Introduction - How Pop Culture Shapes - Full Chapter.pdf

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How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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Introduction: Funhouse Mirrors – Popular Culture’s Distorted View of Girl/Womanhood

Popular culture as of late has painted a blissful and utopic image of gender equality in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world. If you believe everything you read in books and see on the screen, then we are living in a wonderland full of female success. It’s the age of girl/woman power – of *Frozen, Girls, The Hunger Games, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Hermione Granger, Olivia Pope, Lady Gaga,* and *Michelle Obama.*

The past decade has produced our first female speaker of the House, and Presidential elections that found women perpetually in the spotlight as nominees for Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates. Today, we’re being told that if women want to succeed in the work force, they just have to ‘lean in’. And perhaps they don’t even have to lean in all that far because, according to media proclamations, we’ve supposedly arrived at ‘the end of men.’ However – surprise, surprise – this simply is not the case.

Beyond the façade of gender equality lie several uncomfortable truths about the status of women, not only in the United States but around the world. Women are still earning only 77 percent of what men in comparable jobs earn, and the earning gap is even more glaring when it comes to women of color. As far as job prospects go, the landscape pop culture paints as rich with female CEOs, government officials, surgeons, and lawyers grossly misrepresents the frequency of such high-positioned success among women. Even in the 21st century, less than 20 percent of US Congress has been female, and the number of female CEOs has been miniscule. As of 2011, there were only 26 women acting as CEOs for Fortune 500 companies, which accounts for a mere 6.4 percent of such globally influential leadership roles. Although more women are
graduating from law schools than ever before, at rates almost equal to male graduates, women make up only 17 percent of the partners at major American law firms. And while women fare slightly better in other prestigious professions — for example, in 2012 women made up 25–32 percent of judges in the country (depending on the court) — they are still greatly outnumbered by their male colleagues.

While it is true that women now make up half of the workforce, most are not working in the positions fictionalized in primetime lineups. The majority of women still work in the same gendered service jobs that have traditionally been available to them for decades (for example, secretaries and daycare workers). And despite gaining ground in various professions, women are still more likely than men to carry the burden of most domestic tasks, they continue to be held to outdated double standards, and the world they are living in is not growing safer psychologically or physically. For example, there is a 30 percent chance that women will end up with an eating disorder at some point in their lives, a 35 percent chance that they will experience domestic violence or a sexual assault, and the statistics for both depression and suicide rates among girls have increased throughout the 21st century at alarmingly steady rates.

We're not claiming that the media never offers up evidence that points toward these cultural conditions. Titles like The New Soft War on Women: How the Myth of Female Ascendance is Hurting Women, Men — and Our Economy flew onto the bookshelves to contradict the messages concerning female success in the workforce found within Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead and Hanna Rosen's The End of Men: And the Rise of Women. And the media frenzy surrounding the 'Opt Out Revolution' — the sensational reports that exaggerated the rates at which women were flocking from their professional careers to return to lives as stay-at-home moms — further supports the fact that cultural standards are rarely the same for men and women. For example, when Nancy Pelosi became the first female speaker of the House in 2006, the only magazine to feature her on the cover was Ms. Magazine — a point they made sure to highlight in 2011 by featuring her again with the byline 'The Woman TIME and Newsweek Won’t Put on Their Covers' shortly after the other publications ran issues with the newly appointed Jon Boehner featured on the front of their magazines. Similarly, the media commentary concerning Presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin during the 2008 election was extremely problematic and points to the ways in which men and women are treated differently in public professional careers. Popular fiction and Hollywood film make the second-shift phenomenon that women face into fodder for comedic punch lines (for example, I Don't Know How She Does It) and ultimately support the practice by reinforcing the outdated idea that women are simply more natural and competent parents (for example, What to Expect When You’re Expecting). And if we were confused about whether young girls continue to face unreachable beauty standards and overt sexual objectification, we need only flip through any sampling of reality television shows (for example, Toddlers and Tiaras, Teen Mom, The Bachelorette) or watch Miley Cyrus twerking — or dancing with a foam finger or sailing through the air on a wrecking ball — to realize that this continues to be an epidemic.

