From Happy Homemaker
to Desperate Housewives
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Motherhood and Popular Television

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For Poppy
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION: THEORISING MOTHERHOOD ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Women make up 52 per cent of the world’s population (Gallagher et al., 2005, 18), and yet, recent research reveals that men continue to outnumber women on the ostensibly domestic and hence feminine medium of television by two to one (Thorpe 2010). However, even though women are seldom seen on television – and even less so in positions of power, authority, experience or maturity – extant literature from within the fields of feminist television criticism, media studies and women’s studies deem it crucial to explore those representations that do exist on the small screen.

Recent feminist scholarship examines, unmasks and interrogates a myriad of female representations, including the depiction of the doting good woman in the hospital drama (Philips 2000), the powerful matriarch in the primetime soap opera (Madill and Goldmeier 2003), the single thirty-something woman in the situation comedy (Arthurs 2003), the domestic goddess in lifestyle television (Hollows 2003), the exhibitionistic woman in reality programming (Pozner 2004), the objectified female in television advertising (Gill 2006), the adolescent girl in the teenage text (Hains 2007), the smart women in the political drama (Berila 2007) and the abrasive female detective in the cop show (Jermyn 2010). However, although much work to date seeks to investigate the depiction of women on television, little exists to account for the depiction of mothering, motherhood and the maternal role in contemporary popular programming.

Likewise, although there is a burgeoning interest in work that critically engages with the lived experience of pregnancy and motherhood from within the fields of audience research (Miller 2005), social action (Thomson et al., 2008), social and economic research (Martens 2009), self-help literature (Vieten 2009), literary criticism (Podnieks and O’Reilly 2010), social history (Plant 2010), art history (González 2010), social issues research (The Social Issues Research Centre 2011) and citizenship (Jensen and Tyler 2011), there is
little to account for the range of mothers and mothering practices seen on the small screen and no defining text that is dedicated to outlining and examining such representations. And even though motherhood has developed as a central issue in feminist scholarship, with a wealth of texts committed to exploring mothering practices in relation to sexuality (Ferguson 1983), peace (Ruddick 2007), disability (Thomas 2007), globalisation (Cheng 2007), work (Gatrell 2008) and health (Clark 2008), these texts do little to account for the portrayals of mothering and motherwork presented on television. The maternal figure is portrayed in a wide range of television genres, texts and schedules, and as such, it is crucially important that we consider the significance of these representations in a broader consideration of motherhood, motherwork and the maternal role.

More than 700,000 new babies were born in Britain last year, and over 4 million born in America. The average age of a first-time mother, or ‘primigravida’, has risen to 27.4 years in Britain and 25 in America, with growing numbers of women conceiving for the first time in their 30s or 40s (Office for National Statistics 2009; CDC’s National Vital Statistics Reports: Births, 2009). The social construction of motherhood has changed in recent years due to the availability of contraception, advances in medical technology, changing attitudes towards sexual behaviour and challenges to the traditional institution of marriage. The number of births outside of marriage continues to rise in both Britain and America, and the numbers of working mothers continues to follow this same trajectory in both countries. Women today are given increased choices about whether, when and how to mother, and as such, they are mothering in a broad and diverse range of social, sexual, financial and political circumstances. However, these same women are being judged on their age, fertility and family choices and scrutinised in relation to their mothering practices and maternal behaviours. Such scrutiny is in relation to those issues surrounding what is perceived to be the ‘correct’ and ‘appropriate’ path to motherhood, so that those lone, working, teen, mature, lesbian or feminist mothers who do not fit the idealised image of the white, heterosexual, self-sacrificing, middle-class, ‘good’ mother or perform in line with the ideology of intensive mothering, tend to be judged, ranked and found wanting within and beyond the media environment.

