All Adventurous Women *Sing*: Articulating the Feminine Through the Music of *Girls*.

Girls' musical soundtrack functions as a significant aspect of the show's popular, critical and commercial identity. Before the series premiered on HBO in April 2012, trailers would promote the show by selecting music from a collection of artists signed to Universal's indie-label Republic Records division. These early teaser trailers not only offered audiences a glimpse of the dynamic between the four lead characters of the show, but established a clear sense of tone through the prominent usage of an eclectic, quasi counter-cultural soundtrack which positioned the show within a culture of 'post-hipster cool' (Willenbrink, 2015, p. 89). After the success of Season One, HBO decided to release a set of accompanying soundtracks through a distribution deal with Warner Media's indie-orientated record label *Fuelled by Ramen*. The first of these soundtracks was released five days prior to the premiere of *Season Two*, and was issued with a supporting press statement from Lena Dunham, who described the appropriateness of the soundtrack's release given the 'huge part' music plays in her creative process (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 2012). In addition to assisting Dunham's creative process, music has also been important in appealing to the show's target demographic of young, educated women (Nygaard, 2013). The show's musical supervisor, Manish Raval, has confessed that his strategy has been to 'cool music' to use within the show as both a way of distinguishing its soundtrack from other television shows and as a way of living up to the audience expectations for Girls after the success of Season One (*The Hollywood Reporter*, 2012). The songs of *Girls* therefore play a key role not only in defining the show's commercial identity, but function as a key component of the mode of address established in the episodes themselves.

Given the key role music plays in *Girls*, this chapter aims to examine the function the show's soundtrack performs as part of what Fuller and Driscoll refer to as 'the series' explicit

address to feminism' (2015, p, 253). As Woods argues, the widespread reception of *Girls* as a tv show that proclaims to speak of feminist issues has led to the phenomenon of '*Girls* talk' (2015, p. 38), a mode of reception that frames an appreciation of the show through an appreciation of the way in which *Girls* has proven itself to be readily susceptible to a series of 'liberal feminist readings' (Perkins, 2014, p. 35). Whilst debates remain over the appropriateness over this kind of interpretation of *Girls* given its lack of diversity of representation (Watson, 2015), Meredith Nash and Ruby Grant argue that it is precisely the show's concentration on a certain kind of white, middle-class vision of femininity that allows Dunham to address and critique a number of problematic representations of femininity perpetuated within similar shows targeted at a female demographic. (2015) *Girls* is self-consciously indebted to and yet critical of shows such as *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), critiquing the aspirational, sexually-liberated postfeminist ideal of femininity represented in such media examples in order to perform a 'feminist engagement with post-feminism' (Nash and Grant, p. 988). This chapter extends such discussions into the realm of the show's soundtrack. Alongside previous attempts to examine how *Girls* critiques certain postfeminist ideals and values at the level of characterisation, performance, setting and narrative, it examines the function of music as a key way that the show proclaims to speak of feminine concerns within an authentically feminine register. Situating the role of the soundtrack in *Girls* within wider feminist discourses on language and its masculinised restrictions reflected in the philosophy of Luce Irigaray, the chapter examines how *Girls* might be perform this feminist critique not simply through what the characters 'say' and 'do' on screen, but how spectators engage with such narrative scenarios through a series of sonic positioning strategies. *Girls* is, therefore, a show that not only speaks of feminist concerns in a postfeminist age, but sings them as well.

GIRLS AS 'WOMEN'S' TELEVISION: MUSIC, GENDERED DISCOURSE AND LUCE

IRIGARAY

HBO sells *Girls* to a targeted demographic of audiences versed in the conventions and expectations of quality television by emphasising the supposedly fresh take the show offers on contemporary gender issues through a particular 'indie female vision' (Nygaard, p. 373). The use of song within *Girls* does not function as a purely decorative accompaniment to the action on screen but, as Johnson suggests, is essential in the show's efforts at positioning itself within 'the current cultural formation of the modes of popular culture' (2014, p.195). Music is a central aspect to the way the show proclaims to speaks of female concerns to a specifically targeted audience, utilising its soundtrack in a way that parallels the traditional role of music within ideas of 'women's cinema'. As LaPlace argues, whilst the most prominent formal feature of the industrial category of 'women's cinema' has been the desire to tell female-led stories for female-dominated audiences, such stories have tended to inhabit genres such as 'serious dramas, love stories, and musicals' in which music has featured prominent throughout the narrative and stylistic patterns on display (1987, p. 138). This cultural association between displays of femininity and music stretches beyond the notion of women's cinema. Historically, music and dance have traditionally functioned throughout western society as devices that simultaneously announce the presence of the feminine through its supposed appeal to the sensual and bodily aspects of human communication (Laing, 2007, p. 9-12). Emphasising both a bodily and sonic mode of address, narrative forms associated with women's cinema present this dynamic through a mode of filmmaking based around 'excessive mise en scene, performance and *extradiegetic* sound' (Kuhn, 1994, p.260). The excess of music on display within such genres to highlight the feminine as a specialised discourse outside the realms of everyday life, a process that in the process normalises

alternative cinematic forms associated with a more masculine register in order to domesticate and subjugate such ideas of femininity to something outside the sphere of everyday life.

