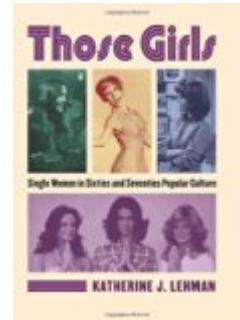


Katherine J. Lehman. *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. 280 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1808-8.



Reviewed by Alex Elkins

Published on H-1960s (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Zachary J. Lechner (Centenary College of Louisiana)

During the 1960s and 1970s, American film and television explored ever more explicitly and profitably the idea that sex might serve a purpose other than child rearing. Two decades before, Alfred Kinsey and his research team had discovered that American youth were in fact experimenting along just these lines. Public norms were being undone, they found, by private behaviors. Activists and legal reforms during the sixties and seventies compounded the cultural crisis by challenging gender discrimination in employment, education, and public life. Onscreen, mass media engaged the question of sexual difference raised by claims of equal rights by attempting to resolve so-called sexual confusion, emphasizing the specific qualities widely perceived to distinguish women from men. Although most cultural producers probably did not wish to perpetuate sex-based second-class citizenship, their portrayals of women as sex-objects dependent upon male protection lent support to its most common rationales.[1]

Film and television addressed these pressing public matters, Katherine Lehman argues,

through the trope of the “young, never-married” single woman. Demographic trends indicated that more women than ever before were moving to cities, marrying later, and entering previously male-dominated professions where they desired meaningful careers, not only income to support their households. For many Americans the question became whether these young single women would set aside their marital duties for independent lifestyles, to enjoy sex for pleasure, unhinged from family values—even love. Millions turned to film and television to watch the new sexual politics play out.

Lehman opens *Those Girls* with the provocative claim that “the single woman was a pivotal figure in postwar popular culture” (p. 1). “Leaving Home,” chapter 2, best represents this motif of the single woman who leaves the protected world of her suburban or country childhood home for the anonymity of the crowded city to lead a more independent life.[2] At the time, most Americans felt ambivalently about the scenario of an unmarried single woman living in the city alone, or worse,

spending the night with a stranger. The metaphor of “sexual revolution,” historian Beth Bailey has contended, was meant to conjure precisely this danger.[3] Lehman nicely captures this mixture of freedom and alarm. Popular culture of the 1960s presented “the big city as a ruinous environment for the single woman’s morals and aspirations” (p. 113) while female characters during the 1970s “seemed to contribute to their own destruction by initiating” trysts with strangers rather than seeking stable romantic love with a single partner (p. 210). These plot lines seemed to dovetail with national political culture. Over the same period, law-and-order politics capitalized electorally on soaring urban crime rates while postwar conservatism gathered momentum against a more liberal public culture.[4] *Those Girls* rarely acknowledges this history but it effectively samples the potent, divisive politics of this moment through pop culture.

Yet, overall, Lehman’s book struggles to distinguish itself from a crowded field. Many scholars and critics have pored over the same slice of American public culture, including the same films and television shows. Lehman generously cites this scholarship and is obviously knowledgeable about her field but the chapters on the whole feel buried under quotations and are frequently sidetracked by points others have already made. This problem may arise from her decision to explore a cultural trope--and its politics--which forces her to repeat many of her claims, giving the same treatment to each show or film. In the end, Lehman does not quite deliver on providing both “the historical lineage and critical tools” that she promises at the start (p. 12). Instead, she seems more invested in refining interpretive practice--how to read popular culture--in order to show how certain artifacts, in her language, “reflected” or “echoed” their moment. Thus, her close readings establish that “the single woman” symbolized and distilled certain anxieties and aspirations circulating around women’s liberation. But they also hint at another, perhaps more promising story about

consumer culture, which, ultimately as the larger setting for her account, deserves fuller elaboration.[5]

