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# FROM SOAP OPERA TO REALITY PROGRAMMING

## EXAMINING MOTHERHOOD, MOTHERWORK AND THE MATERNAL ROLE ON POPULAR TELEVISION

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Representations of motherhood dominate the television landscape in a variety of popular genre texts, and as such it is important that we consider the ways in which these women are being constructed and circulated on the small screen. Indeed, although much work has been done to investigate the depiction of women on television, little research exists to account for the portrayal of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal role. With this in mind, this article introduces extant literature concerning the representation of motherhood in the media and then examines ways in which this research might be understood in relation to the depiction of mothers in soap opera, situation comedy, teen drama, dramedy and reality television. It considers the ways in which popular television texts form a consensus as they negotiate the idealized image of the 'good' mother in favour of a more attainable depiction of 'good enough' mothering which stands apart from the romanticized image of the ideal mother that dominates the broader entertainment arena.

Les représentations de la maternité pullulent sous différentes formes génériques dans le paysage télévisuel; il est important d'examiner leur construction et leur circulation sur leur petit écran. En dépit d'une littérature fort chargée s'intéressant à la représentation des femmes à la télévision, il existe peu de travaux sur la mise en scène corollaire de la maternité. Cet article retrace dans un premier temps les travaux existants, puis explore les applications possibles de ces recherches quant à la représentation des mères dans les *soap-opera*, les comédies de situation, les séries pour adolescents, les comédies dramatiques, et la télé-réalité. On y voit émerger les façons dont un consensus se forme dans le paysage télévisuel alors que chaque représentation cherche à négocier la différence entre une maternité idéale, et une « maternité acceptable » qui pour sa part se distancierait de la perfection inatteignable prônée dans le domaine plus vaste du spectacle en général.

## Introduction

Women make up 52 per cent of the world's population, and yet men continue to outnumber women on the domestic medium of television by two-to-one. Moreover, when women are seen on screen they are seldom seen in positions of power, authority, experience, or maturity (Thorpe). It is no surprise then that extant literature from such fields as feminist television criticism, media communications, and gender studies deem it crucial to explore those representations of feminism and femininity that exist in contemporary popular programming. However, although much of the work to date seeks to investigate the depiction of women on television, little exists to account for the portrayal of mothering, motherhood, and the maternal role. Even though motherhood has developed as a central issue in feminist scholarship, as evidenced in the wealth of texts committed to exploring mothering practices—in relation to sexuality (Ferguson), peace (Ruddick 2007), disability (Thomas), globalisation (Cheng), work (Gatrell), and health (Clark)—these texts do little to account for the portrayals of motherwork presented on television. Yet the maternal figure is portrayed in a wide range of television texts; these cut across genres and are scheduled at different points for a variety of audiences. Closer examination of these representations in a broader consideration of the maternal role remains a valid pursuit, justifying further attention within the growing field of motherhood studies.

Although this article seeks to introduce and examine a number of popular television genres in order to consider the ways in which they adhere to or debunk the ideology of intensive mothering, readers will no doubt question the inclusion of some television categories and the exclusion of others. I look to justify my choice of case studies by stating that the genres introduced here depict women as mothers and appeal to this same demographic. Moreover, this article chooses to work across the televisual genre spectrum since this is akin to what viewers do and how audiences engage with the small screen. This work does not and cannot offer an exhaustive overview of the history of each genre or the minutia of each representation, but rather, it stands as a broad introduction to existing representations of motherhood as they exist on the small screen. It is my hope that the genres presented here will act as the first point of entry for a reader who will then look to unmask ways in which those themes, theories, and representations are also evident in a broader range of texts, be they in the UK or the US, daytime or primetime, long running or pilot programmes. I argue that contemporary popular programming presents a myriad of strained and struggling maternal figures, which appear in stark contrast to the ideology of intensive mothering, but which constitutes a relief considering the demands inherent in wider entertainment

Extant literature argues that a serene and selfless image of 'good' motherhood

dominates the cultural landscape, and women today are struggling to live up to this. Given that television is so pervasive, its role in circulating this image can be reasonably assumed. It is therefore important to look at the representations of motherhood on contemporary television programming and consider the ways in which popular texts either adhere to the image of the intensive mother or negotiate such motherhood practices in favour of a more attainable depiction of 'good enough' mothering. This article will introduce extant literature concerning the representation of motherhood in the media before looking at the ways in which this research might be understood in relation to the depiction of mothers in a wide range of popular television genres such as soap opera, situation comedy, teen drama, dramedy, and reality television. It is my point that these television genres can be seen to form a consensus in the ways in which they present mothers struggling to construct and maintain appropriate mothering behaviors. Although one might choose to critique such texts for deriding those mothers that dominate the small screen, I suggest that the sheer volume, scope, and reach of such struggling maternal figures goes some way towards exposing the expectations of a 'good' mother as a romanticised myth that women are purportedly striving to emulate. This analysis is crucial, not because such representations are an accurate reflection of reality, but because they have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations and define maternal

norms and mores for the contemporary audience.

