Investigating Reality TV: How 'Keeping Up with the Kardashians' and 'The Real Housewives' Introduce New Ways of Seeing and Selling

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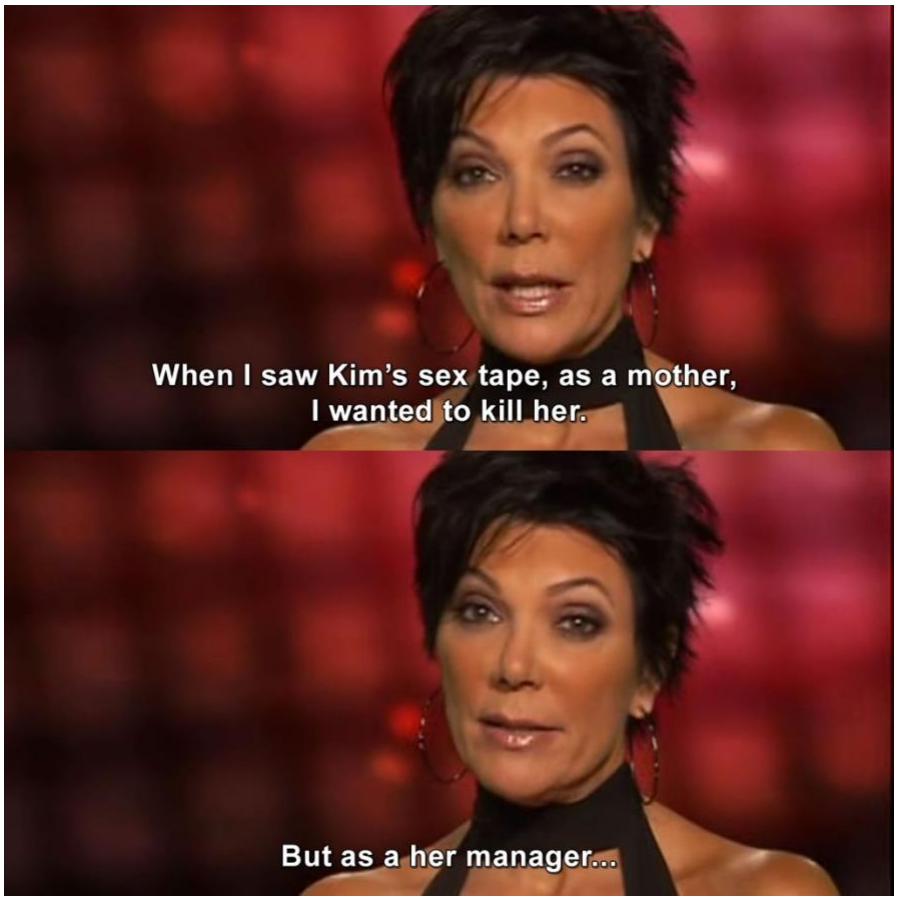

Kris Jenner, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* S1E1 3:40, Hayu.com.

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Introduction

The Kardashians have been in my life for the majority of it, and at this point I may know more about them than about my own family. Since the premiere of their reality show *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* in 2007, I, and the rest of the world, was able to bear witness to every mundane and life-changing moment of their lives. From organizing pantries, giving birth, eating salad, and being robbed in Paris, they have shared it all. Now, twenty seasons later, their show has ended, but as they said in the finale episode, they will "always be okay because [they] have each other" (S20E12 43:23), and I will always be okay because I also have *The Real Housewives*. Premiering the year before *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, this docusoap grew into a successful franchise that broadcasts groups of female friends living their lives. By watching these shows, it follows that I have spent hours and hours of my life looking at how other women live theirs. But while some may think this has been a huge waste of time (could I have worked for NASA if I had spent my hours differently?), I do not regret one thing, because these shows, and the women on them, are incredibly interesting.

As Brenda R. Weber states in "Trash Talk: Gender as an Analytic on Reality Television,*"* "as a set of cultural texts, those labelled reality TV constitute an enormous and ever growing archive, rich with meaning about the collective interests, pursuits, desires, and anxieties motivating viewers, producers, and reality television participants" (2-3). Far from being empty entertainment or a waste of time, reality TV is thus a perfect place for an analysis of our culture.

As a concept, reality TV is hard to pin down, situated in numerous in-between spaces in culture: between fiction and non-fiction (not quite documentaries – produced and edited but *not* scripted), blurring the lines between private and public spheres, performed and 'real' personalities, 'ordinary' people and celebrities, between seeing and being seen. It relies heavily on its audience's ability to navigate these blurred lines, for it requires, as Weber

states, “a mode of critical reading practice that positions viewers both within and outside of the text. It fosters and demands a splitting of one’s critical consciousness into an insistent hybridity” (20). This hybridity at the core of reality TV is what qualifies it as “an important contribution to aesthetics and to art,” according to Weber.

This contribution has been well documented and analysed in scholarly works on the phenomenon of reality TV. Its multifaceted-ness is reflected in the numerous fields that have covered parts of it, such as celebrity studies, gender studies, film and television studies, social studies, digital media studies, and communication studies, as well as the endless topics that have provided interesting explorations, such as selfie-culture, surveillance, neoliberalism, identity, class, race, commodification, and consumerism – to name a few.[1] The diversity found in these studies attest to the many interesting facets of reality TV, which often overlap and connect to one another, and relate to issues and phenomena in society and culture – affirming the hybridity of reality TV.

This hybridity is also evident in the place reality TV holds in our media landscape. As Laura Grindstaff and Susan Murray state in “Reality Celebrity: Branded Affect and the Attention Economy”: “Reality programming has altered the landscape of broadcast television over the past decade, ushering in new industrial labor practices, new narrative/textual codes, [and] a heightened interdependence of broadcast and digital platforms” (109). In a way, reality TV encompasses a rupture and a morphing at once, as it has moved away from traditional broadcast media, and into the realm of new technologies, where social media is now intricately connected to broadcasting.

As Ruth A. Deller explains in *Reality Television: The TV Phenomenon that Changed the World*, “reality television’s techniques have paved the way for many of the forms of self-presentation we see online” and social media formats “can be seen as direct descendants of reality TV in many ways” (164-168), taking reality TV’s mechanism of revealing the private

in public one step further and paving the way for our current Influencer culture where people make a living by presenting and promoting themselves online.[2] Reality TV shows like *Keeping Up with The Kardashian* and *The Real Housewives* – which are categorized as docusoaps because they "follow the antics of real-people 'characters' as they go about their everyday lives" (117, Grindstaff and Murray, 2015[3]) – move along this break between traditional media and new media because the women on these shows are not actors, but present themselves on TV, social media, and in real life. They, essentially, live their lives in modes of hybridity.

Reality TV thus encompasses a shift towards new forms of media as well as a hybridization of broadcasting. In its in-between-ness, its blurred lines, certain structures have the opportunity of changing or morphing into something new. In this thesis I will investigate two such structures, to analyse how they operate within the hybrid forms of reality TV.

The first structure concerns the gaze, which will be examined in chapter one. Found to be male and patriarchal in Hollywood narrative cinema by Laura Mulvey (1975), and empathetic, motherly, and powerless in soaps by Mary Ann Doane (1987) and Tania Modleski (1979), I wonder how the gaze operates in *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, two shows that provide their audience with a female centred cast who are actively presenting themselves. The second structure concerns the financial side of this self-presentation, which will be the topic of chapter two. How have (changed) economic structures, with their base in post-Fordist capitalism (Hearn 2011, Lazzarato 1996), formed the self-presentation of the women on these shows? By examining how these structures manifest themselves in the docusoaps chosen as subject matter, my aim is to pin the workings of reality TV down, making the blurriness of our changed media landscape, and ultimately our changed lives, somewhat less elusive.

A Brief Introduction of the Subject Matter

Before diving into the workings and structures of *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, there are some things important to note about the subject matter. The combination of the two was chosen in this examination of reality TV because they are both docusoaps, similar in structure and content. As stated earlier, they premiered a year apart and have had a long run on television, as well as a large presence on social media. They are both American reality shows, and while the shows are broadcast around the globe, this thesis and its findings are thus placed in an American ('Western') context, as it does not necessarily pertain to docusoaps from different parts of the world, like *Terrace House* from Japan, for example.

Keeping Up with the Kardashians (2007-2021, E! Network) concerns an Armenian-American family living in L.A., navigating their lives, work, and fame while placing a focus on the closeness of the family. Kris Jenner (1955) is the matriarch and "momager" of her children. At the start of the series Kris was married to then Bruce Jenner, now Caitlyn Jenner (1949). They had two daughters: Kendall Jenner (1995) and Kylie Jenner (1997). Before this, Kris was married to Robert Kardashian (1994-2003), who famously was a part of O.J. Simpson's legal team. With Robert, Kris had Kourtney (1979), Kimberly (1980), Khloé (1984), and Robert Kardashian (1987). Throughout the years, the show has focused on the family, how it changed and grew, but the constant has always been the oldest sisters, Kourtney, Kimberly (Kim), Khloé, and their mom.

The Real Housewives (2006-, Bravo) concerns a franchise of the same-style docusoap recreated in different cities. Starting with *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, it has moved into Beverly Hills, New York, New Jersey, Potomac, and Atlanta among other cities, but each iteration has the same premise: following a group of wealthy and entertaining female friends as they go about their days. Contrary to what the title may imply, the women can

hardly be classified as traditional housewives, with most of them being very business-savvy and providing for themselves. The show focuses on their friendship, or lack thereof in certain cases, and documents their interactions as they go to parties, lunches, and vacations. For my research I will limit my focus to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, and *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, because their content aligns with the questions I will be asking, and because they offer a diverse cast of women.

Chapter 1: The Gaze

Introduction

In the season seven reunion of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta,* Kandi Burruss and Nene Leakes confront the chasm that has developed in their friendship over the course of the season; they try to talk it out, explain their point of views, confront each other with their respective wrong doings, all to tie it up with the words: "We good. I see you. …. We see each other. … We see each other, we good" (S7E23 16:43). These small statements, while meant to wrap up conflict, lead to multiple questions on our end. First, in the small context of this example: are they really "good"? (Spoiler alert: no.) Secondly, with regards to the bigger picture to be analysed in this chapter: how do the women on reality TV shows like *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* see each other? How do the scenarios of these shows, where the ever-changing interpersonal relationships and subsequent judgements take centre stage, influence the way they see each other? And how does it influence how the audience sees them? In short: how does the gaze operate?

These questions are especially interesting when we look at the place reality TV holds in the media landscape. As stated in the introduction, reality TV docusoaps like *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* exist in a place of in-between-ness, which is also evident when we investigate the gaze(s) in these shows. While owing a lot of their form to soaps and melodrama – prolonged storylines, domestic settings, multiple point of views – reality TV differs from more traditional media because the women on these shows are not actors. They might slowly become characters, but these characters are attached to their real person, which exists in and outside of the show and has an effect on the audience's gaze. Slightly less revolutionary when looking at the legacy of soaps and melodramas, but still worth noting in the larger scheme of television, is how the casts of these shows consist mostly of women, who are primarily interacting with other women. This provides an interesting

dynamic with regards to gaze studies, which had, at one point in history, located the power of the gaze in the male protagonist and the male audience.[4] What's more, the reality structure of these shows allows the women to comment on what is happening on the show by means of confessionals (interviews dispersed throughout the episodes that provide their take on the events) and extended media, such as their own social media or appearances on talk shows. This complicates both the gaze within the show, as well as the audience's gaze outside of the show. The combination of all these characteristics means that within gaze studies *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* occupy an interesting space. Reality TV has seemingly introduced a new scopic regime, in which dynamics have changed, and it is this new way of looking, this new scopic regime, that I want to investigate in this chapter.

In order to do so, I will first establish a baseline of the gaze theories that I will use for my analysis. While these docusoap style shows are far removed from the Hollywood narrative cinema that Mulvey took as her subject matter, her significant work on the gaze in "Visual Narrative and Narrative Cinema" is important to return to, both to see how power dynamics show themselves in narrative and scenario, and to see how the absence of a distinct male protagonist and audience may change how the gaze operates. Can we, for example, still see the gaze as embedded in a patriarchal structure?

I will also look at gaze studies that hit a bit closer to home, such as Tania Modleski's work on the gaze in soaps, in which she characterized the female audience's gaze as an empathetic gaze due to the complexity that comes from having multiple points of views on a show. Then, I will take newer studies on gaze into account, stemming from an anthology called *Revisiting the Gaze*, in which parts of our current culture are taken into account, such as the digital social media world and its implications.

After laying down this theoretic baseline, I will examine how the gaze operates in *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* by focusing on two recurring themes

in these shows. The first theme concerns etiquette, which will be separated into two sections: etiquette concerning manners and etiquette concerning appearance. The second theme concerns the element of competition between the women, which also has an effect on the audience and their gaze. Lastly, I will quickly dive into the dynamic of the audience, to see how the gaze found in the shows reflects and/or affects their gaze.

Theoretical Background

In her 1975 work called "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey introduced psychoanalytic theory to expose the way in which the patriarchal order structured the look in narrative Hollywood cinema. She found that men (in the assumed roles of main character and spectator) are the ones articulating the look, controlling both the camera and audience's point of view, while women (in their often silent and objectified roles as side-characters) are the bearers of the look. She states:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (11)

In this active vs. passive structure of cinema, women are subjected to the male gaze and pushed into a realm where only appearance matters, they are "looked at" and "displayed" for, as Mulvey found, woman

> stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command

> by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (7)

In cinema, this mechanism is reiterated by displaying woman as (sexual) object and spectacle, in which parts of her body are shown in close-up shots, producing the woman as icon (11-12). Mulvey found that the often-repeated figure of the show-girl produced an image of woman where she is "isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized" (13). Her performance allows her to be a spectacle, one that the male character watches, and by way of his point-of-view shots, the male spectator watches this spectacle with the same pleasure (12).

What's more, Mulvey found that the narrative of Hollywood cinema also allowed for the subjugation of women by turning them into the possession of the male protagonist and the film's audience: "as the narrative progresses [the female character] falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property … By means of identification with [the main male protagonist], through participation in his power, the spectator can indirectly possess her too" (13).

Thus, according to Mulvey, the male gaze combines the gaze of the main male character and that of the audience, and is one that subordinates women, in accordance with the patriarchal order, leaving the women on screen with the burden of being unheard, passive, and objectified. But how does this relate to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives*, in which men only play a small role, and the women drive both the point of view of the camera and the audience? How has the changed dynamic on and off screen affected the gaze? Is this gaze less patriarchal and misogynistic, does it allow women their full humanity, or has it evolved into something hybrid? To get closer to answering these questions we first have to look at a point in time in media and gaze studies where the presence of women was larger than in Hollywood cinema: the time of the melodrama and soap.