Every chapter obeys a similar structure that moves Lehman toward contextualizing each film or sitcom. Attitude surveys and demographic trends reported in popular news outlets like *U.S. News and World Report* and *Time* are brought to life by the experiences recounted by single women in interviews with *Mademoiselle* or *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Lehman then, typically, approaches a particular film or sitcom by tacking between the feminist textual readings of Susan J. Douglas or Bonnie Dow and the more dispassionate historical perspectives of Beth Bailey or Joanne Meyerowitz, to cite prominent examples. By the end, Lehman has demonstrated that popular culture “helped viewers come to terms with single women’s changing roles and reflected broader ambivalence about the meanings and effects of feminism and the sexual revolution” (p. 4). That is to say, Helen Gurley Brown, Mary Tyler Moore, and Wonder Woman modeled on big and small screens a compromise position between the radical feminists marching in the streets and the vastly larger share of Americans fearful of their demands.

On one hand, therefore, *Those Girls* is about the awesome, though limited, discursive power of mass-mediated consumer culture, which, in this case, sexualized the meanings of women’s liberation in American public life. This power was limited because audiences--always multiple--retained a choice as consumers to buy into or opt out of certain representations; even tuning in did not mean consensus. At the same time, as Lehman carefully observes, nationally distributed representations “helped to normalize new roles for women” (p. 6). On and off screen, traditional values slowly lost their place as the unthinking standard. Ordinary women seem to have led the way, Lehman notes, and popular culture struggled to keep up. More than mere cultural relevance, huge profits were at

stake. Yet, producers and writers also had to negotiate conservative standards of decency enforced by censors and corporate sponsors. Popular culture ultimately drifted toward liberal waters, but always against the undertow of tradition.

Thus, moralistic reports about the emergent singles' scene surfaced in sixties films like *Sex and the Single Girl* (1960) and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1967) to suggest unsubtly that both "resolute chastity and reckless promiscuity were symptoms of sexual dysfunction" (p. 66). As the women's liberation movement gained notoriety in the seventies, new sitcoms like *Police Woman* and *Wonder Woman* invented the sexy action heroine who went a long way toward sexualizing women's liberation. Combining progressive and conservative politics, this archetype's "heightened femininity and sexuality" deflated public fears that "women's lib" would make all women androgynous while her "strategic use of sexuality" defeated male foes too enamored, and sexist, to think straight (pp. 159-60). Lehman recovers the mixed messages of these new female stars yet also takes us behind the scenes. We see how censors turned progressive scripts into traditional stories, like the marriage-affirming *Valley of the Dolls*, or how popular ad campaigns crept into TV imagery and sexualized women's gains, as in the inaugural hit of the new genre of "jiggle TV," *Charlie's Angels*, which took its name from Revlon's "Charlie" perfume.

The other story that *Those Girls* tells, then, less provocatively or originally, is about "the inherent contradictions of pop culture" (p. 4). Like other scholars, Lehman finds character arcs and camera angles that emphasized the inherent dangers of liberation from the nuclear patriarchal family, illustrated paradoxically through single women on dates or in the workplace. Sex comedy films of the sixties, such as *Where the Boys Are* (1960) and *For Singles Only* (1968), punished secondary female characters for straying from Victorian sexual mores with rape or death. *That Girl*,

The Mary Tyler Moore Show, and other situation comedies of the late 1960s and 1970s broke the mold in tentatively celebrating single women's premarital sexuality and careerism. But ultimately they gave more support to an apolitical "lifestyle feminism" that prioritized individual choice over collective struggle. Turning finally to the films of the late 1970s, Lehman considers the controversial *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), whose female characters, the director has said, mistook "sexual freedom for women's liberation" and suffered in turn loneliness, psychosis, even violent death (p. 232).[6]

Film and television during this era acknowledged changing social practices, but only reluctantly and paired with moralizing critique. While popular cultural productions did not on the whole "offer valid political alternatives" to the paternalist cautionary tale or to the sexy apolitical female coworker, Lehman states, many women testified to finding solace in onscreen depictions of single working women (p. 235). Commercially endorsed empowerment did not entail political gains, but it helped some women feel more confident in their life choices and imagine new possibilities, some political, for personal fulfillment. Seeing their lives represented, even crudely and unkindly, was a partial triumph. Lehman often returns to this important point and ends her book on it.

