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Keeping Up with the Psychoanalysts

Applying Lacanian and Feminist Theory to Reality Television

Catherine Leary

University of Vermont
Undergraduate Honors Thesis
Film and Television Studies
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Abstract

Keeping Up with the Kardashians is a staple of modern pop culture and provides rich grounds for exploration due to its prominence, controversial nature, and scope of content. I use critical analysis with a basis in Lacanian psychoanalysis, postfeminist theory, and queer theory to explore reality, sexuality, and gender in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. I question how these concepts are utilized within the popular reality television show, how their representations on-screen can contribute to the discourse surrounding and understanding of these concepts, and what the future of women on television could be. I focus particularly on finding the subversive potential of the show's content through each of these lenses, despite the way one might assume reality television upholds societal norms and ideals.

Introduction

Description

Keeping Up with the Kardashians is a reality television show that has been airing since 2007 and has gained a massive audience of viewers as well as critics (McClain). For my thesis project, I took on a role as both one of these viewers and one of these critics by researching *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* through viewing episodes as well as analyzing different aspects of its content through theoretical lenses of Lacanian and post-feminist theory.

The first aspect of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* that I explored was how reality television functions in connection with the Lacanian sense of the Real and reality. In his seminar *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan makes a distinction between "Real" and fictitious, but notes that when he says fictitious what he really means is symbolic (12). From Lacan's perspective, individuals are subjects within the symbolic order which is upheld through ideology.

In his seminar, *Freud's Papers on Technique*, he elaborates on the subject's relation to the symbolic order and the Real:

Employing the categories of the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary, I showed you how it can happen that a subject who has all the elements of language at his disposition, and who has the possibility of making several imaginary moves that allow him to structure his world, might not be in the real. (87)

Within the symbolic world of language and structure, the linguistic subject is able to become distanced from the realm of the Real, that which the symbolic order doesn't wish to reveal.

Lacan elaborates in this same seminar on the way the symbolic order functions:

All human beings share in the universe of symbols. They are included in it and submit to it, much more than they constitute it. They are much more its supports than its agents. It is a function of the symbols, of the symbolic constitution of his history, that those variations are produced in which the subject is open to taking on the variable, broken, fragmented, sometimes even unconstituted and regressive, images of himself. (158)

The symbolic order is responsible for shaping one's own view of oneself. The symbolic order is not something which individuals choose to participate in, it is a powerful force which uses subjects to its advantage to reinforce order and constructed meaning. Utilizing these concepts from Lacan, Slavoj Zizek defines "reality" as opposed to the "Real" in his book *Looking Awry*, and argues that reality is essentially a fantasy world which hides the disruptive and disturbing "Real" which lurks beneath the surface of society. Lacanian reality is typically utilized to discuss what most people think of as "real life" or their day to day lives, but reality television has the potential to push the idea even further. Reality television may be more visibly in line with

“reality” as a fantasy which hides that which disturbs us, but it could also be a space which allows for the eruption of that very same Real, that which we as symbolic subjects don’t want to see. Žižek writes about this Lacanian concept of the Real versus reality and notes that the border between these two categories has the most disruptive potential (*Looking Awry* 15). Using this theoretical basis, I question whether or not there is a possible eruption of the real within reality television shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, a space which links the inside and outside, the public and the private life.

Another aspect of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* I examine is the way in which sexuality is employed on the show and how it relates to feminist and post-feminist understandings of female sexuality and empowerment. These theoretical frameworks are useful in analyzing the way the Kardashian women become known for their bold sexuality and pride themselves in their sexual appeal, which helps them become successful within the realm of American capitalist enterprise. Post-feminism is used because it provides an adaptation of feminism which applies to figures like the Kardashians who fit into many societal standards of beauty, wealth, and sexuality. This theory can be helpful in understanding how this involvement within the symbolic order’s standard structure can be perceived, perhaps falsely, as liberating. Distinguishing between the increasingly popular post-feminism and a more traditional understanding of feminism, Mari Ruti writes, “This shift from (politicized) feminism to a (depoliticized) ‘feminine’ ethos of consumerism characterizes postfeminist culture, generally speaking” (11). Post-feminism as interpreted here, can broadly be understood as a feminism which works within the established system to gain power rather than challenging this system. On the subject of post-feminist sexuality, Ruti writes, “But one of the most noticeable trends of postfeminist society is that many straight women seem to actively welcome their own

objectification” (12). I discuss whether or not this supposed welcoming of objectification occurs on the show and whether or not it is a progressive or radical act. I will question whether it’s possible to find access to the Real through the uniquely Kardashian brand of sexuality, or whether it leaves one condemned to the realm of reality.

The third aspect of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* I examine is the way in which gender functions, particularly in the case of Caitlyn Jenner’s experience on the show as a transgender woman. I employ both queer and psychoanalytic theory, particularly through theorists like Jack Halberstam and Patricia Gherovici who unite the two, in order to question where Caitlyn Jenner fits in to the realm of reality, if she does at all. I question if her transgender identity provides an eruption of the Real on the show or if this Real must be sought through other avenues, such as the clash between transgender identity and celebrity status.

Finally, after analyzing these multiple and related aspects of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, I consider the ways in which the reality television medium and the Kardashians specifically provide a space for the Real to erupt. From this point, I propose a possible future for women in reality television and ways in which reality, gender, and sexuality can be significant in this future. I conclude with the idea of a monstrous woman, like the Kardashians at their worst moments, who could cause the breakdown of the symbolic order.

Significance and Previous Work

Reality television is becoming increasingly well studied by critics and theorists, particularly in an attempt to answer questions like “How Real is Reality TV?,” a question which is also the name of a collection of essays on the subject (Escoffery). This question is one which frequently arises in works such as Bill Nichols book, *Blurred Boundaries*, in which he states that within reality television, “Any firm sense of boundary which such shows attempt to uphold

between fact and fiction, narrative and exposition, story telling and reporting inevitably blurs” (43). Collections of essays like The Reference Shelf’s *Reality Television* address this same question of reality and fiction, along with the history and evolution of reality television, identities, celebrity, viewership, and the business side of the programming. The frameworks of this collection are fairly representative of the types of research being done, but an entry in the *Encyclopedia of the Documentary Film* by Misha Kavka also notes three major perspectives of reality television scholarship: the trash TV approach which critiques mass culture, the empowerment approach which notes the way different voices are heard through reality programs, and the nightmare perspective which sees reality television as a symptom of distress in the postmodern culture of simulacra (1104). Like Kavka notes, much of the critical work on reality television deals with questions of identity and representation through reality television (Deery, Escoffery, McClain). Authors are particularly interested in the way being watched affects people and their personalities, as well as what this act of watching and being watched means for society and politics more broadly (Deery, Escoffery, Hill, McClain). Many people have discussed gender in reality television as well as the way in which reality television is part of a consumerist and capitalist culture (Deery, Escoffery, McClain). Several authors have posited arguments about ways in which what is shown on reality television promotes certain ideas about how people should be living and performing (Deery, Escoffery, McClain). Discussions like this lead to audience reception becoming a major part of reality television scholarship with authors like Kavka stating:

The main focus of reality television is not to document lived reality but to capture individuals in a situation of ‘heightened reality’ [...] Rather than assuming that reality television dupes audiences into mistaking the artificial for the real, however, it is

important to consider that producers and audiences alike recognize the constructed aspects of the shows. (1104)

How audiences respond to reality television shows, and to what extent they believe what they are seeing is the truth, is widely debated and difficult to quantify. Researchers working from marketing perspectives may see reality television as an extremely effective fantasy escape (Edwards) while others like Kavka would say there is a complete knowledge of the constructed nature of the shows.

Keeping Up with the Kardashian Brand: Celebrity, Materialism, and Sexuality is one work which combines these discussions of gender and consumerist culture through a focus on the Kardashians. The author, Amanda McClain, examines how the Kardashian family works as a business, how they are received by journalists and on social media, and how they employ concepts of gender, beauty, family, and celebrity.

Additionally, in trying to answer how real reality television is, genre theory has become an important part of the discussion. On defining the genre, Kavka states that “As with any evolving form, reality television defies easy definition. Programmes that fall into this genre, however, share three basic characteristics: they use nonactors, are nonscripted, and hence fall into the zone of nonfiction” (1104). Definitions like this differ depending on which scholar is writing and which particular shows they wish to work with. For example, while Kavka focuses on the nonscripted aspect of reality television, other authors like Leigh H. Edwards, who is concerned with reality television as a commercial enterprise, emphasize narrative within the genre, “Reality television reverses classic narrative. Instead of trying to make characters seem real, it makes real people into characters, using predictable and repetitive narrative frames” (3).

Keeping Up with the Kardashians is one of the most talked about and widely known reality television shows right now. Most people, whether they feel positively or negatively about them, have heard of the Kardashian family. Kim Kardashian alone has over 50 million followers on Twitter (Kardashian West). Millions of people view these individuals and are aware of what they are saying and doing. As one New York Times article states, “More to the point, as the branding expert Robert K. Passikoff put it in a phone interview this week, ‘You would have had to be living in a cave in Nepal to have not been exposed in one way or another to the celebrity ilk of Kim Kardashian’” (Wilson). Thus, the Kardashians become important in an analysis in the larger conversation about portrayals of women in film and television. Films and traditionally scripted narrative television cannot be the limit of discussion surrounding representations of women within current media culture. Reality television is also very widely viewed and consumed and is an important part of the discussion. The current president of the United States is even a reality television star, marking this media form as even more culturally significant.

In terms of previous Kardashian-based research, my work goes beyond what has already been written about to connect critical theories in new ways and adapt to new information. Most texts on reality television limit themselves to one lens through which to view what is onscreen. Questioning whether or not what is shown is “real” is a popular choice for analysis (Deery, Escoffery, Hill, *Reality Television*), but these texts typically do not use the Lacanian sense of this term which I employ. Feminist theory is also a popular basis for analysis (Alderson, Deery, Escoffery, McClain), but feminist theory is only one part of a larger conversation between gender, sexuality, and reality and using them in connection with one another is a more useful approach.

The closest work to what I have done is perhaps *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand: Celebrity, Materialism, and Sexuality*, but this text is limited and differs in its focus. Firstly, the world of reality television is always changing and evolving as more and more content is produced. This text from 2014 is already outdated with over 50 new episodes of the show coming out since its publication. Additionally, Caitlyn Jenner's transition and coming out as a transgender woman occurred after this book was published, leaving a critical gap in any analysis of gender therein. Secondly, the focus of the book differs because the author chooses to address concepts of celebrity and business more than I am interested in, although celebrity status does become an important part of some of my analysis of identity. These ideas differ from the close analysis I provide of the show's content and my particular focus on theoretical approaches to reality, gender, and sexuality and the links between these concepts.