Feminist media critics have long spent time analyzing such problematic imagery. However, some have turned toward studying the ways in which the imagery of the uber-successful women might be equally problematic. In Enlightened Sexism: The Seductive Message that Feminism's Work is Done, Susan Douglas argues that the depictions of strong, accomplished women in popular culture mask numerous societal problems still plaguing the United States, and the world at large. Her study proves that in the 1950s and 60s the media offered us narratives packed full of bathing beach beauties and stay-at-home moms, which didn’t reflect the reality of many women — women who were joining the Peace Corps, embarking on various professional careers, and engaging in politics. But the media of today offers us the opposite problem. Decades ago the media illusion was that such ambitious women simply didn’t exist. Today the media illusion is that equality for all girls and women has been accomplished when, of course, it hasn’t been. As a result, today's contradictory messages lead to a variety of misconceptions concerning the prospects of contemporary women. For example, a recent poll found that 60 percent of men and 50 percent of women believed women no longer face barriers in terms of advancement in the workplace. Arguably, the endless stream of success narratives dominating popular culture — images of successful female doctors (for example, Grey's Anatomy), lawyers (for example, The Good Wife), politicians (for example, Scandal), CIA agents (for example, Homeland), and more — has contributed to this erroneous thought. That is, while these narratives are useful in offering positive images of professional women, at the same time they don’t give a true picture of our contemporary moment. And, by far, the biggest ‘loser’ of this new mindset is the women’s movement, which is all too often framed as antiquated, outdated, successfully completed, and no longer necessary.

Various scholars have detailed the ways in which feminism is ‘undone’ by our popular culture products. For example, Angela McRobbie's The
Aftermath of Feminism details the ways in which postfeminist messages play out in British magazines, chick lit, and makeover shows. In Gender and the Media, Rosalind Gill analyzes the contradictory gender representations that allow feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric to exist simultaneously in our cultural products. And in Stifled: The Betrayal of American Men, Susan Faludi studies the ways in which pop culture has fed into the "masculinity crisis" – a crisis that some feel is manufactured or exaggerated to distract from the continued crises facing contemporary women.

Beyond being framed as passé, feminism has arisen as the other bad "F" word, causing women to try to distance themselves from the movement even as they are inundated by images of successful women who are, arguably, products of its work. In Bad Feminist, media critic Roxane Gay discusses how the caricature of feminists as 'angry sex-hating, man-hating' victims has been fostered 'by the people who fear feminism the most, the same people who have the most to lose when feminism succeeds.' That women are buying into this notion that feminism is a cultural evil is not new and the evidence of this in popular culture dates back decades before the onset of the 21st century.

This book notes the cyclical nature of this feminist backlash, particularly in the United States, analyzing American pop culture's depictions of women and questioning what effect they have on the women who eagerly (or reluctantly) consume them. Although the chapters within this book focus primarily on the contemporary moment, we realize it is impossible to study these cultural depictions as if they exist in a bubble. We live in a historical echo chamber: the narratives we get today are often reincarnations of earlier epochs; the images we see today are all too often not incredibly different from those witnessed by the generations before us. Analyzing why this is the case and how and why the 21st century alters these recurrent narratives is important because it is only when we understand what purposes these narratives serve that we can start to fully critique them. So while we do provide historical context for these female representations, we primarily focus on how the immediate present (the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the social technology explosion, the self-help movement, etc.) has contributed to them.

Ultimately we argue that this current moment is a bit scarier than previous ones because the messages integrated into television shows, films, and popular literature are becoming increasingly didactic (either overtly or covertly). In the midst of a moment that has trained us that we're all selves in need of help, now it's not just medical experts and pseudo psychiatrists who aim to show us the way to salvation – fixing our relationship woes and other problems, one paperback purchase at a time. Popular culture now subtly promises answers to all that ails us: how to win the man, how to raise the kid, how to keep our sex appeal as we age. We only need look as far as the latest Hollywood film or reality television show to discover the magical solution and prescriptive steps to getting the life we want. Throughout this book we consider how this indoctrination into the self-help movement has impacted popular culture. This idea that we're selves in need of rescue is further reinforced by the culture created in the wake of 9/11. Therefore, we also discuss how these portrayals of women that have existed historically are different in this 21st-century culture, which has witnessed the revival of the manly man image and resurrection of the damsel in distress motif.

