Introduction: Women's Authorship and Adaptation in Contemporary Television

Sarah Louise Smyth

University of Essex, UK, sarah.smyth@essex.ac.uk

Sarah Louise Smyth is a Lecturer in Film at the University of Essex, UK. Her work focuses on women's authorship and the screen industries, where she has published essays on British women filmmakers. She is currently beginning a new project on Nora Ephron and has recently published the chapter "Nora, Julie, Julia: Legacies of Older Women in Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia* (2009)" in *Women, Ageing and the Screen Industries.*

Stefania Marghitu

University of Alabama, USA, smarghitu@ua.edu

Stefania Marghitu is an assistant professor in film and television at the University of Alabama. Her work focuses on feminist media studies with an emphasis on television, authorship, and industry. She is the author of the Routledge television guidebook *Teen TV* (2021). She has published work in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies* and *Communication Culture and Critique*, and the edited collections *White Supremacy and the American Media* and *Refocus on Amy Heckerling*. She is currently working on a monograph on women showrunners in US network television.

Abstract

This special dossier examines issues in women's authorship and adaptation in contemporary television. Recently, in the television streaming era, there have been a number of significant television shows adapted from an original woman-authored source text that have a prominent woman in a production role, such as showrunner, writer, director, or executive producer. This invites attention in the period of "quality" television, where the figure of the television "auteur," often in the form of the showrunner, has emerged. This dossier complicates this figure: firstly, by focusing on women authors, who are often excluded from notions of auteurism; secondly, by insisting on the collaborative nature of television authorship; and thirdly, by examining adaptations, which have proven to be productive sites for feminist explorations of women's authorship. As the contributors in this dossier reveal, women's authorship in adapted television is one of multiplicity, collectivity and collaboration – but also competition, antagonism and struggle. Making evident the rich but complex landscape of women's television authorship today, this dossier intervenes in discussions around women's authorial agency and authority, while also evidencing women's continued limitations in the contemporary television industry.

Keywords: women's authorship; television; adaptation; feminism

Recently, in the television streaming era, there have been a number of significant television adaptations from an original woman-authored source text with a prominent woman in a production role, such as showrunner, writer, director, or executive producer. These include *Alias Grace* (2017), *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019), *Bridgerton* (2020–), *Conversations with Friends* (2022), *Dublin Murders* (2019), *Fleabag* (2016-2019), *Gentleman Jack* (2019–), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–), *I Love Dick* (2016-2017), *I'll be Gone in the Dark* (2020), *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), *Little Fires Everywhere* (2020), *The Luminaries* (2020), *My Brilliant Friend* (2018–), *Normal People* (2020), *Olive Ketteridge* (2014), *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), *Queen Sugar* (2016-2022), *Sharp Objects* (2018), *Shrill* (2019-2021), *The Undoing* (2020), and *You* (2018–). The growing visibility of women practitioners in television already invites attention due to women's historic under-representation in the television industry (Lauzen 2021). However, this trend is especially pertinent, this special dossier argues, due to the complexity of authorship at work in these texts.

The recent period of "quality" television from networks and platforms such as HBO, Netflix, Hulu, and the BBC has seen a rise in the figure of the showrunner as the television "auteur" (Nochimson 2019; Mittell 2015; Newman and Levine 2012; Anderson 2008). While television remains a collaborative medium, with many production personnel contributing to the resulting show, the struggle for discursive meaning over authorship has become pronounced in this period of "quality" television. With this comes the additional burden of gendered authorship as, similar to film auteurism, the television author function connotes the highly masculinized properties of authority, mastery and control - properties from which women are routinely shut out (Mittell 2015, 104). Nevertheless, a number of high-profile women working in television have emerged, including Rachel Bloom, Michaela Coel, Lena Dunham, Sharon Horgan, Ilana Glazer, Abbi Jacobson, Mindy Kaling, Jenji Kohan, Issa Rae, Shonda Rhimes, Amy Sherman-Palladino, and Phoebe Waller-Bridge. Recent considerations of women's television authorship have been cautiously optimistic about the number of women working in the industry and the interventionist representations of women they portray on screen (Havas 2022; Levy, 2022; Hagelin and Silverman 2022; Pinedo 2021; Perkins and Schreiber 2019; Alsop 2019; Ford 2019; Marghitu 2019; Mihailova 2019; Williams 2019; Woods 2015).