As Mulvey's work lies at the base of gaze theories, her findings are without a doubt incredibly valuable and important. However, since its publication in 1975, critics have pointed out limitations to her theory: questions regarding race or female spectatorship were unaccounted for in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and other academics have tried to fill those gaps.[5] Mary Ann Doane and Tania Modleski both investigated female centred media and its female audience, in the forms of melodrama and soap. In *The Desire to Desire*, Doane found that "the tropes of female spectatorship are not empowering" as she outlined how melodrama blurred the lines between the female subject and object as "she is simultaneously projected and assumed as an image" (9). Moreover, melodrama promotes differences in the way that it is situated as a "'feminine' form" in which "alternatives appear to be closed off and limited by a constricted domestic sphere" (72-73). In its hailing of the pathological mother figure, melodrama pushes its characters and its audience to "constantly [decipher] the intentions, desires, and weaknesses of other characters" (72), further collapsing "any distinction whatsoever between subject and object" (83).

The constant deciphering that Doane mentions, is also recognizable in soaps, as Modleski finds in "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas." The many lives represented on soaps lead the subject and spectator to multiple identifications, resulting "in the spectator's being divested of power. For the spectator is never permitted to identify with a character completing an entire action" (14). Furthermore, like Doane found, this "subject/spectator" of soaps is characterized as an

> Ideal mother: a person who possesses greater wisdom than all her children, whose sympathy is large enough to encompass the conflicting claims of her family (she identifies with them all), and who has no demands or claims of her own (she identifies with no one character exclusively). (14)

Within *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the ensemble casts also allow for multiple identifications, but the characterisation of both the subjects and spectators of these shows as 'ideal mothers' is debatable. Whereas the structure of these shows (with their use of confessionals and reunions that provide insight into every point of view[6]) seems to perfectly align with the multiplicity of perspectives that lead to sympathizing with all sides, more often than not it leads to a dividedness filled with judgement among the cast and the audience, as we shall see. This dividedness is decidedly more prevalent in *The Real Housewives*, seeing as their friendships are allowed to not survive the seasons. When it comes to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, the goal will forever be conflict-resolution, for both the subjects and audience, seeing as the concept of a close-knit family drives the show.

While reality TV can partially be traced back to soaps,[7] these shows now exist in a time and place where new types of media and technology have influenced our way of looking. As Morna Laing and Jacki Willson find in *Revisiting the Gaze: The Fashioned Body and the Politics of Looking*, "the act of 'looking' and 'being-looked-at' is still politically charged," but "digital culture has opened up new questions when it comes to images of women" (18). Stepping away from a male gaze or a motherly gaze, they find evidence of a 'critical gaze' and quote Deborah Jermyn (2016) who states that both younger and older women are "party to hierarchies that restrict [them]," where they are "scrutinized, elevated, or relegated alongside one another according to how they look" (15). Dawn Woolley takes this critical gaze a step further in chapter six of *Revisiting the Gaze*, when she theorizes on "The Dissecting Gaze: Fashioned Bodies on Social Networking Sites." She argues that

> Contemporary culture … produces a particular type of fetishistic look: a magnifying, dissecting gaze. This mode of looking is an internalized gaze that compels the individual to work on the body so it more closely resembles social body ideals. It is

> not the pleasurable scopophilia described by Mulvey but a judgemental, disciplining gaze. (123)

In her argument, she takes social media, and in particular selfies, as the biggest perpetuator of this gaze. Social media and selfies are intrinsic to our new media landscape in which there has been an increase in the amount of images shared of (edited) 'normal' people. The large number of shared images leads, according to Woolley, to an "increase in self-surveillance" which "causes an intensification of the self-policing gaze, producing a magnifying and dissecting gaze" (135). This gaze "turns small flaws into glaring aberrations" and produces a "fetishistic hyperfocalization" that sees only body parts that need improving: "when the individual focuses on a small area of imperfection, the appearance and experience of the whole body are obscured from comprehension" (135). In this way, Woolley recognizes the gaze found in our current image culture as a harsh one: magnifying, dissecting, judgemental, and disciplining both to others and to the self, focused on judging and producing ideal bodies.

As social media is intrinsically linked to reality TV (Deller 164-168), basing its structures and principles on a similar broadcasting of the self, I will investigate whether a similar gaze can be found in *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

Situating the Gaze in Etiquette

In both shows, groups of women are put together – whether through 'friendship' or family-ties[8] – and their interpersonal relationships, communication, and conflict drives the narrative. As stated earlier, the predominance of women on these shows makes for an interesting interrogation of the gaze. How do they look at each other? And how does the audience look at them? As we shall see, a lot of their communication relies on comparing themselves to others, holding themselves and others to certain standards, and ultimately competing with one another. While there are moments where we can recognize supportive and empathetic

friendship or family bonding, the undercurrent of judgement and competition is never completely hidden from sight.

In *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Teddi Mellencamp and Kyle Richards struck up a real and close friendship, and season nine shows them realizing how much they mean to each other, as Kyle tells Teddi "I literally love you so much, you're like my little sister" (S9E19 40:00), and Teddi tells Kyle "There's not a lot of people in my life I've felt very safe with" (S9E19 25:30). Their bond is strong and real, and they support each other by picking out clothes for each other, or going to therapy together for the anxiety they both experience. But what seems sweet and supportive seems strange to the other women (S10E5). They question the closeness of the bond in season ten, insinuating that them sharing a bed on vacation and them sharing therapy hints at something more going on. While this could count towards barely covert homophobia, the overarching theme in the criticism of their friendship is competition. Dorit confesses that she is "never going to be Kyle's favourite" but "if Kyle would just admit that there are certain rules that apply to Teddi that don't necessarily apply to the rest of the girls in the group, then there would be no issue" (S10E5 35:04-35:12). In this instance, we see how an actual friendship between Kyle and Teddi is complicated within the confines of a larger group. While their friendship may be a source of love and safety, it is also a source of conflict, in which relationships are measured by favourites and rules.

Rules pertaining to etiquette (how one should behave, look, or be) come back time and time again in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives*, and are used to compare, compete, and ultimately create a hierarchy. By doing so, these shows comment on the proper way to be, which is one of reality TV's main functions. As Ruth A. Deller states in *Reality Television – The TV Phenomenon that Changed the World*, "Reality TV makes clear what is wrong with people, what needs to be changed, which kinds of behaviour should be rewarded and which punished" (23). Deller links this to the time we live in, where neo-liberal

ideas (in which individual effort and success is valued over everything) work hand in hand with surveillance (a concept championed by Michel Foucault[9]), which, as Deller states, "refers to the idea that we are, at all times, under scrutiny from authorities and our fellow citizens – that is, we are always both watching others and being watched" (22). Dweller goes on to say that this watching "is rarely neutral but involves judgements on behaviour, taste and respectability" (23).

Reality TV is thus linked to a judgemental surveillance of others that is connected to establishing the proper way to behave. As a result, etiquette and the gaze are intrinsically linked in reality TV. The standards of etiquette found in *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* can be divided into two categories: etiquette rules concerning manners and etiquette rules concerning appearance. Analysing both will give us a better idea of where and how the gaze is situated in these shows.

Etiquette Rules Concerning Manners

One thing that becomes apparent when investigating how the women on these shows look at each other, is that they have very strict rules – both for themselves and others. The clearest examples come from *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, where issues of respect, the proper etiquette, and the right way of representation inform everything they do.

Set in Potomac, a prestigious and wealthy town close to Washington D.C., this series focuses on a group of black women who have earned various levels of success and respect in their community. With the premiere of the series in 2016, the start of the first episode immediately set the tone for the rest of the season, when Katie Rost states: "If you don't behave yourself in Potomac, you might be asked to leave" (S1E1 00:26). Right away, Katie tells us that there is a proper way to behave yourself and that if you do not conform, you will be excluded – apparently from the entire town. What this small sentence tells us is that there

are people watching and judging whether they belong in this society, encompassing the women in a societal gaze that is judgemental and disciplining. The rest of the season builds on this tension and with the help of the rules of etiquette women are pitted against each other, competing for a place in Potomac.

The two women that are most directly across from each other on this issue are Karen Huger and Gizelle Bryant. Karen embodies the older and more respectable of the two, having received her lessons in etiquette from strong female figures that came before her: “I was very lucky, I had some of the head-matriarchs in this community bring me in. It made it easier, and that’s why I feel responsible in passing on this transition. It’s doable if Ashley will just be a good student” (S1E5 31:30). In this quote, which she delivers in a confessional, she explains that her standards come from generational lessons. She also implicates the younger generation, in this case Ashley Darby (the youngest of the group), and how they can learn from her. By using her knowledge on proper etiquette and turning a judgemental eye to her younger castmates, Karen establishes a hierarchy, placing herself above others. The establishing of this hierarchy moves Karen away from a pathological mother figure that Doane and Modleski found. While connecting herself to a matriarch position, she foregoes empathy and moves on to discipline, producing a critical and judgemental gaze, which is also evident in her exchange with Gizelle.

We see Karen portraying herself as the wisest of the group, consistently laying down the law and reciting rules of etiquette such as “Etiquette rule number seventeen: if there’s a beef amongst the ladies it must be squashed immediately. Ladies don’t hold grudges.” (S1E3 5:30). Gizelle responds to Karen by calling her old-fashioned, saying: “Karen’s book of etiquette is outdated, no one lives like this anymore” (S1E3 7:00). Gizelle and Karen are thus on opposite sides of the etiquette spectrum, and their divide trickles down to the other women, and even the audience, who are invited to choose sides. As Brian Moylan states in his

exploration of *The Housewives: The Real Story behind The Real Housewives*, judgement is one of the driving forces of the audience as "one of the great joys of watching the shows is deciding who is right in any argument … Like a Choose Your Own Adventure etiquette book, the answer is up to all of us at home" (276). The judgemental gaze that divides the women on these shows thus also serves to divide the audience, although their gaze, as will be discussed later in this chapter, is more complicated than that.

In season one, Charrisse Jackson-Jordan throws a birthday party for Karen. As Gizelle is the first to arrive, she positions herself in the middle seat, taking centre stage. This is her first 'mistake', the second one is ordering food before Karen arrives. Charrisse, who is the host of the party and also a stickler for proper etiquette, takes offense, saying: "the middle seat should be for Karen" (S1E1 22:31) To which Gizelle pointedly replies: "Is she here? Is the birthday girl here? Do we need to move now?" (S1E1 22:33). In her confessional, Charrisse disapproves of Gizelle ordering food: "I think the women really should just take a moment, because you do not order before your guest of honour arrives. I mean, that's just stupid. I mean, that's improper" (S1E1 22:00-23:16). Katie, in her confessional, agrees as she states: "If it was me, yeah, I probably would move over when the birthday girl arrived. I wouldn't take up the centre spot. But that's not how Gizelle is" (S1E1 24:15). In Charrisse's condemning of Gizelle, and Katie's agreement, we see how the confessionals work to shed light on the situation, which could lead to empathy for all sides. But we also see how the confessionals are filled with judgement towards others and are used to establish a rivalry, with opponents and teams – and thereby inviting the audience to do the same.

When Karen finally arrives, she is not happy with the situation and lectures in her confessional: "I'm the birthday girl, Charrisse was the hostess, and Gizelle is sitting at the centre of the table. Potomac etiquette rule number 101: When Karen Huger arrives to an event where she's being honoured, please don't sit in my seat" (S1E1 25:00). In this instance, we

see both Karen and Charrisse being the driving forces behind the proper way to be. With their insistence on etiquette and manners, they judge Gizelle for not complying with these rules. We also see how every action is dissected, from the seat Gizelle takes at the table to the moment she orders food, every move is watched and scrutinized.

At the end of the episode Karen decides that Gizelle could use a lesson in etiquette, and she proceeds to gift Gizelle a list of rules in a mirror-edged picture frame. Karen proposes they go through them together. In this instance, Karen has turned her judgemental and dissecting gaze into a disciplining one. Gizelle, the object of Karen's gaze, is confronted with this gaze in the mirrored edges of Karen's etiquette list. Gizelle may not care about Karen's 'outdated' book of etiquette, but it still places her on the outskirts of this group, which shows us that the gaze evident here is one attached to power and a hierarchy. It may not be a male main character taking possession of a female character, as Mulvey saw in Hollywood cinema, but there remains an imbalance and an aggression in this gaze.

In the case of *The Real Housewives of Potomac*, this judgement in the gaze is also complicated by the issue of race. *The Real Housewives* franchise only has two cities that have an all-black cast (Atlanta and Potomac), and before 2020 the other casts of *The Real Housewives* franchise were nearly all white. Race has been brought up a couple times during the seasons of Potomac, to point at certain issues amongst and outside of the group (like colourism), but also to reflect on or even reiterate a certain racialized gaze. In its first season – where the focus on etiquette was the largest – Gizelle's behaviour was linked to 'the ghetto,' thereby encapsulating denigrating stereotypes inside a judgemental gaze, as Charrisse commented: "This is not how you act in someone's home in Potomac. Maybe in the ghetto, but not in Potomac" (S1E1 32:00). Standards and hierarchy are here linked to race and embedded into the gaze. This was strikingly evident in season five, when two of the women got into a physical altercation after constantly getting into arguments the previous episodes.

The physical fight, in which Monique Samuels grabs Candiace Dillard by her hair, bashes Candiace's head in and will not let go, seemingly comes out of nowhere. The conversation right before appears calm, only escalating slightly when Candiace accuses Monique of faking to be asleep when Candiace wanted to say goodbye on their previous girls-trip. Monique denies this and tells Candiace "Well, you wouldn't understand. You ain't got kids" (S5E9 1:40). Candiace takes this as offensive mom-shaming, but with regards to their friendship gone sour says "it is what it is" (S5E9 2:00). Nevertheless, in a manner of seconds, hair is flipped, then grabbed, and producers have to separate the two. Physical altercations go a step too far in this reality show that does encourage arguing, so this episode is a big deal – both for the cast as well as for the audience who could spent the rest of the season debating whether they were team Monique or team Candiace.

What is said in the aftermath of the fight is especially telling of the standards these women hold themselves and each other to. Candiace goes from calling Monique a "ghetto ass hood ass bitch," telling her she "doesn't know how to act," to saying "this is not what we do" (S5E9 4:19-4:35). This last statement is reiterated by most of the other women, and Wendy Osefo sums it up when a couple days later she tells Monique:

> I just don't think that as black women, that's what we're trying to put forward. Like, that is a narrative that society paints of us. That we're angry, that we're physical, that we can't use our heads. And baby girl, what you did that night, brought everything people have said about us to light. (S5E10 24:40-25:10)

What becomes apparent from looking at *The Real Housewives of Potomac* is that not only are the actions of these women judged by means of etiquette and proper manners, in which the gaze is judgemental and disciplining, there is an added layer in that judgement due to them being black. Bad behaviour is compared to the ghetto, and they are painfully aware of the implications their televised behaviour could have. This makes for an even stricter regime –

their every move is watched with the knowledge that they can be judged and their whole community may suffer the consequences. The gaze is thus not only judgemental, dissecting, and disciplining, it is also controlling.