### The 'good' mother myth

A myriad of research from within the fields of motherhood studies and feminist media criticism informs us that the 'good' mother is a woman who, even during pregnancy, observes appropriate codes of style, appearance, attractiveness, selflessness, and serenity (Pitt). The ideology of intensive mothering suggests that after the baby is delivered, this woman takes sole responsibility for the care of her children; she is fully responsible for their emotional development and intellectual growth (Green 33). Most importantly however, she is a full time mother who is always present in the lives of her children (young and old), she remains home to cook for them after school, and if she works outside of the home she organises such responsibilities around their needs (Chase and Rogers 30). Deborah Borisoff makes the point that in order for mothers to adhere to this maternal image, mothers, and only mothers, must supervise each childhood activity. They must lovingly prepare nutritious meals, review and reward every school assignment, seek out educationally and culturally appropriate entertainment whilst maintaining a beautiful home and a successful marriage (7). This 'good' mother finds this intensive maternal role to be natural, satisfying, fulfilling, and meaningful; she feels no sense of loss or sacrifice at her own lack of freedom, friendships, financial independence,

or intellectual stimulation (Green 33). The concern here is neither that a new mother might want to sacrifice her own wishes for her newborn's welfare nor that she seeks to provide an exhaustive range of educational play dates and activities. Rather, if a woman does not emulate this image then "she risks the accusation of being a bad mother" (qtd. in Wolf 50).

If one considers that myths function to regulate society, then it is worth noting that the 'good' mother myth emerged in response to women's growing "social and economic independence: increased labour participation, entry into traditionally male areas of work, rise in female-initiated divorces, growth in female-headed households, and improved education" (O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws* 10). While women were making social, sexual, financial, and political progress, this maternal backlash developed to ensure that "women would forever feel inadequate as mothers [and to make certain that] work and motherhood would be forever seen as in conflict and incompatible" (O'Reilly, *Mother Outlaws* 10). In short, the ideology of intensive mothering serves as a discourse that attempts to return women to their earlier domestic place on the back of the second wave and postfeminist agenda. Since the ideology of intensive mothering presents mothers as effective consumers whilst giving them the sole responsibility of childcare without financial recompense for their labour, patriarchal society remains the chief beneficiary of traditional gender role assignments and the 'good' mother

myth. One might extend this argument by suggesting that the whole of society stands to lose if women's feelings of maternal inadequacy continue to be perpetuated. After all, the burden of welfare states are increased with rising numbers of stay-at-home mothers who have internalized the ideology of intensive mothering demanded of the 'good' mother.

The contemporary media environment is saturated by idealised and conservative images of selfless and satisfied 'good' mothers who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering. Susan Douglas informs us that the landscape "is crammed with impossible expectations ... dominated by images of upper-middle-class moms, both real and fictional, who "have it all" with little sacrifice, counterposed by upper-middle-class women who have fled the fast track for the comforts of domesticity" (285). More recently, the seminal work of Douglas and Michaels informs us that films, radio and advertising, print, broadcast news, and the magazine sector raise "the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers" (14). These authors describe the 'good' mother, who saturates the popular media environment, as being selfless, serene, slim, and spontaneous and above all else, satisfied by her maternal role (Douglas and Michaels 110-39). So too, Kitzinger makes the point that entertainment texts "bombard" women with advice about

how to construct and maintain socially appropriate motherhood practices, be it tips on health, relationships, surface appearances, or maternal practices (qtd. in Maushart 464). Advice literature and child-rearing manuals are also said to play a part in constructing and circulating the ‘good’ mother myth due to the fact that the women in these texts are asked to “serve as a constant comforting presence, to consider the child’s every need, to create a stimulating environment exactly suited to each development stage, and to tolerate any regression and deflect all conflict” (Thurer 336). Moreover, constructions of acceptable mothering demand that these women conform to traditional gender roles, with cooking, cleaning, and domestic chores being “embraced” by the “good” mother (Kinnick 12). Katherine Kinnick goes on to say that:

[T]he media idealize and glamorize motherhood as the one path to fulfillment for women, painting a rosy, Hallmark-card picture that ignores or minimizes the very real challenges that come along with parenthood. Second, media narratives often cast motherhood in moral terms, juxtaposing the “good mother” with the “bad mother,” who frequently is a working mom, a lower-income mom, or someone who does not conform to traditional gender roles of behavior, ambition, or sexual orientation. (3)

When the entertainment and news media present motherhood in moral terms by contrasting what they deem to be the socially acceptable ‘good’ mother with what they believe to be the reprehensible

‘bad’ mother, they are “both prescribing and proscribing norms for maternal behavior” (Kinnick 9). Douglas and Michaels make the important point that the mass media has been and continues to be “the major dispenser of the ideals and norms surrounding motherhood” with the popular cultural landscape collaborated in constructing, magnifying, and reinforcing the new ‘momism’ or what I refer to here as the ‘good’ mother myth (11).