My work contributes to and expands upon the current understanding of how theoretical texts can be used to interpret media by focusing on a new subject, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* in a new way, through the application of multiple theoretical frameworks in conversation with one another. Much of the time, close analysis of media using feminist theory or Lacanian psychoanalysis occurs in reference to film. An exploration of a popular television show can provide a new insight into the way these theories can be used to understand different aspects of the modern world.

I. Lacanian Reality Meets Reality TV

Introduction

One of the most fascinating questions of both Lacanian psychoanalysis and media criticism surrounding reality television remains: what is real? Lacanian psychoanalysis places an emphasis on the difference between “reality” and the “Real.” Lacanian theorists like Slavoj Žižek employ these terms to mean “reality” is essentially a fantasy world which masks the disturbing and disruptive “Real” which lurks beneath the surface of society (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 15). Along with this Lacanian concept of reality versus the Real, comparisons between reality and fantasy have been a part of film scholarship from its very beginning. In his chapter “Basic Concepts” from his larger *Theory of Film* in 1960, Siegfried Kracauer described the “two main tendencies” of early films as “realistic” and “formative” (149). By “realistic” he referred to films which had a firm basis in plausible or true events of everyday life. “Formative,” on the other hand, was used to distinguish films that tended towards fantasy or dream-like situations. To illustrate the difference further, Kracauer specifies, “Their prototypes were Lumière, a strict realist, and Méliès, who gave free reign to his artistic imagination” (149). The two styles of film become apparent when looking at these auteurs of early cinema. A binary distinction was created between that which sought to create verisimilitude and that which was more concerned with fantasy performance. However, both Lacan and the film theorists like Kracauer become interested in what happens when the boundaries between these distinctions of reality and fantasy begin to dissolve. Kracauer states:

Films which combine two or more dimensions are very frequent; for instance, many a movie featuring an everyday-life incident includes a dream sequence or a documentary

passage. Some such combinations lead to overt clashes between the realistic and formative tendencies. (155)

The two types of film he observed and initially distinguished, realistic and formative, are not necessarily exclusive. The overlap and clashes between these two categories are common enough to bring into question the true distinction between them. Similarly, but occurring at a later time in the evolution of criticism and theory, Slavoj Žižek writes about the collapsing of boundaries. He notes the significance of this concept in Lacan's work, "But what is crucial for us here is the place from which this real erupts: the very borderline separating the outside from the inside" (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 15). The boundaries are thin between reality, which Lacan classifies as a fantasy, and the Real, the hidden truth. Neither the different types of filmmaking described by Kracauer nor the psychoanalytic realms of understanding described by Lacan are as heavily polarized as one would initially think. In fact, the main purpose in dividing these categories is to study their interaction. For Lacan, the interaction with reality allows for the eruption of the Real, the truths that were being hidden initially by the system of fantasy.

These theoretical understandings can be applied to reality television quite effectively in order to investigate the question of reality and get to the heart of what is truly Real. Theoretical frameworks can help to interpret television for a deeper understanding than a passive viewership alone would typically allow. One can understand "reality television" as the paradoxical interaction between the planned productions, implied within the "television" portion of the phrase, and real human beings inhabiting the real world, as in the "reality" portion of the phrase. In her book *Reality TV*, Annette Hill writes that "There is a play-off between performance and authenticity in reality TV" (52). Reality television is able to play with the space between Kracauer's reality and fantasy because of the way it combines performativity with realism. The

two clash, but through this clash there is potential for the emergence of the Real in the Lacanian sense. By revealing the way these categories cannot be truly separated from one another, the Real can be revealed because it cannot be effectively hidden within or excluded from the binary. In Bethany Ogdon's essay "The Psycho-Economy of Reality Television," she claims "At the very least, reality television formats function as straightforward documentation of the 'reality' such fantasies insist upon" (32). Ogdon is touching upon the complex nature of the Real and reality in the Lacanian sense of the terms. Reality television, in its simplest form, is a reality arising from fantasy. What is put on display is not the true Real, but the reality which we wish to see and which society and production companies wish for us to see. However, beyond this surface level display of "reality," reality television has the potential to unleash the disruptive Real lurking beneath the fantasy through creating a space in which inside and outside are no longer divided. It challenges the fantasy which it simultaneously upholds.

Lacan's Real

Jacques Lacan's concept of the Real is an essential framework when considering how reality television can disturb viewers by unleashing the Real. While Lacan, drawing upon the origins of psychoanalysis in Freud, makes reference to clinical practice or practical psychoanalysis, his ideas can be usefully applied as theoretical frameworks for media analysis. In his seminar, "The Ethics of Psychoanalysis," Lacan differentiates between the real and the symbolic, "the term real, which in his thought is placed in opposition to the English term 'fictitious' [...] The fictitious is not, in effect, in its essence what deceives, but is precisely what I call the symbolic" (12). This model differentiates between Real and symbolic reality without considering reality to necessarily be false or deceptive, but instead a constructed symbolic system. This framework allows for an interpretation of the way Real and reality function both

on-screen, as in reality television, and off-screen. In his book *Looking Awry*, Slavoj Žižek works with these earlier concepts and explains his interpretation of the Lacanian Real in detail. The Real is that which underlies the reality which we, as members of a constructed society, are used to seeing and therefore don't want disturbed. A confrontation with the real is a traumatic experience. In order to avoid this traumatic confrontation, people remain comfortable in reality, not venturing deeper to access the Real. They maintain a division between the space they are comfortable within and the outside which frightens them. Žižek writes, "The price paid for this comfort is the loss of any continuity between 'inside' and 'outside'" (*Looking Awry* 15). In order to remain comfortable, the inside and outside must remain divided. Drawing on a metaphor for looking out a car window, Žižek continues his interpretation, "Our uneasiness consists in the sudden experience of how close really is what the windowpane, serving as a kind of protective screen, kept at a safe distance" (*Looking Awry* 15). Despite the desire to comfortably separate the inside and outside, the fantasy and the Real, there is an uneasiness due to the fact that the two are always uncomfortably close. The separation is merely an illusion of false security and false distance. The Real cannot exist without the fantasy which seeks so desperately to hide it and prevent its exposure. When one has an encounter with the Real, this "sudden experience" is traumatic because it forces the realization that the inside, the reality, is merely a comfortable fantasy.

Making and upholding a distinction between real and fantasy is essential in maintaining a standard position within the symbolic order. Žižek continues to explain why we try so hard to distinguish what is real and what is fantasy when he writes, "This kind of retroactive displacement of 'real' events into fiction (dreaming) appears as a 'compromise,' an act of ideological conformism, only if we hold to the naïve ideological opposition between 'hard

reality' and the 'world of dreaming'" (*Looking Awry*, 17). According to this theory, people existing within the constructed symbolic order will try to avoid confrontation with the traumatic Real by projecting it elsewhere and moving it into the category of fantasy. However, it is naïve to believe that "hard reality" and the "world of dreaming" can truly be separated and kept separate. While Žižek uses dreams as an example of this fantasy projection, it may just as well be considered in terms of cinema or television, especially those which employ narrative fictions. This inability for separation is even evidenced by the same categories defined by Kracauer of dream-like cinema and a cinema of realism; the two inevitably overlapped and interacted with one another. Placing an encounter with the Real into a space opposed to the framework of fantasy is not truly helpful. The comforting opposition and clear divide between Real and reality is impossible to maintain.

The impossibility of truly separating Real and reality is the result of reality actually being *dependent* upon the same Real which it seeks to hide and repress. Žižek explains this relationship, "The role of the Lacanian real is, however, radically ambiguous: true, it erupts in the form of a traumatic return, derailing the balance of our daily lives, but it serves at the same time as a support of this very balance" (*Looking Awry* 29). The disruption caused by the Real is actually essential for the maintenance of the system of reality which conceals it. Without the disruption, this system to conceal it wouldn't have a need to exist. Žižek adds, "The real functions here not as something that resists symbolization, as a meaningless leftover that cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe, but on the contrary, as its last support" (*Looking Awry* 31). The "symbolic universe" here means a concept similar to that of reality, the constructed way in which the world is viewed. Rather than truly existing outside of the system of reality, the Real

is integrated in its role of enforcing this symbolic universe. The Real both challenges and is essential to the symbolic construction of reality.

Understanding the structure of the Real as compared to reality is incredibly important in looking at and analyzing reality television from a Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective. Reality television takes a space that people are comfortable with designating inside or private, and combine it with a space of the outside or public. Viewers are thrust into the position Žižek describes of looking through the metaphorical window that divides these spaces, only the window has been replaced with a television screen or perhaps more accurately the lens of a camera. This forced proximity prompts confrontation. It is within this space that there is the potential for the eruption of the Real; the potential for the viewer to recognize there is more to the position within the symbolic order which they occupy. Their initial understanding that they are a subject within the “real” world is complicated by the fact that they are really just on the surface. The reality has something lurking beneath, something which is revealed when performance and candid interactions are combined to reveal connections and coverings— the Real. Reality television utilizes “reality” as its foundation and showcases the symbolic order’s imposed roles —economic, gender, sexual, subject and object — at their most extreme. Yet by focusing on these symbolic functions so closely, the viewer comes so dangerously close to contact with the Real that these functions seek to hide because of the inherent link between Real and reality. The viewer facing this traumatic encounter with the Real of their existence often would like to take this extreme symbolic order and claim it is really just part of the fantasy world of scripted television, in the same way Žižek described displacing the Real into the world of dreams. The viewer would like to be able to categorize the encounter and shrug it off as simply another encounter with the usual fantasy. However, one must ultimately confront the fact that the

people on screen are real human beings, representing themselves rather than truly separate characters, and they are committing real acts with impacts. The potential scripting or staging does not make them the same as they would be on a traditional narrative-based television program. They present with verisimilitude, an air of being true and by the nature of the reality television format this must be true to some extent. We cannot force what we have seen into the comfortable categorization of the reality dream world of fictional programming. Reality television is an inescapable combination of reality and the disturbing Real always ready to break through.

Reality Television

Reality television is a relatively new genre in terms of popular culture and popular viewership and there still remains a lot of varied discussion surrounding it, making it an intriguing space for critical analysis. Reality TV has quickly become a significant part of popular culture in recent television history since the 1990s with the rise of shows like *Survivor* or *Cops* (Kavka). Programs like these brought the genre into widespread discussion among the general public and likely contributed to the quantity of reality television shows currently airing. In her exploration of the term “reality TV,” Anette Hill writes, “One academic study on actuality in popular documentary called it ‘reality’ television, the quote marks signaling an uncertainty in the use of the word real” (Hill 12). By pointing to this phrasing, Hill demonstrates that the very language of “reality TV” brings into question its meaning. The question of how “real” the genre is has been posed by several different academics, showing its centrality to the genre (Andrejevic, Escoffery, Kavka, Nichols). This uncertainty about reality and its relationship with the Real lies at the heart of the genre’s terminology and very existence.