Another instance where etiquettes of manners are heavily featured can be found in *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*. The women on this show have a reputation for not letting issues go, and in season seven "panty-gate" was the topic of endless discussions. The day after a party, Dorit Kemsley's husband PK confesses that while he was seated directly opposite Erika Girardi during the party, he found out that she was not wearing any underwear, and he admitted to Dorit that he "didn't mind the view" (S7E3 41:45). Instead of reprimanding her husband, Dorit says that she totally understands that "PK could not stop staring at Erika's hooha" (S7E3 40:44) and then proceeds to go around the group of women to tell them what a huge mistake Erika has made. She tells Kyle: "I don't know how you can sit in front of someone's husband with no underwear on and your legs slightly ajar" (S7E4 6:12). When having drinks with Lisa Rinna and Eileen Davidson she says: "Now, if you're a lady, I'm sorry, but isn't it kind of like, Lady-101? You've got no undies on, you've got a short dress – cross your legs" (S7E4 25:18- 26:45). In this instance, Dorit has reshaped her husband's objectifying male gaze – which consisted of him treating Erika as a "view" to be stared at – into a judgemental and disciplining gaze, one in which she gathers all the other women by gossiping about the incident. By talking about the 'incident' without Erika present, Dorit pushes Erika into a position of passivity, having been looked at and now having been talked about without being able to offer any input. Dorit's campaign for the improperness of Erika lacks any trace of empathy but instead serves to create a divide, as she pushes her judgement of Erika onto the other women, thereby establishing teams of women who also find this behaviour appalling and those who do not. Furthermore, by focusing all the attention on Erika's "hooha," Dorit's gaze can also be classified as a magnifying one, turning one body

part into the defining factor of Erika's being. Finally, by mentioning how a real lady should behave, as she herself would have done, Dorit places herself above Erika. She uses her critical gaze, the judgement she holds for Erika's behaviour, to create a hierarchy between them.

Looking at these female-driven reality TV shows, it becomes apparent that its often-used trope of proper etiquette is a vehicle for a gaze that is judgemental and disciplining. Within these examples, the casts of women use standards for women which are imposed upon them from outside, but which they have internalized. These standards are influenced by matriarchs, racial stereotypes, and an objectifying male gaze, and distributed amongst the women as if the standards are their own. The gaze has thus evolved from Mulvey's male gaze into something hybrid, where it does not necessarily evoke an active/passive dichotomy, but implicates them all in the possibility of being active or passive with regards to the judgemental, dissecting, and disciplining gaze. Standards they hold for themselves are used towards others. By upholding the rules of etiquette, the women put themselves both in the subject and object position of the gaze. The gaze can thus be recognized as circular within these groups, but can still be classified as aggressive in the divide and hierarchy it manages to create. This gaze is even more prevalent when it comes to the women looking at each other's appearance.

Etiquette Rules Concerning Appearance

When it comes to the etiquette rules as they pertain to appearance, they are often not as clearly spelled out as in Karen's book of etiquette. Rather, they come in the form of small comments, or 'helpful' advice, or insults. In any way, they provide a gaze that is, as Woolley called it, "dissecting," which is "also a magnifying gaze that turns small flaws into glaring aberrations" (137).

Being close to Hollywood, *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* are very focused on their image, and have exhibited multiple new faces, new breasts, and new sets of teeth throughout the years. They are very honest about this, and often take the audience along with them to their doctor appointments. As Kyle says: "We live in a town where nobody ages. So you gotta try the newest latest and greatest treatments" (S9E2 2:55). But, this positive view and endorsement of treatments and surgeries has a downside, of which Yolanda Hadid might have endured the worst.

When she came into the series, in season three, she fit right in. Like the other women, Yolanda was focused on looks, and during her time on the show she championed something called the 'Master Cleanse'.[10] This cleanse consists of 10 days of juice fasting, going without food and only drinking tea and a juice made with lemons, maple syrup, and cayenne pepper. Yolanda says in her confessional: "You just really cleanse your entire body, which really reboots your metabolism and your brain, you know, chemicals, and all of that" (S3E9 7:10). In her first season, she tries to get the other women to join her cleanse. She shows Kyle around her garden filled with lemon trees planted for the cleanse, and tells her: "The best thing about is that you lose weight! You can lose like ten pounds!" (S3E9 7:44). Yolanda's focus on weight and the importance of this cleanse extends to the people around her. She is extremely disappointed when Kim Richards, who promised to do the Master Cleanse with her, backs out: "We pinky-swore, you and I, that we were gonna do the Master Cleanse together, remember? (S3E9 27:15). Kim tells them that "[she] can't do that," and Kyle and Yolanda keep asking her why, to which Kim finally replies: "I mean, it's not really good for me right now. It's just, I'm supposed to eat" (S3E9 27:43). To which Kyle replies: "Why?" (27:47). It becomes apparent that not eating is more acceptable than eating is, in these circles.

Not only does Yolanda subject the other women to this, she is especially strict with her daughter Gigi. There are multiple instances where Yolanda tells her what not to eat, and

comments on how her body should be more feminine (S3E8). At Gigi's moving-away party, Yolanda restricts her to one tiny bite of cake, later saying "Gigi's in charge of her own diet. But to be on your best weight, you gotta make the right choices" (S4E16, 38:05). When Gigi calls her about feeling faint, Yolanda replies: "have a couple of almonds, and chew them really well" (S4E2 16:00-16:20). Here, we see how rules on proper behaviour with regards to appearance, are passed on from generation to generation, just like Karen's etiquette rules. But what's more, we see an incredibly critical gaze, one that goes so far as to restrict normal eating, in Yolanda herself but also in the people around her. The standards Yolanda uses to judge herself by are projected on her friends and her daughter Gigi. In her work on "Looking fat in a slender world: the dialectic of seeing and becoming in Jen Davis's Eleven Years," Lauren Downing Peters looks at body images and how the male gaze has impacted the way we look at bodies. She states that the male gaze has been a "crucial force in the proliferation of images of hyper sexualized and slender female bodies within Western visual culture, which thereby perpetuate women's feelings of bodily dissatisfaction and, more distressingly, foment disordered eating" (180). In these instances of Yolanda restricting herself and the women around her to feel healthy and use diets to be on their "best weight," we see this mechanism at work. Only, there is no male presence that enforces this regime, it is Yolanda herself. But, as the male gaze is responsible for the focus on slender female bodies, as Downing Peters argues, relying on work from Susan Bordo and Naomi Wolf,[11] we recognize how Yolanda has internalized this male gaze, and how her own gaze is completely informed by this internalization.

But the endorsement of a culture in which image is almighty and should always be perfected also had its downside for Yolanda when she fell ill with Lyme disease, and her body began attacking her. Despite her struggle with her health, she still showed up to parties during the sixth season – where she was not met with support but indignation at her daring to show

up looking less than perfect. When she arrives at Lisa Rinna's birthday party, looking elegant in an all-white outfit, the other women are surprised to see her without make-up. Their reactions range from admiration to disbelief. Lisa Rinna states: "We all have this armour in the sense that we wear our hair, and our make-up, and our clothes. And Yolanda showed up vulnerable without any of her protection and that's a very brave, courageous thing to do" (S6E1 38:24). While Lisa Vanderpump is less positive: "I'm actually really surprised to see Yolanda, she does not look good at all. I mean, she's got nothing on her face at all, not even an under-eye cover-up or anything. Maybe you could just take 10 seconds to do that?" (S6E1 32:00). Whether in admiration of her courage or in disapproval of her 'oversight,' it becomes clear that the women focus more on Yolanda's appearance than her health, or even her humanity. They zone in on a small part of her, her face, and see her natural face as something deviant. Their comments also showcase Lisa Rinna and Lisa Vanderpump as being the judging audience to Yolanda's appearance, exemplifying how an audience can be divided by their respective points of view of this situation. By praising or judging Yolanda in their confessionals, they relay this divide to the audience of the show, who can then decide whose side they are on, whether they relate to the empathetic gaze of Lisa Rinna or the judgemental and disciplining gaze of Lisa Vanderpump.

By focusing on Yolanda's appearance more than on her health and commenting on the abnormality of a face without make-up, the women produce a magnifying and dissecting gaze, one that Woolley saw as turning "small flaws into glaring aberrations" (137). With its intense scrutiny, this gaze works to point out "problem-areas" that effectively obscure the subjectivity and humanity of the one that is looked at (Woolley, 140, 135). This gaze is based on a judgement that may stem from an internalized male gaze, one that objectifies women rather that humanizes them, but in the women's execution of the look, we see how this gaze is totally appropriated as their own.

What becomes clear from Yolanda's case is that the dissecting and magnifying gaze is linked to socially determined ideals. Woolley found that this gaze concerns a "fetishistic hyperfocalization" which "dissects the body into parts that can be improved" (135). We saw this happen with Yolanda, but this is a widespread phenomenon throughout all *The Real Housewives* shows and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Interesting here is that while the women implicate others in this judgemental, dissecting, magnifying, and disciplining gaze, they themselves are also at the receiving end of it. This circular gaze creates a complicated dynamic not only in the sharing of the gaze, but also in the sharing of its implications, as the need to improve dissected body parts is also equally distributed. Consequently, the work involved in this improvement is often regarded as teamwork, providing solidarity within the harsh gaze they themselves perpetuate. Their gaze is thus peculiar, blurring the lines between judgement and support, encouragement and competition.

One instance in which the judging gaze and teamwork come together is at a 'boob-party' thrown by Cynthia Bailey, in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. Cynthia decides to go to Dr. Curves for a check-up and touch-up on her breast implants, saying: "With my divorce close to being final and preparing to move into my new house, I'm feeling rejuvenated. So, in the spirit of rejuvenation, I decided to give my girls a rebirth" (S9E8 1:45). Her "girls" refer to her boobs here, but she has also invited her other girls (the cast) to go with her "so they could be inspired to look as good as I do" (S9E8 2:00). When everyone has arrived, Cynthia explains her reasoning for inviting everyone, saying: "First of all, thank you guys for coming. Phaedra, I know you are the number one fan of my breasts," to which Phaedra replies: "I love them titties!" (S9E8 5:16-5:25). Cynthia stresses the importance of the other women's opinion when she states "I wanna make sure I continue for you to love them" (S9E8 5:25). This boob-party illustrates the way the gaze holds space for both hierarchy and teamwork. Cynthia values the other women's opinions of her breasts and wants the women to continue to love

them. At the same time, this love for her breasts allows her to create a hierarchy, putting herself in a position where she is able to "inspire" the other women to "look as good as [she does]" (S9E8 2:00). By making sure the critical gaze concerning her breast has positive results for her, she is able to turn this gaze towards the other women. The gaze here is circular and complex, working to blur the line between object and subject of the gaze, all in order to mould the female body into behaving in accordance with society's beauty ideals. This gaze is also prevalent in the case of the Kardashians.

The Kardashians' pursuit of perfection with regards to beauty ideals has been well documented throughout their twenty season long run of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. In their pro-plastic-surgery stance, they are the epitome of Woolley's magnifying and dissecting gaze. They have zoned in on the smallest areas of imperfection, from lips to old-age-smell, and have worked together to achieve perfection. They have also turned this scalpel-like gaze into a profitable business, with numerous beauty-enhancing brands. Woolley states:

> Physical attractiveness is a quantifiable value and a form of labour. … Like Mulvey's fetishized film star, there is a form or erasure implicit in the commodified body, a loss of individuality that comes from copying a template. The Young-Girl is reduced (or elevated) to the status of an image. (131)

The commodification evident in the lives of the Kardashians will be further examined in chapter two. For now, I want to focus on how the magnifying and dissecting gaze works to create women as images, all striving for the same beauty ideals, and working towards this goal together.

Kris Jenner, being one of the oldest women on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, relays her anxiety about her aging body throughout the seasons, worried she is unable to keep up with the bodies of her daughters. With the help of both plastic surgeons (who she calls friends) and her daughters, Kris has undergone multiple procedures to keep her appearances

up to par with that of her daughters. Not only does she work on herself, she also extends this work to her friends. In season fifteen, Kris decides to surprise one of her best friends Sheila with a facelift, turning Sheila's self-policing and magnifying gaze into a team-project to attain physical perfection. This gift was brought on by Sheila and Kris reminiscing about the great times they had when they were younger, after Sheila found some pictures from that time. Sheila feels like a spark is missing when she looks at her face now and confesses: "I've always hated my neck. … We all kind of, you know, go through stuff like that. We look in the mirror, and we kind of go, 'oh, I didn't know that was there'. … I think everybody feels something like that" (S15E9 5:32-6:15). To which Kris replies: "100%. And if you don't feel it, Kim is telling you about it" (S15E9 6:16). In the family, Kim is known to point out every imperfection she sees on everybody. When Kris talks to Scott about this, he confesses that he does not even really like looking at Kim, for fear she will find something new to criticize (S15E9 18:49). In this way, Kim can be seen as the embodiment of the dissecting and magnifying gaze, which will be further illustrated at the end of this section.

Kris decides to gift Sheila a face-lift and she goes with her when it happens, staying in the waiting room until Sheila has made it out safely. In her confessional, Kris tells us that "this is all just a big love letter to [Sheila] for all of her friendship" (S15E9 33:04).

Situating the gaze in the examples of Cynthia's boob-party and Kris' supported and supportive plastic surgery, we find that the dissecting and magnifying gaze Woolley spoke of is normalized and celebrated through the concept of friendship. This speaks to a hybridity within the gaze in the way that it is harsh and disciplining while it simultaneously provides a source of comfort and support, because they collectively deal with this gaze's repercussions. Judgement and empathy are wrapped into one, as illustrated by Kim's choice words to her sisters on their trip to Japan.

As they are preparing for their trip to Japan, Kourtney, Kim, and Khloé are extremely excited to see the country, and go all-out on their outfits, seeing as, like Kim says, "Japan is like for the forefront of fashion" (S15E9 4:17). However, once they have arrived, Kim catches a glimpse of what her sisters will be wearing the rest of the trip and she is not happy. During their first evening there, Kim is unable to eat dinner, and she confesses: "I'm so disgusted with my sisters' crazy outfits that completely don't go with my look. Like, I can't take it" (S15E9 13:36). Scared that this trend continues, Kim decides to confront her sisters, telling them:

> So, I gotta be real with you guys, you look like fucking clowns. … I'm just saying, you have to like, tell the glam people.[12] … I just think you gotta, like, chill. … Like, you can be cooler. I'm not telling you guys who to be or what to wear or anything, but I'm telling you who to be and what to wear. It could be time for, like, a fashion overhaul, so that you stay like young and relevant. (S15E9 14:48-16:30)

Khloé and Kourtney are surprised, but also unphased, as Kourtney admits that she did not think her outfits were "that crazy" (S15E9 15:50). But Kim is relentless and goes on to say: "You look like a fucking grandma. 100%. I think you don't look anything special. Like, you don't look anything, like, innovative and I think you have it in you. It's just you better evolve before you fizzle out" (S 15E9 24:22). In this episode, Kim's gaze is incredibly judgmental and disciplining. She looks at her sisters and disapproves of the image they put out. But it is also more complex than that: her sisters' outfits not being up to her standards is dangerous for her own image and she has to crop them out of her pictures to save herself, which is why she feels the need to confront them. Kim's gazes here is thus, as we have seen examples of earlier, one that is both directed to women around her *and* directed at herself. Her fear for her sisters to 'fizzle out' and become irrelevant reflects her own fear. The gaze towards others is intrinsically linked to the gaze she subjects herself to. In this, there is also a twisted sense of

support evident: Kim locates a site of imperfection in want of improvement and informs her sisters so that they can evolve before fizzling out. In a way, Kim encourages Khloé and Kourtney to survive a gaze that she herself subjects them to. But, at the same time, her disciplining gaze towards her sisters also works to establish a hierarchy. Kim puts herself above her sisters, as the authority on what is relevant and not, and what they should be doing to get on her level.