The mass media has a long history of presenting the ‘good’ mother archetype, and this mediated image is depicted as the ideal figure of maternal care which women in the audience are asked to embody. As I have already noted, this figure of womanhood is exhausting, physically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Therefore one might expect mothers to speak out against this unrealizable myth or rally against what must be seen as a rather limited and limiting version of maternal care. However, this is not the case.

Mumsnet, Britain’s most popular website for parents receives 570,000 site visits and over 30 million page views each month, with over 25,000 posts each day (Google). Although this site gives parents space for peer-to-peer support, there is a sense that these forums support a narrow and privileged notion of the ‘good’ mother. The website set up by two media professionals turned stay-at-home mothers encourages intensive mothering practices as part of a desirable identity. Even a cursory glance at the site gives the impression of an upper-

middle-class maternal environment, and the content confirms this even through the pattern of consumption that is emphasized. Under a banner entitled “Money Matters” there is little about tax credits, child benefits, and school meal entitlements. Rather, a helpful list informs mothers on the following: “Why you should save, Ethical savings, How to give to charity, and Mortgage calculators.” Moreover, the style and beauty pages dispense advice on “Hair care, Skin problems, Botox and filler, Home pedicures, and Fake tans.” Under the title “Lunchbox Tips and Ideas” we are reminded that “what you pack is open to scrutiny—not just by other kids but by other mums. So if your child’s going to a friend’s house after school, make sure that’s not the day you give in to Fruit Shoots and Greggs sausage rolls. Stick a few stray aduki beans/arugula leaves/seaweed sachets in the lunchbox” (“Packed lunch ideas”). When the topic is education, the forums are peppered with conversations about the differences between private and state schooling (mumsnet). Savings, charitable donations, home pedicures, seaweed sachets, and private education speak for and about a privileged notion of contemporary family life that appears in keeping with a socially acceptable, culturally appropriate, and romanticised image of motherhood. The bloggers on Mumsnet can be said to uphold the notion of the serene, selfless, and satisfied mother. Indeed, rather than critique its hectic nature, it is these mothers who contribute to and help to circulate this ideology of intensive mothering.

The media are keen to remind us that “women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” (Douglas and Michaels 4). And yet, even though this image of motherhood is far removed from the lived experience of many women in society, this figure continues to be presented in the popular entertainment environment as the epitome of perfect mothering that women in the audience should all aspire to and strive for. Indeed, viewers are told that the ‘good’ mother is “the ‘legitimate’ standard to which mothers are compared [...] she becomes an ideal to believe in, and one that people both expect and internalize” (Green 33). Shari Thurer echoes this point when she states that “[m]edia images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and the onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers’ feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. We are told that mothers today cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded” (340). Thurer continues by commenting that:

[T]he current standards for good mothering are so formidable, self-denying, elusive, changeable, and contradictory that they are unattainable [...] the current Western version is so pervasive that, like air, it is unnoticeable. Yet it influences our domestic arrangements, what we think is best for our children, how we want them to be raised, and whom we hold accountable. (334)

One might look to question why it is that mothers who themselves might be struggling to live up to this ideology of intensive mothering put on a mask of ‘good’ motherhood or speak with an appropriate yet inauthentic maternal voice. Douglas and Michaels seek to address this point when they suggest that as mothers we “learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times” to save maternal shame or humiliation (6), and their argument is compelling here.

Susan Maushart makes the point that the “gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood” (*Mask of Motherhood* 7). After all, even though mothers know that the ‘good’ mother is an exhausting ideal, “the ideal of motherhood we carry in our heads is so compelling that even though we can’t fulfil it and know that we probably shouldn’t even try, we berate ourselves for falling short of succeeding” (Warner 721). It has been suggested that the “ideology of natural-intensive mothering [...] has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices *all* women’s mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering” (O’Reilly, *Motherhood to Mothering* 7; italics in original).