The terminology “reality TV” is widely discussed due to the inability of scholars to pin down exactly what the genre does or does not encompass. Genre scholarship often struggles with issues of categorization and the scholarship surrounding reality television is no exception. In her book *Reality TV*, Hill explains her perspective on the origins of the term, stating that it “was around in the late 1980s and the 1990s in reference to police and emergency services series or MTV’s *The Real World* (1992-) but it wasn’t by any means the dominant definition in everyday talk about these kinds of programmes” (12). The term itself, along with the genre, is constantly changing, as evidenced by the many subgenres the category seeks to contain. In the earlier days of popular reality television, the genre contained significantly fewer variations in format than the reality television offerings of today. Currently, anything can be considered reality television from competitions to cooking shows to watching people go about their everyday lives. Hill later touches on this by explaining reality television as simply a “media mix of factual entertainment” (14). This simplistic definition is broad enough to include the different styles within the genre and seems a fitting definition as far as the perspective of the general public is concerned. Her use of the word “factual” is of course worth questioning with regards to programming which structures or scripts. Although she later elaborates on a more scholarly definition:

Many scholars use the term reality TV to stand in for a wider set of enquiries about a cultural formation constantly on the move ... The very blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction makes the genre ‘trans-reality,’ a term they describe as stretching the notion of reality into something constructed within media and society. (Hill, 14)

From an academic and genre-theory-based perspective, “reality television” is a necessarily broad term because the genre and culture surrounding it is constantly changing and evolving. The term must expand to encompass the ever increasing variety of styles and forms. It is also worth noting

from this scholarly perspective, there is an understanding that “reality” is connected to and determined by social change and media representations. This is key when considering the Lacanian concept of reality as entirely determined by these same external factors implementing a system of signs and roles. Another author, June Deery, notes the issue of identifying what falls into the “reality TV” category in her book, also titled *Reality TV*, “it is to some extent a floating signifier possessing different meanings for different people in different historical moments” (Deery 3). While genre categorization always tends to pose a critical challenge, reality TV poses a particular problem as shows in this category continue to proliferate and explore alternate structures. The reference to the problem by multiple scholars of the genre and the notion of the term as “a floating signifier” makes it clear that the idea of “reality TV” is still something people are struggling to comprehend fully.

Deery creates her own useful and more specific description of the type of programming as “staged actuality” (29). “Staged actuality” can be a useful way of conceptualizing what it is that reality TV actually seeks to do. Many reality TV shows aim to represent something close to real life, distinguishing themselves from narrative TV through this distinction. In some cases this can even mean creating a situation with more artificial or performative aspects. Like some controversial documentary films, such as the foundational *Nanook of the North* in which Flaherty utilized staging of events, acting or reenacting, and constructed narrative, there is an idea in reality TV creation that through encouraging performance something realer than real can be achieved. Reality TV may use staging to create the sense of verisimilitude, something as close as possible to an actual event on television. This specific staging in order to create reality is one of the ways in which there is potential for the Real to emerge. Some viewers have some level of awareness of the constructed nature of reality TV, just as some people have a basic

understanding that the society they exist in is necessarily constructed by external forces. However, the potential for the emergence of the Real comes when they are forced to recognize and confront this constructed nature on a deeper level; when viewers see what is constructed and attempts to hide this construction. The more extreme the falsification of events, the more clear the system of “reality” which is being upheld becomes. Construction to this extent points to a more general constructed-ness. Once a viewer and subject in the symbolic order is faced with understanding not just one aspect of their life, but the vast majority of it, is not as real as they may have thought, then they may encounter the Real. If a viewer comes to the understanding that the reality on screen is not only constructed, but constructed at a level which they find unbearably and uncomfortably false, it can be a means of confronting the traumatic fact that their own reality off-screen is similarly constructed. The construction of these symbolic subjects mirrors their own.

I would argue, from the psychoanalytic perspective, the concern over categorizing and defining “reality TV” really stems from that same nagging question, that same uncertainty that occupies and creates the discomfort of the Lacanian Real, the questions “how real is it?” and “how real is any of this?”

Deery also engages in discussion about the reality or falsehood of what is being shown to viewers. Succinctly summarizing, she states, “To say that reality TV merely records reality is obviously too simplistic, but so is saying it is all false” (Deery 28). There is no radical potential in attempting to divide reality and fantasy, only in recognizing their close relationship and the blurred boundaries between the two. From the Lacanian perspective, there is an unconscious tendency for a viewer, when confronted with something distasteful or upsetting on screen, to begin to distance it from the real world and instead try to claim it is merely a fantasy created for

the camera. This allows viewers to laugh off what they are seeing as not in any way related to the real world which they occupy, along with the show's subjects. Žižek's point about escaping the traumatic Real by displacing it into the world of fantasy again is relevant. Everyone is generally aware that what is meant to be a person on screen living their everyday life is not an entirely accurate representation. But still, it isn't necessarily *inaccurate* either and one must acknowledge the troubling fact that there is truth in it; there is a Real factor beneath the simulation. More than just an actor playing a character, the character being performed is the self, the symbolic subject. The dismissive objections among both casual viewers and critics voiced through statements about how "reality television is all fake" are harmful in that they ignore something of great value to an understanding of modern American society and understandings of the Real.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians: A Case Study

Since its premiere in 2007, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* has become a reality television staple gaining a massive audience of viewers as well as critics (McClain). The show, unlike many other reality shows currently airing, does not include a specific goal such as winning a competition, overcoming an obstacle, or achieving some otherwise clear goal. Thus, a different approach is taken in order to keep the series interesting. Each episode –or sometimes spanning multiple episodes depending upon the scale of the issue– contains its own "everyday life" conflict and resolution, almost in a traditional sitcom narrative. Many of the critical audience members focus in upon the issues of false personas and scenarios and overall not liking the Kardashian/Jenner family for being extremely upper class, vain, and/or unintelligent. However, through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the true origin of this distaste may really be born from the discomfort that what we are seeing is genuine on at least some level and breaks the comfortable boundaries between true and false or what is real and what is not. The people on

the television screen are real people within our real society, even if they are dramatized. They are representations of the symbolic order carried out to its extremes, but they do truly exist. Their “performance” forces viewers to confront their own performative nature as members of a society, a constructed reality. The Real of the situation emerges and disturbs; these people cannot be entirely written off as fantasy villains or caricatures, but also they don’t fit comfortably within the realm of truth. As much as one may try to place them within a box of “everything wrong with the world” or “society gone wrong” they are a reflection of what the society ultimately produces, our society gone right through the enforcement of the symbolic order, and that is what has the potential to shock and disturb.

One episode particularly useful in visualizing a conflict between Lacanian Real and reality on several levels is “Remembering Dad,” the fifth episode in season one. Early on, this episode puts a twist on the usual format of the series by placing text on the screen reading “The following episode contains recreations of actual events.” This message is in reference to Khloe Kardashian being arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol. Likely for legal reasons, the show could not actually film her being arrested or driving while intoxicated. However, the producers of the show still go to great lengths to make it seem like the camera is secretly watching from some distant car while the arrest occurs. What is unsettling in this episode is that, had it not been for the warning, the cinematography and general situation feels very similar to that of any other episode. The sudden outright acknowledgement that the images in this episode are constructed and planned to this extent forces into question the validity of every other episode because they all appear stylistically similar, with events feeling perhaps prompted but never outright falsified. Any “truth” in any other episode is now challenged. There is an idea of acceptable falsehood; of course some things are emphasized for dramatic effect, and the reality

TV viewership is willing to accept this. However, events like this which call attention to complete outright and announced staging, loosely based on something real, forces the viewer to confront the staging they were willing to accept before. The symbolic order they once were comfortable with embracing now deserves further consideration. While this technique may not be new in terms of filmmaking, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is unique in that it isn't seeking to have this disruptive effect intentionally. Rather than alternative documentaries like Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, this disruptive staging is the failure of the symbolic order to hold itself together, rather than the success of a filmmaker consciously challenging perceptions. This intentional covering of staging in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, rather than its emphasis, can be seen in the way that cameras, while glimpsed frequently on the show, are not meant to be seen. If this production element is seen in a reflective surface, there is usually an attempt to remedy this by altering the angle or finding another fix. The season one episode 5 mention that the reality in which the viewer had become comfortable is entirely different from the truth, even for just one episode, functions as the Lacanian Real. The boundaries between constructed and seemingly true have been blurred. There is something from beneath the surface which reveals that the reality is not reliable, the window separating inside and outside is not as clearly divisive as we once thought.

Moments in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* which overtly call attention to their staging can be seen to have a significant impact on fans. These fans are, without necessarily using the terminology, struggling with the Real which threatens to erupt. They recognize these moments as something which upsets their understanding of the system as necessarily false, but only to a comfortable extent. In an article on "5 of the Most Obviously Staged Moments in *Kardashian* History", which includes Khloe's arrest on the list, blogger Mariah Smith notes the

balancing act fans of reality TV commit to. She writes, “A very necessary part of enjoying reality TV is the suspension of disbelief. You can’t get hung up on stuff like wardrobe inconsistencies, obviously dubbed voices, or spontaneous vacations that somehow manage to get every star of a show on a remote island where drama ensues. It’s part of the fun” (Smith). This is the comfort of Lacan’s reality, the world in which the symbolic order presenting itself as truth is upheld and accepted. By watching reality TV there is an audience acknowledgement that some part of it is constructed and not entirely true. However, this audience comfort at most false scenes cannot always last when the more obviously constructed moments occur, “Sometimes it feels like the inconsistencies are so apparent, that they might as well pull a hammer out of their purses and literally break down the fourth wall,” (Smith). The disruption of the “fourth wall” meaning the wall between television subject and the viewer, is a concept usually applied to works of fiction. By using it in this instance, Smith articulates the idea that reality TV cannot in fact be written off as a work of fiction because of the way it makes clear its characters are real people existing in the real world, and there is some discomfort in that. A character in a fictional narrative acknowledging their existence within a narrative, “This is a fiction!,” is not nearly as effective as a character in something presenting itself as real making the same acknowledgement, “*This is fiction!*” There is that hint of a Real lurking here, something that arises in these moments that force acknowledgment that this system we’ve come to accept is not truly acceptable. Even if there is already a sense that there are constructions, the revelation of the boundary, or lack thereof, between falsehood and truth is traumatic and challenges the stable subject position of the viewer.