Nevertheless, as Claire Perkins and Michele Schreiber warn in their recent introduction on women's television work, the discourse around this feminism "frequently reinforces postfeminist ideas around achieved progress for women in media production by working to canonize individual showrunners and those who orbit them" (Perkins and Schreiber 2019, 920). Moreover, critics must be wary of claiming representations of women in women's television work as inherently feminist. Rather, we must pay sustained attention to the relationship between authorship and representation, and remain vigilant to the kinds of feminisms that mediate these discursive constructions. As the dossier further reveals, white, upper class womanhood remains pervasive both on and offscreen in the TV streaming era, which yet again reinforce the post-feminist pillar of neoliberal individuality. This pattern, previously seen in the network era and the rise of cable and the multi-channel eras, privileges visibility over change.

This special dossier analyses the various gendered modes of authorship at work in key television texts. That all of the television programmes are "quality" shows - four of the six essays analyse a HBO show - suggests where authorship is most visible and most charged. To a greater or lesser extent, the articles in this dossier deploy adaptation as an object of analysis and/or a methodology to think through women's authorship. In an industrial landscape where film and television are relying more and more frequently on existing intellectual properties and pre-sold audiences (Lavigne 2014), adaptations, with their built-in fanbases, prove attractive projects for networks and streamers, as with remakes, reboots and spin-offs. As Betty Kaklamanidou (2020) argues in a recent edited collection on adaptation, the contemporary television landscape, with its large number of series based on previous sources, has become a productive terrain for adaptation studies. Recent academic discussions note the complex theoretical questions generated by television's adaptations in an era of convergence culture (Griggs 2018; Grossman and Palmer 2017; Wells-Lassagne 2017); television adaptations often go beyond the singular, "original" text, expanding the storyworld and leading to new questions of authorship and ownership. Moveover, television adaptations have a strong history of appealing to women, evidenced by numerous Jane Austen adaptations, including the BBC's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and postfeminist ur-text *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), consolidating television

and literature's association with domesticity, mass appeal, melodrama, romance, and sentimentality (Modleski 2008; Radway, 1991; Brunsdon 1990). In this special dossier, Sarah Louise Smyth explores this in relation to Reese Witherspoon's book club, arguing women's adaptation can be read as an industrial practice. Witherspoon's popular feminist celebrity works to reassure audiences of the contents' quality and accessible feminism, and create an intimate and loyal book club audience who both read the books and watch the screen adaptations.

Adaptations have proven to be productive sites for feminist explorations of women's authorship. As Shelley Cobb, who contributes to this collection, argues in her book about women filmmakers and adaptation, women's adaptation can be read as a conversation, allowing critics to theorise authorship through collaboration and co-authorship (Cobb 2015, 10). Would focusing on adaptation allow us to move away from individualist notions of authorship, valorising not the singular television auteur, but enable us to reconsider authorship as collaboration, conversation, and co-production? Cobb's theorisation proves a useful starting point for this dossier, enabling its contributors to consider the relationship between women's authorship in adapted television as one of multiplicity, collectivity and collaboration – but also competition, antagonism and struggle. All contributors consider the collective nature of television authorship, examining how, as Tanya Horeck argues in her article, women's voices become refracted, remediated and reframed. At times, this can be productive for feminism. Jessica Ford argues in her article on *Sharp Objects* that collective authorship brings forth an affective feminism. Similarly, Horeck, examining *I'll Be Gone in the Dark,* suggests multiple female voices enable a restorative feminism. For Karim Townsend, co-authorship in *Enlightened* (2011-2013) can lead to representations of alternative modes of community, mothering, and futurity. At other times, however, women's collaborative authorship becomes a site of struggle. Smyth considers the alleged mistreatment of director Andrea Arnold during the production of *Big Little Lies'* second season in relation to Reese Witherpsoon's popular feminism. Shelley Cobb and Eve Bennett both consider the failed intersectional feminism of *Little Fires Everywhere* and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013-2020) respectively. Making evident the rich but complex landscape of women's television authorship today,

this dossier intervenes in discussions around women's authorial agency and authority, while also evidencing women's continued limitations in the contemporary television industry.

Jessica Ford begins this special dossier with a television show that refuses to be confined to a single author - *Sharp Objects*. Ford's article "Televisual authorship and the affective feminism of HBO's *Sharp Objects* adaptation" examines *Sharp Objects'* collaborative authorship: it is based on Gillian Flynn's novel of the same name, created, and written for television by Marti Noxon, and directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. Although this may open up the possibility of reading adaptation as conversation between female authors, Ford identifies Noxon as curiously absent as an author from the show's paratextual material. However, instead of trying to "find" the singular female author, Ford locates the show's feminism elsewhere: in its affective representation and address. Ford makes a strong case for how the show "feels feminist" through its representation of women's trauma, instincts and emotions, and makes a strong case for drawing together the authorial and the textual.