The problem here of course is that few mothers are capable of upholding this idealized image of maternal care. Indeed, working mothers are automatically deemed “poor” or “bad” caregivers due to the time that they spend apart from their children (Borisoff 8). Yet, stay-at-home mothers also struggle to attain the ideal due to the intensely exhausting physical and emotional demands of such maternal practices (Held 11). The fact that many mothers are unable to mother within the ideology of intensive motherhood does not seem to lessen the power of this maternal model, rather, it means that many expecting, new, and existing mothers present what Susan Maushart refers to as a “mask” of appropriate motherwork which further reinforces the dominance of the ‘good’ mother myth (*Mask of Motherhood*). This, in turn, has an impact on gender stereotypes and maternal mores in the wider society.

With the popularity of its texts, television can be understood as a battleground for contested maternal ideologies. As such, it is important to look at the ways in which popular television texts present motherhood and motherwork. We should pay attention to the ways in which a diverse range of fictional and factual genres either adhere to or challenge the romanticised myth. In the following section I provide a brief overview of the ways in which motherhood and motherwork are currently being presented on some of television’s most popular texts. What is presented here is by no means an exhaustive list of maternal depictions;

rather, it attempts to demonstrate how the medium of television helps to challenge the ‘good’ mother myth that is in evidence in the wider media environment. Readers are invited to consider how such depictions might speak to audiences, advertisers, or the wider entertainment environment. In short, this article seeks to encourage future research on the maternal representation by exposing existing representations.

### Soap opera: challenging the ‘good’ mother stereotype

Soap opera is routinely understood as a woman’s genre. Perhaps it is more fitting to refer to it as a maternal genre, due to the importance of motherhood, the significance of the maternal role, and the acknowledgement of motherwork in the weekly narratives. The soap opera appears committed to presenting a number of poor, single, teenage, homeless, bipolar, abusive, and drug addicted mothers, not to mention a diverse range of sexually, socially, and financially independent mothers and ‘other’ mothers who each in turn confront and confound the ‘good’ mother archetype because they destabilise “patriarchal representations of motherhood and family structures” (Reyes). Based on the formal demands of the genre, Soap opera can never depict a ‘good’ mother in line with the maternal ideal. Rather the genre is dominated by those women whose maternal identities and motherwork practices negotiate the culturally appropriate and socially acceptable image of the stay-at-

home mother. The characteristics and expectations associated with the ‘good’ mother set women up to fail, and this pattern of failure is played out in minute detail in the soap opera. However, rather than critique the genre for its depictions of ‘bad’ mothers, one might consider the ways in which these women are merely presenting a more candid version of motherhood that exposes the role as “wearing, boring, and, at times, infuriating” (Douglas 284).

Early British radio soap operas such as *Mrs Dale’s Diary* (1948-69) were presented as “narratives of maternal sacrifice and redemption” (Plant 42) and when new television soaps were introduced, they were based around a myriad of mothering roles. While *Coronation Street* (1960- ) presents Elsie Tanner/Patricia Phoenix as the archetypal struggling working-class single mother, *Crossroads* (1964-88) gave us the epitome of middle-class working motherhood in the character of Meg Mortimer/Noele Gordon. However, although the matriarch has always been integral to the soap opera narrative, the figure of the housewife has become less prevalent and more troubled in recent examples of the genre (Brunsdon 81). Peter Buckman states that “the problems of motherhood” (67) are crucial to soap opera, Christine Geraghty argues that the mother figure is the undisputed “heroine” of the domestic text (81), and Dorothy Hobson notes that “child-rearing” is one of the genre’s principal story-lines (9). The soap opera does not merely represent motherhood, but rather, it represents the “power of

motherhood” within the family unit and such maternal power is most evident in the ways in which the genre foregrounds “the needs of children for their mothers” in the weekly narratives (Hobson 93). Tania Modleski’s work on the soap opera suggests that two of the most fundamental and oft repeated narrative devices revolve around unwed mothers and the difficulties of balancing a career and motherhood in these domestic dramas (31).

It is important to remember that soap opera presents female characters as more than mere stereotypes due in part to the sheer volume of time spent following their stories, and perhaps this is why the audience can see the women struggling to adhere to the ideology of intensive mothering. Successful intensive mothering is only available to a small number of privileged women, and even then, these women can find such maternal care exhausting over the period of time that we spend with the women of soap opera. From this perspective then, female viewers in general and maternal audiences in particular are empowered to doubt the attainment of the mothering ideal. Perhaps they can take solace in witnessing the struggles of others whose experiences compare with theirs.