The gaze then, as we have seen in both sections on etiquette, is definitely critical and judgemental; dissecting people's characters and appearance, magnifying problem areas, and working to discipline and control each other on the basis of inherited standards. But this gaze is not singularly judgmental, or one-sidedly objectifying in Mulvey's sense, or empathetic in Doane's and Modleski's sense. There is a hybridity to this gaze in the way that it encompasses all women, is applied from all sides, and blurs the lines between object and subject of the gaze. There is some empathy to be found in the teamwork they deliver to navigate this gaze, but this empathetic teamwork is still in service of an aggressive critical gaze that pushes the women to objectify themselves and others. Why, if it implicates them all, do they not just quit? The answer to this question might be found in the element of competition at the heart of this gaze.

Situating the Gaze in Competition

As we have seen in the scenes analysed in the previous sections, the women on these shows often judge and discipline each other. As a consequence, a certain unspoken hierarchy is created. Karen did it when she pointed to all the ways Gizelle was not up to standard when it came to manners. Yolanda laid down the law as the 'healthiest' woman in the group, restricting other women's eating so that they could, like her, be at their best weight. Kris and her friends compete with the power of time and aging, and will do anything to stay in the

game of the younger girls. And Kim, with her encouraging advice on staying relevant, makes sure she remains the authority on beauty and style. All in all, we have already covered a bit of the competitive driving force that underlies the gaze between these women. But by looking at one more scene, I want to examine this element of competition a bit closer.

By its fifteenth season, Kourtney had strong doubts whether she wanted to continue filming *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. These doubts were discussed on the show, and both Kim and Khloé complained that they were having to pick up the slack for Kourtney's less than desirable work-ethic. The tension around this issue slowly built up to a point where it came to an explosion, one that revealed exactly how Kim looks at her sisters: as competition.

During the planning of their yearly Christmas-card shoot, Kourtney lets Kim know that she wants the shoot to end at 4 p.m. so she can be home on time. As this makes it even harder to plan the shoot around everyone's schedule, Kim becomes agitated, and finally blows up: "I need Kourtney to not be so fucking annoying with a stick up her ass like she fucking runs this shit because she doesn't. She's the least exciting to look at, so, she can be out. She doesn't do shit. She doesn't know what it's like to actually have work to do" (S15E1 24:00-27:00). In this moment, we see what Kim values, and what kind of competition is at play. Kourtney is counted out on the basis of her not working hard enough, but also on the basis of the level of excitement connected to her look. Kim's words thus reveal that there is a hierarchy at play, a ranking of sorts, that judges who works the hardest and who is the most exciting to look at. Like the moment in Japan, Kim puts herself in the position of authority on all things, judging Kourtney for her work ethic and her appearance, and disciplining her for her apparent shortcomings. We also see the moment the competitive critical gaze turns aggressive as it is used to exclude someone on the basis of a value linked to their appearance.

The element of competition, of being the most or least 'exciting to look at', results in a denial of worth and a subsequent erasure – Kourtney "can be out" (S15E1 24:00-27:00).

This competition supports the gaze we found earlier in etiquette by way of providing a reason to participate in its dynamic – seeing as we found the gaze to be equally distributed amongst the women (save for additional racial layers to some), the competition allows them to create the hierarchy we have found again and again in the scenes described. No longer having the active male presence that informed the imbalance between looking and being looked at, the women on these shows have morphed this imbalance into a competition of the most and least exciting to look at, effectively creating divides by looking at each other with the same gaze, constantly comparing and competing with one another. Woolley states that this is characteristic of our image culture, where a "vicious cycle" has emerged: "the increased expectation of perfection causes increased scrutiny and greater sensitivity to what constitutes an imperfection" (137). Competition allows the notion of the ideal, the most exciting to look at, to persist. By doing so, the status quo is held in place and the magnifying and dissecting gaze is deemed valid and important, creating the circular gaze we have found in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives*.

The gaze and competition are thus inextricably linked in the interactions between the women on these shows. Even in moments where real friendship or family ties would allow for empathetic moments, as with Kyle and Teddi's friendship and Kim and Kourtney's planning of a Christmas card shoot, we see the element of competition creeping up. This is not strange when we take into account that they exist on a reality TV platform, where details like ratings, audience engagement, and social media followers are the driving forces that determine the survival of the careers of the women. Consequently, the audience has a certain power in is gaze, but in what way does the audience actually look at *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives*?

Situating the Gaze within the Audience

In her examination of the spectator in soaps, Modleski found that the multiple characters and their featured feelings and motivations rendered the spectator powerless, for

> A viewer might at one moment be asked to identify with a woman finally reunited with her lover, only to have that identification broken in a moment of intensity and attention focused on the sufferings of the woman's rival. … the multiple identification which occurs in soap opera results in the spectator's being divested of power. For the spectator is never permitted to identify with a character completing an entire action. (14)

The spectator of soaps is like a mother figure who has to understand all, extend sympathy to every character, and who is consequently made unable to "form unambiguous judgements" as they are placed above the action, forced to see the bigger picture; this spectator never "[reaches] a permanent conclusion" as she is made to "extend her sympathy to both the sinner and the victim" (14-15). Ultimately, Modleski argued, "soaps convince women that their highest goal is to see their families united and happy" (14). The spectator that Modleski describes, connected to soaps, could not be more different than the spectator found connected to *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. This spectator actively pursues judgement, conclusions, and enjoys conflict rather than unity: the joy one gets from big explosive fights far exceeds the joy from reconciliation.

This joy in conflict partly stems from the "thrill of vicariously doing something we want to but can't" (Moylan 277), seeing others lose control in large and entertaining ways. In order to have conflict, there must be some dividedness on the shows, which we have seen established time and time again. This conflict and divide bring about another pleasure in looking: judgement. Deemed by Moylan as "one of the great joys of watching the shows"

(276), audiences are invited to form judgements, choose sides, and – like judges – decide who is wrong or right in any given situation.

These judgements are brought about by the multiple points of view that the women provide, which is similar to soaps, but different because they now rely heavily on the use of confessionals. In these confessionals, as we have seen, the women invite the audience to participate in their point of view, to be a part of the gaze they subject each other to, and they invite the audience to choose sides by highlighting the divide that has come to be.

The audience of these shows often shares the judgements they have made – which is another source of the viewer's pleasure. As Deller states in *Reality Television*, "one core motivation for viewers is the opportunity to use reality television as a talking point" (44). This factor of social interaction is enlarged with the help of social media, where blogs, social media, and podcasts provide commentary on the shows, dissecting and analyzing the women's every word and action, shedding light on whose side they are on, creating memes that poke fun at the women on the shows, but mostly sharing the enjoyment they find from watching these shows.[13]

The encouragement towards judgement (by the confessionals), and the celebration of judgement (by social media platforms), resists a reading of this spectator as Modleski found hers, powerless, motherly, and empathetic. The audience may at points change who their favourite is, but they always have a favourite, and are always capable of forming judgements and sharing these judgements.

However, empathy is not entirely counted out of the pleasure of looking. In the establishing of favourites, viewers often analyse who they relate to the most. And by watching the women for years and years, a connection is slowly built. As Moylan states, there is a "companionship" in watching these shows for years: "We are being let in on their most

intimate moments over long periods of time, which makes it feel like catching up at brunch with long-lost colleagues – I mean, friends" (274).

The pleasure that the audience then finds in watching these shows comes from the feeling of being connected, of being a part of a friend group or family and understanding them. In order to feel this connection, the audience is invited to participate in the gaze the women share amongst themselves. The audience's gaze is also dissecting, in the way they take apart every move made on the show. It is also competitive and judgmental, in the way the audience chooses favourites and sides. But within this, there is also a hint of empathy, which explains why I cry every time Kris Jenner cries. The audience becomes part of the show, gaze included.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I questioned how the gaze operates within *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, two docusoaps situated in a hybrid place between media, broadcasting the lives of groups of real women, not actors. Situating this question within established studies on gaze, I wondered what would happen to the gaze if men were no longer present to be the active part of the look: what kind of gaze would we find between the women on these shows, and from the audience? Would this gaze still be patriarchal, like Mulvey found? Or empathetic, like Modleski found?

Investigating the driving matter of these shows – the interpersonal interactions of the women – it becomes clear that rules of etiquette, in both manners and appearance, are the vehicles for the women's critical, judgmental, dissecting, magnifying, and disciplining gaze – a gaze characteristic of our current media climate, as Woolley found. The focus on presentation, both for the self and the other, allows the women to judge each other based on their success in adhering to societal ideals. With the help of the element of competition, these

judgements are deemed necessary, and aid in the establishing of hierarchies between the women.

Looking at the description of this gaze now, it seems extremely aggressive and toxic, not far away from the damaging male gaze found by Mulvey. But contrary to what Mulvey found in Hollywood narrative cinema, this gaze is distributed equally amongst the characters on the screen. The women subject each other to a gaze that they themselves are also implicated in. In this way, the oppressiveness of this gaze is circular, as they are both the object and the subject of this gaze.

In this circularity, and the collapsing of the subject/object dichotomy, the element of teamwork is introduced as it combines judgement and support when the women collectively try to adhere to the oppressive beauty ideals they subject each other to. This gaze between the women is thus a complex one, not devoid of patriarchal or societal oppression, but also not devoid of empathy.

The audience follows this gaze as they dissect and analyse every word and move of the women on (and off) screen, picking sides and favourites, and sharing these views with friends on- and offline. While empathy cannot be discounted in the viewing pleasure of the audience – rooting for a favourite, understanding someone's motives for fighting another woman – the joy found in the ability to form judgements distances this spectator from Modleski's.

Overall, what we find when looking at the gaze in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* is the introduction of a new scopic regime, embodying the hybridity already evident in its form as docusoap and its place in our media-landscape. Not fully classifiable as a male or empathetic gaze, the way the women look at each other shows signs of an internalized critical gaze to which they subject each other, competing in a power struggle amongst themselves for the prize of 'most exciting to look at'.

This competition and the gaze that accompanies it are unsurprising occurrences if we look at their origin and their current place in society and culture. With the legacy of the patriarchy and the male gaze, it follows that a certain importance has been inscribed in a woman's image. When looking at other structures that have inscribed this importance, it becomes clear that our current economic system, in combination with social media and its forming of our consumer and attention economy, also places enormous value on woman as image. Chapter two will examine this further.

Chapter 2: The Personal Brand

Introduction

As we have seen in chapter one, reality television takes a step away from earlier gazes, and offers us something complex, hybrid, and novel. However, its focus is still on the woman as an image. As we shall see, this is also reiterated in the economic structures underlying *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. With ads ingrained in all its matter – from the trips the women go on, to the beauty salons and restaurants they visit, to the clothes they wear, and cars they drive, everything can be read as product-placement. Taking this a step further, reality TV has managed to link (female) personhood to both the product that is the show (with personality-driven social media content and other media appearances working as paratexts to promote the show) and to the products that they endorse – effectively producing the women on these shows as products themselves. Consequently, reality TV can be seen as the precedent for the influencer culture we live in today, in which women use their personality, or rather their bodies, to endorse products, projects, and ultimately themselves.

Reality TV has introduced a regime in which female bodies are able to generate value, and this is especially evident in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, a show that is practically a blueprint for self-branding your way to celebrity status, in which the Kardashians' bodies and their images are repeatedly linked to money.[14] One iconic line embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of the family, when, after the leaking of Kim's sex-tape, Kris comments: "When I first heard about Kim's tape, as her mother, I wanted to kill her. But as her manager, I knew I had a job to do" (S1E1 3:40). This line and its accompanying image are now, fourteen years after the fact, still used as a meme, and jokingly circulated as a Mother's Day card.[15] Khloé has also commented on the saleability of her sister's body when she said that "Kim's ass makes money" (S1E3 7:49). And when, in a later season, Kim was experiencing wrist pain due to the selfies she was taking, she warned her mother not to have too much fun at her expense, as

Kris' commission was on the line (S15E5 25:53). These instances show the conscious linking of bodies to money and the careful and conscious consideration behind branding, as well as the blurring of lines between family and business. With this, they exhibit the forming of new and complex economies, where lines are blurred and the person, the body, and the product become one.

The forming of these new economies also plays a role in *The Real Housewives* franchise. Erika, from *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, produced an alter-ego for herself called Erika Jayne, who sings, dances, and performs. In her song *XXpen$ive*, she sings: "My Kitty's like a python / Tick-tickin' like a timebomb / Limited edition / Gotta buy it with no try on … I'm a million dollar diamond … That's just who I be, it's expensive to be me" (genius.com). Here, we see a blurring of the lines between the body, the person, and the product: a limited-edition 'kitty' that can be bought, a person that is a diamond, and a person connected to an expense.

When we look at these examples, like Kris' conflicting position as a mother and a manager, or Erika Jayne's expensive body parts, we see evidence of the forming of new economies and the lines that have been blurred in the process. While these moments are funny and entertaining, they also serve as instances where we recognize the complexity in relationships that once may have been clear-cut: classic dichotomies between private and public, personal and busines, and work and life are no longer strict dichotomies but their properties have merged. What we find now is something hybrid, with the concept of a 'personal-brand' as being perhaps the most emblematic, which can not only be found in reality TV but is indicative of the change and complexity we find in our everyday lives. Our relationship to work has changed, time we spend on and off work has become increasingly blurry, and we live in a world saturated by information and images in which our attention is one of the greatest assets – not just to us, but also to big corporations, and reality TV shows.

Seeing as TV shows like *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* do not exist in a vacuum, they offer us an opportunity to dissect how different economies function in pop-culture and in our lives, and how they came about.

In this chapter, I will investigate how personhood and economies move together, and how this affects the line between women as subjects and women as objects. To do this, I will first examine the economy of reality TV, in threefold. In the first part, called 'precarious and immaterial labour', I will establish what type of economic structure reality TV is built on, by looking at the working conditions and the demands on the participants. In the second part, I will explore how these shows rely on the 'affective labour' of the women on them, dramatizing emotion in order to gain more visibility and branding opportunities, and how this relates to gender-inequality. In the third part, I will delve further into theory on gender, most notably theories on post-feminism, to investigate how popularized feminist language works with personal branding in moving away from a consumption economy into a realm where the women themselves are now the product to be sold. Throughout this, I will look at the produced branded images of Kandi Burruss, Kim Kardashian, Khloé Kardashian, and Kylie Jenner to investigate how the female body functions as both subject and object in reality TV.

