

In this section I have reviewed the way in which 'serious drama' has been celebrated for penetrating the naturalistic and subsequently the postmodern flow of television. However it is also the case that forms of popular drama have been similarly denigrated within academic criticism in this period for characterising the postmodern flow of television and embodying the values that 'serious drama' have attempted to master and penetrate. To illustrate this point I will review Robin Nelson's account of television drama of the 1990s in *TV Drama in Transition* (1997). I review this account in particular to illustrate the way in which the values of 'serious drama' have come to be the marker of 'quality' drama which popular drama fails to live up to. Secondly, I



review this account because, in this instance, the drama that does not live up to this standard is the flexi-narrative form of drama that characterises the feminised flow of television in the late modern period and which informs the conventions of the FED.

### Robin Nelson's account of 'quality' television drama

Nelson's account of what constitutes 'quality' television drama is of particular interest because of the way in which he attempts to distance his account from the pessimistic accounts of television drama of this period. Indeed, Nelson's approach to television drama is broadly within a postmodern framework, one which attempts to bridge the 'great divide' between high and low cultural forms as illustrated through his discussion of range of television texts from *Baywatch* to *Middlemarch*. As he argues, 'no clear boundary will be drawn between the two [...] *Middlemarch* will be recognised both as a canonical nineteenth century novel in "the great tradition" and a popular television drama serial, commercially produced in 1994 for a transnational market' (ibid: 8).

However, despite some noble gestures such as conceding 'whilst television drama has changed markedly since its beginnings with some losses on the way, current TV output is by no means all bad' (ibid: 1), the criteria which he establishes to ascertain the markers of 'quality' drama amidst this diverse range of dramas tally with the high cultural and political values which underpin the study of 'serious drama'.

For Nelson, making evaluative judgement of the signifiers of 'quality' within these texts are based on three criteria established by John Mepham in *The Ethics of Quality in Television*: 'The rule of diversity' which 'involves pursuing a means to sustain a diverse output such that varied social – as well as individual – needs are served'. Secondly 'Usable stories': 'these told according to conditions the audience understands but which - in order to pursue the third criterion the ethic of truth telling' – avoid mere conventionalism (ibid: 7).

Indeed, Nelson's criteria appear to be useful criteria. Building on my own approach to representational systems that I stated in the introduction of this thesis, for instance, Nelson's account points to the way in which television provides narratives that we use in the making of our own sense of self in relation to the world around us. This is

mirrored in Nelson's own discussion of television drama where judgements should be based on the possibilities of communication, on 'our commonality of being in the world' (ibid: 228) and on the role that drama can play in 'bridging the gap between subjectivities...on the contested ground of what it means to be human' (ibid: 229). However, it is Nelson's key criterion, that dramas should encourage viewers to 'think more reflectively and feel more profoundly about human life and value' (ibid: 230) that, as Geraghty has argued, leads Nelson to privilege a discussion of the difficult, male-orientated realist drama over and above the popular flexi-narrative drama that characterises the majority of television drama (2003: 32).

Below I want to explore the way in which Nelson's particular characterisation of flexi-narrative drama as popular 'postmodern' drama prevents it from being able to fulfil these criteria which instead are best realised in more contemporary reincarnations of 'serious drama' underpinned by a modernist, realist sensibility. To reiterate, the purpose of reviewing this account is to illustrate the value judgements that characterise Nelson's account of television drama which marginalises popular dramatic forms such as the FED.

In section one of this chapter I reviewed how Nelson identified flexi-narrative drama as emerging as the predominant form of drama of the late modern period to appeal to a wide and diverse range of audience segments in an increasingly competitive and consumer-led context of broadcasting. As the following extract from Nelson illustrates, his account, like those of Caughie and Cooke et al, is a narrative of loss, one characterised by a concern that the flexi-narrative form characterised as 'virtually all popular series' is displacing the kind of drama that he values – the single play:

As the unresolved multiple narratives of soaps and series found favour with schedulers and were accepted by audiences, the plot/resolution narrative diminished in importance. Narrative drama in a liberal consensual tradition, with convincing characters whose actions have consequences, privileged story of performance – performance alternatively conceived, that is, in terms of a display of celebrity or lifestyle. As the single play slot gave way to series, the outcomes of the plots – in terms of the consequences of actions - similarly diminished.

(ibid)

It is precisely in its use as a serviceable and commercial vehicle for prime time television that Nelson isolates it as a conservative form of drama. This is illustrated through the distinction he draws between the flexi-narrative form as it was originally conceived in the American *Hill Street Blues* to appeal to more affluent 'quality' (AB/C1's) demographics and its more 'everyday usage' on British television in texts such as *Casualty* and *Heartbeat* where it is utilised to appeal to a broader audience.

In its original conception for 'quality' audiences, the flexi-narrative's movement away from the traditional narrative mode of problem leading to resolution was called for, not only to 'hold the attention spans of an audience whose powers of concentration were diminished', but where the 'relatively unambiguous, established formulaic narrative did not facilitate new challenges leading to the examination of values, at a time of a sense of the greater complexity of issues' brought about by the liberalising cultural developments from the 'beat' generation of the 1960s, the civil rights movement, and the feminist movement of the early 1970s (ibid: 30-31).

In this scenario, the multi-narrative, multi character format of the 'quality' flexi-narrative drama achieved a 'dense texture', where the 'inter-relationship of narrative strands can result in a complex dramatic construct with a range of multiple-plot relationships between them'. Moreover, the lack of resolution to difficult problems, far from being a dis-abling force for the truth-telling of usable stories, rather denied conventionalism and addressed audiences who sensed the complexity of things in the historical world that weren't neatly tied up in the end of each episode or series (ibid: 31). In relation to this form of flexi-narrative, Nelson argues 'If as [Jane] Feuer suggests, "quality" means "more literate, more stylistically complex, and more psychologically 'deep' than ordinary fare" (1984: 56) then flexi-narrative is a contender' (ibid: 42).

However, Nelson's review of the 'quality' flexi-narrative drama stands in contrast to his account of *Casualty* as an example of more 'regular flexi-narrative production'. Here the status of the flexi-narrative drama, as innovative teller of usable stories is lost when it shifts from addressing the 'quality' demographics through processes of narrowcasting, to that of attempting to fulfil the needs of broadcasters to appeal to the broader audiences of evening television.

Rather, in Nelson's account, it is this more commercial and everyday use which aligns it with its forerunner soap opera and prevents it telling 'usable stories'. Comparing its limitations to those of the continuous nature of soap opera, Nelson argues that the serial, multi-narrative and multi-character nature of flexi-narrative drama is needed in television 'if only for the benefit of the scheduler filling large time slots...and where the fluid, open text better matches the sporadic attention span of the three minute culture' (ibid: 23).

Similarly the flexi-narrative drama's ability to engage the audience through a more complex treatment of character and subject through the multi-character, multi plot is denied in its everyday form: '[s]uch a feature of plotting is ...not a significant factor in building the large audiences articulated in ratings discourse, because the level of reading difficulty is associated with a ... "quality" audience' (ibid: 42). Rather, the institutional constraints of producing prolific quantities of television drama deny the time for more prolonged attention to 'sophisticated' compositional strategies so that for Nelson a 'difference might be provisionally drawn between the conscious structuring of multiple-plot narratives in *Hill Street Blues* and the almost random chance that other series will amount to the sum of their fragmented parts (ibid: 47). At best the everyday form of flexi-narrative offers a semblance of a usable story through television's 'naturalist habit', but at worst they employ the 'new textual strategies and a new affective order' of a postmodern flexiad drama (ibid: 74):

The dramatic mode remains ostensibly 'realist' in that the mimetic conventions of construction of an illusionist world are retained...But the signifiers are deployed increasingly for their intrinsic appeal as evocators of 'values and lifestyles' rather than – as they may have been in the referential drama of the past – tied to signifieds which denote a contemporary, historical (though fictional) 'reality'.

(ibid)

What is produced in flexiad drama is, then, comparative to television advertisements and pop videos, 'the circulation of signs which appear to construct a recognisable world' but which amount 'to nothing more than simulation in Baudrillard's sense of copies for which there are no originals' (ibid: 86/88).

In contrast to his discussion of the flexi-narrative drama, whose tendency towards a postmodern flexiad format prevent it from the telling of 'usable stories' Nelson reinstates, comparative to the accounts of 'serious drama' above, Peter Flannery's drama *Our Friends in the North* as a 'quality' text. *Our Friends in the North* is then constructed as a 'quality' text in Nelson's account, comparable to the social-realist texts of Garnett and Loach in its use of what Nelson terms 'critical realism' (1997: 235/245). Indeed, like Caughie and Cooke et al's account of 'serious drama', Nelson distinguishes *Our Friends in the North* from the rest of the flow of television as: authored, 'serious drama', one that takes risks, (exemplified in way its political underpinnings threatened its production), one whose narrative 'defies' the 'fragmented, flexiad drama by [...] tracing the lives of four central characters through thirty years'; one whose developed and complex narrative structure demands a sustained viewing; one which invites critical and personal reflection through the interweaving of personal histories of its protagonists with the broader political issues. Indeed, although Nelson is keen to point out that the text's 'success overall is to ground the political questions in the everyday lives of its four central characters' and that the 'personal scenes are amongst the most powerful scenes', he draws back from this because it 'ultimately marginalize[s] more public politics' (1997: 245). Similarly to Caughie's discussion of *The Wednesday Plays* as examples of monuments on television, so too Nelson's discussion of *Our Friends in the North* is representative of a modernist television event.

In reviewing Nelson's account of television drama in the 1990s I have illustrated the way in which the criteria and values which he distinguishes as marking 'quality' television drama replicate those found in academic accounts of 'serious' television drama. Ultimately, this is exemplified through Nelson's privileging of Peter Flannery's social-realist drama *Our Friends in the North* which has been similarly celebrated among Nelson's contemporaries for its adherence to the values of 'serious drama' over and above the discussion of more popular forms of flexi-narrative drama.

Indeed, Nelson's account of *Our Friends in the North* can be critiqued for the way in he attempts to distinguish it from the rest of the flow of television as a contemporary form of critical (social) realist drama. In so doing however, Nelson denies

the text's own familial resemblances to soap opera and flexi-narrative drama; where it is precisely the multi-character, multi-narrative format of soap opera and flexi-narrative drama which contributes to the complex narrative that is woven in *Our Friends in the North*. Indeed, while acknowledging their significance, Nelson eschews the more personal and private aspects of the drama and he similarly glides over the way in which *Our Friends in the North* resembles soap opera through its domestic themes of parenting and relationships (ibid: 242).

Secondly, the distinctions Nelson constructs between forms of 'quality' and 'everyday' forms of flexi-narrative that characterise his discussion of the American series *Hill Street Blues* and British series *Casualty*, I would argue, also reinforces the hierarchy of legitimated cultural values. In his account, 'quality' flexi-narrative drama is 'quality' drama precisely because it is targeted at the 'quality' demographics. In other words, this brand of 'quality' drama is one which is valued because it, like 'serious drama', is aimed at and confirms middle-class tastes and preferences. In the following section I will explore how it is this branch of 'quality' flexi-narrative drama, or American 'Must See TV' as it has become more commonly known, that has come to represent the alternative way 'quality' television drama can be inferred in relation to popular television drama.

Thirdly, it is through its associations with middle-class viewers' taste preferences that Nelson validates certain forms of flexi-narrative drama. In so doing, I argue that Nelson's critique of popular forms of flexi-narrative drama for failing to fulfil the criteria of 'serious', high brow television drama (and middle-class tastes and preferences) also reinforces the association of popular and quotidian texts that form the flow of British television with inferior products of an encroaching mass culture.

In this section I have reviewed the way in which 'serious drama' has been privileged within recent academic publications of television drama because of the way in which it confirms existing and legitimated middle-class tastes and values. I have attributed this to the incitement to discourse regarding the 'quality' of television output in this period and within the subject area of Television Studies which does not have in place a more developed model for evaluating television drama. In so doing, I have

illustrated how the privileging of this form of drama within academic criticism marginalises the discussion of more popular and ‘feminine’ forms of drama.

I have reviewed that, in replicating the academic television criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, the privileging of male-authored ‘serious drama’ in the 1990s and 2000s replicates the marginalisation of female-authored drama that works within more popular formats. I have argued that such criticism not only reinstates distinctions of high and low cultural forms within the sphere of television drama, but also denigrates and characterises them as examples of mass culture which returns us to the debates of an earlier Television Studies regarding the validation of popular cultural texts. Moreover, this form of criticism also perpetuates the gendered cultural values that denigrate values associated with ‘the feminine’.

Later in this section I will draw on more recent accounts of television drama which provide more useful ways of evaluating different types of texts and which, therefore, avoid casting further symbolic violence on more popular forms such as the FED. For now, however, I want to turn to a second form of drama which has been privileged within academic criticism and which is representative of the ‘quality’ television that has been touched on in Nelson’s account above: that of American ‘Must See TV’. I will explore for instance that while these texts have been valued according to alternative criteria from that of ‘serious drama’, for their high production values which allows for a more positive evaluation of flexi-narrative forms, they are nevertheless valued comparative to ‘serious drama’ for the way in which they confirm and privilege middle-class tastes and preferences. I will explore how the academic criticism which centres on this form of drama that has achieved worldwide circulation and acclaim also marginalises the discussion of British ‘feminine’ texts that fall within the flow of British television.

### **‘Must See TV’**

As I have indicated through the review of Nelson’s account of television drama in the 1990s, it is popular American series and serials from *Hill Street Blues* to more recent texts such as *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) and *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-2005),

characterised as ‘Must See TV’ (Crisell 1997; Segrave 1998; Jancovich and Lyons 2003; McKee 2003), which have become the second way of defining ‘quality’ television drama in recent years. As with Nelson’s discussion of *Hill Street Blues*, the incitement to discourse surrounding American ‘Must See TV’ can be traced back to Jane Feuer’s research in this area in *MTM: ‘Quality Television’* (1984) and *Seeing Through the Eighties* (1995) which has subsequently informed more recent collections including Mark Jancovich and James Lyons’ *Quality Popular Television* (2003) and the I.B. Tauris series of edited collections on specific examples of ‘quality’ television.<sup>37</sup>

The significance of this form of drama, and the way in which it has come to dominate discussions of contemporary television drama, is captured by Lez Cooke’s recent experience of attending a conference on ‘quality television’ at Trinity College in Dublin in 2004, where he recounts how all of the 41 conference papers were on American drama and where half of these focused on four series in particular: *Sex and the City*; *Six Feet Under*; *The Sopranos* and *24* (2005: 23).

The first obvious but nevertheless significant point regarding the celebration of this form of ‘quality’ television is, then, its American identity. As I have discussed in the last section, although ‘Must See TV’ follows the general trend of popular drama in the era of availability by embodying a flexi-narrative format, their reception as ‘quality’ drama can be distinguished from other flexi-narrative dramas in that they are perceived as *event* television. That is as texts that stand out from the flow of television’s output and which are increasingly produced by cable companies such as HBO with high budgets and whose policies of narrowcasting allow greater freedom. Indeed, HBO’s tagline reflects this, stating ‘It’s not TV. It’s HBO’.

As I have also discussed, the privileging of American ‘Must See TV’ is constructed as ‘quality’ drama because it is targeted at the ‘quality’ demographics: ‘affluent viewers that advertisers [are] prepared to pay the highest rates to address’ (Jancovich and Lyons 2003: 3). In other words, this branch of ‘quality’ drama is one

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<sup>37</sup> This includes Akass, K and McCabe, J (2004) (eds.): *Reading Sex and the City*. London: I.B Tauris; Akass, K and McCabe, J (2005) (eds.): *Reading Six Feet Under*. London: I.B Tauris; Akass, K and McCabe, J (2007) (eds.): *Quality TV: Contemporary American Television and Beyond*. London: I.B Tauris and Lavery, D (2006) (ed.): *Reading The Sopranos*. London: I.B Tauris.



which is valued because, like ‘serious drama’, it is aimed at and confirms middle-class tastes and preferences.<sup>38</sup>

However, one significant outcome of this academic criticism of American ‘Must See TV’ is the way in which, like Nelson’s account, it does not construct the flexi-narrative form as being essentially conservative but allows for a more positive appraisal, albeit of the ‘quality’ variety of the flexi-narrative form. Below I review Glen Creeber’s particular characterisation of ‘quality’ flexi-narrative drama in *Serial Television* (2004) not only because it goes further than Nelson’s account in celebrating ‘quality’ flexi-narrative drama, giving a flavour of the way in which this form of drama has been discussed, but also because it raises some significant issues that informs my discussion of the FED as serial drama later in this chapter.

### Glen Creeber’s account of ‘quality’ flexi-narrative drama

For Creeber, going against the grain of much contemporary television criticism, the rise of continuous serials and series underpinned by a flexi-narrative structure is perceived positively as signalling the very ‘coming of age’ of television drama. Unlike the single play which ‘arrived out of a set of historical circumstances that were actually more theatrical than they were inherently televisual’, continuous flexi-narrative drama serial for Creeber ‘reflect[s] and celebrat[es] the inherent dynamics of the medium for which it has proved so uniquely suited’ (2004: 2). Reflecting and exploiting Raymond Williams’ conception of the television image as flow, Creeber argues:

Like soap opera, serialised drama recurs regularly throughout the schedule, weaving in and out of the domestic space and deliberately tapping into and playing with an audience’s sense of time in a way never imagined before by the cinema, theatre or single play. Simply in terms of hours alone the series and serial can produce a breadth of vision, a narrative scope and can capture an audience’s involvement in a way unequalled by few contemporary media.

(2004: 4)

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<sup>38</sup> Jancovich and Lyons for instance state: ‘the compulsiveness of ‘must see’ television is designed to appeal to affluent, highly educated consumers who value the literary qualities of these programmes’ (2003:3).

For Creeber, the incorporation of soap opera conventions in flexi-narrative serial drama, see it working in paradigmatic complexity (how particular events affect the complex network of characters) over syntagmatic determinacy (the eventual direction of the overall plot), and as drama whose decentred mode of address has the ability to 'give voice to an increasing number of perspectives and points of view' to create a narrative complexity which, for Creeber, 'better responds to and reveals the complexity, ambiguity and lack of narrative closure that typifies the contemporary world' (2004: 4-5).

What makes the finite serial a unique form for Creeber, however, is the combination of a flexi-narrative form within a single narrative arc. Whilst a central plot develops over the course of the serial, which is thus merely 'an expansion on the creative coherence of the single play', the finite serial also exploits two important elements of soap that Newcomb identified: that of intimacy and continuity which enable viewers to get to know characters and the story in greater detail and which encourage a far greater 'audience involvement, a sense of becoming a part of the lives and actions of the characters they see' (Newcomb 1974: 253 quoted in Creeber 2004: 9).

However, while connections between continuous serial and serial drama are prominent, Creeber also identifies four ways in which the new breed of flexi-narrative drama differ from soap opera. Firstly, that the broadcasting of these serials post-watershed enables their content and characterisation to be decidedly more adult and intense in tone; secondly, that despite the narrative closure of successful finite serials lessening to leave opportunity for subsequent sequels, there is still a combination of a loosely-defined narrative arc which enables narrative progression with a complex exchange of narrative and character complexity. Thirdly, there is a tendency towards more 'experimental' techniques which includes the subversion and reinvention of genre. Lastly, but most significantly, these serials offer a *new* relationship between politics and the self, 'meaning that political issues are now increasingly centred convincingly around the domain of personal and private interaction' (ibid).

It is this last point which Creeber argues 'reveals one of the most important changes that has taken place in television drama over the last twenty years or so' (ibid).

Indeed, rather than discussing this shift as marking a decline in the political engagement of television drama, Creeber, drawing on Higson, rather perceives this shift as taking place due to wider shifts in conceptualisations of the public and private and between the personal and political (2004: 12-13). For Creeber, these changing conceptualisations have in turn seen a marked shift in the codes of realism and the relationship between these concepts even within 'serious drama'. Thus he states:

Put crudely, traditional forms of British social realism tended to suggest that the problems in a character's life could be remedied by structural changes in society. In contrast, newer forms of realism have tended to reflect a less optimistic belief in the power of the political and social change as a whole, forcing a shift towards narratives of a more 'psychological' rather than overtly 'political' nature.

(2004: 13)

For Creeber then, the 'soap opera-isation' of long-form television drama should not be conceived purely as a move away from the 'social' and the 'political' towards the personal and the trivial, but as a gradual progression towards newer forms of representation which offer an arguably more contemporary articulation of present social experience (2004: 13). Creeber discusses the way in which the personal as political is employed across various forms of serial television such as the historical mini series and crime serials, and what he terms 'soap dramas' such as *Queer as Folk* and *Sex and the City*.

For Creeber, the growth of the latter 'soap drama' with texts such as *ThirtySomething*, *This Life* and *Cold Feet* reveals a growing interest in 'life politics', that is with the 'micro' as opposed to the 'macro' politics of everyday life. Whilst such dramas prioritise the personal over the political, for Creeber, 'they do so in a way that issues of identity in the case of *This Life*, sexuality and gender in texts such as *Queer as Folk* and *Sex and the City* and community and nationhood in texts such as *Our Friends in the North* are explored more powerfully and thoroughly than ever before' (2004: 116).

Indeed while Creeber's account is also distinctive for the way in which he includes a discussion of British dramas which also embody these same markers of 'quality' as American 'Must See TV', in the remainder of this section I want to engage

with the rise of American 'Must See TV' which has for the most part signalled the critical perception of the decline in the 'quality' drama of British drama.

### 'Quality' drama as exportable drama

The rise of American series and serials coming to stand in for 'quality' television drama is significant because of the way in which it signifies the reversal of discourses associated with American and British drama historically. Not only does it contradict a pervasive discourse in which American series and serials have been associated with mass culture rather than 'quality' television<sup>39</sup> which could swamp British schedules and culture, but also for the way in which it has replaced the critical perception of British television representing 'the best television in the world'.

This is illustrated in the former Channel Four Chief Executive, Mark Thompson's<sup>40</sup> McTaggart Lecture at the Edinburgh International Television Festival in 2002:

When you're looking for ambitious, complex and above all modern TV, you find yourself watching not British, but American pieces: *Six Feet Under*, say, or *24*. There are exceptions but the idea that British television is teeming with that kind of creative risk is a joke.

(Thompson 2002:18)

Describing British television dramas as 'dull, mechanical and samey', American drama is praised by Thompson because for its high production values that move ever closer to cinematic values (Jancovich and Lyons 2003: 1).

Centrally I want to argue that it is American rather than British serials that have become constructed as 'quality' television because of their appeal to international audiences. I will review why international exportation has become a marker of 'quality' within this particular broadcasting and critical context. In reviewing this factor I will argue that privileging this form of drama as 'quality' drama works to further marginalise

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<sup>39</sup> Brunson details how the American serial, although popular with British audiences, was critically denigrated as representing the worst of popular or commercial television.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Thompson has since been appointed Director General of the BBC in 2004.

a discussion of more national and regional British drama that falls within the flow of British television such as the FED.

The performance of television dramas on overseas markets has become increasingly significant in light of recent globalising trends. Firstly, the shift to a globalised context of production has had a massive impact on national production. As John McMurreh in *Long Format TV: Globalisation and Network Branding in a Multi-Channel Era* argues: 'The television landscape, once a province of nationally organised systems of dissemination, regulation, finance, production and consumption, is increasingly contoured by national industry deregulation and global media conglomeration' (2003: 66). In this context the international performance of texts has become integral to the survival of national systems of broadcasting.

In Britain the pressure on texts to do well abroad has been heightened because of the international success that has been enjoyed in previous decades with action-adventure series in the 1960s such as *The Avengers* (ABC Television 1961-1969) and *The Prisoner* (ITC/Everyman Films 1967-68), and heritage texts in the 1980s such as *Jewel in the Crown* and crime dramas with a very 'British' flavour such as *The Sweeney*, *Minder* and *Widows* (Stemers 2005: 34). Framed by this context, not only are television texts implicated in the survival of British broadcasters within this globalised context, but also in the Conservative and Labour governments' policies as a significant component to ensure Britain's future in a globalising communications economy (Stemers 2005: 35). As Stemers has argued, the perceived decline in the 'quality' of British television drama is attributable in the late 1990s to when the Labour government and the industry became preoccupied with export under-performance and the growing trade gap between Britain and the United states<sup>41</sup> (ibid: 34).

In the 1990s, a government and industry commissioned report, *Building a Global Audience: British Television in Overseas Markets* (1999), concluded that a central factor in Britain's poor international accomplishments within this period was due to producing the 'wrong' type of drama to compete successfully in the global marketplace. Citing

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<sup>41</sup> Stemers for instance summarises 'In 1996-97, Britain was estimated to command an 8% volume share of global trade in drama and situation comedy, a 12% of film and a 6% share of TV movies. It came a distant second to the United States (72% drama, 63% film, 81% TV movies) (2005: 36).

interviews with overseas programming executives in twelve countries, the report concluded that although the ‘quality’ of drama was praised in terms of ‘high production values, quirky sense of humour, and high standards of acting’ (1999: 24), the qualities of British dramas were perceived as ‘too identifiably British’ and ‘too dark; too slow; unattractive; too gritty or socio-political’ for overseas markets (1999: 24-25). Specifying dramas such as *Prime Suspect* and *Band of Gold* in particular, the report argued such dramas do not represent a positive image of Britain but instead represent ‘distasteful characters and storylines’ and ‘a relatively poor, down-at-heel place which does not inspire interest’ (1999: 25). Although registering some noticeable successes such as *Cracker* (Granada 1993-1996), *Bugs* (BBC1 1995-1998), *The Sculptress* (BBC1 1996) and *Mr Bean* (TAP 1990-1995), the report concluded that ‘British producers and broadcasters have not yet capitalised on the rejuvenation of the British “brand” to produce the kind of positive, glossy, mainstream drama series that would command interest overseas’, adding: ‘The series that made Britain “swing” in the sixties – *The Avengers*, *The Prisoner*, *The Saint*, *The Champions* – have not been replaced in the nineties<sup>42</sup>, (1999: 26).

As Steemers points out, the report ‘blames’ the public service-inspired regulatory culture for this scenario which prioritises domestic audiences in its production. Singled out in particular were the peak-time soap operas which, although ‘much-loved’ and a ‘distinctive’ feature of UK television, ‘do not sell well abroad’ (1999: 39). So while peak-time soaps are relatively cheap in comparison to more prime-time drama to provide domestic solutions, they concomitantly prevent the production of more glamorous and weekly dramas that generate international sales.

As well as producing the wrong content, Britain was also perceived to be producing the wrong format of drama through the ‘inability to produce enough episodes for longer runs (13 or 26) and a failure to produce 90-minute television movies or 60-minute series which were demanded internationally’ and which have centrally

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<sup>42</sup> British ‘glossy’ texts such as *Cold Feet* have not sold well internationally. Steemers, for instance, notes how it was considered ‘fantastic’ with German commercial broadcaster ProSieben but it was considered insufficiently strong in casting for prime-time and too sophisticated for ProSieben’s younger daytime audience (2005: 40).

contributed to America's international success (Steemers, 2005: 35). However, once again this can be attributed to the different national contexts of broadcasting, as Steemers argues:

To be sure, British commissioning structures and scheduling practice favour one-offs or short serials [which] means these cannot compete with US series like HBO's *The Sopranos* or *Six Feet Under*, which can be sold in large packages of up to 52 episodes. The United States accounts for the bulk of trade in drama because it has a sufficiently large and wealthy population to support the advertising and subscription base necessary to fund such drama in volume.

(ibid: 38)

In summary, American 'Must See TV' has come to be regarded as 'quality' television because of its ability to cross national boundaries and appeal to international audiences. This is in contrast to British television texts. Although, as findings from the government commissioned report suggests, the 'quality' of British texts in terms of production values has remained relatively stable, it is rather its *qualities* as shorter serials which feature 'down at heel' representations of Britain that have contributed to the perceived decline in 'quality' and value of British television texts. Such serials are mainly produced to provide programming solutions for domestic contexts of broadcasting which do not appeal to international broadcasters.

If processes of globalisation have, as I have argued, contributed to the rise in status of American 'Must See TV', (played through in terms of 'quality' and value) because of their international appeal, then equally they have also contributed to the privileged position they have occupied in academic television criticism. To be sure, there are several practical reasons why American 'Must See TV' is attractive for scholars of television drama.

Firstly, given the proliferation of television texts with the advent of cable and satellite television, the status of these texts as 'event' television, that are easily accessible and well-known internationally, provide useful reference points for comparative points of academic research within and across national boundaries.

Secondly, unlike some of the more regional dramas that are lost to obscurity once they have finished their run on terrestrial and cable television, the international

success and distribution of American 'Must See TV' make them easily obtainable by scholars. This is not only on television where they are recycled on cable channels such as More4 and E4 but on their subsequent release on DVD. The accessibility of these texts together with the range of promotional materials that accompany the release of these texts such as the book and the website, along with their popularity with audiences, make them attractive texts to study.

Thirdly, as can be inferred from these first two points, given that processes of globalisation have not only affected the broadcasting context but also that of academic and publishing contexts, American 'Must See TV' dramas are useful areas for developing academic research profiles precisely because of their international circulation that is attractive to publishers.

However, mirroring the debates around the privileging of 'serious drama' in academic criticism which replicated the television industry's marginalisation of female authored or 'feminine-gendered' fiction more generally, so too the privileging of American 'Must See TV' within academic criticism as representing the pinnacle of 'quality' within this globalised context marginalises the study and significance of more nationally and regionally specific texts such as British female ensemble drama.

On the one hand, this marginalisation stunts the growth of British television drama studies at a period in time when shifts to broadcasting such as globalisation and social shifts to a postfeminist period make these discussion all the more urgent. Indeed, I would argue, drawing on an argument made by Brunsdon in her 2000 article, that British television is valuable precisely because it remains representative of what is 'local, awkward and complex within the nation' compared to British film of the same period, which has to provide a 'representation of the nation', 'capturing images around which the complexity of the nation can identify itself to the outside and securing its continuity on the global market' (Brunsdon 2000: 169).

This point is particularly relevant to this study given the gendering of these shifts. 'Precisely because there are real equivocations in the fit between being a woman and representing Britishness', Brunsdon argues that it is the 'boys' stories' of texts such as *The Full Monty* and *Trainspotting* which have provided representations of the nation



internationally, and the ‘strongly regional’ dramas of Debbie Horsefield and Kay Mellor which provide ‘vivid accounts’ of what is ‘local awkward and complex within the nation’ (ibid: 169-170). Significantly then, it is precisely because they do not embody the wider burden of representation of these male stories that these dramas are a prime site for academic feminist television criticism to explore, particularly for their constructions of what is local, awkward and complex in relation to female subjectivities in this period. However, if these texts are potentially enabling in terms of textual constructions of women, the local remit of these texts prevents a wider circulation and concomitantly a wider academic discussion of them.

If the neglect of the FED can be then situated within the broad parameters of British Television Studies which has been largely concerned with the ‘quality’ of programming, in the following section I want to explore its neglect within Feminist Television Studies. While Feminist Television Studies has historically been concerned with the gendering of cultural values, I want to explore how the FED has been neglected in feminist television criticism because some forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction has come to be valued over others.

### **Feminist television criticism**

As I have touched on above, it is feminist television criticism that has historically addressed those examples of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction that have been denigrated within academic study. In this section I want to argue that it is precisely its thematic and formal similarities to soap opera that contributed to the neglect of the FED within feminist academic criticism.

Indeed, the female ensemble drama has much in common with soap opera in its seriality, its focus upon regional identities and communities, its ensemble cast of strong and central female characters and its focus upon interpersonal relationships. However, despite their proliferation across television schedules in the same historical period that feminist academics have engaged in the revaluation of soap opera, I want to argue that the FED’s thematic and formal similarities to soap opera have prevented them from receiving sustained academic study in their own right.

This is true of earlier examples of the British FED such as *Within These Walls* and *Angels* and the later FEDs of the 1990s which have been subject to critical neglect precisely because they come after the substantial wave of feminist work on soap opera which saturated the field from the 1970s to the 1990s. Illustrating this point fairly succinctly is Charlotte Brunsdon (1995) in 'The Role of Soap Opera in the Development of Feminist Television Criticism'. Charting feminist research on soap opera, for instance, Brunsdon lists a total of 44 key articles and books published between the period of 1974 and 1992 (1997: 23-37). However there are two central problems with omitting a discussion of the FED because of the research that has already accumulated around soap opera between the late 1970s and the early 1990s. Firstly, the canonical work on soap opera was specific to that moment in the formation of feminist television criticism as a field of study rather than being about soap opera per se. As Brunsdon has argued:

[...] while I do want to insist on the historical significance of soap opera in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the significance of this defence lies mainly in the challenge to aesthetic hierarchy and the canon, the gendering of the study of popular culture and the associated gendering of its consumer, rather than, beyond a certain point, the study of soap opera as such.

(1997: 12)

As she writes elsewhere, the large bulk of feminist research on soap opera has focused on audience studies and the pleasure female audiences make of these texts because it has not been considered textually worthy (1990; 1997: 120). What has been largely absent from the wave of research on soap opera has been a detailed textual analysis of particular episodes of the texts. Publications such as Christine Geraghty's *Women and Soap Opera* (1991), for instance, provide a general overview of the formal and aesthetic elements of the genre of the 1980s but not the analysis of specific scenes or episodes. As Geraghty has argued, the lack of detailed textual analysis is due to the 'perilous business' of studying soap opera where its continuous flow across television schedules obscures an identifiable fixed object of study (1991: 7). However, as Geraghty's more recent article 'Discussing Quality: Critical Vocabularies and Popular Television Drama'

(2006) demonstrates, it is possible and fruitful to ‘stop the flow of [a soap opera’s] narrative and subject isolated episodes to the kind of textual analysis that might be given to other forms of television drama’ (2006: 221). Geraghty’s own detailed textual analysis of a week’s episodes of *EastEnders*, in this later article provides a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetic and narrative aspects of this text at a specific historical and socio-cultural moment.

If the work to date on soap opera only provides a general overview of it within a particular historical period of the 1970 to 1990s, it is then limited to the specific study of the FED. These findings, I would argue, cannot be simply grafted onto the FED because these two forms of drama appear to share certain formal characteristics. A useful point of comparison with the work on soap as an example of ‘women’s fiction’ in this respect is the volume of research which has formed around the ‘women’s film’ of the 1940s and 1950s. Although films of this period fall under the generic title of ‘women’s films’, the detailed textual analyses of these texts have enabled the similarities and differences between these texts to be explored as well as providing more nuanced understandings of how women are constructed within them.

Indeed, I would argue that privileging the ‘woman’s film’ rather than ‘woman’s serial’ of television for this form of sustained critical analysis replicates the high cultural esteem of film and low cultural esteem of television texts. In relation to the latter, the failure to distinguish between and give more sustained analysis to different forms of serial drama because it all seems to cover the same territory reinforces the assumption that ‘women’s genres’ are not worthy of sustained critical attention and adds to their characterisation as examples of homogeneous mass culture.

The second problem with overlooking the FED as an object of study because of its similarities to soap opera is because it also differs from soap opera. The FED may share the conventional attributes of soap opera and flexi-narrative dramas, but the FED also shares characteristics with other forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction such as the ‘new’ ‘woman’s film’ and examples of ‘heroine television’ that, have also proliferated since the 1970s. In chapter two I discuss the similarities with the new ‘woman’s film’ but for now I want to situate it within the development of ‘heroine television’.

'Heroine television' is a term coined by Brunsdon, to refer to texts across different fictional television genres that are centrally about strong female characters such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS 1951-1957), but more particularly those texts from the 1970s onwards such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS: 1970-1977) and *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1981-1988) which embody a 'new woman' figure in the wake of second wave feminism (ibid: 34). As Brunsdon summarises:

Heroine television is centrally about female characters living their lives, usually working inside and outside the home, usually not in permanent relationships with men, sometimes with children, and 'trying to cope'. It is this 'trying to cope' which is critical. These shows are all, in some fundamental way, addressing feminism, or addressing the agenda that feminism has made public about the contradictory demands placed on women.

(ibid).

This 'new woman' figure embodied in examples of 'heroine television' differs in significant ways from the traditional 'woman' figure of soap opera through registering the shifting social position and role of 'women' across private and public spaces in this period.

However, feminist research of 'heroine television' has largely excluded a discussion of the FED. Once more I would suggest that this is because of their serial identity that brings them closer to soap opera. Instead, feminist academic research of 'heroine television' has largely drawn on American examples from the genres of situation comedy such as *The MTM Show* (CBS 1970-1977) *Kate and Allie* (CBS 1984-1989) *The Golden Girls* (Touchstone TV 1985-1992) and *Designing Women* (Columbia Pictures 1986-1993) and crime series such as *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1981-1988) and *Prime Suspect*.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Publications in this area include Bathrick, S (1984): 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show: Women at Home and at Work', In Feuer, J., Kerr, P., and Vahimagi, T (1984) (eds.): *MTM: 'Quality Television'*. London: BFI; Baehr, H and Dyer, G (1987) (eds.): *Boxed In: Women and Television*. London: Pandora; D'Acci, J (1994): *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Thornham, S (1994): 'Feminist Interventions: Prime Suspect 1', *Critical Survey*, 6(2): 226-233; Brunsdon, C., D' Acci, J and Spigel, L (1997) (eds.): *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Brunsdon, C (1997) (ed.): *Screen Tastes*. London: Routledge; Hallam, J (2000): 'Power Plays: Gender, Genre and Lynda La Plante', In Bignell, J., Lacey, S and Macmurray-

Brunsdon argues that the situation comedy has been attractive to feminist academics because of the inclusion of distinguished comedians such as Lucille Ball and Mary Tyler Moore and more generally the pleasure from engaging with ‘the irresistible comedy of being a modern woman’ (ibid: 34). Similarly, Brunsdon argues the crime genre, particularly *Cagney and Lacey* and *Prime Suspect*, have attracted a considerable amount of academic attention because of their ‘positive images’ of independent women working in male public domains (ibid). Indeed, it is its status as crime fiction that accounts for the academic interest in the FED *Widows*. *Widows*, like *Prime Suspect*, has been the subject of academic attention as an example of female-authored drama that subverts the conventions of the traditional ‘male-centred’ crime drama (Skirrow 1987; Brunsdon 1987). However, *Band of Gold*, another female-authored intervention into the crime series, this time by Kay Mellor, produced just four years after La Plante’s *Prime Suspect*, has not received the same academic attention. While acknowledging that feminist television academics cannot be expected to provide research on every example of television’s output, I do however want to suggest two further reasons why discussions of these specific examples of ‘heroine television’ have been privileged and the FED as a specific body of texts have been largely overlooked within feminist television criticism.

Firstly, like Television Studies more generally, research has largely focused on examples of American texts because of their international popularity and circulation and thus their accessibility across national borders. Indeed for the burgeoning field of Feminist Television Studies that has attempted to set up and sustain an international field of study, having texts which cross national borders as common points of reference, is particularly useful. It is from this perspective that we can view the usefulness of earlier examples of ‘heroine television’ such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Prime Suspect* to the field of study but also, more recently the almost exclusive focus of feminist television

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Kavanagh, M (2000) (eds.): *British Television Drama: Past, Present and Future*. London: Palgrave; Jermyn, D (2003): ‘Women with a Mission: Lynda La Plante, DCI Jane Tennison and the Reconfiguration of TV Crime Drama’, In *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 6 (1): 46-63.

criticism on two examples of what Gill has termed American 'Must-She TV': *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* (2007:240).<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, I want to suggest that these particular sitcoms and crime dramas as examples of 'Must-She TV' have been privileged over a discussion of the FED, including for example the internationally-acclaimed *Band of Gold*, because they reflect the personal tastes and preferences and pre-occupations of the feminist academics who study them. It is no coincidence that the texts which have been privileged by feminist television critics are those which reaffirm feminist television criticism's central concern with the status and positioning of white, middle-class women, given that these texts consistently centre on the middle-class professional woman.<sup>45</sup> This is in comparison to the FED whose ensemble cast of characters focus on 'everywoman'<sup>46</sup> types, some of which are middle class but which increasingly in the 1990s focus on British working-class female identities.

Concomitantly, it is no coincidence, I argue, that the form of television drama that is neglected (in this instance the FED), is associated more with the forms of television drama (soap opera), that is traditionally associated with the feminists' antithesis (that of the housewife). In this way feminist television criticism, like Television Studies more generally has privileged a discussion of texts which are aimed at the working-woman's audience and which confirm middle class tastes and preference.

I would argue that privileging these particular examples of 'heroine television' are problematic for feminist academic television criticism for several reasons. Firstly, I

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<sup>44</sup> Feminist research of these two texts includes for instance: Dow, B.J (2002): 'Ally McBeal, Lifestyle Feminism and the Politics of Personal Happiness', *The Communication Review*, 5:259-264; Moseley, R and Read, J (2002): "'Having it Ally": Popular Television (Post)Feminism', *Feminist Media Studies*, 2 (2): 231-249; Ouellette, L (2002): 'Victims No More: Postfeminism, Television, and Ally McBeal', *The Communications Review*, 5:315-337; Arthurs, J (2003): 'Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama', *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 (1): 83-98; Negra, D (2004): "'Quality Postfeminism?": Sex and the Single Girl on HBO'. *Genders Online Journal* 39; Akass, K and McCabe, J (2004) (eds.): *Reading Sex and the City*. London: I.B Tauris.

<sup>45</sup> I am not suggesting that feminist television criticism is inherently concerned with the middle class professional woman but rather that this has been the case historically.

<sup>46</sup> By 'everywoman' types, I refer to the way in which the central female protagonists of the FED are chiefly characterised by their occupation of particular social positions that cut across socio-economic boundaries, such as 'the housewife', 'the mother', 'the single woman', 'the lesbian'. I argue that by focusing on particular social types of women the FED attempts to appeal to a large number of audience segments.

would argue that this is problematic because it is the middle-class career woman that is represented and addressed in both the text and in dramatic criticism which perpetuates the normalisation of middle-class identity and values both within the television industry and feminist criticism (see Press 1993 and Stratham; D'Acci 1994).

Secondly and similar to the discussion of 'Must See TV', whilst the international distribution and success of American 'Must-She TV' ensures that selected American female identities are visible and accessible for discussion within Feminist Television Studies, this is at the expense of the more British regional gendered and classed identities. In this respect Brunson's 2000 article; 'Not Having It All: Women and Film in the 1990s' cited at the beginning of this chapter is unique in terms of discussing the female ensemble of the 1990s even if here too it is subordinated to a discussion of women in film.

To summarise, in this section I have attributed the neglect of the FED within feminist television criticism due to its similarities to soap opera. In reviewing the television texts that have formed the focus of feminist television research since the late 1970s I have suggested that like the broader field of Television Studies feminist television criticism confirms middle-class tastes and preferences. In so doing, it also replicates the denigrated status of 'feminine-gendered' fiction that characterises the flow of British television and neglects to consider the significance and constructions of 'women' within these more regional British texts.

## **Conclusions to Part Two: Critical Contexts**

In section two I have been concerned to review the way in which the FED has been overlooked critically within academic television criticism. To refer back to the introduction to this chapter, the purpose of this review has been to illustrate how traditional hierarchies of cultural value continue to underpin academic television criticism not despite, but rather because of, gendered shifts to programming within this period.

I have reviewed, for example, that while Television Studies has been largely concerned with issues of 'quality' with the shift to a 'feminized' consumer-led approach

to broadcasting in the late modern period, the lack of a developed model for the evaluation of television texts has resulted in the reassertion of narrow and elitist definitions of ‘quality’ and value that the field of Television Studies from its inception was formed against.

However, I am aware that one consequence of focusing this opening chapter around the neglect of the FED means that it has, to a certain extent at least, replicated the marginalisation of this form of drama within academic criticism. While I have privileged a discussion of academic accounts of ‘serious drama’ and ‘Must See’ and ‘Must-She TV’, this has been to contextualise the narrow conceptions of ‘quality’ that have contributed to the academic neglect of the FED within this period as well as providing a useful insight in to the different ways in which the flexi-narrative structure that, to some extent informs the FED, has been discussed. As a way of concluding this chapter, I will bring the FED more centrally into this discussion. Given that much of this chapter has been concerned with issues of ‘quality’ and value, I will firstly reassert my particular focus on the FED and the value of this type of text as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction before going on to map out the way in which I will make evaluations of this type of text.

### **The value of the FED as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction**

Like the academic criticism of television drama that I have discussed in section two, this study of the FED is informed by my own set of value judgements. That is, comparable to the academic television criticism discussed above, the object of this study, the FED, is largely informed by my own personal tastes and preferences formed in relation to the types of texts that I value. However, unlike the types of drama that are valued in academic television criticism such as ‘serious drama’ and ‘Must-See TV’, the televisual events that I value fall within and indeed characterise the feminised flow of television in this period.

Firstly, the FEDs of the 1990s are, I would argue, a valuable body of dramas to explore because, as I outlined in section one of this chapter, they have been identified as one example of how women’s visibility and experience now occupy a more ‘culturally



central position' (Brunsdon, 2000:169) than has been traditionally the case with 'feminine-gendered' fiction.

More so than the other branch of 'feminine-gendered' fiction that has become prominent during this period, the 'professional woman drama', the FED has particular value to me being the texts that I viewed during the mid- to late 1990s and whose appearance on television coincided with my introduction to and education as a working-class woman in the field of Feminist Television Studies. Informed by these entwined histories, these dramas were significant to me because, as I stated in the introduction to this thesis, they were one of the few dramatic sites on television outside of the genre of soap opera which featured working-class female characters and as such they brought pleasure to me within my own classed and gendered positionality as a female viewer and student of Feminist Television Studies.

Secondly, the FED is a valuable form of drama to explore because of its status as a contemporary form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction but whose thematic concerns and formal conventions would appear to replicate the more traditional 'woman's' soap opera. The FEDs of this period then provide an opportunity to explore how such serial dramas are both similar to and differ from the traditional soap opera and its constructions and narrative treatment of women and femininity.

A common observation/criticism in research of previous female ensemble dramas and female friendship texts that have proliferated since the late 1970s, has been that even if the original premise of the text saw it working within the conventions of the police and crime genre such as *Cagney and Lacey* or *Widows*, the texts eventually mark a (safe) return to the terrain of soap opera (that of the emotional and private lives of the female characters) which by extension returns female characters to traditional 'feminine' spaces and discourses.<sup>47</sup> Whilst not denying this has been the case, I want to situate the

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<sup>47</sup> This includes: Brunsdon, C (1987): 'Men's Genres for Women', In Baehr, H and Dyer, G (1987) (eds.): *Boxed In: Women and Television*. New York and London: Pandora; D'Acci, J (1994): *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Nelson, R (2000): 'Performing (Wo)Manoeuvres: The Progress of Gendering in TV Drama', In Carson, E and Llewellyn-Jones, M (2000) (eds.): *Frames and Fictions on Television: The Politics of Identity within Drama*. Exeter: Intellect and Jermyn, D (2003): 'Women with a Mission: Lynda La Plante, DCI Jane

British FED of the 1990s as the exploration of the personal and emotional lives of women in relation to two significant shifts.

Firstly, I want to situate the exploration of the personal and emotional lives of the female characters within the FED as produced during a period in which the flexi-narrative form has been widely accepted as an industry norm. As we have seen, the adoption of the flexi-narrative has not only blurred conventions of the serial and series but has resulted in a more general shift in which narratives focus upon the private lives of male as well as female characters in texts such as *The Bill* (Thames Television 1984-), *Cold Feet* (Granada 1997-2003), *The Sopranos* (HBO 1999-2007) and *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-2006). Rather than seeing this move as one purely driven by economic imperatives and safe programming solutions, I want to explore Creeber's argument that contemporary serial drama both employs and in some cases pushes to the limits and subverts established conventions of the soap opera whilst also embodying the *new* relationship between politics and the self 'meaning that political issues are now increasingly centred convincingly around the domain of personal and private interaction' (Creeber 2004: 12). I will explore his claim that the political nature of the personal, in this instance around 'feminine' sexual and gendered identity, are explored 'more powerfully and thoroughly than ever before' (ibid: 116).