This relationship between music and femininity speaks to a wider concern within a particular strand of feminist philosophy over the restrictions language imposes upon the female subject due to the masculinised nature of its discourse, an area of feminist philosophy that is arguably been most fertilely explored through the work of Irigaray. Building on an understanding of gendered identity within both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, Irigaray's philosophy repeats and elaborates on Lacan's famous declaration that 'woman does not exist' in order to articulate the paradoxical relationship ideas of femininity have in relation to ideas of masculinity. For Lacan, the 'woman' as concept does not exist because the model of gendered identity described within such a term only functions as a 'signifier of the lack of a signifier' (1975, p.73). Whilst the masculine model of subjectivity positions itself against the primordial signifier of the phallus, the feminine model, lacking such as symbol of expression, expresses itself as an absence rather than as a presence. Irigaray interrogates Lacan's acceptance of the *feminine as absence* by examining the socio-historical dimensions that underpin his theory. As Irigaray argues, Lacan's psychoanalysis displays an inability to see his own work as part of the same systems of signification it attempts to articulate (i.e. as a theoretical framework produced within a patriarchal culture). His model of gendered subjectivity therefore lacks the ability to conceive of a concept of female identity as something outside traditional discursive structures that position the masculine as normative and the feminine as something outside this normative structure (Irigaray, 1974, 102). Psychoanalysis, therefore, articulates how male subjects are able to enter into the symbolic realm through a relationship to ideas of masculinity, but not how female subjects gain similar access the feminine. As Whitford argues, what is at stake for Irigaray is that 'the female imaginary needs to find her voice' (33). By creating a new discourse outside the masculinised

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trappings of traditional intellectual thought, Irigaray's philosophy gestures towards, without ever fully defining, a notion of the feminine that is defined in isolation from its relationship to ideas of the masculine. More so, until this truly feminine articulation of gendered identity is articulated, Irigaray argues that 'woman does not exist owing to the fact that language – a language – rules as master, and that she threatens – as a sort of "prediscursive reality" – to disrupt its order' (89). In disrupting that discursive system through which masculinity has asserted itself over the feminine, Irigaray's philosophy offers a feminist engagement with the nature not only of gendered discourse, but how discourse is itself gendered, providing a theoretical space through which a concept of femininity might be brought into being beyond the traditional remits afforded to it by language.

Seen through this understanding of language as a discourse that speaks to the gendered nature of subjectivity, the role of music in a show like *Girls* can be understood as a potentially feminist tool that assists in establishing a mode of address to the spectator that speaks of issues of the feminine through a feminine form of expression. As theorised most famously by Laura Mulvey, narrative cinema (and by implication narrative television based on a similar series of formal and stylistic strategies) positions spectators so that they identify with the persons and characters on screen such that men are the 'active controllers of the look' (1975, p. 21). This model of spectatorship becomes further enhanced when considering the specific mode of address established within television in which, coupled with the desire for identification, the spectator is also provided with a feeling of 'domesticity' that provides further assurances of the mastery over the images on display (Smit, 2015, p. 892). The spectator transforms the perceptual information on screen into a codified and rationalistic discourse, making meaning out of information in a manner that provides a feeling of faux-mastery over the images and sounds in accordance with a phallic relation to the symbolic order. In privileging this mode of address, media culture establishes the rational pursuit of

meaning as the key function of narrative, a dynamic which in Irigaray's understanding of gendered discourse might be argued to contribute to the way in which "man is explicitly presented as the yardstick of the same" (1974, 28). However, as Dyer argues in *In the Space of the Song*, song and music provides performers and audiences with a means of partially accessing the 'pre-semiotic' register of everyday life (2012, p. 2). Privileging emotion over reason, the use of music in film and television has the potential to disrupt previous theoretical notions of spectatorship based upon the Lacanian model of subjectivity. In this manner, song becomes a device that not only enhances or emphasises the show's thematic concerns of issues of female and feminine identity, but provides a means of expressing ideas of the feminine beyond those afforded through traditional, phallocentric devices available through the narrative and characterisation alone.