The Economy of Reality TV: Precarious and Immaterial Labour

The validity of the Kardashians' fame has often been the topic of popular discussion in the media, from people stating that they 'have no talent' to them being 'famous for being famous' (buzzfeednews.com) – for a lot of people, their large visibility seems rooted in visibility alone, without any underlying value. But, of course, this value does exist, and it is tied into the labour that goes into reality TV. This labour, as we shall see, is precarious, immaterial, affective, exploitative, objectifying, and gendered. The gendering of this labour proves to be the reason for the doubt behind their fame, for it is the gendered nature of immaterial labour

that renders the work of women invisible, as Alison Hearn and Jacquilyn Arcy argue, which will be discussed later in this section.

Partly to blame for the fog that surrounds the knowledge about the work that goes into reality TV is the "demotic turn," as Graeme Turner coined it, referring to the change in the making of celebrity, in which suddenly any ordinary person could be awarded the same visibility that only Hollywood celebrities had previously had access to. This made reality TV seem like an accessible and democratic vehicle for becoming a celebrity, but, as Turner states: "the media's interests in their reality and game show contestants is at least as exploitative as it is enabling" ("Ordinary People and the Media" 1).

It turns out that the large number of ordinary people that want a shot at fame through reality TV is part of what inscribes the exploitative working conditions on reality shows. As Arcy states in "The Digital Money Shot: Twitter wars, The Real Housewives, and Transmedia Storytelling," "With an endless supply of willing contestants, reality producers manipulate participants through notoriously tenuous contracts, competitive working conditions, and the fleeting promise of fame" (488). These exploitative working conditions are deplorable in and of themselves, but they get more complex and layered when we look at their gender dimension.

In her work called "Witches and Bitches: Reality Television, Housewifization and the New Hidden Abode of Production" Alison Hearn states that shows like *The Real Housewives* depend on the "housewifization" of their workers,[16] in the way that the shows' value-creation is linked to the "concealment, degradation and mystification" of women's work (17):

> The types of precariously employed and exploited workers and participants involved in reality television production are like 'housewives'; they work, but their labour tends to be discounted or invisible, and as such can become a "source for unchecked unlimited exploitation." (15, Hearn quotes M. Mies, 1998)

This invisible labour can be recognized in the denial of the Kardashian family's hard work behind their fame, and in the multiple roles Kris Jenner takes on in this family: as both mother and manager she blurs the lines between private and public work, and material and immaterial work. Within the new economies that Kris Jenner embodies we see the 'concealment' of work that is 'discounted or invisible'. It is, however, important to note that in accordance with the family's branding power, Kris has managed to brand this identity under the trademarked name "Momager," and her hard work *is* recognized, albeit in a degrading matter. Next to the Mother's Day card mentioned earlier, mocking the 'motherly love' Kris shows in monetizing on Kim's leaked sex-tape, another characterization of Kris has led to the popular saying: "The devil works hard, but Kris Jenner works harder," which praises her work only by ranking her below (or above?) the devil (vice.com). With regards to gender, Hearn finds that the precarious work done by women on these shows and the connected erasure of said work is imbedded in the rich history of women's subjugation under capitalist systems (11). The degradation of the Kardashians' work begs the (rhetorical) question whether successful and famous men would ever receive the same treatment, or if their ruthless ambition would be praised.

In any case, the blurring of lines evident in both *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* and the new economies they seem to manifest are connected to larger trends in changing economies. In earlier works, Hearn explored how the long hours, low wages, blurred boundaries, and exploitative worker conditions we recognize in reality TV and in life found their source in the post-Fordist era. In "Confessions of a Radical Eclectic: Reality Television, Self-Branding, Social Media, and Autonomist Marxism," she reports that

> As the barrier between work and life breaks down, value is now diffusely generated from the sociality, communicative competencies, and lived experience of individuals. Under post-Fordist capitalism, or the 'social factory', we see the rise of the socialized

> worker. The productive activity in which the socialized worker is primarily engaged involves immaterial labour. (316)

This immaterial labour, she explains by quoting Mauricio Lazzarato (1996), is work that is not normally categorized as work, and relates to art, fashion, culture, and consumer norms (316). Immaterial labour also includes affective labour (the intentional production of feelings), the monetization of 'being,' and "the production of subjectivity" (also known as personal branding) (315-316), all of which are instrumental in the success of reality TV.

In conclusion, it becomes clear that through the seemingly elusive workings of reality TV stars, the changing economic structures and precarious working environments lead the women into a life of immaterial work that is often 'discounted or invisible'. In the next section, I will investigate how one such form of immaterial labour, namely affective labour, is crucial to the success of these shows, and ultimately to the success of the women themselves, albeit as products.

Affective Labour

In their work on reality television, affect, and branding called "Reality Celebrity: Branded Affect and the Emotion Economy," Laura Grindstaff and Susan Murray recognize how affect and emotion are essential for the sustainability of reality TV and its participants. They define emotion as "feelings experienced and expressed" (111) and affect as "the often intense physical responses that accompany emotion" (111). They go on to explain that in reality television "the emotion and affect of participants not only provide climactic narrative moments … they also serve as evidence of authenticity" (111). This connection between affect and authenticity is important because "dramatic outbursts of emotional expressivity are 'branded' only as they are taken up, circulated, replayed and recycled as indexes of a celebrity persona," which is crucial seeing as "branding is key to moving up in the reality-celebrity

hierarchy" (111). To become successful in the reality business, Grindstaff and Murray argue, the affective labour has to be authentic, so it produces an emotion that is inextricably linked to the carrier of that emotion. Only then will this emotional production "come to define the personae of the programs' stars as they move through intertextual and extratextual sites, eventually becoming embodiments of branded affect via web pages, blogs, social media, GIFs, merchandising, and traditional media coverage" (118).

Seeing as these emotional moments are instrumental and intrinsic to reality television – and, as Grindstaff and Murray state, especially to 'docusoaps' reality shows such as *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* (111,117) – there are numerous of such moments (table flips, prosthetic leg throws, breakdowns etc.[17]) that have made the passage from explosive emotion to brand-defining emotion by being shared on the internet. In "The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows," Laura Grindstaff calls these moments the "money shot": "like the orgasmic cum shot of pornography films, the money shot … makes visible the precise moment of letting go, of losing control, of surrendering to the body and its 'animal' emotions" (20). One such 'money shot' has had a defining and long-lasting branding effect on Kandi Burruss from *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Contrary to a lot of Real Housewives, Kandi had already made a name for herself before she joined the show by being a celebrated and Grammy Award winning artist, as well as a businesswoman with her own successful sex-toy company called *Bedroom Kandi*. Throughout the seasons she has spent on the show, Kandi managed to expand her business empire by tying every part of her personality and life to a business plan, with restaurants, theatre productions, and a make-up line to show for it. So when, in season nine, an accusation of rape was thrown in her direction, it threatened to destroy everting she had built. But partly due to her affective labour and the money shots she produced, Kandi came out on top.

The drama Kandi found herself in that season was grounded in the fact that her friendship with Phaedra was a thing of the past. With them still being a part of the same group of Housewives, they had to see each other and be cordial, but they were not on the best terms. Throughout the season we see Phaedra gossiping about Kandi's sexuality and business to other cast members, especially to Porsha, who by this point has become Phaedra's best friend within the group. However, Porsha takes this gossiping one step further, and confronts Kandi with a list of offences Kandi had allegedly committed: Kandi was a lesbian and had had a seven year long relationship with a girl, Kandi's husband Todd was cheating on her under the alias Marvin, Kandi has a sex dungeon in her house and together with Todd had planned to drug Porsha and bring her back to the dungeon (S9E14 30:00-35:00). This last accusation had a dramatic effect on the rest of the season and culminated in multiple 'money shots' – it became the reason a lot of people tuned into the show. Because Kandi values and takes pride in the business-empire she has built for herself, Phaedra's gossip and Porsha's accusations hit Kandi where it hurt the most.

But at this point, Kandi did not know Phaedra was the one behind the gossip and accusations Porsha threw at her. So, when the group goes on a trip to Hawaii the next episode, Kandi enragedly confronts Porsha at a group dinner: "You're not even thinking about the fact that I got kids. Don't try to ruin my life or my business, ruin everything. And that type of accusation can sit with you for life" (S9E15 41:20), Kandi follows this up with an appeal to Phaedra's knowledge of her as a person:

> Let's be clear Phaedra. You know, you know I have fun or whatever. But the one thing I would not do, I would not do no stuff about no drugs or nothing. And for her to put that out there about me, oh my God, it took everything in me not to fucking choke the shit out of this bitch. (S9E15 41:38-41:59)

During this scene, Kandi stood up, and became increasingly agitated, her voice started quivering, she started crying, and towards the end of her appeal to Phaedra she was visibly enraged, and Todd had to hold her back. This moment in Hawaii does not just show emotion, it also shows fragility in the form of a reputation that may be ruined. What fuels Kandi's anger is not just a baseless accusation, it is the threat that comes with it, the precariousness of her situation is revealed with a lie that gets the platform that comes with a show like *The Real Housewives*. Kandi is fully aware of the danger she is in if this rumour is believed to be true, as she says that her life and business, "everything," could be ruined by what is put "out there" (S9E15). Hearn recognized how one represents oneself and one's reputation have "become immanent to the capitalist mode of production" (2017, 13). In this, Hearn recognizes another aspect of "Housewifization" in which women on these shows are not only "precarious and easily exploited" but they also "require the manipulation of emotion and the carrying of a 'reputation' not entirely one's own" (21). This reputation, Hearn says, "inevitably exceeds the grasp of those individuals who generate it or the individual who must 'carry' it" (21). Kandi's frantic fight for her reputation and career shows the fragility underlying her participation in this show, having to deal with a reputation that can be influenced and produced on a show and is thus outside of her grasp. With Kandi, then, we recognize the blurred lines between a person and their reputation, and the forming of a new economy where the reputation has dominance over the person, all in service of personal branding.

In Hawaii, contrary to the rumours she is spreading, Phaedra affirms that Kandi would never do such a thing, but she refrains from letting Kandi know that she is the one responsible for these accusations. When Kandi finds out Phaedra is behind the attack on her reputation, this extra layer of deceit gives the season-ending explosive money shot more power. That moment happens during the season reunion and is a classic example of the emotional labour that Grindstaff and Murray credit with carrying the show into higher visibility, as quotes and

images from that moment have become iconic, and were turned into soundbites, memes, and GIFs of Kandi still used on the internet today.

At the reunion, Andy Cohen (as mediator), asks Porsha: "Why do you believe that Kandi and Todd would try or even think to try to drug you to take advantage of you? Why would you think that?" (S9E23 41:10). Porsha talks around it at first but then states: "I was served a cease and desist by Kandi, and I no longer can speak on the subject, so what I want to do, is have Phaedra speak, 'cause she's the one that told me that Kandi said that" (S9E23 41:48) at which point the camera captures Kandi who incredulously and high-pitched asks "*You* said that?" (S9E23 42:02). The camera then catches Andy's shocked face as Phaedra uncomfortably looks away. Kandi repeats herself, asking Phaedra again "You said that?" to which Phaedra replies "I did not say it," and Kandi goes "That is some *bull*shit" (S9E24 00:30-1:12). Phaedra goes on to say that she simply repeated something she had heard, but Porsha objects: "No you told me she said it to you!" (S9E24 1:25-1:40). It is at this point that Kandi loses it, producing a money shot in which she is yelling, crying, and heavily gesturing from her side of the couch:

> What! See that's what I'm talking about! The lies! The lies! The lies! That's what I'm talking about Porsha, you keep saying why I think she pulls your strings? Why would she tell you shit like that so you could run it back to me like that. You and I never had a fucking problem. (S9E24 1:45-2:00)

Here, the money shot becomes layered, for it is now Porsha who unravels, crying, shocked as to why Phaedra would do this. During it all, Kandi's anger is palpable, readable from her stance and expression, as well as her words and the tears that flow freely when Kandi realizes that Phaedra was responsible for it all, even during Kandi's appeal to her in Hawaii: "We was standing at that table in Hawaii and I kept asking you 'Why would she think that? You knew that you told her that? You told her that? … This is crazy" (S9E24 3:18-5:00).

The season's build-up of tension mounts in this moment, where shock, disbelief, and anger take over the show, and this becomes *the* money shot of the season, one that is used to promote the show, and one that provides content in the form of GIFs and memes across different platforms.[18] This moment, then, becomes branded, and Kandi comes out as the winner not just because in this emotional moment she is able to unearth the evil that was done to her, thereby playing a key part in the ultimate dramatic moment within this reality show, but also as a winner on these other media platforms, where it is her face and her voice that is shared, made visible. As Grindstaff and Murray explain,

> [*The Real Housewives*] are competing for attention – from the camera, from the audience, from Bravo – and, in doing so, engage in an ever-escalating performative battle with one another. Those who succeed in this environment … not only have their Bravo contract renewed but also brand themselves in relation to more products. (119)

With this competition in mind, Kandi is the ultimate winner. Phaedra, stunned into silence after being exposed, loses, and has subsequently been fired from the show, while Kandi's visibility and the garnered support from fans allows her to prosper by way of branding.

Having a knack for turning every part of herself into a business, Kandi perfectly adheres to the self-branding practices that reality TV promotes. As Hearn states: "Reality television is ground zero for the production of lucrative branded selves. … As they work and live in front of the cameras, their work/lives are, apparently, one seamless flow of value-generation" (2017, 18-19). Hearn recognizes that "being *is* labour" (2017, 18), and Kandi proves this point not just by being on this show, but also in the way she monetizes her entire being. Every emotional aspect of her life is turned into capital: she puts her feelings into song writing, her parenting into a children's lifestyle brand 'Raising Ace' named after her son, her bond with her mother into the play 'A mother's love', she employs her friends into her 'Kandi Factory', uses the bond her mother and aunts have to launch a soul-food restaurant called

'The Old Lady Gang', and channels her sexuality into a talk show called 'Kandi Koated Nights' and her successful sex-toy company called 'Bedroom Kandi'.[19] Every part of her being is monetized, so it comes as no surprise that Kandi manages to turn the heavy emotional upheaval of season nine into a productive and successful business: a sex-positive burlesque and variety show called 'Welcome to the dungeon'. With this show, Kandi completes the chain of production that started with *The Real Housewives*: stemming from a devastating rumour on the show, her affective labour produced money shots that spoke to her authenticity as a person, which expanded her visibility, which ultimately turned into branding opportunities for seasons to come, seeing as the most interesting and exciting storyline from the recent thirteenth season originated from a 'dungeon' theme bachelorette party organized by Kandi. Kandi has thus managed to turn the threat to her reputation into another business venture, expanding her brand through the visibility she garnered from the affective labour she performed in season nine. As she says in season eleven: "I'm gonna take their shade and get paid, okay?" (S11E11 23:21).[20]

In Kandi's example, then, we recognize, as Grindstaff and Murray have argued, that it is the emotional money shot that paves the way to branded affect in the attention economy, which ultimately leads to success and capital (130-132). But within this dynamic, it becomes clear that what is linked is not just life and business, emotion and profit – it is also a linking between gender, the body, and business. While Kandi might seem to win the 'competition' for attention and ultimately wealth through personal branding, it is important to note that this competition plays out on her person and ultimately on her (sexual) body. As Hearn states,

> Like the women in the brutal transition to capitalism, whose labour was exploited and rendered invisible and who suffered processes of social and cultural degradation … the bodies of the television housewives also work to signify and legitimate the message of

> a new, economic formation fixated on self-promotion: 'conform to our template, be seen, and build a reputation!' (21)

We cannot, then, take Kandi's road to branding as uncomplicated or unproblematic. It is her (sexual) body that becomes the battleground for her reputation, which in turn threatens her very being: "her life, her business, everything" (S9E15 41:20). And it is this combining of her body, person, and business on which her success as a brand ultimately relies.

