

## Looking Forward By Looking Back: The Role of Historical Inquiry in Current TV Studies

### ***That Girl's a Star: Star Studies for Historical and Contemporary Television*** Kayti Lausch, University of Michigan

This modern age of television scholarship, with its focus on “quality” programming and convergence culture, too often forgets the concerns that initially motivated the field. Television is more respected and abundant than ever, and it is easy to focus entirely on the present moment and forget those historical television shows deemed inessential. With the canon of historical television shows that we teach firmly established, we need new (or, alternatively, old) approaches to appreciate the significance of programs previously forgotten. In our desire to craft narratives of “progress” in representation, identity politics, or aesthetics, scholars often dismiss older programs as aesthetically and politically uninteresting. For example, when considering representations of feminism on television, many trace a trajectory from *I Love Lucy* to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Murphy Brown* to *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* to *Girls*. We align these shows with different phases of feminism and establish them as *the* shows we talk about when we talk about feminism on television. Scholars usually discuss these shows in terms of their representation of women. This is not, however, the only way to approach a conversation about women and feminism on television. In order to write more of television history, we need new and revitalized old approaches to understand forgotten shows’ importance.

One potential new approach is star studies, which has been underutilized by television scholars. When stars of popular series become hugely famous, their ascent, combined with entertainment and tabloid press about their “real” lives, can create parallel trajectories that affect how viewers and fans understand their shows. For example, in the late 1960s Marlo Thomas, known only as popular entertainer Danny Thomas’s daughter, catapulted to fame with the success of *That Girl* (ABC, 1966-71), the first sitcom to star a young, single, adult woman living on her own. Many episodes revolved around Ann Marie’s search for her big break as an actress in the big city. Ann also had a loyal boyfriend, Donald, whose marriage proposals she continually refused because she felt she was not ready for marriage. Feminist scholars who *do* mention the show in their work fault it for Ann Marie’s ditzzy nature, lack of professional success, and the omnipresence of Donald. My own research, which included readily available archival interviews with the show’s producers, as well as historical newspapers and magazines, casts *That Girl* in a different light. As Marlo Thomas became a star in her own right, fans of the show likely knew that Marlo was an important producer whose voice at the table was actually heard and considered. Further, the tabloid press often reported on Thomas’s own love life. She had several boyfriends throughout the sitcom’s run and was not afraid to acknowledge them in the press. Thomas therefore became a representative for all of the young, single women throughout

the country. While Ann Marie struggled to make any progress toward her goal of becoming an actress, Thomas's own career took off, with roles in high profile movies and the continued success of the show. A star studies approach is vital to understanding a show like *That Girl* because, while more contemporary scholars may not see it as "progressive" enough (whatever that means) or aesthetically significant, the show was hugely popular among a generation of young women who grew up with Marlo Thomas as a potential role model. Thomas's own success, both as a producer and an actress, imbues the series with a feminist potential that is not apparent when one only considers the show's narrative.

While gathering historical evidence can be challenging, *That Girl* teaches us that a revitalized star studies and a reverse-engineered production study can help us to further understand the parallels between historical and contemporary struggles for women (as well as other marginalized groups) in the television industry. There is a clear link between Marlo Thomas, one of the first women to essentially produce a show about her life, and contemporary star-producers like Lena Dunham, Mindy Kaling, and Liz Meriweather and Zooey Deschanel (of *New Girl*). The easy availability of online tabloid and entertainment journalism (combined with the rise of social media) makes it even easier for fans of shows to closely follow the "real" lives of their favorite television stars. Star studies provides an interesting perspective on stars and creators' use of social media to promote both themselves as individuals and their projects while offering a new angle on the "old" issues that originally motivated television scholars, primarily concerns about the representation of race, class, gender, and sexuality on television. This approach ultimately provides a new way to talk about old and new shows and complicates the common narratives that dominate television histories.