Secondly and following on from this, I want to explore the way in which the construction of 'women' within the FED acknowledges and attempts to negotiate contemporary discourses of 'women' and femininity. If the soap opera embodied/s the traditional construction of femininity – that of 'woman' as wife and mother within the domestic context of the home – I will explore how these FEDs of the 1990s, produced within a period marked by shifts in women's social and economic positioning, can be perceived to engage and negotiate with the 'life politics' of 'women' within a post-feminist context – particularly the discourse of 'women' 'having it all' as they are

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Tennison and the Reconfiguration of TV Crime Drama', In *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 6 (1): 46-63

constructed across public and private domains in their professional and personal lives. Indeed if soap opera, as Geraghty has argued, has found it difficult to accommodate the figure of the liberated 'new woman' (1991: 139), I am interested in exploring how in the context of the 1990s the FED negotiates discourses of de- and re-traditionalization and whether or not the FED returns women to their naturalised place in twentieth century patriarchal culture, that of the home.

Thirdly, as I have reiterated throughout chapter one, the British FED is of particular value because it has been the subject of academic neglect. Indeed, as will be discussed more fully in chapter two, American texts are often used to stand in for and represent shifts to the way 'women' have been constructed by television generally in this period, particularly in relation to discourses of postfeminism, so that more national and regional constructions - in this case British female identities - are absent from such a discussion.

It is significant to note from the outset how the British FEDs differ from their US counterparts by some inclusion of constructions of black femininity and lesbianism and because of their focus upon female working-class identity. Moreover, whereas American professional women dramas and female ensemble dramas along with mixed gendered ensembles have been given some critical attention (Gray 1994; Dow 1996; Arthurs 2003; Akass and McCabe 2004; Creeber 2004), there has not been a sustained study of the construction of women within the British all-female ensemble dramas. As will be discussed in chapter two the 'postfamilial family' structure of the ensemble drama has particular resonances when it is the all-female group of friends who embody these communities. In turn, these dramas, as in British society more broadly during this period, bear negotiations surrounding issues of community, individualism and social class that are significant to explore.

As these comments make clear, my evaluation of the FED has not been, like more recent accounts of television drama, one borne out of a concern with 'quality' but one which follows the dominant approach in Media Studies through the concern with the discursive 'qualities' of these texts; in this instance its constructions of 'women' and female subjectivity. The FEDs are, then, of value to me because they are a rich site for

the analysis of discourses surrounding particular gendered and classed constructions of 'woman', 'women' and 'femininity' at this period in British cultural history, both within and around this body of texts. Subsequently the evaluative judgements I make concerning this body of dramas follows the dominant strand of feminist television criticism which is bound up with questions of feminist politics and issues of representation.

### Aesthetic Evaluation

However, while this study remains firmly within the established strand of Feminist Media Studies, making evaluative judgements of constructions of women will not only include the analysis of narrative but also the aesthetic properties of these texts as finite serial dramas. This evaluative strategy is informed by three points.

Firstly, I will make evaluative judgements of aesthetic as well as the narrative properties of these texts in order to avoid some of the problems associated with earlier approaches to 'feminine-gendered' fiction within Media Studies and Feminist Media Studies. I want to avoid, for instance, making a largely defensive and reactionary reading of these texts because of the derogatory way in which such texts are held up as being representative of the feminization in this period. To do so would be to replicate the defensive tone of earlier feminist approaches to denigrated areas of 'women's fiction' from the 1970s. Writing retrospectively in 2003 about her 1990 book *Women and Soap Opera*, for instance, Christine Geraghty discussed her own unease, and for the most part absence, of judgements based upon aesthetic grounds because this 'would have been to concede too much to those who felt that the study of such programmes could only be a ludicrous exercise' (2003: 39).

Although 'feminine-gendered' fiction continues to be marginalised because of its association with women and the feminization of television within this period, I want to argue that the avoidance of making evaluative judgements of the formal and aesthetic properties of these texts does not challenge the low cultural status of such forms and the familiar characterisations of them within academic accounts of drama (such as Robin Nelson's that was explored above).

Secondly, and following on from this first point, the significant shifts to broadcasting that have taken place within this context makes evaluations particularly pertinent. While I have disagreed with Nelson's particular approach and criteria for making evaluative judgements according to some narrow criteria of 'quality' drama, I agree in principle that there is a necessity to engage with issues of aesthetics and form in order to analyse what is happening to television drama during this period of transformation. This can enable more nuanced understandings of the shifts that are taking place and to counter the dismissal of all popular television as mass-produced, consumerist fodder.

Thirdly, engaging with and making evaluative judgements of the aesthetic properties of these texts is necessary in this study because of the way in which such factors inform the constructions of female identity and subjectivity within the FEDs. Indeed, a central reason why I valued these texts when they were first aired on television was because they offered new and alternative perspectives of working-class women and female subjectivity. A central theme within my analysis of the FED is then not only to understand and explore how narrative but also the aesthetic properties of the texts contributes to these new perspectives. In this thesis I view the aesthetic properties of the text as a discourse which can be both productive and enabling as well as constraining for constructions of female identity and subjectivity; they are what we make meaning from in the texts. As such there will be more successful and enabling constructions of 'women' through the use and combination of particular aesthetic and formal properties than others in this body of texts and this study is concerned to explore and distinguish between such examples.

Following on from a suggestion made by Geraghty, evaluative judgements of the FED within this thesis will be made by comparing examples of this form of drama with other examples within this particular category of drama (2003: 32), rather than through reference to the criteria of high culture or in this instance 'serious drama'.

The FEDs of the mid- to late 1990s are particularly interesting to explore in this respect because of their heterogeneous character, one whose form is informed like other series and serials of this same period by the soap opera-isation of drama, by generic

hybridity and an interplay of aesthetic modes. Along with Geraghty's suggestion that more nuanced and specific analyses of the uses of melodrama and realism can extend our understanding of them in specific instances, in chapter two I also include a consideration of comedy which is the third aesthetic mode that is prevalent across the female ensemble dramas and which needs consideration.

## **Conclusions to Chapter One**

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide knowledge and understanding of the academic neglect of the FED as 'feminine-gendered' fiction in the context of the 1990s. To reiterate, the purpose of this analysis has been to account for this neglect within a postfeminist media culture in which the values associated with 'the feminine' have come to dominate British television.

In section one I have illustrated the way in which values constructed as 'feminine' may have come to dominate television schedules and subsequently mark some significant shifts in terms of the de-gendering of cultural forms. However, I have subsequently illustrated how this process has been matched by one of the re-gendering of the discourses and spaces associated with 'the feminine' at the level of academic criticism. I have argued that the feminization of television aligned with the inroads women have made into television during this period has been one which has been used as a metaphor to stand in for the perceived dumbing-down of television during this period and the continual denigration of cultural values that have been traditionally associated with 'women' and 'femininity'.

In section two I have reviewed the way in which the FED has been subject to academic neglect because of its status as 'feminine-gendered' fiction that is representative of the feminization of television within this same period. Through reviewing the types of television drama that have been valued it has also provided an insight in to the way in which popular forms of flexi-narrative drama have been constructed and thought about.

As a way of concluding this chapter I have reinstated the significance of the FED, given its critical neglect and the disparagement of popular and 'feminine' forms of

flexi-narrative drama within television criticism. I have subsequently mapped out my preferred way of making evaluations of this form of drama.

Given that a discussion of the FED has been limited in this chapter in order to contextualise its neglect within the broadcasting and critical contexts of this period, chapter two takes the textual characteristics of the FED as its focus and contextualises these in relation to social contexts.

## **Chapter Two**

# **Textual and Social Contexts**

### **Aims and objectives of Chapter Two**

While chapter one was concerned to fulfil the first aim of this thesis, that of how the ‘feminine-gendered’ identity of the FED has impacted on how it is perceived and valued within culture, this chapter is concerned to fulfil the second aim of this thesis: providing knowledge and understanding of the emergence of this tradition of drama historically in Britain in relation to other textual and social shifts. The purpose of this review is threefold. Firstly, to map out the development of the FED since the 1970s, given its marginalisation within academic criticism. Secondly, and most centrally, to identify and explore how the thematic and aesthetic attributes of these texts inform the constructions of women within them. Thirdly, to identify the themes and issues that I will explore in relation to its 1990s’ form in the case studies that follow this chapter. In summary, by reviewing each of these concerns and fleshing out its histories, thematic and aesthetic properties this chapter both addresses the critical neglect of the FED that was highlighted in chapter one as well as providing a framework for approaching the case study chapters that follow this one in chapters three to five.

In order to accomplish these aims, this chapter is divided into two sections. In section one I review the three thematic properties of the texts. In section two I review the aesthetic properties of the FED of the 1990s.



## **Part one: Thematic overview of the FED**

In order to provide an overview of these texts which encompasses both a historical sense of its development as well as the issues I want to raise in relation to its particular 1990s' variant, I will review three discursive contexts.

Firstly, I contextualise the thematic preoccupations of the FED of the 1990s in relation to its textual precedents. While I draw comparisons with soap opera, I also review how the earlier FEDs of the 1970s and 1980s share certain characteristics with other textual developments within this period, namely the 'new woman's film' but also other strands of 'heroine television' and 'Must See TV' that were introduced in chapter one. While in chapter one I marked out some of the differences with regard to the classed identities of these different types of texts to account for the critical neglect of the FED, in this chapter I will map out the thematic similarities of the FED and examples of 'heroine television' and American 'Must See TV' which, I will argue, have developed out of a particular set of historical and social conditions of late modernity.

I will review, for instance, how they share a common history which engages with and provides textual responses to certain de-traditionalizing processes in this period, namely shifts to women's social positioning and the breakdown of traditional family and community structures. While I review how the themes of friendship, family and community are central to all of these types of drama, I will review the significance of these features and the issues they raise for this specific form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction and its constructions of 'female' identity and subjectivity.

Secondly, I contextualise the thematic preoccupations of this body of texts and their particular engagement with feminism in relation to the body of research that has accumulated around 'heroine television' within academic feminist television criticism. I will review, for example, how they embody a particular trend of 'heroine television', that of the construction of 'lifestyle' feminism. I subsequently contextualise this shift in relation to wider textual shifts and the movement to the exploration of 'life politics' during this same period.

Following on from this discussion I contextualise the FEDs' particular constructions of female identities and 'life politics' in relation to discourses of postfeminism that have circulated within culture during this period and which inform later examples of 'heroine television' and 'Must-She TV', including the American female ensemble drama *Sex and the City*. I will subsequently map out the themes and issues I will explore in the case study chapters in relation to these British texts and discourses of postfeminism.

A central theme of analysis which is woven across these three discursive contexts is the way in which the FED, similar to its textual contemporaries, embodies both discourses of de- and re-traditionalization. In mapping out the thematics of the FED I will explore how it embodies these discourses and the issues I will explore in relation to them in the case study chapters.

### **Precedents of the FED**

The central, defining property of the female ensemble drama, as its descriptive label suggests, is its focus on particular communities of female characters. In the body of texts that I am concerned with in the 1990s, these range from groups of four in *Daylight Robbery* to nine in *Playing the Field*. Dramas that focus on groups of female characters are not new to television in the 1990s. Constructions of female and working-class 'matriarchal communities'<sup>48</sup> have been a feature of television since the 1960s in British soap opera such as *Coronation Street* and continue to inform the newer soaps which were developed in the 1980s such as *EastEnders* (Dyer 1981; Hobson 1982; Geraghty 1982, 1991). Indeed, feminist criticism of the 1980s and 1990s has stressed the historical significance of soap opera for the space it gave to 'women' and areas of culture tied to 'the feminine' (Modleski 1979; Brunsdon 1981; Hobson 1982).

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<sup>48</sup> Discussing British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, Christine Geraghty in *Soap Opera and Women* refers to the way in which British soap operas construct matriarchal communities which are headed by strong female characters (1991:97). These female characters are not only maternal figures who provide practical and moral support to their own families but also to the wider community. In short these female characters are responsible for holding together the community and its moral values through their caring properties.

However, since its emergence in the 1970s the FED has moved to centre stage what is celebrated only periodically in British soap opera: that is, women's relationships with other women outside of their familial roles as wives and mothers. As with their forerunners in the 1970s and 1980s in Britain with texts such as *Rock Follies*, *Tenko* and *Widows*, the FED of the 1990s largely consist of women tied by friendship rather than blood, through affiliations to particular places such as school in *Real Women* and *Daylight Robbery*, the amateur football club in *Playing the Field* and occupation in *Making Out* and *Band of Gold*.

Therefore while acknowledging the FED's resemblance to soap opera as serial dramas which focus on the emotional lives of working-class female characters in regional British settings, in this section I will develop a point that I made in chapter one: that is, the way in which the formal and thematic preoccupations of FEDs of the 1990s bring them closer to examples of the 'new' 'woman's film', 'heroine television' but also 'Must See TV' and 'Must-She TV' that have proliferated from the 1970s in a bid to attract the 'quality' sections of the audience.

Firstly, I will explore how the FED is comparable to examples of the 'new' 'woman's film' and 'heroine television'. I will explore how these forms of drama have been informed by two de-traditionalizing processes: the inroads women have made into the public sphere, and the impact of second wave feminism. In this way I will explore how these texts may not have been 'movement orientated' but, in an attempt to address women in shifting social positions, these forms of drama were potentially enabling for women, opening up the possibilities for constructions of women outside of the roles and spaces tied to 'the feminine' in the twentieth century. I will use this section to explore two characteristics of this form of drama that are relevant to contextualise the FED of the 1990s: the figure of the new independent woman and female friendship.

Following on from this discussion, I will explore how the alternative family structure offered in the female ensemble drama bears a resemblance to the mixed gendered ensemble dramas of 'Must See' and 'Must-She TV'. I will explore how this characteristic of such dramas has been informed by two further processes of de-traditionalization: that of the breakdown of the nuclear family structure and community.

I will explore how these features are embodied in the text through reference to the ‘post-familial family’ and utopian ideal of community. While exploring how the FED is marked by similar themes to these other texts, I will focus on the significance of the all-female ‘post-familial family’ grouping which centres on working-class women. I will explore for instance how, although marked by processes of de-traditionalization, there is the potential within the ‘post-familial family’ form for the re-traditionalization of gender, and I will explore this in relation to the FED’s resemblance to soap opera.

### ‘Heroine television’ and the ‘new’ ‘woman’s film’

As I introduced in chapter one, the proliferation of the FED across prime-time schedules has been used by Brunson as an example of a wider cultural trend that began in the 1970s which sees women’s visibility and experience occupying a more central ‘position than has been traditionally the case with feminine-gendered fiction’ (2000: 169). As Brunson has argued, this shift is attributable to what can be referred to as two interrelated ‘de-traditionalizing’ processes: the inroads women have made into the public sphere and the impact of second wave feminism within this period.

Within this context, the FEDs have emerged as examples of ‘heroine television’ along with the ‘new’ ‘woman’s film’ as an attempt to appeal to the shifting demographics of women by registering shifts in women’s social positioning in and through their constructions of ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘femininity’. More specifically, as Brunson details in her article ‘A Subject for the Seventies’ (1982), they have historically represented an address to and the attempted construction of a new audience; that of ‘*Cosmo* girl’ (1997: 54). Brunson delineates her as: ‘White, youngish, heterosexual and an aspirant professional’ (ibid: 54-55).<sup>49</sup>

A significant early 1970s’ televisual text which embodied the figure of this new independent career woman was *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* followed the character of Mary Richards as she made it on her own as a career woman in a city newsroom. Although the production of the series was born out of desire

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<sup>49</sup> The ‘*Cosmo* girl’ was the brainchild of Helen Gurley Brown, who revamped *Cosmopolitan* magazine in the 1960s to appeal to this new demographic of relatively affluent women by generating a feminine template that functioned within the public arena, the office, the workplace (Radner 1993: 59).

to attract the ‘quality demographic’ audience of young adult consumers more than an attempt to address the concerns of the woman’s movement, as a character-driven comedy which focused upon a fully-rounded ‘nice but ‘spunky’’ female character (Feuer 1984: 36), the text ‘caught the cultural moment for the emerging new woman in a way that provided a point of identification for the mass audience as well’ (ibid). As Frances Gray (1994) notes in *Women and Laughter*, no matter however conservative the reasons for producing the text, the focus upon a single woman was to prove an asset in a decade in which the number of single women between the ages of 24 and 34 in the USA rose by 111% (1994: 63).

Moreover, although *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was not the first working-woman sitcom it differed from its predecessors in ‘assert[ing] that work was not just a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it, but could form the centre of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men’ (Dow 1996: 24).

As well as providing a ‘positive’ representation of the single career woman, Bonnie J. Dow (1996) in *Prime Time Feminism* lists one other ‘progressive’ discourse to emerge from *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* that was also key to representations of feminism within this period: that is, friendships between women (1996: 45). As Dow notes, the daily conversations held between female friends in Mary’s apartment ‘linked to the heightened awareness of the importance of women’s talk created by the spread of consciousness raising among women during the early 1970s’ (ibid).

Secondly, the constructions of female friendship embodied by Mary and Rhoda’s relationship represented female solidarity and the pleasures to be gained from female companionship which, as Dow notes, was an antidote to television’s frequent isolation of women within the suburban family or its caricature of female friendship as largely competitive (ibid). Indeed, it is the female friendship between Mary and her female neighbours Rhoda and Phyllis which provided a source of strength and community for Mary as a single independent woman trying to make it on her own.

It is these two themes, that of female independence and female friendship, which have similarly structured the ‘new’ ‘woman’s film’ and ‘heroine television’ from the

1970s. I will explore these features in order to situate the FED as part of these developments.

The independent woman figure was a prominent figure in the 1970s and early 1980s across film and television. The ‘new woman’s film’ of the 1970s such as *An Unmarried Woman* (Mazursky 1978) and *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (Scorsese 1974) focused on the independent woman attempting to make it on her own after divorce or the death of their partner. In the early 1980s in Britain the figure of the white, middle-class independent woman has also been embodied in the ‘professional woman drama’, as found in crime dramas that are structured around a role reversal narrative such as *The Gentle Touch* (LWT 1980-1984) and *Juliet Bravo* (BBC 1980-1985), and situation comedies such as Carla Lane’s *Solo* (BBC 1981-1982).

Secondly there has been a number of filmic and television texts from the late 1960s which have focused on female friendship or particular communities of women. These include the ‘new’ woman’s film *Julia* (Zinneman 1978), *The Turning Point* (Ross 1977) and *Girlfriends* (Weill 1978). On television this includes a proliferation of situation comedies including the British texts such as *Girls About Town* (ATV 1969), *Take Three Girls* (BBC 1969-1971), and *The Liver Birds* (BBC 1969-1979, 1996) [Fig 2]. In addition, there were popular imported sitcoms such as *Kate and Allie* which centred on two divorcees raising their children together, and *The Golden Girls* which focused on a group of retired women in Florida, but also the crime drama *Cagney and Lacey*. Although some of the female characters in these texts may be married, as in the case of *Cagney and Lacey*, it is nevertheless the friendship and camaraderie between women that is privileged by these texts over romantic relationships with men.

#### *Locating the FED as female friendship text*

It is in relation to this second strand of female friendship texts that I want to locate the emergence and proliferation of the FED since the late 1970s with dramas such as *Rock Follies* (LWT 1976-1977), *Tenko* (BBC 1981-1982, 1984) and *Widows* (Euston 1983). Indeed, whereas the ‘professional woman drama’ within this same period has embodied the more individualistic rhetoric of liberal feminism in its construction of the

independent middle-class woman attempting to make it on her own in male public spheres of employment, the ensemble format of the FED, similarly to that found in the ‘friendship’ situation comedies, enables an exploration of the experiences of different individual women but also the commonalities of female experience across the group structure. While the situation comedies largely explored the humorous side of women’s experience and friendship - ‘the irresistible comedy of being a modern woman’, to recall Brunson - the FED is similar to *Cagney and Lacey* where women’s friendship is not only based on friendship ties but on bonds that are forged in the public sphere and their experience therein.

*Rock Follies*, for instance, may explore the experiences of three very different female characters: Q (Rula Lenska), a socialite; Dee (Julie Covington), a struggling singer; and Anna (Charlotte Cornwall), a bored housewife, who assert themselves to form a rock band ‘The Little Ladies’ but it also focuses on the general experience of women in the music industry and their exploitation therein [Fig 3]. Similarly, the early British FED *Tenko* [Fig 4] uses the group structure to bring a sense of second wave consciousness-raising to women’s historical experiences during the Second World War in a Japanese prisoner of war camp.

While it is middle-class female identity that is the norm in these early examples of the FED, they nevertheless and more so than the ‘professional woman drama’ of the same period negotiate some constructions of women who inhabit working-class and non-white positions.<sup>50</sup> *Rock Follies* for instance centres on Q, a woman with French aristocratic blood; Anna, a middle-class southern woman, and Dee, a working-class northerner. Similarly, *Tenko* explores a range of women who inhabit middle-class positionings from doctors to the wives of army officers as well as the experience of white and Malaysian working-class women. Moreover, the opening two episodes of *Tenko* are devoted to introducing the female characters in their everyday gendered,

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<sup>50</sup> While the constructions of race are not unproblematic in any of the dramas, they did at least attempt to engage with non-white femininities. *Widows* features a British woman of Afro-Caribbean descent (Bella) and *Tenko* a Malaysian woman. Although the first series of *Rock Follies* centres around three white characters, it also featured a black woman in a supporting role and a second central black characters is introduced in series two.



**Figure 2: *The Liver Birds***



**Figure 3: *Rock Follies***



classed and racial positionings before they become prisoners of war. While it explores the different social positions of the women and the antagonisms between them that this causes initially in the prison camp, it crucially foregrounds their solidarity and the strength that they derive from each other which ultimately enables them to survive the experience of being prisoners of war.

Similarly, the critically successful *Widows* [Fig 5] is distinct within this textual landscape because of its focus on the ability of a group of working-class women to pull off an armed robbery together. Rather than reinforcing negative connotations of the working-class through its alignment of these women with the criminal underworld, *Widows* instead provided an opportunity for working-class actors to play more than mere stereotypes but working-class women with dignity.

As the actor Ann Mitchell, who plays the ringleader, Dolly in *Widows* noted: ‘These were conscious political decisions – the result of a lifetime of watching my class rubbished on television’ (Mitchell quoted in Skirrow 1987: 176).

As these three early and diverse examples illustrate, the group structure of the female ensemble drama is one which has celebrated female collective strength and the ability of women outside of traditional ‘feminine’ roles as wives and mothers within the public sphere. More so than the ‘professional woman drama’, the female ensemble drama has attempted to explore a range of ‘everywoman’ types across classed, and in some cases racial, positions.

I would argue that the FED’s exploration of more diverse and plural conceptions of female identity is attributable to their status as British terrestrial television texts. Unlike some of the American texts developed to attract the ‘quality’ demographics, the range of characters included in these British texts reflect an attempt on behalf of broadcasters and schedulers to appeal to the broad audience of British terrestrial television. Moreover as I argued in chapter one, while the focus on female identity and experience within these texts may appeal to female audience members the status of *Rock*



**Figure 4: *Tenko***



**Figure 5: *Widows***

*Follies* as a rock musical, the experience of war in *Tenko* and crime in *Widows* could make these texts appeal to a wider number of audiences, male as well as female. Nevertheless, like the other examples of ‘heroine television’, I would argue that they are potentially enabling for constructions of ‘women’ in the way they open up the different ways of doing ‘femininity’ and in their focus on relationships between women rather than romantic relationships between women and men. From this perspective, the female communities of women which the female ensemble dramas pivot around, can be seen to offer an alternative place of belonging for women from that of the nuclear family where a sense of individual identity can be asserted.

However, whilst this new breed of ‘heroine text’ embodies constructions of the ‘new woman’, I would argue that it shares tropes with traditional forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction such as soap opera. Indeed, I would argue that the FED is largely enabling for the construction and exploration of ‘women’s’ identity similar to soaps’ constructions of traditional ‘femininity’. That is, it is the centrality of women in the FED, similar to soaps, which, has ‘the effect of making them the norm by which the programmes are understood’ (Gergahty 1991: 50). While the FED is similar to soap opera in the way it is structured around the decentred address, and one in which viewers are invited to identify with several differing central characters, they, like the forerunners, ‘not always, not continuously, but at key points, offer an understanding from the woman’s viewpoint that affects the judgements the viewer is invited to make’ (ibid: 47). The privileging of a female viewpoint, this sense of being ‘down among the women’, in the FED is, like other forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction, distinct for its characterisation of women as understandable and rational (1991: 47).

Indeed, like Stephen Maddison’s (2000)<sup>51</sup> discussion of the British soap opera *Coronation Street* and the female ensemble films of Pedro Almodovar<sup>52</sup>, in the analysis

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<sup>51</sup> Maddison, S (2000): ‘All About Women: Pedro Amodovar and the Heterosocial Dynamic’, In *Textual Practice*. 14 (2): 265-284

<sup>52</sup> Maddison discusses Almodovar’s *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* and *All About My Mother* in this respect.

of the FED in the case study chapters I will explore the way in which the FED is distinct in the way it celebrates female homosocial bonds; that of female networks despite their marginalisation within patriarchal culture. I will explore that in so doing, the FEDs allow ‘women’ to resist normative gender positionings and the symbolic violence cast upon them within male-orientated texts which privilege male homosocial bonds.<sup>53</sup> In contrast to male homosocial texts, I will explore the way in which the FED enables ‘women’ to enact what Maddison refers to as ‘gender dissent’ in the way they privilege ‘heterosocial bonds’ between ‘women’:

Heterosocial bonding is a reversal of the discourse of [male] homosociality. If homosocial relations strive towards an appropriate masculinity by suppressing women [...] we could suggest that such relations produce a condition of gender dysphoria for [...] women, where their gender is culturally organised in such a way as to facilitate their exclusion, oppression, humiliation and powerlessness. Heterosocial moves attempt to resist these formations of women [...] by producing alternative models of gender relations that resist the dysphoria of homosociality. Narratively, heterosocial bonds are often concerned with displacing the dominance of homosocial representations of women [...] which constitute male subjectivity, by foregrounding bonds that express our interests.

(2000: 275)

Therefore in the analysis of the FED, I will explore how these dramas privilege female homosocial bonds and in so doing are structured by a heterosocial dynamic which disrupts and disturbs normative constructions and ways of seeing ‘women’. However in the next section I will explore how this project is one complicated by other characteristics of this type of drama.

In this section I have addressed the way in which the FED, along with the ‘new’ ‘woman’s film’ and examples of ‘heroine television’ has emerged during a period in which particular shifts were taking place in women’s social positioning in Britain and north America. As such, I have explored how the FED is informed by discourses of feminism in this period through embodying themes of female independence and friendship. In the next passage, however, I will explore how the FED embodies another

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<sup>53</sup> Homosocial bonds for Maddison describe the relations between men, be they intimate, combative, competitive or collegial, through which the authority and centrality of men’s interests are secured (2000: 272). In texts which privilege homosocial bonds such as crime fiction, Maddison argues that women are exchanged as tokens of social desire between men (ibid: 273).

trope of the earlier examples of ‘heroine TV’ and the more recent ensemble dramas of ‘Must See’ and ‘Must-She TV’: that of the ‘post-familial family’ setting. I will explore this trope, how it is embodied within these texts and how it has developed in relation to other de-traditionalizing processes of this period, that of the breakdown of familial and community structures within this same period. I will go on to explore how the ‘post-familial family’ structure informs the FED specifically.

### ‘Must See’ and ‘Must-She TV’

As Feuer has argued, every genre of American - and I would add British - television has historically been based on some kind of family structure from the personnel of news programme to situation comedies and soap operas (1984: 56). Responding to the decline of the nuclear family outside of the institution of television, MGM studios pioneered a new family structure in the 1970s which is based upon co-workers as family in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to appeal to the ‘quality’ audience.

The co-workers as family structure adopted by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, focused upon Mary’s friendships with her male colleagues at work and the bonds between Mary and her two neighbours, Phyllis and Rhoda at ‘home’ within her apartment block. In shifting the focus of the text from a traditional ‘oppressive’ nuclear family structure that informed much television in that period to focus upon a utopian family structure whose membership was defined in terms of friendship and co-workers, which could accommodate the career woman, Jane Feuer observes in *MTM: Quality Television*, that ‘The MTM work-family both reproduces the wholesome norms of family life on TV and presents us with a utopian variation on the nuclear family more palatable to a new generation and to the ‘quality’ audience’ (1984: 57).

As well as informing examples of ‘heroine television’ such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and, as I have explored earlier in this chapter, situation comedies such as *Kate and Allie* and *The Golden Girls*, this structure has informed the earlier and later examples of ‘Must-See’ and ‘Must-She TV’ from *Hill Street Blues* to American situation comedies and dramas such as *Friends* (Warner Bros/Bright/Kauffman/Crane Prod 1994-2004), *Ally McBeal*, (Twentieth Century Fox 1997-2002) *Will and Grace*

(NBC 1998-2006), *Sex and the City* (HBO 1998-2004) and the burgeoning set of British 'Must See' TV texts such as *This Life* (World Prod 1996-1997) and *Queer as Folk* (Red Prod 1999-2000).

The alternative family structure that is embodied in these ensemble-based texts is one based on friendship and, like the female ensemble drama, I want to argue one that embodies the contours of a 'post-familial family'. For Beck-Gernsheim, the post-familial family embodies new forms of family with the waning of the more traditional nuclear family structure in the late modern period. Indeed, rather than processes of de-traditionalization and individualization weakening the ideology of the family in the late modern period, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that they foster a longing for the opposite world of intimacy, security and closeness which people find through partnerships or family. However, freed from necessity and formed through choice, the 'post-familial family' takes the form of 'elective affinities', which, mirroring self-identity in the late modern period, become the 'do-it yourself famil[ies]' (1999: 60).

Whereas co-workers as 'post-familial family' continue to structure texts such as *Ally McBeal*, these other texts embody more contemporary variations of the 'do-it-yourself family': young professional flatmates in *This Life*, members of queer communities in *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*, and as friends that inhabit the same cities in *Friends* and *Sex and the City*.

As I explored, the FED of the 1970s and 1980s focuses exclusively on female examples of the 'do-it-yourself family' who populate rock bands, prison camps and crime networks. Similarly, in the late 1980s and 1990s the FED focuses on female 'post-familial families' in the form of a group of factory workers in *Making Out*, taxi drivers in *Rides*, prostitutes in *Band of Gold*, members of a woman's football team in *Playing the Field* and old school friends in *Real Women* and *Daylight Robbery*. In the section below I will outline the themes and issues that I will address in the case study chapters regarding the FED as female 'post-familial family' text.

### *Gender roles*

One central theme of analysis I will explore in the case studies of the FED of the 1990s are the positions women occupy within these new familial structures and how they differ from the constructions of women within texts which embody a traditional familial structure such as situation comedy and British soap opera.

As I have argued, the 'post-familial family' structure has been informed by processes of de-traditionalization within this period and appears to remove women from traditional 'feminine' familial roles. Indeed, the growing tendency to focus on groups of women as opposed to the traditional dyadic friendship within these texts can also be perceived to embody a representational shift from the late 1970s, in which the visibility of women coming together in groups for 'fun, companionship, and shared enjoyment' increased. Indeed, as O'Connor asserts, women coming together in this way, can be seen as socially challenging in a number of ways:

The traditional female life course is normative, socialised and supported by the ideology of compulsory marriage and motherhood [...] The recognition of women's ability to enjoy themselves with other women obviously implicitly undermines a romantic-love ideology which stresses that true pleasure is only possible in the arms of a man. It challenges social controls over women's behaviour, especially their access to public areas; it undermines the equation of femininity with maternity, domesticity and the private area, and the culturally legitimated tendency for women to base their identities on such 'caring' relationships.

(1992: 182)

The challenge posed by female friendship is one that transfers to its representation within symbolic forms. As Hollinger puts it in her discussion of the female friendship film:

The heroines of the female friendship films...provide images of alternative lifestyles for women based upon meaningful social relationships with other women. In so doing, they avoid advocating the submissive behaviour that so often characterises filmic portrayals of women's relationship with men.

(1998: 4)

However, while the ‘post-familial family’ structure of these texts has the opportunity to open up the positionalities available to women within this de-traditionalized context, they also have the ability to re-cast and therefore re-traditionalize women into normative ‘feminine’ (that is maternal and caring) roles. A case in point is *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* which has been critiqued by feminist academics for the way in which the co-workers as family structure positioned Mary back into maternal and sisterly roles. As Bathrick argues, although the text attempted to offer a critique of women’s position in journalism the text frequently reinforced Mary in traditional ‘feminine’ and familial roles as sister, mother and wife to male colleagues in the workplace (1984: 124-128).

This re-traditionalization of Mary in relation to traditional ‘feminine’ roles was furthered by a second aspect of the text. The continual separation of the public and private spheres within *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, marked by shifts from scenes in her apartment with Phyllis and Rhoda to scenes with male colleagues in the newsroom, did not challenge the work roles that are done in each sphere. Rather, this strategy simply extended the role women have performed in the personal sphere to that of the public sphere (ibid: 31).

However, I would argue that exploring whether the working-class female characters within the FED are similarly repositioned in relation to traditional ‘feminine’ caring roles within the ‘post-familial family’ structure is particularly pertinent. This is because one of few positive ways in which working-class women are constructed and indeed romanticised on television is within matriarchal positions, as in quintessential British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. As Press and Stratham make clear, working-class characters on television have largely been constructed in relation to the private sphere as wives and mothers and thus in their embodiment of the discourses of caring.<sup>54</sup> This is in comparison to middle-class women who have been portrayed more in line with patriarchal and egalitarian family structures (Press and Stratham 1993: 9). Therefore in the analysis of the FED of the 1990s, I am interested in

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<sup>54</sup> The sitcom *Roseanne* (Carsey-Werner Company 1988-1997), has challenged conventional constructions of the working-class woman through Rosanne Barr’s construction of the ‘unruly woman’ who takes pleasure in flouting discourses of respectability. However, as Macdonald (1995) has argued, even Roseanne remains ‘the ideal mom, but with the sentimentality removed’ (1995:144).



exploring how the constructions of working-class women in the FEDs are similar to and differ from such previous constructions.

In exploring the construction of working-class women across public and private spheres and roles, I will draw on Beverley Skeggs' (1997) research in *Formation of Class and Gender* to illustrate how these texts disturb and negotiate discourses of respectability (including that of 'caring') which have been perceived to be a defining feature of working-class women's identity historically in Britain to secure their moral legitimation (1997: 1-2).

As Skeggs argues, historically, working-class women's identity and sexuality has been defined in relation to middle-class constructions of the modern family in which the behaviour of women was interpreted in relation to their role as wives and mothers and their capacity for the general surveillance of working-class men (1997: 5). It is through discourses of respectability, Skeggs argues, that the 'threat' of working-class women's sexuality, constructed also as dangerous and impure, has been controlled (1997: 1/122).<sup>55</sup>

In the case study chapters, then, I explore how the FED embodies and disrupts discourses of respectability by taking working-class women out of their traditional maternal roles and positioning them as career women, footballers, prostitutes and lesbians as well as how these constructions embody the potential to reinstate middle-class constructions of the working-class as threatening, polluting and dangerous. Within the case study chapters I will explore this theme in relation to the discourses of postfeminism that I will discuss later in this chapter and how the construction of the post second wave feminist woman in the context of the mid 1990s compares to the quintessential construction of pre-feminist woman that appears in British soap opera.

For now however, in the next passage, I want to address Feuer's description of these texts, which I am referring to as a 'post-familial family' text, as embodying a utopian quality and the issues this raises for exploring the FED of the 1990s.

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<sup>55</sup> To return to soap opera for instance it is significant to note that as Geraghty has illustrated in her analysis of the figure of Pat Evans in *EastEnders* or Elsie Tanner in *Coronation Street*, the figure of the working class 'tart' has had her respectability confirmed by either showing a caring side to her nature or becoming married which enables her renegotiation into the local community.

*Utopian communities*

Drawing on Dyer's (1981) essay 'Entertainment as Utopia', I argue that the FED, like the post-familial family texts above<sup>56</sup> works as 'wish-fulfilment', by offering:

the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes - these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and realised.

(1981: 177)

Similar to the other post-familial texts of 'Must-See TV' (and 'Must-She TV'), I want to argue that the FED of the 1990s offers a model of 'what a utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organised' (1981: 177) by offering utopian solutions to certain inadequacies within society during this period. While Dyer details five such utopian ideals that are offered in texts<sup>57</sup>, it is his latter category - that of the utopian solution of community - that is a feeling of belonging and communal interest (and some cases collective action) in a social context marked by social fragmentation caused by job mobility, housing and development and legislation against collective action (ibid) that is most relevant to a discussion of the FED as a 'post-familial family' text.

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<sup>56</sup> To reiterate, the female ensemble drama can be differentiated from other types of post-familial family texts in their focus on female post-familial families as opposed to the mixed gendered post-familial family dramas such as *This Life* or male post-familial family text such as *Queer as Folk*. If situation comedies such as *Birds of a Feather*, *The Golden Girls*, and *Kate and Allie* embody a similar female post-familial family structure to that of the female ensemble drama, they are distinct from them in the degree to which these texts are played through comedic modes and episodic series form. The female ensemble dramas, on the other hand, are flexi-narrative serialised dramas whose hybrid aesthetic character encompasses non comedic and comedic codes.

<sup>57</sup> Dyer categorises the experience offered by entertainment into five 'utopian solutions'. Poverty and scarcity within society, is set against the utopian satisfaction of *abundance*, the elimination of poverty for self and others and the equal distribution of wealth; exhaustion brought about by work as a grind and the pressures of urban living are contrasted with the articulation of *energy*, in which work and play are united in entertainment texts; dreariness and the monotony and predictability of everyday life and routine are contrasted with *intensity* expressed through excitement and drama in entertainment texts; manipulation by capitalist and patriarchal ideology is contrasted with *transparency*, expressed through open, spontaneous, honest communications and relationships, and finally social fragmentation, caused by job mobility, housing and development and legislation against collective action is set against the sense of *community* marked by a feeling of belonging, of communal interest and collective action (1981: 184-185).

While I argue that the utopian ideal of community is embodied by all of these ‘post-familial family’ texts, what I will explore in the case study chapters is its more specific use in relation to the FED of the 1990s. Indeed I will investigate in the case study chapters how the utopian solution of community is utilised more specifically to deal with the fragmentation of traditional conceptions of *working-class* communities and senses of belonging in the late modern period.

As Rosemary Crompton has detailed in *Class and Stratification*, processes of de-traditionalization and individualization have been held accountable for the decline in what has been considered to be the ‘traditional working-class’; that is, geographically concentrated communities with the decline in heavy industries located in largely northern cities such as steelmaking, mining, shipbuilding and heavy engineering. These processes have not only caused the erosion of the character of traditional communities but have also led to the dispersal of traditional class communities by compelling some sections of the working-class to enter non-manual white collar jobs associated with the middle classes (1993: 15).

Indeed, while texts of the 1990s such as *Brassed Off* (Herman 1996) and *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997) have offered a utopian solution of community and class belonging to male identities within this fragmented landscape, the FED of the 1990s is significant because it is one of the few sites across television and film which offers a female perspective of this zeitgeist and a utopian solution of community and class belonging to female identities in this period.

In the case studies, for instance, I will trace how this utopian solution is used by the three texts under discussion in relation to the specific socio-cultural moments in which they were produced. In chapter three, for example, I explore the way in which this utopian solution of community is utilised in *Band of Gold* to offer a sense of belonging to a group of prostitutes within the dystopian landscape of mid 1990s’ Britain marked by neo-liberal values of individualism and the enterprise culture fostered by the Conservative government. In chapter four, I explore how the utopian solution of community is embodied in *Real Women* in the way it reinstates a sense of belonging amongst a group of old school friends who have become alienated from one another

because of processes of social mobility and the opening up of life choices that have become available to working-class women in this period. Finally, in chapter five, I explore the way in which *Playing the Field* reinstates a nostalgic image of the traditional working-class community similar to British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and how this coincides with and embodies the utopian spirit of the late 1990s with New Labour's 'New Britain' and discourses of 'Cool Britannia'.

Once more, a central theme of analysis which runs through the case studies of the FED of the 1990s is how its constructions of utopian communities are similar and different to the construction of matriarchal communities in British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. As Christine Geraghty has argued, retaining the ideal of community as a utopian possibility has been one of the most important and hard-fought functions of British soap in the 1980s 'at a time when the tide in political thought was firmly running the other way' (1991: 120).

The British soap opera provides a particularly useful point of comparison for its construction of an ideal community precisely because of the central role working-class women have played therein. As Geraghty has argued: 'It is the women characters who embody the function of community in the form of the matriarchs who hold the community together [...] they bring isolated and disparate individuals into the community/family; they organise its rituals; they transmit its values and spin the web of gossip through which it is continually renewed' (ibid: 122). Moreover, in a re-reading of Dyer's five utopian solutions of entertainment, Geraghty argues that the pleasure in soaps like other forms of 'feminine-gendered' fiction such the romantic novel and the 'woman's film' is due to the utopian solutions being aligned with 'feminine values' which 'seek to enable their readers to imagine an ideal world in which values traditionally associated with women are given space and expression' and 'in which there is some model of the way in which relationships, [...] could be differently organised on women's terms' (ibid: 117). So along with the utopian quality of energy being utilised by these female characters in largely maternal roles to keep the communal values alive, the utopian ideals of transparency and intensity are used to foster 'feminine values' of openness and sincerity in relationships (ibid: 123-124).

While I would contend that Geraghty's account risks essentialising women in relation to the 'feminine values' embodied by soap opera, her account nevertheless offers a useful way to explore the FED's own relationship to the traditional 'feminine values' embodied within such 'feminine-gendered' fiction. In the analysis of the case studies, therefore, I will explore if the FED's construction of an ideal female community involves the re-traditionalization of 'women' in relation to these traditional 'feminine' discourses or whether these utopian ideals are embodied differently by the FED of the 1990s.

One further point of comparison between traditional British soap opera and the FED is also relevant to this discussion. One of the most problematic utopian ideals embodied by soap has been the personification of female energy. While 'women's' strength and ability in the local community have been celebrated within the British soap opera Geraghty has argued it has had a greater difficulty accommodating women who express energy through activity within the public sphere. For this reason the British soap opera has found it particularly difficult accommodating the figure of the 'new independent woman' that has emerged from the 1970s and which, as I have argued, populates the FED.

Geraghty argues that although this figure could be perceived as extending soap's long tradition of dominant, strong-minded, tough women 'who could hold their own with any of the men', they also, 'challenged the basis of home and community which had provided the female characters in soaps with their strength' (1991:135). So whereas female characters were usually shown working in soaps as matriarchs either inside the home or in mundane jobs in the local community, or even in the case of Meg Richardson running the Crossroads Motel in *Crossroads* as an extension of the personal sphere, Geraghty argues the independent career woman is distinct because she operates in the public sphere and is marked by economic self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment (including sexual fulfilment) rather than defined by her role within the personal sphere. Alexis in the American soap opera *Dynasty*, is identified by Geraghty as 'the ultimate paradigm of the independent woman figure' (ibid) who takes on the masculine role and subsequently is personified by her cruelty and lack of emotion (ibid: 125). Geraghty argues that in

*Coronation Street* Deirdre Barlow's pursuit of a career in local politics raised the irreconcilable demands facing women when trying to hold down a career and a family. So although *Coronation Street* continued the tradition of seemingly supporting a 'women's viewpoint', through alignment with Deirdre, it was nevertheless the case that the demands made on Deirdre by her husband Ken and her daughter Tracey were seen as a result of the choices she had made in pursuing a career rather than 'just a natural part of a woman's lot'<sup>58</sup> (ibid: 138).

In summarising the British soaps' treatment of the independent career woman, Geraghty contends that despite their basic sympathy and endorsement of 'women's viewpoint', the career woman is still perceived to be a problem issue:

While accepting the woman's right to a career, the British soaps quite markedly stress the pains not the pleasures, the defeat not the victory, the tiredness not the elation. The idea of the career woman offers a challenge to the British soaps' traditional way of representing women's characters because it proposes a model in which women act rather than react; a model in which it is necessary for a woman to be self-assertive rather than continually absorbing the pain and the punishment on behalf of other members of the family or the community.

(ibid: 139)

To reiterate, while FEDs are not soap operas, this description of soap opera's treatment of the new independent woman by Geraghty is useful to compare the FED's own embodiment of female 'energy' and indeed its constructions of new femininities as a form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction on television.

### **Conclusions to precedents of the FED**

In this section I have reviewed the thematic concerns of the FED in relation to its textual precedents of the 1970s to the 1990s and the social contexts in which they have been produced. I have explored the way in which the female ensemble drama is utilised to

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<sup>58</sup> The playing out of the familiar storyline, that of the child, Tracey, becoming ill in the course of the mothers (Deirdre's) self-fulfilling absence from the personal sphere can be compared with films from other periods such as the 1940s when women's employment and self sufficiency was a problem issue. This trope has been used in films of the 1940s such as *Brief Encounter* (Lean 1945) and *Mildred Pierce* (Curtiz 1945) where the mother is punished for privileging her personal (and sexual) desire over her duties as wife and mother.

offer a utopian vision of an all-female community, one whose basis is informed by women's shifting social position and shifts in the ideology of the family and community similar to other variants of drama such as 'Must See' and 'Must-She TV' in this same period.

While I have explored the way in which these texts are enabling for 'women', informed by discourses of de-traditionalization in an attempt to address a new generation of social subjects within this shifting social landscape, I have also suggested that they are informed by processes of re-traditionalization and have subsequently outlined some of the issues I will address within the case study chapters in relation to these themes.

While a dominant theme within this section has been the way in which the FED has historically been informed by the concerns of the second wave feminist movement in the next section I will review some of the ways in which examples of 'heroine television' and 'Must-She TV' have been problematised within feminist academic accounts in terms of their embodiment of feminism and feminist politics. In the absence of a more detailed discussion of the FED in relation to this discursive context, this material is useful from which to contextualise my own particular way of framing the FED's own take up of feminism and feminist politics.

### **Textual politics**

In this section I contextualise the FED's own take up and embodiment of feminist politics by reviewing some academic feminist accounts of the female friendship film and 'heroine' television's' embodiment of feminism during this same period. I will argue that while the majority of the FEDs follow the friendship film text and 'heroine television' text in their embodiment of feminism as an individual lifestyle rather than political choice, they nevertheless are ambivalent texts and sites of negotiation between 'conservative' and 'progressive' elements.

I will subsequently contextualise the retreat from the overt engagement with politics within these texts in relation to a more general shift in the area of 'Must See TV' during this time, to that of 'life politics'.

While this section will provide a broad overview of how these texts can be approached, it also provides useful contextualisation for the closer examination of the particular textual politics that the FEDs of the 1990s embody as postfeminist texts. A point that I explore in more detail later in part one of this chapter.

### From explicit feminism to ambiguous feminism

If producers of 'heroine television' have drawn on discourses of second wave feminism in a bid to appeal to modern female audiences, this is not to say examples of 'heroine television', including the FED, are straightforwardly or overtly feminist or political.

During the 1980s and 1990s academic feminists have been concerned to address the way in which 'feminism has been appropriated and assumed by, or otherwise grafted on to mass cultural forms' by media industries (Mayne 1988: 30). As Mayne's description of this as 'prime-time feminism' suggests, feminism is here utilised by the media industries for its entertainment and ratings values rather than its political values (Mayne 1988; Gamman and Marshment 1989; D'Acci 1994; Dow 1996, Probyn 1993).

Feminist academics, for example, have viewed the female friendship film as 'co-opting feminist ideas in order to recuperate them for patriarchy by harnessing them to other discourses that in effect neutralise their progressive potential':

The idea of recuperation suggests that radical, oppositional issues, such as ideas concerning sisterhood and female bonding can be assimilated by the dominant culture so that they lose their critical bite. Viewed from this perspective, female friendship films merely represent this recuperative strategy. They make it appear as if oppositional ideas have caused significant alterations in representational strategies when in fact, if they have occurred at all, are at best superficial.