The two broad strands of the narrative that I have identified come together fortuitously over the subject of censorship and corporate interests. The Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC) established the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 to regulate onscreen morality and sexual behavior in particular. During the time frame of Lehman's book, the Production Code underwent two important shifts. In 1956, the PCA decided to relax its standards so long as the subject of sex was "treated with 'good taste'" (p. 32). Censors wished above all to uphold the sanctity of marriage and apparently worried profusely over the tendency of comedies to make "light of sexual

mores" (p. 33). The second big shift took place in 1968, when the Code came to an end. The competitive market shares of more libertine foreign movies and the many newly emergent hip television shows facilitated its demise. Still, the Code's outsized influence early on reinforced the industry standard of casting almost exclusively young white attractive heroines. For the censors, whiteness helpfully sent the right message of purity to the American public.

Lehman productively draws upon the records of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), including script drafts and memoranda passed among producers, censors, and writers. She also has consulted the papers of important figures like Helen Gurley Brown and organizations like the National Organization for Women (NOW) to enrich her individual set pieces. Such groundbreaking advertising campaigns as Revlon's "Charlie" or Virginia Slims cigarettes become important to her narrative as she shows how corporate advertisers, in the words of the eponymous Charles Revlon, sold their products to "the woman who is sort of liberated but who isn't a bra burner," thereby shielding their target audience from the stigma of feminism (p. 125).

Details culled from these archives usually serve to demonstrate the conservatism of the final product instead of building into a history of those individuals and institutions. Given her apparently uncommon use of the archival materials of pop culture, it is surprising, and at times disappointing, that Lehman primarily employs this evidence to do as others have done. After all, as she acknowledges but does not engage with equal gusto, "the public" often rebuffed and resented the obvious knockoff. Critics and audiences dismissed the films and shows that missed the mark in their shallow bid for relevance, their clichéd and retrograde themes, and their surrender to censorship; in other words, for precisely the mixed messages that Lehman identifies and critiques. Here, then, is a different story, less about the well-known am-

bivalent politics of women's liberation, than about the making of popular culture and its search for profitable niches at a moment when, to many Americans, the nation's public culture seemed to be heading in several directions at once. Lehman is, of course, aware of these changes but has decided on another story to tell. And by boring down so thoroughly into its subject, *Those Girls* has unearthed in rich and significant detail a history that deepens our understanding of American public life in the 1960s and 1970s.

Notes

[1]. On Kinsey in this context, see Beth Bailey "Sex Revolution(s)" in *The Sixties: From Memory to History*, ed. David Farber (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 235-262. For background on Kinsey, see Sarah Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), chap. 5. Short framing pieces on postwar sexual and gender politics can be found in Joanne Meyerowitz, "Beyond the Feminine Mystique: A Reassessment of Postwar Mass Culture, 1946-1958," *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (1993): 1455-1482; and Beth Bailey, "She 'Can Bring Home the Bacon': Negotiating Gender in Seventies America," in *America in the Seventies*, ed. Beth Bailey and David Farber (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 107-128.

[2]. Each chapter title is in fact a gerund phrase, e.g., "Challenging Convention" or "Court-ning Danger." As I interpret it, Lehman wants to emphasize that culture is active, not static.

[3]. Bailey, "Sexual Revolution(s)," 237.

[4]. Michael Flamm, *Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).

[5]. For a rich, still-relevant debate about the relative power of the solitary consumer in mass-

produced popular culture, see the forum in *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (1992): 1369-1430, with entries by Lawrence W. Levine, Robin D. G. Kelley, Natalie Zemon Davis, and T. J. Jackson Lears; for examples of scholarship on the institutions of popular culture, consult David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusement* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Frank's argument is relevant here: "Consumer capitalism did not demand conformity or homogeneity; rather, it thrived on the doctrine of liberation and continual transgression" (p. 20).

[6]. The director was Richard Brooks.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

Citation: Alex Elkins. Review of Lehman, Katherine J. *Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37968>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.