Sarah Louise Smyth's article "Reese Witherspoon's Popular Feminism: Adaptation and Authorship in *Big Little Lies"* continues the concern with collaborative authorship (which also involves Jean-Marc Vallée), but considers a case study where this collaboration spectacularly failed. *Big Little Lies'* second season director, Andrea Arnold, allegedly had her creative control and authority undermined at the hands of first season director Vallée, writer David E. Kelley, and HBO executives. Smyth contextualises this within *Big Little Lies'* other discursive author, executive producer and star Reese Witherspoon, who is vocal in her mission to "shine a light" on women's authorship across media via her company Hello Sunshine. Contextualising Witherspoon within popular feminism and identifying sisterhood as a key strategy through which Witherspoon deploys this feminism, Smyth reveals who is excluded from this female collective: both Arnold and, in its narrative, the show's Black female characters. As popular feminism limits, excludes, and disciplines those who trouble its logics, Smyth argues that feminist critics must be attentive to the ways this informs women's authorship and representation on television.

Shelley Cobb considers the Hulu adaptation of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* within Lauren Berlant's notion of sentimentality. *Little Fires Everywhere* was also produced by and stars Reese Witherspoon and, like Smyth, Cobb interrogates Witherspoon's role in the production, content, and reception of the series. Having visible female authors and stars and centring female stories, Cobb argues that *Little Fires Everywhere* creates an intimate public of "feminist-femininity," which privileges sentimentality and feeling over the political. Cobb draws this together with the series' 1990s setting, intersectional and collaborative authorship, and Kerry Washington's casting and subsequent depiction, interrogating the extent to which the series critiques white feminism through its focus on class, race, and motherhood. While the series was praised for its diverse writing staff led by co-producers Witherspoon and Washington, Cobb discerns how *Little Fires Everywhere* does not provide a utopian, multi-racial sisterhood between its four mother characters. Instead, Cobb asserts that *Little Fires Everywhere* provides a countersentimental narrative by refusing to portray interracial sisterhood between Witherspoon and Washington's on screen portrayals.

Tanya Horeck further complicates ideas of authorship and gender within the true crime genre in her article "*I'll Be Gone in the Dark*: Feminism and the Adaptation of True Crime in the #Me-Too Era." Horeck argues that Liz Garbus' television version of Michelle McNamara's *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* is representative of a post #MeToo true crime series. Horeck details how the book - completed and published by a team after McNamara's sudden death during its writing - and the series has been refracted through many voices. A compelling example of adaptation, Horeck argues that *I'll Be Gone in the Dark* offers a critical reflection on how true crime is approached as subject matter, especially regarding rape and gender-based violence. Through a rich analysis of the remediated voices, Horeck reveals both the restorative power and problematic whiteness of the HBO series. Significantly, Horeck proposes new feminist interventions for the study of genre, adaptation, and authorship.

In his article, "The Mother is a child, too": neoliberal segmentarity, reproductive futurism, and relationality in *Enlightened*," Karim Townsend dissects how Mike White and Laura Dern's *Enlightened* (2011-2013) draws on Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995) in his Deleuzo-Guattarian analysis of the series' relationship with issues such as motherhood, capitalism, and ecology, amidst the

contemporary neoliberal era. Townsend reveals Dern's contribution as a co-author of the series, demonstrating how the star's investment in activism and advocacy for social causes informed the feminist and political concerns of the series. Townsend contextualises this within the role of the actress-producer, both historically (Lucille Ball and *I Love Lucy*) and currently, where premium cable and streaming services have provided new opportunities for women actor-producer projects in 2010s television. Townsend considers Deleuze and Guattari's thinking on micropolitics, segmentarity, and becoming alongside *Enlightened* and *Safe*'s common bounds of ecology, neoliberal capitalism, New Age spirituality, and maternity. He also draws on Haynes' own directorial involvement in *Enlightened*, speaking to the networked authorship between the two texts. Townsend's rich analysis suggests *Enlightened* posits alternative modes of community, mothering, and futurity, and pinpoints the larger political implications of a segmented feminism.