(Hollinger 1998: 4)

Hollinger outlines five variants of the friendship film text that can be categorised into apolitical and political categories: the 'sentimental', 'erotic' and 'manipulative' text falling into the former category and the 'political' and 'social' text falling into the latter category. I will review these categories here to give a flavour of the way in which such texts are divided into political and apolitical classifications and to illustrate how the FED of the 1990s fits within these classifications.



Sentimental friendship texts such as *Julia* through to *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias* then construct 'close, emotionally diffusive, dyadic same sex unions': 'Sentimental female friends cry and confide, protest and embrace, and relate so intensely that their friendship acquires many of the signs of a love affair' (ibid: 7). However, Hollinger argues, 'although extreme and radical in its expression, sentimental female friendship is frequently quite limited in action. It is often portrayed as stimulating personal growth, but it rarely leads to the promotion of significant social change' (ibid). Hollinger concludes then, that the function of the sentimental friendship film text is 'primarily to serve as a temporary respite from the problems women face in their heterosexual romantic encounters' (ibid).

If the sentimental text can be distinguished from the erotic female friendship text by the suggestion of a lesbian sexual relationship between two friends, more often than not the ambiguity of the lesbian relationship 'renders them almost indistinguishable' from constructions of sentimental female friendship (ibid). Thus 'the sexuality of the two friends is left indeterminate. They can be perceived either as very close friends or as lovers' (ibid). Conversely the manipulative female friendship text can be deemed anti-female friendship or 'backlash' films. As Faludi argues in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, discourses of a backlash to women's advancements occur historically in periods where it is perceived women are making great strides. (1992: 13). In this instance, backlash discourses have circulated from the early 1980s with the impact of the second wave feminist movement and shifts in women's social positioning which destabilised traditional and conservative ideologies regarding gender and the family within this period. Backlash texts in this period include *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Hanson 1992) and *Single White Female* (Schroeder 1992) which portray a destructive female relationship that mocks the possibility of women forming the bonds of loyalty and affection. Instead, as Hollinger argues:

By focusing so strongly on conflicts between women, they obscure other issues related to women's social position in society, relieve men of any responsibility for women's problems, and suggest, instead, that women should grant men primary importance in their lives because they are the only ones upon whom women can rely.

(ibid: 207)

These three apolitical forms of friendship text can be compared to two political friendship texts. The political female friendship text such as *Nine to Five* (Higgins 1980) and *Thelma and Louise* (Scott 1991) involve an alliance of women ‘that leads to some action against the social system, its institutions, or conventions’ (ibid: 8). Low-key female bonding replaces the emotional intensity characteristic of the sentimental and erotic friendship texts, the female friendship stemming ‘not from an emotionally intense sense of connection, but from needs that lead to sociopolitical action’ (ibid). Hollinger continues: ‘Freed from the intense intimacy that seems to replace political energy in sentimental friendship, political female friendships are able to move in more socially challenging directions’ (ibid). Lastly, the social friendship film text such as *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidman 1985) and *Mystic Pizza* (Petrie 1988), Hollinger argues, can be perceived to be a more conservative variant of the political friendship film text:

They involve a nurturing tie that does not so much pit women against society as smooth their passage back into it. Through the teaching of female wisdom or the granting of a sympathetic ear, women in these works aid and sustain each other, perhaps by promoting a friend’s heterosexual romance or by easing her pain at the loss of her male lover.

(ibid: 8)

However, if in these ways the social female friendship does not ‘in any way attack patriarchal society’, and ‘even work to facilitate women’s integration into the existing social structure’, Hollinger argues, it still challenges articulations of conventional femininity in two ways: ‘by portraying female friendship as an alternative to women’s complete dependence on men and by qualifying traditional conceptions of female passivity’ (ibid).

As I have suggested, Hollinger’s typology is not exclusive to the friendship film texts but translates to the female ensemble drama of the 1990s. *Band of Gold* is, I would argue, recognisable as the more overtly political female friendship drama and *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* more apolitical as social and sentimental friendship texts. I will explore these characteristics of these dramas in greater detail in the case study chapters.

Julie D'Acci's discussion of the female buddy drama *Cagney and Lacey* as an example of 'heroine television' in *Defining Women: The Case of Cagney and Lacey* is also relevant to this discussion of the 'prime-timing' of feminism. I review here what she refers to as *Cagney and Lacey's* move from an engagement with 'explicit general feminism' to that of 'ambiguous or tacit feminism' to discern further the FED's engagement and embodiment of feminism from the late 1970s:

Riding the crest of the women's movement in the late 1970s and very early 1980s, the C&L movie and original Foster/Daly series generated...“explicit general feminism” (usually with a liberal slant). This included dialogue and scenes that straightforwardly addressed discrimination against women in both the public and private spheres, stories structured around topical feminist causes, and the use of unequivocal feminist language and slogans. It also included the conflation of issues involving gender, race and to some degree class, as well as political analyses of stereotyped masculinity and status quo feminist roles. [...] As the series progressed, its feminist affiliations became much more muted and oblique, transmogrified into...“ambiguous” and “tacit” feminism that appeared to derive not from a social movement but from the life experiences, lifestyles, and behaviours – the overall bundle of traits – of the individual characters, particularly the protagonists.

(1994: 147/161)

As D'Acci argues, the transference of feminist politics to the level of the individual character has not only resulted in the ambiguity of meanings of feminism but has protected the interests of programme makers and schedulers by offering 'something for everyone, depending upon the particular viewers' political positions and interpretations' (ibid: 48). Nevertheless, as D'Acci also argues, if this strategy has protected the interests of programme makers and schedulers, it has simultaneously worked to open up the text by 'continuing to support and suggest a multiplicity of viewpoints':

1980s' prime-time network TV was ultimately governed by the imperatives to address a large heterogeneous audience, to offend as few members of that audience as possible, to amalgamate progressive and reactionary voices, and to encourage multiple readings of programs. So despite the downplaying and constriction of feminism and despite the network's discursive authority over its more explicit representations, feminist fragments continued to find negotiations in the texts, and political readings of the series survived and thrived.

(ibid: 167)

Hollinger has made a similar point regarding the female friendship film text, where she argues that film producers ‘most likely have no strong idea of their target audience’s sympathies towards feminist ideas, or because they fear that these sympathies might be divided [...] create films that partake in what Julia Lesage terms ‘ideologically implicated ambiguities’ (1998: 6).

The ambivalent nature of ‘heroine television’ texts then, may work to open up rather than close down meanings of feminism circulating within culture. Like D’Acci and Hollinger, in the analysis of the FED of the 1990s, I follow Gledhill to argue that these ‘feminine-gendered’ texts can be most usefully seen as ‘sites of struggle between both ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ textual elements (D’Acci: *ibid*; Hollinger: *ibid*).

Moreover, I want to frame the retreat from a more overt engagement with politics in the FED in relation to shifts taking place within other areas of television drama such as ‘Must See TV’ during this same period. Indeed, texts such as *Hill Street Blues* to *The Sopranos* do not focus on the overt macro politics but rather on the more micro and quotidian politics that shape people’s everyday lives. For Creeber, as I explored in chapter one, the retreat from a more overt engagement with politics within serial drama has arisen not only because of the economic imperatives of the broadcasting industry but also as a response to wider cultural shifts which has seen the re-conceptualisation of the relationship between the public and private and the political and the personal in contemporary life (Creeber 2004: 117). Creeber cites the women’s movement’s own contribution to this process through which politics and relations of power have come to be understood as being embodied in the most intimate relationships and quotidian aspects of everyday existence and subjectivity (*ibid*).

Hollinger also acknowledges this shift in her discussion of the female friendship text. She argues, for instance, while the dominant approach has been to categorise these texts as political texts which privilege an alliance against the system and apolitical texts that privilege the personal, psychological nuances of the female characters, this represents ‘an unreal divorce between two areas which, as we know from our own lives, are interrelated and interdependent’ (*ibid*: 9). Hollinger therefore argues that there are

political implications to all these films – ‘they are more overt in the categories of political and social female friendship films, but they exist explicitly or implicitly in all of these works’ (ibid: 9).

For Creeber these contemporary texts reflect shifts in contemporary social thinking from thinking of politics in terms of ‘emancipatory politics’ to that of ‘life politics’. I will explore this below.

### ‘life politics’

Drawing on Giddens, Creeber argues the shift from ‘emancipatory politics’ to ‘life politics’ is one which sees the movement from the struggle of society to free itself from the oppressive customs and traditions to the concern of the moral and ethical responsibility of the self ‘which inevitably takes place primarily on an individual and day-to-day level’ (Creeber 2004: 118) in the de-traditionalized context of late modernity. From this viewpoint, the more ambiguous take-up of feminism as one of a particular lifestyle choice or trait at the level of individual characters need not be seen as a depoliticization of feminism. Rather it can be framed by this contemporary concern with the more ‘political’ aspects of ‘lifestyle’ choice. For Giddens, if ‘emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances, life politics is a politics of lifestyle’ (1991: 214):

Lifestyles are routinised practices, the routines incorporated into habits of dress, eating, modes of acting and favoured milieux for encountering other; but the routines followed are reflexively open to change in the light of the mobile nature of self-identity. Each of the small decisions a person makes every day –what to wear, what to eat, how to conduct himself [sic] at work, whom to meet with later in the evening – contributes to such routines. All such choices (as well as larger and more consequential ones) are decisions not only about how to act but who to be. The more post-traditional the settings in which an individual moves, the more lifestyle concerns the very core of self-identity.

(ibid: 81)

For Creeber then, contemporary television drama’s concern with lifestyle and the quotidian ‘life politics’ of characters in serial dramas such as *This Life*, *Queer as Folk* and *Sex and the City* ‘reveals a generation for whom the construction of certain

lifestyles is partly a 'political act'. Drawing on Giddens' theorisation of self identity within *Modernity and Self Identity* he argues the self-reflexive construction of the self has taken on new significance in the post-traditional context of late modernity:

For while the self-reflexive construction of the self is almost irrelevant in 'traditional' societies (where life choices are usually strictly imposed through established customs) in a world of increasing personal choice it becomes the crucial means by which individuals negotiate and make sense of the world around them. As such, lifestyle choices become an important component of self-identity, a crucial site of individual freedom that reflects a world in which identity itself is now a matter of continual renewal rather than a compulsory inheritance. As Giddens points out, this means that seemingly small and everyday decisions become encoded with both political and moral meaning and significance.

(2004: 121)

If, as Creeber suggests, serial drama in the 1990s can be perceived to be concerned with the 'life politics' of its characters, in the case study chapters I will explore the 'life politics' of the FEDs female characters. More specifically I explore the 'life politics' that are constructed around its postfeminist femininities.

### **Conclusions to textual politics**

In this section I have reviewed how the FEDs as mainstream texts embody a wider trend within 'heroine television': that of the construction of 'lifestyle' feminism. I have subsequently contextualised this shift in relation to wider textual shifts within the area of 'Must See TV' and framed the retreat from the overt engagement with politics within these texts as responses to wider cultural shifts, namely the personalisation of the political sphere within the late modern period. I have argued that I will subsequently frame an analysis of the FED of the 1990s in terms of their embodiment of 'life politics'. As I have argued, these texts allow for an exploration of the 'life politics' of these different characters and the ethical and moral decisions that these characters make regarding their lifestyle choices in a de-traditionalized, postfeminist context.

Indeed increasingly from the late 1980s, the ambiguity of 'heroine television's' embodiment of tacit or ambiguous feminism has been framed in terms of the embodiment of postfeminist discourses. In the next section I review some of the ways in

which ‘heroine television’ has been identified as embodying discourses of postfeminism by feminist critics in order to identify the contours of the postfeminist ‘life politics’ of the female ensemble dramas female characters that I will explore in the case study chapters.

### **Discourses of postfeminism**

‘Postfeminism’ has become the dominant, if contested, term used by a growing number of feminist critics to explain shifts in the construction of women on television and media culture more generally within the contemporary period.<sup>59</sup>

Despite disagreements within Feminist Media Studies about how postfeminism can and should be defined, feminist academics agree that the shift to a postfeminist media culture has taken place in the intervening period between the television constructions of the ‘new woman’ in texts such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and the construction of ‘new, new women’ within more contemporary texts such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (Lotz 2001: 105-6). As Lotz states, these ‘new, new woman’ texts require new critical tools and perspectives to make sense of them because they ‘offer some of the most developed and compelling (if contradictory and sometimes even reactionary) televisual representations of gender politics and debates over (and within) feminism’ (ibid: 106).

In this section I will review some of the dominant ways in which feminist academics have engaged with the term ‘postfeminism’ and how discourses of postfeminism have been perceived to inform examples of ‘Must-She TV’ such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. I review these accounts to provide an overview of this burgeoning area of study and to contextualise my discussion of the FED of the 1990s’ embodiment of postfeminism which follows this discussion.

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<sup>59</sup> In the 1980s and 1990s the currency of the ‘postfeminism’ has been used by a growing number of feminist (and non feminist) Media Studies academics to describe shifts taking place within media culture. This includes: Probyn (1988), Macdonald (1995) Dow (1996), McRobbie (1997, 2004a, 2006), Projansky (2001), Arthurs (2003, 2004), Creeber (2004), Tasker (2005), Negra (2004, 2005), Brunsdon (1997, 2005), Hollows (2003) and Gill (2007).

## The 'New', 'New Woman'

Firstly, constructions of the 'new', 'new woman' in the 1990s follow on from that of constructions of the 'new woman' of the 1970s, both being unthinkable without the women's movement and women's increasing participation within the public sphere. As with constructions of the 'new woman' in the 1970s in the sphere of 'heroine television', the construction of the 'new', 'new woman' of the late 1980s and 1990s in these examples of 'Must-She TV' is informed by a desire on the part of producers and schedulers to appeal to predominantly white, middle-class professional women.<sup>60</sup> Mirroring the audience which they attempt to appeal to, the narratives of both *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* focus on 'the liberal, heterosexual, white, metropolitan, career women' (Lotz: 83).

However, whereas the figure of Mary Richards in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was a construction of the newly independent woman who emerged against the backdrop of struggles of 'real' women to achieve equality and independence in the public sphere, the figure of the 'new', 'new woman' is a more contemporary incarnation of the liberated woman in a social context in which, as I explored in the introduction to this thesis, the values of feminism have been felt to have been 'taken in to account' (McRobbie 2006: 61). Indeed, as I also explored in the introduction to this thesis, the constructions of the 'new', 'new woman' within this context are seen as representing the successes of feminism.

However, what has been of concern to feminist academics is the way in which such texts not only mark, or rather overstate, the successes of feminism but then simultaneously represent the end of feminism by suggesting that the goals of the second wave feminism movement have been achieved (Projanksy 2001: 70, but see also Dow

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<sup>60</sup> *Ally McBeal* for instance first aired in Britain in 1998 was commissioned by Fox from David E Kelly with a brief appeal to 'women of 18-34 and provide an alternative to the predominantly male audience of Monday Night Football on the rival Network ABC' (Brunsdon 2000: 177). Similarly *Sex and the City* was produced as an example of narrowcasting by the cable company HBO to appeal to quality affluent sections of the televisual audience. *Sex and the City* combined an explicit sexual discourse and remediation of familiar forms of television sitcom and glossy women's magazine to attract the niche quality audience of women to HBO Signature Channel, a whole channel which was marketed as: "Smart, sophisticated entertainment for women". (Arthurs 2003: 83/89).



1996; McRobbie 2006). More than most other media constructions, the character of Ally McBeal has been held up as being representative of the success of liberal feminism, as a successful professional lawyer. A well-publicised *Time* magazine cover from June 1998 that asked 'Is Feminism Dead?' for instance, displayed a photograph of Ally McBeal (played by Calista Flockhart) alongside photographs of well-known feminist activists Susan B. Anthony, Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinham to posit the claim that the success of *Ally McBeal* was 'a sign that feminism is no longer relevant to today's young women' [Fig 6]. In the article that accompanies the cover there is also a quote from the creator of *Ally McBeal*, David E Kelley, claiming that 'She's not a hard, strident feminist out of the 60s and 70s. She's all for women's rights but she doesn't want to lead the charge at her own emotional expense' (Belafonte 1998: 58).

As this passage illustrates, the 'new', 'new woman's' positioning is only thinkable in the wake of feminism but is also marked by a simultaneous repudiation or 'disidentity' as McRobbie terms it, with second wave feminism's dismissal of 'feminine' pleasures. So, along with such texts marking of the passing of feminism, a second defining trope of these texts, which accounts also for feminist academics' ambivalent responses to them, is the way in which they embody discourses of feminism such as female empowerment and equality which sit alongside discourses which celebrate traditional 'feminine' pleasures such as men, sex, shopping and beauty. Ally McBeal may be a lawyer, for example, but she has a passion for short skirts and is constantly on the search for true love. Similarly, the four central female protagonists in *Sex and the City* may be affluent single women but their social lives revolve around the quest for sexual satisfaction, Mr Right and the perfect pair of Jimmy Choo shoes.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> These tropes in *Sex and the City* have not only framed the way in which they have been marketed to female audiences (as consumers) but are also elaborated within academic accounts of the text. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe's 2004 publication *Reading Sex and the City* for instance included a map of the city and the places the characters shopped and the cocktails they drank.



Figure 6: Ally McBeal and the death of feminism

## Post-1970s feminism

For critics such as Moseley and Read (2002) and Arthurs (2003, 2004), postfeminist texts such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* do not mark the death of feminism but rather more simply can be seen as embodying post-1970s feminism (Moseley and Read (2002; Arthurs 2004). For Jane Arthurs (2004) in *Television and Sexuality*, generation is one of the key dynamics structuring this debate:

For a younger generation born in the 1970s and 1980s, feminism, instead of appearing radical, has become associated with their parents' generation and can therefore be perceived as an establishment ideology whose codes restricts their freedom of expression.  
(2004: 130)

Rather, born in a post-1970s' second wave feminist context in which the goals of equality and choice for women have been achieved, women can now 'have it all', including the option to engage with the cultural practices associated with 'the feminine' given their empowerment and distance from these oppressive positions and practices historically.

As McRobbie has argued, the freedom of women to choose to engage with the pleasures of the traditionally 'feminine' is supported by accounts of reflexive modernization (Giddens 1991, Beck 2002,) in which women have become 'dis-embedded' from traditional structures through wider process of de-traditionalization and individualization in late modernity. Self-identity for women, as with social subjects more generally, becomes a reflexively organised endeavour, 'femininity' being a matter of one lifestyle choice among many. At the most optimistic end of the spectrum, the choice of femininity as a lifestyle choice, as Arthurs notes: 'when combined with an emerging postmodern aesthetic of parody in popular culture, excessive femininity can be performed as an assertive form of feminist fashion' (2004: 130).

However, I prefer to frame *Ally McBeal's* and *Sex and the City's* particular investments in femininity in relation to some points Arthurs makes in her 2003 article

'Sex and the City and Consumer Culture: Remediating Postfeminist Drama'. As Arthurs has argued, the new public femininities that are constructed in texts such as *Sex and the City* are the latest incarnation of the 'Cosmo Girl's' of the 1960s and 1970s that are encouraged to use their femininity and sexuality (via consumption practices) for their own positive gain: that is, to gain career advancement but, most importantly, a man on their own terms. Each of the episodes of *Sex and the City*, for instance, revolves around the four central characters Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte's success at finding sexual fulfilment and Mr Right based on their particular versions of the 'feminine' template: the vamp, (Samantha); the 'kookie' spirited woman (Carrie); the feminist career woman (Miranda) and the WASP (Charlotte).

On the one hand the text's play with the new template of femininity can be viewed positively as enabling new constructions of women particularly in relation to female sexual satisfaction, where, as Arthurs states, this was not previously considered a suitable topic for television drama (2003: 85). This is the position taken by Arthurs who argues that in a context freed from the moral constraints of network television, *Sex and the City* is able to exploit fully the glossy women's magazine's consumerist approach to sexuality, in which 'women's sexual pleasure and agency is frankly encouraged as part of a consumerist lifestyle and attitude' (ibid). Indeed, combined with the codes of the television sitcom, for Arthurs *Sex and the City* provides a 'licenced space for an exploration of sexual taboos and decorum' and repudiating and defying the 'bourgeois codes that used to be demanded of respectable women' (2003: 85-86). This can be seen in *Sex and the City* in the way each episode is structured around the sex lives of the four women which act as research for Carrie's weekly newspaper column about sexual relationships in Manhattan. Carrie's column, and thus the series as a whole, ranges from exploring themes such as 'can women have sex like men?', bisexuality, lesbianism, bondage, to female masturbation and the use of vibrators. While women become the sexualised subjects of the narrative men become the objects of the female gaze who are tried on for size like garments of clothing 'to see if they fit':

Sex in this context becomes like shopping – a marker of identity, a source of pleasure – knowing how to choose the right goods is crucial. But men in *Sex and the City* are the only objects of desire that create consumer dissatisfaction. The women treat men as branded goods – the packaging has to be right but the difficulty is to find one whose use value lives up to the image.

(ibid: 94)

However, while I would argue that these texts may be informed by de-traditionalizing process and the ‘undoing’ of traditional gender norms in the way they foreground the performativity of gender, female desire and agency, they are simultaneously marked by what Angela McRobbie describes as the ‘double entanglement’ of neo-liberal values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life (2004; 2006) that I referenced in the introduction to this thesis: that is, they are marked not only by the ‘undoing’ of gender but also by the ‘re-doing’ and re-traditionalization of gender.

*The reinstatement of normative ‘feminine’ destinies*

Indeed, while Arthurs plays up the de-traditionalizing aspects of *Sex and the City* to celebrate the texts more frank treatment of sexuality, she downplays the extent to which, like other postfeminist texts such as *Pretty Woman* and *Working Girl* (Radner 1993; Brunson 1997) or *Ally McBeal* (Ouellette 2002; Dow 2002), this text, like previous forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction, is structured around a marriage plot; that is, single women who want to get married.

The marketing for *Sex and the City* illustrates this point, whereby the text was originally promoted as ‘sexy, hip smart and sassy, *Sex and the City* charts the loves and lovers of four women and their quest to find the one thing that eludes them all – a real, satisfying relationship’ (Arthurs ibid: 131). Indeed, Arthurs herself quotes Carrie lamenting the fact that she cannot find Mr Right: “In a city of great expectations is it time to settle for what you can get?” (Series 1, Episode 9: “The Turtle and Hair”, as quoted in Arthurs ibid: 94). Similarly to the finale of *Pretty Woman*, *Sex and the City* reinvents the quintessential ending to romantic fiction: that of a fairytale scenario in

which Carrie gets her Prince Charming, in this instance Mr Big [Fig 7]. This is accompanied by the other members of the group becoming married or settling down.<sup>62</sup>

What is particularly troubling about these texts, as Rosalind Gill (2007) in *Postfeminist Media Culture* argues, is the way in which such heroines: ‘value autonomy, bodily integrity and the freedom to make individual choices’ but where they ‘seem compelled to use their empowered postfeminist position to make choices [...] located in normative notions of femininity’ (2007: 162). Similarly to the argument I have framed above in terms of the re-traditionalization of gender, Elspeth Probyn (1988) in ‘New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home’ argues that pre-feminist ideals are repacked as postfeminist freedoms in such texts. In particular she argues that female characters are constructed as having a choice between home and career, but where home is posed as the ‘natural’ choice for women (1997: 131).

While home is reaffirmed as the ‘natural’ choice for women in *Sex and the City* which can be seen in the way each of the women are re-traditionalized by the end of series six by becoming married or settled down, this is also reaffirmed by *Ally McBeal* through Ally’s continuing single status as a lonely career woman in the text. In this way *Ally McBeal* has been described as embodying a backlash discourse which sees women depressed and unhappy – ‘enslaved by their liberation’ (Faludi 1992: 2). That is, if the women’s movement contributed to women’s participation in the workforce on a par with men, increasingly postfeminist constructions of the professional women such as Ally McBeal question whether it was worth it (Lotz 2001: 108; Arthurs 2004: 130). As Arthurs states:

The personal cost of the professional women competing in a man’s world is represented as making it more difficult to find a man to marry. The emotional misery this causes is closely linked to the biological clock that makes women in their thirties the particular focus for these concerns.

(ibid)

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<sup>62</sup> Samantha’s settlement is arguably the most disconcerting. Like some of the ‘woman’s films’ of the 1940s, Samantha’s journey towards normative femininity is one marked by a narrative of punishment; her promiscuous lifestyle brought to an end by her discovery of cancer and the love of a good man.



**Figure 7: The postfeminist fairytale ending**



**Figure 8: The postfeminist backlash**

Indeed, at the end of the majority of episodes of *Ally McBeal*, there is the image of Ally walking alone along the city streets at night to the melancholy vocals of Vonda Shepherd [Fig 8].

While in this section I have discussed how these examples of postfeminist texts re-traditionalize women at the level of normative femininity, in the next section I will review how a similar process is apparent in the ‘re-doing’ of the codes of sexuality and female bodily control.

*The re-instatement of normative sexuality and bodily control*

While femininity is supposedly posed as a choice for women within a postfeminist culture, feminist academics such as McRobbie and Gill have been concerned with the way in which postfeminism marks new forms of disciplinary power over women and their bodies. As Gill has argued, one of the most striking aspects of postfeminist culture, that I would argue is evident in texts such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, is its obsessive preoccupation with the body. In recognising a shift from earlier representational practices, Gill argues that femininity is in this period defined as a bodily property rather than a social, structural or psychological one:

Instead of caring, nurturing or motherhood as central to femininity (all of course highly problematic and exclusionary), in today’s media, possessions of a ‘sexy body’ is presented as key (if not sole) source of identity. The body is presented simultaneously as women’s source of power and as always unruly, requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and re-modelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever-narrower judgements of female attractiveness.

(2007: 149)

While Calista Flockhart’s thinness has been the source of much unrest within the press, the equal levels of thinness of Sarah Jessica Parker have been celebrated via her status as a celebrity fashion icon. Indeed, *Sex and the City*, replicates the style of the glossy women’s magazine in its surveillance of the sexiness and attractiveness of its female protagonists to men. This is particularly troubling given the aspirational quality of *Sex*



*and the City* and the girlification of the lead characters of Carrie and Ally who are held up as desirable sexual icons for ‘real’ women to emulate (Gill, *ibid*: 151).

Furthermore, while in these texts women are constructed as knowing sexual subjects rather than as sexual objects ‘who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so’ (Goldman quoted in Gill: *ibid*), I would argue, following Gill, that this represents a ‘deeper form of exploitation than objectification – one in which the objectifying male gaze is internalised to form a new disciplinary regime.’ (*Ibid*: 152):

In this regime, power is not imposed from above or the outside, but constructs our very subjectivity. Girls and women are inverted to become a particular kind of self, and are endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography.

(*ibid*)

As Gill argues this is particularly troubling precisely because of the pernicious connection of this representational shift to neo-liberal subjectivities in which sexual objectification can be ‘re-presented’ not as something done to women by some men, ‘but as a freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects’ (*ibid*: 53).

To reiterate, so far in this section I have attempted to provide an overview of some of the issues that postfeminist texts such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* pose for Feminist Television Studies. As I have argued these texts are significant to explore in terms of the ‘life politics’ of postfeminist femininities because of the way, to draw on Rosenfelt and Stacey, they seemingly incorporate, but at the same time repudiate feminism (1990: 549). These examples of ‘Must-She TV’, then, compound feminist academics anxieties surrounding examples of ‘heroine television’ because of the way in which they present feminism as a lifestyle choice for entertainment purposes and because of the way in which they subsequently construct an uncontradictory alliance between feminism and femininity.

As I stated in the introduction to this section on postfeminism, the purpose of exploring *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* as postfeminist texts has been to

contextualise the FED's own relationship and embodiment of postfeminist discourses. In the following section then, I map out the FEDs' of the 1990s own relation to these postfeminist discourses as British regional dramas and the issues that I will explore in relation to them in the case study chapters.

### Discourses of postfeminism in the FED of the 1990s

As is detectable from the above discussion, the term 'postfeminism' has been utilised by Feminist Media Studies academics primarily to explore dominant constructions of white, middle-class women within the 'professional woman drama' such as *Ally McBeal* and American female ensemble dramas such as *Sex and the City*. In this section, I am concerned to explore how I perceive the British FEDs of the 1990s engage with discourses of postfeminism. For the purposes of clarification I will argue that not all of the British FEDs of the 1990s embody discourses of postfeminism. While it may have become the 'culturally dominant' with regard to constructions of women in the 1990s, I will illustrate in chapter three that *Band of Gold* is more informed by a feminist discourse than a postfeminist discourse. For this reason this section will relate more specifically to the later dramas of the 1990s: *Real Women* and *Playing the Field*.

In this section then I will firstly review how the FEDs as regional dramas which centre on 'everywoman' types embody a different brand of postfeminism to that of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. I will frame this discussion by drawing on Brooks and Lotz's accounts of postfeminism. Secondly, I will go on to explore how the thematic concerns of FED cross with their American counterparts in the way in which they are similarly marked by discourses of feminism and femininity. I will subsequently identify the issues I will address in the case study chapters given their different articulation of these discourses as British texts which focus on 'everywoman' types and largely working-class femininities.

### The 'everywoman'

As I have so far argued, one prominent theme that emerges from feminist media academics' discussions of the American female ensemble drama *Sex and the City* is the

way in which the ensemble format is utilised to explore the 'life politics' of middle-class women in a post-second wave feminist context. However, as I have reviewed, these texts have been problematised for the way in which they acknowledge feminism but as Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2005) summarise in 'In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Culture', such acknowledgment of feminism as a feature of the cultural milieu takes the form of a prepackaged and highly commodifiable entity, 'so that discourses having to do with women's economic, geographic, professional, and perhaps most particularly sexual freedom are effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism' (2005: 107). In the American ensemble drama *Sex and the City*, for instance, I have explored how the different variations between the female characters are but variations of the 'feminine' template offered by glossy women's magazines. In short, they are contemporary re-incarnations of the 'Cosmo girl' who are used to deliver relatively affluent segments of the female audience to advertisers and schedulers.

However, I would argue that, in comparison with the American female ensemble drama *Sex and the City*, the British FED is more enabling for the exploration of female identities in this period. I want to argue that this is due to its different conditions of production. As I have argued, *Sex and the City* has been produced by processes of narrowcasting, deliberately developed to appeal to more affluent domestic and overseas markets. However the FED as I have also explored in chapter one, has been developed by processes of broadcasting to appeal to a wider diversity of audience segments who make up the British viewing public. As such I will argue that the British FED does not carry the same burden of representation as that of *Sex and the City*. Indeed *Sex and the City* is comparable to the British 'boys' stories' that I discussed in chapter one that have to provide images that are representative of the nation whereas the local and domestic remit of the British female ensemble dramas allow them to focus on, to recall Brunson, what is local and awkward within the British nation.

What's more, I want to argue the ensemble format, utilised by British terrestrial broadcasters to appeal to a wide diversity of audience segments makes it particularly suitable to explore the different life choices and thus 'life politics' of 'everywoman' types, and thus not simply the middle-class professional woman of late modernity. In

this way I want to draw on Amanda D. Lotz's (2001) application of Ann Brooks' (1997) largely theoretical discussion of postfeminism in 'Postfeminism Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes', to explore further the potential of the female ensemble drama's embodiment of a plurality of diverse 'everywoman' types.

Lotz (2001) draws on Ann Brooks' theoretical and positive definition of postfeminism to 'rehabilitate' the use of the term postfeminism, given the negative associations which it has acquired within Feminist Media Studies, and to explain some developments on television. In order to situate Lotz's application of Brooks' theoretical definition of feminism to televisual texts, I will briefly outline Brooks' definition of postfeminism.

Differing substantially from the largely negative accounts of postfeminism within Feminist Media Studies, Brooks' theoretical definition of feminism rather heralds a third wave feminist movement through intersecting with other movements for change: postcolonialism, poststructuralism and postmodernism. For Brooks, it is intersecting with these other movements for social change that has caused a conceptual shift within feminism, from centering on debates around equality to that of difference (1997: 4). So, rather than marking a depoliticization of feminism, for Brooks postfeminism marks feminism's 'coming of age', one which along with these other social movements is 'capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks' and one which 'facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the 'demands of marginalised, diasporic and colonised cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms' (1997: 4).

For Lotz, Brooks' definition of postfeminism is useful because it conceptualises the way in which some texts of the 1990s focus on non-white women and, secondly, their diverse relations of power (2001: 115). She states:

Shows exhibiting this attribute may construct female characters who are complex and distinct from one another despite the commonality of womanhood [...]. The multiple ways ethnicity, class, education, sexuality, age, generation, marital status, motherhood, and ability

position women in society all offer possible axes for illustrating disparate perspectives on female experience and social opportunities. The representation of this attribute emphasizes the ways varied proximity to power structures, such as patriarchy and capitalism, can lead women to experience their subjectivity differently and dependent on context.

(ibid)

While Lotz's account is similar to other feminist accounts of postfeminism in its focus on American texts (such as *Any Day Now* (Finnegan Pinchuk 1998-2002)), her insights are transferable to frame an analysis of the British FED. The British female ensemble drama then embodies something of the flavour of Lotz's application of Brooks' definition of postfeminism given that it explores the 'commonalities of womanhood' as well as the different 'life politics' of its 'everywoman' types who occupy different social and economic positions. Although still predominantly white, the groups of women in the FEDs of the 1990s do embody black femininities as well those of different sexual orientation and those of different generations and class positionings. Indeed, in the case study chapters I explore how such constructions of marginalised identities are both similar and different to previous constructions.

However, if in this section I have detailed how the female ensemble drama differs from the American postfeminist texts such as *Sex and the City*, I am nevertheless concerned in the case study chapters with the way in which it shares with the American postfeminist texts 'a non-contradictory unification of feminism and femininity' (Goldman et al 1991: 334).

### Post 1970s feminism

The embodiment of this postfeminist discourse can be observed in the marked difference in the composition of the female ensemble drama from the early and late 1980s. Early 1980s' female ensembles dramas such as *Tenko* and *Widows* are populated by independent women who are constructed as single; the 'post-familial family' structure in these instances is allowed by and provides a utopian solution to women who have been separated from their husbands because of war or fatal accidents. From the late 1980s and texts such as *Making Out*, however, there is a shift in that the independent woman is

now represented as being single *or* married. Whereas the ‘post-familial family’ of early 1980s’ dramas was posed as a refuge for single independent women, and one in which, as has already been noted, female friendship is offered as an alternative to heterosexual relationships, the ‘post-familial family’ structure of the dramas from the late 1980s can be seen to offer female friendship to women no matter their marital or sexual status.

A central concern in the analysis of the FED of the 1990s is the textual negotiations surrounding the embodiment of feminism and femininity within this body of texts. Similarly to feminist readings of the American postfeminist ensemble drama *Sex and the City*, I am interested in exploring how they are marked by negotiations between discourses of de-traditionalization and re-traditionalization of women in relation to two areas: normative femininity and sexuality and the body.

#### *Discourses of normative femininity*

In her brief discussion of the FED of the 1990s, Brunsdon argues that *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* are recognisable as postfeminist texts because, similarly to their American textual counterparts, they are concerned with the status of marriage for the modern woman and with notions of ‘having it all’ (2000: 167/175). In the case study chapters I will explore whether the ‘choiceosie’ rhetoric of the female ensemble drama, like that of American postfeminist texts, such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, sees a re-traditionalization of femininity through reinstating marriage as *the* life choice for the modern woman. While the American texts confirm this through their journeys towards normative femininity marked by marriage (or the longing for marriage in the case of *Ally McBeal*) in the end of the text, in the British ensemble drama I will explore the status of marriage in relation to the narrative treatment of these women who occupy the positionalities of wife but also in relation to its construction and narrative treatment of single women and lesbian women.

As I have stated earlier in this chapter, exploring the status of marriage in the FED of the 1990s is also significant given that its narrative of ‘everywoman’ types translates to its focus on working-class women who have historically been constructed in

relation to maternal roles within the family to secure their moral legitimation. I will explore this further in the next section in relation to sexuality and the body.

*Discourses of sexuality and bodily control*

I argued above that postfeminist texts have been celebrated by academics such as Arthurs for the way in which they allow a licensed space for female characters to explore sexual pleasure and agency and to defy the bourgeois codes demanded by respectable conduct. In the case study chapters I will similarly explore the British female ensembles' own particular incarnations of 'unruly' wom[e]n'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, what I will argue is that the FED's embodiment of unruly sexual figures holds different connotations and a different set of issues because of the female characters different class positioning in relation to discourses of respectability than that of the middle-class figures in *Sex and the City*.

Significantly, the women in *Sex and the City* are able to play with codes of respectability because of their middle-class status and the distance this affords them and their promiscuous behaviour within the cultural economy from connotations of the pathologised sexuality of the 'lower' social orders. Rather than their promiscuity having connotations of the loose sexual morals of the 'lower classes', the constructions of sexuality in *Sex and the City* are connected to their status as 'bourgeois bohemians'. This is the class fraction which replaced the 'Yuppies' as the new dominant class in America and other western economies in the 1990s (Arthurs 2003: 86). Significantly:

The key feature of this new class fraction is their ability to reconcile the contradictions between bourgeois and bohemian values and lifestyles. Sexual permissiveness, that in the bohemian movements of the 1960s was articulated with radical anti-capitalist political values, has been re-articulated to conform, not only with the materialist priorities of consumer culture, but also with the emancipatory politics of the 1970s and 1980s. One effect has been to free white, middle-class women from the sexual constraints required by bourgeois respectability.

(ibid)

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<sup>63</sup> I explore the figure of the 'unruly woman' in part two of this chapter.

The status of the female characters in *Sex and the City* as bourgeois bohemians is marked in the way they strive to be sexually frank without being ‘vulgar’ (ibid: 92).

In the analysis of the FED’s constructions of unruly sexual, working-class women I will pay attention to the way and extent to which these working women are afforded the same liberties as their middle-class counterparts in *Sex and the City* within this de-traditionalized context and to the way in which they are marked by the re-doing or re-traditionalization of class and gender in relation to discourses of sexuality. For instance, I will explore whether the excesses of female working-class sexuality can be celebrated and indulged within these narratives or whether they are seemingly narratives towards the modification and correction of this particular facet of working-class women’s behaviour. This point has particular resonance firstly, given that Yvonne Tasker (1998) in *Working Girls* and Skeggs (2004) in *Class, Self and Culture*, argue that narratives of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction which focus on working-class female characters are often marked by transformative strategies ‘in which the visually excessive working-class woman is turned in to the subtle and discreet middle-class woman’ in the end of the text<sup>64</sup> (Skeggs 2004: 99).

Secondly, this point has resonance because there is a historical lineage of the surveillance and regulation of working-class women’s sexuality. This, I would argue, is heightened in this postfeminist context as I explored earlier, where the preoccupation is with the body as a site for heightened surveillance and control. Here it is important to note that it is not only glamorous, celebrity or middle-class bodies that have been subject to scrutiny and evaluation within glossy women’s magazines or ‘glossy’ postfeminist texts such as *Sex and the City*. Rather, this has been matched by the scrutiny of ‘ordinary’ women’s bodies, appearance and behaviour within reality make-over programmes such as *What Not to Wear* (BBC 2002-), *10 Years Younger* (Maverick Television 2004-) and *Ladettes to Ladies* (RDF 2005-). Significantly, as Angela McRobbie has argued (2004) in ‘Notes on *What Not to Wear* and Post-feminist Symbolic Violence’, class distinctions based on middle-class codes of respectability are

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<sup>64</sup> The texts which Tasker and Skeggs both discuss include: *Working Girl*, *Pretty Woman*, and *Up Close and Personal* (Avnet 1996).



being rearticulated and reinstated as one disciplinary strategy to control women in their newly 'liberated' positions within the de-traditionalized context of late modernity (2004: 101). Rather than the breaking down of old classed distinctions, as McRobbie details, they have seen the invention of new negative classed and gender identities such as 'minger' and 'pramface',<sup>65</sup> identities that the women taking part in these reality shows attempt to negate through their narratives of transformation guided by their female middle-class presenters.

If this example reinstates the significance of the concept of class and how it informs the way classifications of gendered identities are made and remade in culture, in the analysis of the FED of the 1990s in the case study chapters I will focus on the negotiations taking place with regard to the de-traditionalizing and re-traditionalizing discourses of class which they embody.

## **Conclusions to part one: thematic overview of the FED**

The aim of part one of this chapter has been to provide a thematic overview of the FED of the 1990s, one which encompasses its historical development since the 1970s in relation to relevant social and textual shifts but also one which outlines the particular issues I will explore regarding its constructions of female identity within the case study chapters.

Through drawing comparisons with the examples of 'Must See' and 'Must-She TV' of the same period, I have argued that FEDs, like these other examples of television texts embody a 'post-familial family' structure and utopian ideal of community. As I have argued, the British female ensemble drama is a particularly interesting strand of this form of drama to explore because of the female identity of its 'post-familial family' and how its ideal of community is structured around working-class female communities.

Secondly, I have contextualised the thematic preoccupations of these texts and their particular engagement with feminism in relation to the body of research that has

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<sup>65</sup> 'Minger' and 'Pramface' are terms which have circulated across the tabloid press and the internet as new forms of public denigration for a 'certain type of girl whose bodily features and disposition betray her lowly cultural status', through the signifiers of false tan, dyed (blonde) hair and single motherhood status and who is usually shown pushing a pram (McRobbie 2004: 102)

accumulated around 'heroine television' within feminist television criticism. I have reviewed how the FED similar to other examples of 'heroine television' embody constructions of 'lifestyle' feminism. I have subsequently contextualised this characteristic in relation to other types of texts of this same period, namely 'Must See TV' and framed the retreat from the overt engagement with politics within these texts as responses to wider cultural shifts, namely the personalisation of the political sphere in the late modern period. I have explained that I will frame an analysis of the FED of the 1990s in terms of its embodiment of 'life politics'. As I have argued, these texts allow for an exploration of the 'life politics' of these different characters and the ethical and moral decisions that these characters make regarding their lifestyle choices in a de-traditionalized, postfeminist context.

Finally, I have framed my analysis and exploration of the 'life politics' of the female identities surrounding discourses of postfeminism that have circulated within culture during this period and which inform later examples of 'heroine television' and 'Must-She TV' including the American ensemble drama *Sex and the City*. I have subsequently mapped out the particular themes and issues I will explore in relation to discourses of postfeminism in relation to these British regional texts. Drawing on Lotz, I have suggested that the FED can be approached via different and more positive conceptualisations of postfeminism through its exploration of regional femininities and 'everywoman' types. I have gone on to outline how the FED of the 1990s does, however, share some of the characteristics of its American counterparts which make them more readily identifiable as postfeminist texts, namely through their embodiment of discourses of feminism and femininity. Following on from this, I have outlined the issues that I want to address in relation to these themes, given their different articulations of postfeminism as British texts which focus on working-class women.

As I stated in the introduction to this chapter, a central theme of analysis which is woven across these three discursive contexts is the way in which the FED, similar to its textual contemporaries, embodies both discourses of de- and re-traditionalization. In mapping out the textual thematics of these texts I have primarily outlined the issues that

I want to raise in the case study chapters because of their implications for the constructions of female identity.

While the purpose of part one of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the thematic properties of the FED of the 1990s, in part two of this chapter I provide an overview of the aesthetic properties of the FED of the 1990s. Together with this section, it outlines my particular way of approaching these texts.

## **Part two: aesthetic overview of the FED**

The FED, like the female friendship film text, is not a discrete genre. Rather, each of the FEDs have their own generic affiliations. The three case studies, for example, feature a crime drama (*Band of Gold*), a comedy-drama (*Real Women*) and a 'soap drama' (*Playing the Field*). Despite their different generic affiliations, each FED can also be perceived to be informed to a greater or lesser extent by three aesthetic traditions: realism, melodrama and comedy. In this section, I review how the FED is informed by each of these aesthetics by drawing on academic research from these three traditions. As with the review of the historical and thematic elements of the FED, a review of the aesthetic codes on which the FED draw is useful to contextualise how these have also shifted and changed in the de-traditionalized context of late modernity as well as to contextualise their relationship to 'women' and 'the feminine'. Indeed I will explore how these two issues intersect whereby aesthetic modes such as social realism for instance, have been used more in contemporary dramas such as the FED to express and engage with female rather than male identities. As such we can see how aesthetic forms have also been subject to some de-gendering in this particular socio-historical period.

Before reviewing the aesthetic properties of the FED it is both necessary and useful to clarify the particular model of textual analysis which is employed in this thesis, which encompasses both a thematic *and* aesthetic analysis of the constructions of female identity.

Within the field of Media and Cultural Studies textual analysis is a research method which investigates meaning. It systematically analyses the languages of

representation - 'signifying systems' - which texts use in order to make meaning.<sup>66</sup> As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, one aim of this particular textual analysis, is to study the FED as cultural artefacts; that is, as forms of representation which will have embedded in them meanings derived from the culture in which they are produced, which in turn may tell us something about dominant and subordinate networks of meanings, values, assumptions, ideologies and discourses circulating in a particular historical moment.

In attempting an analysis of the aesthetic as well as the thematic properties of the FED, and how they construct meanings of working class female characters, this study follows on from the research methodologies of Charlotte Brunsdon (1981, 1997), Julie D'Acci (1994), Christine Gledhill (1987, 1997) and Christine Geraghty (1991, 2006). In line with their textual analyses of the construction of 'feminine' identities, a consideration of the aesthetic properties of texts under discussion, as I stated in chapter one, is perceived as a discourse which can be both productive and enabling as well as constraining for constructions of 'women'. To reiterate, the aesthetic codes, no less than narrative codes of the text, are what we make meaning from.

As I stated in chapter one, the purpose of reviewing the aesthetic, as well as the thematic properties of the FED, is to provide a framework to enable the analysis of constructions of 'women' in the preceding case study chapters. While I discuss how each of the FEDs under discussion are informed by three aesthetic traditions, that of realism, melodrama and comedy, it is also necessary to state that in this particular instance a discussion of how the aesthetic traditions inform the FED is limited to a discussion of the specific episodes which I have selected for analysis and discussion in this thesis. In this instance I have chosen to analyse episodes from the first series of each of the dramas under discussion. This selection has been made for two reasons. Firstly, because the first series provides an opportunity to explore the dramas as they were originally conceived and commissioned. This is significant because it is the first series of

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<sup>66</sup> However, textual analysis does not assume that meanings are fixed. It assumes that meanings depend on the particular historical, social and cultural contexts in which texts are produced. It also assumes that the meanings offered by a text may be interpreted by its audience in a variety of ways, again dependent on social, historical and cultural factors.

the dramas that were distinctive at that time on television in terms of constructions of working-class female identities. This is not to suggest that the constructions of female identities within subsequent series of each text are unworthy of analysis. Indeed the lines of continuity and shifts within each serial's constructions of female identities is fruitful for further exploration. However, and secondly, my decision to focus on the first series of each serial is due to time constraints. Given that some of these serials ran to five series (*Playing the Field*) and involve twelve hours of drama per series, the constraints of time for this research project prohibited me from analysing episodes from subsequent series. However, through providing a thematic overview, together with the preceding aesthetic overview, I do provide a theoretical and analytic framework on which to build on this research project with a further investigation in to subsequent series and contemporary examples of the FED as a form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction.

## **Realism**

In this section I explore how the dominant aesthetic code which informs the FED is that of realism. As I have explored in chapter one, realism has been the aesthetic code that continues to be favoured and valued within academic dramatic criticism, one which informs 'quality' 'serious drama'. In reviewing the way in which a realist aesthetic informs the British FED, I want to argue that this review is not one motivated out of a desire to align the FED with prestigious aesthetic forms in order to validate its study and increase its cultural prestige.<sup>67</sup> Rather, the claim to realism in this analysis of the FED is one which acknowledges and explores the way in which the dominant British aesthetic, that has had a bearing on most British texts from soap operas such as *Coronation Street* to 'serious dramas' such as *Boys from the Blackstuff*, informs the FED of the 1990s and, its constructions of women within it.

In this section, I review how the FED can be seen to be informed by a realistic or, more specifically, a social-realist aesthetic. To illustrate this point, I contextualise the FED's own embodiment of social realism in relation to the new wave of films of the

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<sup>67</sup> Although, as I will explore in the case of *Real Women*, this is not to say the dramas themselves do not employ the realist aesthetic through which to construct themselves as a form of 'quality' British drama.