Ultimately, this book shows that contemporary popular culture has created a slew of stereotypical roles for girls and women to (willingly or not) play throughout their lives: The Princess, the Nymphette, the Diva, the Single Girl, the Tiger Mother, the MILE, the Cougar, and more. We study the impact that popular culture products marketed toward girls and women have on their development through various ages and 'stages' of life. These essays investigate the role of cultural texts in gender socialization at specific moments in a woman's life: as a young girl, an adolescent, a single/dating woman, a bride, a wife, a pregnant woman, a mother, a middle-aged sexual woman, and a menopausal/maturing woman. By studying a variety of products from childhood toys and fairytales to popular television shows, Hollywood films, and self-help books, we argue that popular culture exists as a type of funhouse mirror constantly distorting the real world conditions that exist for women and girls and magnifying the gendered expectations they face. Such warped depictions of women's experiences are further complicated by the fact that the vast majority of products marketed toward girls and women ignore class, race, and sexual orientation – equating female experiences, in most cases, to that of a uniform middle-class experience. Ultimately, we ask this: if women are perpetually trapped within this funhouse mirror, through the constant barrage of media they are exposed to, how can they ever see beyond its blurry view of reality?

In Chapter 1, 'Becoming a Girl: Pop Culture's First Stage of Gender Training', we discuss the contentious relationship our contemporary moment has with feminism (embracing its tenets and label when beneficial, and claiming it has successfully run its course when it is not), how that relationship impacts the products marketed to young girls, and
how those products affect girls in return. We lay out some troubling statistics that point to the reality that girls face, and discuss how the media could work to better represent and change that reality for the better. By analyzing films (for example, **Frozen**), television shows (for example, **Toddlers and Tiaras**), toys (for example, the Disney Princess Franchise), and fairytales (for example, adaptations of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’), we highlight our culture’s continued focus on girls’ beauty, passive behavior, and sexuality. This chapter showcases the ways in which the compounded messages young girls receive as they are indoctrinated into girl culture have a lasting impact and set the stage for media socialization at the later ages.

Chapter 2, ‘Reading Between the Lines: The Lessons Adolescent Girls Learn through Popular Young Adult Literature’, explores how the cultural training girls receive as children resurfaces in texts marketed to adolescents. By studying the most popular young adult series of the past decade, this chapter calls attention to the mixed messages that teenage girls receive concerning their bodies, their intellect, their autonomy, and more. Even the books praised for creating strong female protagonists (for example, Susan Collins’s ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy and Veronica Roth’s ‘Divergent’ series) often contain the same problematic lessons aimed to enforce gender norms (for example, plots focused on romance, female characters who must perform femininity in order to succeed, etc.). And other popular series, such as Stephenie Meyer’s ‘The Twilight Saga’, reveal how female sexuality is paradoxically presented in texts aimed at adolescent girls (that is, girls are expected to be attracted to young men but not to act on that attraction). These conflicting lessons girls learn during this formative stage affect them as they head into the young adult years, where serious romantic partnerships are often a major life focus.

Addressing current obsessions with self-help culture and the problematic marriage of ‘how to’ manuals and Hollywood film, Chapter 3 considers the ways in which these trends impact young women’s expectations for romantic relationships. In ‘The Gendered Self-Help Reel: How Romantic Comedies Instruct Women on Dating Dos and Don’ts’, we sketch the progression of the self-help movement and consider the consequences of entertainment products that now take on this role. This chapter focuses specifically on one genre of Hollywood film often marketed to women and the ways in which it borrows (obviously or not) from the self-help arena to endorse certain behavior. We look at romantic comedies – such as Donald Petrie’s **How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days** (2003), Andy Tennant’s **Hitch** (2005), Ken Kwapis’s **He’s Just Not That into You** (2009), Robert Luketic’s **The Ugly Truth** (2009), and Tim Story’s **Think Like a Man** (2012) – in order to see how they instruct women to behave while on the dating market.