II. Postfeminist Progression and Onscreen Sexuality

Introduction

In addition to grappling with the question of what is real, reality television also serves as a site for investigation into what is or isn't "feminist." This question, along with other questions concerning representations of women on television, is worth discussing in terms of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* as a show focused primarily on women. The modern shift towards postfeminism, a branch of feminist theory which counters earlier forms of feminism, in popular culture has sparked debate over whether or not, paradoxically, objectification through choice – and often for profit – can be empowering. For the Kardashians in particular, female sexuality is at the forefront of this discussion and is worth examining in terms of the potential for progressive womanhood in television.

It is hard to ignore the sexual presence of the Kardashian, and later Jenner, women. Their reality show and subsequent empire got its start only after Kim Kardashian's infamous sex tape was made public. The media attention from the sex tape drives conflicts in some early episodes of the show while also providing unintentional foreshadowing into one of the aspects of the show that truly sticks with audiences. One particularly negative response to the show's sexuality can be gauged through websites such as Common Sense Media, a website self-described as a "nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing the trustworthy information, education, and independent voice they need to thrive in the 21st century" (Common Sense Media). The website provides reviews for parents and children that

rank the content of a show in the categories of positive messages, positive role models and representations, violence, sex, language, consumerism, and drinking, drugs, and smoking (Common Sense Media). While this site provides only one perspective of Kardashian viewers, I am most interested in the opposing readings viewers who are angered by the open sexuality and feminist fans of the Kardashian women. The website's reviewer who covered *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* gave a score of "not present" for positive messages and role models. The show also received a four out of five for sex, consumerism, alcohol, drugs and smoking (Croop). While fans of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* might laugh off this dismissal of the show, it is clear that many of the negative responses are extremely passionate and worth considering because of their proliferation. Members of the public not hired by the website, predominantly parents, also have an opportunity to voice opinions and give the show an overall rating for what age children should be when watching. One user, an adult going by the username Q_T, wrote in a review entitled "VULGAR":

This is by far one of the MOST vulgar television shows I have seen! Parents getting drunk... Kris K. is constantly glassy-eyed and rarely age-appropriately dressed! I guess she will not stop trying to 'compete' with her daughters! The 20-something daughters are all out-of-control! Posing for Playboy USED to bring shame to a mother or father. [...]
Posing for 'Girls Gone Wild' is 'classy' or 'tasteful'? Give me a break! (Q_T)

While not all the comments on the page are similarly aggressive, this commenter is not the only one picking up on the overt sexuality of the Kardashian women, nor are they the first to be offended by or opposed to it. Many viewers have made arguments that the Kardashians are particularly bad role models for young girls, noted here by the "not present" rating for positive representation. This outrage is contrasted by the show's producers who frequently include meet

and greets or other publicity events in which the Kardashian sisters greet young girls who proclaim their love and admiration for the family, even to the point of considering them role models. Similarly to previous parental critiques, commenters frequently claim the Kardashians are famous for doing absolutely nothing, or for their inappropriate sexual behavior. Other Common Sense Media adult commenters have written, “I cannot believe these people have their own show, for what?? What are they actually talented for – being trashy....” and “Kim, Khloe and Kourtney’s only talents seems to be shaking their booty in everyones face,” (ijimmymiracle, snowgirl). While few, if any, of these parental critiques of the Kardashian family are based in feminist theory, they align shockingly well with some of the foundational principles of feminist criticism. The idea of a woman’s only value being derived from her body and its use for sex is part of what these commenters are rebelling against, although this may be unconscious or expressed differently. However, in the modern age, this is not the only side to the debate. Postfeminist theory significantly complicates any analysis of sexuality on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, along with the audience reactions to it. As Amanda McClain states in her book, *Keeping Up the Kardashian Brand*, “As Kim profits from her sexual image, she exemplifies a contortion of feminism; she benefits from her own exploitation” (58). Kim’s financial success comes from her body and selling her image, whether that is through photoshoots as a model or branding products like a mobile game. Kim Kardashian may be the woman of the future, the progressive image of new womanhood, if one is to view her through this particular post-feminist lens.

Post-Feminism

When viewed through the lens of post-feminist theory, what the Kardashian women are doing by presenting their bodies could be seen as a progressive and empowering use of their

sexuality. After all, aren't they dismantling the patriarchy by becoming financially successful women through their female bodies? McClain brings up the notion of Kim Kardashian as a post-feminist figure:

In a sense, Kim Kardashian may represent Angela McRobbie's (2009) conception of post-feminism, in which women have given up their claims to feministic equality in exchange for a discourse of individualism. [...] Individualism concentrates upon the power of public femininity, placing emphasis on physical beauty and the commercial consumption necessary to maintain it. (58)

Rather than the traditional concept of the necessity of feminism as a community effort in order to join women together, post-feminism is focused on mobilizing and empowering women at the individual level. Considering the needs of the diverse category of "women" as a whole becomes secondary in favor of prioritizing the choices of the individual and their right to make them, particularly when it comes to bodily autonomy. In this way, trends once considered regressive or even oppressive such as high heels and makeup have been co-opted into an idea of progressive womanhood. Embodying society's ideal woman is seen as a positive step towards success and power. If one can consume these goods and feel good about oneself, who would need the old fashioned feminism of the past? Post-feminists would argue for an evolved feminism which goes beyond these old ideas. In her critical book, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie explains her concept of post-feminism:

Elements of feminism have been taken into account, and have been absolutely incorporated into political and institutional life. Drawing on vocabulary that includes words like 'empowerment' and 'choice', these elements are then converted into a much

more individualistic discourse, and they are deployed in this new state, as a kind of substitute for feminism. (1)

In the ever-evolving American capitalist state, the individual's ability to express oneself has become prioritized in order to accommodate the previous disruption of feminism. New feminist discourse deals with this individual expression. We now see the concept of the ideal neo-liberal individualist woman, meaning a woman who challenges ideas of the past but conforms to the larger capitalist system of power relations. She is someone who is able to do what she wants and is thus empowered and achieves economic success. The patriarchal institutions which form "reality" have appropriated the language of progress to create its opposite: stagnation. There is an understanding from these particular types of post-feminists that the time has come where traditional feminism is no longer needed and it is acceptable to challenge from within the patriarchy rather than radically work towards its destruction. McRobbie later elaborates, "Feminism is taken into account, but only to be shown to be no longer necessary. Why? Because it now seems that there is no exploitation here, there is nothing remotely naïve about this striptease. She seems to be doing it out of choice, and for her own enjoyment," (17). If the women are aware of their position and attempt to use it for their own gain, then an act like displaying female sexuality for perceived male enjoyment is no longer oppressive or exploitative. This sort of action is taken frequently by the Kardashian sisters who will make calendars ("Kim's Calendar for Reggie," Season 2 Episode 9) or sexual videos ("I Want Your Sex," Season 4 Episode 8) for the enjoyment of the men in their lives. Using the language of choice, the act is changed. If a woman chooses to do something, from this post-feminist viewpoint, it is considered acceptable. The individual and their agency is prioritized over the actual act or its functional effects. Later in her work, McRobbie shows what seems to be a

disdain for or frustration with post-feminism when she writes, “bearing in mind that I define post-feminism as a kind of anti-feminism, which is reliant, paradoxically, on an assumption that feminism has been taken into account” (130). The post-feminist perspective is one which is intrinsically linked to the feminism that came before. It is a state of critical understanding which requires one to acknowledge the importance of feminist ideals of progress for women, but only insofar as to move past them as irrelevant. Progress now needs not be so radical. As long as the woman doing the striptease questions whether or not her act is feminist, she is allowed to answer her own question with “I’m asking and choosing, so it doesn’t matter.”

Returning to the Kardashians, they can be viewed as models for the application of this post-feminist theory. Viewing them through this lens, they are significant and progressive women for their use of sexuality in their work. McClain writes:

While the Kardashians’ sexual depictions throughout various media may appear to represent enlightened sexism, their ownership of their business empire complicates this notion. In addition, although they may portray and maintain sexual standards, other concomitant views throughout the series mitigate the dominance of this illustration. (58)

Unlike many sexualized women of the past, the Kardashian women have built a financially successful media empire around their open sexuality and physicality. This has shaped them as icons for a neo-liberal post-feminist understanding of what it means to be empowered. This definition of empowerment relies upon gaining acceptance and financial success within the system rather than working against it. If a woman is financially successful through her own exploitation and individualist ventures, it is equivalent to empowerment. While many of their early business ventures, such as the DASH boutique, were not specifically focused on them as individual bodies, the role of the fashion industry in objectifying women, often as non-beings

meant to sell clothing, is hard to ignore. Female bodies and their use for profit have always been part of the Kardashian business model. The way the Kardashians manipulated their bodies into financial profit, through choice and agency, is what makes them figures of post-feminist success. They did not “need” traditional feminism because they were able to succeed through methods that feminists may consider regressive. Though, as McClain points out, they sometimes go against sexual standards based on gender by sidelining men and creating a uniquely female dominated space, they still maintain standards more often than not through becoming subservient to the capitalist system and predetermined ways of being. They exercise choice and agency in just the way that appeals to the post-feminist school of thought.

Some viewers, far from the angered parents previously mentioned, did understand the Kardashians to be these progressive figures of female sexuality. While some of these viewers align themselves with feminism, they may be more appropriately considered post-feminists if using the criteria of prioritizing individual expression and choice. In an article entitled, “As a feminist, this is why I love the Kardashians,” Libby Allnatt fights back against critiques she identifies as including, “They’re sluts/whores. What terrible role models!” She writes:

The Kardashians have celebrated female sexuality and confidently embraced their bodies despite venomous backlash. They gloriously rejoice in their womanhood in a world where women are expected to be small and self-conscious. [...] Even if Kim Kardashian isn’t your idea of a feminist icon, please stop the slut-shaming. Your misogyny is showing. (Allnatt)

This viewer brings up what she believes to be the transgressive potential of the Kardashians due to their bold womanhood that goes against the standard sexual expectations placed upon women. This understanding of the Kardashian presence is echoed by others like McClain who writes,

“Just as television stereotypes men and women, it also reinforces stereotypical male/female relationships. Men are portrayed as authoritative and independent, while women are illustrated as incompetent, reliant upon men, and primarily domestic (Wood, 2011),” (24). Television serves as an important tool in upholding patriarchal and capitalist ideals, including the manner in which men and women should properly express their sexuality and roles in interacting with one another. McClain continues, “The Kardashian women are far from passive, although correspond with sexual norms,” (26). Although McClain argues that the Kardashians maintain sexual norms based in patriarchal control and male spectatorship, many audience members and post-feminists may disagree.