### **Situation comedy: maternal fulfillment and motherwork frustrations**

While the soap opera has, since the outset, presented a variety of maternal images and motherwork practices, the situation comedy has witnessed

a dramatic shift in representations of the family in recent decades. While programmes such as *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-63) and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958-66) made it clear that women were entirely satisfied with their role as full time wife and mother, and *I Love Lucy* (1951-6) offered a partial challenge to traditional gender roles (Feasey 32-36), the impact of the second-wave feminist movement encouraged titles such as *Maude* (1972-8), *Murphy Brown* (1988-98), and *Roseanne* (1988-97) to depict more controversial images of divorce, single parenting, and the working mother. Indeed, the situation comedy has presented such a myriad of family units since its emergence on commercial radio in the 1930s that the most daring and unique representation in recent years seems to be that of the traditional, nuclear, middle-class family, with shows such as *My Family* (2000-2011) and *Outnumbered* (2007-) being presented as “plausibly novel” in their depiction of the patriarchal unit (Hartley 66). After several decades of divorced, widowed, working-class, quasi, and queer representations, the middle-class nuclear family has returned to our screens, and what is interesting here is the ways in which representations of motherhood in this seemingly traditional format challenge the ‘happy housewife’ stereotype by reflecting both the pleasures and comedic frustrations that come with modern day mothering.

Although caring for children might



Fig. 1, Fig. 2

at times be pleasurable, fulfilling, and emotionally rewarding, the contemporary sitcom makes it clear that “the burden of caring for children can become routine drudgery or emotional torment when it is done constantly, repeatedly, because of one’s obligations, and when it consumes nearly all of one’s energies and time” (Held 11). Even though today’s sitcom mother feels demoralised in the home and despondent at the lack of care or attention given to the domestic space by the rest of the family, she clearly defines herself as a mother and homemaker. Indeed, these mothers routinely want to remove themselves from the domestic role and yet cannot help but continue to define themselves in it. They are often frustrated with the day-to-day workings of family life yet struggle to let others take over these responsibilities. This desire for domestic control reminds us of the ways in which earlier generations of the ‘happy housewife’ were granted power, albeit in limited form, based on their position in the family home. It is as if these women understand that any respect or gratitude that they earn from their family is based on their position in the home, thus they continue in this role, even though motherwork frustrates rather than fulfils them.

The contemporary sitcom makes it clear that we should sympathise and potentially identify with the harried and hard working mother figure, even when they are not necessarily depicted as the most efficient or organised figure of maternal authority. Rather than judge these women in line with

the ‘good’ mother myth we are asked to acknowledge, as Diane Speier does, that mothers “are human and flawed, and are learning on the job,” and since “mothering is a trial and error experience, we need to respect that at best it will be ‘imperfect’” (149). Indeed, these shows are not presenting the unhappy mother and housewife in order to critique the institution of family or traditional family values, rather, they are simply trying to critique those unrealistic and unrealisable ideals of middle-class suburban domesticity that have historically dominated the genre. Therefore, it is not the family unit that is of concern. On the contrary, it is the feminine mystique of the contented homemaker that is being challenged. In this way the comedy continues to foreground the importance of motherhood and motherwork to the family, suggesting that this role might be frustrating rather than fulfilling for the woman in question. It is this final point that separates the early family sitcom from its more recent counterpart.

### **Teen television: toxic and intoxicated mothers**

Teenagers and the teen experience have been a staple element within both soap opera and the situation comedy since the 1950s. However, the adolescent lifestyle tends to be presented from the point of view of the adults, particularly that of the maternal figures in the aforementioned television genres. It was not until the mid ’90s that audiences were asked to view the teen experience from their point of view in a range of quality small screen

productions. Although routinely absent or overlooked in “must-see” teen dramas such as *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), *Party of Five* (1994-2000), and *Dawson’s Creek* (1998-2003), parents and guardians have taken on a highly problematic role in contemporary teen drama. The genre shows parents as weak and irresponsible, be it socially, sexually, or financially, and in many cases it is the mother who is delinquent. Even a cursory glance at contemporary teen programming makes it clear that parents are either problematic forces in the life of the teenager or entirely absent in their lived reality. Sherri Sylvester makes the point that “fictional adolescents without parents are a trend [and] parenthood is out of the picture” in teen television. Likewise, Joyce Millman tells us that “parents are mostly dead, absent or background static” in the genre in question.