Chapter 4, ‘Selling Weddings and Producing Brides: The Quest for the “Perfect Day”,’ focuses on the ways in which popular culture establishes weddings as the so-called climactic moment of women’s lives, and how the training that girls and young women receive in earlier stages encourages them to buy into such notions concerning this life event. We provide a historical look at weddings, and turn to the plethora of media outlets that depict or somehow relate to images of these occasions (for example, magazines, self-help books, TV sitcoms, reality TV, and films). These products instruct audiences (largely comprised of women) on how to get married. By casting women into the role of the caretaker of weddings and associating her with household items, these narratives lay the foundation for expectations that women will, by extension, caretakers for the marriage, home, and the family as well.

Building on the arguments made in the previous chapter, Chapter 5, ‘Love, American Style: Gender and Representations of Marriage in the Media’, studies how – even in an era when women are delaying marriage and forsaking their spouse’s name – cultural texts still spend an inordinate amount of time training women on how to become a proper ‘Mrs.’ We examine various popular culture representations of women as they enter this new (arguably, socially produced) phase in life: marriage. This chapter examines texts such as Laura Schlessinger’s self-help book, **The Proper Care and Feeding of Marriage**, and films such as Jud Apatow’s **This Is 40** (2007) to expose how they work within the patriarchal setting rather than against (for the most part) existing societal norms. Moreover, we suggest that the lessons thrust upon women at this stage of their lives on how to care for their marriage and mate carry over into the next stage, in which women are cast into roles as the primary caregivers for their children.

In Chapter 6, ‘Nine Months of Fear and a Lifetime of Paranoia: The Hidden Effects of Pregnancy Manuals, Child Rearing Products, and More’, we turn our attention away from the messages women receive concerning male/female relationships and toward those that indicate that their ultimate role in life is to become the perfect mother. Pregnant women supposedly ‘glow’ during their nine months of expected motherhood, but perhaps what people are actually noting is the fear radiating from their bodies caused by all the fearful dictates they receive during this stage of their lives. In this chapter we study pregnancy how-to/self-help books to demonstrate how they utilize fear to control women during
their pregnancies and beyond. Of course, this strategic rhetoric of fear concerning motherhood does not limit itself to narratives and products pertaining to pregnancy alone. Cultural products instruct women to become all-knowing, all-powerful forces within their children's lives (for example, educational experts to oversee their schooling, product safety specialists to ensure their wellbeing, pseudo-medical professionals to guarantee their health, etc.). These texts suggest that in order to be healthy during one's pregnancy (thereby producing healthy offspring), one must exist in a constant state of minimal fear. Moreover, in order for one to be a successful mother post-pregnancy, these texts suggest that one must conform to the mass paranoia of parenthood (thereby extending one's state of perpetual fear). In order to showcase the overt nature of this indoctrination into fear, we close this chapter with an analysis of customer reviews of one of the most widely read pregnancy manuals, What to Expect When You're Expecting, in order to reflect on the impact that these messages have on actual consumers.

Chapter 7, 'Changing the Playing (or Reading) Field: Reconceptualizing Motherhood Through Humorous Parenting Texts', addresses the fact that some women are resisting the overwhelming expectations thrust upon contemporary mothers. Here we study the recent wave of mom-crafted texts that counter 'one-size-fits-all' depictions of parenthood. Exploring various mom blogs and mother-written (comedic) self-help books — such as Stefanie Wilder-Taylor's Sippy Cups Are Not for Chardonnay, Ann Dunne's Even June Cleaver Would Forget the Juice Box, Muffy Mead-Ferro's Confessions of a Slacker Mom, Christie Mellor's The Three-Martini Playdate, and Trisha Ashworth and Amy Nobile's I Was a Really Good Mom Before I Had Kids — we illustrate how these contemporary texts are redefining motherhood and connecting women (and their experiences) in novel ways. We also attend to the ways in which these texts, despite their positive intentions, sometimes fall into the same problematic patterns of the expert-crafted texts that came before them.