As we shall see in the next part of this chapter, where I will investigate the intersection of branding and gender more closely, when every part of your being can be used to create revenue, the person and body become something hybrid: part human, part commodity.

Personal Branding, Empowerment, and Post-Feminism

As we have seen with Kandi Burruss, the produced visibility that has been garnered from affective labour in reality TV-shows affords the reality stars a platform on which to create a personal brand. Why reality TV structures lend themselves well for this sort of personal branding can be explained in three ways. First, at its base, everything in reality TV is shaped to be an advertisement. From the countries they visit on their holidays, the restaurants they eat at, the beauty enhancing products and treatments they consume, to the clothes they wear, furniture they buy, cars they drive – every single thing can be considered product placement, even emotions and people themselves. Which brings us to the second structural reason for branding: the shows produce the women on them as the product. They are the stars of the shows, and their image and their emotional money shots are used to capitalize on the attention economy and draw the audience in to watch the show. Seeing as the stars of reality shows are not actors, their subjectivity is tied into this commodification of their person. As Alison Hearn states:

> Reality television has inaugurated the means for individuals to pursue a form of reputational capital by agreeing to become participants and subjecting themselves and their identities to the shows; structuring logics and demands. Reality television not only produces branded content, formats and goods and services, then; it also produces branded selves. (2017, 12)

The production within this leads us to our third structural opportunity within reality TV for branding: the editing. Because of docusoap reality formats not being scripted, shows like *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* rely heavily on editors to create narratives moving through entire seasons. While this editing is mostly covert, there are other forms of editing within the show that are overt: the confessionals allow the women to provide insight into what is happening, thereby editing their own stories and reactions. Moreover, this same editing is available to the women on their social media platforms, where they can collect the audiences won by their presence on the show.

Within the world of social media, editing is omnipresent in the way that pictures and videos can be altered to attain a perfect image, and as social media sites like Instagram and Twitter are user generated content platforms the women can comment on the show and add their own take, (mostly) free from the shows' producers.[21] Within the structure of these shows, and intertextual formats like social media, the women are produced, but they have recognized that they can also produce themselves, editing themselves to get the most attention and the best monetary results. In "Insecure: Narratives and Economies of the Branded Self in Transformation Television," Alison Hearn connects the producing of the self, or rather the 'stylized self-construction' as she calls it, with the branding of the self and the subsequent commodification of the self. She states:

> The 'branded self' is a commodity sign; it is a body that works and, at the same time, points to itself working, striving to embody the values of its corporate working

> environment. Here we see the 'self' as a commodity for sale in the labour market, which must generate its own rhetorically persuasive packaging, its own promotional skin, within the confines of the dominant corporate imaginary. This 'persona produced for public consumption' reflects a 'self, which continually produces itself for competitive circulation' (Wernick 1991, 192) and positions itself as a site for the extraction of value. (497-498)

Within the commodification of reality stars, value is most often placed on the female body: it is the body that works, that points to itself working, that *is* the packaging and the product to sell, and it is this body that extracts value in the labour market of reality stars and influencers.

As we have seen in chapter one, the bodies of these women are regulated and policed, by society but often also by themselves. This comes as no surprise when you factor in the focus on production and editing within the shows and social media, and the competition that runs through them. As Hearn states:

> The bodies of television housewives … work to signify and legitimate the message of a new economic formation fixated on self-promotion: 'conform to our template, be seen, and build a reputation!'… It is a function of an image economy, where attention is monetized and notoriety, or fame, is capital. (2017, 19-21)

As we shall see in the close readings following shortly, the production of a template of beauty ideals ties together self-promotion, attention, and the female body to move us slightly further along the lines of female-empowering consumerism, into a realm in which the body is the product to sell and buy.

Using female bodies in advertising is nothing new, and as Rosalind Gill says in her essay on analysing sexual agency in advertising called "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising," "The use of sex as a means of selling is probably as old as advertising itself and advertising has long been indicted for contributing

to the silencing of women's desire by presenting women primarily as objects for male consumption and pleasure" (38). Gill goes on to dissect the history of advertising in relation to women's bodies and finds that

> If, in the 1950s, it was the home that was the ideal focus for women's labour and attention and from which their 'worth' was judged, in the new millennium it is the body. A sleek, controlled figure … is portrayed in advertising and many other parts of the media as the primary source of women's capital. … it is now possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key source of identity. (42)

We have seen part of this already played out in chapter one, where the women judged themselves and each other on their rightly groomed and dressed bodies in order to establish a hierarchy. But when looking at the personal branding of Kim, Khloé, and Kylie, the possession of a sexy body is not enough to achieve success. Rather, it is the selling of this sexy body that is essential, along with the message that by buying their promoted products, the audience can attain this sexy body too.

An interesting and potentially problematic layer to this selling of the female body comes in the form of adopting a feminist agenda, one that proves to be rather empty of actual causes. As we shall see, in producing their personal brands focused on their body, the women use words like 'confidence' and 'empowerment' to connote a certain female agency and power, but without the actual political power of equality and agency behind these words, themselves, and their products. As Gill states, this is embedded in a "growing trend within contemporary advertising to promote products targeted at women using a discourse of empowerment" (37). This was especially evident in the TV show *Sex and the City* where products such as stiletto heels became a sign of empowerment, confidence, and "powerful femininity … The fact that they are difficult to walk in, even painful, adds to this by drawing attention to the valuing of sexual attractiveness over and above freedom of movement" (37).

What we will see in the case studies is that, as I have stated earlier, this empowerment in consumerism has evolved into empowerment in the commodification of the self – where the female body is now the product to be consumed and sold.

Within this evolvement, the packaging of consumerism or commodification in empty terms of empowerment remains the same, and in this use of feminist language without its actual feminist power we recognize one of the characteristics of postfeminism. As Gill describes in "Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times," "postfeminism is involved in the undoing of feminism" (613). She defines postfeminism as a "sensibility" that is "deeply enmeshed with neoliberalism" and as such she finds postfeminism to be a "critical analytical term that refers to empirical regularities or patterns in contemporary cultural life, which include the emphasis on individualism, choice and agency as dominant modes of accounting" (613). Postfeminism also entails "the [disappearing] – or at least muting – of vocabularies for talking about both structural inequalities and cultural influence" and "the 'deterritorialisation' of patriarchal power and its 'reterritorialisation' in women's bodies and the beauty-industrial complex" and "the intensification and extensification of forms of surveillance, monitoring, and disciplining of women's bodies" (613).[22] Some signifiers of postfeminist empowerment and agency are, according to Gill, the championing of everything female with cheer words devoid of substance (2016, 623), lexical choices that are "borrowed from activist feminism" but are emptied out of any politics and rather "turn onto individual entrepreneurialism" (2016, 624), "an emphasis upon the body … and empowerment" (2008, 41), and a "pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy" (2008, 41).

With these signifiers in mind, I will investigate how the personal branding strategies of Kim Kardashian, Khloé Kardashian, and Kylie Jenner involve postfeminist structures that

aid in the production of a perfected body as a commodity, in service of the attention economy they capitalize on.

Kim Kardashian

It comes as no surprise that the woman who told her sister she was the "least exciting to look at" and that she should "evolve" to "stay young and relevant … before you fizzle out" (S15E9) has a personal brand that is all about her look, image, and body. The source of this focus may be found in the origin of her career, as the unauthorized release of her sex tape propelled Kim into the limelight more than her appearances on the arm of Paris Hilton had done previously,[23] making her hyper aware of the way she was perceived. Turning this horrific situation into a career, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* broadcasted Kim turning her sex-tape scandal and visibility into profit as she built her empire of brands and endorsements, with her body at its centre.

The show allows us a behind the scenes glimpse into the production of Kim's personal brand, showing us exactly how value is placed in the body, and under what terms. In season seventeen, Kim attends the MET Gala, where her choice of outfit works to produce an image that is so perfect it compromises her humanity. In her incredibly narrow corset and dress, designed by Thierry Mugler, Kim "can't take a full breath" (S17E5 22:50) and "every little piece [of her dress] is itchy on the inside. It's pokey … it's a cactus," to which her stylist replies: "it's not about comfort, it's about *confidence*" (S17E5 24:07-25, emphasis added). This echoes the signification of the stiletto heel that Gill discussed, where its connotation of "confidence" and a "powerful femininity" denies its painfulness and thereby draws "attention to the valuing of sexual attractiveness over and above freedom of movement" (2008, 37). Kim cannot perform humanly functions in this dress, like peeing or sitting down: "If I gotta pee, it's a problem." But, she says, "if it's an emergency I think I'll pee my pants and have my

sister wipe my leg up. I'm not even joking." (S17E5 23:28). And when, at the end of the night, Kim's husband asks her whether she sat down at all during the evening. Kim replies: "No. I think I'm bleeding on the inside, for real" (S17E5 34:00).

Her pain is broadcast while the result is celebrated – not just on the show, but also in an Instagram post in which she praised the corset and her body.[24] This broadcasting of her pain is layered: it provides the humanity absent from the image, but it also provides the narrative that pain is essential to be beautiful, that there is power in pain as it creates the powerful femininity that leads to sexual attractiveness.

It could be the case that the dress did give Kim confidence, that she did feel empowered by wearing it, and that the pain really was worth it. But, as the image she works painstakingly hard to produce exists in public and allows her to sell products like body-make-up and shapewear down the line, the question of her personal confidence is minor in the bigger picture. It is rather how the trope of confidence, and as we shall see, empowerment, is deployed in the narrative to sell products.

We can see the production of a commodity in the image Kim produces. In contrast to a stiletto heel that is promoted through shows like *Sex and the City*, the corset and dress were not for sale, custom made for Kim's body only. In this instance then, Kim does not sell a product that is produced and can produce feelings of confidence, she sells her own image, her brand of perfectionism, focused on her female body as it moves away from its human qualities and into the realm of a produced template, functioning as an attention-grabbing image in the attention economy. In this we can recognize a produced commodification of the female body, a painful process made worthy by attaching confidence to it.

That Kim places her worth in her body can be recognized throughout the whole twenty seasons of the show, through her displayed work-outs, beauty treatments, dieting, and comments – but was especially clear in season twelve, when she was preparing herself and

her body to get back out in public after having her second child Saint, and paired this coming out with an appearance in Fergie's music video for the song *M.I.L.F. $*. MILF is an abbreviation of the phrase 'Mom I'd Like to Fuck' and Kim explains how "people always say the word MILF, and, you know, you definitely hope that you become one. … it's like, super empowering to, you know, have kids and then, like, still be a hot sexy MILF, you know?" (S12E11 32:45, 29:44). In this sentence, and as we shall see within the video itself, we see the connection of the body to worth, which is not only evident in the name of the song, in which MILF is connected to money, but also in the way that possessing a hot and sexy body is aspirational, worth something, and, as Kim finds, empowering. Within Kim's participation in the *M.I.L.F. $* project, we see how an objectifying gaze and the celebration of a derogatory term like MILF is wrapped up in words of empowerment, in order to create a sellable image.

The wrapping up of an objectifying structure with words of empowerment is nothing new in advertising, but it has allowed "a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification" (2008, 41) to take place in women, as Gill found in her exploration of sexual agency in advertising. Gill found a type of advertising called "midriff advertising" that fits Kim Kardashian's brand perfectly, with its focus on "an emphasis upon the body … a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment" (41) – which all collectively gather in this *M.I.L.F. $* video and its message (youtube.com). In the video – of which the production was documented on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* – a male milkman drives through a town full of colourful houses and 'housewives' – moms in and around their houses, feeding their kids milk, while dressed in a pin-up variation on 60's housewife attire. The milkman – portrayed by a male model – drives around ogling at the moms and distractedly spills milk down his shirt as he drives by a breastfeeding mother. Spilled milk comes back a few times in the clip, and at one point Kim takes a shower of milk while wearing a corset and high stiletto heels in the setting of a 'MILF Spa'. The video also

relies on connotations to the ‘Got Milk?’ campaign that advertises milk by having celebrities photographed with a milk-mustache, as the clip ends with all the women doing a ‘Got MILF?’ ad. Fergie and Kim are joined by other women well-known in image industries, like models Chrissy Teigen and Alessandra Ambrosio. Their bodies (all slim) are on display, with a focus on their breasts, while Fergie sings and raps: “Heard you in the mood for a little MILFshake … Been working at your service to give it to ya … All my girls on fleek / Cause we I-N-D-E-P-E-N-D-E-N-T … Can’t see me B-R-O-K-E, I’m P-A-I-D” (genius.com). The women in the clip can all be recognized as partaking in “midriff advertisement” where “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman … knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power” (41). In this type of advertising, women are presented as “active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their (implicitly ‘liberated’) interests to do so” (42). Gill argues that “a crucial aspect of both the obsessional preoccupation with the body and the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising though a discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice” (42). This can be found in the clip, where Fergie combines the message of being independent and paid, thereby communicating her freedom, with the power she holds over the milkman by being hot, and having her body on display in a playful candy-land-like setting. As Gill states, “Women are presented as not seeking men’s approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing they ‘just happen’ to win men’s admiration” (42). By including the milkman, the women’s bodies are not just hot because they are conventionally slim and scantily clad, they are hot because men cannot keep their eyes off them– which emphasizes the value in a desirable body. In this clip then, the empowerment that is celebrated (which supposedly comes from the pleasure of being a mother while being able to keep a hot and sexy body) is validated by the male gaze, which complicates their supposedly empowering sexual subjectification.

In the episode where this video is filmed, Kim is anxious about her body, having given birth four months prior and not being "at [her] weight goal yet" (S12E11 29:18). But she persists because she and Fergie "totally get the mom struggle. We get how hard it is to really work out and feel good about yourself again, so I'm proud to be a part of her mom-MILF-pack and the music video. I love the message behind it" (S12E11 29:20). Watching Kim on the show, and seeing the anxiety she has about her body after giving birth, one can see how feeling sexy again might feel empowering – but this empowerment is devoid of any critique on society, and in this empty empowerment we can thus recognize a postfeminist sensibility, where the power of women is linked to the upholding of the nearly-impossible body and beauty standards there are for women, as the clip only features conventionally thin and mostly white women. Empowerment thus comes with conditions based solely on the body and how it appears. As Gill states: "empowerment is tied to possession of a slim and alluring young body, whose power is the ability to attract male attention and sometimes female envy (2008, 43). With Kim's appearance in this video and the behind-the-scenes footage that was shown on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, Kim drives home the message that her body is the source of her power but only when it is rightly regulated in weight and portrayed as sexy and desirable to others. As with the MET Gala example, here too the perfected body is the product that is advertised, and nothing else, save from a bit of breastmilk. These are just two instances in which the body is connected to Kim's worth on the show. But from its clear connection it follows that the products that Kim does promote all tie into her body, and the enhancing of said body.