Contrary to the squeaky clean image suggested in the ‘good’ mother myth, teen programmes often feature mothers as troubled alcoholics and drug addicts first and maternal caregivers second. Future research would be welcome to garner just how frequent these images are in the genre, but in the first instance it is worth noting that *Beverly Hills 90210* introduced us to an alcoholic and drug addicted former fashion model who routinely ignored, berated, and abused her daughters. *Popular* (1999-2001) presented viewers with two alcoholic, abusive, and emotionally unavailable mothers. In the *O.C.* a teenage boy had the painful experience of living with an alcoholic mother and

was eventually kicked out of his family home. Though adopted into another home, his nightmare was relived as he watched his adoptive mother take to alcohol as well. Likewise, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (2001- ) depicts a young woman having to create a life with her alcoholic mother while her father is fighting in Iraq. *Veronica Mars* (2004-7) presented a teen investigator selflessly sacrificing her college tuition to put her mother into an alcohol rehabilitation clinic, only to discover that the woman is clandestinely drinking and stealing from her own family. In *Beyond the Break* (2006-09) a young girl is seen running away from home to escape from her alcoholic mother, while *Hellcats* (2010) focused much of its drama on the turbulent relationship between a young pre-law student and her unreliable alcoholic mother. Likewise, *90210* (2008- ) presents a broad range of toxic and intoxicated mother figures including a glamorous “yummy mummy” who is more interested in her appearance than her daughter’s well-being, a hippy who believes in free love and legalised drugs and who sleeps with her daughter’s teacher, classmate, and boyfriend, a secret drug abuser-in-denial and emotionally unavailable Hollywood mother, a bipolar drug addict and abusive alcoholic, and a young heiress who refuses to compromise her life for her new baby.

One might suggest that these representations of motherhood belong firmly within the tradition of teen television as one way in which we can enjoy the trials and tribulations of the youth

experience without the teen characters or adolescent audience being impeded by a controlling voice of authority or a civilising figure of maturity. However, this is less about a lack of parental figures or guardians of authority and has more to do with an absence of mothers—potentially problematic for a teen audience during their formative years as these narratives of maternal abandonment and indifference might be seen to signal accepted and expected norms of mothering. Several of the aforementioned programmes make it clear that fathers and male guardians are to be respected because they alone “provide structure, guidance and authority” for those teens under their care (Banks 19). Teen drama goes to great lengths to debunk the ‘good’ mother myth, demonstrating instead that maternal feelings and motherly instincts are not natural, fixed, or innate for all women. As such, one might suggest that the genre is picking up on early second wave feminist writing which attempted to denaturalize motherhood and theorise the maternal without recourse to those “natural or biological explanations” that inform the ‘good’ mother myth (Miller 56). That said, the fact that we experience the teen drama from the adolescent rather than the adult viewpoint means that the mothers in question tend to be demonized as toxic figures of failed maternal care rather than feminist icons challenging idealized images of intensive motherwork.

### **Dramedy: single, sexual and sisterly motherhood**

The dramedy, like the teen drama, is a relatively new television genre that has received much critical and commercial success since its emergence in the late 1980s. Although the classification is relatively broad, recent examples of the genre tend to focus on a number of alternative family codes, conventions, and complications. Indeed, although one might suggest that the mother figure is not herself the focus of the genre in question, many of these programmes seem committed to the presentation of the family unit in general and the alternative, non-nuclear, and non-patriarchal family unit in particular, be it stepfamilies, single parenting, surrogate parenting, or homosexual partnerships. *Moonlighting* (1985-9) presented pregnancy and miscarriage, *Northern Exposure* (1990-5) depicted a phantom pregnancy, and the underlying narrative of *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002) seemed to grow out of the central protagonists concern over her biological clock and the subsequent discovery of her 10-year-old daughter. *Six Feet Under* (2001-05) depicted accidental pregnancy, abortion, and the death of a young mother, *Weeds* (2005-) focuses on a suburban widow resorting to desperate means to support her children, while the *Gilmore Girls* (2000-07) was dedicated to the relationship between a teenage mother and her daughter. *Parenthood* (2010-) revolves around the trials and tribulations of one extended family, focusing on the pain of divorce and the financial, social,

and educational struggles surrounding single motherhood while *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) presented a number of fascinating representations of ‘bad’ motherhood and ‘poor’ maternal care, through a myriad of medicated, murderous, “stepford,” and single mothers. In short, the dramedy appears keen to debunk both the traditional nuclear family and the romanticized ‘good’ mother.

We are told that there are still very few representations of single mothers on the small screen, be it due to a right wing political agenda (Skipper 82) or the lack of necessary escapism for the audience (Benfer), and yet the dramedy routinely depicts this particular maternal figure, in part because of the genre’s interest in contemporary social issues. Angharad Valdivia informs us that on the rare occasion when a single mother is presented in contemporary popular culture, she tends to conform to negative discourses that suggest that she is failing her children and falling short of parenting ideals (272). Much of this negative discourse is associated with the woman’s desirability and sexual availability. It is commonly understood that those representations of motherhood that are the most sexual and alluring are also the same representations that are the most dysfunctional (Kenner 56). Abby Arnold makes this point somewhat bluntly when she tells us that “conventional wisdom dictates that a mother who is truly sexy must be [...] a slut and [...] a bad mother” (3).