Post-feminist theory encourages looking beyond the striptease which may seem so conventionally exploitative to find the liberation it can provide. Post-feminism applauds the way the Kardashian women are outspoken about their sexuality in nontraditional ways. Khloe, in particular, is never shy about commenting on the sex lives of her sisters or mother. In season four’s first episode, “The Wedding,” which centers on Khloe’s wedding and the preparation for the event, the sisters joke about hiding the wedding ring in Kourtney’s vagina. In season 1 episode 4, “Birthday Suit,” Kris is present while her daughter is photographed nude for Playboy. As previously mentioned, in season 4 episode 9, “I Want Your Sex,” Khloe makes a sexual video for her husband for while he is away. In a scene which may very well have been staged to create conflict and excitement, other people, including Khloe’s own brother, also watch the tape. Within the same episode, there is another plotline involving Kourtney and Scott’s sexual relationship while she’s pregnant. In season 6 episode 6, “Kendall Goes on Birth Control,” Khloe has an open and blunt talk with her younger sister, Kendall, about her sex life. The taboos surrounding sex talk, and particularly sex talk with family, which cause discomfort in people like

Caitlyn (Bruce at the time), prove to be no obstacle for women like Khloe. While this is just a small sampling of the sexual scenarios and conversations on the show, it provides insight into the way in which sexuality functions. Men in the family, such as Rob, Scott, and Bruce are made uncomfortable by the boldness of the women. They are marginalized and emasculated and express this feeling themselves on occasion. For example, in season 6 episode 14, “Kim’s Fairytale Wedding: A Kardashian Event Part 1,” Kourtney’s boyfriend Scott tries to explain to Kim’s soon to be husband that “men have no say whatsoever.” He jokes that being around the Kardashian women means losing your penis and losing control, to the dismay of Kim’s fiancé, Kris Humphries. Several times the men try to cover up what the women express, such as when Rob tries to convince his sisters not to say anything around his girlfriend’s more conservative family in season 3 episode 10, “Meet the Kardashians.” However, the women always triumph, and this is the triumph of post-feminism. They are allowed to express their unrestrained sexuality, stepping outside the role of sexual submission expected of women and into one of personal choice and control. They don’t express any desire or need for liberation, since they already rule the household and maintain all the power through embracing female bodies as objects to be viewed for profit and becoming capitalist entrepreneurs. Kim Kardashian herself has expressed her belief that her posting nude photos is politically significant. She wrote on the subject in a blog post entitled “Happy International Women’s Day” on her personal website, which generates revenue through pay-walling posts:

I am empowered by my sexuality. I am empowered by feeling comfortable in my skin. I am empowered by showing the world my flaws and not being afraid of what anyone is going to say about me. And I hope that through this platform I have been given, I can encourage the same empowerment for girls and women all over the world. (Robbie)

Kim Kardashian does consider herself a role model for women for using her sexuality to her advantage. She considers her body to be a source of power and liberation. Empowerment for her, as someone existing in the supposedly post-feminist world, relies upon one's own body and choices rather than a collective political shift, and she encourages others to express their own ability to present their body for consumption, if they so choose. However, contradictions in her empowered stance arise through frequent episodes in which she is unhappy with her flawed figure and seeks to maintain standards. For example, in the notorious season 14 episode 2 "MILFs Gone Wild," Kim breaks down over unflattering photos of her signature backside. Rather than being empowered by her flawed body on display, as she wrote in her Women's Day post, she is mortified. She struggles to maintain the post-feminist ideology of finding power through the system which places such strict requirements on what women should look like.

Challenging the Post-Feminist Kardashian Ideal

Ultimately, post-feminism is an imperfect method for analyzing media like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* because of the flawed ideology at its core. It is not enough to merely consider the question of profitable female sexual agency and move on into the post-feminist world where feminism no longer need be considered or need not concern itself with the same issues of the past. Instead, to find the radical future potential of a cultural staple like the Kardashians, one must return to the feminist work of the past along with Lacanian psychoanalysis. The potential of the series relies upon its ability to disturb the "reality" of the symbolic order that comforts viewers, rather than by subliminally enforcing it as post-feminist work might.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault proposes an idea that helps to counter the post-feminist concept of individual sexual liberation as a progressive act. In his chapter "We

‘Other Victorians,’” Foucault questions a widely accepted historical belief concerning sexuality which he refers to as the “repressive hypothesis” (10). He explains that he wishes to challenge the way that sexuality and pleasure have been discussed previously. He wishes to especially consider how frequently the subject has been discussed even in famously “repressed” periods like the Victorian Era. Foucault lists doubts concerning this accepted hypothesis of repression such as whether or not it is historical fact and whether there are more significant power structures involved when examining sexuality beyond repression. Foucault explains one of his main doubts with regards to the hypothesis:

A third and final doubt: Did the critical discourse that addresses itself to repression come to act as a roadblock to a power mechanism that had operated unchallenged up to that point, or is it not in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces (and doubtless misrepresents) by calling it “repression”? (10)

Foucault questions whether the discourse which claims to work progressively against repression is really part of the problem. These doubts raised by Foucault when it comes to repression may also be useful when applied to the post-feminist project of working towards a more liberated female sexuality. Like theorists operating under the “repressive hypothesis,” post-feminist work operates under the assumption that women’s sexuality is something that has been repressed; therefore, its open expression is empowering. However, as Foucault explains, this understanding may actually be contributing to the negative power structures that post-feminist theory believes it’s challenging. A woman like Kim Kardashian, expressing open sexuality for capitalist ventures is really working within the patriarchal structure which this act supposedly goes against from Kim’s point of view. Empowerment through sexuality for the male gaze, represented by the men on the show like husbands and boyfriends who the women perform for, for the sake of fighting

“repressed” feminine sexuality is a flawed practice which shows naivety to systematic power structures in the post-feminist approach. However, what makes the Kardashian performance interesting is that the viewer position of the male gaze may not actually be the most significant.

In order to consider a different means of challenging the symbolic order, the functions of gaze and viewership must be investigated. In theoretical discussions surrounding melodrama, a cinematic form that predates reality television like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* but is nonetheless comparable due to its heavily gendered viewership, questions of gaze and viewership were essential. These analyses are worth considering for their focus on female spectators. In her essay, “Women’s Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory,” Annette Kuhn writes:

In a patriarchal society female desire and female point-of-view are highly contradictory, even if they have the potential to subvert culturally dominant modes of spectator – text relation. The characteristic ‘excess’ of the women’s melodrama, for example, is explained by Cook in terms of the genre’s tendency to ‘[pose] problems for itself which it can scarcely contain’. (148).

I would argue that the genre of reality television in the style of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* similarly calls into question spectator-text relations in ways that may break down traditional structures. The Kardashians are also defined by the excess emotion and strong female presence seen in melodrama, with the added element of overt female sexuality to an extent not before seen. In her book, *Feminine Look*, Jennifer Friedlander discusses the feminist potential of melodrama:

Within the project to reveal the feminist potential of melodrama, two key approaches became dominant. The first, espoused by Teresa deLaurentis involves reading a text ‘against the grain,’ in order to discover its internal inconsistencies, excesses, and fissures, in particular, looking for places where patriarchal discourse breaks down. (7)

The concept of reading “against the grain” to find the flaws in patriarchal discourse is incredibly helpful in viewing *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Through the post-feminist approach, the Kardashians, while initially seeming rebellious, uphold the patriarchal idea of female bodies as objects and commodities for profit in their business. It is considered acceptable because it is their informed choice and an expression of agency which makes them the ones to benefit and profit. Through an alternate approach of seeking disruptive feminist potential proposed by Friedlander, it may become possible to find ways in which the Kardashians, and more importantly their female viewership, reveal inconsistencies or otherwise challenge the existing symbolic order.

Analyzing viewership and the role of spectators in the Kardashian brand of sexuality is one way in which the symbolic order can be challenged. As theory regarding melodrama challenged the gendered relationship between spectator and text, so too does *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. The roles of woman to be watched and the male who watches and holds the power of the gaze, do not necessarily apply to the Kardashians. While the women on the show certainly enjoy being watched, as evidenced by countless photoshoots and public events with even Kris getting nude for her husband in season 4 episode 4 “Birthday Suit”, the viewership is not what may be expected. According to McClain:

The program appeals to a certain specified audience in particular, as 1.1 million women ages eighteen to thirty-four watched the season six finale, setting an E! channel record for that particular demographic (Fernandez, 2011). In 2012, more than 1.5 million women

aged eighteen to forty-nine watched the seventh season debut (E! Entertainment, 2012).

(5)

Like melodrama, a “women’s genre,” *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is primarily viewed by women, predominantly within the age range of the women represented on the show. Thus, the role of the one who is watched and the one who watches are conflated in a way that challenges the idea of the Kardashian women as sexual objects. This challenge to objectification is not the same as the post-feminist notion that they are choosing to be sexualized, but occurs because their sexuality might actually be uniting women beyond individual acts and in some way against the traditional male gaze. While many of their sexual acts do enforce the patriarchy, the fact that these acts are mainly looked upon by fellow women provides an element of complication as well.

When considering the subversive potential of female Kardashian viewership, the Lacanian framework and concept of feminine masquerade can be valuable tools. In *Feminine Look*, Friedlander explains the Lacanian concept of the masquerade compared to imposture. According to this framework, the options for a woman seeking to identify with women objectified on screen are quite limited. In the case of imposture, a woman must distance herself from the women on screen, placing herself instead within a more masculine position of viewing to understand what she is seeing the way it was meant to viewed, by a man. In this way she is able to achieve some masochistic pleasure in spectatorship (Friedlander 50). However, masquerade offers an alternative, one with radical potential. Friedlander explains that through masquerade, a woman can work towards questioning identity, “Masquerade thus emerges as a far more stable strategy than imposture. Whereas imposture carries the burden of accomplishing an identity based on the illusion of knowledge, masquerade accepts the knowledge that identity is itself an illusion” (64). Returning to the Kardashians and their large female audience, subversion

can be possible through the questioning of identity. Kim's conundrum (konundrum?) about self-empowerment through a body, but a body defined by cultural standards, could be solved through this rejection of supposed knowledge about how to be a proper subject. While this rejection is unlikely, the subversive potential arises through viewership. Viewing the female Kardashians' sexual practices through the mask of masquerade allows for a deeper questioning the symbolic order and its establishment of certain identity roles. Just as the "reality" element of the show has the potential to disrupt, so too does the sexuality element, as long as the female viewership engages in this way.