One of her most recent business ventures is her shapewear line called *Skims*. In the past, Kim has admitted to wearing up to three pairs of shapewear under her clothes, just to make everything look as skinny and smooth as possible (S15E11 35:39)– and she has turned this part of her personal brand, the focus on the perfect body, into a profitable business. *Skims*

shapewear is marketed as a brand that provides "solutions for every body" and promises to enhance curves while supporting and smoothing bodies, making sure that no body-rolls will be shown through your clothing (skims.com; "Kris, Kyle Richards and Lisa Rinna" YouTube). In *Keeping Up with the Kardashians,* Kim shared the production side of things, marketing-meetings and her inspiration, and while this is a brand that regulates women's bodies and promotes the constant perfecting of an image, Kim keeps her marketing in happy terms of ease, not stressing its actual function but rather stating that "the brand is about inclusivity and comfort" (S17E9 11:30), invoking a feminist agenda of inclusivity while pushing women to conform to a template.

In a commercial for *Skims* on YouTube, she shares that her favourite part of her body is her "small waist." While that answer seems to deny the need for shapewear, she models a bodysuit and states: "The shapewear makes me feel really confident and just secure and cinched in, but comfortable" ("Kim Kardashian West" YouTube). With *Skims*, what we see is the perfect combination of personal branding and postfeminism. Having lived her life in the spotlight in a world focused on image, Kim has established her produced perfected body as her biggest form of income. In this, shapewear is something that comes with the territory, and has proven to be a great brand extension of herself, as it goes well with the selling of her body as a product. Consumers can now get one step closer to attaining a body like Kim's, by buying the same brand shapewear she wears.

Furthermore, a certain commodification can be found in the editing of one's body to look less human, to be 'cinched in' and 'enhanced' in all the right places – here again, the production of a female body can be recognized. And true to the postfeminist sensibility that Gill describes, this too is concealed in warm and enthusiastic cheer words that are "unimpeachable, but also devoid of substance" (Gill 2016, 623), as "security," "comfort" and "confidence" are used to sell this product. In the marketing of *Skims*, and the marketing of

products we will see by Khloé and Kylie, the discourse of feminist empowerment is actually rooted in female-insecurities and emblematic of a "broader shift [in advertising] in which products are sold to women with the promise of confidence and self-esteem" (Gill 2008, 43). Whereas, in actuality, the marketing of these products works to reproduce the same kind of bodies society deems acceptable, doing so by capitalizing on the reputation and visibility of the perfect template which Hearn saw as central to personal-branding (2017, 21). This branding proceeds to wrap disciplinary structures in soft terms of progression, further concealing the harmful way in which female bodies are connected to worth.

Tying into Kim's personal branding and the focus on her body is her presence on social media platform Instagram. Having mastered the art of the selfie through years of practice – from an early episode where Kris tells Kim "Stop taking selfies of yourself, your sister's going to jail!" (S3E1 8:10) as they are driving to drop Khloé off at jail, to the publishing of her selfie book called *Selfish*, documenting her selfies from 2006 to 2014 – Kim's selfies now dominate Instagram, where she shares them with her 232 million followers. Where *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* episodes average about a million viewers per episode,[25] Instagram allows her to expand on her visibility and branding power. She uses this platform to promote her businesses by sharing ads and teasing new collections, she promotes other brands by showing and tagging every item of luxury clothing she is gifted, and once in a while she shares pictures of her and her children – but most of all, her Instagram is another avenue where she promotes her body. Posting every single day, most of her pictures showcase her body, in which photos of her in a bikini are most often used to accentuate her curves and skinny waist. One such photo shows her "Studying in the Sun" as the caption reads (Instagram), with her sitting at a table with books and her laptop, wearing a bikini and posing in such a way that it appears as though her breasts rather than her studying are the main focus. This picture is comical in the way that it shows such an impractical and unusual way of

studying, but it also shows that no matter what else Kim has got going on, her body will always be her biggest asset, central to her brand. Just as being a mother did not prevent her from being hot, studying will not stop her either.

For Kim, Instagram's focus on image and the large following it allows to be collected serves as the perfect brand extension of herself. Themes that are important to her and her brand can be featured repetitively, and in this way Instagram allows her to circulate and capitalize on the image she has produced on *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Combining her perfected body with the brands she sells to enhance other women's bodies, Kim is the perfect example of a self as a "commodity sign," both the producer and the product.

Looking at Kim's personal brand, it becomes clear that production and commodification play a large part in her life. Not only does she work to project a perfect image of her body – no matter how painful – she also produces products that can aid in the improving of other female bodies. It is in this perfect body, closer to a product than nature, that she finds empowerment and confidence. Here then, we find a postfeminist packaging of a personal brand involved in female objectification: even when wrapped in words of empowerment, connoting sexual subjectification with the allusion of agency, a woman's power remains stuck in a narrow and disciplining definition of sexual attractiveness.

Khloé Kardashian

When it comes to Khloé Kardashian's personal brand, hers can be characterized by a bodily transformation. Having always been known as the "fat sister," being taller and larger than both Kim and Kourtney, Khloé struggled with her body image throughout the seasons, but in this way also provided relatable material for the audience. In those first few seasons, her brand revolved around being funny, kind, and accepting of her own body but also of others'.

When in season nine Khloé transformed her body, her brand changed with her. No longer the "fat sister," Khloé was now the sister who worked out daily, was on a consistent diet and made fitness her brand, positioning her body at the centre of this brand and subsequently tying her personal and economical worth to the value of her body. And this value, as we shall see, only matters as far as her body conforms to the standards Kim lives by: the near commodity perfection attached to a body that must at all times be desirable. At the same time, Khloé's body history and the way she informs her brands offer a tiny challenge to these standards.

When establishing herself as a fitness personality – by filming working out both on the show and on Instagram, where she shares her daily regime with 159 million followers – Khloé capitalized on this new part of her brand by developing a show called *Revenge Body with Khloé Kardashian*. Premiering in 2017, it is essentially a make-over show in which contestants have twelve weeks to work-out and diet in order to become a new and improved version of themselves who by way of this improvement can take 'revenge' on the person who has hurt them the most. I find this show to offer a complex balance of progression and oppression. On the one hand, a make-over show like this spreads the message that worth comes from slimmer and better-groomed bodies, and that these bodies can be used to feel superior to others – championing rivalry and competition as a motivator to spend twelve weeks in the gym and on crash diets, instead of championing self-love and acceptance as a motivator to create healthy habits. On the other hand, this show clearly shows how much work goes into the bodies of the Kardashians; as a part of the show, each contestant is treated by "celebrity trainers, doctors, nutritionist, and glam experts," including "stylists, make-up artists, hair stylists, colourists, even dermatologists … who are going to remake their body, mind, and soul" (S1E0 1:04, 14:50). This stands in contrast to what Gill found in midriff advertising, where "the contemporary 'beauty myth' requires not simply time-consuming,

expensive and sometimes painful labour but, moreover, demands that this work itself must be invisible" (2008, 44). In this show, the work that goes into attaining a "revenge body" *is* shown. The production, time, and effort that goes into creating a new image is advertised just as much as the 'new' body is advertised. This could be considered a step forward, but the basic principle of a body being worth more after all that work is done complicates this seemingly progressive step. The goal, still, is to attain the "power of sexual attractiveness" (Gill, 2008, 44), for, as Khloé states: "Revenge is a dish best served *hot*" (S1E0 18:20).

Another brand growing out of Khloé's fitness persona is *Good American*, which launched as a size inclusive denim brand but now also sells "Sexy Knits," activewear, and shoes (goodamerican.com). In the episode where Khloé launches *Good American*, she echoes the same sentiment of 'empowerment' characteristic of postfeminist consumerism: "[*Good American*] is passionate to me because it's about creating something that empowers women" (S13E4 2:15). While this empowerment is connected to the selling of products "to women with the promise of confidence and self-esteem" (Gill, 2008, 43), this empowerment is not just an empty cheer word this time. *Good American* promises not to focus on the tiniest of women, and "breaks down barriers of average sizing, plus-sizing – it's just sizing" (S13E4 2:30). Khloé's intentions are to "be a voice for people who don't have a voice. And who's to say, like, what is sexy and beautiful?" (27:45). In their marketing, the company has opted for a 'squad' of women, as Khloé and her business partner Emma state: "We have such a variety, a diverse range of women, from taller to petite, curvier to smaller. Whether they love tattoos or they have shaved heads or long flowing hair … They're individuals" (S13E4 16:50). With this, Khloé and her brand can be seen to make a conscious effort to expand the narrow expectations for sexiness existing for women. But, placing power and voice in the selling or buying of a product is still problematic, for it keeps the agency of women in a sphere where they are often repressed. Gill states that "women's agentic capabilities are, it would seem,

confined to be aestheticization of their physical appearances and tied to consumerism" (2008, 44). While I definitely recognize this in *Good American*, promising sexiness at every size and empowerment when you buy their jeans, I do think that this brand's drive towards inclusivity is a small positive and feminist step within the Kardashian empire.

But there remains a constant reminder that the shape of their bodies matter. In the way they tell each other how skinny they are as a form of greeting, in the way they remind each other they don't need to eat those cookies (S12E11 28:20), and in the way they never show their real bodies - which became apparent when a photo of Khloé that was not perfectly staged, lighted, or edited circulated on Instagram recently. In the photo, Khloé stands next to a pool, wearing a bikini and looking perfectly human and skinny (pagesix.com), but because of its naturalness the photo stood out in stark contrast to the photos she herself puts out on her Instagram, and as such, it broke with the way her body had functioned as a brand over the last years. It thus provided a threat to her brand, and in her reaction, it becomes apparent how much of her brand relies on the perceived perfection of her body.

Lawyers got involved to have the picture removed from social media, and Khloé posted an Instagram live video she had recorded to show people her body in real time, to prove that it was not fake or photoshopped ("PS Yes I" Instagram). The accompanying text stressed that she had worked so hard for her body that to have a photo out there that she did not approve of, hurt:

> As someone who has struggled with body image her whole life, when someone takes a photo of you that isn't flattering in bad lighting or doesn't capture your body the way it is after working so hard to get it to this point … you should have every right to ask for it to be not shared. (Instagram)

She went on to explain the extreme strain she had always been under, being called "the fat sister" and having her look be scrutinized so closely, stating that it was too much to handle:

"In truth, the pressure, constant ridicule and judgment my entire life to be perfect and to meet other's standards of how I should look has been too much to bear" (Instagram). While there is no denying the heavy burden that comes with popular and toxic beauty and body standards, and while her feelings are valid, it is interesting how her reaction to a natural photo aids in and conforms to the standards that have been a burden to her. The erasure of any naturalness when it comes to the image of her body plays into its objectification. By always showing a picture-perfect body, we move away from humanity and into the realm of commodification, where processes of production (good lighting, staging, editing) produce an image that is sellable, as her brand depends on her body to be fit. This time there is no coating of cheer words of empowerment and confidence - but still lexicon of feminism is borrowed to do the same damage feminism fights against: Khloé uses the oppressive beauty standards and scrutiny done to female bodies in her argument to do the exact same. She tells us how the pressure is unbearable while upholding that very pressure by denying any human photos of her to exist.

Thus, in the case of Khloé, we see how her brand is precariously tied up with her body when the exposing of her 'real' body threatens the 'fit sexy body' she has built her brand on. Post-feminism offers her a way of critiquing the pressure that comes from the focus on female bodies, while still jumping on this pressure's bandwagon to be able to make money of her produced and perfected body image.

Kylie Jenner

The sensibility that results from the pressure to look perfect combined with the ability to edit oneself that runs through the Kardashian family had a great effect on Kylie Jenner, who was only ten years old when *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* premiered in 2007. And it comes as no surprise that she, like the rest of the family, became imbedded in the importance of a

perfect body in lieu of personal branding, and in her case: a perfect face. As Jia Tolentino states in "The Age of Instagram Face":

> For those born with assets – natural assets, capital assets, or both – it can seem sensible, even automatic, to think of your body the way that a McKinsey consultant would think about a corporation: identify underperforming sectors and remake them, discard whatever doesn't increase profits and reorient the business toward whatever does. (newyorker.com)

In Kylie's case, the "underperforming sector," at least in her eyes, were her lips.

At first, when she started using lip-fillers in 2015 to get rid of the thin lips that made her insecure, no one from the Kardashian/Jenner family publicly commented on them, which only made the speculation in the press and on social media that much bigger. The world was captivated by her lips, resulting in a viral lip-challenge, where people started using shot glasses or specially made plumping devices, sucking in their lips, and waiting for the swelling to give them fuller lips (washingtonpost.com). Kylie cleverly capitalized on the buzz when she launched her *Kylie Lip Kits*, [26] which later rebranded as *Kylie Cosmetics*, a company that was valued at almost a billion dollars in 2018 (forbes.com). As she says on *Life of Kylie* (her spin-off reality show from *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*):

> Ever since I was probably fifteen, I've been obsessed with lipstick and I was insecure about my lips, so I went to a store and I bought every single lip liner that looked like the color of my lips, so people didn't think I was wearing lip liner and I would just overline my lips as much as I could. But I could never find a lip liner and lipstick that were the perfect match, so, that's how 'Kylie Lip Kit' started. (S1E3 3:04-3:35)

When it comes to Kylie, then, her brand was born out of a personal experience, a feeling of insecurity with which she had to grapple on a reality TV show, being a part of a family that spends their time perfecting their look, branding their bodies, and selling brands associated

with their bodies. Unsurprisingly, the lines between Kylie's body and her commercial brand are as blurred as they are with Kim and Khloé, connecting their subjectivity to a commercial objectification of bodies.

When it comes to actual advertising, Kylie confesses that she has not spent any money on it, simply using her large social media following (244 million followers on Instagram) to promote her products (S1E3 4:30). In Kylie's case then, we see the perfect blending of personal branding as defined by Hearn, and postfeminist advertising as defined by Gill. Kylie has completely monetized her being, where "being is labour" (Hearn, 2017, 18), as her entire company and income relies on her (online) person and face alone, which drives home the point that the female body is both the "primary source of women's capital" and the possession of a sexy body (which in Kylie's case meant the using of lip-fillers to attain it) is "presented as women's key source of identity" (Gill, 42). Like her sisters, Kylie has managed to not only sell a product, but sell the road to bodily perfection, and more specifically *her* road. With her company's origin story, Kylie shows that the way to a happier and more confident life is through the enhancing and perfecting of her body, and as she offers herself up as the perfect product of this mechanism, she also produces a product that can lead others to perfect lips, albeit it without the help of a doctor. This reiterates the form of advertising where confidence is sold, with Kylie as its token example: going from an insecure girl to a confident and successful woman – all because of a product that has turned into an empire. All in all, with the launch of *Kylie's Lip Kit* turned *Kylie's Cosmetic*, Kylie and her brand have become one.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how the economy of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives* works to connect women's subjectivity to their objectification in the service of capitalism. Reality TV's reliance on precarious and immaterial labour provides a structure

that encourages emotional ‘money shots’ in search for profitable visibility. We have seen the power of those money shots in the case of Kandi Burruss, where her emotional work produced transmedia storytelling in the form of GIFs that increased her visibility, on which she successfully capitalized.