Eve Bennett's article, "Lost souls, victims and deviants: radicalization and gender in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*" considers the ways *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* has been discursively read as authored by the white, male, celebrity television auteur, Joss Whedon, which sidelines the contribution of co-showrunner and co-creator Maurissa Tancharoen (Joss Whedon was co-creator and directed and wrote the pilot episode, while his brother Jed was also co-showrunner and co-creator). Collaborative authorship makes identifying singular authorial signatures difficult - if not futile - so Bennett reads *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as a collectively authored text, situating it in relation to another series written by both Whedons and Tancharoen: *Dollhouse.* However, despite being co-authored by a woman of color, Bennett argues that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* reproduces pernicious, highly gendered stereotypes of people, especially women, involved in terrorism, portraying them as the products of broken homes, or, in the case of the women, as victims, "mothers," "monsters," or "whores." *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* acts as a reminder that women's authorship does not equate to feminist representation; women of color are embedded in powerful structures of racialized sexism in the media industries, which can be difficult, as academics, to untangle.

Lastly, the roundtable on Women's Authorship and Adaptation in Contemporary Television, moderated by Smyth, provides a conversation between feminist television scholars Marghitu,

Elizabeth Alsop, Jacqueline Johnson, Isabel C Penido, and Theresa Trimmel. The conversation took place in summer 2023 and captured current thoughts on women's authorship and television. Alsop's suggestion that women's authorship is currently having a "surgence" proves especially productive, as panellists noted that many women showrunners, writers, producers, and directors are becoming highly visible in the streaming era, but this eclipses certain women authors; whiteness, for example, continues to be extremely pervasive, despite high-profile women such as Shonda Rhimes and Ava DuVernay working in television. Interestingly, panellists noticed that, despite the "surgence" in women's television, it still proves a challenging topic to teach as notions of taste and quality still permeate, causing students to often dismiss women's television as worthy of critical attention. The roundtable proved to be a fruitful and exciting discussion, and hopes to open up new avenues for further research.

Bibliography

Alsop, Elizabeth. 2019. "Sorority flow: the rhetoric of sisterhood in post-network television." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1026-1042. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1667066.

Anderson, Christopher. 2008. "Producing an Aristocracy of Culture in American Television." In *The Essential HBO Reader,* 23-41. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press.

Brunson, Charlotte. 1990. "Problems with Quality." *Screen* 31 (1): 67–90. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/31.1.67.

Cobb, Shelley. 2015. *Adaptation, Authorship and Contemporary Women Filmmakers*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ford, Jessica. 2019. "Women's indie television: the intimate feminism of women- centric dramedies." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 928–943. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1667060.

Griggs, Yvonne. 2017. *Adaptable TV: Rewiring the Text.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grossman, Julie, and R. Barton Palmer. 2017. *Adaptation in Visual Culture: Images, Texts, and Their Multiple Worlds*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hagelin, Sarah, and Gillian Silverman. 2022. *The New Female Antihero: The Disruptive Women of Twenty-First-Century US Television.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Havas, Julia. 2022. *Woman Up: Invoking Feminism in Quality Television*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

Kaklamanidou, Betty. 2020. Introduction: Inclusivity and Possibilities. In Betty Kaklamanidou, (ed.), *New Approaches to Contemporary Adaptation*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 1-18.

Lasagna-Wells, Shannon. 2017. *Television and Serial Adaptation.* New York: Routledge.

Lauzen, Martha M. 2021. "Boxed In: Women on Screen and Behind the Scenes in 2020-2021." *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film*.

Lavigne, Carlen, ed. 2014. *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-Use, Recycle*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Levy, Yael. 2022. *Chick TV: Antiheroines and Time Unbound*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Marghitu, Stefania. 2019. "*Broad City* and *Insecure's* millenial showrunners: from indie web series to cable and streaming crossovers." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1050-1053. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1667075.

Mihailova, Mihaela. 2019. "Drawn (to) independence: female showrunners in contemporary American TV animation." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1009-1025. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1667065.

Mittell, Jason. 2015. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling.* New York: New York University Press.

Modleski, Tania. 2008. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. Second Edition. New York, Routledge.

Newman, Michael Z., and Elana Levine. 2012. *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*. New York: Routledge.

Nochimson, Martha P. 2019. *Television Rewired: The Rise of the Auteur Series.* Austin: University of Texas.

Perkins, Claire, and Michele Schreiber. 2019. "Independent women: from film to television." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 919-927. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1667059.

Pinedo, Isabel C. 2021. *Difficult Women on Television Drama: The Gender Politics Of Complex Women In Serial Narratives*. New York: Routledge.

Radway, Janice. A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

Williams, Sherri. 2019. "Queen Sugar's women directors: nourishing complex images." *Feminist Media Studies* 19 (7): 1043-1046. DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2019.1667073.

Woods, Faye. 2015. "*Girls* Talk: Authorship and Authenticity in the Reception of Lena Dunham's *Girls*." *Critical Studies in Television* 10 (2): 37-54. http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/CST.10.2.4.