Elaborating on the masquerade, Friedlander explains that other theorists use the mask to shut out female viewer's enjoyment, relating enjoyment to the imposture of the male gaze, but she wants to work towards embracing enjoyment. She writes:

Doane's suggestion that feminine spectators should inhabit the masquerade sends us in the right direction. But whereas Doane suggests the mask as a way to foreclose pleasure and forge a critical distance between spectator and image, I want to recognize and embrace the pleasure afforded by identifying with the mask. (Friedlander 66)

Female viewers need not resign themselves to distance from women on screen when engaging in subversive viewing. The Kardashians must be viewed critically, but not negatively; they can be enjoyed in a revolutionary way. Friedlander elaborates on this concept of pleasure, "Furthermore, I suggest that feminist media studies should take seriously this dimension of enjoyment (*jouissance*) as a way of working toward 'traversing the [ideological] fantasy' that conceals the contradictions and incompleteness of the social system'" (51). Just as the breaking down of borders between reality and fantasy enables the Real of constructed subjectivity to be exposed in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the symbolic order can be broken down through

female viewers engaging in masquerade and experiencing the obscene enjoyment of jouissance. While it may be argued that no average viewer of the Kardashians is engaging with it at this level of criticism, I do think there is something to be said for the elements of the show that would escape enjoyment from the position of imposture or the male gaze. There are elements of female performance on the screen which a heterosexual male viewer would not find enjoyable, but a woman, viewing in a way which seeks to examine the intricacies of feminine experience could enjoy. Men might even find these moments repulsive because they go against the standard prescription of who a woman should be. For example, the countless times the Kardashian women discuss their bodies in ways which could be seen as repulsive or over the top, but are perhaps related to by the female audience. In season 6 episode 7, “The Have and Have Nots” Kris talks about her issues with incontinence as she gets older, and her subsequent issues with urination and her trip to a gynecologist are played up for laughs among the girls with jokes about her “leaky vag.” The women on the show fart, burp, cling to each other like they are children, discuss their genitals openly to one another and so on. There is an obscene pleasure to be found through embracing that which societal standards seek to hide and enjoyment of it through the masquerade positioning is one of the ways to access the Real and the potential subversion through viewership.

Similarly, another aspect of Kardashian sexuality that could actually point out flaws or contradictions in the symbolic order is the way marriage functions. McClain points out the paradoxical expectations placed upon women like the Kardashians:

Keeping Up with the Kardashians exhibits a paradox of conservative family-first values with an image of overt sexuality. While the sisters often appear explicitly sexualized in

popular media, verbal discourse of the show emphasizes conservative values, such as fidelity, stability, and marriage (57).

As post-feminist women operating under capitalist patriarchy, the Kardashians' sexuality goes against the governing laws of family values and marriage. The women on the show often try to balance the two things they are expected to be, extremely attractive sexual beings and traditional family. This contradiction ends up revealing and perhaps challenging the expectations themselves, unlike a simple post-feminist embrace of either role on its own might. Kourtney for example, as shown in season 6 episode 4 "Out of Wedlock," is constantly pressured to marry Scott, despite her clear stance that she is not interested in marriage. Her family doesn't take issue with her sexual activity, which results in multiple children, but they do try to force reconciliation between the sexuality and tradition. Marriage is also a way in which the Kardashians don't fully perform post-feminist femininity. In her essay, "I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here," Suzanne Leonard explains the role of marriage in a post-feminist world:

In the postfeminist popular media, these celebratory representations of marriage are even less tempered and often take on an additional valence wherein they emphasize that if push comes to shove, a woman's marital status is indeed more important than her career. Such portrayals frequently emphasize that female employment, far from being the sort of life necessity that feminists advocated, has the potential to be a hindrance to her 'feminine' aspirations. (103)

Through this interpretation of post-feminism, embracing marriage over career is ultimately prioritized for women but framed as a choice. Despite all the other elements of post-feminism Kim Kardashian may uphold, she still challenges the idea of marriage taking priority over her career. Her infamous marriage to Kris Humphries, which only lasted 72 days, was largely

affected by her focus on her career. Kris Humphries was insistent that Kim take his last name, in the heterosexual tradition of the woman taking the man's last name and giving up her own. Kim, however, was adamant on keeping the Kardashian name since it was essential to her career and her Kardashian branding. The couple butted heads over this several times in the shows coverage leading up to their wedding in the two part "Kim's Fairytale Wedding: A Kardashian Event" special for season 6 episodes 14 and 15. By prioritizing career over marriage and patriarchal tradition while still discussing being a good wife, Kim does call into question the patriarchy in a move beyond post-feminism, even if she is ultimately limited by a capitalist interpretation of success and progress dominated by financial growth and capital.

III. Transgender Identities and Privileged Experience

Introduction

Having already begun to examine the ways in which gender functions on *Keeping Up with The Kardashians* through the lens of post-feminism and female sexuality, we must now shift towards an analysis of one of the most prominent and controversial ways gender is employed on the show: through the transgender experience of Caitlyn Jenner. Caitlyn Jenner's widely publicized transition made her into the face of transgender identity in popular culture for people who were unfamiliar with these identities. The initial reveal of her transition began with a *Vanity Fair* article and cover, but was also covered at length within *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. The show offered a two part "About Bruce" special during the 10th season which provided interviews with many members of the Kardashian family –although it noticeably excluded Rob, the only male child. These interviews discussed the experience each family member had with Caitlyn along with her own experience with her gender identity. In these episodes, along with the rest of season 10, different family members discuss meeting "her" and

their complicated feelings about losing their father in favor of this person they perceive as entirely different and new.

This event on the show marked a major shift in the family politics that had been established over the previous nine seasons and it also provides an opportunity for a discussion about the way Caitlyn's gender functions in relation to the show as a whole and its representation of reality. Caitlyn Jenner's open transgender identity from season 10 onward is an important step forward in challenging the cisgender gender binary imposed by the symbolic order and revealing its limitations. However, because she continues to uphold the symbolic reality through other aspects of her life like her politics, from a Lacanian perspective more must be done to disrupt the idea of stable boundaries between binaries. Perhaps, in the case of Caitlyn Jenner, this disruption may occur through her transgender celebrity status as a place where oppression and privilege clash, rather than through her transgender identity itself as a clash between male and female.

Pushing the Boundaries of the Binary

In order to discuss the way in which Caitlyn Jenner and her presence on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* functions in relation to the erupting Real, it is first necessary to discuss the way transgender identities beyond Caitlyn Jenner operate. While gender certainly occupies an important place in psychoanalysis, it is also frequently investigated from the perspective of and considered central to queer theory. The psychoanalytic approach which I have employed, drawing heavily on Žižek's interpretation of Lacan, focuses on the ways that the Real can erupt and disturb the reality which seeks to mask it. Similarly, queer theory deals with seeking to understand and analyze that which erupts from the normative or does not fit within it. In her article on the word "queer" itself, Jennifer Purvis notes its many different definitions centering on three main concepts of "nonheterosexual," "nonheteronormative," and "deviant and

nonnormative” (192). She encourages the “embrace of queer [...] for the sake of all those not privileged by dominant white heteropatriarchy” (Purvis 203). In this way, queer theory struggles with the same concepts as the psychoanalytic conflict between the Real and reality. There are things which the fantasy of the symbolic order seeks to mask or hide through dominant ideologies. Transgender identity arises as one of those identities which goes against and challenges the norms enforced by society. It shows something beyond the standard categorization of bodies that the dominant ideology would have subjects believe. By approaching Jenner’s particular identity through both psychoanalysis and queer theory, we can begin to understand what it challenges, how it challenges it, and why that may be significant.

Theorists like Patricia Gherovici work with this idea of analyzing transgender identity through a combined psychoanalytic and queer theory approach. On the subject of combining the two, she writes:

I too have argued elsewhere (Gherovici, 2010; 2011) for a productive confrontation between psychoanalysis and transgender discourses and have shown how transgender people are actually changing the clinical praxis, advancing new ideas for the clinic that can be expanded to social and intellectual contexts. (Gherovici, “Psychoanalysis Needs a Sex Change”).

Gherovici refers to the ways in which transgender individuals, with individual needs and experiences, have influenced the clinical practice of psychoanalysis. She continues to argue further, however, that psychoanalysis and the theoretical discourses surrounding transgender issues can be employed together in social and intellectual settings beyond their clinical significance. In another work by Gherovici, she explains the importance of gender and sexuality in queer theory, “The idea of gender, sex, and sexuality as free floating is one of the main tenets

of queer theory [...] According to queer theory, identities are not fixed and immovable, and thus one can transcend them” (*Please Select Your Gender* 115). Rather than considering identities, like one’s gender, something fixed or defined as the dominant ideology might have one believe, queer theory proposes that identity is something flexible. Individuals are capable of moving beyond categories in ways that suggest a disruption of the order of things. Even further, Gherovici argues that transgender identities in particular provide a means of revealing the flaws in traditional gender models. She writes:

One of the truths the transgender phenomenon illustrates is that body and gender consistency is a fiction that is assumed through identification. It is absurd to ascribe to anatomy the role of normalizer in a type of sexuality by focusing on the genitals or on a single prescribed act, as classical psychoanalysis has traditionally done. This normalizing role has been effectively challenged by transsexual discourses and practices. (Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* 33)

According to Gherovici, transgender identities can challenge the standard fiction that upholds the link between anatomy and gender. This fiction has even been upheld by earlier psychoanalytic practice and theory. Her word choice of “fiction,” is notable because it suggests that there is something more real that transgender identity is able to access, perhaps the Real in the Lacanian sense of the term. The societal traditions which maintain the gender binary are upheld through ideology which relies on the idea of stable categorization. Transgender identity can be an eruption of that which cannot be contained by the fiction of the symbolic order. It can show the way ideology attempts to stitch together an image of what is acceptable and cuts out that which does not comfortably fit.

Theorists like Gherovici frequently make reference to figures like Caitlyn Jenner in recent discourses. Gherovici's particular position on Caitlyn Jenner is positive and optimistic. She explains the significance of Jenner's public transition:

The transformation from male sex symbol to a femme fatale brought the former champion more fame than winning an Olympic gold medal. She became the first global celebrity to come out as transgender and shine, showing that coming out as a trans person did not mean living like a pariah. (Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* 3)

She draws upon the idea that Caitlyn Jenner was able to become even more popular than she was before her public coming out. Caitlyn received far more press attention than Bruce ever had, at least within the span of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. She believes that through Caitlyn Jenner, transgender identity can become accepted by the public. Borders can be broken down without the negative consequences that so many transgender people currently face and have faced in the past.