1950s and 1960s. While exemplifying how these texts are similar to as well as how they differ from the new wave texts of the 1950s and 1960s, I go on to contextualise the British FED's embodiment of social realism in relation to a new postmodern wave of social-realist texts that has been identified by Lez Cooke.

I conclude this section by arguing that although the FED of the 1990s moves towards a contemporary 'postmodern' form of social realism, similarly to other British television dramas in this same period, they remain centred around a rational/moral axis but also play with performance, style and desire. I go on to distinguish between codes of realism and verisimilitude.

### 'Real' women

I want to argue that the central preoccupation of the FED is to engage with the 'reality' and 'truth' of female identity and experience in the context of the 1990s. This is suggested most clearly by the title of one of the dramas that I explore in the case study chapters, *Real Women*. However, if this is arguably the case, the titling of the series *Real Women* also draws attention to some of the problematics of such a project. On the one hand, the title of *Real Women* suggests that it is possible to transparently and unproblematically represent 'real' women. On the other hand, this labelling, I would argue, casts doubt on the credibility of other media representations by its suggestion that they are some how 'unreal', 'fantastical' and 'inaccurate' by comparison to those embodied within this drama. For the purposes of this study, the ambivalence of the title of *Real Women* exemplifies how media constructions claim a proximity to a transparent reality but in so doing, simultaneously point to the very contested nature of reality within media forms. Media forms, then, do not 'reflect reality' but are rather caught up in the struggle to construct different and competing versions of reality according to the programme makers' particular and subjective perspective and according to whom, in this instance, they interpret as being 'real' women.

I want to argue that in attempting to engage in the realities of women's lives, to show 'things as they really are' (Williams 1976: 218), these texts can be understood as drawing on and working within the conventions of a realistic aesthetic, as Hill argues:

No work can ever simply reveal reality. Realism, no less than any other type of art, depends on conventions, conventions which ... have successfully achieved the status of being accepted as 'realistic'. It is this 'conventionality' of realism which also makes its usage so vulnerable to change, for as the conventions change (either in reaction to previously established conventions or in accordance with new perceptions of what constitutes reality) so too does our sense of what then constitutes realism.

(1986: 57)

In what I argue is its attempt to document the lives of its working-class female characters, as I have indicated above, I argue that the female ensemble drama works within the conventions of the dominant tradition of British cinema and television: that of the documentary-realist tradition.

For John Grierson, the documentary-realist idea was one underpinned by his definition of it as 'the creative interpretation of actuality' (quoted in Higson, 1986: 75), a definition which for Higson is 'no naïve "window-on-the-world" conception of documentary realism as mere record' but which 'on the contrary [...] is an acknowledgement that the aesthetic principles which determine the particular combination of sounds and images that make up film [...] produce one desired view of the social world rather than another' (1986: 75). Constructed as the foundation of an indigenous British cinema which has displaced the more gothic, expressionistic and melodramatic strains of British cinema historically (ibid: 82), the British realist tradition has been formed in opposition to American cinema as a social-democratic project, one whose function was that of communication, documentation and education of social problems and issues rather than to 'uplift' citizens from their everyday reality into a world of 'wish fulfilment' as a form of entertainment and escapism (ibid: 74).

The realist discourse which is embodied by the FEDs of the 1990s, I would argue, resembles the renewed form of social realism that was embodied within the 'New Wave' of film and television dramas in the late 1950s and early 1960s in films such as *Room at the Top* (Clayton 1959) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Reisz 1960) and television soap operas such as *Coronation Street*, police drama *Z Cars* (BBC 1962-1978). In chapter one I have already discussed some of these texts and their embodiment of a realist aesthetic. However, this discussion was one largely framed in

relation to the television academic's appreciation of certain aspects of it rather than a more detailed discussion of the aesthetic itself. In this section I will review the characteristics of this form of social realism and how they are embodied by the FEDs.

## Social Realism

Marion Jordan's description of social realism in 'Realism and Convention' is worth quoting at length, for its usefulness as an overview of this aesthetic:

The genre of social realism demands that life should be presented in the form of a narrative of personal events, each with a beginning, middle and an end, important to the central characters concerned but affecting others only in minor ways; that though these events are ostensibly about social problems they should have as one of their central concerns the settling of people in life, that the resolution of these events should always be in terms of the effect of social interventions; that characters should be either working-class or of the classes immediately visible to the working classes (shopkeepers, say, or the two-man business) and should be credibly accounted for in terms of the ordinariness of their homes, families, friends; that the locale should be urban and provincial (preferably in the industrial north); that the settings should be commonplace and recognisable (the pub, the street, the factory, the home, and more particularly the kitchen); that the time should be the 'present', that the style should be such as to suggest an unmediated, unprejudiced and complete view of reality; to give, in summary, the impression that the reader, or viewer, has spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted.

(1981: 28)

Like its predecessors, the FED embodies the iconography of social class realism; that of the factories, the houses and pubs, but it also extends the new wave's sense of regional place from exploring the industrial Midlands and North of England to include southern boroughs of London in dramas such as *Real Women* and *Daylight Robbery*.

Moreover, if the new wave was praised for bringing to both the large and small screen constructions of working-class life and attitudes that had previously been neglected and 'where reality now seemed to reside' (Caughie 2000: 66), it is no coincidence that in its exploration of the 'life politics' of 'everywoman' types, the focus within the FED is upon working-class women and women of classes 'immediately visible to the working classes' (Jordan 1981: 28).

The female ensemble drama's embodiment of social realism in the 1990s can, then, be contextualised in relation to its previous incarnation in the 1960s. Indeed, for



the ‘angry young men’ of the new wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the concentration on ‘traditional working-class culture’ came at a particular moment of social change, one in which there was a concern with the decline in traditional working-class culture, associated with work, community and an attachment to place and anxiety about the ‘corruption’ of the working-class by consumerism and Americanisation (Hill 1999: 166/2000:178). As Higson argues:

The ‘traditional working-class community’, [is] on the one hand...nostalgically valorised as the site of authentic cultural values and a responsible morality, but on the other hand is constructed as tainted by the encroaching mass culture, the culture of consumerism, affluence, social mobility – the culture of television. The community now constitutes the backdrop, the setting for the exploration of the psychological complexity of the (usually) young working-class male protagonists of the films. Both the community of the neighbourhood, and its most domestic form within the genre, the family, have become intrusions on the private (sexual) life of the individual – now the hero of the film.

(1986: 92)

There are three points which come out of this summary which relate to the female ensemble drama’s embodiment of the social-realist aesthetic. Firstly, the shifting relations between the public and private; secondly, the focus upon men and the status of women within the new wave of the 1950s and 1960s; and thirdly, the concern with community values versus individual desire. I will explore each of these points in turn.

#### *Public and Private*

Firstly then, and to return to Higson’s argument that was introduced in chapter one, the British new wave as a precursor to the FED embodies ‘the changing conceptualisations of the relation between the public and the private, between the political and the personal – thus between the state and the citizen’ within the realist tradition in the post-war period (1986: 83). Whereas the documentary realist tradition of the 1930s attempted to ‘articulate a common, public sphere of responsible social activity, as distinct from the spectacular cinema of escapism’, which foregrounded individual desire and wish fulfilment, Higson argues that ‘the conjunction of a liberal humanist morality and a social-democratic politics’ within the new wave ‘insists that a space be marked out

within the public sphere for the expression of the private, the personal, the emotional, the individual' (1986: 83). In concluding his point, Higson argues in relation to the new wave films:

[They] acknowledge the separation of the individual from key political decision-making processes, and use the generic forms to explore this social gulf as much in psychological terms (alienation as a state of mind) as in sociological terms. In the end, it does seem that social relations, and the formal strategies of the genre are newly inflected towards this exploration of – if not fulfilment of – individual desires.

(1986: 93)

Like the new wave films, location and identity are still foregrounded in the FED but the community of women within the texts provide the setting for the exploration of the psychological as well as the social complexity of the working-class female protagonists. As such, they do not embody 'a reformist politics that deemed adverse social circumstances could be changed by the introduction of more enlightened social policies or structural changes in society' (Hallam and Marshment 2000: 185), but instead they focus upon how to deal with the pressures and problems of the everyday and offer particular, individual ways of coping and surviving. Moreover, the ensemble format of these dramas both allows for an exploration of the problems faced by individual members of the group and the group structure simultaneously acts to compensate and support the members of the group through their difficult times rather than mobilising collective action against the bigger political issues that have a bearing on their lives. Again, as I stated in section one, *Band of Gold* as the more overtly political FED of the 1990s is the exception to this, which I explore in chapter three.

#### *Female working-class identity*

This brings us to the second point. Whereas the films of the new wave were informed by the anger of their central male protagonists, the FEDs differs from their forebearer in their concentration upon female working-class identity. As Hill argues, the anger of the angry young men was fuelled by a more generalised cultural anxiety around questions of male identity within this period, marked by an ethic of consumption over that of

production and the increased involvement of women in the labour force and occupation of traditional male roles (1986: 25). Thus it is women in the films of the new wave who become the target for the male protagonists' objections.

Although televisual texts informed by a social-realist aesthetic such as *Coronation Street* have celebrated working-class women's strength and endurance in matriarchal communities, (Dyer 1981: 5), in the films of the new wave, women, in their embodiment of a matriarchal community, are constructed both as a constraint, associated with domesticity and marriage but also as metaphor for consumer culture. Thus Hill argues: 'Just as the 'female consumer' had served more generally as a metaphor for the 'affluent society', so was it in their imagery of women that the angries were most successful in finding a target for their objections.' Drawing on a quote by D.E Cooper then, he argues 'what these writers really attack [...] is the effeminacy [...] the sum of those qualities which are supposed traditionally...to exude from the worst in women: pettiness, snobbery, flippancy, voluptuousness, superficiality, materialism' (Cooper quoted in Hill 1986: 25).

Clearly then the female ensemble drama differs from the new wave films in its concern with female identity. However, whereas the misogyny of the new wave was levelled at women because of their gains in employment and spending power (albeit, if this was for domestic consumption) it is somewhat ironic in the context of the 1990s that it is precisely the inroads women have made in employment and their increasing purchasing power that has contributed to their central occupation of film and television narratives (even if this development in the contemporary period, as I explored in chapter one, has been constructed as signalling the decline in the 'quality' of British television).

Although the FED does register the crisis in masculinity following de-industrialisation and mass unemployment in texts such as *Making Out* and *Band of Gold*, this is largely framed from the point of view of the female characters.

### *Community*

Whereas family and community were constructed as constraints to the individual desires of the male working-class protagonists of the new wave texts, it is conversely the case in relation to the FED of the 1990s.

As we have seen in part one of this chapter, the FED's embodiment of the utopian solution of community goes some way to recover a sense of community based upon class belonging and mutual concern given that this has been to some extent lost or eroded in the 1990s. Indeed, John Hill in 'Failure and Utopianism: Representations of the Working Class in British Cinema of the 1990s', has argued that a similar trope has been used in British films of the 1990s such as *Brassed Off* (Herman 1996), *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997), and *Up n' Under* (Godber 1998) which offer 'a certain utopianism about the possibilities of collective action' in the face of alienation and de-industrialisation. Hill argues that the representations of working-class life within such texts rely upon their construction of utopianism similarly to soap opera through their emphasis on community and mutual concern (Hill 2000: 183). This is in comparison to films of the previous decade of the 1980s which, Hill argues, engage with a social-realist aesthetic (such as *The Ploughman's Lunch* (Eyre 1983), *Educating Rita* (Gilbert 1983), *Letter to Brezhnev* (Berhard 1985)) but where he states there is virtually no representation of 'community' as such and very few images of collective action' (1999: 166).

Similarly to other films of the 1980s, such as *Educating Rita*, *Letter to Brezhnev* and *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* (Clarke 1986), the female ensemble dramas take female experience as the subject of their narratives but unlike these texts do offer escape from their problems through the reinstatement of community. However, the FED, like these 1980s films which centre upon working-class women are rarely straightforward works of social realism but crossed with the tropes of comedy and the 'woman's film' in their focus upon women's lives and female desire.

If the above account has attempted to delineate ways in which the female ensemble dramas embody a social-realist aesthetic comparative to the new wave of the 1960s, in the next passage I want to situate the FED's own embodiment of a social-realist aesthetic in relation to a postmodern new wave of dramas that Cooke has identified.

### *Postmodernism*

In chapter one I detailed how television academics such as Caughie and Nelson have argued that contemporary television drama has been informed by a 'postmodern' aesthetic. As I also reviewed in chapter one, this particular aesthetic has largely been viewed pessimistically by such critics who see the postmodern aesthetic as one motivated and informed by a consumerist discourse and consequently one whose 'values and lifestyle' appeal works against the social-realist project, by limiting the drama's social and democratic function and the ability to tell 'usable stories'. Similarly, in section one of chapter two, I have also inferred how this postmodern aesthetic informs postfeminist texts such as *Sex and the City* which is similarly informed by a consumerist discourse in the way it replicates the address of the glossy women's magazine. Indeed, *Sex and the City* as postfeminist drama can also be seen to embody the more general characteristics of postmodern drama which, as Brunsdon in 'Post-feminism and Shopping Films' argues, 'ha[s] moved away from a rational/moral axis' to become 'more profoundly informed by ideas of performance, style and desire' (1997: 85).

In this section, however, I want to situate the FED's own embodiment of a postmodern aesthetic in relation to Cooke's account of British postmodern television drama in the 1990s and 2000s. Cooke's particular interpretation of the postmodern attributes of contemporary forms of British television drama are useful to this discussion for the way in which he sees them working within, rather than against, the British social-realist tradition. For this reason I review Cooke's account because it is useful to discern the FED's own embodiment of a postmodern aesthetic in a social-realist framework.

Lez Cooke has argued that just as the new wave of the late 1950s and early 1960s 'introduced an element of 'modernity' into British culture, the recent cycle of new

drama series and serials on British television have been born out of a wave of 'postmodernity' (2003: 25). These include dramas such as *This Life* (BBC2 1996-97), *Cold Feet*, (Granada 1997-2003), *The Cops* (BBC2 1998-2001), *Queer as Folk* (C4 1999-2000), *Clocking Off* (BBC1 2000-2003) and *Shameless* (C4 2004-). While Cooke acknowledges that the subject matter of these dramas is varied, collectively he argues 'they share an ambition to reinvent British television drama for a new audience and a new cultural moment' (ibid: 23). I review five elements which Cooke perceives as defining this postmodern new wave of television drama because they, to varying degrees, inform the FEDs of the 1990s and are therefore useful to discern how they impinge on their codes of social realism.

The first three of Cooke's points relate to the way in which the elements of iconography, character and subject matter of the postmodern drama attempt to register social shifts that subsequently makes them different from those of the new wave of the 1960s. This includes a new regionalism in these dramas, such as the portrayal of Manchester in *Cold Feet*, *Cutting It* and *Queer as Folk* which sits alongside more traditional (social-realist) dour portrayals of urban life in dramas such as *Shameless* and *The Cops*. The iconography of a new regionalism, however, in texts such as *Queer as Folk* and *Cutting It* shifts the social-realist focus from 'the grim industrialism of the 1950s and early 1960s' and reflects the 'postmodern' transformation which these cities have undergone, 'or are in the process of undergoing, as new architecture and new social spaces replace, or transform, the nineteenth century industrial heritage of these northern cities' (2003: 26).

Secondly, Cooke argues that, like their counterparts in the early new wave, there is a focus upon the working-class in many of the dramas of the 1990s and 2000s. However, this postmodern new wave of dramas registers the socio-economic changes of the intervening period, in their construction of a new, more affluent working-class. As Cooke argues, even in *Clocking Off* which focuses on the workers in a textiles factory in Manchester, there is a concern to show the spectrum of working-class lifestyles enjoyed by the characters, 'from those who live on the poverty line in council houses or rented flats, to the factory foreman who lives in an owner-occupied semi-detached suburban

house, to the younger, more upwardly mobile characters who live in loft apartments in the city centre' (ibid: 26).

Thirdly, there is 'a greater diversity in the representation of social, sexual and ethnic groups and individuals than was found in the early 1960s, or than is found in other contemporary dramas' (203: 25-26). As Cooke argues:

If the portrayal of a new working class is one way in which these dramas attempt to modernise a feature of the 1960s new wave, then the portrayal of other groups and identities suggests a postmodern tendency to diversify, representing a multiplicity of identities compared to the singularity of the 1960s' new wave where the portrayal of isolated gay and ethnic characters in a text like *A Taste of Honey* was a rare event.

(ibid: 29)

It is useful to pause here and reflect on the FED's own relationship to these three characteristics of the postmodern new wave of social-realist drama which Cooke delineates. As I have explored in part one, it is the latter two characteristics which Cooke outlines that can be seen to inform the FED more centrally; that is, the way in which it explores a plurality of female identities and the 'new' working class. Similarly to the dramas which Cooke explores, the FEDs explore the experience of women 'from those who live on the poverty line in council houses or rented flats', in *Band of Gold* to the football club manager 'who lives in an owner-occupied semi-detached suburban house' in *Playing the Field*, to the 'younger, more upwardly mobile characters who live in loft apartments in the city centre' in *Real Women*.

Indeed, while the British FEDs are centrally concerned with 'lifestyle', this is in order to remain relevant to the de-traditionalized period they attempt to engage with and construct. Moreover, I would argue that it is precisely because of the shifts to class and gendered identities within this period that these texts explore the new 'life politics' and moral dramas this sets up. While in this way it shares with its American counterpart *Sex and the City* the concern with lifestyle this is inflected through a British realist aesthetic. In point of fact, I would argue that *Sex and the City*'s concern with lifestyle embodies more of the hallmarks of the flexiad postmodern text which Nelson discusses in the way in which it is informed by a consumerist discourse in its replication of the address of the

glossy women's magazine. In *Sex and the City*, as I have already explored in part one of this chapter, images of female success (personified through its four central female protagonists) are held up as lifestyles for female viewers/consumers to emulate. This is distinct from the address of the more social-realist inflected British FEDs which I argue are centrally concerned to explore the 'life politics' of 'ordinary' British women. So although some of the British FEDs, most notably *Real Women*, embody the content and address of women's magazines, this is more in keeping with the material found in their problem pages and 'real life features'. In this way, the text is concerned to work through moral issues of abortion, adultery, infertility, promiscuity and lesbianism rather than being reminiscent of fashion spreads as in *Sex and the City*. However, this is not to reinstate a familiar dichotomy, which sees American texts aligned with a consumerist discourse and mass culture and British texts via a social-realist discourse associated with 'quality' drama. Indeed, texts such as *Cutting It*, *Cold Feet* and *Queer as Folk* are similar to *Sex and the City* in the way they offer more aspirational lives to be emulated within this British consumer-led social context.

Whilst I would argue that the new regionalism which Cooke discusses is not apparent in my texts through the social transformation of buildings and spaces, I would argue that the sense of more modern, de-traditionalized and 'trendy' working-class communities are achieved in some of the FEDs by two further characteristics of this new breed of postmodern drama that Cooke identifies. Firstly then, more modern constructions of the working class are achieved through stylistic innovation, such as the heightened use of colour, faster narrative tempo, more mobile camera work, unusual camera angles as well as fantasy sequences (ibid: 25). Secondly the FEDs make use of diegetic and non-diegetic music which adds urgency and contemporaneity to them (ibid: 29). Moreover, while these stylistic innovations enable the construction of more modern working-class communities, in the case study chapters I will explore further how they similarly aid in the construction of more modern and contemporary British female working-class identities.

To reiterate, in this section I have reviewed the characteristics which Cooke identifies as marking the new wave of postmodern drama and I have similarly reviewed



how they inform the FED. Reviewing these postmodern features has been useful to stress the way in which they inform more contemporary social-realist dramas rather than negate them. This has been particularly useful to discern the FED's particular embodiment of a contemporary form of social realism and the way they engage with and tell 'usable stories' about working-class female identity in the 1990s. This account is also useful to negate other accounts of postmodernist and postfeminist dramas which reduce the focus on lifestyle in such texts to the selling of viewers to advertisers. In summary, rather than moving away from a moral/rational axis to be more concerned with ideas of performance, style and desire, I would argue that this new brand of postmodern social realism allows these regional British dramas to explore both of these areas. As I have argued, it is precisely the shifts to identity and the opening up of life choices in the late modern and de-traditionalized period that informs the moral centre of these texts and the 'life politics' of these female characters.

In this section I have argued that the British FED embodies a social-realist aesthetic in its attempt to construct and engage with the identity of working-class women in the 1990s. Before leaving this subject I want to distinguish between codes of realism and verisimilitude which are embodied by the female ensemble drama and which extends our understanding of its codes of realism.

### Realism and verisimilitude

Gledhill draws on Neale for his separation of the two terms realism and verisimilitude. For Neale realism is, as in the above account, always constructed. Verisimilitude, however, 'refers not to what may or may not actually be the case but rather to what the dominant culture believes to be the case to what is generally accepted as credible, suitable, proper' (Gledhill 1997: 360).

I argue the female ensemble drama both confirms and disturbs notions of both cultural verisimilitude (how groups are perceived within 'the social world outside of the fiction') and generic verisimilitude (what is considered 'credible within the bounds of a genre'), which in turn both confirms and disturbs existing ways of thinking about working-class women. Indeed, the confirmation and disturbance of how working-class

women are constructed in the FED comes, as Gledhill argues, from the negotiation between codes of realism and verisimilitude, as she states:

...while the concept of verisimilitude refers to normative perceptions of reality – what is generally accepted to be so – the demand for a ‘new’ realism from oppositional or emerging groups opens up the contest over the definition of the real and forces changes in the codes of verisimilitude.

(1997: 360)

I argue that it is the shifting social position of women within the contemporary period which has a bearing on the textual negotiations surrounding the construction of ‘woman’, ‘women’ and femininity within the FED. This negotiation in the instance of the FED is intensified particularly because like other kinds of fictions aimed at women, the constructions of women within these texts need to draw on ‘contemporary gender discourse, drawn from the specific socio-cultural experiences of women’ (Gledhill 1988: 76) in order to remain relevant and credible to engage the female viewer. In this respect, shifts to realism can be located within these texts at the level of marital and professional status but also at the level of ‘race’, age and sexual orientation.

### **Conclusions to realism**

In this section I have argued that a central preoccupation of the FED of the 1990s is to engage and construct the reality of working-class women’s lives and I have gone on to explore how a social-realist aesthetic centrally contributes to this project. I have contextualised the FED’s own embodiment of social realism in relation to the new wave of films of the 1950s and 1960s and in relation to the new postmodern wave of social-realist texts of the contemporary period.

I have concluded this section by arguing that although the FEDs of the 1990s move towards a contemporary ‘postmodern’ form of social realism, similar to other British television dramas in this same period, they remain centred around a rational/moral axis but also play with performance, style and desire. I have also distinguished between codes of realism and verisimilitude.

In the next section I explore how, in a bid to engage with and construct the reality of working-class women's lives in the context of the 1990s, the FED also embodies a melodramatic aesthetic. I explore how this is utilised by the FED to convey a sense of emotional realism of its female characters.

## **Melodrama**

As I have indicated above, in this section I discuss how the FED is also informed by the aesthetics of melodrama to convey a sense of emotional realism of its female characters. I explore this in relation to the expressive elements of melodrama and the way in which the characters within the FED become the viewers' emotional representatives. I go on to contextualise the FED's embodiment of a melodramatic aesthetic in relation to Peter Brooks' theorisation of the 'melodramatic imagination'. Here I explore the significance of melodrama within a modern secular society and how the moral drama it centres around takes on particular significance in the late modern period. I will conclude this section by exploring the significance of the FED's focus on the experience of women within these moral dramas, given the symbolic function or 'burden of representation' women have carried historically in melodrama, in terms of moral virtue.

## **Excess and emotion**

It is useful to start with the dominant way in which a melodramatic aesthetic has been constructed in Film and Television Studies. As Singer has recently argued 'the essential element perhaps most often associated with melodrama is a certain "overwrought" or exaggerated quality summed up by the term excess' (2001: 38). Although there is to date a limited amount of research that has explored how television melodrama works in comparison to film melodrama, what research has been done is useful as a way of thinking through how a melodramatic aesthetic informs the FED.

Discussions of television melodrama have largely followed those of film melodrama and thus have been concerned to theorise how the excessive elements of melodrama, such as *mise en scene* and performance function to express the inner, emotional lives of its characters. However, whereas research on Hollywood melodramas

of the 1950s argued that the aesthetic forms of expression stood in for or marked explosive emotional issues which could not be expressed at the level of the narrative and which were displaced into expressive elements of mise en scene and performance<sup>68</sup>, the excessive qualities of television melodrama, such as those found in the soap opera do not lead to a subversive counter-current within the text but, as Feuer has argued, ‘rather, elements such as mise en scene would appear to function for the most part expressively’ (1984: 9).

Drawing attention to television’s limited scale compared to film, Feuer has argued that scenes of high melodrama are created more through acting, editing, musical underscoring and the use of the zoom lens rather than through mise en scene (1984: 9-10). Drawing on Feuer’s account of television melodrama in her study of American and British soaps such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, Geraghty argues that it is the expressive dimensions of these elements which work with rather than against the narrative which are important given the complicated nature of the stories being told:

...the close-ups of faces, of important objects, the deliberate movement of a character across a room, the lingering of the camera on a face at the end of a scene, the exchange of meaningful glances – work to make every gesture and action seem highly coded and significant, marking out emotional relationships and enabling the audience to understand the significance of every action.

(1991: 30)

Indeed, Geraghty has taken issue with Neale’s critique of the excesses of the melodramatic aesthetic, one in which he finds, reading from a realist point of view, an ‘excess of effect over cause’ (Neale as quoted in Geraghty 1991: 31) which leaves the audience too little work to do in terms of reading the text. Similarly to Ang’s discussion of the melodramatic properties of soap opera, Geraghty argues that the pleasures of

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<sup>68</sup> Indeed much of this theory took on a Freudian, psychoanalytic inflection, where Nowell-Smith argued music and mise en scene do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of action: ‘to some extent they substitute for it’ (1987: 73). For Nowell-Smith the genre was subject to a kind of “conversion hysteria” where a conversion takes place in the body of the texts, so that ‘where there is always material which cannot be expressed in discourse or in actions of the characters furthering the designs of the plot’ this material is ‘siphoned off’ in mise en scene and music (1987: 73-74).

reading these texts do not come from engaging with a realistic aesthetic. Rather she states:

What is the reason for the welling up of music, the exchange of glances, the slamming of a door? Such spaces are most characteristically signalled by a close-up on a character after a dramatic confrontation [...] All these moments have narrative explanations but their intensity is more than the events of a particular episode warrant. They have to be filled in by the audience, those blank faces given a reason through the viewer's knowledge of the programme's past and a recreation of the feelings which the character must therefore be experiencing.

(ibid)

Geraghty therefore argues: 'It is this identification with heightened emotion through the filling of the space created by the excessive expressiveness of the mise en scene and performance which is the most important element in TV soap opera's melodramatic aesthetic' (ibid). It enables the most unlikely characters to take on a representative role for the viewer – 'it's everybody' (1991: 31). For Geraghty then, the characters in soap act as our emotional representatives.

While the FED is marked by a more naturalistic style of acting and motivation in the way in which it is informed by a realist discourse, the FED does embody a melodramatic discourse, as delineated by Geraghty, in three ways. Firstly there is still the expression of overwrought emotions and secondly the characters, I would argue, are positioned as our emotional representatives. Thirdly, similar to soap opera, there is also across the FEDs a reliance upon sensational plotlines such as murder (*Band of Gold*), adultery (*Real Women/Playing the Field*) and questions of parentage (*Playing the Field*). As Ang has argued in relation to *Dallas*, viewers of the FED are able to relate to these narratives on an emotionally connotative level; what they see as the ups and downs of family life and 'ordinary' daily problems, 'the big and the little pleasures' (ibid: 43) that they similarly recognise and experience in the contexts of their own lives. For Ang, the viewers of television melodrama 'see through' the particularities of plot to the more general living experiences that underpin them: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery and thus are able to relate to the soaps 'emotional realism' (1985: 45).

However, this is not to downplay or overlook the function of the excessive elements and the sensational way in which these narratives are played out in the FED, where melodrama works through schematic plot devices such as the discovery of hidden relationships, fatal coincidences, missed meetings and lost chances (Gledhill 1992: 108). Indeed, it is under the guise of the sensational that ‘something is brought to the surface which would otherwise remain hidden’ (Ang 1985: 159). This ‘something’ which melodrama makes explicit then is the underlying social and ethical forces at work in individual lives (Gledhill 1992). I will explore this further below in relation to what Brooks refers to as the ‘melodramatic imagination’.

### Melodramatic imagination

For Brooks the more expressionistic melodramatic mode, what he terms the ‘melodramatic imagination’, in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult (1976: 5). This ‘moral occult’ replaces religion as a form of ‘social glue’, giving individual lives an overriding moral significance within a secular, modern society. Indeed, while Singer explores the use of melodrama as a form of social glue during a period of great social upheaval brought about by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (2001), I follow Geraghty’s claim that melodrama performs a similar function in the late modern period in a post-industrial, post-traditional culture characterised by ‘questions of trust, risk and instability’ (2006: 225).

The construction of melodramatic narratives around moral polarisation then, not only plays out the ethical forces at work in everyday life but thereby endows the behaviour of ‘ordinary’ people with dramatic and ethical consequences (Gledhill 1992: 107). Indeed, crossing with the discussion of the contemporary form of social realism, personalisation is, according to Gledhill, melodrama’s primary strength in which:

the webs of economic, political, and social power in which melodrama’s characters get caught up are represented not as abstract forces but in terms of desires which express conflicting ethical and political identities and which erupt in the actions and transactions of daily life.

(1992: 107)

As much work has already been done on the 'woman's film' and soap opera, this formal excess is often used to express the contradictions of female experience within Western patriarchal cultures, that between duty and desire, even if in the end it does reinforce the existing moral order under patriarchy.

As feminist research has identified, melodrama works around the conflict between good and evil and women have long been identified as the symbol of moral value within melodrama (Gledhill 1988: 77). However, as Gledhill has noted, the meaning of 'woman', and indeed the terms of the moral dilemmas, are not fixed. To explore this I will discuss the relationship between melodrama and realism.

### Melodrama and realism

Christine Gledhill in her article 'Pleasurable Negotiations' (1988) has argued that it is the use of both melodramatic and realist modes within mainstream film and television texts that provide a considerable source of textual negotiation (1988: 75). For Gledhill, drawing on a melodramatic framework allows texts to work on a symbolic level, providing archetypal and atavistic symbolic enactments 'for the focus of melodrama is a moral order constructed out of conflict of Manichean, polar opposites – a struggle between good and evil, personified in the conflicts of villain, heroine and hero' (1988: 75-75). However, to be considered relevant and credible within the contemporary period, the moral drama of melodrama must also conform to the ever-shifting criteria of a recognisable verisimilitude and thus find 'credible articulations of such conflict which will re-solicit the recognition of continually shifting audiences' by drawing on 'those contemporary discourses which apportion responsibility, guilt and innocence in modern terms – psychoanalysis, for example, marriage guidance, medical ethics, politics, even feminism' (1988: 76). Modern popular drama then becomes a negotiation between melodrama's Manichean moral frameworks and conflicts and those contemporary discourses which will ground the text in a recognisable verisimilitude and generate a renewed use value that will bring audiences back to the screen.

Gledhill's account is particularly useful to this study as she recognises that gender representation is at the heart of such cultural negotiations, where she states:

New definitions of gender and sexuality circulated by the women's movement contest the value and meaning of the female image, struggling for different, female recognitions and identifications. When popular cultural forms, operating within a melodramatic framework, attempt to engage contemporary discourses about women or draw on women's cultural forms in order to renew their gender verisimilitude and solicit the recognition of a female audience, the negotiation between 'woman' as patriarchal symbol and 'woman' as a generator of women's discourses is intensified.

(1988: 76-77)

Whilst Gledhill is quick to clarify her use of the phrase 'women's discourse' to refer to discourses drawn from the socio-cultural experiences of women rather than as some innate quality (1988: 76), this account is useful to identify how 'melodrama orchestrates gender conflicts on a highly symbolic level to produce the clash of identities that will adumbrate its moral universe' as well as how 'the codes of women's discourse work in a more direct and articulate register to produce realist and gendered recognitions' (1988: 77). I want to argue that this is the terrain on which the FED is grounded and from which their negotiations take place. Indeed, as Tasker has argued in her discussion of contemporary female friendship films, Gledhill's account, perhaps going against the terrain of contemporary criticism, illustrates how there is no inherent tension between feminism and melodrama but rather these become the site for interesting negotiations surrounding the contemporary positioning of women within the moral system (1998: 142). In the analysis of the case studies I am interested in how such negotiations between atavistic Manichean moral values and contemporary discourses of de-gendering surrounding women are played out.

### **Conclusions to melodrama**

In this section I have discussed how the FED is informed by a melodramatic aesthetic to convey a sense of emotional realism of its female characters. I have explored this in relation to the expressive elements of melodrama and the way in which the characters within the FED become our emotional representatives. I have gone on to contextualise the FED's embodiment of a melodramatic aesthetic in relation to Peter Brooks' theorisation of the 'melodramatic imagination'. Here I have explored how melodrama



works as a form of ‘social glue’ making explicit the ethical consequences of individual actions in a post-traditional, de-traditionalized context of late modernity. I have gone on to explore the significance of focusing on the experience of women within such moral dramas given the symbolic significance of the figure of woman within melodrama.

In the latter two sections I have argued that both realism and melodrama are employed in the FED in an attempt to engage with and express the ‘reality’ of ‘ordinary’ women’s social and emotional lives. In the next section I discuss how the comedic and carnivalesque codes of the FED further this project.

### **Comedy and the carnivalesque**

I have argued that both realism and melodrama are employed in the FED in an attempt to engage with and express the ‘reality’ of ordinary women’s social and emotional lives. Centrally, I want to suggest that it is through privileging female experience, the sense of being ‘down among the women’, and the pleasure from the inversion of cultural values this entails, that the FED can be perceived to embody the overlapping principles of both the comedic and the carnivalesque. In order to illustrate how the carnivalesque and the comedic inform the FED I explore some of the ways in which these concepts have been theorised. I go on to review how the FED is informed by a particular comedic and carnivalesque tradition: that of the unruly ‘woman on top’. I contextualise the FED’s embodiment of this figure and her transgressive potential by reviewing the accounts of Natalie Zemon Davis, Mary Russo and Kathleen Rowe. I then go on to explore further how the FED embodies a particular national variation of the ‘woman on top’ by examining how it shares characteristics of the domestic comedy of British female comics.

### **Cultural inversions**

As I have indicated above, it is through privileging female experience, and the pleasure from the inversion of cultural values this entails, that the FED can be perceived to embody the overlapping principles of both the comedic and the carnivalesque. Indeed, both of these traditions have historically been associated with taking and creating

pleasure in and through inverting the established hierarchal cultural or 'serious' order by subordinating what comes 'above' with what comes 'below'.

Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* describes medieval carnival as the second world and second life of the people, organised on the basis of laughter and that which 'celebrated a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileged norms and prohibitions' (1984: 10). This temporary suspension 'where all were considered equal across barriers of caste, property, profession, and age' (ibid) created during carnival time allowed, for Bakhtin 'a special type of communication impossible in everyday life that is a special carnivalesque marketplace style of expression'. This marketplace style of expression, one marked by the earthy and grotesque laughter of the people, ritual spectacles, parodic comedic performances, the genres of billingsgate (such as obscenities and profanities), and indulgence in the pleasures of the lower stratum of the body (such as feasting, drunkenness and licentiousness) works to bring down low, to degrade and debase all that is privileged within official culture (ibid: 19-21)

Similarly utilising a comedic aesthetic through which to explore female identity within 'female-centred' texts such as the FED would appear logical given comedy's low cultural ties with 'the feminine' historically (Rowe 1995: 100). Rowe in *The Unruly Woman*, for instance, argues that whereas tragedy has enjoyed critical prestige for its alignment with Western masculine values, comedy like melodrama 'is more often confined to the realm of amusement than to art because of its popular accessibility and its connections with gossip, intrigue, and the everyday, areas of culture tied to the feminine' (ibid).

For Rowe, women have been excluded from the prestigious high dramatic plane of tragedy because its properties and values in Western culture 'are closely tied to the construction of a masculinity measured in large part by the power, and desire, to exist autonomously' (ibid: 97). In tragedy 'the drive toward individuation that sets the hero "apart" also sets him "above," and so the genre reaffirms not only the difference but hierarchy, and not only sexual difference but male authority' (ibid).

Rowe argues that comedy's interest in the social, as opposed to tragedy's interest in the individual, aligns it with the values that are conventionally associated with 'the feminine' (and indeed the carnivalesque): 'community over separation, the preservation of life rather than its sacrifice for principle, power or knowledge' and the centrality of sex over death: 'part of an overall attack on repression and celebration of bodily pleasure, a means of connection within the space of family, and the time of generation' (ibid: 104). Centrally, then, comedy can be perceived to be aligned with 'the feminine' in the way it 'mocks the masculinity that tragedy ennobles' through its 'antiauthoritarian' principle; 'its drive to level, disrupt, and destroy hierarchy, to comment on and contest the values tragedy affirms' (ibid: 101).

However if in this way 'comedy contests patriarchal power and so is available to women and all oppressed people as a weapon with which to express their aggression and rage at the forces of the father' it can, and has, historically been 'turned against those people in a movement of displaced abjection, when it shifts its destructive impulses from what might be considered its "proper" target – those with greater social power – towards even weaker groups' (ibid: 102) such as women.

As research by feminist Cultural critics has identified, comedy has historically been perceived as the domain of men with women positioned as the objects rather than the subjects of 'male-centred' comedy: that is, as the butt of male jokes (Purdie 1993; Gray 1994: 9). This has contributed, for instance, to the tired misogynistic roles occupied by women within British comedy, such as the dumb blondes, squeaky bimbos, moaning harridans and ugly hags (Porter 1998: 65). Within male dominated comedic traditions women have been constructed as lacking a sense of humour (Barreca 1992: 3; Gray 1994: 3) and similarly, comedy by women has been dismissed by male critics because a 'tradition of women's comedy [is] informed by and speak[s] to the experience of being a female in a world where that experiences is devalued' (Barreca 1992: 9).

Given this history, I will contextualise the FED's positioning of female characters as the subjects rather than merely the objects of humour within prime-time television drama in relation to two comedic/carnavalesque traditions which have also been centrally concerned with expressing a female sense of identity and experience.

Firstly, through its inversion of the gendered cultural norms and values I will review how the FED embodies the *topos* of the ‘woman on top’; a figure who, according to Natalie Zemon Davis in ‘Women on Top’, has been enjoyed for her unruly transgressive behaviour since pre-medieval Europe (Davis 1975: 129). Secondly, I will explore how the FED embodies a particular national variation of the ‘woman on top’ by examining how it shares characteristics of the domestic comedy of British female comics. I will explore each of these points below.

### Woman on top

As Davis has argued: ‘In hierarchical and conflictual societies that loved to reflect on the world-turned-upside-down, the *topos* of the woman on top was one of the most enjoyed’ (1975: 129). Davis’ account traces the diverse uses of this particular sexual inversion and play with the image of what she terms this ‘unruly woman’ across literature, art and popular festivity in pre-medieval Europe.

Arguing against anthropological and critical research findings which suggested that the uses of sexual inversion, like other rites and ceremonies of reversal are ‘ultimately sources of order and stability in a hierarchical society they can clarify the structure by the process of reversing it. They can provide an expression of, and safety valve for, conflicts within the system’ (ibid: 130), Davis suggests that the uses of sexual inversion through the figure of the unruly woman were more ambivalent than such accounts give it credit. Tracing the various incarnations and uses of the figure of the woman-on-top from pre-industrial Europe in literature and across festivals and customs, Davis argues that the image of the disorderly woman ‘did not always function to keep women in their place’. Rather she argues that comic and festive inversion such as the ‘rich treatment of women who are happily given over to bodily sway’ or allowed a place of dominion and ferocity could *undermine* as well as reinforce that assent through its connections with everyday circumstances outside of the privileged time of carnival and stage play (ibid: 131). The multi-valent image of the unruly woman, for instance, could ‘operate to widen behavioural options for women within and even outside of marriage’,

and second ‘to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest’ (ibid). For Davis:

Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within the society.

(1975: 131)

Building on Davis’ article exploring carnival and gender Mary Russo’s 1986 article ‘Female Grotesques’ has been key in exploring further the disruptive potential of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque grotesque body in relation to this unruly woman figure. I explore this below.

#### *Female grotesques*

Indeed, while the grotesque body for Bakhtin, that of the open, protruding, secreting excessive body mocks the classical body, ‘the monumental, static, closed and sleek body which corresponds to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism’, Russo critiques Bakhtin who ‘like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic’ (1986: 219). For Russo, however, it is exactly the mocking and parodic spectacle of the female grotesque body and its ability to debase and destabilise the boundaries of the official culture that is significant. This includes not only its ability to destabilise classed boundaries as explored within Bakhtin’s analysis but to destabilise the idealizations of female beauty and indeed normative femininity (ibid: 218).

More specifically for Russo, it is the excessive qualities of the female grotesque, the hyperbolic nature of her as spectacle that has the ability to foreground the performativity of gender. Russo applies Irigaray’s description of this gendered play as mimesis to argue that ‘to act as a woman’ is one which sees femininity worn like a mask ‘rather than something that hides a stable feminine identity’. As she argues, ‘to put on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off’ (ibid: 224). Drawing on Mary Anne Doane’s appropriation of Joan Riviere’s theory of masquerade, Russo

argues, the masquerading as woman can be useful to the feminist project, one which sees women 'manufacture a distance from the image, to generate a problematic within which the image is manipulable, produceable, and readable by women' (Doane as quoted in Russo *ibid*: 224).

Kathleen Rowe (1990) in *The Unruly Woman* has appropriated both Davis' research of the 'woman on top' and Russo's theoretical discussion of the female grotesque through which to discuss more contemporary female incarnations of the unruly woman. I will review Rowe's account below before outlining the FED's own embodiment of the tropes of the unruly woman figure.

#### *The unruly woman*

Rowe argues that Davis' typology of the unruly woman is not limited to Early Modern Europe 'but reverberates whenever women, especially women's bodies, are considered excessive, too fat, too mouthy, too old, too dirty, too pregnant, too sexual (or not sexual enough) for the norms of conventional gender representation' (1990: 410). For Rowe, like Davis and Russo before her, the unruly woman violates the unspoken sanction by making a spectacle of herself through body and speech, through a celebration of the carnivalesque and grotesque body (1990: 410).

Given that women have been positioned as objects of the male gaze, Rowe argues that 'making a spectacle' of oneself is to return the male gaze and utilize the power already in us as image [...] to negate our own invisibility in the public sphere' (1990: 411). Drawing on Russo, Rowe suggests that the parodic excesses of the unruly woman and the comic conventions which surround her - mocking, parodying and inverting the established order through performance and speech - provide a space to act out the dilemmas of femininity, to make visible and laughable the 'tropes of femininity'. Discussing the female comedian Roseanne Barr, for instance, she suggests that she has built an act and her success on an exposure of the tropes of femininity (the ideology of 'true womanhood', the perfect wife and mother) by cultivating an image of the unruly woman through her body and speech: by being associated with excessive qualities of

fatness and looseness of speech, qualities that mark her in opposition to bourgeois and 'feminine' standards of decorum (1990: 413).

While in this section I have provided a brief overview of Davis', Russo's and Rowe's description of the unruly woman figure, I will suggest how the characteristics of unruliness are embodied by the FED.

### The FED and unruly women

Feminist research by Rowe and Russo on the modern *topos* of the unruly woman provides a useful starting point through which to explore the FED's particular embodiment of the unruly woman. Indeed, I would argue that it is the focus on *women* rather than *woman-on-top* which is suggestive of the FED's potential for the play with the disorderly and unruly display of female bodies and their behaviour. From the outset the qualities of unruliness are written across the characteristics of this form of drama. This is signified by the way in which the FED is unable or unwilling to confine these 'ordinary' women to their 'proper' place, both as a form of drama (in the way in which it takes up the valuable space of the prime time scheduling slots) as well as the characterisations of women within it. I will explore this latter point in further detail.

In the body of the FED, then, in their inclusion and focus upon a plurality of female identities, they embody a sense of excess and unruliness that is comparable to the carnivalesque female body: one which makes a spectacle of herself within the public sphere (both on public television and within the public spaces within the diegesis) and where there is an inversion of norms and values associated with the lower stratum, those which are already associated with the working classes.

The plurality of female characters ensures an excess of female speech in quantity, content and tone. The female characters make jokes and laugh at themselves. There may be androgynous constructions of women which draw attention to the social construction of gender; behaviour which is associated with looseness and whorishness, female sexuality that is less negatively defined than that of the *femme fatale*; the characters all in some way are associated with dirt, liminality (particularly the crossing

of sexual borders) and taboo, rendering them above all figures of ambivalence (Rowe 1995: 31).

As a comedic licensed space which celebrate the bodies and behaviour which are associated with working-class women historically; that of danger and indecorum/whorishness and looseness, I will be interested in exploring whether these texts disturb rather than simply reinforce such classed and gendered norms. Similarly I will explore, where appropriate, how the FED makes use of the female masquerade to make visible the performativity of gender and the tropes of normative femininity rather than simply reinforcing these norms.

While in this section I have contextualised the FED's embodiment of the carnivalesque and comedic by reviewing the way in which it embodies the *topos* of the unruly woman, in the following section I review the way in which the FED is informed by a second comedy/carnavalesque tradition. That is, I contextualise the FED's particular British inflected construction of 'women on top' which explores the 'reality' and 'life politics' of 'ordinary' British women in the context of the 1990s in relation to the British women's comedic tradition.

### The FED and the British women's comic tradition

The FED's positioning of female characters as the subjects rather than merely the objects of humour within prime-time television drama can be contextualised in relation to the inroads female comedic performers and writers have made in television from the alternative comedy and cabaret circuits in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This includes figures such as Victoria Wood, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders and Caroline Aherne (Marshall 2004: 71).

Like the comedy of figures such as Victoria Wood and Jennifer Saunders the FEDs build on the dominant strand of women's comedy by focusing on female experience. Like these alternative comedies, the comedy within the female ensemble drama revolves around 'a plurality of female characters and personae, around the personal and private experience and identities of women and women's language and cultures' (ibid: 71-72).



For Frances Gray (1994) in *Women and Laughter*, one of the most important aspects of female comic performance on television (as in their stage shows) is the way in which such texts make publicly visible the personal, autobiographical experience of women (1994: 149). For women to articulate their own experience in this way, Gray argues, the personal becomes the political. Firstly, 'it disrupts the rigidities of traditional hierarchy; the act of making visible the personal within the public domain helps to shape a new identity of women, one that refuses the definitions imposed on it by the ruling elite' (ibid) by telling 'stories and jokes which are grounded in her own feelings and her own insights' (ibid). I want to argue that the FED follows in this tradition by making visible the quotidian and domestic aspects of women's experience that has been marginalised within culture. There are two aspects of this form of domestic comedy that I will take forward in the analysis of the case studies.

Firstly, as Gray has argued, domestic comedy is significant for asserting not only the importance of the quotidian aspects of women's daily lives but also because it engages with a process that is important to the feminist project, that of naming: "it breaks silences; it acknowledges problems society has preferred to confine to the private space' (ibid: 151). Indeed, I will explore the FED's own embodiment of this aspect of domestic comedy through the way in which it explores the marginalised areas of women's experience such as prostitution (*Band of Gold*) and adoption (*Playing the Field*), as well as the unequal power relations that continue to pervade the domestic sphere (*Real Women*). This latter point, I want to argue, is particularly important to explore in this late modern period given that sociological theorisations of the 'transformation of intimacy' not only overstate the extent to which equality has been achieved in modern relationships but then also undermine the extent to which patriarchal power relations continue to inform the experience of women within the home.