Although characters such as Susan Mayer/Teri Hatcher from *Desperate Housewives* are svelte, fashionable and fun, the fact that they are both incredibly glamorous and inconceivably clumsy goes some way towards taming the potential power of the sexual single mother. The fact that Susan “can barely walk across the street without falling over” (Knowles) may appear endearing to some, but it speaks to the infantilisation or more general incompetence of the sexual figure. In short, this comedic device is merely a “trait thrown in to tone down the sexuality of a television mom” (Kenner 54). Likewise, cultural commentators seek to question the appropriateness of a mother who cannot pay her own bills, arrange custody conflicts, or orchestrate romantic unions without the help of her teenage daughter. Alice Hart-Davis makes this point when she tells us that the “blurring of generations can be the social equivalent of a car crash” because, although these mothers may suit their daughters’ youthful attire and want to be seen as young, fashionable, and on trend, they are failing to “respect [the] healthy boundaries” that parenting demands. Hart-Davis concludes by telling us that “[i]f your child likes you at the end of the parenting process, great. But that’s best if it comes about by being a good role model for them to look up to, rather than being too pally.” From this perspective then, Susan may be a desirable and desiring single woman, but she cannot be a desiring, desirable, and appropriate single mother, because being presented in such a way detracts from the selfless nature of the ‘good’

mother who is said to sacrifice her own desires for those of her children.

### Parenting documentaries and reality television: maternal shame, scandal and humiliation

While the dramedy presents fictional women as selfish, sexual, and scarce mothers, a growing number of documentaries, docu-dramas, reality shows, and celebrity formats seek to expose a range of salacious and scandalous images of real, lived motherhood practices. Such programming offers some of the most conservative distinctions between the ideology of intensive motherhood and real examples of ineffectual mothers. By purporting to highlight the aberrant, the genre invites its viewers, and asks mothers, daughters, and grandmothers in the audience, to judge these women and find their maternal practices wanting.

Celebrity reality shows that feature the new breed of accessible, available, and candid celebrity such as Kerry Katona's *The Next Chapter* (2010- ), Katie Price's *Katie* (formerly known as *What Katie Did Next*) (2009- ), and Alicia Douvall's *Glamour Models, Mum and Me* (2010) present mothers who struggle to maintain the mask of perfect motherhood, or rather, who are unwilling to adhere to the rules of intensive mothering. Katona, Price, and Douvall are examples of recognisable women who are currently challenging these maternal myths by letting audiences view their day-to-day

mundane, and otherwise, motherwork practices on the small screen. These programmes do not shy away from showing these women as sexual, selfish, and unfulfilled by their maternal role, and as such, we are asked to view these texts as a more believable, albeit still privileged, example of contemporary motherhood. The fact that these women appear happy to demonstrate their motherwork on camera makes us question whether they are either unable to uphold the mask of perfect motherhood, or uninterested. Either way, celebrity reality television can be seen to provide one more challenge to the 'good' mother myth that dominates the wider media environment.

In the broader televisual landscape, reality programming continues to exploit the image of the struggling mother. *Help Me Love my Baby* (2007) focused on the traumatic journey of a maternal mother who only bonded with one of her twin girls, while *Cotton Wool Kids* (2008) allowed us to condemn one particularly anxious mother for wanting to have a chip implanted in her daughter for the purposes of safety, security, and surveillance. *The World's Oldest Mums* (2009) focused on a number of women who had chosen to use fertility technologies in order to have babies long after the menopause, *Octomom: Me and My 14 Kids* (2009) detailed the daily motherwork of Nadya Suleman, the woman who gave birth to the world's only surviving octuplets, leaving audiences to question the appropriateness of an unemployed single mother who uses artificial

insemination to produce her children and uses media contracts to provide for them. The programme thus called attention to those who used motherhood as an excuse for ‘scrounging,’ living off charity, or the largesse of the state. Such practices are generally associated with mothers from low-income groups. This genre tends to deal with real social issues, like the case of gender preferences. *8 Boys and Wanting a Girl* (2010), examined the psychological condition of “gender disappointment,” whereby a mother who has a number of sons is desperate to have a daughter. Viewers are left to question the appropriateness of those women who are unhappy with or unfulfilled by their existing children. These preferences have serious cultural undertones, therefore the programmes help viewers confront and challenge the cultural practices which value one particular gender over the other. *Four Sons versus Four Daughters* (2010) questioned the gendered mothering taking place in two family homes, whilst also condemning what they set up as hypothetical maternal practices. Even from their titles, the regulatory mission of these programmes is evident. *Misbehaving Mums to Be* (2011) focused on a number of mothers whose pregnancy practices do not adhere to the ‘good’ mother myth, while *Fast Food Baby* (2011) was committed to showing the ways in which ‘bad’ mothers failed to provide the correct nutritional food for their children, and witnessed their efforts to shift their inappropriate eating habits and maternal practices.