Reality TV also provides a structure that is focused on advertisement, production, and editing – a structure that encourages the making of a personal brand. In these personal brands, value is linked to the self insofar as the self is able to commodify and sell itself (Hearn, 2008, 2011, 2017). In the case of reality TV stars, this value is most often placed upon the female body. This is not necessarily surprising, as women and their bodies have a history of being objectified in advertising. What has changed is that it is now the possession and selling of a sexy body that is a woman’s key source of identity and success – changing the advertising *with* sexy bodies to the advertising *of* sexy bodies (Gill, 2008, 42).

To sell bodies and products to enhance bodies, advertising has appropriated terms of empowerment in a move from “objectification to sexual subjectification” (Gill, 2008, 41) – a mechanism that aligns with post-feminism, in which terms of empowerment help to place “the valuing of sexual attractiveness over and above freedom of movement” (Gill, 2008 ,37), making it possible to sell objectified and commodified femininity with the air of women’s freedom.

With Kim, Khloé, and Kylie, we see how the selling of products all start with the commodification of their heavily edited, produced, and disciplined bodies. Their marketing leans on terms of empowerment and confidence – but this empowerment is tied to products that are rooted in the insecurity that the natural female body is not good enough. This insecurity is connected to the gaze found in chapter one, as it influences the forming of subjectivities that are judged on their looks and disciplined to adhere to beauty standards. The gaze plays a fundamental part in the value placed in perfect bodies, collapsing the subject

with the object, and creating the perfect jump-off point for personal branding. In the forming of Kim, Khloé, and Kylie's personal brands, we see a move away from the human form and a move towards their bodies as corporations. Their bodies are powerful and empowering only when they happily conform to impossible standards – which might hurt them but which they are unwilling to change, for it is here that they generate their value.

Here, we see the consequences of a circular gaze made more complex. In the economy of these shows, driving in part on the hidden work of women in a culture focused on perfect images, the gaze which collapses the subject/object dichotomy is transformed into an economic structure in which the value of one's subjectivity is intrinsically linked to the value of one's body as object to be sold. In this, negative and harmful structures are appropriated and celebrated, as we saw in the gaze when judgement is used to "help" each other conform better, and as we saw in the advertising of female bodies as products, moving away from objectification to "sexual subjectification." The two structures investigated in chapter one and two, then, work together to create a blurriness between object and subject, in service of the exploitation of women's work, value, and being.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, reality TV is hard to pin down. Encompassing a shift away from traditional broadcast media and a move towards social media, combining elements of both, hybridity is at the core of reality TV. Having watched endless hours of both *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives*, I knew that this hybridity was complicated, both in the way these shows challenged my own beliefs and principles (the question of whether I, as a feminist, was allowed to enjoy them has haunted me throughout the writing of this thesis) and in the way that they are difficult to explain to people who have never watched them ("So you watch them eat salads, fight, and shop?" Yes.). But this hybridity is also exactly what makes them so interesting, seeing as these shows do not exist in a vacuum. They, and the hybridity inherent to them, provide commentary on the world as it is now, especially for women. They point at changing structures and blurred lines both within and outside of the shows – and so this hybridity, even when hard to pin down, is worth investigating.

Having an all-female cast of real women (not actors) and a structure within the shows that allows the women to comment on what is happening (confessionals) means that certain structures that once might have been considered set in stone, as with Mulvey's theory on the male gaze, are challenged and given room to change or morph into something new. And in the exploration of both structures of the gaze and the economy of self-presentation, we have found evidence of such a change and morphing. Interestingly enough, both these structures have moved in a similar way.

Looking at how the gaze operates, we see how there is a collapsing of the subject/object dichotomy; no longer having a male main presence to provide a power imbalance, as Mulvey saw in the male gaze, the women on these shows exhibit the use of a gaze that is applied amongst themselves, in pursuit of socially determined beauty ideals. This gaze – a judgmental, dissecting, magnifying, and disciplining one, as Woolley found to be

characteristic of our current culture focused on images – is equally distributed amongst the women and works in a circular motion. They are simultaneously the ones looking and the ones being looked at – they implicate each other in this gaze and create a hierarchy by judging and disciplining each other through tropes of etiquette and competition. The standards that they use to judge each other are incredibly similar to the objectifying standards found in male gazes, denying the women their full humanity by necessitating and reiterating strict ideal bodies. In blurring the lines between looking and being looked at, the line between object and subject has vanished, and the women are trapped in an endless cycle that pushes them to look a certain way.

With regards to the economic side of self-representation found in reality TV, we see a similar collapsing of the dichotomy between subject and object connected to socially determined ideal bodies – here we see it in the way the women on these shows have become personal brands, blurring the lines between the personal and the economical. Whereas in traditional broadcast media product-placement was reserved for actual products, it now also pertains to the women on these docusoaps. This mechanism works to stress the importance of aiming for the ideal female body, an importance already established by the gaze, because it is this body that generates value. From what we have seen, it becomes apparent that it is not enough to have this ideal body: in our current attention economy this ideal body is sold and used to sell products that help others attain this body. Here, too, we find a circular motion that denies women their full humanity, having to be the producer, the product, and the consumer all at once. As with the gaze, this mechanism also hints at the internalization of patriarchal structures. But in the case of the personal branding of the women, this internalization is masked by post-feminist tropes of empowerment, turning objectification into sexual subjectification, as Gill found, where the oppressive structures have morphed with a

celebratory narrative of empty empowerment, blurring the lines between forced and welcomed objectification.

In both cases, then, we see plenty evidence of shifts, of hybrid forms, and the blurring of lines. We also see that, however much has changed, we cannot in confidence say that the results are feminist, or free from oppression. What has changed is that it can now survive without the presence of an objectifying male figure. The women on these shows can turn themselves into objects of the gaze as well as objects in the economy – while providing a narrative of friendship, empowerment, and free-will.

Complicating this shift and its blurriness further is the way the women on these shows seem to be aware of the operating structures, at times. The constant stressing of empowerment and confidence seems to be a strategy to boost sales and simultaneously pre-empt any criticism coming their way – for who can condemn them when they promote empowerment and confidence? Moreover, their practices are coated in entertainment, with them often providing funny commentary which borders on irony, making it hard to distinguish whether they are actually aware of the (misogynistic) mechanisms that they have successfully capitalized on, or whether they are so far embedded in this culture that they genuinely celebrate the commodification of their beings.

In all the hybridity that is found, it becomes clear that the theories I used to fall back on for this thesis are rendered insufficient when faced with the complexity of the new structures. Laura Mulvey and Tania Modleski did not account for the intricacy that new forms of media would bring us – and neither should they have, for they investigated a time of Hollywood narrative cinema, melodrama, and soaps. The shift epitomized by *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* touches on so many changed structures and logics – from the way of looking, the role of men and women in society, the precarious and immaterial working conditions found today, the way our economy values attention and

has embedded competition in our lives by way of social media likes and followers, how those same social media work to promote everything from places to people to products (also known as people) – the presentation of the self and the way of looking in this world cannot, at this point, be compared to the logic of the structures once found in Hollywood cinema or soaps. Which is why works like *Revisiting the Gaze*, including Woolley's work, provide a meaningful addition to the work on gaze. The gaze, as well as the connected economic structures which combine emotional labour with visibility and commodification, are evidence of the complexity of docusoaps like *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* – complexities that would benefit from more scholarly work equipped to navigate all its facets.

This scholarly work would be valuable as the phenomena examined here provide meaningful insight into our everyday lives. These reality TV shows, and the women on them, expose all kinds of hybridity to be found in our contemporary culture, where lines between work and life are blurred, where the personal and the product are morphed together on social media sites like Instagram, where women still have to adhere to and uphold incredulous beauty standards but now also have to pretend to enjoy this and attribute it to celebrated 'self-care' practices. These are just a few of the hybrid instances that can be found in *The Real Housewives* and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, and I imagine there are many more to be found in the numerous other reality TV shows, as well as in other digital media forms that are essentially reality shows such as vlogs and influencers. What it boils down to, then, is that the Kardashians and the Housewives are not simply entertaining, funny, and enjoyably eccentric, they are also incredibly relevant, and worth keeping up with.

Notes

1. Andrejevic 2004; Bell-Jordan 2008; Gamson 2011; Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Levine 2015; D.C. Murray 2015; Murray and Ouellette 2009; Opree and Kühne 2016; Smit 2015; Turner 2006 and 2010; Weber 2014.

2. Khamis et al. 2016.

3. See also Murray 2009 and Bruzzi 2000.

4. Mulvey 1975, Berger 1972.

5. Gamman and Marshment 1988; Jones 2003; Evans and Gamman 1995; bell hooks 2015; de Lauretis 1987.

6. Confessionals are commonly filmed one by one (each woman has solo-interviews where she is able to provide unfiltered commentary on what is happening on the show), and the reunions serve to bring all the women together after a season to hash out every bit of drama and conflict. Reunions are a feature of *The Real Housewives*. *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* generally does not make use of reunions. For its last season, however, the Kardashians employed Andy Cohen (who mediates every *TRH* reunion) and they filmed a two-part reunion, in the style of *The Real Housewives*.

7. For a detailed exploration of the history of reality TV and its connection to soaps, see Moylan 2021.

8. *The Real Housewives* supposedly feature real friend groups, and while the casting always looks for natural connections the women have to each other, over the years women have been cast to be on the shows who do not already have an established relationship to the women. They are still introduced as a ‘friend’ of one of the women, to make the connection

appear as natural as possible. The casting of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* is more organic, seeing as the show features only their family and close relationships.

9. Foucault 1977.

10. www.webmd.com/diet/a-z/lemonade-master-cleanse-diet.

11. Susan Bordo 1993, 2003; Naomi Wolf 1990.

12. "Glam people," also known as "glam squads" or "glam teams," refer to the tiny army of people the Housewives and the Kardashians gather around themselves, consisting of stylists, make-up artists, and hairdressers.

13. For various examples, see: Blogs/fora: https://www.reddit.com/r/realhousewives/ https://www.reddit.com/r/KUWTK/ Vulture Recaps: https://www.vulture.com/news/the-real-housewives/; Social Media Fan accounts: https://twitter.com/queensofbravo https://www.instagram.com/bravobybetches/ https://www.instagram.com/realityguy/ https://www.instagram.com/norisblackbook/; Podcasts: *Everything Iconic with Danny Pellegrino*, Danny Pellegrino, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/everything-iconic-with-danny-pellegrino/id1279562874, *Bitch Sesh*, Casey Wilson and Danielle Schneider https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/bitch-sesh-a-real-housewives-breakdown/id1063393054, *Comments by Celebs*, Emma Diamond and Julie Kramer, https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/comments-by-celebs/id1409801789

14. I say "Kardashians' bodies" here, but in this I am also including Kris Jenner, Kylie Jenner, and Kendall Jenner – who, because of Kris' marriage to then Bruce Jenner (now Caitlyn Jenner), have a different surname. Seeing as the family is branded under the name 'The Kardashians' I use this surname as an umbrella-term for the whole family. In this, we can also recognize the power of the Kardashian brand.

15. www.instagram.com/p/COqorp3Hmyl/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

16. A term pioneered by Maria Mies in her work *Patriarchy and Accumulation and a World Scale* (1998, revisited in 2007).

17. Teresa Giudice from *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* is responsible for the table-flip that happened in season one in a bout of rage, which has become an iconic moment on reality TV, and still circulates in GIF form (https://giphy.com/gifs/realitytvgifs-rhonj-real-housewives-of-new-jersey-table-flip-SrDsJj5i1Chm8). Aviva Drescher from *The Real Housewives of New York* is responsible for an iconic prosthetic leg throwing, which also still circulates as a GIF (https://giphy.com/gifs/realitytvgifs-rhony-HuUpehBQry2S4). Breakdowns are omnipresent, which is not surprising if you factor in the stressful work-environment the women must be in. Not all of them become iconic, but Kim Kardashian's crying face has surpassed the GIF form and made it into merchandise (https://giphy.com/gifs/kim-kardashian-funny-lol-8y37L91bd8Uda, https://sidewalkhustle.com/kimoji-merchandise-is-finally-available/).

18. Kandi's GIFs can be found here: "The lies, the lies, the lies": https://giphy.com/gifs/rhoa-reunion-real-house-wives-of-atlanta-3oKIPBxpm5tHqcL1Ic; "Who said that?": https://giphy.com/gifs/culture--rhoa-real-housewives-of-atlanta-sanoHrtWDN5ew; "You said that!?": https://giphy.com/gifs/rhoa-reunion-real-house-wives-of-atlanta-l4FGpOwbQM2PWJD4k.

19. For more information on these brands, see: www.raisingace.com; www.amazon.com/Mothers-Love-StagePlay-Kandi-Burruss/dp/B08QRG921H; www.oldladygang.com; www.bravotv.com/kandi-koated-nights; www.bedroomkandi.com.

20. "Shade" is a term often used in *The Real Housewives* franchise and in popular culture, where it refers to a form of disrespect or contempt that is clothed in subtle and often funny insults (Merriam-Webster, Urban Dictionary).

21. Contracts and Non-Disclosure-Agreements might prevent them from using the platforms in total freedom.

22. Gill leans on the following works to find these instances of postfeminism: McRobbie 2009; Gill 2007; Thompson and Donaghue 2014; Kelan 2009; Scharff 2013; Elias et al. 2017.

23. Paris Hilton, arguably one of the first influencers who monetized her being, was both Kim's friend as well as her employer, as Kim was hired to organize Paris' closet and style her in 2004. With public appearances being documented by paparazzi, Kim became part of the it-girl scene and her image circulated on gossip blogs and websites such as TMZ, where her sex-tape with her then boyfriend rapper Ray J. was released in 2007. Kim sued for invasion of privacy and agreed to a settlement of five million dollars. (Ellis Cashmore, *Kardashian Kulture*).

24. This Instagram post can be found here: www.instagram.com/p/CBw_u1HA_uM/?utm_medium=copy_link.

25. Earlier seasons had a way higher average viewing rate, but later seasons have come down to about or under a million: www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Keeping_ Up_with_the_Kardashians_episodes.

26. It is important to note that the filling up of her lips and the money she makes off of them are characteristic of a larger trend of cultural appropriation within the Kardashian family. Kylie's lips, as well as Kim's curves, some of their hairstyles, and the way they spray-tan themselves into another skin tone all appropriate cultures different then their own, and they receive financial gain for features black women have been policed for. I have not found the space to incorporate this into my thesis, but I do think that it is an important and

problematic facet of their branding, and definitely worth examining closer. (www.time.com/6072750/kardashians-blackfishing-appropriation/).

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