Secondly, and following on from this first point, in constructing 'ordinary' women I want to also explore how these texts bring to the fore and engage in what Marshall describes as the 'backstage' roles and places 'ordinary' women inhabit (2004:82). This may be those spaces which are usually ignored, such as the factory or the kitchen, but also those spaces which have been ignored because of their traditional

association with female transgression into male domains – whether this be on the football pitch in *Playing the Field* or as prostitutes inhabiting the public sphere in *Band of Gold*.

### **Conclusions to comedy/carnavalesque**

In this section I have reviewed how the comedic and carnivalesque properties of the FED contribute to their exploration of female identity and experience in the context of the 1990s. I have framed the FED's particular embodiment of these traditions by briefly reviewing Bakhtin's and Rowe's theoretical accounts of the carnivalesque and comedy before going on to review how the FED is informed by a particular comedic and carnivalesque tradition; that of the unruly 'woman on top'. I have contextualised the FED's embodiment of this figure and her transgressive potential by reviewing the accounts of Natalie Zemon Davis, Mary Russo and Kathleen Rowe. I have subsequently gone on to explore further how the FED embodies a particular national variation of the 'woman on top' by examining how it shares characteristics of the domestic comedy of British female comics.

Centrally, I have suggested that it is through privileging female experience, the sense of being 'down among the women' and the pleasure from the inversion of cultural values this entails, that the FED has the potential to disrupt normative definitions and constructions of femininity and sexuality. I have outlined how in the case study chapters I will explore whether these texts celebrate and contain this female excess; that is, how they oscillate between disruptive spectacle of unruly women and spectacle as celebration of conventional femininity.

So far in this section I have outlined the three dominant aesthetic codes which inform the constructions of women within the FEDs of the 1990s. While I have suggested that a realist code is the dominant aesthetic code which informs the FED, I nevertheless want to review how it is the aesthetic interplay of these three aesthetics codes, that of realism, melodrama and comedy which inform the constructions of female identity and experience within these texts. I will also briefly review the modes of address that are offered as a result of the aesthetic interplay of these texts.

## **Aesthetic interplay**

In this section I will review how the aesthetic interplay parallels the narrative interplay of the FED through which to construct and explore the complexity of female experience within the late modern period. I go on to explore how this aesthetic interplay informs the mode of address of the FED.

## **Aesthetic complexity**

As is clear from the above discussion, the FED of the 1990s, similar to soap opera, deploy a range of aesthetic elements. However, Geraghty has illustrated that one consequence of having such an aesthetic mix in the instance of soap opera, is that their codes do not always fit smoothly together, causing incoherence at the level of acting and performance which has contributed to its critical disparagement (1991: 36). In the case of the FED, I want to argue that rather than detracting from the subject matter, the aesthetic hybridity is largely enabling for the exploration of female identity and experience within this period. To explore this, I want to explore the way in which the aesthetic plurality of these texts work similarly to that of the narrative plurality of these texts.

In relation to the latter, for instance, Creeber has argued that the flexi-narrative structure of contemporary forms of serial drama, that of the multi character, multi narrative format borrowed from soap opera, 'best responds to and reveals' the complexity and ambiguity 'that typifies the contemporary world' (2004: 5). Drawing on Nelson's example of *Hill Street Blues* as flexi-narrative drama, Creeber illustrates this point in the way the text weaves together a number of 'interrelating, continuous, connecting and disconnecting storylines', and how *Hill Street Blues* 'produced a heightened form of realism that enabled it to explore and examine social and human issues in a more authentic manner' (Nelson as quoted in Creeber 2004: 4).

Paralleling the narrative structure of these texts, I would argue that the aesthetic intricacies of the FEDs better respond to and reveals the complexity of female

experience within the contemporary period. This can be inferred from Arthurs' discussion of the aesthetic hybridity of *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, where she argues different aesthetic codes are drawn on to express the contradictory emotions the characters are feeling at different points in the narrative, where 'the emotional tone tends towards melodrama, with the impossibility of a woman getting what she wants – she is a figure of pathos. Or the tone is comedic, where the plight of the thirty-something single girl is a sign of her woeful inadequacy as a woman and to be laughed at in rueful recognition'. (2004: 130-131). As she argues:

The widespread popular success of *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal* suggests that contradictory and unstable texts steeped in melodramatic and comedic excess are usable because they allow people to explore the contradictions and instabilities of their own subjectivity.

(ibid: 133-134)

I would argue that such a narrative complexity works similarly within the British FEDs to explore the contradictions and instabilities of female experience in the late modern period. I will explore this in relation to the dramas in the case study chapters.

Before leaving this section however I want to explore how the aesthetic hybridity within these texts similarly informs the mode of address of these texts.

### Mode of address

Similar to both soap opera and flexi-narrative drama, the aesthetic hybridity of the FEDs offers a range of aesthetic experiences within a single episode and across the series as a whole.

Discussing the FED's embodiment of a social-realist aesthetic is useful to understand its mode of address and the different ways viewers are invited to engage with these text. The FED, then, shares the new wave's negotiation of public and private gazes which work to both draw us into the narrative, to see from the point of view of particular characters, but also to look on at the characters from a more distanced perspective.

For Higson, the mode of address of this realist aesthetic is due to the convergence of the strategies and devices of documentary and narrative fiction; what he terms ‘the documentary’s distanced public gaze’ at ‘universalised’ social processes and people, and the ‘individuated private looks’ of the fictional protagonists in narrative cinema:

The documentary and the narrative fiction construct two relatively different systems of looking, which bind the spectator into the organisation of looks within the diegesis, within the world of the fiction played out for us ‘up there’ on the screen, by means of the devices of point of view, shot/reverse shot, and eyeline matching. In the documentary there is a quite different system of looks, which create a different relationship for the spectator to the figures on the screen: to put it crudely, the camera no longer looks from the position of the diegetic figures....‘the figures of the documentary are looked at and looked on’.

(1986: 83)

The particular articulation of public and private gazes within the FED is furthered through the embodiment of melodrama and comedy. Like the social-realist aesthetic, both melodrama and comedy have the ability to draw the viewers into the narrative through emotional identification with the central female protagonists. Here, the expressive excess of melodrama and comedy found in the text activates what Singer refers to as various kinds of excess in the spectators’ visceral responses, such as tears, laughter, strong sentiment and powerful feelings of pathos, that of the elicitation of a strong feeling of pity (2001: 39-40).

While the expressive excesses of melodrama and comedy can invite alignment with the characters through private gazes, they, like the social-realist aesthetic, can also create a distanced perspective, and the adoption of an ironic mode from which to view the events unfold.

The particular articulation of public and private gazes within the female ensemble drama then, allows us to both identify with and see from the position of individual characters. However given the decentred mode of address, where we see from the point of view of multiple characters, the identification with and privileging of a particular character’s point of view is temporary rather than fixed or stable. Similar to the British soap opera’s decentered mode of address, then, the public gaze allows us to reflect upon,

from a more distanced perspective, the individual character's positioning as well as the relationship between them in relation to their social and cultural milieu.

## **Conclusions to part two: aesthetic overview of the FED**

Given the hybrid character of the FED, the purpose of part two of this chapter has been to delineate the way in which the FED is informed by three aesthetic traditions: realism, melodrama and comedy which informs its constructions of female identity and experience.

I have firstly reviewed how it is predominantly informed by a social-realist aesthetic. I have reviewed how a social-realist aesthetic has contributed to the exploration of working-class identity, and themes of community and individualism, given that these themes have informed this aesthetic tradition historically in the cycle of British new wave films of the 1950s and 1960s. As well as contextualising the FED's embodiment of a social-realist aesthetic in relation to these films of the new wave of the 1950s and 1960s, such as the retreat from the overt engagement with politics, I have also explored how the FED differs from these films. I have explored this primarily through its focus on female rather than male working-class identity. I have suggested that the exploration of female identity and experience through a realist aesthetic enables the construction of a new and alternative perspective of women and female experience that challenges existing notions of cultural verisimilitude, a theme which I take forward to explore in the case study chapters. I have concluded my review of the FED's embodiment of social realism by arguing that the FED of the 1990s moves towards a contemporary 'postmodern' form of social realism, that which remains centred around a rational/moral axis but which registers the shifts to the socio-economic changes of the working-class. Similar to my discussion of this point in part one of this chapter, I have reviewed how I will explore the constructions of the 'life politics' of the female characters within the case study chapters.

While I have explored how the codes of social realism ground the FED in a recognisable verisimilitude, I have also explored how the more expressive codes of melodrama convey a sense of emotional realism of its female characters as well as mark

out the moral underpinnings of such dramas. I have suggested that the figure of woman is always positioned ambivalently within 'feminine-gendered' melodramas as both 'patriarchal symbol' of woman and the embodiment of discourses of women drawn from contemporary social life. I have argued that in the case study chapters it is the textual negotiations surrounding women's ambivalent positioning within this de-traditionalized context and the differing functions which they perform within these texts that I will explore.

Finally I have reviewed how the comedic and carnivalesque properties of the FEDs contribute to their exploration of female identity and experience in the context of the 1990s. I have suggested that it is through privileging female experience, the sense of being 'down among the women' and the pleasure from the inversion of cultural values this entails, that the FED has the potential to disrupt normative definitions and constructions of femininity and sexuality. I have outlined how in the case study chapters I will explore whether these texts celebrate and contain this female excess.

Finally, I have concluded this section by suggesting that it is the combination of these aesthetic codes within the FED which enable the exploration and expression of the complexities of female identity and experience within the de-traditionalized context of the late modern period.

## **Conclusions to chapter two**

The aim of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the thematic and aesthetic properties of the FED of the 1990s. To reiterate, the purpose of this review has been to firstly map out the development of the FED since the 1970s, given its marginalisation within academic television criticism. Secondly, and most centrally, the purpose of this review has been to explore how the thematic and aesthetic attributes of these texts inform the construction of women within the 1990s' variant. Lastly, the purpose of this review has been to identify the themes and issues that I will explore in relation to its 1990s' form in the case studies that follow this chapter.

A primary concern within this chapter has then also been to contextualise the thematic and aesthetic properties of these texts in relation to social context. I have

explored the way in which the FED, for instance, is comparable to other contemporary dramatic texts particularly, 'Must See' and 'Must-She TV', in their focus on the 'post-familial family' and the embodiment of the ideal of community, 'life politics' and the movement towards postfeminist femininities. I have contextualised these characteristics in relation to discourses of de- and re-traditionalization and the waning of traditional forms of belonging and process of individualization in the late modern period.

I have gone on to argue, however, that the British FED is a particularly interesting strand of this form of drama to explore because of its focus on British working-class female identities. In effect, I have argued that my particular textual analysis of the case study chapters will be concerned to explore the constructions of working-class women within these post-familial family texts in relation to discourses of de- and re-traditionalization. I will explore how the FEDs of the 1990s become 'sites of struggle' between discourses of de- and re-traditionalization in relation to working-class femininity.

A central theme of analysis in the case studies in respect of this concerns the way in which these texts de/re-traditionalize working-class women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with the traditional 'feminine'. I will explore this through the three central characteristics of the FED of the 1990s: the post-familial family structure; their embodiment of 'life politics'; and their construction of postfeminist femininities.

In relation to this first characteristic, for example, I will explore how these texts provide alternative and new constructions of women in de-traditionalized roles and spaces through the privileging of female homosocial bonds and the construction of women outside of their traditional roles as wives and mothers. However, I will also explore the way in which, where appropriate, the construction of working-class women within these new familial structures and matriarchal communities resemble the constructions and positioning of women in more traditional familial structures and roles as maternal and caring figures. I have argued this is a particularly significant point to address given that working-class women have been positioned in relation to discourses of caring historically to secure their moral legitimation.



The second feature I will explore in relation to the negotiations surrounding the de and re-traditionalization of working-class femininities is that of the embodiment of 'life politics' in these texts. I will explore the 'life politics' of these female characters with regard to the politicisation of the personal sphere and what they can tell us regarding moral and ethical dilemmas surrounding female identity in this period. However, while recognising the value of exploring the personal as the political in this late modern period, I will be concerned to explore whether limiting the exploration of female experience with reference to the micro as opposed to the macro factors shaping women's lives in these dramas, sees the re-privatisation of issues facing women in the 1990s. Concomitantly I will explore whether it reduces the exploration of female identities in relation to traditional 'feminine' discourses of the personal and the emotional.

The third feature of these dramas I will explore in relation to discourses of de/re-traditionalization is that of the construction of postfeminist femininities. While I have argued that not all of the FEDs that I will explore in the case study chapters are informed by postfeminist discourses, it is nevertheless a useful concept through which to differentiate between what I will consider as being feminist in intonation and the shifts in constructions of women in the later 1990s. As I have argued, one of the central problems with postfeminist texts that has been identified by feminist academics is the way in which they embody constructions of women with more lifestyle choices available to them within a de-traditionalized post second wave feminist culture but who reinstate marriage and normative femininity as *the* life choice for women. One central theme of analysis in this respect will be to identify the way in which these texts embody discourses of feminism and femininity and whether, similar to critiques of other postfeminist texts, they make marriage and normative femininity the preferred ('natural') destiny of modern women. Similarly, while the FEDs represent a diversity and a plurality of femininities at the level of class, sexuality, race and generation I will explore whether these texts negate dominant and negative constructions of these femininities that are found within other media texts or re-traditionalize women in relation to these previous constructions.

While I have so far reviewed the themes which will inform my textual analysis in the case study chapters, I will also be interested in exploring the way in which the aesthetic properties of these texts - realism, melodrama and comedy - are enabling as well as constraining for the constructions of working-class female identity. That is, I will explore how in attempting to 'show things as they really are', for working-class women, the codes of realism, melodrama and comedy/carnavalesque that are utilised in these texts can disturb codes of cultural verisimilitude regarding women and normative discourses of femininity as well as reinstate them. In other words, the aesthetic codes can serve to de and/or re-gender women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with the feminine.

Together with chapter one, this chapter has largely been concerned to contextualise the FED of the 1990s in relation to broadcasting, critical, textual, social and aesthetic contexts. The remainder of this thesis is concerned with the analysis of the FED themselves. As I stated in the introduction of this thesis, the case study chapters provide an analysis of the first series of *Band of Gold*, *Real Women* and *Playing the Field*.

## Chapter Three

# Band of Gold

### Aims and objectives of chapter three

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed textual analysis of the constructions of working-class female identity in the earliest of the FEDs of the 1990s that I explore here in the case studies chapters: *Band of Gold*. As I argued in chapter two, a central theme of analysis in each of these case study chapters concerns the way in which as specific examples of the FED they de- and re-traditionalize working-class women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with the traditional 'feminine'. As I also stated in chapter two, I will explore this concern in each case study with reference to three central characteristics of the FED of the 1990s: their post-familial family structure; their embodiment of 'life politics'; and their construction of postfeminist femininities. While these concepts provide a theoretical and critical framework through which to approach each case study, as I also stated in chapter two, each case study will involve the analysis of these concepts in relation to its particular aesthetic and generic affiliations. In this analysis of *Band of Gold* I explore its embodiment of discourses of de- and re-traditionalization and these three characteristics with reference to its status as a 'woman's crime drama'.

I firstly contextualise *Band of Gold's* status as a 'woman's crime drama' in relation to other role-reversal narratives of the 1980s and 1990s. I explore some of the ways in which the 'woman's crime drama' has been problematised by feminist television academics because of the way in which its narrative inversions re-traditionalize women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with 'the feminine'. However, I argue that *Band of Gold's* feminization of the crime drama does not re-traditionalize women but rather, through privileging female networks and spaces

(2000: 275), it embodies a 'heterosocial dynamic' that displaces and de-traditionalizes constructions of women/prostitutes within the 'homosocial' crime genre.

Subsequently I explore *Band of Gold*'s embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic in the way it foregrounds the heterosocial bonds between women which enables it to deconstruct the dominant homosocial constructions of prostitutes as patriarchal symbols and reconstruct them as 'ordinary' women.

I will explore how the ensemble format of *Band of Gold* is key to its reconstruction of prostitutes as 'ordinary' women in the way it is utilised to parallel how women are the objects of exchange in both prostitution and marriage. As such, I will conclude these sections by arguing that the privileging of a female 'heterosocial bond' and the exploration of women's 'life politics' in this way foregrounds how women's take-up of prostitution is determined by their occupation of the position of 'woman' within the gendered cultural economy, and how women are positioned as tokens of desire caught up in networks of male power. As such, I will argue that the text not only makes a powerful statement about the experience of women in prostitution but, in attempting to explain why they take up this position, it also makes a powerful and radical feminist-aligned statement about women's subordinate position in marriage and the heterosexual cultural economy.

Finally, I explore how the heterosocial bond between the women becomes a heterosocial alliance which enables them not only to cope and survive in the dystopian social landscape but from which they gain strength and collective power to transform their own lives as well as resolve the crime narrative of the text. In so doing, I explore how *Band of Gold* as a 'woman's crime drama' is not merely a 'feminine' appropriation of the crime series but is rather more feminist in intonation or, to use Hollinger's typology, is an example of the political female friendship text.

### **Feminising the crime drama**

*Band of Gold* is a six-part crime serial written by Kay Mellor, produced by Granada, and was originally aired on ITV during March and April 1995. It regularly attracted 15 million viewers and was nominated for a BAFTA in 1995 for Best Drama Serial. A

second series, *Band of Gold 2*, and a third series, *Gold*, were produced subsequently in 1997 and 1998.

In the original series, with which this analysis is concerned, the narrative focuses upon the lives of a group of female prostitutes in Bradford. We initially follow the story of Gina (Ruth Gemmell), a young single mother and her decision to enter prostitution and the group of prostitutes she befriends: Carol (Cathy Tyson), a black single mother; Rose (Geraldine James), an older prostitute who ‘runs the lane’; Tracey (Samantha Morton), a fifteen year old prostitute; and Anita (Barbara Dickson), a resident of the lane who rents out rooms to prostitutes. The drama pivots around the murder of Gina at the end of episode one and subsequent episodes interweave the investigation of Gina’s murder with that of an exploration of the ‘life politics’ of the group of prostituted women.

As this brief narrative synopsis suggests, *Band of Gold* may draw on the established conventions of the crime drama whose climax involves revealing the identity of a prostitute’s murderer but, through inverting the focus of the traditional crime genre from that of male identity to that of the personal lives and ‘life politics’ of a particular community of female characters, the drama enters the terrain of traditional ‘feminine’ British soap opera.

To enable a more nuanced discussion of *Band of Gold*’s particular ‘feminization’ of the crime genre, I want to firstly contextualise its appearance at this time in relation to its generic forerunners; that is, in relation to previous role reversal crime dramas such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Prime Suspect* and discourses of ‘Equal Opportunities’.

### Role reversal narratives and ‘equal opportunities’

Like successful role-reversal dramas such as *Cagney and Lacey* and *Prime Suspect* before it, *Band of Gold*’s female takeover of the traditional male crime drama needs to be contextualised in relation to women’s shifting social position in the wake of the women’s movement and inroads they have made in to the public sphere of employment and the concomitant discourses of ‘equal opportunities’.

Given that the crime genre has often boasted a privileged relationship to reality (Alvarado and Stewart 1985; Hurd 1981), the role reversal device is a prominent way of keeping the genre fresh and responsive to social and cultural shifts, particularly given the way 'equal opportunities has been shown to have very particular inflections in the context of the police force and the justice system in the 1980s' (Brunsdon 1998: 226). Following very public cases of sexual discrimination, misogyny and racism in the police and justice system from the 1980s, Brunsdon has argued that the impact of discourses of 'equal opportunities' has registered on all manifestations of the police genre in the 1980s and 1990s and has become inscribed as a discourse within the generic conventions of the series: 'even grumpy old Morse has to learn to be civil to female pathologists' (ibid: 227).<sup>69</sup>

Two of La Plante's crime dramas, *Widows* and *Prime Suspect*, have received some critical attention and praise for the way in which their role reversal narratives have disrupted the crime genre: by 'deconstructing' and thus denaturalising gender roles that structure the crime genre in *Widows* (Skirrow 1985; Brunson 1987), and exposing the male hegemony and misogyny that structures both the police service and the crime genre in *Prime Suspect* (see Thornham 1994; Brunsdon 1998; Creeber 2001; 2004; Jermyn 2003). However, other role reversal narratives such as *Juliet Bravo*, *The Gentle Touch*, and even *Cagney and Lacey* have been deemed less radical by feminist academics such as Deborah Jermyn (2003) in 'Women with a Mission', precisely because the central female presence in these texts does not shift the conventions or 'male police structures of the genre' and where, she argues, the crime police procedural elements of the show become 'somewhat eroded by its domestic angle' (Jermyn 2003: 49).

Attempting to distinguish *Prime Suspect* from the rest of the flow of these feminized crime dramas, Jermyn locates the difference between them as one of approach: one which can be perceived to be signified through the title of the texts: *Juliet Bravo* and *Cagney and Lacey* foreground a 'feminine' angle compared to the title of

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<sup>69</sup> As well as Inspector Morse Brunsdon explores the impact of Equal Opportunities in relation to the laddish *Between the Lines*, *Rockcliffe's Babies* and *The Bill*. Similarly Creeber discusses the impact of Equal Opportunities in the reinvention of the crime drama in the 1990s in texts such as *Cracker* (Granada 1993-1996).

*Prime Suspect* which deflects attention away from the gendering of the text. Thus Jermyn locates *Prime Suspect* as ‘first and foremost’ a crime drama, compared to texts such as *Juliet Bravo* and *Cagney and Lacey* which she labels ‘woman’s crime drama’. Whilst recognising the historical significance of *Cagney and Lacey* in terms of shifts to genre and gender, ‘in putting professional woman at the forefront of a TV crime drama, exploring social issues and the demands on women juggling family, career and personal lives’, she nevertheless states that ‘its characters, settings, humour and status as a long running prime-time US series developed in to a kind of cosy familiarity quite unlike the characteristic ‘grittiness’ of *Prime Suspect*’ (ibid: 49).

D’Acci’s study of *Cagney and Lacey* not only concludes similarly to Jermyn that as *Cagney and Lacey* developed the ‘generic balance altered, making it less of a police genre and more of a woman’s form’ (1994: 105), but significantly she argues how this feminization returned and defined women, to a considerable extent, in relation the discourses and spaces associated with ‘the feminine’ (1987: 222; 1994).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, even the critically and popularly acclaimed *Widows*, has been problematised by Charlotte Brunson who in her 1987 article ‘Men’s Genres for Women’ positions the drama’s status as a ‘wom[a]n’s crime drama’ which works to transform the ‘final register from heist to romance [...] from men’s genre to woman’s genre at its most masochistic’ (1987: 198).

Clearly this discursive context is significant in terms of my own interpretation of *Band of Gold*’s particular feminization of the crime drama. As my brief overview in the beginning of this chapter, and indeed as the title of the texts also attests too, following Jermyn and Brunson’s logic, *Band of Gold* can be situated within this role reversal tradition as a ‘woman’s crime drama’. However, I want to argue that *Band of Gold*’s feminization of the crime drama does not simply invert but rather subverts the conventions of the crime drama and the gendered economy of gazes, voices and power

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<sup>70</sup> D’Acci has argued for instance that as *Cagney and Lacey* progressed it come to portray Mary Beth’s and Harvey’s situation, that of the traditional family, and the role of mother and wife ‘not simply as *one* of many possibilities but as the satisfying, healthy norm for ‘woman’’ (D’Acci, 1987:222). By way of contrast with Mary Beth Lacey, Chris Cagney was in several narratives represented as alone and on the outside of this ‘normal, healthy and moral unit.’ (ibid)

that structure it. In effect, I want to argue that *Band of Gold* embodies a ‘heterosocial dynamic’ that I explored in chapter two and which Maddison, to reiterate, refers to as texts which enact ‘gender dissent’ by privileging female networks and spaces (2000: 275) which displace ‘homosocial’, that is dominant and male orientated, constructions of women. I will explore this further in the next section.

### Heterosocial dynamic

Much of the research and celebration of the ‘feminine’ genre of soap opera in early television criticism stemmed from the way that the genre privileged that which is usually subordinate within Western patriarchal culture: that of the spheres and values associated with the ‘feminine’. I want to argue that *Band of Gold*’s subversion of the crime drama and its embodiment of a ‘heterosocial dynamic’ stems from this same sense of ‘female-centeredness’. I want to explore this ‘female-centeredness’ in relation to two aspects: female identity and ‘women’s discourse’.

### *Female identity*

Traditionally the crime genre has been concerned with male identity, as Skirrow summarises:

The most important relationships in the programmes are those between men, usually a father-son relationship between an older and younger cop – though sometimes hinting at a homosexual element – and the most important issue is male identity, which in the series is often expressed through fast and violent action. The characters from whose point of view we see events are on the side of the law and do not change from week to week - unlike the stories, which are usually about a different ‘case’ every week in the series. In these stories women have very minor roles; even if they are the cause of the disturbance of equilibrium which sets off the narrative, the equilibrium which is restored in the end is a strictly male one.

(Skirrow 1985: 175)

In *Band of Gold* the female ensemble structure is utilised to displace the crime series’ focus on male identity and, indeed, the homosocial bonds which Skirrow’s overview points to ‘through which the authority and centrality of men’s interests are secured’ (Maddison 2000: 272) that structure it.



What I want to argue is that *Band of Gold*'s feminization of the crime drama, its focus on and sympathetic alignment with a group of female prostitutes displace the traditional crime series' focus on male identity and homosocial bonds that structure it in favour of female networks and relations between women. Similar to the privileging of female networks and relations between women in traditional British soaps such as *Coronation Street*, I want to argue that in *Band of Gold* the alignment with prostitutes has the effect of 'making them the norm by which the programmes are understood' (Geraghty 1991: 50). It is the privileging of a female viewpoint in *Band of Gold* and the sense of being 'down among the women', which crucially displaces the construction of prostitutes from a male homosocial point of view as upholders of the patriarchal law.

Indeed, the continual marginalisation of prostitutes within the 'homosocial' male-orientated crime series is problematic for the way in which it reinforces gendered norms which see women positioned as subordinate and as the sexualised Other to men within patriarchal culture, 'as bearer, not maker of meaning'. As Laura Mulvey argues in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*:

In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.

(1975: 6-7)

It is significant to note in this respect that it is not only prostitutes but women more generally that have been constructed as the sexualised Other in the crime genre. Rather like the positioning of prostitutes, the gendered economy on which the crime fiction is based can also be inferred from the way in which female police officers from *Cagney and Lacey* to *The Vice* find themselves undercover as prostitutes, reaffirming, as Tasker has argued, the 'extent to which women's work involves sexual display and/or sexual performance' (1998: 93).

However, if women have generally occupied the position of sexualised Other to masculinity within mainstream texts, the marginalised and denigrated positions which

prostitutes occupy within the crime series (usually as the familiar iconography of ‘some old slag in the background’<sup>71</sup> or body of mutilated evidence) illustrates that it does not transpire that all types of women occupy similar status. Rather, the dominant patriarchal constructions of prostitutes within the male-orientated crime genre reinforces patriarchal social arrangements: that of ways of seeing and classifying women in relation to the ideals of femininity within British patriarchal culture. Indeed, the prostitute has acquired special status which accounts both for her marginalisation and denigration within the male-dominated crime drama because she has been defined in relation to her distance from, and negation of, the moral discourse of respectability that governs the ‘feminine’ ideal (Nead 1988; McLaughlin 1991; Skeggs 1997).

I want to argue that *Band of Gold*’s particular displacement of dominant homosocial constructions of prostitutes is attributable to being informed by two forms of ‘women’s discourse’: its female authorship, and the experiences of real prostitutes who inhabit this position.

*‘Women’s discourse’: female authorship and female voices*

Whereas the television crime drama has historically been the terrain of the male writer with the female writer relegated to ‘feminine’ genres of soap opera and children’s television, the different perspective of prostitutes that we, as viewers, are offered in *Band of Gold* can be attributed to its authorship by female writer Kay Mellor.

Indeed *Band of Gold* reinforces Mellor’s status as a ‘woman’s writer’, one whose craft of storytelling has been developed in the ‘female-centred’ genre of soap opera and children’s fiction<sup>72</sup> and whose oeuvre of work consists largely of focusing on the personal and emotional lives of northern working-class women.

Similar to her previous texts *Band of Gold* displays Mellor’s passion for providing an ‘insider’s view’ of her particular subject. As with her play, *A Place of Safety* which dealt with the effects of child-abuse accusations on a family, *Band of Gold*

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<sup>71</sup> This comment is from Trea, one of the prostitutes interviewed by Kay Mellor during the research for *Band of Gold* (As reported by Kay Mellor, in Hayward, 1997:15)

<sup>72</sup> Before writing *Band of Gold* Mellor wrote for *Coronation Street* along with Paul Abbott. Together they also wrote the children’s ‘soap’ *Children’s Ward* (Granada 1989-2000).

deals with another controversial issue that attempts to bring 'truth' via a different perspective to a stigmatised identity. And along with her West End comedy, *A Passionate Woman* (a play which explores her own mother's experience of becoming a writer in later life) and more recent texts such as *Playing the Field* and *Fat Friends, Band of Gold* succeeds in making visible a marginalised culture which women inhabit. Like these texts, Mellor attempts to engage with the 'structure of feeling' of a community and the emotions that inform it, creating an atmosphere in which the viewer feels like 'they have spent some time at the expense of the characters depicted' (Jordan 1981: 28).

As I argued in chapter one, this is not to suggest that female authorship will have an automatically different or sympathetic bearing on the construction of female characters, but in the instance of *Band of Gold* it was Mellor's own sympathetic alliance with the 'real life' prostitutes she interviewed to provide an 'insider's view' as research for the drama that contributes to the different point of view that is expressed in *Band of Gold*.

Making prostitutes the subject of a realist narrative was a primary concern for Mellor after taking a wrong turn into the red light district of Bradford in 1989 and witnessing a teenage girl prostituting herself. As I will argue in the following section, *Band of Gold's* investigation of the world of prostitution and the women who inhabit it can be perceived to emerge from the enigma of the prostitute Mellor encountered in Bradford and her concern for the girl as a person: 'Whose daughter is she? Whose sister is she? Who is she?' (Mellor, quoted in Hayward 1997: 9). Through her research for the drama and particularly the interviews with prostitutes, Mellor wanted to challenge the dominant construction of prostitutes as 'slags' and to 'write it like it is' for prostitutes who work the streets: 'I thought that if I just achieve one thing, it should be to point out that these people are women first and prostitutes second. They have mothers, kids and school meals to worry about.' (Mellor, quoted in Hayward 1997: 15).

The different perspective of prostitutes that is offered in *Band of Gold* from traditional crime drama can then be attributed to the shift in focus from male to female identity in the text. Concomitantly the shift from being aligned with a male point of

view which takes pleasure/disgust in looking at prostitutes to that of the alignment with a female point of view is one which takes pleasure in gaining knowledge -as a 'usable story' (Nelson 1997: 7) - about the the subjectivities of these women who inhabit the label of prostitute. *Band of Gold*'s preoccupation with the figure of the prostitute is one which marks the shift from seeing these women as patriarchal symbols 'cut to the measure of male desire' (Mulvey 1975) to one informed, like other forms of 'feminine-gendered' fiction, by the discourses of 'real women' who inhabit such positions.

In this section I have outlined how the 'female-centred' properties of *Band of Gold* contribute to its embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic, which informs the alternative constructions and perspective of prostitutes that we are offered to identify with in the text. Before exploring these themes through a more detailed analysis of the first series of *Band of Gold*, I want to review one further feature which I also argue contributes to this project: that of its production in relation to social context or, more specifically, the 'structure of anxiety' that Brunson has argued informs the British crime genre in this period. In exploring this theme below I will also briefly review how the aesthetic properties of this text - social realism and melodrama - also aid in constructing a different perspective on prostitutes that we, as viewers, are offered by the text.

#### *The 'structure of anxiety'*

Rather than *Band of Gold*'s feminization of the crime drama detracting from the 'serious' business of law and order, I want to argue that it can instead be perceived to extend the equal opportunities rhetoric that has impacted on the genre by providing a space through which to rethink the pathologisation and criminalisation of prostitution and, centrally, the identity of the prostitute.

If it is no longer credible to confine constructions of women on television to the personal sphere in relation to roles such as wife and mother (given shifts in women's social and economic positioning and the inroads they have made within the public sphere in recent years), *Band of Gold* would appear to be a timely intervention providing a dramatic space through which to engage with prostitution as the subject of a narrative,

given that it is their longer occupation and visibility within the public sphere which has contributed to their classification as deviant and pathological.

Without wishing to over-determine the relationship between social context and the production of this drama it is nevertheless interesting that in viewing the text retrospectively, *Band of Gold*'s preoccupation with the issue of prostitution can be perceived to embody what Brunsdon describes as the 'structure of anxiety' in crime dramas from the 1980s to the mid 1990s, as 'the staging of the trauma of the break-up of the post war settlement' (1998: 223). She notes for instance the proliferation of the crime series in the 1980s and 1990s which 'works over and worries at the anxieties and exclusion of contemporary citizenship, of being British and living here now' and 'speaks very directly to the concerns of a Great Britain in decline under a radical Conservative government with a strong rhetoric of law and order' (ibid: 223-224). I want to explore two ways in which *Band of Gold* can be perceived to embody this 'structure of anxiety'.

Firstly then, *Band of Gold* can be perceived to be concerned, in the context of the mid 1990s, with what Brunsdon describes as the 'increasingly punitive law and order rhetoric' (ibid: 225) of the radical Conservative government, one which minimises the humanity and reason for citizens to turn to crime. I would argue *Band of Gold* embodies this structure of anxiety with the punitive law and order rhetoric of the Conservative government by exploring this issue through one law-abiding citizen's (Gina) decision to enter prostitution and comparing this with three other women's (socio-economic) reasons for engaging in prostitution.

Crossing this first point, the second way in which *Band of Gold* can be perceived to embody this 'structure of anxiety' is precisely through its reconfiguration of prostitutes as 'ordinary' women, rather than constructing them as criminal or deviant. This reconstruction of prostitutes as 'ordinary' women, I would argue, needs to be contextualised in relation to the social context in which discourses of law and order and 'where to apportion guilt, innocence and blame' has been severely muddied by the Conservative government's abandonment of the ideals of public service in favour of discourses of private enterprise and market-governed choices (ibid: 226). Focusing on the issue of prostitution, *Band of Gold* brings to the fore the way in which this discursive

context of privatisation ‘opens up the possibility for actions which would previously have been perceived as immoral to be recast as merely enterprising’ (ibid). In so doing, *Band of Gold* also enters into more public debates surrounding prostitution which, in this neo-liberal context, have shifted from seeing prostitution as a form of sexual deviancy on the part of women to that of fulfilling a market-led demand as signalled by the contemporary shift in discourse to refer to prostitution as ‘sex work’ (Dela Coste and Alexander 1998; *Feminist Review* special issue on ‘Sex Work Re-assessed’ 2001).

If discourses of privatisation prompt a revaluation of the moral worth of women who engage in prostitution, then similarly it can also be perceived to contribute to the displacement of the male detective within *Band of Gold* where discourses of private enterprise and policing have cast a shadow of doubt on the moral fibre of the traditional male hero of the crime genre.

Having reviewed the ‘structure of anxiety’ which I argue informs *Band of Gold*, I want to briefly explore the aesthetic terrain of the text which both expresses this structure of anxiety and which also contributes to the construction of prostitutes that we are offered in the text.

Similarly to that of soap opera and the crime drama, *Band of Gold*’s narrative is played through the interweaving of British social realism and melodrama. A social-realist aesthetic I will explore in my analysis grounds the text in a recognisable cultural verisimilitude, one which makes all the more immediate, relevant and credible the moral drama of melodrama that informs its narrative.

Indeed, I would argue that it is the crime drama’s embodiment of a ‘melodramatic imagination’ in the way its moral drama attempts to function as ‘social glue’, making significant the behaviour and life choices of ordinary people with dramatic and ethical consequences within a secular, modern society, that informs its status as a usable story. In this instance, it is through the combination of realism and melodrama that *Band of Gold* is a usable story both at the level of attempting to explain (as well as apportioning responsibility for) women’s take-up of prostitution within the social context of the 1990s and in its disturbance of both generic and cultural verisimilitude concerning the figure of the prostitute.

Having contextualised *Band of Gold* in relation to previous role reversal texts, social context and its embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic, I will go on to explore these themes and issues through a more detailed analysis of the first series of *Band of Gold*.

In this first section I will explore further how *Band of Gold*'s embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic deconstructs dominant homosocial constructions of prostitutes as patriarchal symbols and reconstructs them as 'ordinary' women.

Along with the sympathetic gaze of the camera and the utilisation of social realism to situate the women as social subjects within a realist social landscape, I will explore how the ensemble format of *Band of Gold* is key to its reconstruction of prostitutes as 'ordinary' women in the way it is utilised to parallel how women are the objects of exchange in both prostitution and marriage.

By paralleling the positioning of women within marriage and prostitution, I will argue that *Band of Gold* not only depathologises the prostitute as Other but provides a different perspective from which to see/judge the networks of male homosocial power, the hypocrisy of their values and the subordinate positions women, more specifically working-class women, occupy within them.

I will conclude this section by arguing that the privileging of the 'heterosocial bond' in this way foregrounds how women's take-up of prostitution is determined by their occupation of the position of 'woman' within the gendered cultural economy. As such, I will argue that the text not only makes a powerful statement about the experience of women in prostitution but, in attempting to explain why they take up this position, it also makes a powerful - and radical feminist-aligned - statement about women's subordinate position within marriage and the heterosexual cultural economy.

### **Heterosocial bonds: constructing prostitutes as 'women first'**

Whereas prostitutes usually figure as two-dimensional figures within the crime drama, Mellor's construction of prostitutes within *Band of Gold* is one which attempts to negate homosocial constructions of prostitutes as noirish, enigmatic figures by narratively and aesthetically refiguring prostituted women as social subjects within a realist social

landscape. To this end, the investigatory male gaze of the crime drama, one which has voyeuristically looked at these women as sexual objects, is redeployed in *Band of Gold* as a sympathetic female gaze which, with documentary conviction, observes these women in an attempt to explain why they turn to prostitution.

Episode one ('Sold'), for instance, revolves around Gina's story and her decision, as an 'ordinary woman', to enter prostitution. Two factors, however, add resonance to *Band of Gold's* attempt to explore *women's* take-up of prostitution rather than one *woman's*. The broader, general implications of observing Gina's particular 'life politics' as being representative of women's entrance into prostitution is strengthened by the way in which her story is paralleled by the other central female characters of the text who inhabit the same locale and, secondly, from the way in which the 'life politics' of these women are constructed as unfolding against a particular social landscape.

The two opening scenes of the drama illustrate that this is an image of a dystopian community where the women occupy dysphoric gender positions. In the opening shot of *Band of Gold* the camera pans across the skyline of Bradford and centres on a derelict factory, its sense of abandonment and decay echoed by the surrounding industrial landscape. As the camera pans round to focus on a shot of Gina's street, the abandoned factories stand in contrast to the former council houses bearing 'For Sale' placards [Fig 9]. If this panoramic shot establishes that we are in the former industrial north, its also acts as witness to the social transformations that have taken place there in recent years; transformations that take us away from the nostalgic and utopian image of working-class communities within soap operas such as *Coronation Street* to that of a realist social landscape that embodies the effects of 18 years of radical Conservative government signified through these markers of deindustrialisation and privatisation.

It is located within this landscape that we, the viewers, observe Gina and her children hiding behind the sofa from Mr Moore the debt collector who is menacingly shouting at her through the window before cross-cutting to Carol's house where we witness her exchanging sex for cash. If the country-and-western soundtrack accompanying Moore's arrival at Gina's door momentarily breaks with the more





**Figure 9: Dystopian landscape**

documentary-realist feel of the drama, it is one which signifies the women's positioning within a masculine landscape. Here, I would argue, the country-and-western music signifies how the law and order rhetoric of the crime series has been displaced by a sense of lawlessness that exists on the streets that is evocative of the western with women personified as being positioned by networks of homosocial power governed by outlawish, maverick and morally ambiguous figures such as Mr Moore.

The cross-cutting between the two women in the opening of the text illustrates the different social positioning of each of them in relation to normative femininity: Gina positioned as the 'Madonna', as the young white mother; Carol by contrast, as the young black 'whore'. However, the naturalistic mise en scene and characterisation work to foreground the similarities between the two women, paralleling the dystopian positions they occupy as women rather than their differences.

The North Yorkshire accent of both women situates them as occupying the same regional locale, and each woman is framed by the interior of her working-class home. Negating the association with darkness and deviance, Carol's home is shot in the same naturalistic lighting, her home marked by the same neat mise en scene as that of Gina's. Carol's first appearance within the confines of her home can arguably be perceived to disturb generic and indeed cultural verisimilitude in terms of the places in which prostitutes reside and, similarly, the use of everyday vernacular speech and her appearance in a white dressing gown parallel Gina's own smart two-piece suit, which works further to disassociate her with deviance and aligns her more alongside Gina as an 'ordinary', 'everyday' 'normal' working-woman.

However, whilst the naturalistic detail of mise en scene and characterisation confirm their status as 'ordinary', indeed 'respectable' women, the realist discourse also poses a gap between the image that each woman projects and the 'reality' of their positioning. This is captured in this first scene where, as viewers, we are privy to both the public and private faces of each woman. The public image of respectability which Gina projects whilst getting the children ready to leave the house is contrasted with her

private self as a woman in debt to a loan shark hiding behind the sofa with her children [Fig 10]. Similarly, Carol's public smiling face which she shows to her punter as he leaves her home is contrasted with her look at her reflection in the hallway mirror, wiping away the red lipstick, once he has left the house [Fig 11]. We as viewers are granted a 'private moment' with both Gina and Carol, where each character is allowed a moment of reflective intimacy with the audience that the other characters are not privy to (Dyer 1980: 95). In both instances, being privy to these moments exposes the gap between the image and the reality of each woman's experience.

Through paralleling Gina and Carol in the opening two scenes, I would argue that the text removes the distinction between woman and prostitute. Prostitutes such as Carol are constructed as 'ordinary' women and similarly 'ordinary' women such as Gina are constructed as being more complex. The similarities between Gina and Carol are cemented further in the text through their affiliation as single mothers whose daughters are friends at school. This narrative detail works further to erode the distinction between prostitute and woman; through the characterisation of Carol, prostitutes are constructed in Mellor's vision as women with 'mothers, kids and school meals to worry about' and similarly both women's (Carol's present and Gina's eventual) engagement in prostitution is attributed to their status as single mothers.

Mellor's project to construct prostitutes as 'women first', thus confirming their engagement in prostitution to care for their children, could be perceived as simply reinforcing normative definitions of femininity and indeed naturalising and essentialising women in caring roles, particularly through use of the documentary-realistic aesthetic. Indeed, similarly to Carol and Gina, it is through discourses of caring that the respectability of the two other members of the group (Rose and Tracey) is also confirmed. While Rose is shown as a maternal woman in the way she takes Tracey under her wing, it is the lack of care Tracey has previously received via her sexually abusive father that negates her characterisation as deviant and unrespectable.

However, I would argue that Mellor's project is not merely an opportunity to reintegrate these working-class women within classifications of normative femininity and attendant codes of respectability, although I would argue that given the moral



**Figure 10: Gina's public and private faces**



**Figure 11: Carol's public and private faces**

judgements and symbolic violence that has been cast upon women who engage in prostitution historically, the construction of them as normal and respectable also works to de-pathologise them and, in fact, gives credibility and value to them as a group of women. I would argue that the inverted gaze of the crime series however, one aligned with these women, provides an opportunity to disrupt discourses of respectability and problematises making moral judgements and moral distinctions between different types of women through exploring the sexual politics that underpin the heterosexual gendered cultural economy which sees all women as the sexualised objects of exchange in relationships with men. I will explore this point further below.

#### Parallel lives: Bands of gold and the bonds between women

The dystopian landscape constructed in *Band of Gold* is one that foregrounds the unequal distribution of power and status accorded femininity and masculinity within this particular social context.

The positions women occupy in relation to men are symbolised through the paralleling of the gender differentiated spaces and roles they each occupy. Observing Gina and Carol in the beginning of the text, we are affiliated to female networks and spaces through which the positions they occupy are paralleled: as mothers attending to their children; as prostitutes attending to male sexual needs; as wives and daughters fulfilling caring duties to husband and elderly father. The spaces women occupy attest to their 'servicing' duties: the kitchen, the bedroom, the schoolyard, the street.

In contrast to the servicing roles and spaces women perform and occupy in proximity to one another, men are constructed as being positioned in relative ease and comfort; as breadwinners, businessmen, pimps, punters and representatives of the law, their accrued levels of economic and social capital personified by their social mobility and freedom marked by their occupation of cars and offices and their affiliation with homosocial business networks.



The segregated landscape that is constructed in *Band of Gold* is one which, I would argue, foregrounds the different positions women and men occupy as a result of the different levels of symbolic capital femininity and masculinity have accrued in patriarchal culture. Whereas the trading of masculine cultural capital for men in the texts affords them power and authority across public and private spaces, the trading of 'feminine' cultural capital for women, in contrast, sees them not only in *subordinate* positions to men but in domestic and sexually *servicing* roles to men.

Indeed, making moral judgements about Gina's decision and the other female characters' existing engagement in prostitution is problematised by the text in the way it illustrates the limited ways in which they can capitalise on the 'feminine' cultural capital they have acquired within these homosocial networks of male power as working-class women: between 'trading' 'femininity' within prostitution and that of the 'trading' of 'femininity' on the marriage markets where women are themselves the objects of exchange.

The ways in which women, as a social group, trade on their 'feminine' cultural capital is illustrated in the text through the paralleling of the trading of 'femininity' in both prostitution and marriage as two sides of the heterosexual economy. That is, the trading on appearance and sexuality within prostitution for financial reward is paralleled with the trading of these same attributes within marriage, to gain some power in interpersonal relationship with men.

Prior to her own engagement in prostitution, for instance, Gina is observed attempting to 'trade' 'femininity' by selling mail order cosmetics to Carol and Anita (episode one). This triangle of women shows the different but similar ways women are in 'the business' of producing 'femininity' through lipstick and dress to attract men in a bid to win financial security. Carol's transformation from woman in jeans and jumper to 'whore' complete with mini dress, thigh high boots and wild hair illustrates how she trades on the projected look and image of black 'femininity' as exotic 'Other', whilst Anita, at the other side of the room, and thus symbolically at the other end of the spectrum, scrutinises her reflection in the mirror, pouting her lips as she applies make-up in a bid to increase her attraction stakes on the marriage market.

Carol's trading on and from her particular 'brand' of black 'femininity' to attract punters for financial reward is paralleled by Rose's, Tracey's and eventually Gina's trading on their own particular brand of 'femininity' [Fig 12]. Rose, for example, trades on her maturity and experience, and Tracey on her youth. Gina's entrance into prostitution is one that involves little transformation from her everyday persona, trading on her image of respectable 'femininity', complete with vanity case. The image from which Gina trades blurs most closely the image of 'femininity' which women trade on in both prostitution and marriage.

*Women's work: constructing 'femininity'*

As the analysis of the above scene also demonstrates, rather than naturalising women in relation to 'femininity', being 'down among the women' and observing them within spheres of 'women's culture' has the effect of exposing the performative nature of gender roles, deconstructing 'femininity' and reconstituting it as gendered work. This is achieved, I suggest, from the shift in viewpoint from how we usually observe these women within the crime genre; that is, from being aligned with a male gaze and voyeuristically surveying women as sexual objects 'onstage' within the public domain to being aligned with these women as social subjects via a sympathetic female gaze in more private 'offstage' spaces and moments together. Being aligned with this female gaze allows us, the viewers, to not only separate each woman from her particular construction of 'femininity'/sexuality but concomitantly the labour that it takes to construct the projected image of 'femininity'/sexuality.