Documentary representations of

motherhood are at best conservative and at worst critical of real mothers and the lived maternal role. And while parenting documentaries depict biological and other mothers as problematic and pathological, their reality televisual cousins routinely depict mothers struggling with the maternal role, emphatic on the attainability of the ideal. Programmes such as *Supernanny* (2004- ) *Nanny 911* (2004- ) and *Extreme Parental Guidance* (2010- ) routinely emphasise the mother as the primary caregiver in the nuclear family, even if she works outside of the domestic space. Mothers are portrayed as the domestic manager, in charge of meal times, bath routines, bed-time stories, school runs, grocery shopping, household chores, and general children’s entertainment planning and activities. In short, mothers are portrayed as the primary parent even when the contribution of fathers is acknowledged. As such, mothers are also depicted as being responsible for existing behavioral problems. Indeed, several of the infants, toddlers, and older children who swear at, kick, punch, and spit at their mothers tend to act very differently when their fathers are present in the home. Indeed, it is often clear that the “men in the families are peripheral to these titanic struggles, as the mothers are ultimately left with the burden of raising the children” (Tally 21).

Parenting documentaries and reality programming hold up the ideology of intensive mothering as the only model of motherhood to aspire to. That said, rather than critique or condemn these programmes for exposing shocking

maternal practices or for exploiting fragile mothers, these shows might be understood as a powerful, necessary, and real voice for negotiating the constraints involved in contemporary motherhood practices. Indeed, if one considers that contemporary mothers are said to bring inaccurate or ill-informed, disabling, and delusional expectations to motherhood and the maternal role (Maushart, *Mask of Motherhood* xviii), one might suggest that reality television shows on parenting which feature strained and struggling mothers serve to bridge the gap between expectations and lived experiences.

## Conclusion

Although television is an entertainment driven medium that lends itself to extreme representations for the sake of audience escapism, the sheer scope of struggling maternal figures on the small screen cannot, and indeed should not, be dismissed in the name of amusement or distraction. I would argue that the fact that the domestic medium is understood as mere entertainment and the fact that the genres outlined here address in the main to the woman in the audience means that these depictions must be taken all the more seriously for the ways in which they speak to, inform, or frustrate the viewing public. In short, representations of motherhood have the power and scope to foreground culturally accepted familial relations, and as such, it is crucial that we examine those representations of motherhood and motherwork that dominate the contemporary media landscape.

Although little research exists to account for the myriad representations of motherhood, motherwork, and maternal roles seen in contemporary television, this article has begun to explore the ways in which motherhood is being constructed, circulated, and interrogated in both fictional and factual programming, considering the ways in which such representations can be understood in relation to the ideology of intensive mothering and the 'good' mother myth that dominates the contemporary period.

The soap opera presents a self-serving rather than serene image of motherhood; the situation comedy highlights the pleasures and frustrations of motherwork; the teen drama introduces a number of toxic and intoxicated maternal figures; the dramedy text portrays the trials and tribulations of the single mother, while reality television positions mothers as fragile, failing, and ineffectual. Although each genre has its own repertoire of elements, thematic codes, and narrative conventions, they appear to form a televisual consensus in their representations of 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable' mothering.

Many of these televisual mothers are devoted to their children. They consider their maternal role to be a privilege and want to create happy and harmonious families. This aspiration echoes the desire to be 'good,' evidence that the 'good' mother myth continues to persist. However, the fact remains that many of the women are single, sexual, and scared, and even those within otherwise

stable familial relations still struggle to maintain authority in the home, finding little satisfaction in the routines of domestic life. This demonstrates their removal from the ideology of intensive motherhood. However, rather than condemn or critique such seemingly problematic figures for their inability to adhere to idealised maternal ideals, these expectant, new, and existing mothers should be applauded for debunking the improbable and unobtainable 'good' mother myth in favour of 'good enough' and achievable maternal practices.

### Image Notes

Figs 1 and 2 Images from the TV show *Outnumbered*. In: Drew-Honey, Tyger. "What I love about being in *Outnumbered*." *bbc.co.uk TV Blog*. 8 April 2010. Web. 12 Nov. 2013. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/tv/posts/what-i-love-about-being-in-outnumbered>

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## Bio

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