Moving beyond just disruption, Gherovici even goes so far as to connect Caitlyn Jenner directly with the Lacanian Real. She uses an example of Jenner mentioning death in a seemingly casual public conversation as a way in which the standard boundaries of the symbolic are disrupted. She writes, "I see in this irruption of death on the one hand something that touches the Real," (Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* 166) Gherovici is referencing Caitlyn Jenner's coming out special in which Jenner explains she wouldn't have wanted to die without coming out and transitioning. Gherovici picks up on the idea of death as Real that permeates this discussion, something disturbing which lurks beneath the surface and is revealed through this transgender identity which pulls at the seams and begins to show what is hidden. The death that arises in this conversation about transition has the potential to serve as the death of the symbolic.

However, Gherovici's analysis of Caitlyn Jenner focuses heavily on her transgender identity and excludes a focus on her as a member of the Kardashian/Jenner empire. The question must be posed: is her particular experience one that truly challenges the standard ideology and provides a place for the Real to emerge?

Limits of the Kardashian/Jenner Celebrity Brand

Caitlyn Jenner's position as a celebrity significantly impacts her position and experience as a trans woman. Even within her optimistic point of view, Gherovici poses questions about transgender individuals like Caitlyn Jenner who maintain celebrity status. Writing on the increasing visibility of transgender individuals through popular media she questions:

Is all this staging of trans-presence making us more aware of the discrimination, inequality, and violence trans people continue to experience? Is the world changing? Or is it just an image? As we have seen, gender mutability has entered the quotidian vernacular ever since the very public transition of Caitlyn Jenner. (Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* 29)

She raises the very important point that socially, transgender celebrities may not be having the impact one would hope for. Transgender people still face violence and discrimination at alarming rates, despite these cultural figures with immense popularity. However, along with the social justice aspects it is important to consider the theoretical impact of these figures. If people like Caitlyn Jenner are challenging the way gender is perceived by the public, but only to a limited extent, it is also possible that they aren't challenging ideology to the fullest extent either.

Michael Lovelock raises this exact objection in his article on transgender celebrities and the complex politics surrounding them. He writes, "Whilst scholarly work has analysed, and

continues to analyse, representations of trans celebrities, this research has largely approached these figures as significant because they make transgender visible, rather than because of the more specific fact that they are celebrities” (Lovelock 737). Looking at Caitlyn Jenner through the lens of her gender identity is certainly essential, but so too is looking at her through the lens that *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* provides. Even before her transition, Caitlyn Jenner was in the public eye as a member of the Kardashian family. Her status now as an out and proud transwoman does not diminish this other aspect of her identity. This multifaceted identity is worth considering through the framework of intersectionality. In her essay on intersectionality, Vivian May explains, “gender is inherently interwoven with the politics, structures, and epistemologies of race, sexuality, social class, disability, and nation” (68). The (trans)womanhood Caitlyn Jenner presents is influenced by an ideal of womanhood informed by class and race, along with her own conservative politics. She is a rich white woman as well as a transgender woman, and this alters her relationship to ideology. She is not simply the disruptive transgender force Gherovici imagined that challenges the symbolic order of binary oppositions through her existence. She also does a great deal of work to uphold that very same symbolic order.

As a reality TV persona and celebrity, Caitlyn Jenner is in a position of constantly attempting to normalize and represent the highest level of ideology. Jenner’s time on the show before her transition involved a constant reaffirmation of her masculinity. Caitlyn, at the time, was one of the noticeably few men present on the show. She would often spend time with her sons from other marriages or Scott, in order to have some guy time. She made frequent reference to her Olympic career, along with continuing to participate in traditionally masculine sports and activities like golfing or racing cars. For example, season 2 episode 8 “Kardashian Family

Vacation” combines these two activities, guy time and masculine sports, when Jenner insists on spending “guy time” with a group of young ski and snowboard instructors. At other times, like in season 6 episode 3 “The Former Mrs. Jenner,” Jenner would object, much like Kris Humphries in his relationship with Kim, to Kris Jenner’s attachment to the Kardashian name rather than the Jenner name she took on in their marriage. One particularly interesting episode in retrospect occurs in the sixth episode of season five. This episode involves the neutering of one of the Kardashian family’s dogs. Jenner is very opposed to the decision and makes frequent reference to how the poor dog is going to lose his manhood. Through actions and arguments like these, Jenner managed to uphold a very traditional idea of masculinity. She enforced the ideological concept of manhood as something linked to masculine behaviors and certain anatomies. She encouraged patriarchal viewpoints when it came to marriage and relationships between men and women, with the men of the family needing time to escape from women and their drama.

After her transition, Caitlyn Jenner’s identity was no less based in dominant ideology, aside from her trans-ness itself. A shift occurred from masculine to feminine, but it was a feminine identity equally as well categorized and defined as her previous masculine identity. Like her former masculinity which relied upon her upper class position to engage in expensive hobbies like golf and racing luxury cars, Caitlyn’s femininity was expressed through capitalist consumerism. Some of the intimate moments during the season 10 episodes dealing with Caitlyn’s transition involve Kim giving her new heels and helping her go through her closet. In the “About Bruce” special, episodes 10 and 11 of season 10, Scott questions whether or not she’ll still have the same hobbies and be a very butch woman. The womanhood Caitlyn and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* seeks to present, the one which the symbolic order would like

to maintain, is one which is neatly categorized as separate from masculinity, maintained through an upper class white identification, and involves capitalist consumption as a necessity.

Returning to the idea of how this impacts Jenner's potential as a subversive subject, we must consider what it means to define oneself under ideology. Both Gherovici and Lovelock call into question the idea of an authentic or true self as promoted by celebrity figures. Gherovici poses questions about the relationship between self and body in reference to Caitlyn Jenner:

Recall that when Jenner's gender change became official on a Vanity Fair cover captioned 'Call Me Caitlyn,' Jenner tweeted, 'I'm so happy after such a long struggle to be living as my true self.' But what 'truth' holds that self and body? What makes the body and the perception of the self cohere? What makes a body more or less authentic to the self it contains and expresses? (Gherovici, *Transgender Psychoanalysis* 104)

Gherovici believes it is worth questioning this "coherent self" and how it is expressed through the body. This is one of the places where Jenner's particular expression of transgender identity loses some of its revealing potential. Her own experience is constructed through this lens of ideology which stabilizes an identity through a body, even one that has undergone dramatic change. Lovelock, similarly critical of the "authentic self" concept, relates it to popular culture, "The concept of authentic self has long been central to the commercial logic and cultural work of stardom and celebrity" (741). He later continues "As a cultural phenomenon, celebrity is thus engaged in the work of producing and delineating the idea of the authentic self as a common-sense understanding of self-identity." (Lovelock 741) The idea of an authentic self allows for the symbolic order to stitch over the Real by incorporating a safer, simpler version of it. By allowing audiences to believe there may be a level of falsehood, but below that there is something authentic which still maintains stable boundaries of identity, the symbolic order prevents these

audiences from looking beyond what they should see. Lovelock explains how the *Vanity Fair* article in which Caitlyn came out functions this way, “For instance, Jenner’s *Vanity Fair* interview/photo-shoot through which she introduced her female identity to the public seemingly invited readers/viewers behind-the-scenes, to witness the becoming public of the apparently ‘real’ female self she had been concealing beneath her former, male persona” (741). The ideological problem caused by transgender identity is solved by presenting the idea of an authentic self. This structuring allows us to think there is still something stable and certain about social identity and identity as a subject; identity can be understood simply through the established parameters. Something may have been hidden before and it has been revealed, but the problem is contained with no need for further investigation. The boundary may shift slightly but it still exists.

Reality, the deceptive construction, always relies upon the Real which it is trying to hide. In terms of celebrity figures like Jenner, this means that reality will be upheld through allowing her to be her “authentic self”, not a falsehood, but still bound by what is acceptable. Lovelock writes about the way celebrity balances out transgender identity, “Within this semiotic and discursive process, Jenner’s celebrity also works to ‘fix; the meanings of transgender identity in a way that speaks to highly normative notions of gendered selfhood” (Lovelock 742). She is still rich, white, and purchasing the necessary products; therefore, the structure will adapt to contain her and prevent the traumatic eruption of the Real. Her transition served to shift the symbolic order, she is now the ideologically prescribed model of femininity instead of masculinity, rather than to radically dismantle the order. Lovelock explains this limit imposed upon the radical potential of Caitlyn Jenner’s identity:

I would argue, however, that Jenner's textual construction as a celebrity works to shut down the ability for representations of Jenner's transgender identity to enact these kinds of epistemological disruptions [...] This discursive framing enables Jenner's transgender identity to attain coherence and consumability for cisgender-assumed viewers, discursively framing her transitional narrative as the making public of an authentic selfhood, in ways that correspond to the commercial grammars of authenticity and self-revelation which structure celebrity culture. (743)

Jenner's relationship to gender cannot be the way in which the Real is accessed in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* because the challenge of her transgender identity has been met with her construction as a celebrity who upholds traditional boundaries of masculine and feminine, despite crossing between them. However, this does not mean she does not provide any glimpse at a problem or visible seam in the symbolic order at all.

Simultaneous Privilege and Oppression

Caitlyn Jenner's identity as a transwoman is inseparable from her identity as a celebrity figure. While this may have unfortunate consequences regarding her gender politics upholding binary distinctions, there is another way in which it provides a breakdown of binaries. By returning to the idea of intersectionality as proposed by Vivian May, Caitlyn Jenner can be analyzed not as a figure who breaks down the seemingly stable boundaries of gender, but as a figure who breaks down seemingly stable boundaries between privilege and oppression. May writes, "Exploring the implications of simultaneous privilege and oppression [...]" Intersectionality seeks to shift the logics of how we understand domination, subordination, personhood, and rights" (168). By taking this intersectional approach, it is possible to begin to

understand the “complex subjectivity” May encourages considering (166). Caitlyn Jenner is a complex subject. She’s not easily contained, but this is not solely because of her gender.

While her transition may have only shifted her role from upholding masculine ideology to upholding feminine ideology, it has also done something more provocative in terms of causing a reconsideration of how classifications of privilege and oppression can coexist. Caitlyn’s own viewpoints reflect her complex identity which cannot be limited to the ideas one might expect from a transwoman. In her article on Caitlyn Jenner’s politics, Anita Brady writes, “the positive reception of Jenner as an out trans celebrity has become increasingly complicated by the conservative Republican politics she identifies with” (Brady). People who may have initially been optimistic about the potential subversions caused by Jenner’s transition were met with the complication that her politics are far from progressive. But, rather than ending possibility for challenging ideology, the disturbance caused by this clash in and of itself opens up this possibility.

Despite a very positive response from many members of the public, including numerous fans of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Caitlyn Jenner still faces discrimination for being a transgender woman. In his biography on the Kardashian family, Jerry Oppenheimer explains some of the struggles Jenner had to face before her transition. He writes about an experience one of Jenner’s previous wives had, “Linda took Bruce to a therapist in 1985, hoping he would change” (Oppenheimer 277). To many people, especially in Caitlyn’s personal life, her identity is something which is still not quite accepted. This can also be seen in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* after Caitlyn Jenner comes out in season 10 where several of the episodes feature Kris Jenner’s distressed reactions to the transition process. Transgender identity cannot be fully enveloped by celebrity status and accepted into the dominant ideology.