It is through being 'down amongst the women' that the construction of 'femininity' is foregrounded as a form of masquerade which the women use to gain advantage in social situations with men. This masquerading performance is used tactically by these women in order to manipulate their punters. Carol tells Gina, for instance: 'You have to talk the money from them. You have to use your gob somehow, best to get the money out of them.' In this way we, the viewers, see how the women play on male fantasies of women as virgins, as Carol comically illustrates when attempting to sell Gina to a punter: 'She's new. She's never been had before. Her





**Figure 12: Trading on femininity**

middle name is Mary' (episode one). Moreover, viewers get to see the private faces of these women, those they reserve for each other in their private moments together. Men as punters and husbands in the text are always kept at a distance, always faced with the public (masquerading) mask of these women in place.

Significantly however, I would argue that it is through paralleling the trading of femininity within prostitution and the heterosexual marriage market which illustrates how each of these transactions with men, for individual and personal security, involves women as the object of exchange to fulfil male sexual 'needs'. As Carol's statement to Gina indicates: 'I ain't ashamed of what I do. Those who can do it become whores, them who can't become whore wives, right?' (episode one).

The direct parallel in the sexual servicing of men by both prostitute and wife can also be inferred from the opening scene that I referred to earlier, in which Carol leads her punter down her stairs. The image of her in a towelling bathrobe in daylight offers an image of normalcy, that of husband and wife coming down the stairs on a morning for breakfast. If this image is disturbed by Carol's proclamation: 'Tell your wife like I showed you and you'll come like a roman candle every time' (episode one), which reinstates him as punter, her comment also realigns her with the positioning of his wife who is here constructed as interchangeable with the prostitute to fulfil male sexual needs.

Carol's interchangeability as wife/prostitute is paralleled with the similar positioning of Gina. The familiar iconography of a prostitute selling herself to passing cars is reconfigured in *Band of Gold* to show how Gina is similarly positioned as a sexual object to be bought within marriage. Here, her estranged husband, Steve, attempts to pick her up as he drives along the road, offering to pay the mortgage on their bought council house in exchange for her (in the form of a marital reconciliation).

I would argue that it is through following Gina's and Carol's narratives and their decision to prostitute themselves for money that *Band of Gold* embodies discourses of radical feminism that deconstructs the ideology of love and romance by exploring the

gender politics 'behind' women's positioning in both prostitution and marriage (a point which is also hinted at by the title of the text itself). Indeed, Gina's entrance into prostitution is marked by her own recognition of the parallel between marriage and prostitution when she says to Carol: 'I don't see the difference.'

*Women's work: performing sexuality*

*Band of Gold's* commentary on the sexual servicing of men as a normalised aspect of women's domestic work is exemplified through Carol's sexual servicing of regular punters at her home. The regulatory nature of these visits form part of Carol's domestic timetable. The distinction between household maintenance and male sexual maintenance as a form of household drudgery is shot through the juxtaposition of Carol attending to both chores simultaneously. In one scene, for example, Carol walks for her punter, Curly, in stockings and suspenders whilst dusting the lounge (episode three). In one further scene (episode two), however, the comparison between these two forms of 'women's work' is made even more apparent. Carol, shot in a PVC maid's outfit in the midst of servicing a bondage client is shown scrubbing her kitchen floor. Over the top of the PVC outfit she wears a cleaning overall. Playing with the derogatory use of the term 'scrubber', this scene foregrounds how women's identity is defined in relation to both types of 'scrubbing' that they do: that of sex work and domestic cleaning, in the private sphere of home. The double layering of the outfit [Fig 13], the cleaning apron over the maid's outfit, heightens the performative nature of these roles but also illustrates how closely each role is related to the other by condensing them into one image.

I would argue that the incongruity that arises from the juxtaposition of Carol in a PVC maid's outfit cleaning the kitchen floor produces an ironic distance from which to view this scene and one which de-fetishises Carol. I would argue that Carol's appearance in the fetishised outfit, positioned scrubbing the kitchen floor, takes the social-realist code of the drama into the realms of social surrealism, making humorous how the more mundane (domestic) side of 'women's work' acts as a form of sexual stimulation to men. Moreover I would argue in making comically strange male sexual



**Figure 13: Women's work**

fetishes, in this instance the 'naughty maid' outfit, *Band of Gold* draws attention to the way in which women's occupation of subordinate positions to men, and indeed the servicing roles they perform for them, act as a source of sexual excitement for men.

Furthermore, the above scene also problematises discourses of middle-class respectability where it is Councillor Baker, a respected figure of the community, who is enjoying Carol's fetishised sexual services. The maid's outfit or domestic apron is one which belongs to respectable normative femininity, that which women are encouraged to occupy. The fetishisation of this costume for sexual titillation also illustrates the way in which women who wear such garb and perform such sexual fantasies are condemned while the originators of this discourse of condemnation take pleasure from it.

So far in this section I have explored how the heterosocial bond in *Band of Gold* is utilised not only to erode the distinction between woman and prostitute but in so doing parallels the experience of women in both prostitution and marriage. I have explored the way in which *Band of Gold* illustrates women's trading of 'feminine' cultural capital in exchange for financial security from men within both prostitution and marriage. As such, I have explored how *Band of Gold* foregrounds the subordinate positions women occupy within the patriarchal cultural economy where they are themselves the objects or 'tokens of desire' in homosocial networks of male power. In the next section, however, I want to explore further how the heterosocial bond is utilised to explore a second parallel of women in prostitution and marriage: that of the violence women experience within these homosocial networks of male power. In so doing, I want to argue *Band of Gold* attests to the radical feminist discourse of prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation rather than reconstituting it in line with contemporary discourses of 'sex work'.

During the course of this analysis I will also illustrate how, in reversing the gaze of the crime drama into a sympathetic alignment with the female point of view and, indeed, female experience of prostitution, *Band of Gold* also disrupts the position from

which we view acts of violence, sex and death that are performed on prostitutes within the crime genre.

### **Women's experience of prostitution**

Gina's decision to enter prostitution in *Band of Gold* is clearly constructed as a decision made out of desperation. However, this decision is nevertheless one in which Gina is constructed as attempting to refuse her position of powerlessness by illustrating her agency from the limited choices that she has available to her: that of exchanging herself within marriage or prostitution for financial security. In positing prostitution as a (preferable) choice to marriage, *Band of Gold* could be perceived to embody and indeed celebrate a neo-liberal discourse in which the figure of the prostitute is re-classified as a working-class 'career' woman who embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of the 1990s. However, I would argue *Band of Gold's* particular characterisation of Gina's decision to enter prostitution and subsequent experience of it illustrates a point made by Skeggs, that is how Gina's decision 'to challenge powerlessness does not mean that one automatically shifts into positions of power. It means, straightforwardly, that one is refusing to be seen as powerless or to be positioned without power' (1997: 11). Rather than romanticising Gina's choice of prostitution as a liberatory alternative to marriage, her decision to enter prostitution, her attempt to liberate herself from a physically abusive husband is paralleled by the violence that she and the other women experience as prostitutes on the lane.

Indeed, Gina's introduction to life on the lane, and through identification with her our introduction to prostitution, brings home the danger that women face trading on the lane at night. The women's inhabitation of a dystopian social landscape by day takes on a more noirish atmosphere by night, marked by the sinister dark streets, the anonymous male figures voyeuristically surveying the women in their passing cars, and the more expressionistic use of shade and lighting on the lane where the women work.

Furthermore, Gina's death at the end of episode one is not the only attack that women participating in prostitution experience but is rather constructed as the tip of the violent iceberg. It is useful to recall in this respect that Gina's story, her decision to

enter prostitution, experience of, and death as a prostitute is the catalyst for a more extended exploration of the life of prostitutes on the streets. Indeed, the self-contained nature of the first episode, one that concludes Gina's life and narrative, is one which could stand on its own as a single play. However, the scope of the series would be severely more circumscribed in terms of its exploration of the experiences of women inside (and outside) of prostitution.

Gina's story then, may be the catalyst that sets the enigma code of the crime narrative rolling, and one whose narrative climax in episode six reveals 'whodunnit'. However, it is the dramatic space, the extended middle of the text, as serial drama in which the investigation into Gina's murder becomes a broader and deeper investigation of the violence women experience at the hands of different 'types' of men: the pimp, punter, detective, husband and father. This exposure of the violence inflicted upon women is one which is not uncovered by the police procedural element of the text, led by Inspector Newall, but rather is exposed through being 'down amongst the women' as flies on the wall as they experience prostitution and marriage.

Significantly the violent attacks that take place on the female characters by their male perpetrators are posed as attempts to control and assert their patriarchal authority across women. Tracey's pimp, Dev, for instance, inflicts violence on her but also on Carol and Rose when they attempt to prise Tracey away from his control [Fig 14]. Similarly, Inspector Newall attacks Carol for failing to disclose her affiliation with Gina, and Steve violently attacks Carol in an attempt to vent his aggression over Gina's involvement in prostitution. What's more, the frustration of the patriarchal figures - that of Steve as husband and Newall as police officer - at their inability to assert their order and control over Gina's death is played out between the two men when their anger turns on each other.

The regularity of violent 'episodes' in *Band of Gold* provides a rhythm of experience to the women's lives and also to the viewing experience. Here, paranoia and tension build in between the moments of dramatic intensity as we, the viewers, like the characters within the drama, wait for the next mini climax during the course of the episode and the major, violent cliffhanger at the end of each episode to take place. If the





Figure 14: The noirish landscape



violent episodes bring *Band of Gold* more recognisably into the terrain of the crime drama, it is the gaze of the camera, which is aligned with the female point of view and hence with the victims of crime rather than the male perpetrators of it, that makes *Band of Gold* distinct from male-orientated crime dramas.

Whereas in traditional, male-orientated crime drama the violence that is inflicted upon a prostitute is only investigated from the point of view of the postmortem, reconstructed from clues from the battered body by pathologist and detective, in *Band of Gold* we, the viewers, observe Gina's last moments alive, trapped in a punter's car on the moor. In this way *Band of Gold's* treatment of Gina's death can be seen to involve a double inversion of these conventions, aligning viewers with the fear and psychological torment experienced by the prostitute *before* her death.

Rather than showing any physical violence being inflicted upon Gina by the punter in the build-up to her death, one which could replicate the titillating and gratuitous sense of violence at the 'smoking-and-drinking' (Brunsdon, 1998:232) end of television crime drama, it is Gina's psychological terror and fear that is foregrounded. Indeed, the identity of the punter is kept to minimum. This arguably is not only a plot device to prolong the murder investigation (to find out 'whodunnit') but, I would argue, the marginalisation of the murderer also keeps the focus on Gina's experience at this point. Staying on a close-up of Gina's face, this vantage point from which we view her terrifying ordeal unfold is one which resists instigating us in the murderer's point of view and pleasure in terrorising Gina.

The intensity of Gina's experience is heightened by the claustrophobic locale of the car and the use of close up and extreme close-up on Gina's face. The murderer's sadism is personified through the use of a relaxation tape whose instructions stand in contrast to Gina's experience within the car. We hear the instrumental music of the relaxation tap:

Gina: What kind of music is that?  
 Voice on relaxation tape: *Now close your eyes, relax and clear your mind of all your thoughts. Breathe deeply and slowly* [Gina tries to open the locked car door] *Let all tension leave your body*  
 Gina: [Beginning to panic] Door's locked. Will you open the door?  
 Tape: *Feel your head relax...*  
 Gina: [more panicked] Would you please open the door? I wanna get out"  
 Tape: *...and allow your arms to hang loosely by your side*  
 Gina: I wanna get out of the car. Will you please open the door? Will you open the door?  
 [screams] Please!"  
 Tape: *Don't think about anything*  
 Gina: I wanna get out!

The paralleling of the abuse women can experience at the hands of men across both domestic and public contexts is illustrated further through the deliberate ambiguity of the identity of Gina's murderer which points to either punter or husband. The ambiguity concerning the identity of Gina's murderer is constructed in the way in which Gina enters a red car, saying nothing, appearing to recognise the driver. This could be either Curly, a mysterious new punter who appeared in the pub on the night of Gina's murder and who expressed an interest in Gina (and who, on the day after Gina's murder, is spotted with scratches on his wrists), or Steve whom we have already seen attempting to pick up Gina from the street, or Mr Moore the debt collector whom we have witnessed driving a red car. The enigma code of the crime series is extended to create paranoia within this noirish, sinister landscape of the lane, with the women being stalked and voyeuristically surveyed through parked cars windows and car mirrors even in daylight. Often we are aligned with the point of view of the voyeur without the text revealing the identity of him as pimp, husband, detective or murderer.<sup>73</sup>

As with the more overt forms of violence on women, being 'down among the women' also allows the drama to explore the subjective experience of women being used by men for sex, the psychological barriers they utilise to protect themselves as well as the psychological damage this can cause. The scene which shows Gina's first time

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<sup>73</sup> Indeed, it was only after viewing the drama that Kay Mellor realised how much she had been influenced by living in Leeds at the time of the Yorkshire Ripper's reign of power (as reported in Hayward 1997: 14) and indeed when 'ordinary' men were not above the fear of suspicion.

with a punter, for instance, conveys the exchange of sex for money as dehumanising for the prostituted woman [Fig 15]. Once again Gina is shot in close-up, lying frozen on the bed as he takes his pleasure. The shot set up is reminiscent of Marleen Gorris' radical feminist film *Broken Mirrors* (1984) where we similarly view the events unfold from the prostitute's (Diane's) perspective [Fig 16]. As well as the shot being aligned with Gina's subjective experience, the voiceover conveys Gina's thoughts, replaying Carol's warning to Gina prior to entering prostitution: 'Til this, 'til that, 'til you hear your bones banging and there's no one there.'

If as I have explored earlier, the women use masquerade in order to protect themselves from their experience of prostitution to forge a gap between them and the image and activities they enter into, the text also makes explicit how the mask is not fixed or psychologically protective. Mirrors in *Band of Gold* are symbolically used to illustrate the psychological damage incurred on women who are prostituted. Carol's stare in the mirror in her opening scene, for instance, not only illustrates the gap between her own self and the image projected, but also reaffirms that she is still able to look at herself in the mirror and to reassure herself that she still exists as a person outside of prostitution. This shot is repeated with Gina after her first act of prostitution. Similarly, the deterioration of Tracey's mental health and her own self loathing is dramatically illustrated when she shatters a wall of mirrors in a nightclub [Fig 17].

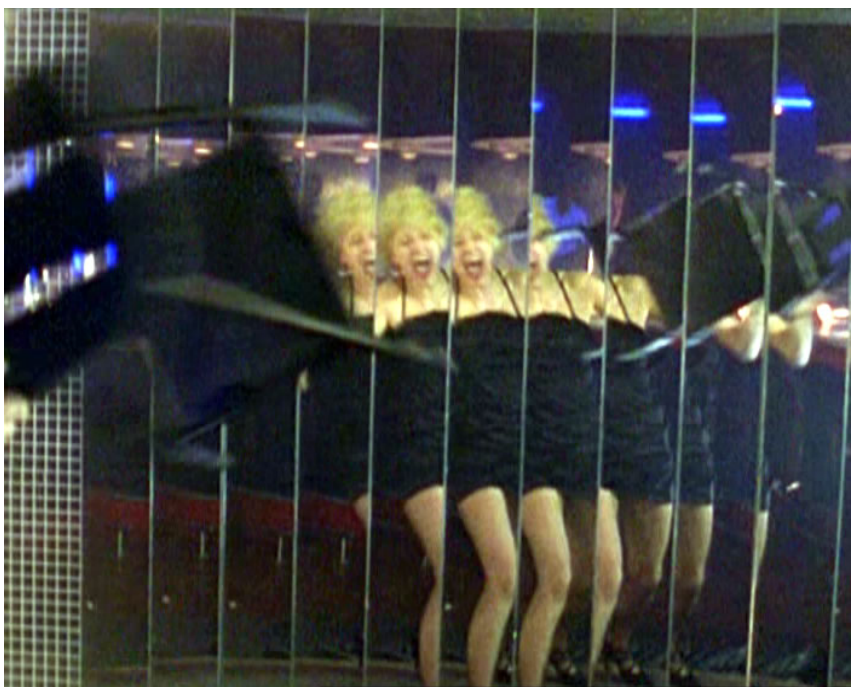
As well as the use of more expressionistic melodramatic devices to communicate the levels of violence inflicted on women, the text also shifts from its use of social realism to explore the position of women in the social landscape to what Creeber terms 'social surrealism'; that is, fantasy/surreal sequences to convey the individual, inner psychological life and subjective experience of these women. Most prominently, this social surrealism is utilised to explore the deterioration of Carol's mental health. Carol's mental health is consistently shown to be fragile as a result of prostitution throughout the body of the text, where she is characterised as excessively cleaning either herself or her home. However, the surreal scene is used to mark her loss of a grasp on reality where she pours boiling water over Curly's genitals in a bid to get 'clean', which she describes after the event to a psychologist in episode five:



**Figure 15: Gina's experience of prostitution**



**Figure 16: Diane's experience of prostitution**



**Figure 17: Tracey's psychological torment**

I used to think that if I didn't get showered, I'd smell. I used to think that when people came to me house, they could smell it [...] What I did. Sex. Men. The whole thing. I could smell it so I thought everyone else could. Sometimes I couldn't breathe... I used to think if I didn't clean, I'd suffocate, I'd drown in the dirt.

Rather than this scene simply reaffirming classifications of respectability, however, I would argue it works to illustrate the internalisation of judgements on oneself as a prostitute.

In this section I have explored how the heterosocial bond is utilised to explore a second parallel with women in relation to prostitution and marriage: the violence women experience within these same homosocial networks of male power.

I have argued that *Band of Gold* as a social-realist text does not construct the women's choice to enter prostitution as a liberating alternative to marriage but rather explores the physical and psychological abuse women suffer as prostitutes that parallels women's abuse within marriage. In so doing, I want to argue, *Band of Gold* attests to the radical feminist discourse of prostitution as a form of female sexual exploitation rather than reconstituting it in line with contemporary discourses of 'sex work'.

Lastly, I have argued, through reversing the gaze of the crime drama to one which is more sympathetically aligned with the female point of view and indeed female experience of prostitution, *Band of Gold* disrupts the position from which we view acts of violence, sex and death that are performed on prostitutes within the crime genre and therefore disturbs the crime genre's codes of generic verisimilitude. However, if *Band of Gold* illustrates through its use of the ensemble format how women, individually and as a social group, are positioned subordinately in networks of male power, it resists positioning women merely as victims. What I want to focus on in the next section is the final subversion of the crime series by *Band of Gold*. This final subversion illustrates how, as victims of crime, the women are not rescued by the detective in charge of the murder investigation but that narrative resolution lies with the women of the text. In this final section, then, I will explore this point by suggesting that the heterosocial bonds

between the women becomes a heterosocial alliance, one which enables the women not only to take revenge for Gina's murder but to transform their own lives.

### **Heterosocial alliance**

As I have argued, it is through privileging a heterosocial bond and the interweaving of the lives and 'life politics' of this female group which allows the text to explore the individual experiences as well as the collective experience of women and indeed the oppression of women. As the narrative progresses the female characters - Carol, Rose, and also Gina's mother Joyce - move spatially closer to one another, as they become aware of their shared experiences as women as well as the position of oppression they share within this dystopian homosocial landscape.

However this female alliance is one forged between the characters as women rather than as prostitutes as exemplified by Carol's friendship with Joyce. Carol empathises with Joyce as a mother who has lost her daughter (where Carol is desperately trying to get back her own daughter who has, during the course of the narrative, been taken into the care of Social Services when she suffers a nervous breakdown). Joyce's alliance with Carol and the other prostitutes works to undermine the social construction of prostitution as Other and indeed realign them as women. This is illustrated by a scene in episode six in which Steve objects to Joyce's friendship with Carol because she is a prostitute. Joyce's response, however, closes the gap between herself and these women:

Steve: Well how can you let her near the house, how can you bear to look at 'er?

Joyce: It's easy. Ye see her, (camera on youngest daughter who Rose is holding) your own daughter, your own flesh and blood, just like Gina was mine. And it never entered my head that one day she would be gone. Not in my lifetime, you don't expect that, you never think you're gonna bury your children. Oh I know, one day when I go round to my dad's with his dinner he'll be dead and I'll be upset but *never in my life* did I think for one single second that I would go to my own daughter's funeral. I am not ever going to get over it, ever. I've just got to find some way of living with it, some way of making sense of it and Carol helps me do that. (Carol looks round) She's the only one who's been there for me, so don't you stand there and ask me how could I do this and how could I do that - I'd stand on a street corner tomorrow and sell me own body if I could have Gina back, and if that makes me a whore, then I am a bloody whore and I'm proud of it!

In aligning herself with the prostitutes, Joyce, like Gina, shows how 'ordinary' women will engage in prostitution for the care and protection of their children.

As Joyce's speech to Steve illustrates, it is through identifying with each other through their experience and shared positioning as women which forms the basis of their alignment. Indeed, these women are aligned through their shared discourse, that which is personified by its offer of support and understanding, empathy, camaraderie as well as 'straight talking' to one another when need be. In contrast, 'men's discourse', associated with the language of business, aggression and moral judgement, which is usually privileged in male crime drama, is here rendered strange in its distance from the experience and ability to identify with women.

However, the heterosocial alliance that is forged between the women of the drama is one forged less out of personal intimacy and, avoiding the tropes of the sentimental female friendship text, it instead takes on the characteristics of the political friendship text. This is illustrated from the way the women utilise their heterosocial alliance to collectively transform their lives by starting up their own cleaning business 'Scrubbers International' [Fig 18].

The female alliance and the start of the cleaning company, however, takes on greater significance in the text where it is used not only to transform their individual lives but to counter the network of male power which keeps them in positions of oppression. In this instance, the networks of male power in which women are positioned is personified by the businessman George Ferguson in the text. Indeed, as viewers of the text observing the drama unfold over the first four episodes we witness how each woman is caught up in Ferguson's homosocial network, how they are both positioned and used by him: Joyce as a cleaner within his cleaning company; Anita as his financially dependent mistress; Carol whose services he draws on to 'keep sweet' business associates. It is, however, not only their growing awareness of their own personal exploitation that causes their hatred of Ferguson but also the revelation that it was he who was the loan shark behind the aggressive debt collector that forced Gina into prostitution to repay her debt.





**Figure 18: Heterosocial alliance**

Taking revenge on Ferguson, the women's alliance symbolically marks their own triumph with their oppressor, hitting him where it hurts by competing for a cleaning contract for the new leisure centre as well as exposing his extra marital affair and underhand business dealings to his wife. Although in keeping with the realist premise of the text, *Band of Gold* avoids the utopian and formulaic 'happy ever after' by delaying the revelation of the women's business triumph over Ferguson (this remains the cliffhanger to the end of the series). We do, however, witness the women's mini triumphs over Ferguson in attempting to win the contract, particularly their opportunities to embarrass him in front of his 'respectable' business associates for his affiliation with prostitutes if he objects to their business plans.

These triumphs over Ferguson to revenge the death of Gina can be compared to the text's revelation of Gina's murderer, Ian, an apparently 'ordinary' punter who has psychotic tendencies. Whilst it is revealing the identity of the killer that usually forms the focus of the investigation in the crime series, in *Band of Gold* however, as the more formulaic and quick narrative resolution to this narrative attests to, the identity of Gina's killer is less significant than that of the role accorded to George Ferguson in the text. Ferguson is given symbolic status as the *real* culprit in the text, as representative of the homosocial network of male power that oppresses women and which is responsible for Gina's death. To go back to the 'whodunnit' – where to apportion guilt, innocence and blame - the moral universe of *Band of Gold* points the finger at the ruthless entrepreneur, underpinned by capitalism, money and power.

Although the text ends without confirming whether the women have secured the cleaning contract (this is confirmed in series two), there is a feeling of hope for the women in and through their heterosocial alliance with one another to fight their exploitation together and to offer a sense of belonging and support to each other in a dystopian social landscape.

## Conclusions

To reiterate, the aim of this chapter has been to provide a detailed textual analysis of *Band of Gold*. The purpose of this analysis has been to explore how *Band of Gold* as a 'woman's crime drama' is not merely a 'feminine' appropriation of the crime series but is rather more feminist in intonation.

I have fulfilled the aim of this chapter through illustrating how *Band of Gold*'s embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic has been utilised to deconstruct the dominant homosocial constructions of prostitutes and in so doing makes a powerful and radical feminist-aligned statement about women's subordinate position within the heterosexual cultural economy.

Clearly the characteristics of the FED that I explored in chapter two have been central to the text's embodiment of a 'heterosocial dynamic' through which it has subverted the conventions of the crime drama. It is largely utilising the ensemble structure, for instance, to parallel both the individual and the collective experience and 'life politics' of these women that has allowed the text to make a significant statement about the personal as the political. Similarly, the group structure of *Band of Gold* has been central not only to foreground the heterosocial bond between women, and thus the networks of male homosocial power which keep women in positions of relative powerlessness and subordination but also has provided one of the few positive constructions on television of the strength women can derive from one another outside of relationships with men. In this instance, not only does the women's collective strength provide a sense of belonging (via its 'postfamilial family' structure) to the group of women, but also a sense in which they can transform their own positions through their alliance with each other.

While *Band of Gold* displays some of the themes that I have identified, in chapter two, as being associated with postfeminism - the status of marriage for the modern woman - and the foregrounding of the performativity of gender and identity, I have explored how these textual themes have been central to the text's embodiment of a feminist discourse. This is illustrated in the way in which the gendered politics which

underpin marriage has been dissected rather than simply presented as one option among many that women are now able to freely choose. Indeed, rather than providing a utopian image of contemporary Britain in which women can now 'have it all' within a post-traditional society, *Band of Gold* is more reminiscent of film texts such as *Stella Does Tricks* but also *Broken Mirrors* in foregrounding the limited choices women have available to them and indeed the ongoing forces of oppression which shape women's lives within patriarchal culture in the late modern period.

While the main focus of this analysis has been on the alternative perspective we are offered of women in *Band of Gold*, it has also illustrated how, in providing this alternative perspective of prostitutes, it has disturbed not only cultural but also the generic codes of verisimilitude of the crime drama.

## Chapter Four

# Real Women

### Aims of objectives of chapter four

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed textual analysis of the constructions of working-class female identity in the second of the FEDs of the 1990s that I explore in these case study chapters: *Real Women*. As I stated in chapter three, the central theme of analysis in each of these case study chapters concerns the way in which as specific examples of the FED they de- and re-traditionalize working-class women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with the traditional 'feminine'. As I also stated in chapter three, I will explore this concern in each case study with reference to three central characteristics of the FED of the 1990s: their post-familial family structure; their embodiment of 'life politics'; and their construction of postfeminist femininities. To also reiterate, while these concepts provide a theoretical and critical framework through which to approach each case study, as I also stated in chapter three, each case study will involve the analysis of these concepts in relation to its particular aesthetic and generic affiliations. In this analysis of *Real Women* I explore its embodiment of discourses of de- and re-traditionalization and these three characteristics with reference to its status as a 'quality' British postfeminist soap drama and its embodiment of a life choices narrative.

While exploring how it is centrally concerned with themes of community, friendship and identity similar to other soap dramas of this period, I also explore how it resembles other forms of postfeminist women's fiction through its *topos* of the woman on top and its embodiment of an explicit sexual discourse. Indeed, as an example of a 'quality' postfeminist text which embodies constructions of unruly women on top *Real Women* could be perceived as embodying a heterosocial dynamic similar to *Band of Gold*. Particularly given its 'quality' status, where, as I explored in chapter one, 'quality'

texts such as ‘serious drama’ are often associated with the embodiment of a ‘progressive’ element, particularly through their use of social-realist aesthetic. However, through the analysis of *Real Women* I want to illustrate how it privileges female homosocial rather than heterosocial bonds. As I have so far suggested, this provides an insight into women’s experiences but is more ambivalent regarding the disruption of ways of seeing and constructing women. Indeed, I refer to *Real Women* as embodying a female homosocial bond because, whilst it privileges female bonds and provides different perspectives of women’s lives which at certain moments offer the opportunity for anti-homosocial affiliation and critique, I argue that *Real Women*, similar to the social friendship texts which Hollinger discusses, uses the homosocial bond to position women back into ‘feminine’ subject positions. In this way, *Real Women*’s narrative, I would argue, becomes a site of struggle between discourses which attempt to both de-traditionalize and re-traditionalize the working-class female characters in relation to the norms of traditional ‘femininity’ and the traditional moral values which underpin British working-class communities.

In the main body of the analysis then, I explore in more detail how *Real Women* celebrates an inversion of sexual norms by positioning these women as the sexual subjects of the narrative. However, as I stated in chapter two, I will explore the narrative treatment of this sexual discourse in relation to the working-class identity of its female characters. I will explore the extent to which the working-class characters are able to flout the discourses of respectability as well as how the text’s construction of the raucous and unruly behaviour of the female characters replicates the symbolic violence that has been cast on working-class women historically. Secondly, I will explore how *Real Women* as a postfeminist text problematises before reinstating marriage as *the* life choice for working-class women.

### **The ‘life-choices’ narrative**

*Real Women* is a three-part mini series that was first aired on a Thursday night at 9.30pm on BBC1 during February and March 1998. Its screenplay was written by Susan Oudot and was based on her 1995 novel of the same name. A four-part second series of *Real*

*Women* returned in 1999, written once more by Oudot and was adapted from her follow-up novel to *Real Women, All that I Am* (1998).

The central narrative arc of the original series of *Real Women* sees a group of old school friends - Susie (Michelle Collins), Mandy (Pauline Quirke), Anna (Frances Barber), Karen (Lesley Manville) and Jan (Gwyneth Strong) - reunited in preparation for Susie's wedding day. The drama unfolds over three 'acts'; episode one: 'The Hen Night'; episode two: 'The Hangover' and episode three: 'The Hitch'.

In its focus on the friendship bonds between a group of women, the marriage plot of *Real Women* displaces the focus on the romantic heterosexual couple in favour of a narrative focused on female maturation. As its focus on a group of thirty-something women suggests however, this is not a 'coming of age' drama but rather the marriage plot functions to reunite the group to explore the different destinies of working-class school friends since their school days and concomitantly their 'life politics'.

To enable a more nuanced discussion of *Real Women's* life choices narrative and the constructions of female identity within the text, I want to frame a discussion of it in relation to its status as a 'quality' British postfeminist drama.

#### 'Quality' postfeminist 'soap' drama

As a three-part mini series *Real Women* was something of an anomaly in the television schedules. As my brief narrative synopsis suggests, the episodic structure of *Real Women* could be seen as an extended version of the 'quality' single play, one whose narrative structure is based around a central narrative arc - Susie's wedding day - but in which its three acts unfold across three episodes rather than over the course of an evening's viewing.

Secondly, the promotion of this drama by the BBC as a 'new major three-part drama' marked its status as 'feminine' 'event' television, and its direction by Phil Davis, best-known for his affiliation with British social-realist films of Mike Leigh such as *High Hopes* (Channel 4 Films 1988) and *Vera Drake* (Les Films 2004), and 'quality'

actors such as Frances Barber<sup>74</sup> and Lesley Manville<sup>75</sup> and ‘hugely bankable BBC1 stars’ (Ogilvy 1999: 8) Michelle Collins<sup>76</sup> and Pauline Quirke<sup>77</sup>, reinforced its status as a ‘quality’ production.

Thirdly, similar to the ‘Must See’ and ‘Must-She TV’ that I explored in chapter two, the status of *Real Women* as a ‘quality’ drama, focuses around a ‘post-familial family’ structure; that of a group of friends rather than a traditional familial structure. In this way *Real Women* embodies the characteristics of a new form of ‘quality’ hybrid drama, which Creeber describes as ‘soap drama’ (2004: 114). As I explored in chapter one, for Creeber, soap operas describe a new hybrid form of drama evident in texts such as *This Life* (World Productions 1996-1997), *Cold Feet* and *Queer as Folk* which combine elements of soap opera, drama, comedy and comedy drama to appeal to the ‘quality’ demographics and whose narratives evolve around ‘close-knit communities and friends echoing the type of preoccupation with private existence more commonly associated with traditional soap opera’ (ibid: 115).

While embodying characteristics of this new form of ‘quality’ soap drama through its focus on the all-female group as opposed to the mixed ensemble format of most examples of ‘Must See TV’, I want to explore how *Real Women* more specifically shares characteristics with the ‘quality’ postfeminist soap drama *Sex and the City*. There are two features of *Sex and the City* that are useful through which to initially

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<sup>74</sup> Prior to *Real Women*, Frances Barber’s status as a ‘serious’ actor was confirmed by her work for the National Theatre and The Royal Shakespeare Company. As well as winning the Olivier award for best newcomer in 1984 and nominated for a second Oliver award for best supporting female actor in 1997, she is also associated with cult independent films such as Stephen Fears’ films *Prick Up Your Ears* (Civil Hand 1987) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (Channel 4 Films/Working Title 1987).

<sup>75</sup> Prior to *Real Women*, Lesley Manville’s status as a ‘quality’, ‘serious’ actor was confirmed similar to Barber’s, through her career as a theatre actor but more recently for her roles in several Mike Leigh productions such as *Grown-Ups* (BBC 1980) *High Hopes* (1988), *Secrets & Lies* (Channel 4 Films 1996), and ‘serious’ dramas such as Tony Marchant’s  *Holding On* (BBC 1997)

<sup>76</sup> Prior to her role in *Real Women*, Michelle Collins was best-known for her role as Cindy Beale in *EastEnders* from 1988 to 1998. Her popularity with viewers for playing the femme fatale character in *EastEnders* saw her contract extended from 11 episodes to one which stretched to ten years.

<sup>77</sup> Prior to her role in *Real Women*, Pauline Quirke was a well-known face on television. As well as hosting two children’s TV series *You Must Be Joking* (Thames TV 1975-1976) and *Pauline’s Quirks* (Thames TV 1976) she was popular with audiences in her television acting roles such as a student nurse Vicky Smith in *Angels* (BBC1 1976-1983), Veronica in *Shine on Harvey Moon* (Central Television 1984-1985), as the unconventional wife and mother Sharon in *Birds of a Feather* (BBC1 1989-1998) and the female murderer Olive Martin in the BBC’s adaptation of Minette Walters’ *The Sculptress* (1996).



contextualise *Real Women* as a 'quality' British postfeminist text. This is in relation to its *topos* of the woman on top and its embodiment of an explicit sexual discourse.

#### *Women on top*

In privileging female bonds and the pleasure from the inversion of cultural values this entails, *Real Women* provides a comedic-dramatic space through which to explore that which is subordinate within culture, that is, the experience and subjectivity of women. This is a significant trope of these dramas given that this 'licensed space' explores the experience and subjectivity of women: their 'life politics', at a time when lifestyle choices for women were perceived to be opening up, and women were perceived to be capable of 'having it all' in a de-traditionalized postfeminist period. Moreover, *Real Women* is particularly significant in this respect because it explores these themes, not in relation to the 'bourgeois bohemian' professional women who populate *Sex and the City*, but rather regional British working-class women and 'everywoman' types: the housewife (Mandy), the bad girl (Susie), the career woman (Anna), the lesbian (Karen) the infertile woman (Jan). Focusing on 'everywoman' types, I would argue, attests to the drama's attempt to appeal to as wide and diverse a (female) audience as possible in contrast to 'Must See' and 'Must-She TV's appeal to the 'quality' demographics. I would argue this makes *Real Women* distinct for the space it gives to exploring the shifts to working-class female identity in light of the destabilisation of working-class community life and identity through processes of individualization and de-traditionalization in this period.

Indeed, while *Sex and the City's* 'post-familial family' grouping has been formed in relation to de-traditionalizing and individualizing process by offering a sense of community and belonging to a group of thirty-something, professional, single women in Manhattan, *Real Women* conversely focuses on the dynamics of the friendship of a group of women which has been destabilised due to these same de-traditionalizing processes. In this way *Real Women* personifies a point made by Creeber regarding soap dramas: that as family and community life become more fragmented and unsettled in the

contemporary world, *Real Women* allows for an exploration of the ‘dynamics by which social networks [a]re formed, maintained and occasionally destroyed’ (2004: 13).

Centrally, I would argue *Real Women* uses the licensed space of ‘quality’ comedy-drama to explore two prominent postfeminist themes within this life choice narrative: ‘having it all’, and the status of marriage for the modern woman in relation to the ‘realities’ of ‘ordinary’ regional women in their gendered and classed positionings. In so doing, I will argue that *Real Women* problematises this utopian rhetoric of ‘having it all’ rather than presenting it as a given as in *Sex and the City*.

Indeed, I will argue that, in exploring realities of working-class women within the dominant British social-realist tradition, *Real Women*’s generic affiliations to British soap opera and domestic comedy are apparent where both of these forms have a longer lineage of focusing on matriarchal communities of women and the more quotidian ‘life politics’ of the women who inhabit them.

However, as I have explored in chapter two, I will explore if *Real Women* reinstates marriage as *the* life choice for these working-class women. While this has been a trope of postfeminist texts more generally, this is a particular concern with the construction of working-class femininity given that historically working-class women’s identities have been confirmed as ‘respectable’ via their positioning as wives and mothers. Indeed I will also explore in this respect the text’s embodiment of unruly women on top figures and their embodiment, like *Sex and the City*, of a ‘woman-centred’ and explicit sexual discourse (Arthurs 2003: 83; 2004: 128) which I will explore further below.

#### *Sexual discourse*

The novelty of having a sexually explicit discourse explored from a female point of view in *Real Women*, like that of *Sex and the City* can be attributed, as Arthurs and Grimshaw have argued in *Women's Bodies: Discipline and Transgression*, to cultural transformations regarding the representation of sexuality on television ‘in the wake of a post-1960s liberalisation of representational regimes’ (1999: 4). Although as they argue, censorship is still publicly a debated and contentious issue, viewers have become

accustomed to a vast array of sexual images and representation of sexuality which can be attributed to shifts within the legal status of sexual behaviours and practices, and the recognition of identity rights ‘arising from successive waves of political campaigning by the new social movements – bohemian, feminist, gay and lesbian, queer...’ (Arthurs 2004: 3).

As Arthur’s has argued, informed by these cultural transformations regarding the representation of sexuality on television, *Sex and the City* has re-mediated<sup>78</sup> the address of glossy women’s magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, and re-mediated Candice Bushnell’s chick lit novel of the same name<sup>79</sup> to appeal to the new sophisticated and liberated ‘bourgeois bohemian’ audiences on pay-per-view channels. Moreover, as I have argued in chapter two, this exploration of women’s sexuality has been enabled by changes in the regulatory regime of television as a consequence of digital convergence: ‘It has moved closer to the freedoms enjoyed by the print media and the Internet as compared to the sensitivity to religious Puritanism historically shown by the television networks’ (Arthurs 2004: 132).

While working within rather than outside of the confines of British terrestrial television, *Real Women* has also re-mediated those forms of British ‘feminine-gendered’ fictions that have also embodied a sexual discourse in relation to ‘ordinary’ women: that of British ‘chick lit’ but also soap opera and the domestic situation comedy to appeal to contemporary female audiences in an increasingly sexualised British televisual context (Arthurs 2004). I will explore how each of these forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction informs *Real Women*.

Being based on Oudot’s original novel, *Real Women*, like *Sex and the City*, is a remediation of another form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction; that of chick lit. Unlike *Sex and the City* which draws on Bushnell’s American novel for inspiration, *Real Women* embodies a popular strand of British chick lit which focuses on themes of female friendship (Tasker and Negra 2005: 109). This strand of chick lit that is embodied in

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Re-mediation’ according to Bolter and Grusin refers to the forms in which new media arise, as each medium “responds to, re-deploys, competes with and reforms other media” (1999: 35).

<sup>79</sup> In turn both novel and television drama of *Sex and the City* have been informed by former *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown’s ‘chick lit’ novel *Sex and the Single Girl*.

*Real Women* is one that in turn draws on a popular mid-1990s' British cultural trend: the raucous behaviour of women on 'nights out with the girls'. This can be perceived in chick lit novels such as *Girls' Night Out* (Lette 1993) and the raucous all-female iconography translating into films of the decade such as *Girls Night* (Hurran 1998) and *The Full Monty* (Cattaneo 1997). The 'unruly women' theme of this brand of fiction would have perhaps been more apparent in *Real Women* if it had gone with its original title of *Rude Girls*, but this had already been taken by another chick lit author (Walters 1996). Nevertheless, the commentator's voice-over introducing episode one signals its affiliation with this movement: 'Taking no prisoners, they're raucous and they're raunchy, they're "real women"'.

Whilst I have already argued *Real Women* resembles British soap opera and domestic comedy in its construction of a matriarchal community, it is also the case that it shares with soap and domestic comedy its own women on top figures. Although women have most often been defined in relation to caring familial roles within the traditional soap and domestic comedy, the narrative demands for fresh storylines of long-running serials/series and their focus on female identity has often evoked storylines which, similarly to the traditional 'woman's film', deal with the contradiction between women's duty as wives and mothers and their sexual desire. The sensational element to the storylines of soap and domestic comedy offers female viewers the pleasure of revelling in the sexual transgression of women who refuse to remain in their proper place, from Elsie Tanner in *Coronation Street* to Doreen Green in *Birds of a Feather*.

In this vein, two stars of *Real Women* - Michelle Collins and Pauline Quirk - are best-known for their unruly sexual behaviour in British soap opera and situation comedy. Michelle Collins, for instance, is intertextually known as the femme fatale character in *EastEnders*<sup>80</sup> and Pauline Quirke for playing the unconventional and unfaithful wife in the female ensemble situation comedy *Birds of a Feather*. As popular television actors, their former roles feed the audience's expectations of their unruly personas, whilst pleasure may also arise in viewing Gwyneth Strong, most strongly

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<sup>80</sup> In *EastEnders*, Michelle Collins played Cindy Beale, the woman who attempted to have Ian Beale assassinated as well as having an affair with his friend David Wicks (Wicksy).

associated with playing Rodney Trotter's demure wife Cassandra in *Only Fools and Horses*, here characterised as an outspoken cockney, as well as 'serious' actors such as Frances Barber and Lesley Manville being brought down 'low' to indulge in the pleasures of the flesh in *Real Women*.

As a text which is aired after the 9.30pm 'watershed', *Real Women* is able to extend soap opera and domestic comedy's trope of the unruly woman in relation to a more explicit and diverse exploration of women's sexuality. I will explore this below in the more detailed analysis of the text in which each female character is engaged with breaking a particular taboo of female sexuality: infidelity, promiscuity, lesbianism, infertility and abortion.

In this analysis, then, I will explore how *Real Women*, similarly to *Sex and the City*, celebrates an inversion of sexual norms by making its female characters the sexual subjects of its narrative. However, as I stated earlier, I will explore the narrative treatment of this sexual discourse in relation to the working-class identity of its female characters. Unlike *Sex and the City*, whose licensed space and embodiment of unruly women is granted by its female character's status as bourgeois bohemians, I will explore the extent to which the working-class characters in *Real Women* are able to flout the discourses of respectability. I will also explore in this respect how *Real Women*'s construction of the raucous and unruly behaviour of its female characters replicates the symbolic violence that has been cast on working-class women historically. Secondly, and following on from this point, in the following analysis I will explore the relationship between the explicit sexual discourse of the text and a second theme of postfeminist texts; that is, how it reinstates marriage as *the* life choice for working-class women.

Firstly, in the following section, I will explore *Real Women*'s embodiment of a de-traditionalizing discourse. I will explore how *Real Women* uses the licensed space of 'quality' comedy drama through which to explore the dispersal of female identity within the de-traditionalized context of the late 1990s. I will explore how the text provides an insider's view of the experience of women, how it works through the sexual taboos of working-class women as well as how it disturbs normative discourses of working-class

female identity. I will explore how these themes are furthered by the texts subversion of the conventions of soap opera and domestic comedy in the post-watershed slot.

### **The de-traditionalization of gender: from class to lifestyle**

*Real Women*, like *Playing the Field* that I will explore in chapter five, opens the first episode round a waiting wedding dress (Brunsdon 2000: 174). In both instances the wedding dress is symbolic of the traditional 'feminine' journey towards maturity and independence (from her family). It is used to signal the end of her journey of girlhood and her entrance into womanhood (Radner 1993:57). In the case of *Real Women* however, the dress hangs like a question mark on the back of Susie's bedroom door. In setting the drama three days before the wedding and three days before Susie steps into the wedding dress, the text uses this transitional space to question two interrelated themes. Firstly, this narrative space, as Brunsdon has argued, is used to question the status of marriage as *the* life choice for women in the late modern period (2000:174). This can be inferred not only from the way in which the text follows Susie's narrative before her wedding day but through paralleling her decision to get married as her particular life choice in this period compared to those of her old female school friends. In this way the marriage plot is used to explore the wider themes of female destiny, experience and 'life politics' within this de-traditionalized context. Secondly, and following on from this first point, I want to argue that the marriage plot of *Real Women* is used to explore the dynamics of this particular friendship bond between the five women, given the dispersal of their identities from their former working-class school days in London and therefore to work through shifts and changes to classed senses of community and belonging in this period.

The text's engagement with both of these themes can be inferred from the bringing together of both the past and present positioning of these women to give a sense of their biography: where they have come from and where they are now. Before we reach the contemporary period and the image of the wedding dress, for instance, the opening of the drama begins with a nostalgic black and white flashback which sees the five central characters constructed in proximity to one another within their working-class

milieu as school friends, rejoicing at their last day at secondary school together. Reminiscent of the use of flashback within the 'woman's film' *Shirley Valentine* (Gilbert 1989) the brief return to the girls' past sees the female characters full of youthful vigour, filled with optimism for their futures, as they take their first step towards adulthood. The memory of togetherness, stability and optimism for the future is used as an image from which to compare the reality of their destinies in the present period. Through the image of their youthful days at school together, instilled as a group photograph, we are brought back into the contemporary period and the dispersal of the group of friends is indicated through their separate introductions with each woman framed by her contemporary habitus and 'lifestyle'.

Whereas the cross-cutting in the beginning of *Band of Gold* between Gina and Carol was used to parallel the similar positioning of the two female characters within their particular classed and gendered positioning, in *Real Women* the cross-cutting between the five members of the group is used initially to illustrate their diversity of experience from one another. Moreover it is used to visually exemplify their locations, that is their proximity and distance from their original working-class habitus. Similarly to *Band of Gold*, *Real Women* explores the social positioning of each woman through the public gaze of the social-realist aesthetic. To this end, the direction from Davis is reminiscent of Mike Leigh's 'slice of life' mode of social observation which compares the class location of each woman in their contemporary locations.

The bride-to-be, Susie, lies in her former bedroom of her parental home in preparation of the wedding, the wedding dress hanging on the back of the bedroom door. Susie, with peroxide blonde hair, lying late in bed is introduced as the more youthful, immature member of the group – signified further by the old Minnie Mouse stickers on her headboard and her mother entering with a cup of tea, attempting to rouse her. The camera cuts to Mandy's house. Mandy is situated in the cramped dimensions of her kitchen, positioned as the dutiful wife and mother preparing breakfast for her husband and two sons. She parallels Susie's mother rather than Susie herself as she attempts to coax her children out of bed for school. There is a cut to Karen's peaceful and calm home, Karen having nobody but herself to get ready for work. Karen's habitus and



**Figure 19: The real women in their habitus**



personal appearance contrast with that of Susie and Mandy, both of whom are situated closer to their social origins within their working-class habitus, in the cramped rooms and aged decor of their familial homes, where women's identities are constructed in relation to the roles as wives (and wives to be) and mothers. In contrast, Karen's habitus signifies her social mobility: the natural wood floor and rustic décor of her Victorian terrace house the signifiers of a British middle-class 'bourgeois bohemian' lifestyle. Her middle-class status is confirmed by her own polished appearance and her preparations to leave for work (later confirmed as a school teacher), kissing her partner good-bye. The camera cuts to Jan having breakfast with her husband at home. The decor of her familial home situates her social status as now being located somewhere in between that of Mandy/Susie and Karen: the pine welsch dresser signifying a modern but traditional home. The camera cuts finally to Anna, the only one of the five women to be introduced in the context of the public domain, in a waiting area of a publisher's office. Anna represents the career woman of the group, already attending meetings whilst the other women are still eating/making breakfast. Her sophisticated appearance of cropped dark hair, red lipstick and dark suit personifies the image of the independent career woman [Fig 19].