The ‘good’ mother is a woman who, even during pregnancy, adheres to appropriate codes of style, appearance, attractiveness, selflessness and serenity (Pitt 2008). And later, when the child is born, this mother adheres to the ideology of intensive mothering whereby she takes sole care and responsibility for her children’s emotional development and intellectual growth, is devoted to them and their needs rather than her own, and never has any negative feelings towards them, only unfailing unconditional love (Green 2004, 33).
Most importantly, however, she is a full-time mother who is always present in the lives of her children, young and old; she remains home to cook for them after school and if she works outside of the home, she organises such responsibilities around the needs of her children (Chase and Rogers 2001, 30). Deborah Borisoff tells us that in order for mothers to conform to the idealised image of the ‘good’ mother and adhere to the ideology of intensive mothering, mothers, and only mothers, must supervise each childhood activity, lovingly prepare nutritious meals, review and reward every school assignment and seek out educationally and culturally appropriate entertainment, whilst maintaining a beautiful home and a successful marriage (Borisoff 2005, 7). The ‘good’ mother finds this intensive maternal role to be natural, satisfying, fulfilling and meaningful and feels no sense of loss or sacrifice at her own lack of freedom, friendships, financial independence or intellectual stimulation (Green 2004, 33). Anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger informs us that ‘once a woman has produced a child she bonds with it in utter devotion, forgets her own wishes, and sacrifices herself for her baby’ (Kitzinger cited in Wolf 2002, 50). And yet, although it has been suggested that intensive mothering isolates both children and parents from society, and in so doing creates frustration and alienation for both parties involved (hooks 2007, 152), there is a sense that if the woman ‘does not slip easily into this role, she risks the accusation of being a bad mother’ (Kitzinger cited in Wolf 2002: 50).

The contemporary media environment is saturated by romanticised, idealised and indeed conservative images of selfless and satisfied ‘good’ mothers who conform to the ideology of intensive mothering. Susan Douglas informs us that the media landscape ‘is crammed with impossible expectations […] dominated by images of upper-middle-class moms, both real and fictional, who “have it all” with little sacrifice, counterposed by upper-middle-class women who have fled the fast track for the comforts of domesticity’ (Douglas 1995, 285). More recently, Douglas and Meredith Michaels tell us that a range of media texts, from films and television, radio and advertising to print and broadcast news, the magazine sector and advice literature, raise ‘the bar, year by year, of the standards of good motherhood while singling out and condemning those we were supposed to see as dreadful mothers’ (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 14). These authors tell us that the ‘good’ mother who saturates popular media culture is selfless, serene, slim and spontaneous and above all else, satisfied by her maternal role (ibid., 110–39). So too, Kitzinger makes the point that media texts ‘bombard’ women with advice about how to construct and maintain socially appropriate motherhood practices, be it tips on health, relationships, surface appearances or maternal practices (Kitzinger cited in Maushart 2007, 464). Child-rearing manuals play a part in constructing and circulating the ‘good’ mother myth due to the fact that the women in these
texts are asked to ‘serve as a constant comforting presence, to consider the child’s every need, to create a stimulating environment exactly suited to each development stage, and to tolerate any regression and deflect all conflict’ (Thurer 2007, 336). Moreover, constructions of acceptable mothering demand that mothers conform to traditional gender rules, with cooking, cleaning and domestic chores being ‘embraced’ by the ‘good’ mother (Kinnick 2009, 12).

Katherine Kinnick goes on to say that:

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

When the entertainment and news media present motherhood in moral terms by contrasting what they deem to be the socially acceptable ‘good’ mother with what they believe to be the reprehensible ‘bad’ mother, they are ‘both prescribing and proscribing norms for maternal behaviour’ (ibid., 9). With this in mind, Douglas and Michaels make the important point that the ‘media have been and are the major dispenser of the ideals and norms surrounding motherhood [seeking] to advise mothers, flatter them, warn them and, above all, sell to them, they collaborated in constructing, magnifying, and reinforcing the new momism’, or what I will throughout this book refer to as the ‘good’ mother myth (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 11).