In Chapter 8, 'Pumas, and Cougars, and MILFs, Oh My!: Popular Portrayals of Middle-Aged Female Sexuality', we shift into the messages that women receive as they enter their middle and late stages of life, in which their identities may not be as tied to their roles as wives and mothers. Turning once again to depictions of women's bodies, we interrogate the new sexualized terminology that has arisen in the 21st century to categorize women according to their age and sex appeal. Although these terms are often formed with humorous intent, their staying power and use as cultural descriptive categories are both intriguing and disturbing. Also troubling is the fact that the majority of these new terms, such as 'puma' (a 30-something female 'dating' a younger male), 'cougar' (a 40-plus female 'dating' a younger male), and MILF ('mother I'd like to fuck'), are restricted to the female gender alone. This chapter traces the etymology of these three terms, their use in popular culture, and their overall reception in mainstream culture to determine whether they are helping to re-conceptualize gender in empowering or problematic ways. We close by discussing the results of a study we conducted, and debate the ways in which these terms may or may not allow women to work against prior notions concerning female sexuality.

Chapter 9, 'Beyond the Hot Flashes: New Portrayals of Mature Women', closes our journey through the stages of a woman's life by returning to the messages women receive as they enter their 'twilight' years. We attend to the recent explosion in books and other media relating to the aging woman, and, in particular, menopause. Previously, menopause was a taboo word — a word that implied that the menopausal woman was now a sexless being; hence, not only were there few books devoted to the subject, but the subject was not even broached in public spaces. Texts such as Germaine Greer's groundbreaking, The Change: Women, Aging and the Menopause, and films and theatrical productions such as Something's Gotta Give, Hope Springs, and Menopause the Musical all speak to the notion that menopause is now an accepted topic of conversation. Given this revolutionary change in viewing the formerly 'sexless' body of the aging female as a body that, today, is full of life, we argue that cultural depictions of the aging woman point to a new perception of aging and menopause as a time in a woman's life when she is still considered sexually attractive. These new portrayals of older women problematize the past depictions of the aging woman and suggest that in the later stages of a woman's life, popular cultural training may actually be producing some positive trends.

What becomes clear by dividing the vast array of gendered imagery into these prescriptive 'stages' of a woman's life is that the instruction women receive at one stage of their lives carries over and influences her behavior during the next (for example, messages about girlhood during youth impact narratives concerning female dating behavior during young adulthood; motifs found within cultural depictions of brides carry over into those focused on pregnant women and new mothers; and so forth). So it's not just that popular culture is providing these depictions ad nauseam at every stage of a girl's and woman's life (providing problematic depictions ranging from toddlers-in-tiaras to cougars-on-the-prowl); it's the spiral effect of this cultural training that needs to be noted. The little girl who overdoses on princess culture grows up to
easily buy into the cultural mindset that all women should long to be princesses for a day; therefore she is easily manipulated into the consumerist trappings of wedding culture. The woman who is fed prescriptive fear-mongering self-help books while pregnant turns easily years later to books about how to be the perfect helicopter parent by reading up on how to play ‘the heavy’ or become a ‘tiger mother’. With the help of popular culture, our little Bratz become grown-up Bridezillas, and our young nymphettes become middle-aged cougars. And is this really any surprise? Ultimately, we argue that the effect of these cultural narratives compounds over time like layers of scar tissue unless such cultural narratives are engaged with critically.

In the end we suggest that all is not lost and these scars can fade. The ways in which people can, and do, counter these narratives are plentiful and spelled out in this text, most notably in its conclusion. We discuss top-down efforts, such as media literacy programs being launched in schools and attempts in the business world to create advertising campaigns that foster higher self-esteem in girls. We discuss more grassroots efforts, such as the ways in which consumers are taking advantage of Web 2.0 technology to influence television programming or to curve consumption trends by posting critical product reviews. And we discuss the idiosyncratic ways that individual women are fighting against this barrage of imagery, oftentimes reappropriating and refunctioning these female stereotypes in powerful ways. Finally, we join the voices of other feminist media scholars who came before us, reassuring our readers that even the smallest efforts can greatly defuse the effects that pop culture’s gendered lessons have on us. By talking back to these narratives, laughing at their imagery, we can learn to see through the distorted depictions of women and exit the funhouse once and for all.