DANCING ON *THEIR* OWN: COMMUNITY AND INDIVIDUALITY IN THE SONGS OF *GIRLS*

Previous discussions of *Girls* as a potentially feminist text that seeks to undermine and critique typical images of femininity circulating in a postfeminist age of mass media have often focused on the way the show places emphasises female friendship as its key narrative concern. Within contemporary popular media culture, the representation of female friendship on screen often functions as an affirmative space for the maintaining a particular postfeminist vision of femininity (Winch, 2012, 70). It provides a nurturing space wherein woman can discuss aspects of their own gendered experiences of their body, their personal relationships or their work-life, and thus if often valorised for its potential opportunity for empowerment within typical media representations. In this manner, one aspect of the show's soundtrack is

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that it functions to display one of the key utopian concerns Dyer identifies in relation to the musical, namely that of 'community' (1992; 26). Placing the four leads in a continuously shared soundscape, a synergy between song and narrative is established which allows music to be used as a sensuous device that binds the different narrative threads together and adds meaning to the expression of female friendship on screen. For example, in season 3, episode 2, Hannah and Shoshanna bond during a road-trip in which the two women sing along to Maroon 5's 'One More Night'. The song contributes an energy to the scene that is key to understanding the events taking place, providing a platform whereby two women are not only able to have fun, but express themselves and their friendship, notably to the annoyance of the one male character on screen, Adam, who is left driving the car in silence. Unlike Hannah and Shoshanna, Adam is unable to freely embrace the sensuality of the song, a dynamic that speaks to an Irigarayian vision of femininity as something closer to the pre-symbolic rather than the symbolic. A similar, and perhaps more significant, display of female friendship occurs in Season One: Episode 3, in which music provides the platform through which Hannah is able to reach out to Marnie for support as she struggles to come to terms with her ex-boyfriend Elijah's recent disclosure of his homosexuality. Alone in her apartment, Hannah blasts Robyn's 'Dancing on My Own', a dance-track described as a 'comet-trail of sadness and exhilaration' (NME, 2010). Hearing the music in the corridor, Marnie greets Hannah in her room with 'Yo Girl!' and the two friends dance together and hugging, as the comfort that might otherwise have been communicated verbally is done physically. At first, the lyrics of the song match Hannah's sense of rejection and loneliness born out of her perceived failure in relation to a man ('I'm the corner / Watching you kiss her'). However, as Marnie enters the room and they start dancing, it is the sensuality of the up-tempo song that provides the richer platform for an expression of friendship taking place on screen. They are not dancing on their own, as the song suggests, but rather dancing together. The harmony of their bodies moving

together to the rhythm of music expresses their closeness as two friends, an articulation of friendship that notably comes from the two characters ignoring the lyrical, and thus linguistic, qualities of the song in favour of its rhythmic and tonal qualities.

The relationship between music and narrative in achieved in such moments is framed through an Irigarayian view of traditional discourse as female identity is expressed through a rejection of the symbolic rather than through the symbolic itself. However, this positive representation of female friendship expressed through the sensuality of song is matched by other moments in which the soundtrack is used to punctuate a more fractured sense of friendship. *Girls* therefore complicates the postfeminist ideal of femininity by presenting relationships between woman not as a wholly supportive and harmonious but rather as something that has the potential towards competition, jealously and anxiety, as well as something that operates in tense with their desire for romantic love. It does this not only through its narrative concerns but through its use of music. An example of this appears in Season Two: Episode One in a scene in which a karaoke stage is set up as part of Hannah's housewarming party to celebrate her decision to move in with her ex-boyfriend Elijah. The housewarming party functions as a comedic and dramatic set-piece, the scene constructed around a series of awkward encounters as each character obsesses over the personal struggles they each face. In this scene, then, song becomes not a force that brings characters together but rather expresses the inability of the social scenario to provide the comfort it might seemingly have allowed. For example, as Marnie makes awkward conversation with her ex-boyfriend Charlie and his new girlfriend Audrey. Seemingly to highlight the levels of jealously and competition that lie beneath these attempts at small talk, the camera cuts to Shoshanna's karaoke performance, which is jarringly abrasive in comparison with the faux pleasantries exchanged in the conversations that precede it. Shoshanna sings a cover of Sean Kingston's 'Beautiful Girls', a song described in *Rolling Stone* magazine as an expression of

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the 'high-school self-pity' of a teenage boy (2015). Her performance deflates the masculine angst contained within the original lyrics ('Beautiful girls / They only want to do you dirt') in order to reveal their banality, constantly breaking between singing and speaking in a manner that shows a lack of commitment to the song's symbolic register. In this scene, the lyrics shift from directing attention at a female subject to addressing the female *as a fellow* subject. Shoshanna's song therefore becomes a declaration of her pain at being dismissed by Ray after their one night stand together, as well seemingly a plea to her fellow 'girls' to not 'do [her] dirt' but rather help her through her emotional distress. Through this sound/image interplay, music functions to bring the personal stories of four women in dialogue with broader cultural issues of gender relations to both highlight the capacity of female friendship to provide a source of comfort and strength, but also its limitations and complications at the same time.