Other passages from Oppenheimer's text carry in their wording the negative and bigoted viewpoints that transgender people, including Caitlyn Jenner, have to face. In a work which is meant simply to be a biography of the family, though it is often negative in tone, Oppenheimer writes on the subject of Jenner, "Secretly, he squeezed his athlete's six-foot-two muscular form into their clothes, tried to slip his size-twelve clodhoppers into their Manolos, and tested their makeup for the right look, and just once, one of his adopted Kardashian daughters, the sex tape star Kim, walked in on him" (272). This passage not only emphasizes Caitlyn's previous masculinity and the perceived failures of her body to fit in, but also makes her identity into something immensely shameful. Oppenheimer continues to emphasize Jenner's masculine presentation prior to transition along what he sees as her failure to truly be a woman:

Never thought of as anything but masculine and straight, people who knew him well for decades, including his ex-wives and his many girlfriends, didn't give his preference for being surrounded by glamorous women a second thought. [...] Later the entire world would know his secret: He adored being around glamorous women because he actually liked to try on their clothing and makeup and be like them, because he believed he *was* one of them. (271)

Despite Caitlyn's celebrity status, she still faces bigoted perspectives which position her as outside of a limited worldview and as a confused man trying to be something he is not. Her public position may bring with it a great deal of praise for her bravery, but it does not make her immune from the same language that is used against other trans people to invalidate their identities. Thus, the two aspects of her identity, as someone who is oppressed in the sense that bigoted rhetoric is constantly used against her and other transwomen but also as someone who is

privileged enough to express a white womanhood with the money to transition almost overnight, are inseparable.

Through this interaction between Jenner's identity as a privileged individual with the money, time, and resources to transition comfortably and her identity as a transgender woman who still faces transmisogyny, there is potential for a glimpse at the Real. Queer theorists along with casual viewers struggle to understand how Jenner can identify as she does while still holding conservative viewpoints and enforcing the ideology of traditional feminine and masculine roles. The discomfort and inability to make sense of this dual nature of Caitlyn Jenner's identity arises from the fact that it is not something the symbolic order leaves room for. Trying to consider someone as both privileged and oppressed complicates the ideas of stable and understandable identity which the reality relies upon. If there is subversive potential in Caitlyn Jenner, it lies here, in the dual nature of her identity, not necessarily in her trans-ness itself. Caitlyn's duality, like the duality of Real and reality, can allow for a breaking of supposedly stable boundaries and binaries.

Conclusion

Keeping Up with the Kardashians provides a rich ground for analysis through the lenses of Lacanian psychoanalysis and feminist theory. Due to its nature as a reality television show focused primarily on a group of women, the show prompts discussions concerning reality, gender, and sexuality. Lacan's concepts, as interpreted by more recent theorists like Slavoj Žižek and Patricia Gherovici paired with notable feminist and queer theorists provided a framework for this analysis. Foundational postfeminist theory was incorporated in order to show a potential effort towards critical analysis of the Kardashians and its shortcomings. Close examinations of reality, gender, and sexuality in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* have allowed for a glimpse

into the subversive potential currently possible within the shows structure. But from this starting point, more work can be done towards a radically disruptive femininity on television that does more to dismantle the symbolic order and access the Real.

Reality was the first point of access for the Real analyzed in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Reality, in the Lacanian sense meaning a fantasy constructed in order to maintain the symbolic order, parallels the constructed space of reality television. However, much like the way Lacanian reality relies on the Real it seeks to hide, reality television is only able to exist by having something real beneath it which it hides through the constructed space. Reality television exists in a space between fantasy and actuality and it is the clash between these two spaces which provides the disruptive potential to challenge the standard ideology. This clash has the potential to reveal the Real, or at least to reveal the fantasy space as a construction of the symbolic order. For the Kardashians, this clash occurs whenever the verisimilitude is disturbed because the constructed nature of the show is made directly apparent. While the show may always have this constructed nature, the symbolic order, seeks to hide it through minimizing its visibility. While *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* offers glimpses at the Real through these moments which draw attention to the construction of reality, there is more work to be done in order to access the Real in more radical ways. In her essay, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema", Claire Johnston discusses the ways in which women can work towards a challenging the dominant culture through film. While she specifically deals with film, and is primarily concerned with narrative films, her analysis of myth might be worth applying to the realm of television. She writes:

Myth then, as a form of speech or discourse, represents the major means in which women have been used in the cinema: myth transmits and transforms the ideology of sexism and

renders it invisible – when it is made visible it evaporated – and therefore natural.”

(Johnston 32)

From this viewpoint, narrative cinema, and by extension much of narrative television, portrays women in a way that helps to maintain the dominant ideology that upholds the symbolic order. Reality television may offer a new opportunity to combat this mythmaking through rendering visible that which the mythic reality seeks to hide. Reality television, the more it consistently moves towards breaking down distinctions between myth and Real, can work to dismantle the ideological system. Johnston continues her analysis of film with a discussion of reality, “Any revolutionary strategy must challenge the depiction of reality; it is not enough to discuss the oppression of women within the text of the film; the language of the cinema/the depiction of reality must also be interrogated, so that a break between ideology and text is effected” (37). Johnston calls for the interrogation of reality in a way that causes a break between ideology and text. Reality television has the potential for this break. If more instances were to occur, like those on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, where attention is drawn to the constructed nature of the supposedly natural program, and particularly the constructed nature of women’s roles within the show, there could be a truly radical, and potentially traumatic, encounter with the Lacanian Real.

Another means of accessing the Real was through the role of women as sexual beings on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Postfeminist theory suggested that women like the Kardashians who are open about their sexuality and use it towards capitalist gains are progressive women. However, considerations of viewership and enjoyment for female spectators complicated this interpretation. The feminine masquerade and the obscene enjoyment offered to the female audience in seeing women less concerned with maintaining the societal standard of feminine behavior became one way to access the Real beneath the surface of the constructed

femininity. The moments that gave a glimpse at this access to the Real occurred when the Kardashian women were at their most repulsive for a male audience, with statistics supporting the enjoyment of a female audience. This concept of challenging performed femininity can be pushed even further towards challenging stable notions of identity. In her foundational “Gender Trouble,” Judith Butler writes, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seem that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (329). According to Butler’s view, gender is not inherent to bodies, but imposed upon them. Much like the way the form of reality television has the potential to challenge the seemingly natural functions of reality and Real, so too can women on these programs challenge the notion of gender as something true to one’s body or femininity as something definite and stable.

Caitlyn Jenner’s transition and open trans identity provided another glimpse at the Real through *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Although it might initially seem that any disruptive potential for Jenner would manifest through her gender identity, it actually arose from the clash between her gender identity and her social identity as a celebrity figure, and one with conservative politics as well. This conflict, like that between constructed reality and traumatic Real, showed a flaw in the symbolic orders attempt to cover up and contain identities which might challenge its categorizations. Caitlyn Jenner could not be contained within a system that divides identity into categories of privilege and oppression because of her simultaneously experiencing both. On the subject of gender and liberation, Jack Halberstam wrote, “Because bodily flexibility has become both a commodity (in the case of cosmetic surgeries for example) and a form of commodification, it is not enough in this ‘age of flexibility’ to celebrate gender

flexibility as simply another sign of progress and liberation” (376). The capitalist ideological system which upholds the symbolic order was able to adapt to include certain flexible identities, and it is therefore no longer enough to claim flexibility as progression. Caitlyn Jenner’s transition as a rich white woman was not as significant a challenge to the social order as it might once have been. Yet, because of the way it works with her other identities, there is a way for her to challenge the order as an individual without a proper place. In order to work towards this more radical potential, shows like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* must emphasize this multiplicity of identity and not leave individuals reduced to one aspect of themselves which fits comfortably within the symbolic order’s categorization. These boundaries must be broken in ever more challenging ways.

However, despite these three spaces in which *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* opens up possibilities to access the Real, there is still room for more. Most notably, the concepts of jouissance and abject could play a much larger role in reality television that would disturb reality. In Johnston’s essay on counter-cinema, she draws upon Laura Mulvey’s idea that women on screen are represented as what they represent to men. Johnston states that, “It is probably true to say that despite the enormous emphasis placed on women as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent” (33). Again, though she is dealing primarily with narrative cinema, the formulation of viewership is worth applying to reality television to consider the way women are presented. Some of the strongest moments in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* occur in those moments where the women are presented as women, and not the constructed women who appeal to heterosexual men. These moments of open unattractiveness or unseemly bodily details work towards the radical portrayal of women as abject. For a significant challenge to be posed to

the symbolic order and constructed reality, woman as woman, and even further, woman as monstrous is essential.

The most significant way to access the Real on reality television in a show like *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* would likely arise from monstrous women on screen for the obscene pleasure of a female audience. In her essay on horror films, Barbara Creed defines the abject as that which goes against categorization and borders; a monstrous feminine figure who disturbs systems of ordered identity (Creed 252). Creed works towards this definition as based in horror films. She argues that these films do the ideological work of controlling the feminine figures that challenge the social order (264). They stage the violent eruption of these figures in order to control and limit them within the films. However, if this concept were to be applied to reality television, there could be a space for the abject and monstrous woman to erupt without being contained as she may be in narrative and horror cinema. Women, as the Kardashians do at their societal “worst” moments, could express themselves openly and aggressively if they could only get past the constructed framework of the symbolic order that currently limits them. Here, without being contained by narrative punishments or a horror framework inspiring fear, the monstrous woman that defies categorization could be enjoyed, to the pleasure of a female audience. The excessive and uncontained jouissance which grants access to the traumatic Real. In her piece on counter-cinema, Johnston asserts the importance of desire and enjoyment:

At this point in time, a strategy should be developed which embraces both the notion of films as a political tool and films as entertainment [...] In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women’s cinema must embody the working through of desire. (39)

Reality television need not be condemned as a genre which consistently upholds ideology and a constructed reality. There must be a move towards embracing the elements of the Real which peak through, and encouraging more of these moments. Female viewers must enjoy these moments and the women on screen must work to consistently challenge the symbolic structures that seek to limit their monstrous nature as beings who cannot be contained. The Kardashian women should be obnoxious, even more so than they are now. They can resist sexualization and proper subject positions, Caitlyn Jenner can display all the aspects of her identity which exist in paradoxical conflict, the producers need not hide the cameraman, and the female audience should enjoy this chaotic and traumatic eruption of the Real.

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