While the text in this way illustrates the dispersal of female identities as a result of processes of individualization and social mobility within the post-feminist period rather than privileging one particular way of life over the other, or emphasising the level of choice open to women within this de-traditionalized context, *Real Women* uses the 'licensed space' of comedy-drama to parallel and compare the 'life politics' of each woman within their individual positions. Similarly to *Band of Gold*, it is through making these women the subject of the narrative and observing them across public and private spaces that *Real Women* provides an insider's view of the realities of each of the women's experiences which problematises the post-feminist rhetoric of 'having it all' in relation to femininity but also sexuality.

### Not 'having it all': female experience

Firstly, the anticipated white wedding as marking the happiest day of a woman's life is contrasted with the 'realities' of married life as experienced by Mandy, a bored housewife and mother. Mandy's 'life politics' are played out through comedic codes to underscore the 'typicality' of her positioning as the frustrated woman who is taken for granted by her family. Through observing Mandy within her male-orientated home of husband and two sons, the text illustrates the ongoing relevance of what Betty Friedan (1963) in *The Feminine Mystique* described as 'the problem which has no name' (ibid: 13): that is, women's disappointment and unfulfilment in the traditional role of wife and mother that forms their daily rhythm of experience within the private sphere in the late 1990s.

Mandy, when shown within the context of her familial home, is framed within the four walls of kitchen, cooking for her husband and two sons. The low angled vantage point from which the camera observes the division of labour within the household shows Mandy frantically cooking and cleaning while her husband and sons are static, sitting or standing but ignoring her and the labour she utilises towards their well-being. This division is marked out spatially through Mandy being positioned on one side of the room and the men on the other. While observing Mandy serving her husband, sons and occasionally also her brother-in-law, we also observe the way they position her as the objects of their jokes ('mutton dressed as lamb') or discuss her as if she wasn't in the room ('What about her?'). The themes of domestic melodrama executed through comedy illustrate the male camaraderie of the household that shows no sign of understanding Mandy's point of view or her frustration with this scenario.

In this way, the text takes themes of soap opera through illustrating the extent to which the brunt of domestic labour falls on women within the domestic sphere (Dyer 1981: 3-4). It does not romanticise this role but rather offers potential pleasure to female viewers through its recognition of 'women's work' and through comically underscoring the sexual politics of such women's positioning.

If Mandy's 'life politics' point to her disappointment with marriage as not fulfilling her expectations and disrupts the utopian rhetoric of women in the 1990s 'having it all', this theme is similarly played out in relation to Jan. While the image of Jan is one constructed as an 'ordinary' woman who 'has it all' (a loving husband, a comfortable home and secure job at a local bank), by observing Jan through the non-comedic codes of realism, we witness how it is a childless marriage that is the cause of her unhappiness. Jan's story provides an insight into the marginalised experience of miscarriage for woman: '... there it was, our baby...just a tiny blob of jelly clinging to my fingertip. I don't know what to do with it. I turned on the tap and held it under the water. Didn't know what to do with it...', (Jan, episode two) whilst also dissecting the strain put on a 'happily' married couple by issues of infertility.

However, while reflecting on and exploring the experience of thirty-something women problematises the romanticised image of marriage as the route to women's fulfilment and happiness (as the route to 'having it all'), we similarly observe the complex 'life politics' of the other women of the friendship group who have chosen alternative lifestyles to marriage in this de-traditionalized context.

Behind the smart-suited image of success which Anna projects, for instance, we are privy to the complicated 'life politics' of the career woman which is posed as the dilemma between prioritising either familial or career commitments. In *Real Women* we observe Anna attempting to rebuild a life in London after making the decision to choose her career over her personal life, signified by her decision to have an abortion, and losing her partner in the process.

Similarly for Karen, while she is characterised as having a career as a teacher and a partner, personal happiness is shown to elude her because of her closeted lesbianism. While Karen's own self-hatred is personified by her pale and fragile mask-like appearance, through observing her, we, the viewers, are also offered an insight into what it feels like to suffer the ingrained and casual homophobia that she is confronted with on a daily basis in the schoolyard. Finally, and at the other end of the social spectrum, the text also allows for an insight into the subjectivity of Susie, the promiscuous, heterosexual singleton of the group. However, rather than simply celebrating Susie's

promiscuity as a sign of her sexual freedom and liberation within this socio-cultural period, the insider's view point observes her feelings of self-loathing and her degraded experience of being the sexual object of pornography.

As well as disrupting the discourse of 'having it all' through observing their everyday 'life politics' within their 'feminine' positions, the text also utilises the licensed space of comedy drama through which to parallel the sexual experiences and dissatisfactions of the five women with this post-traditional period.

### Not 'having it all': sexual experiences

Similarly to *Band of Gold*, the five female characters in *Real Women* are positioned as the sexual subjects rather than sexual objects of the narrative. The sense in which sexual scenes are aligned with a 'feminine' perspective can be perceived firstly in the pleasure it takes, engaging with some of the traditional tropes of 'women's romantic fiction'. In contrast to Mandy's humdrum existence, for instance, the text offers the pleasure of observing Mandy's illicit fling, as an 'ordinary' and overweight housewife with a conventional, tall, dark and handsome figure [Fig 20], and Anna's seduction of a young and equally conventionally good-looking waiter. While the text also indulges in the pleasure of women objectifying naked male bodies in a strip club on the hen night [Fig 21], there is a rare opportunity to observe the sexual and loving relationship of Karen and her lesbian partner Chris [Fig 20]. As these differing examples illustrates, *Real Women* offers the viewer the pleasure of engaging with the taboos of female sexuality and desire on prime-time television.

More often however the use of the sexualised 'woman on top' figure is used not for titillation, albeit from an alternative female viewpoint, but to draw attention to each woman's sexual dissatisfactions which disturb further the postfeminist discourse which suggests that women can 'have it all' in this period. The more fantastical elements of Mandy's affair, for instance, one in which she has invested too much significance, is made explicit in *Real Women* by Mandy's romanticised image of her lover: 'He can't get



**Figure 20: Mandy's (above) and Karen's experience of sex**



**Figure 21: Unruly women**

enough of me' (episode two) contradicted by the image of him rushing to leave after he has had sex with her.

Similarly Anna's one-night-stand is used to underscore her feelings of loneliness and rejection after her relationship break-up. Her look past the camera, the un-relaxed pose, along with the return of the pathetic tones of the signature tune during her sexual encounter confirms that she is only half in the encounter and as someone who is filled with a longing for someone else (in this instance, Callum).

By way of contrast to Anna's one night stand in which the young man attempts to bring pleasure to Anna, Susie's [Fig 22] last fling on her hen night up an alleyway with an old flame is used comedically to show the realities of such an event. Susie's look past the camera parallels that of Anna's to suggest her dissatisfaction with the sexual encounter and her longing to also be somewhere else. While in both instances the male is positioned as the sexual object, in the case of Susie, the male also becomes the comedic spectacle to illustrate his vulgarity, selfishness and inadequacy. While for Anna, Mandy and Susie, sex separated from reproduction through contraception is largely personified as enabling them to seek solace and pleasure from it, for Jan, sex is personified as holding no currency of its own, to be engaged in only to try for a baby.

Indeed, while the text is marketed as that which privileges the raucous and raunchy side of unruly women, what we are presented with for the most part in *Real Women* is a more subtle and diverse use of the 'woman on top' figure. Through being aligned with the female characters the text emphasises the pains and dissatisfactions each woman experiences within the contemporary period, regardless of their life choices. The central theme which emerges is the isolation and alienation these women experience within their daily lives from their colleagues, partners and also their old female friends. As with the example of Mandy cited earlier the women's sense of social isolation is marked out spatially in the way they are constantly positioned on the other side of a room, a screen, a table, an opinion or experience from other characters. In contrast to *Band of Gold* where the women were privy to each other's personal personas



**Figure 22: Anna's (above) and Susie's experience of sex**



and their public personas were reserved for men, in *Real Women* the female characters present other female as well as male characters with their public personas.

This point is illustrated on the evening of the hen night (episode one) and the first moment in the text that we see the women together as a group. While the rituals of the hen night, culturally renowned as a licensed carnivalesque space, allow the group of women to take pleasure in flouting the codes of propriety and respectability by making spectacles of themselves within the public domain by joking about sex, male inadequacy and the tribulations of motherhood, these private experiences of women are played out through their public personas to one another, their own private issues remaining undisclosed.

Moreover, while they take pleasure in disturbing the norms of working-class femininity by exploring the ‘realities’ of sex, marriage and motherhood, these conversations which the women hold on such subjects are utilised in the text to illustrate the breakdown of the group’s consensual values and the lack of commonalities between them due to their different life choices and life experiences in the de-traditionalized context. Rather than their humour in this instance being used as a short cut to confirm their consensus, it conversely works to further alienate certain members of the group. The camera, for example, observes Jan’s reaction to Mandy’s story of childbirth and the taken-for-granted way in which Mandy recounts this experience. Similarly the group’s homophobia regarding a female teacher from schooldays and the excitement about visiting a strip club serve to alienate Karen from their heterosexuality.

In this way, I would argue *Real Women* illustrates the dispersal of lifestyle choices and different ways of doing femininity in this context but it also foregrounds the social isolation these women face both within the private context of their lives with (and without) partners, but also with their oldest friends. Concomitantly, the text also explores the breakdown of consensual values of the traditional working-class community and sense of belonging in the de-traditionalized context.

However, if *Real Women* problematises two key themes (the friendship between these old working-class school friends and the status of marriage as *the* life choice for women within this post-traditional culture), I would argue that in its bid to provide some narrative closure to its licentious space, both are reinstated in the end of the text. In the next section, then, I will explore *Real Women*'s recuperation in relation to these themes in terms of its embodiment of a re-traditionalizing discourse. I will argue that the ideal of working-class matriarchal community that is negotiated in the end of the text delivers women back into normative positions of class and gender.

### **The re-traditionalization of gender**

If the licensed space of comedy within *Real Women* undermines the ideology of love and romance by attempting to show the realities of married life, it does not simply explore the realities of married life as one life choice for women (it being the chosen life choice for three of its female characters), but renews the status of marriage as the predominant norm for women in the final episode of the text.

Indeed, like the rest of *Real Women*, the reinstatement of marriage is not one which unreservedly romanticises this option. For instance, the romanticised image of a wedding as the happiest day of woman's life is undermined once more by comic reversal. It is on the way up the aisle after the happy couple have been married that the identity of the groom, Jonathan, is revealed to us (including the oblivious Mandy) as Joe the estate agent with whom Mandy has been having an affair. If this attempts to overlay the romanticised image of the wedding scene with that of its 'reality', Susie, for example, stating: 'It wasn't supposed to be like this. It didn't say this in *Brides Magazine!*' (episode one), the respectable spectacle of the white wedding is further turned into a farce. The bride punches the groom in the face and sticks his head in the wedding cake; the bridegroom is handed pornographic pictures of his wife's former life; Susie discovers Karen and Chris's lesbianism in the cloakroom ('closet') [Fig 23]; Mandy's affair is made public to her husband Pete, and Pete attempts to punch the groom.

However, if in this way the text disrupts the idealised image of the white wedding it does so to reveal the issues that have been bubbling under the surface of the



**Figure 23: The 'reality' of the wedding day**

text in order to resolve them and reinstate the ideology of love and romance in the end of the text. This is firstly achieved through Susie and Joe's reconciliation by the end of the text. This reconciliation is presented positively by the text being mapped onto a more realistic perspective of marital life aside from the fantasy of the white wedding day. However, marriage and the ideology of love and romance are also renewed through the positioning of the four other women.

As can be inferred from the previous section, marriage as the life choice for Jan is not constructed as being the problem. Rather it is the experience of a childless marriage that is constructed as causing tension within her relationship and preventing her from 'having it all'. If Jan's storyline problematises naturalistic definitions of womanhood tied to their 'natural' ability to reproduce, it simultaneously suggests that women 'naturally' desire to have children. Jan's story is one which plays out a familiar narrative that can be compared to other postfeminist dramas of this period, one which, as I explored in chapter two, make reference to the ticking biological clock. The characterisation of Jan's husband, Steve, as the sensitive husband also works to reaffirm the romanticised image of marriage. It is they rather than the newly weds who are the happily married couple on the dance floor near the end of the text.

It is interesting in this respect to compare Jan's narrative through the course of the text with that of Anna's. Anna's decision to choose her career over the life of her unborn child is largely constructed as having been the wrong choice. Anna's story illustrates how she has lost it all - esteemed magazine editorial position and Mr Right - by having an abortion, ironically to further her career. The sombre tones of pathetic melodrama through which her narrative is played out express her feelings of isolation and loneliness at losing Mr Right and her ambivalence about her decision to have an abortion. Anna's ambivalence at her own decision is constructed during a scene in the hen night (episode one) in which Susie is talking to Anna through the bathroom door as Anna stares at her reflection in the mirror [Fig 24]:

I tell you something Anna, what I really dreaded most, was ending up like one of those sad bastards you see in Sainsbury's [close up on Anna as she looks at her reflection in the bathroom mirror] with a basket full of little see-through bags, one carrot, one pear, one banana, and a pile of frozen meals for lonely old gits! I mean anything's got to be better than that, ain't it? [Mid range shot of Anna so we see her head and torso in the mirror] Oh I can't wait to start a family you know, I think Joe [Anna unbuttons jacket] will make a lovely dad...[Anna feels her tummy] and let's face it I'm no spring chicken am I? So I can't afford to drag my feet. Anyway you never know how long it's gonna take do you? I mean look at poor Jan, I'd hate to end up like 'er.

In this instance, *Real Women* suggests that by choosing a career over traditional familial life, women are unhappy. This discourse is further embodied in the text through its characterisation of the archetypal cold and unfeeling magazine editor, with whom Anna has a meeting, and who despises working mothers. In this way *Real Women* comes close to, if it in fact does not, embody a more conservative and reactionary backlash discourse, one which lays the blame for women's unhappiness at the opening up of the life choices available to them outside of traditional roles as wives and mothers in the de-traditionalized, post-feminist period. In the case of Anna, however, the text plays out the fairytale ending of the 'woman's romantic novel' when Callum, another conventional good looking 'hero' appears at the wedding to 'rescue' her from loneliness.

Susie's wedding day may be the site which stages the end of Mandy's marriage to Pete but this does not call into question the institution of marriage or the ideology of love and romance. Rather, in the climate of the late modern period it stresses, I would argue, the perils of marrying too young. If their marriage ends, Mandy's belief in love and romance is still present in the text, most clearly in her tearful farewell to the newly weds and one which suggests she wishes she were in Susie's position.

Only Karen's lesbianism is constructed as the 'real' alternative to marriage within the text. If Karen's life choice is not reconciled with the heterosexual institution of marriage, her relationship with Chris does however still attest to the ideology of love and romance. What's more, Karen's lesbian relationship does not threaten the status of marriage as the predominant norm and life choice for its female community, given that this is reaffirmed through the positioning of the four other members of the group.

However, if marriage is reaffirmed in the end of the text then so too is the idealised image of female friendship marked by the female group taking centre stage to



**Figure 24: Anna and the backlash**

perform the last dance that is usually reserved for the bride and groom. On the one hand, the text's reaffirmation of female friendship outside of their more romantic relationships is testament to its continual positive valuation of such female networks. With the song 'I'll be there' being played from the wedding disco the friendship bond between the women becomes the final public spectacle in the finale of the text suggesting that it is the friendship between these women which stays constant as other factors in their lives shift and change (and therefore irrespective of their life choices) [Fig 25].

For Brunsdon, the female group 'offers at least some kind of camaraderie of a woman's lot' in their repeated insistence 'that no one can have it all' (2000: 175). However, like the social friendship texts which Hollinger discusses, the model of female friendship on which the text draws does not threaten to undermine the significance of the heterosexual union but rather complements it by offering women a safety valve through which to vent their frustration about marriage and partners (O' Connor 1992:21).

While the text's reaffirmation of female friendship outside of relationships with men is significant, so too is the reinstatement of female friendship to signify a community ideal. It is doubtful, for instance, whether issues of loyalty and alternative sexuality would be so easily accommodated into the group's consensual values, given the way in which lesbianism in particular has been made fun of during the hen night. However, and once again I would argue the togetherness of the group is marked in the way in which a consensus of values is found within the diverse group of women in their belief and continuing significance of the ideology of love and romance within this fragmented social landscape.

As a three-part drama, too much has been condensed into the narrative for these issues to be more gradually resolved. However, the utopian image of collective female friendship is one which I would argue attests to the longing for a sense of community within a social landscape, which as their own journeys testify, is marked by individualism and social fragmentation. The sustenance of the women's friendship commencing within their regional, working-class school days through the life choices



**Figure 25: The celebration of marriage and romance**



and disclosures and ending with the public expression of their solidarity on the dance floor, is thus suggestive of the sustenance of elective affinities and relationships, even as the community in which they live and their own lives shift and change.

### **Class: the reinstatement of respectable classifications**

If the text as a 'licensed space' interrogates the status of marriage as *the* life choice for women before reaffirming it, I would argue that it similarly interrogates the norms of femininity through its construction of unruly women but also reaffirms classed categorisations of women [Fig 26].

Brunsdon, for instance, concludes her discussion of the female ensemble dramas *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* by suggesting that the ensemble format of the dramas extends the different ways of 'doing' femininity (2000: 175-6). However, if *Real Women* does construct different female lifestyles to personify its 'everywoman' types largely to appeal to different audience segments of terrestrial television, I would argue this does not equate to 'extending' the different ways of doing femininity. Rather I would argue that the 'everywoman' types which *Real Women* constructs reinforces very specific class-based ways of perceiving and doing femininity.

This is not to overlook, as I have argued above, how *Real Women* uses the licensed space of comedy-drama to privilege a female point of view and disturb codes of cultural verisimilitude by exploring the realities and the 'life politics' of its 'everywoman' types. However, I would argue that, as a text which replicates Mike Leigh's social observation of class conflict, in this instance the point of view of the women that is offered is one which replicates Anna and Karen's middle-class ambivalent identifications with the group of predominantly working-class friends.

If each woman in some way embodies 'unruliness', in the way they each engage in particular taboos of female sexuality (lesbianism, infertility, adultery, abortion, promiscuity), it is the more markedly working-class women of the group, namely Mandy, Susie and at some points Jan, who bear the more 'unruly' characteristics that are



**Figure 26: Re-classifying women**

traditionally associated with the working-class. This can be inferred in their displays of vulgarity, grotesqueness and indecorum on the hen night. Not only is it the more marked working-class characters who are constructed as being excited by indulging in the strip club, but they are also constructed in terms of looseness and tastelessness, in terms of excessive bodies (Mandy), and excessive appearance (Susie, Mandy), and foul use of language (Jan: 'I'll have a cut and blow dry and a fanny rinse please!'). Therefore, if by making a spectacle of themselves on the hen night these women disturb codes of respectability, it also serves to re-naturalise working-class women in relation to these attributes.

This is in comparison to Karen and Anna, whose appearance in muted dark colours and subdued conduct are associated with the civilised body, and who are embarrassed by their working-class friends (Anna: 'Oh Mandy, you're disgusting, we're eating!'). In replicating Anna and Karen's perspective of the unruly group, the text reinforces the moralizing middle-class gaze of the unruly working-class woman. Indeed it is not surprising in this vein that it is Mandy and Susie who are also coded as the more un-enlightened women, those responsible for the comments which offended and alienated Jan and Karen earlier in the evening regarding motherhood and lesbianism. Through its alignment with a middle-class perspective of the group, such as those who have moved away from their working-class origins, the text replicates the symbolic violence done to the working-class within media forms. In so doing, it replicates a common trope, that which suggests:

...working-classness, not only as something that has to be left behind, that which is fixed in order for mobility to proceed, but also as that which has no value. [*Real Women*] offer middle-class taste and positioning as the means by which being working-class can be overcome and eradicated, and as something to be aspired to, reproducing a definition of that which is valued as cultural capital is middle-class culture.

(Skeggs 2004: 99)

Moreover, and similar to *Playing the Field*, it is the women coded as working-class who represent the most traditional female life choices (marriage and motherhood) and Karen and Anna coded as middle-class women who are represented as choosing more individual life choices.

Similarly, the 'life politics' of the working-class women, particularly Mandy and Susie, are played out more comedically than their middle-class counterparts which reinforces the way in which the working-class have been constructed as both a source of disparagement and a source of fun (ibid). Interesting in this respect is the text's characterisation of Mandy. Unlike the original novel, Mandy is constructed as a grotesque figure. I would argue it is her characterisation as a grotesque which is used in the text to undermine her right to happiness, unlike the other members of the group who each move one step closer to 'having it all' by the end of the text.

Mandy is posed as the only casualty of love in the end of the text. This could be read more ambivalently and that it was her loveless marriage to Pete that caused her unhappiness in the first instance and concomitantly that working within the codes of realism it would be implausible for all of the members of the group to 'have it all' by the end of the narrative. However the text is more damning of Mandy suggesting, I would argue, that it is incredulous to believe that Joe could be seriously interested in her compared to the conventionally attractive Susie. While there is pleasure in Mandy playing the fool by making a spectacle of herself on the wedding day by vomiting down the groom's wedding attire in the final scene, she is nonetheless reduced to the blubbing idiot in the end of the text.

If Mandy is narratively punished for her sexual transgression by being left on her own in the end of the text, the other two working-class members of the group, Susie and Jan, are safely reintegrated back within normative definitions of working-class femininity through their aspirations to be wives and mothers. By way of contrast with the working-class characters, I would argue that both Anna and Karen's sexual and moral transgressions (lesbianism and abortion) are downplayed in the text and are found more acceptable because of their middle-class status. Indeed, Karen's lesbianism fits rather well with her liberated bourgeois bohemian lifestyle, while Anna's decision to

have an abortion is recuperated by her re-integration into a romantic relationship with Callum. I doubt the text would have been so kind to Anna if she has been characterised as a working-class member of the group.

## Conclusions

To reiterate, the aim of this chapter has been to provide a detailed textual analysis of the second of the FEDs of the 1990s that I explore in these case study chapters: *Real Women*. The purpose of this analysis of *Real Women* has been to explore its life choices narrative and the constructions of female identity within the text.

While framing an analysis of *Real Women* as one which privileges a female homosocial bond, I have argued that this, similar to *Band of Gold* and its embodiment of a heterosocial dynamic, allows for an exploration of the experiences of more ‘ordinary’ and ‘everywoman’ types in the context of late modernity. More specifically I have argued that *Real Women* is distinct for the dramatic space it gives to exploring the shifts to *working-class* female identity that have occurred in the de-traditionalized context of late modernity.

However, while *Band of Gold* was concerned to explore femininities in the late modern period from a feminist perspective, conversely *Real Women* has explored ‘feminine’ identities from a postfeminist perspective. As such I have argued they have been bound up with two concerns of postfeminist texts: the status of marriage for the modern woman, and the notion of women ‘having it all’ in the de-traditionalized postfeminist period. I have argued that through the text’s embodiment of unruly and sexualised women it has problematised femininities both inside and outside of marriage, and discourses of ‘having it all’.

Nevertheless I have also argued that *Real Women*, as ‘quality’ postfeminist drama, has also re-traditionalized working-class women in relation to normative discourses of gender and class. I have argued that in attempting to reinstate a sense of community and belonging in the end of the text it has also reinstated marriage as *the* life choice for women as well as middle-class codes of respectability.

## Chapter Five

# Playing the Field

### Aims and objectives of Chapter Five

The aim of this chapter is to provide a detailed textual analysis of the constructions of working-class female identity in the last of the three FEDs of the 1990s that I explore in these case study chapters: *Playing the Field*. As I stated in chapters three and four, the central theme of analysis in each of these case study chapters concerns the way in which as specific examples of the FED they de- and re-traditionalize working-class women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with the traditional 'feminine'. As I also stated in chapters three and four, I will explore this concern in each case study with reference to three central characteristics of the FED of the 1990s: their post-familial family structure; their embodiment of 'life politics'; and their construction of postfeminist femininities. To also reiterate, while these concepts provide a theoretical and critical framework through which to approach each case study, as I also stated in chapters three and four, each case study will involve the analysis of these concepts in relation to its particular aesthetic and generic affiliations. In this analysis of *Playing the Field* I explore its embodiment of discourses of de- and re-traditionalization and these three characteristics with reference to its status, similar to *Real Women*, as a postfeminist soap drama. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how *Playing the Field* more so than *Real Women*, as postfeminist soap drama re-traditionalizes women in relation to the discourses and values associated with traditional soap opera.

Firstly I outline how *Playing the Field*, more so than *Real Women*, as postfeminist soap drama resembles traditional British soap opera through its construction of a northern matriarchal community. I explore for instance how the homosocial female bond that is privileged in *Playing the Field* is used not only, as in

other soap dramas, to reflect new forms of communities based on elective affinities, but rather does so to revive more traditional ideals of community linked to particular region and class belongings similarly to traditional British soap opera.

I go on to explore how, in focusing the text around a female rather than male football team, the text attempts to negotiate within this utopian construction of a matriarchal community contemporary de-traditionalized gendered identities; one which celebrates women's access to equal opportunities; their growing participation and acceptance in the public sphere in the context of the 1990s, and the dispersal of life choices available to them. In this way I contextualise *Playing the Field's* utopian celebration of empowered footballing heroines in relation to a particular variant of postfeminism that emerged in Britain in the 1990s - 'girl power'.

Shifting from exploring the text in relation to textual and social contexts, the main body of this analysis is concerned to explore how *Playing the Field's* postfeminist rhetoric of girl power allows more modern de-traditionalized femininities to be integrated within its construction of a matriarchal community.

In the first part of this analysis I explore how the text's embodiment of girl power and constructions of ladettes disturb notions of normative femininity. I explore how *Playing the Field* constructs a more sympathetic portrayal of working-class women than that of *Real Women* as a postfeminist text. In the second section of this analysis I go on to explore how the girl power logic of *Playing the Field* works to reaffirm the traditional 'feminine values' of soap opera and therefore re-traditionalizes women in normative 'feminine' positions and roles similar to traditional soap opera. That is, I explore how the embodiment of girl power within *Playing the Field* helps to reintegrate and make safe the personification of female energy in these texts by positioning them similarly to British soap opera.

### **Postfeminist soap drama**

*Playing the Field* was a six-part serial written by Kay Mellor and aired at 9pm on BBC1 during March and April 1998. Four subsequent series were produced between 1999 and 2002. As with *Band of Gold*, Mellor received some critical recognition with *Playing the*

*Field*, being nominated for Best Television Drama Series at the BAFTA's consecutively in 1999 and 2000.

The narrative of *Playing the Field* focuses on the members of an amateur woman's football team 'The Castlefield Blues' located in Sheffield, comprising team members Geraldine (Lorraine Ashbourne), Rita (Melanie Hill), Gaby (Saira Todd), Angie (Tracy Whitwell), Shazza (Marsha Thomason), Diane (Debra Stephenson), and sisters Theresa (Leslie Sharpe) and Jo (Jo McInnes).

Similarly to *Band of Gold*, the female homosocial bond that is privileged is one which sees a group of women take over a male space; this time the male football pitch. Like *Band of Gold*, the 'role reversal' narrative of *Playing the Field* privileges an exploration of a community of women that has previously been ignored. On this occasion Mellor was inspired by Pete Davies' (1997) book *I Lost my Heart to the Belles*, a novel which follows 'The Doncaster Belles' over a football season and the under-explored and undervalued world of women's football in Britain in the 1990s.

Like the novel from which it was inspired, the drama follows the ups and downs of the 'Castlefield Blues' over the course of the football season. Diverting from the novel, however, the text foregrounds the friendships between the female characters both off as well as on the pitch and marginalises the more political aspects of the women's game.<sup>81</sup>

In utilising the female ensemble format to create a 'matriarchal' community, one which privileges an exploration of the personal over the more overtly political aspects of the amateur woman's game and indeed one whose multi-narrative format interweaves and parallels the lives of female team members, *Playing the Field*, similar to Mellor's *Band of Gold*, relies on soap opera conventions through which to explore female identity. However, whereas in the case of *Band of Gold*, soap opera conventions were crossed and entwined with those of the crime genre, in *Playing the Field* I want to argue how, similar to *Real Women*, it more closely resembles the new form of hybrid drama - that of 'soap drama' (2004: 114).

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<sup>81</sup> Except for vandalism of the clubhouse and issues of sponsorship.



### Matriarchal community

Similarly to the soap dramas which Creeber discusses and my analysis of *Real Women, Playing the Field*, I want to argue, is centrally concerned with the issue of community. While I would argue that *Playing the Field*, similar to other soap dramas, attempts to reflect new forms of communities based on elective affinities I want to suggest that it does so through reviving more traditional ideals of community linked to particular region and class belongings as in traditional soap opera.

*In Playing the Field* it is the women's football team that brings a sense of community, not just to the women but to Castlefield; the women's football team (similar to the male football team in more traditional communities) is what gives the local community a sense of collective identity and belonging. In so doing, *Playing the Field* resembles traditional British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* by offering a utopian construction of a traditional northern working-class matriarchal community; one which has been found to have been eroded in the contemporary period by processes of de-traditionalization and individualization.

A brief overview of some of the characteristics of this finite serial drama confirms its resemblance to British soap opera and the construction of a matriarchal community therein. Firstly, and most obviously, is the centrality of its ensemble cast of female characters. As with the local community setting of British soap combined with the demands of the multi-narrative and multi-character serial, *Playing the Field* offers a wider range of 'women of different ages, class and personality types...with whom many members of their female audience can empathize' (Hobson 1982: 33). Secondly, the centring upon regionalised working-class female identities and their quick repartee and humour reflects more acutely *Playing the Field's* self-conscious engagement with social class and realism, similar to traditional British soap opera.

Moreover, as in traditional soap opera *Playing the Field* does not focus solely on the female homosocial bond between members of the woman's football team but also the women's personal 'life politics' in terms of their relationships with familial members

and their partners. In this way, *Playing the Field* also returns to the domestic melodramatic terrain of traditional British soap operas. It is interesting in this respect to note how the loose central narrative arc of the series around which the other storylines build is that of Theresa's story. This includes her impending marriage to Eddie and her attempt to engage in a new relationship with her daughter Jo who has, until this moment, been brought up, unknowingly, as her sister. Along with Theresa's narrative, the text interrelates the associative long-running narrative of Geraldine's affair with her brother-in-law, Rita's jealousy of her husband, and Shazza's broken home life.

Thematically then, *Playing the Field* occupies the same terrain of soaps and, more so than the other FEDs that I have discussed in chapters three and four, is also inclusive of male identities of that particular community. In this way I would argue that *Playing the Field* utilises the conventions of soap and resembles mixed ensemble dramas such as *Heartbeat* and *Where the Heart Is* (Meridian 1997-2006). However, more so than these texts, and more in keeping with the previous FEDs that I have explored, as viewers of *Playing the Field* we are aligned with the female characters or, as Geraghty terms it, we are 'down among the women' and where the drama 'not always, not continuously, but at key points, offer an understanding from the woman's viewpoint that affects the judgements that the viewer is invited to make' (1990: 47). Similarly to the constructions of the female homosocial bonds within traditional British soap opera, *Playing the Field* embodies that same sense of female solidarity: that women share common attitudes because of their positioning as women (1990: 48). Centrally then, like traditional soap opera, *Playing the Field* provides an opportunity to explore the personal and emotional 'life politics' of women within this community setting. Overall, I would argue that *Playing the Field* operates like soaps which 'enable their readers to imagine an ideal world in which values traditionally associated with women are given space and expression' (Geraghty 1991: 117).

Following on from this, in the analysis of *Playing the Field* that follows, I will explore how the female characters perform a similar function to those in soap operas such as *Coronation Street* where it is the women characters in this drama 'who embody the function of community' (Geraghty 1991: 122). On the one hand, I want to explore

how *Playing the Field* is nostalgic in its construction of a utopian, local, regional community similar to that which is offered up in soap operas such as *Coronation Street*. As I stated in chapter two, I am concerned with how this re-traditionalizes these female characters in relation to normative ‘feminine’ positions and in relation to normative ‘feminine’ discourses.

On the other hand, I also want to explore how, by focusing the text around a female rather than male football team, it attempts to negotiate within this utopian construction of a matriarchal community contemporary de-traditionalized gendered identities. Indeed, as I stated in the introduction to this chapter, I want to contextualise *Playing the Field*’s utopian celebration of empowered footballing heroines in relation to a particular variant of postfeminism that emerged in Britain - girl power.

### Girl power

I would argue that the text’s construction of footballing heroines is not simply, like the novel on which it was based, formed through either a desire to engage with the historically neglected area of women’s football or a desire to cash in on the World Cup fever of 1998. Rather I would argue that, similar to the slightly later film *Bend it Like Beckham* (Chadha 2002), *Playing the Field* embodies what Justine Ashby (2005) has coined in ‘Postfeminism in the British Frame’, the most potent and pervasive slogan of postfeminism in Britain in the 1990s – ‘girl power’ (2005: 128).

Girl power was associated most strongly in Britain as the ‘ideology’ of the girl band the Spice Girls with their arrival in 1996. The band’s ‘front woman’, Geri Halliwell, articulates girl power as being ‘like feminism, but you don’t have to burn your bra. And the message is you can do what you want – look the way you want – as long as you believe in yourself’ (Halliwell, In *Smash Hits* 11-24<sup>th</sup> Sept 1996:22 as quoted in Davies, 1996:163). The girl power of the Spice Girls was attributed to heralding the arrival of new forms of female solidarity and a new, assertive ‘feminine’ identity and popular feminism (Hollows 2000: 181). Davies (1999), Whelehan (2000) and Ashby (2005) recount, for instance, how the language of girl power promoted an ‘in your face’,

boisterous, aggressive attitude towards gender politics (Ashby *ibid*: 129), saying things such as ‘we can give feminism a kick up the arse’ (Whelehan 2000: 45).

If the focus on the female football team borrows from girl power’s sense of female solidarity based on friendship networks *Playing the Field* can also be seen to embody the more aggressive and boisterous attitude of a second, public femininity that emerged during this period of girl power, that of the ladette. ‘Ladettes’ was the term coined by the press to refer to a movement among young women and by popular female presenters of the period such as Denise van Outen, Zoe Ball and Sara Cox, and through television texts such as *The Girlie Show* (Rapido Television 1996-1997), they were defined as such by their aggressive behaviour that is more associated with male youth culture - being ‘outspoken’, ‘loudmouthed’ and excessive drinkers.

In order to contextualise the construction of the utopian matriarchal community within *Playing the Field*, one which attempts to negotiate de-traditionalized identities within its boundaries, I want to argue that *Playing the Field* embodies the themes of modernisation and renewal that were circulating more generally with the New Labour victory at the polls in 1997 (Ashby 2005: 128). As Ashby has argued, girl power has often dovetailed with and been inflected by the rhetoric of Prime Minister Tony Blair’s “New Britain” (*ibid*), both for example ‘being couched in a language of modernization and renewed self confidence and have often been understood as a repudiation of a stuffier, more politicised past’ (*ibid*). If New Labour renounced the stuffier politicised past of twenty years of Conservative government, then girl power also reflects the perceived ‘genderquake’ that had been reported to have taken place in the 1990s; that, which I explored in the introduction to this thesis, describes the socio-cultural moment in which women stepped beyond feminism, its goals of equality and choice achieved (Wolf 1994: 19). Indeed, the dovetailing of girl power and New Labour rhetoric as representing a new democratic Britain, based on the principles of modernisation and renewal, can account for the optimistic tone of *Playing the Field*, represented in the Technicolor opening credit sequence that I will explore below.

The opening credit sequence of *Playing the Field* [Fig 27] is useful to give a general flavour of the way in which the themes of modernisation and renewal are

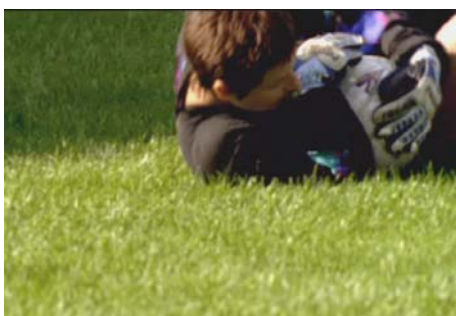








Figure 27: The opening credit sequence of *Playing the Field*

embodied by the text's particular constructions of female identities and community. It is also useful to explore to give a sense of the way in which this modernised community both confirms and disturbs the feminine-aligned utopian ideals of British soap opera that I explore in more detail later in this chapter.

Indeed, the sense of modernisation and renewal is played out in the opening credit sequence of *Playing the Field* through its reinvention of the social realist drama in its use of more contemporary postmodern codes. Here, the heightened use of colour and faster narrative tempo of the succession of images present us, the viewers, with a dynamic and optimistic vision of Britain in late modernity that contrasts strongly with the noirish and dangerous landscape constructed only three years previously in Mellor's *Band of Gold*.

Whilst the kick of the football in the beginning of the credit sequence reinforces the sense of dynamism associated with the contemporary period embedded within this montage of images surrounding football, it is also a celebration of the markers of traditional working-class cultural life. Here the 'retro' style vintage football strips, the shots of the characters (female and male) in the pub enjoying a pint or two, as well the club's sponsor in a sheepskin coat with his wife standing beside his Jaguar, are all evocative of a certain traditional and classed way of life of an earlier period. However, the nostalgic appeal of *Playing the Field* also embodies a sense of the contemporary zeitgeist in which the markers of traditional working-class culture have become 'trendy' again through figures such as the ladette but also the 'new lad'<sup>82</sup>, and discourses of 'Cool Britannia.'<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Rosalind Gill defines the 'new lad' as being 'hedonistic, post-(if not anti) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football and 'shagging' women. His outlook on life could be characterized as anti-aspirational, and owes a lot to a particular classed articulation of masculinity' (2003: 6).

<sup>83</sup> Indeed if the 1980s under the Conservative government were structured in terms of enterprise and heritage then the modernisation and renewal rhetoric of the late 1990s involved the appreciation of a more popular British cultural heritage – signified by that of 'Cool Britannia'. While Cool Britannia was personified by New Labour's alliance with popular musical heroes in the late 1990s such as Blur, Oasis and The Spice Girls, the discourse of Cool Britannia, can be perceived to inform *Playing the Field* with its popular appreciation of football.



However, whilst nostalgia for this community is evoked through this laddish imagery, the focus upon female characters inserted into positions we have come to expect males to occupy, I would argue, transfigures as well as bridges the gap between old and contemporary senses of imagined working-class culture. The feeling of suspense in which the players are 'revealed' to be female, as they pose for the team photograph (the camera swooping in from behind before we are offered a frontal shot of the group) makes clear they are like every other traditional male football team but are modernised by the fact that they are women. The familiar proud stance of the women for the team's photograph gives a permanency to their position on the field and appears to give a nod to the longer history of women's participation in the sport. Once more, the brightness of colour signifies the positivity of this team which keeps the community spirit of Castlefield alive. I would argue that contemporary time, space and place are all linked by the football team in the image of the pitch which bears a sign of home.

If these utopian images provide a sense of the text's more general embodiment of discourses of modernisation and renewal then its embodiment of further postmodern social-realist codes bear testament to the 'new Britain' that is also constructed in the text.

The montage of images of the female characters playing football with those inter-cut with them off the pitch across public and private spaces (as police women, as factory workers, with their partners, on a girls' night out on the town) and emotional situations, I would argue, stress the dispersal of working-class female identities and the multi-faceted nature of women's identities in the contemporary period. While these images also register shifts in terms of the dispersal of social economic positions of the working-classes in this period, the inclusion of Shazza the black woman of the group, also marks shifts in terms of the 'ethnicity' of the working-class community. This is significant, I would argue, given not only the marginalisation of non-white femininities on television, but also given that it is both working-class and concomitantly footballing culture that is associated with racial hostility and indeed national extremism.

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However, the opening credit sequence also exemplifies the way in which the drama provides a contemporary exploration of soap opera's 'feminine' inflected values of transparency and intensity within the text. Here, the theme tune sung by Alison Moyet, which includes lyrics about women 'going all the way' on the football pitch, in an emotional and earnest way, represents the intensity of emotion within the text. Similarly, embedded in the quick succession of images of the opening credits is also a transparency and sincerity of emotions: happiness/sadness/love.

Having explored how *Playing the Field* embodies discourses of modernisation and renewal in and through the opening credit sequence, I have illustrated how it also places new postfeminist femininities within its construction of a matriarchal community without contradiction in the text. This is a significant point, given that the new footballing heroines disturb how female energy is personified in traditional soap opera. As I explored in chapter two the personification of energy in traditional soap opera is expressed through strong female characters and, like those in *Playing the Field*, their energy is marked by their upholding of communal values. However, whereas women in traditional soap opera uphold these communal values as maternal figures who act as moral and practical supports to their families, the personification of female energy and thus the upholding of communal values in *Playing the Field* is one which sees the women move outside of maternal roles and take up positions and spaces more traditionally associated with men in soap opera: the football pitch. Indeed, it is not only the male spaces that the female characters take over but through their characterisation as ladettes, the female characters also embody traits associated with male youth culture.

The remainder of this analysis of *Playing the Field* is one which is concerned to explore how the text negotiates these more assertive public femininities within its matriarchal community. To reiterate, in the following analysis I want to explore in more detail how its postfeminist rhetoric, that of girl power, involves a negotiation of the tradition communal values of soap opera and more modern de-traditionalized femininities to be presented without contradiction in the text. I will firstly explore how the text's embodiment of girl power and constructions of ladettes disturb notions of normative femininity which allow for a more sympathetic portrayal of working-class

women than that of *Real Women* as a postfeminist text. I will then go on to explore how it reaffirms the traditional 'feminine values' of soap opera and renews and therefore re-traditionalizes women within normative 'feminine' positions and roles similar to traditional soap opera. I will therefore illustrate how the embodiment of girl power within *Playing the Field* helps to reintegrate and make safe the personification of female energy with these texts, by positioning them similarly to British soap opera.

### **Girl power and the de-traditionalization of gender**

The opening scenes of *Playing the Field* reiterate its focus on the terrain of the traditional soap opera, that of traditional familial life and the centrality of home and community. *Playing the Field* demonstrates its affiliations to the familial melodrama of soap opera in its privileging of the Mullens' familial home as the centre of the community (and around which much of the drama of *Playing the Field* pivots). In contrast to the dour construction of Gina's home as one signifying a decaying working-class community in *Band of Gold*, *Playing the Field*'s opening on the Mullens' familial home in is one which reinstates a sense of dignity and affection for the working-class familial home. The establishing long shot of the familial home, one bathed in sunlight centres on the dignity of the small 'ordinary' man, in this case Jimmy Mullen who is hanging balloons outside of his home as a symbol of the happy event, that of his eldest daughter's wedding, that is to take place that day [Fig 28]. The image of the serene, happy family is one also marked by the big emotional gestures: Jo, the youngest of the Mullens' children rushing out to kiss her father on her way for her morning run and from within the familial home Theresa fondly running a finger down her white wedding dress.

Indeed, these first images convey the compatible focus of the text, both its staging of a domestic melodrama of home and community life, but also as a postfeminist drama whose narrative questions, as Brunson has suggested, are bound up with the status of marriage for the modern woman. The marriage plot of *Playing the Field*, I would argue, is used to question the status of marriage, and by extension the familial values that underpin this community by paralleling Theresa's experience with that of the other women in that community. Similarly to *Real Women*, the marriage plot in this way



**Figure 28: The Mullen's (idyllic) family home**

is used to explore the wider themes of female destiny, experience and ‘life politics’ in relation to the postfeminist discourse of ‘having it all’ within this de-traditionalized context.

If traditional soap opera has been celebrated by feminist critics for offering a space for considering female experience predominantly in traditional and pre-feminist roles as wives and mothers, then *Playing the Field* can be perceived to extend soap opera’s focus on female experience to consider the life choices and ‘life politics’ of more contemporary, de-traditionalized post-feminist femininities. Here, the ensemble format of *Playing the Field*, similar to the ensemble format of the Spice Girls, is utilised to pluralise and explore these differing femininities. Just as the Spice Girls’ distinctive individual identities (captured succinctly by their popular media nicknames as Ginger, Sporty, Scary, Posh and Baby Spice) personified the perceived dispersal of female identity under the rhetoric of choice and individualism in the late modern period, similarly *Playing the Field* embodies the ‘you can be whoever you wanna be as long as you believe in yourself’ rhetoric in its positing of a range of femininities across its cast of female characters: the black girl (Shazza), the lesbian (Angie), the married businesswoman (Geraldine), the promiscuous singleton (Gaby), the sportswoman (Jo), the mature student (Rita), the bride (Theresa) [Fig 29].

Indeed, unlike the Spice Girls’ embodiment of girl power which flattens out difference and suggests that women, irrespective of class, race, etc can ‘have it all’, *Playing the Field* does explore the different females’ relationship to ‘having it all’ in terms of their specific positionalities in respect of gender, class and race but particularly generation. The two sisters that we are initially introduced to, Jo and Theresa, represent the two generations of women whose ‘life politics’ the texts explores. Theresa’s status in the beginning of the episode represents the other women of her thirty-something generation – those for whom marriage was the norm. As well as Theresa’s impending marriage to Eddie, which as I have suggested provides the loose central narrative arc of the text, this is paralleled with the experiences of Rita and Geraldine who have already



**Figure 29: Girl power**



**Figure 30: From ladies to ladettes**

been married and, in Rita's case, had children. Jo, conversely, is representative of the more youthful twenty-something members of the community, including Gaby, Angie and Shazza, whose identities embody more clearly girl power through their dispersal of 'feminine' identities across racial and sexual lines.

Through the narratives concerning the thirty-something women we explore the status of marriage through their proximity to it, conversely we explore the status of marriage for the twenty-something generation precisely by their distance from it. Although Theresa may be the Cinderella of the narrative, awaiting her big day as marking her path towards independence and maturity, this path is no longer presented as the only option for women. The shoe to accompany Shazza's bridesmaid's outfit for Theresa's wedding doesn't fit her. Instead, her feet are more akin to the Timberland boots she usually wears. Gaby, too, happily recites the fact that she doesn't want to get married. Rather she epitomises the liberated new woman, one who take pleasure in promiscuity as well as her policing career. Her affair with Angie, the lesbian of the group, conceptualises modern contemporary femininities as sexually fluid. While in this way the text's embodiment of girl power works to pluralise and de-naturalise women in relation to normative femininity and 'having it all', I would argue its characterisation of working-class laddettes similarly works to problematise these women in relation to normative femininity.

### From ladies to ladettes

Girl power as embodied by the Spice Girls can also be seen to manifest itself in *Playing the Field* in the way it concentrates on and celebrates 'ordinary' women. In so doing, *Playing the Field* like the girl power of the Spice Girls celebrates the new freedoms available to 'ordinary' women, and their participation in the public sphere. This is a significant point given, as I have explored in chapters one and two, British television drama has tended to explore these issues in relation to the high-flying career woman of the 'professional woman drama'.

Ordinariness of female characters within *Playing the Field*, like soap, is then coded as working-class female characters. On the one hand the characterisation of female working-class characters as laddettes could be perceived as simply replicating the symbolic violence cast on working-class women historically. As I discussed in chapter two, working-class women have been historically defined in opposition to femininity. Therefore their physical antics on the football pitch could be perceived to perpetuate existing ways of defining working-class women in relation to their physical presence and ability to labour; their robustness and thus their distance from 'respectable' middle-class discourses of femininity. It is also the working-class which have been at the centre of panics around health, family values and binge drinking similar to that of laddettes (Jackson and Tinker 2005). However, as the opening credit sequence exemplified, the text celebrates these boisterous, northern working-class femininities. Therefore rather than the portrayal of working-class women as laddettes being a negative aspect of this drama, the performance of laddettism by the female characters allows for an exploration of working-class women's identity and their relationship to conventional femininity.