Music therefore does not just allow *Girls* to articulate issues of gender within a collective and cultural capacity, but through the individual representation of its four leads. In this sense, the show's deconstruction of a postfeminist vision of femininity takes place not just by presenting a complex friendship dynamic between four woman, but by having these character each display different values and characteristics that complicate any homogenised notion of femininity even within the narrow subsection of US society they represent as a group. As Grdešić argues, criticisms of *Girls* that attack the show's failure to represent an adequately embody the complexities of contemporary notions of femininity ignores a key aspect of the whole that rejects such a collective notion altogether (2013, p. 356). Jessica Ford suggests this aspect of the show is heightened by the show's adherence to conventions associated with American indie 'smart' cinema, particularly that of 'reflexivity', (2016, p. 5). Characters engage with and yet distance themselves from typical postfeminist notions of femininity, allowing the series to provide a contrasting and conflicting representation of femininity marks by its lack of cohesion rather than by its adherence to set of identifiable

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principles. In this role, song functions in accordance with a traditional value associated with the Hollywood musical. With its roots in popular folk art and vaudevillian entertainment forms, the musical genre has traditionally provided the means by which audience members can engage in a process of 'personal identity formation' by allowing the performances on screen to embody some of the values associated with a particular ethnicity, sexuality, and gender (Knapp., 2016, p. 1).

In *Girls*, this musical dynamic is best demonstrated through the character of Marnie. Of the four lead characters, Marnie is seemingly the most divisive amongst critical commentaries of the show, an embodiment of a kind of "postfeminist entitlement" that *Girls* has been accused of displaying within her narrative arc that takes her on a journey from an art gallery assistant in Season One to an aspiring singer/songwriter by the end of Season Four (DeCarvalho, 2013, p. 368). Her relationship with the other lead characters is also often the least authentic and positive. She often sees Shoshanna, Jessa and especially Hannah either as a source of competition or else as people useful to her only as means of serving her own emotional needs. Yet, given Marnie's persistent failure to express herself authentically through conversation, it is the moments where she expresses herself in a partially non-verbal manner that is she arguably at her most honest on screen. For example, in Season One: Episode Three, Marnie encounters an attractive artist named Booth Jonathan at one of her gallery's openings, with whom she proceeds to engage in series of flirtatious exchanges. When Booth tries to kiss Marnie, he tells her that he 'is a man, and [he] know[s] how to do things', and his forceful advances triggers within Marnie a level of erotic excitement that requires her to immediately return to the party, find a private space and masturbate. The scene therefore speaks to Marnie's relationship with her own sexuality, but does so in a way that is almost entirely nonverbal. Not only is Marnie's masturbation an expression of her own gendered individuality, but the use of music in this scene adds to the dynamics of such a

moment. Accompanied by Gang Gang Dance's 'Mindkilla', a song described in *The Washington Post* as a startlingly 'dystopian dancehall bounce', Marnie's masturbates to a song that is itself designed to engage its listener in a physical act of self-expression, namely dance. This appeal to the bodily register recalls Irigaray's statements about femininity, arguing as she does that, as opposed to the male subject, "woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking." (1977, 26) Whilst masculinity is typically defined as force that asserts itself onto the world through the act of looking, femininity is often expressed through a relationship to the act of touching. In the case of Marnie, performing an act that gives the spectator insight into Marnie's experience of her own body and sexuality outside the linguistic register, expressing a feminine viewpoint through an act of expression defined in Irigarayian philosophy as feminine.

Of the four leads, Marnie's relationship with music is arguably the most crucial to allow the character a degree of self-expression. As Bolton argues, self-expression is arguably the key way in which popular film and television examples might contribute progressively to gendered representation (2001, p.4). Drawing from Irigaray, Bolton suggests that a truly feminie register can be established in media outside its traditionally masculine mode of address as theorised within psychoanalytic spectatorship theory through a 'foregrounding of the inner life of the female characters in each film, the positioning of the female point of view, and the invitation to share it' (p. 6). Arguably, Marnie's greatest moments of self-expression come not when she expresses herself in conversations with her friends, lovers or family, but rather in her relationship with music. It is in these moments that she is at her most transparent and open, often making herself vulnerable in the process as her ambitions and desires are revealed to the world though her performances.