Mumsnet, Britain’s most popular website for parents, receives 570,000 site visits and over 30 million page views each month, with over 25,000 posts each day (Google Analytics 2011). And although the site gives parents the space for peer-to-peer support, there is a sense in which these forums adhere to a rather limited and privileged notion of the ‘good’ mother. The website was set up by two media professionals turned stay-at-home mothers and even a cursory glance at the site gives the impression of an upper-middle-class maternal environment. Under a banner entitled ‘Money Matters’ there is little here about tax credits, child benefits or school meal entitlements, rather, a helpful list that tells mothers ‘Why you should save, 10 ways to save on family fun, 10 ways to save on family travel, Ethical savings, How to give to charity and Mortgage calculators’ (Mumsnet 2012a). Moreover, the style and beauty pages give tips on ‘Hair care, Skin problems, Botox and filler, Home pedicures and Fake tans’ (Mumsnet 2012b). Under the
‘Lunchbox Tips and Ideas’ we are reminded that ‘what you pack is open to scrutiny – not just by other kids but by other mums. So if your child’s going to a friend’s house after school, make sure that’s not the day you give in to Fruit Shoots and Greggs sausage rolls. Stick a few stray aduki beans/arugula leaves/seaweed sachets in the lunchbox’ (Mumsnet 2012c). When the topic is education, the forums are peppered with conversations about the differences between private and state schooling (Mumsnet 2012d). Savings, family holidays, charitable donations, home pedicures, seaweed sachets and private education speak for and about a privileged notion of contemporary family life that appears in keeping with a socially acceptable, culturally appropriate and romanticised image of motherhood. Mumsnet, like existing media experiences, is keen to uphold the notion of the slim, serene, spontaneous and satisfied mother, with mothers themselves contributing to and circulating rather than critiquing the ideology of intensive mothering.

At a time when the British government is offering initiatives and support to encourage mothers to return to the workplace as soon as possible after the birth of a child (McRobbie cited in Skeggs, Thumim and Wood 2008a, 14), the media are keen to remind us that ‘women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children’ (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 4). And yet, even though this impossible, implausible and unattainable image of motherhood is far removed from the lived experience of many women in society, this idealised figure continues to be presented in the popular media environment as the epitome of perfect mothering that we should all aspire to and strive for. Indeed, we are told that the ‘good’ mother acts as ‘the “legitimate” standard to which mothers are compared […]. She becomes an ideal to believe in, and one that people both expect and internalize’ (Green 2004, 33). Shari Thurer echoes this point when she states that ‘[m]edia images of happy, fulfilled mothers, and the onslaught of advice from experts, have only added to mothers’ feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and anxiety. Mothers today cling to an ideal that can never be reached but somehow cannot be discarded’ (Thurer 2007, 340). The theorist continues by commenting that

the current standards for good mothering are so formidable, self-denying, elusive, changeable, and contradictory that they are unattainable […] The current Western version is so pervasive that, like air, it is unnoticeable. Yet it influences our domestic arrangements, what we think is best for our children, how we want them to be raised, and whom we hold accountable. (Ibid., 334)
One might look to question why it is that mothers who themselves might be struggling to uphold the ideology of intensive mothering put on a mask of ‘good’ motherhood or speak with an appropriate yet inauthentic maternal voice. Douglas and Michaels make this point when they say that as mothers we ‘learn to put on the masquerade of the doting, self-sacrificing mother and wear it at all times’ to save maternal shame or humiliation (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 6). Patriarchal society remains the chief beneficiary of the ‘good’ mother myth, as the ideology of intensive mothering presents mothers as effective consumers whilst giving them the sole responsibility of childcare without financial recompense for their labours.