The 'unfit' between conventional femininity and the women in *Playing the Field* is made explicit in the scenes in which Theresa's team-mates, positioned as bridesmaids, help Theresa to get ready on the morning of her wedding. As Skeggs has argued, a central trope of femininity, and by extension respectability, is conduct and appearance: 'appearance became the signifier of conduct; to look was to be' (1997: 100). However, the text makes explicit the unfit between the appearance of these women in traditional wedding attire and their everyday conduct. Whilst the team colours of the bridesmaids' dresses reinstate these women as footballers first, the discomfort with which these dresses are worn by Theresa's team-mates is summed up by Rita: 'I look like a dickhead'. Here the broad Yorkshire accents and language further work to differentiate these women from the expected codes of respectable conduct and propriety. Similar to *Band of Gold's* deconstruction of femininity as performance, the scenes in which the bridesmaids help Theresa get ready for the wedding by helping her to do her hair and make-up serve to highlight the laborious process for 'ordinary' women like Theresa to construct a 'feminine' image. Although Theresa may achieve the appearance of



respectable femininity by the end of the getting ready/transformation process, the coarseness of language and general unruly context in which it is produced further acts to undermine dominant 'respectable' discourses of femininity. The final disregard for 'feminine' conduct appears as the bridesmaids leave for the church in the back of the football team's van, singing football songs [Fig 30].

However, if the discourse of girl power informs *Playing the Field's* construction of community based on notions of female solidarity, empowerment and plural sense of female identity, which in turn disturbs naturalised discourses of femininity, the text's embodiment of girl power can also be said to limit the more overt political potential of this construction of female friendship and indeed reconcile women's relationship to roles within traditional soap opera. I will explore this in the next section.

### **Girl power and the re-traditionalization of gender**

Key to this discussion is the way in which *Playing the Field's* embodiment of girl power is one which is a post (second wave) feminist rather than feminist construction of female collectivity and sisterhood. Judith Stacey (1987) in 'Sexism by a Subtler Name?' has defined postfeminism as 'the simultaneous incorporation, revision and depoliticization of many of the central goals of second-wave feminism' (1987: 8). In this instance, the term 'girl power' itself acts as evidence of this simultaneous evocation and disavowal of feminism where it both signals second wave feminism's appeal to women's strength and solidarity but diffuses this power by terming it as 'girl' power, infantilising it and thus rendering the discourse safe. In its embodiment of girl power, *Playing the Field's* construction of female collectivity is one which limits/diffuses the subversive potential of the group of unconventional femininities by embodying girl power's particular variety of (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism. I have explored this in chapter two as emerging in the 1990s, where this strand of postfeminism defined itself against the perceived anti-sex attitude of second wave feminism (Projansky 2001: 67) by offering itself as a current, more positive, alternative (ibid). Whilst it rejects feminism as being anti-sex, it does embrace a feminism that is focused on individualism and independence, in this case extending postfeminism's choiceoisie rhetoric to include women's choice to engage in

heterosexually attractive bodily behaviour (ibid: 79). This particular brand of postfeminism informs *Playing the Field*, as I have suggested earlier in this chapter, where it is the female football team which provides the focus of the drama but where this is used not only (or indeed primarily) to explore new forms of friendship and camaraderie between women within the public sphere, but where it provides a new twist on soap's established formula. In this way, it situates women back into the local context of community and home through an exploration of the personal and private lives of members of that community, including the relationship between the individual women and their predominantly heterosexual partners.

Centrally I argue that the women's embodiment of girl power similar to that of the Spice Girls, enables them to fit with the communal values of traditional soap opera. Indeed, I would contend that while the text questions the status of marriage for contemporary women, it is bound up with reaffirming the status of familial values that underpin this traditional community (and also that of traditional soap opera). This can be seen in the way the text privileges the narratives of the thirty-something generation in the text and the familial maternal melodramas of the twenty-somethings, Jo and Shazza.

### From ladettes to ladies

Drawing on Mulvey's analysis of 1950s familial melodrama, Geraghty has argued that British soap opera, like the filmic melodramas, works as a safety valve, 'an outlet for the inevitable contradiction and inconsistencies which are created by the role of the family in bourgeois society' (Geraghty 1991: 61). Rather than ideological contradiction being a hidden or subversive counter-current waiting to be unearthed by the cultural critics as in previous appraisals of 1950s melodramas, Mulvey argued that 'ideological contradiction is the overt mainstream and specific content of melodrama' (Mulvey 1987: 75):

No ideology can even pretend to totality; it must provide an outlet for its own inconsistencies. This is the function of 50s melodrama. It works by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; its excitement comes from conflict not between enemies, but between people tied by blood and love.

(1987: 75)

Firstly, then, I want to explore how the central narrative of this soap drama concerning Theresa is used as the central narrative vehicle to problematise but ultimately to reinstate the familial values similar to traditional soap opera and women in traditional matriarchal positions.

As I have already argued, *Playing the Field* demonstrates its affiliation to the familial melodrama of soap opera in its privileging of the Mullens' family home as the centre of the community. It is the iconic familial home of soap opera, the archetypal haven in a heartless world, a place of security and safety, and one which is bursting at the seams with the number of family members. It is within the walls of this familial home that the different familial values of two of its generation are played out; that between Theresa and her mother, the overarching 'soap' matriarch, Mary. Theresa's impending marriage to Eddie is one which is centrally bound up with her taking flight from the familial home and her independence from her mother's way of doing and being. 'Having it all' for Theresa involves marriage to Eddie but crucially involves her independence from the familial home and to have the choice to tell Jo that she is in fact her mother rather than her sister.

Indeed, there are visual indications of things not being totally as they appear in the Mullen household in the beginning of the text. Theresa's embrace of Jo on the morning of her wedding is weighted with significance, marked by the lingering camera on her reaction to their embrace [Fig 31] as well as Mary Mullen's characterisation as agraphobic; her fear of leaving the familial home marking her oppressive ruling of it.

If the wedding does not go according to plan - Theresa jilted by Eddie at the altar - this plot device enables the text to work towards Theresa's goal of 'having it all', becoming independent from her mother, living her life according to her own values, signified by 'living in sin' with Eddie but crucially telling Jo the familial secret. If it is the difference in generational beliefs and values that cause tension within the Mullens' idyllic familial home, these are given a further contemporaneous and significance by working through a social-realist aesthetic. In this instance Theresa has had to repress having become a teenage mother in the 1970s to be able to protect her family's and her



**Figure 31: Theresa and Jo's embrace**



**Figure 32: Mary the matriarch**

own honour. Theresa's story therefore may evolve around the moral drama of melodrama, but it is one in which the terms of the moral drama; where to apportion 'responsibility, guilt and innocence' (Gledhill 1988: 76) is specific to the context of the 1990s. So rather than guilt being cast on the figure of transgressive woman who is thus punished accordingly, as in earlier historical cycles of the maternal melodrama, Theresa is positioned as the victim of socio-historical context and her family's Catholic values which have forced her to give up her baby for adoption.

How each of the characters are positioned by their Catholicism is playfully signified by their names: Mother Mary, playing on the sense of the immaculate conception, and Jo as the gift from God. Theresa could be interpreted as Mother Theresa, particularly through her characterisation of taking the pain of seeing her daughter daily without complaining of being denied the right to be her mother. Mary's sons (Theresa's brothers), Mathew and Luke are like their namesakes, but are Mary's, rather than Jesus's disciples: submissive and even dependent upon her orders. The father, Jimmy Mullen, is the opposite of the fearsome Saint James and completely submissive to his wife's beliefs and wishes. Ironically, it is the claustrophobic confines of the familial home in which no member of the family can attain any level of privacy which hides the family secret. It is a small tin box (Pandora's box), one that remains locked and for which Mary holds the key that contains Jo's birth certificate and the truth of her parentage.

A confrontation between Mary and Theresa at the aftermath of the 'wedding' (episode one) illustrates the overbearing nature of Mary. Once more Mary is more concerned with the image of the family and particularly how Eddie has upset her, rather than Theresa: 'I've never felt so shown up in all my life. It's a disgrace. He's shamed the whole family. When I think what I've done for that boy. I've cooked for him. I've treated him like my own son....' (episode one). Crucially Theresa takes a crucial leap towards standing on her own two feet when her brothers locate Eddie and bring them to their family. Here Theresa chooses to show her independence from her mother:

Mary: (to Eddie) You've brought shame on the home family  
Theresa: Will you shut up mum  
Mary: Well, that's a lovely thing to say to your mother. Did you hear that?  
Theresa: (to brothers holding Eddie by each arm): Will you let go of him? Me and Eddie 's going to have a talk  
Mary: Oh no you're not. Jimmy Mullen are you going to stand there looking gormless? Come on Theresa, you're coming home with me.  
Theresa: No I'm not. This's got nowt to do with you mam – it's between us.

If this first confrontational scene exemplifies Theresa making an independent decision, free of her mother's interference regarding her relationship with Eddie, a second confrontational scene regarding Jo's parentage arises in episode two when Theresa and Eddie return from 'honeymoon'. They are summoned to Mary's bedroom, Mary having taken ill because they have gone away together even though they were not married. If Mary attempts to disgrace Theresa once more for the trouble she continually brings to the family, this has the opposite effect on Theresa. Theresa finally confronts her mother with how she has felt about having to let Jo pass as her mother's child. Similarly, while Mary is shown in extreme close-up, exaggerating her overbearing nature, the medium close-up of Theresa's exchanges makes her small in stature in comparison to her mother, but which allows us distance from which to observe Theresa. As Theresa's emotions grow, the camera moves closer to her, emphasising the expression of her emotions to her mother and inviting a more subjective identification with Theresa's point of view.

The decentered mode of address, I would argue, allows us, as viewers, to see both points of view without casting blame on either character. Nevertheless, the soap values of transparency here, played through the earnest expression of emotions, also allows us, the viewers, to see the way Mary's point of view has dominated and been supported by that of her husband and sons as we watch from Theresa's point of view as they attempt to console her at her bedside [Fig 32].

The narrative surrounding the Mullen women, then, explores the personal consequences and emotionally damaging effects of giving up a baby through teenage pregnancy in order to promote the family as moral and respectable. Significantly, Mary Mullen's characterisation, as in the above exchanges, whilst showing how it allows her to domineer her family also illustrates how she was only attempting to do what she

thought was right for Theresa and Jo. Moreover, observing the mother's rants moves us, the viewers, from understanding of her to humorous observation of her behaviour. In both confrontational scenes, her rants and her bedridden status are made all the more humorous because they parody the domineering matriarchal figure of soap opera and the British new wave films.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, she is made humorous because she is personified as bearing outdated moral values of a bygone era.

If Theresa's suffering because she has transgressed codes of respectability that guide the nuclear family is critiqued by the text, it deflects culpability of patriarchy in her fate through laying the 'blame' on the matriarchal figure as head of the family: Mary Mullen as its moral centre (even if here she is a patriarchal moral symbol). As Geraghty has pointed out, 'The representation of the family in British soaps does not challenge patriarchal authority but bypasses it, handing emotional and practical control over to the mother' (1991: 83). It is significant in this respect that it is the patriarch of the family, Jimmy, who suffers a heart attack when Theresa discloses her secret to Jo. Similarly it is over his hospital bed that familial harmony is re-established. Jimmy Mullen may remain silent, not interfering with his wife's handling of the situation, but he does reinstate his leadership of his family by his sickness and steer them back onto the path of harmony.

If Theresa's decision to tell Jo disrupts the harmony of the Mullen family over the course of the series, then the three generations adjust to a new equilibrium by the end of the text. The final scenes of the text return to the wedding scenario of episode one. This time however the wedding that does take place does so in light of the transformations that have occurred during the course of the narrative. Eddie confirming his commitment to Theresa by organising the surprise service and, crucially, Jo reconciling her relationship with Theresa. Jo tells Theresa: 'I can't call your mum because I've had a lifetime of calling you our Theresa. But I couldn't love you anymore than I already do' (episode six). If the scene parallels their first exchange of loving sentiments on the morning of Theresa's first attempt at marriage to Eddie, the repetition

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<sup>84</sup> Such as Ingrid's (June Rothwell) mother Mrs Rothwell (Thora Hird) in *A Kind of Loving* (Schlesinger, 1962).

of this scene in the end of the text is one which marks the transfigured relationship of the two women as one where they can both exchange loving sentiments knowing their 'true' identity.

Indeed, Theresa's decision to tell Jo reaffirms the patriarchal family values that underpin British soap opera and returns her to position of moral and practical support within her own family, as well as reinstating women as caring and maternal figures. Theresa, may, like the daughters in traditional soap opera, follow in her mother's footsteps as a matriarchal figure but her journey towards independence is made in a postfeminist context; one in which she attempts to negotiate the more domineering and overbearing matriarchal figure of British soap opera, who does not fit with the more individualist, liberal rhetoric of the de-traditionalized postfeminist era. Theresa, then, as a matriarchal figure, is one who embodies the more liberal rhetoric of the late modern period but one who crucially believes in a renewal of family values.

#### The reinstatement of marriage as *the* life choice for women

If familial values and the status of marriage for contemporary women is confirmed by Theresa, then similarly through exploring the experience of married life of the other two women of Theresa's generation - Geraldine and Rita - *Playing the Field* problematises marriage before reinstating it in the text. In each case, exploring the dynamics of their marital relationship, the narratives of *Playing the Field* return to the terrain of the family/domestic melodrama. The tensions caused in their relationships are constructed as one in which these women want to 'have it all'.

Unlike the majority of the other female characters Geraldine is marked by appearing to 'have it all' - husband, career, financial success - marked through the detached house she owns with her husband Dave and the large Jeep she drives to the inherited family car dealership business. We learn, however, that for her 'having it all', running a business and being a wife are not easy bedfellows and her social mobility as a result of taking over her father's business has caused Dave to feel emasculated. As the confrontational speech (from episode five) between them illustrates:



Geraldine: You've always resented me running me dads garage, haven't ya?  
 Dave: I resent how you've changed since you took it on  
 Geraldine: Right. How have I changed? C'mon then, tell me?  
 Dave: You've never got time, for, for anyone. All you think about is your franchise or your yearly figures.  
 Geraldine: Bollocks!  
 Dave: When you worked at Hepworth's, you used to come home and that was it. We would go up the pub, have a Chinese, we... we'd have a laugh. Now it's all work and football. I'm third on list  
 Geraldine: I know what it feels like. I was third on the list when you had the shop and played golf every weekend but did you ever hear me go on about it? The bottom line is Dave, you don't like the idea of me earning more money than you do.

Here through being aligned with Geraldine the text makes explicit the double standard that is apparent in their relationship and, indeed, the shift in power relations that has accompanied her position of economic authority.

Geraldine's storyline is interwoven with that of Rita's who feels her career ambitions have been subordinated to her second husband's desires: 'All I've got is a piddling part time nursing job. I could have been physio by now... When I met you I'd done the marriage and baby bit. I didn't want to go through it all again but I did it because I knew it was what you wanted.' (episode two). As with Geraldine, we see a gap open up between women's desire for a career and that of the perceived duties of wife and mother within the domestic sphere. The narrative involving Geraldine, however, is particular interesting because it engages with the 'life politics' of the independent career woman, the figure that has come into being with shifts in women's social positioning in the late modern period and the figure that could not easily be accommodated into soap opera. As Geraghty has argued, although this figure on the one hand could be perceived as extending soap's long tradition of dominant, strong-minded, tough women 'who could hold their own with any of the men', on the other hand, they also 'challenged the basis of home and community which had provided the female characters in soaps with their strength' (1991: 135). As I have explored in chapter two, Geraghty has argued that the independent career woman was distinct because she operated in the public sphere and was marked by economic self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment (including sexual fulfilment) rather than defined by her role within the personal sphere. As Dave's declarations make clear, Geraldine's privileging of business

and hobbies align her with the latter category, as taking over the breadwinner role. Geraldine's characterisation and way of dealing with her husband's rejection of her new-found economic independence in the form of an affair with his brother, Rick, reinforces the construction of the independent career woman as both economically and sexually assertive.

The decentred mode of address of the text allows us, the viewer, to see from both Geraldine and Dave's point of view regarding their marital difficulties and Geraldine's affair. It is Geraldine, for instance, who comes across unsympathetically in their first scene in bed together by taking on the masculine role and being unsympathetic to Dave's feelings [Fig 33]. However, over the course of the series we largely follow Geraldine's experience of her marital troubles and the narrative, as in above dialogue with Dave, endorses the female point of view.

However, if Geraldine is not narratively punished for her infidelity when Dave stands by her on finding out about the affair (symbolically re-asserting his masculinity by 'penetrating' the window of her car showroom with his taxi cab), she is negotiated back into a more 'feminine' position by becoming a mother (albeit a working mother). However, if in the end of the text the couple live more like the image they produce – a modern couple whose roles have almost been reversed due to process of de-traditionalization and shifts in women's social position with Dave remaining in the more 'feminised' role within the relationship and becoming a modern stay-at-home dad; it is still not quite a 'happy ending' for the couple. In some sense, Geraldine's punishment for having the affair with Dave's brother is played out across all four remaining series of the text where the issue of the paternity of their child, George, as either Dave's or Rick's is never quite resolved.

### The marginalisation of 'alternative' lifestyles

If Geraldine and Rita's stories explore the experience of marriage, it is Angie and Gaby's lesbian relationship which poses the only 'real' challenge to the conventional familial values underpinned by heterosexuality and marriage. If their laddish characterisation makes them less 'feminine' women generally, Angie, the only self-



**Figure 33: Geraldine with (above) Rick and (below) Dave**

confessed gay character is characterised as a femme lesbian, complete with girly hairslides and coiffured hair, whereby she is able to pass as 'feminine' if she so chooses:

Postman: There's an airmail as well  
Angie: Ah cheers  
Postman: Boyfriend?  
Angie: Ex lover  
Postman: Oh he dumped you then  
Angie: No, she did  
[She shuts door]

Angie's characterisation as a femme is ambivalent. On the one hand it makes lesbianism appear threatening but it nevertheless dispels the presumed heterosexuality of women. Similarly, if Angie's lesbianism marks her difference from the other women, the text illustrates her alliance with heterosexual women through the similar range of emotions they experience in romantic relationships.

If Angie is confident in her lesbian sexuality, the shift from intimate friendship to sexual partnership is more of a divergence for the promiscuous heterosexual singleton, Gaby. Her lesbian relationship with Angie personifies the new sexual fluidity of contemporary gendered identities and challenges the assumption that penetrative sex is the most fulfilling for women where it is within her lesbian fling with Angie that Gaby experiences her first orgasm [Fig 34].

Nevertheless the text's characterisation of these two lesbian figures is ambivalent. For instance, it is interesting that, as in *Real Women*, both of these characters are coded as being lower middle-class. If their class belonging diffuses the more threatening nature of their alternative lifestyle, the characterisation of the relationship as one of sexual experimentation for Gaby in line with her characterisation as independent, sexually assertive career woman also limits the significance of lesbianism within the text. It is one where its challenge to heterosexuality is limited due to the minimal lifespan of the storyline, one whose visibility is lower down the narrative hierarchy which works to marginalise the 'life politics' of lesbianism further.



**Figure 34: Angie and Gaby 'having it all'**



**Figure 35: Shazza having nothing at all**

If lesbian identity is acknowledged and marginalised in the text, it too is accommodated into familial/communal values of the text through the positioning of Angie and Gaby as caring matriarchs. Along with their team-mates they help to integrate Shazza, the only black female character of the group into the bosom of their community.

#### A more inclusive community ?

Problematically, the text's accommodation of Shazza into the community comes from her position as victim/social problem. If the other women of the text are positioned in relation to 'having it all' - family career, sex – Shazza, by way of contrast is positioned in relation to having nothing at all. Indeed, I would argue that it is through carrying the burden of representation that the text reinscribes stereotypical attributes of blackness onto the character of Shazza. As Brunsdon notes, black women are personified either as the black lady (over-achiever) or welfare queens (1997: 47) in mainstream texts. It is the latter narrative that is constructed for Shazza's character who embodies the signifiers of underclass: coming from a 'broken' family home, excessively drinking and taking drugs. If Theresa's problems have arisen because of her overpowering (over-caring) matriarch, then similarly Shazza's problems are attributed to her despondent 'white trash' mother. Similarly Shazza's relationship with her mother is explored in a tragicomic way which parallels Theresa's relationship with her mother.

Significantly, it is her team-mates who come to Shazza's rescue when they realise her desperation due to her lack of family on her birthday. In a sensational storyline, the team-mates have to beat the clock to locate Shazza in the middle of Sheffield and prevent her from jumping off a multi-story car park [Fig 35]. Here, Gaby's policing skills and the women's fitness are utilised as they race up the stairs to save Shazza. Managing to reach her in time, the team-mates give her a sense of belonging and love, throwing her a birthday party. If it is their savvy and quick thinking that initially saves her, then it is their care and support that sustain her. Not surprisingly,

Shazza's permanent residence within the community becomes at the Mullen's family home.

Similarly to *Band of Gold*, *Playing the Field* evolves around a double narrative structure: exploring the 'life politics' of the women, and also their progression to the final of the women's FA Cup championship. However, whilst the footballing narrative, similar to the conventional crime narrative strand of *Band of Gold*, provides dramatic intensity to the narrative, it is in this case the wedding of Theresa and Eddie which provides dramatic climax and closure to the text [Fig 36]. Indeed, the women's loss in the FA cup final is marginalised in comparison to the way in which they are constructed as 'winning' in terms of their personal relationship with one another within their local community. In this way, I would argue the wedding which provides the finale to the first series reaffirms the familial values of *Playing the Field* and the utopian image of community that is constructed within it, one which is not undermined by Dave and Rick fighting in the end of the text. This scuffle, I would argue, does not undermine these familial values but rather, like soap opera, illustrates that while such values are never completely confirmed or settled by such texts, they do provide the material for the further and ongoing working through of such 'life politics' and ideological contradictions in subsequent series of soap drama.

## Conclusions

To reiterate, the aim of this chapter has been to provide a detailed textual analysis of *Playing the Field*. The purpose of this analysis has been to explore how *Playing the Field* as postfeminist soap drama re-traditionalizes women in relation to the discourses and values associated with traditional soap opera.

I have fulfilled the aim of this chapter by illustrating how, in *Playing the Field*, the female homosocial bond of the female football team is utilised to construct a matriarchal community similar to that of soap opera. Similar to soap opera, then, I have explored how, in privileging the bonds between women and female points of view, *Playing the Field* as soap drama is significant in terms of the space it gives to exploring postfeminist femininities and experiences within this period. Moreover, as with both



Figure 36: Marriage as *the* life choice for women



*Band of Gold* and *Real Women*, it is through utilising the multi-character and multi-narrative forms of serial drama that it deconstructs normative definitions of femininity and explores a plurality of femininities within this period, including the status of marriage for the modern woman. More so than *Real Women*, however, I have argued that similarly to Mellor's *Band of Gold*, *Playing the Field* is more sympathetic and enabling for the constructions of working-class femininities. In this instance, rather than the characterisations of ladettes, similar to *Band of Gold's* constructions of working-class women as prostitutes, perpetuating further symbolic violence on working-class femininities by reinforcing existing ways of constructing and seeing them it rather offers the opportunity to take pleasure in and through the constructions of unconventional femininities that have been marginalised on television. Indeed, while the majority of this analysis has been focused on the way in which the text re-traditionalizes working-class women in relation to normative discourses of femininity through reinstating marriage as *the* life choice for women and discourses of caring, it nevertheless provides a dramatic space through which to take pleasure from the construction of more unconventional femininities (in terms of their adventures across the private and public sphere and both on and off the football pitch). Like soap opera as domestic melodrama, the pleasure in *Playing the Field*, I would argue, arises from viewing how much 'dust the story raises along the way' before ideological and narrative closure is affirmed in the end of the text.

However, this analysis of *Playing the Field*, similar to *Real Women*, has also illustrated how its embodiment of discourses of postfeminism chiefly reconciles contemporary and de-traditionalized femininities with normative and traditional conceptions of female identity. In the instance of *Playing the Field*, I have explored this through its embodiment of girl power and a (hetero)sex-positive discourse of postfeminism. Rather than disturbing the personification of female energy within forms of 'feminine-gendered' fiction such as soap opera, I have argued that this postfeminist

discourse contributes to the text's re-positioning of women in relation to traditional 'feminine' and maternal roles similar to British soap opera.

## Conclusions

As I stated in the introduction to this thesis, the purpose of this study of the female ensemble drama has been to engage with a central theme of feminist television criticism; that of the gendered identity of this particular dramatic form. As such it has attempted to pick up where feminist academic studies of 'women's genres' of the 1980s and 1990s left off. Firstly, it has provided knowledge and understanding of the way in which the FED's identity as 'feminine-gendered' fiction has contributed to its critical neglect in the context of the 1990s. Secondly, in light of its marginalised status as a form of 'feminine-gendered' fiction, it has provided knowledge and understanding of its textual characteristics and aesthetic properties, and how it has emerged and proliferated historically in Britain in relation to other textual as well as particular social shifts. Thirdly it has provided an interpretation of constructions of female identity in three female ensemble dramas of the 1990s.

Fulfilling the aims of this thesis has not only been for the purpose of recovering a history of this form of 'feminine-gendered' drama given its marginalised status but also because of the social and theoretical shifts that have taken place in the intervening period between this study and the earlier feminist studies of 'women's genres'. By way of contrast with earlier feminist studies of 'women's genres' this study has, then, been concerned to explore these issues in relation to a post-traditional, post second wave feminist context in which feminism has been felt to have been 'taken into account' across the social and cultural landscape and where the cultural values associated with women have become culturally dominant, as illustrated through discourses of the feminization of culture. Indeed, as both a feminist research student and a female viewer the impetus for this study arose from attempting to address the paradox which opened up in this context; namely, if there has been a shift in power relations and a revision of the subordinate place allotted to women and 'feminine values' within culture, why is it that

a form of drama that I appreciated continued to be largely marginalised within academic and journalistic criticism?

In chapter one I tackled this paradox by investigating the critical neglect of the female ensemble drama in a cultural context in which there has not only been a perceived feminization of culture but also a feminization of British television.

Through investigating Charlotte Brunson's account of the feminization of television I problematised seeing the feminization of television as one of a postfeminist narrative of progress for women and 'feminine-gendered' fiction in and on television. I illustrated that Brunson's construction of the feminization of television as one of a postfeminist narrative of progress for women not only re-essentialises women in relation to the cultural values designated as 'feminine', but also overstates the successes of feminism in terms of gender equality having been achieved and the extent to which women have made inroads in to the television industries. Crucially, in so doing, I illustrated how Brunson's account fails to address how the feminization of British television, similar to the broader cultural feminization which Lisa Adkins has researched, marks a de-traditionalization of gender, that of the 'undoing of categories boundaries and binaries that make up gender order' (Adkins 2001: 670). Subsequently, I have argued that the rise in lifestyling genres and the soaping of television genres, which are representative of the feminization of television, are representative of the un-gendering of the spaces and discourses associated with 'the feminine' in this period. Following Rachel Moseley's research of the feminization of television, I have argued that the hybrid nature of such texts at the level of narrative, aesthetics and representation are suggestive of this wider cultural shift in which conceptions of gender are becoming more fluid rather than represented in terms of polarised oppositions. More specifically I have argued that they have been used by television producers and schedulers in this period to appeal to a wider and more diverse number of audience segments, given the increasingly competitive context of broadcasting.

Furthermore, and most worryingly, particularly from a well known and respected feminist media academic such as Charlotte Brunson, I have illustrated how Brunson's particular construction of the feminization of television which is so closely associated

with women (and women's progress) at each stage of meaning production, colludes with the more pessimistic and reactionary characterisations of the feminization of television in this period. As I have illustrated, (largely male) television industry representatives, academics and journalists have also attributed the feminization of television to women. However, such accounts hold women (with their new found social 'power') responsible for feminising television which has led to the 'dumbing down' of television in this period.

Therefore, I have argued that while the feminization of television marks a reversal of the values that have come to dominate television schedules and indeed marks some significant shifts in terms of the de-gendering of discourses and spaces associated with 'the feminine' on television, these shifts are ones in which the foundations of the gendered hierarchy of cultural values has remained unchanged. I have framed my particular analysis of the academic, industrial and journalistic responses to the feminization of television in terms of discourses of de- and re-traditionalization. That is, while I have argued that the feminization of television marks the de-traditionalization of gender through the de-gendering of spaces and discourses associated with 'the feminine' in this period, this process is matched by the re-traditionalization of gender, that is the re-gendering of the spaces and discourses historically associated with 'the feminine' at the level of cultural and social commentary.

Whilst my investigation of academic, industrial and journalistic responses to the feminization of television in part one of chapter one has provided a general overview of the way in which values associated with 'the feminine' remain culturally denigrated, through investigating the types of drama that are discussed in dramatic criticism in part two of chapter one, I have also suggested how it is the feminine identity of these texts, which characterise the feminised flow of television in this period, which centrally contributes to their critical neglect. Indeed, these are the types of texts which academic television drama criticism is defined against in this period. Primarily I illustrated how the metaphor of the feminization of television which symbolically signifies the shift to a consumer-led approach to broadcasting within this period may have promoted issues of programme 'quality' to the top of the Media Studies agenda but these debates have

drawn on and reinforced very narrow and elitist definitions of 'quality' that the field of Television Studies (and Media and Cultural Studies more generally) have attempted to negate. I have illustrated this point through reviewing the two predominant types of television drama that are privileged in academic television dramatic criticism: that of 'serious drama', and American 'Must See' television drama. I have illustrated how each of these forms of drama have received critical attention because they conform to narrow definitions of 'quality' television and where in this instance 'quality' refers to forms of drama that fit within the established (gendered) hierarchy of cultural values; ones which in effect confirm (masculine identified) middle-class tastes and preferences.

However, I have also illustrated that it is not only television drama criticism that is governed by such logic, but the female ensemble drama has been the subject of critical neglect within feminist television drama criticism because it is also governed by and therefore privileges middle-class tastes and preferences. I have argued that although feminist television criticism has given critical attention to those fictions which have been critically denigrated because of their association with women, feminist television criticism continues to privilege those texts which represent their own interests; those of white, middle-class professional women, as exemplified by the research that has accumulated around the 'professional woman drama' and examples of 'Must-She TV'. I have argued that this is problematic because it is the middle-class career woman that is represented and addressed in both the text and in dramatic criticism which perpetuates the normalisation of middle-class identity and values both within the television industry and feminist television criticism.

In summary, I have argued that the British female ensemble drama has been the subject of critical neglect both inside and outside of feminist dramatic criticism because it does not conform to or confirm middle-class tastes and preferences and because as a form of drama (unlike much 'Must See' and 'Must-she TV') the FED lacks international circulation and esteem. Therefore although Brunson has argued that the female ensemble drama is representative of the more culturally central position which 'feminine-gendered' fiction occupies in this period (2000: 169), I have argued that academic dramatic criticism reinforces the denigrated status of 'feminine-gendered'

fiction that characterises the flow of British television, and neglects to consider the significance of constructions of female identity in these more regional British texts.

In response to the critical neglect of the British female ensemble drama both historically and more specifically in relation to its 1990s form, I have illustrated how it is a significant form of drama to critically analyse for two reasons. Firstly, because it allows for an investigation into the meanings surrounding ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ that are constructed within a form of regional British drama and secondly, because it allows for an investigation of how gender impacts on a particular cultural form in the context of late modernity. As such it has allowed me to investigate questions such as what has happened to ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction during this period, marked by processes of de-traditionalization such as the feminization of television? and how do such shifts impact on constructions of ‘woman’, ‘women’ and ‘femininity’ within texts in this period?

In response to this first point, my findings from chapter one have suggested that the feminization of television marks the de-feminization of traditional genres such as soap opera that have been addressed to women historically. As I have illustrated, the multi-character, multi-narrative and cliffhanger format of soap opera which now underpins much television drama has been used by broadcasters to appeal to as broad an audience as possible in an attempt to secure a sizeable proportion of the audience within an increasingly competitive and uncertain period of broadcasting. Indeed, given this context and the destabilisation of traditional ‘female’ and ‘male’ genres, it would appear inappropriate and indeed contradictory to frame a discussion of the FED as ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction. This would appear substantiated by my discussion in chapter one, where I have also illustrated how the FED, similar to the other flexi-narrative dramas which make up the soap opera-isation of television drama in this period, is marked by hybridity which suggest a mixed gendered address.

However, while in chapter one I have illustrated how the increasingly competitive climate of the late modern period has fostered strategies of broadcasting which has seen the de-stabilisation of traditional gendered forms to appeal to a wide range of audience segments, I have also illustrated, by drawing on the comments of

television producers, how this climate has not eradicated the targeting of particular demographics including particular gendered groups. As I reviewed, although it is young men who are the Mecca for advertisers and schedulers because they bring in more expensive advertising revenue, it is women who are consistently targeted by advertisers and schedulers because they continue to form the largest audiences for terrestrial television (particularly given cable and satellite television's development of more masculine-identified film and sports channels). Drawing on Brunson but also Feuer, Hollinger and D'Acci in chapter two, I have argued that women have become even more attractive to advertisers and schedulers since the 1970s because of their relatively affluent status that is attributable to shifts in their social positioning in this period. Situating the FED in this broadcasting context, then, I conclude that although they are 'open' texts whose narrative hybridity encourages an address to a greater number of audience segments, I have illustrated how they remain, similar to other forms of 'heroine television' and the 'new' 'woman's film' of the same period, predominantly addressed to women.

I have illustrated this point by exploring the textual characteristics of the FED. I have argued that the FED may form part of the contemporary soap opera-isation of television drama in the context of the 1990s but its textual characteristics bring it closer to the traditional British soap opera that was addressed primarily to women. This is illustrated in the way in which the FED, by way of contrast to much of the other flexi-narrative dramas that make up television (including examples of 'Must See TV') focuses on particular *matriarchal* communities, which privilege a consideration of the personal 'life politics' and experiences of its central *female* characters. While the FED is similar to soap opera in the way it is structured around a decentred address, and one in which viewers are invited to identify with several differing (and occasionally male) characters, they, like the forerunners, 'not always, not continuously, but at key points, offer an understanding from the woman's viewpoint that affects the judgements the viewer is invited to make' (Geraghty 1991: 47). The privileging of a female viewpoint, this sense of being 'down among the women', in the FED is, then, like traditional soap opera but also other forms of 'feminine-gendered' fiction, distinct for its characterisation of



women as understandable and rational (ibid). That is, it is the centrality of women in the FED, similar to soaps, which, has ‘the effect of making them the norm by which the programmes are understood’ (ibid: 50).

However, whilst using the case study of the FED through which to argue that forms of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction on terrestrial television have not been eradicated in the contemporary period marked by processes of de-traditionalization, it is also useful to track the shifts and changes to ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction that have occurred in this context. It would be an oversight, for instance, to overstate the British FED’s resemblance to traditional ‘feminine’ British soap opera. As a form of drama which has historically moved centre stage what is celebrated only periodically in British soap opera; that of women’s relationships with other women outside of their familial roles as wives and mothers, I have illustrated how the FED is not only distinct from soap opera but how its formal and thematic preoccupations are similar to the more contemporary flexi-narrative dramas that have also proliferated in recent years. Moreover I have illustrated how the FED, similar to the flexi-narrative dramas that make up much of ‘Must See TV’, provide textual responses to certain de-traditionalizing processes in this period; that is responses to shifts in women’s social positioning, the impact of second wave feminism, the breakdown of the traditional family and community structures, and the politicisation of the personal sphere. However, while I have illustrated how the FED is comparative to examples of ‘Must See TV’ through its preoccupation with themes of friendship, family, community and ‘life politics’, I have also reviewed how these preoccupations raise a particular set of issues when they are employed in a form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction which centres on a group of female characters. In addition I have argued that, more so than examples of ‘Must See TV,’ the FED also allows for an exploration of constructions of the ‘new’, ‘new woman’, that is constructions of post-feminist femininities in a British context. In chapter two then, I have provided an overview of the FED, how it is both similar and different from both traditional ‘feminine’ British soap opera and the new forms of flexi-narrative dramas that make up the soap opera-isation of television in the 1990s. I have subsequently provided a framework through which to explore the FED’s embodiment of themes of family and

community, 'life politics' and postfeminism and the issues these textual characteristics raise in their construction of female identity.

Mirroring my exploration of the critical neglect of the FED in chapter one, I have argued in chapter two that these texts may have developed and provide particular symbolic responses to certain processes of de-traditionalization that are taking place in late modernity but that they also have the potential to re-traditionalize women in relation to the spaces and discourses associated with 'the feminine' similar to traditional soap opera. I have reviewed this issue by exploring the three central characteristics of this form of drama.

Firstly, I have explored this issue in chapter two by reviewing the positions women occupy within these new 'post-familial family' structures and how they differ from the constructions of women within British soap opera which have been constructed around a traditional familial structure. I have argued that the 'post-familial family' structure of the FED appears to de-traditionalize women from the traditional familial roles that have been constructed for them in the twentieth century. Not only do they privilege a consideration of friendship bonds between women that have been marginalised on television but, in so doing, these dramas have also embodied discourses of female solidarity, 'sisterhood', independence and empowerment that are associated with the second wave feminist movement. Subsequently I have argued that by privileging the friendship bonds between women, this form of drama has the potential to be socially challenging. By providing alternative lifestyles for women based on meaningful relationships with other women, for instance, I have argued that this form of drama has the potential to undermine the ideology of love and romance, as well as 'the equation of femininity with maternity, domesticity and the private area, and the culturally legitimated tendency for women to base their identities on such caring relationships' (O'Connor 1992: 182). Drawing on Stephen Maddison's use of the term 'heterosocial bonds', I have argued that in privileging bonds between women, the FED has the potential to enact 'gender dissent', that is to disrupt and critique dominant constructions of women within mainstream texts that are produced within western patriarchal cultures.

However, while the post-familial structure of these texts has the opportunity to open up the positions available to women within this de-traditionalized context, I have argued that they also have the ability, similarly to previous ‘post-familial family’ texts such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to re-cast and therefore re-traditionalize women into normative ‘feminine’, maternal and caring roles. I have argued this is a particular concern of the FEDs of the 1990s whose post-familial families consist of working-class female characters.

As I have argued one of few positive ways in which working-class women are constructed and indeed romanticised on television is within matriarchal caring positions, as in quintessentially British soap operas such as *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*. One added layer to this analysis of the re-traditionalization of working-class gender in these postfamilial family texts is in relation to their constructions of utopian communities. As I have argued, the FED of the 1990s has offered utopian solutions not just to the waning of community in this period but also in relation to the fragmentation of traditional conceptions of *class* communities in the late modern period in Britain. In this way the FED is distinct for being one of the few sites on television which offers a female perspective of this *Zeitgeist* and a utopian image of community and sense of belonging to female identities within period. However, as I have argued, the FED then also has the potential to reinstate women into maternal, caring roles similar to British soap opera in order to provide a utopian image of a matriarchal community.

The second textual characteristic of the FED of the 1990s that I have explored in terms of de- and re-traditionalizing women is its focus on the ‘life politics’ of its female characters. As I have reviewed, the narratives of the FED, like other flexi-narrative dramas that make up ‘Must See TV’ in this period are ones which represent the retreat from the overt engagement with politics and indeed the politicisation of the personal sphere in the late modern period. Similarly to the postfamilial family structure of these texts, then, I have argued that on the one hand these texts allow for a consideration of the political aspects of daily life (which the second wave feminist movement made explicit) as well as the moral and ethical decisions that these characters make regarding their lifestyle choices. On the other hand, I have also argued that by concentrating on the

micro as opposed to the macro politics which continue to shape and inform female experience within the late modern period, these texts have the potential to re-privatise the issues facing women in the context of the 1990s. Concomitantly, they have the ability to re-traditionalize women in relation to the discourses and spaces associated with women (that of the personal and the emotional) in culture similar to traditional British soap opera.

The third textual characteristics of the FED of the 1990s that I have explored in terms of de- and re-traditionalizing women is that of its constructions of postfeminist femininities. As I have reviewed, feminist academics have been concerned to explore the constructions of de-traditionalized femininities in television drama such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. Feminist academics have not only been concerned with the way in which such texts overstate the level of equality and choice that have been achieved by women in a post-traditional, post second wave feminist context, but then also the way in which feminism, acknowledged as a feature of the cultural milieu, frequently takes the form of a highly prepackaged and highly commodified entity 'so that discourses having to do with women's economic, geographic, professional, and - perhaps most particularly - sexual freedom are effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism' (Tasker and Negra 2005:1 07).

While I have argued that not all of the FEDs that I explored in the case study chapters were informed by postfeminist discourses, it has nevertheless been a useful concept through which to explore shifts in constructions of women in the later 1990s. As I have argued, a second central problem that has been identified with postfeminist texts by feminist academics is the way in which they embody constructions of women who have more lifestyle choices available to them in a post second wave feminist context, but which reinstate marriage and normative discourses of femininity and sexuality as *the* life choice for women.

As I have argued in chapter two, the FED has provided a useful example through which to explore the embodiment of discourses of postfeminism in British regional texts given feminist television criticism's tendency to focus on the embodiment of postfeminism in American examples of 'Must-She TV'. Given the lack of critical

attention which explores postfeminist discourses in relation to British television drama, I have utilised the feminist research that has accumulated regarding American postfeminist texts as useful reference points through which to compare the British FED's own embodiment of postfeminism. Centrally I have concluded that the British FED as regional drama embodies a different brand of postfeminism to that of American texts such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. I have argued that, as a form of regional British drama, the FED does not carry the same burden of representation or burden of expectation (in terms of revenue) by comparison to American texts. I have argued that by way of contrast to the glamorous constructions of successful middle-class women who have unlimited choices available to them in American texts, the British FED embodies constructions of more regional 'everywoman' types located in particular classed, aged, racialised as well as gendered positions. Drawing on Amanda D Lotz's appropriation of Ann Brooks' theoretical conceptualisation of postfeminism, I have illustrated how the FED has the potential to be more enabling for the exploration of female identities; one whose ensemble format has the potential to explore the 'commonalities of womanhood' as well as the different 'life politics' of its 'everywoman' types who occupy different social and economic positions.

However, I have also illustrated how it is significant to consider the way in which the British FED of the 1990s does embody a similar strand of postfeminism to that of American texts such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* in two ways. That is, firstly in the way their narratives embody a non-contradictory unification of feminism and femininity, and secondly in the way their narratives make marriage and normative femininity the preferred ('natural') destiny of women. Therefore as with the American texts, I have outlined how the British FEDs have the potential to de-traditionalize women by constructing a diversity and a plurality of femininities at the level of class, sexuality, race and generation but also re-traditionalize women in relation to traditional femininity.

In the case study chapters, then, I have subsequently provided an analysis of three of the FEDs of the 1990s utilising the framework that I have developed to approach these dramas in chapter two.

Most importantly, the analysis of the three FEDs in the case studies chapters has substantiated how this is a significant contemporary form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction in terms of its constructions of British women in regional settings. The significance of this drama, I have argued, arises from having an opportunity to engage with fictions which bear constructions of particular matriarchal communities of working-class female characters at a time when twentieth century conceptions of gender and class are shifting. Across the three dramas under discussion, for instance, I have illustrated how all three texts, similarly to their predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s, utilise the ensemble format to explore a plural sense of female identity. However, I have shown through the analysis of these three case studies how the ensemble structure is used to parallel the experience of women and thus make explicit the commonalities of female experience in this socio-historical period as well as their more individual experiences and ‘life politics’ in terms of race, class, age and sexuality.

Through the analysis of the case study chapters I have also illustrated that, by privileging the female homosocial bonds between women and female points of view, the FED not only gives space for the exploration of female experience within British patriarchal culture, but in some cases critiques the positions women occupy therein. As I have explored, this is particularly the case with *Band of Gold* which makes a powerful and feminist-aligned statement about the subordinate positions women occupy in British patriarchal culture in this period.

*Band of Gold* has also provided a useful case study through which to illustrate how soap opera conventions can be enabling for the exploration of female experience. In this instance, rather than re-traditionalizing women back into to the spaces and discourses associated with ‘the feminine’, soap opera conventions are utilised to critique these positions. Similarly *Band of Gold* has also provided a useful example of the way in which the ‘postfamilial family structure’ can also be enabling for the constructions of women and female friendship. In *Band of Gold*, this does not simply re-traditionalize women in terms of re-positioning them in maternal, caring roles (towards one another), but provides the members of the group with the strength to collectively challenge their positions of powerlessness.

As the earliest of the FEDs of the 1990s under discussion, I have also illustrated how *Band of Gold*'s utilisation of the female ensemble form has not been followed up to the same extent by subsequent dramas such as *Real Women* and *Playing the Field*. Indeed, one further significant conclusion that can be made from the analysis of the three case studies is that as we moved towards the end of the 1990s the tendency of the FED to incline towards the format of soap drama combined with the embodiment of discourses of postfeminism re-traditionalizes women in relation to the discourses and spaces associated with 'the feminine' (this is particularly so, as I have explored, with *Playing the Field*). I have noted that the recasting of women into caring positions and roles within such constructions of matriarchal communities provide symbolic responses to women's shifting positions within this period as well as nostalgically re-constructing a sense of traditional working-class culture that has been lost at this time. Ironically the recasting of women into traditional roles along with the reinstatement of marriage as *the* life choice for women in *Playing the Field* at the end of the 1990s is used to signal the optimistic future of women in Britain under the New Labour government. While *Playing the Field* and *Real Women* attempt to create more inclusive constructions of working-class cultures (at the level of race and sexuality), they nonetheless reinstate whiteness and heterosexuality as the norm.

While I have repeatedly illustrated across these latter two case studies of *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* how they do ultimately re-traditionalize women in relation to marriage and reinforce heterosexuality as the dominant life choice for women, I have also illustrated how they disrupt conventional constructions of working-class women (similarly to *Band of Gold*) before reaffirming them.

Having reviewed how I have fulfilled the aims of this thesis, there are two further points that I wish to make. These points refer to one other gain as well as the limitations of this study. One positive side effect of investigating the critical neglect of the FED has been the opportunity it has provided to try to develop a more enabling approach to the study of 'feminine-gendered' fiction.

I have argued that it is important to further the development of feminist approaches to 'feminine-gendered' fiction which includes making evaluations of their

aesthetic properties of these dramas. As I have argued, this is necessary because taking a more defensive approach to these texts since they have been neglected and denigrated does not challenge the low cultural status of such dramatic forms. Rather my approach has followed that of Christine Geraghty who has advised making evaluations of drama within categories – in this instance, by comparing examples of the British female ensemble drama with one another. However, whilst my own progress in attempting to adopt such a framework has been limited in this study which has been dominated by a discursive analysis, I do where appropriate make evaluations of the aesthetic properties of these texts. This is most noticeable in my analysis of the use of the dominant British social-realist aesthetic in these texts and its ability to enable the exploration of British working-class female identity. I have suggested that the use of social realism is more successful in Kay Mellor's *Band of Gold* and *Playing the Field* than Oudot's *Real Women*. Indeed, I have suggested that the documentary realist aesthetic within these texts disturbs cultural codes of verisimilitude regarding working-class women compared with *Real Women* which I have argued predominantly reaffirms existing codes of cultural verisimilitude and reiterates the symbolic violence cast on working-class women historically.

However, whilst I have fulfilled the aims of this thesis and also contributed to both the development of future approaches to television drama and more specifically the analysis of British 'feminine-gendered' and postfeminist texts, I want to draw attention to the boundaries of my study.

Given the critical neglect of this form of drama historically, in this thesis it has only been possible to provide a broad overview of the historical development of this form of drama, albeit with a more detailed exploration of the FED of one particular period (1995-1998). Therefore, while I have provided a framework for the analysis of the FED as well as a more detailed analysis of three of the FEDs from the 1990s, clearly there is scope for subsequent research into this form of drama. This includes research into earlier examples of this form of drama; its forerunners which predate the 1970s, the early examples such as *Within These Walls* and *Rock Follies* of the 1970s as well as the more recent texts from the late 1990s with texts such as *Bad Girls* and *Life Isn't All Ha*



*Ha Hee Hee*. Indeed given the serial identity of this form of fiction the subsequent series of *Band of Gold*, *Real Women* and *Playing the Field* are also in need of critical attention. Therefore, having fulfilled the aims of this particular research project, I have provided a theoretical and analytical framework on which to build on this original study with a further investigation of the FED as a form of ‘feminine-gendered’ fiction in the near future.

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