Such a moment of transparency occurs during Season 2: Episode 9, wherein Marnie covers Kanye West's 'Stronger'. During this performance, the audience is encouraged to

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laugh at Marnie as she tries to inject emotional vulnerability and personal expression into a song with largely nonsensical and aggressive lyrics. Her decision to 'feminise' a 'masculine' song reveals pretention in her own ambition as a performer. In Season 3: Episode 3, Marnie tries to take a music video offline wherein she performs a cover of the song 'What I am' by Edie Brickell and the New Bohemians. In the embarrassing video, Marnie's performance straddles a variety of female performer archetypes from the grunge-girl look of a performer like Avril Lavigne to the school-girl sexualisation of Britney Spears. As her relationship with Dessie progresses in seasons 3 and 4, Marnie expresses her identity through an interplay between the traditional 'feminine' role she embodies in that relationship on and off stage, and in the uncomfortable nature in which she inhabits such a position. The relationship with Desi allows her a voice in the show's diegetic soundtrack, replacing the hyperbolic displays that characterise her early performances with a degree of authenticity as covers are replaced with the original songs she writes and performs with him. Yet this authenticity comes through the positioning of her musicality in relation to a more authoritative masculine presence. Marnie does and does not want to be Dessie's muse and accompanying songstress, and it is this contradiction that best represents her character's contribution to the show's feminist discourse framed through its dialogue between music and narrative form.

CONCLUSION: DISCUSSING *GIRLS* THROUGH THE FEMININE

The prominent use of song in *Girls* serves to enhance, emphasis and, at times, augment the series's thematic concerns with issues of female identity and friendship as a key part of its feminist negotiation of ideals of femininity emerging within the postfeminism context.

However, placed in dialogue with the philosophy of Irigaray, the importance of song to *Girls* is not simply that the show's soundtrack adds a dimension of meaning to its story that is worth expanding upon through critical analysis. Instead, it is by privileging this aspect of the show's mode of address that analyses of *Girls* might examine not only how *Girls* articulates issues of gender, but how the way it speaks of such issues is itself gendered. As Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Paterson argue, 'the human experience of sound is fundamentally more tactile than the experience of light' (1999, p. 86). Establishing emotional resonance between spectators and characters, songs provides spaces whereby meaning is invited beyond the expression of 'mere' words or sight alone. Music therefore functions as a method of engagement similar to demand for a feminised practice of writing and communication expressed within a strand of feminist philosophy. As Helene Cixous suggests,

> In women's speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which, once we've been permeated by it, profoundly and imperceptibly touched by it, retains the power of moving us – that element is the song: first music from the first voice of love which is alive in every woman. (1976, 881)

Enacting her vision for a feminised mode of writing, Cixous utilises imagery within these sentences to link concepts of female identity to a semantic field of touch, emotion, and music, arguing that for a feminised mode of expression to truly exist it must embrace this style of communication above the focus on clarity of meaning or logic of argument that has been appropriated by the masculine register.

In perceiving of music as merely an added accompaniment to the show's narrative, analyses of the way *Girls* articulates issues of gender are in danger of prioritising certain

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aspects of the experience of watching such examples at the expense of others. The *meaning* obtained from its more overt ways of communicating to the audience (i.e. its dialogue) is articulated, whilst the *feeling* of watching *Girls* is considered superfluous to intellectual analyses of its politics of gender. For Irigaray, this prioritisation of reason over feeling has traditionally functioned in intellectual discourse to privilege the masculine over the feminine voice, a critique she demonstrates by recalling Plato's own analogy of the cave. For Plato, the subject seeking intellectual advancement must see the world as series of imperfect images projected onto a cave wall. For Irigaray, this way of understanding the world is inherently gendered in its approach. Instead of seeking to understand the mystique of the darkness and embrace the sensual surrounding of the cave itself, Plato's subject looks to images on the walls in order to establish a link 'between the outside and the inside, between the plus and the minus' in an act that is fundamentally masculine in its characteristic (1974, 247). In a similar manner, instead of shying away from music's lack of overt symbolism, it is the very absence of logic or symbolic value in music that allows it to inhabit a space outside the trappings of traditional logic structures that have prioritised and valorised masculininty over femininity. In utilising that space, a show like *Girls* is able to contribute to feminist debates not simply by communicating with a female voice, but by expressing itself *as* a female voice. To watch *Girls* is to hear *Girls*, and to understand its narrative is to recognise that there are moments in the show where understanding the narrative is not enough. It is in these spaces where things are best left to song.

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