The problem here of course is that mothers are not capable of upholding the impossible, improbable and unachievable image of the ‘good’ mother in line with the ideology of serene, selfless and satisfied intensive mothering. Indeed, working mothers are automatically deemed ‘poor’ or ‘bad’ caregivers due to the time spent away from their children. The ideology of intensive mothering ‘takes a toll on working mothers by asserting that this population is not doing – and can never do – enough to raise their children properly’ (Borisoff 2005, 8). Stay-at-home mothers are also struggling to conform to the image of appropriate motherhood due to the exhausting physical labour and constant emotional intensity demanded of this ideal (Held 1983, 11). Susan Maushart makes the point that the ‘gap between image and reality, between what we show and what we feel, has resulted in a peculiar cultural schizophrenia about motherhood’ (Maushart 1999, 7). After all, even though mothers know that the ideology of intensive mothering is unachievable and that the figure of the ‘good’ mother is merely an unrealistic and unattainable myth, ‘the ideal of motherhood we carry in our heads is so compelling that even though we can’t fulfil it and know that we probably shouldn’t even try, we berate ourselves for falling short of succeeding’ (Warner 2007, 721). It has been suggested that the ‘ideology of natural-intensive mothering […] has become the official and only meaning of motherhood, marginalizing and rendering illegitimate alternative practices of mothering. In so doing, this normative discourse of mothering polices all women’s mothering and results in the pathologizing of those women who do not or can not practice intensive mothering’ (O’Reilly 2004a, 7; italics in original). The fact that many mothers are unable to mother within the ideology of intensive motherhood does not seem to lessen the power of this maternal model; rather, it means that many expecting, new and existing mothers present what Susan Maushart refers to as a ‘mask’ of appropriate motherwork which goes further to reinforce the dominance of the ‘good’ mother myth (Maushart 1999).

Although the ‘good’ mother myth might encourage us to assume that the ideology of intensive mothering is somehow fixed, stable or natural, or that
women have always taken sole responsibility for their children’s emotional, physical, intellectual and social growth, it is worth noting that ‘motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors. As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place’ (O’Reilly 2004b, 5; italics in original). There is no natural, universal or essential experience of motherhood, and a brief look at the history of mothering and motherwork demonstrates a number of broad shifts in what has been understood as appropriate mothering practices (Badinter 1980; Dally 1982; Thurer 1994; and Plant 2010).

In pre-industrialised societies, men and women, fathers and mothers worked on the land with their children, and both acted as physical provider and emotional caretaker for them. However, with industrialisation and a move away from family farming to factory work in the cities, men were employed away from the family home and had little hand in domestic chores, leaving women in the private domestic role to look after the house and their children in line with what we now understand to be the traditional nuclear family unit (Horwitz 2004, 43). Women and mothers were encouraged to return to the workforce during World War II, government funded nurseries were set up and women were reminded that they were capable of more than motherwork, and yet during the postwar period there ‘was a concerted [...] shift to return women to the home’ and the ideal mother was once again a stay-at-home figure (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 1994, 6). However, we find that children would not necessarily be spending time with their mother, but rather, playing with other children in the local neighbourhood (O’Reilly 2004b, 8). It is only since the 1980s and the emergence of the ideology of intensive mothering that mothers were encouraged to be both at home and attuned to the physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual needs of her children (ibid., 7). The practice of intensive mothering ‘is an historical aberration of twentieth-century industrialized life’ (Maushart 1999, xx) because although ‘the post-war discourse of good motherhood demanded that mothers be at home full time with their children, it did not necessitate the intensive mothering expected of mothers today’ (O’Reilly 2004b, 7).

Douglas and Michaels make the point that the ideology of intensive mothering reduces a mother’s identity to her relationship with her children, derides working mothers and presents stay-at-home mothers with improbable and impossible ideals (Douglas and Michaels 2005, 22–3). With this in mind, it has been suggested that the ‘good’ mother myth ‘emerged in response to women’s increased social and economic independence: increased labour participation, entry into traditionally male areas of work, rise in female-initiated divorces, growth in female-headed households, and improved