

Feminist cinematic television: Authorship, aesthetics and gender in Pamela Adlon's *Better Things*

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Abstract

In the past decade there has been a sharp increase in woman-authored, woman-directed, and woman-centred scripted primetime television produced for the US market. This recent cycle includes series by feminist filmmakers, such as Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* (2013, 2017), Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017), Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), Jill Soloway's *Transparent* (2013-present), and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* (2016-present). As well as television series by creative and authorial teams, such as Tig Notaro and Diablo Cody's *One Mississippi* (2015-2017) and Issa Rae and Melina Matsoukas' *Insecure* (2016-present). These series are created, written, and directed by women with a strong authorial vision and they are performing a kind of "cinematic television" that is in conversation with indie, art, and exploitation cinemas. This essay will map how current articulations and theorisations of "cinematic television" do not account for these women-centric feminist series. In this essay, I argue that the "cinematic-ness" of these recent series is indebted to their feminist sensibility and their women-centric authorship. This argument will be developed through a close textual analysis of Pamela Adlon's dramedy *Better Things* (2016-present).

Keywords

Feminism; Television; Authorship; Women; Cinema

In the past decade there has been a sharp increase in woman-authored, woman-directed, and woman-centred scripted primetime television produced for the US market. This recent cycle includes series by feminist filmmakers, such as Jane Campion's *Top of the Lake* (2013) and *Top of the Lake: China Girl* (2017), Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge* (2014), Jill Soloway's *Transparent* (2013-present), and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* (2016-present). It also includes television series authored by creative and authorial team, such as Issa Rae and Melina Matsoukas' *Insecure* (2016-present) and Tig Notaro and Diablo Cody's *One Mississippi* (2016-present). As

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well as series that centre on an author-star, such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-2017), Pamela Adlon's *Better Things* (2016-present), and Frankie Shaw's *SMILF* (2017-present), and prestige big budget screen adaptations of best-selling women-centric novels, such as *Big Little Lies* (2017-present), *Sharp Objects* (2018), and *Dietland* (2018). Each of these series articulate and/or engage with contemporary popular feminisms.

These series constitute a cycle, which I call "feminist cinematic television." They are largely written and directed by women with a strong authorial vision. They employ a range of aesthetics that draw on or reference cinema. These women-centric series operate across genres, distribution platforms, styles, formats, and race and class lines. Yet the series are united in their engagement with feminist ideas and issues, and how they play with the dissolving boundaries between television and cinema. This cycle is defined by the cinematic tendency of each series, their authorship, and their feminist sensibility.

Feminist sensibility refers to how series negotiate and explore feminist politics, ideology, and issues in deliberate and distinct ways. By using the phrase "feminist sensibility," I deliberately move away from binary understandings of cultural objects as pro-feminist or anti-feminist. Feminist sensibility is not a recent phenomenon; it is evident in a wide range of television series from *I Love Lucy* (1950-1955) to *Roseanne* (1988-1998, 2018) to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2004). This article will explore how the series that make up feminist cinematic television affirm their feminist sensibility through their authorship and engagement with distinctly women-centric and feminist cinematic aesthetics and storytelling.

Each of the series within this cycle also operate as part of other television genres, cycles, and categories. *Olive Kitteridge*, *Top of the Lake*, and *Queen Sugar* continue the strong history of women-centric melodramas, TV movies, and miniseries. While *Girls*, *One Mississippi*, *Better Things*, and *Insecure* function within a woman-centric comedic tradition that includes *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Maude* (1972-1978), and *Roseanne*. Many recent women-centric US television series, including but not limited to *Girls*, *Transparent*, *Better Things*, *Queen Sugar*, *SMILF*, *Sharp Objects*, and *Dietland*, are at once televisual, feminist, and cinematic, but they do not always circulate as such.

In her seminal essay "The World and the Soup: Historicizing Media Feminisms in Transnational Contexts," Kathleen A. McHugh looks at film feminisms as part of a larger feminist cultural landscape and examines the difficulty of theorising and exploring feminisms' impact on film production (113). McHugh considers how different theoretical frameworks and film categories, including auteur theory, national cinemas, and genre, often erase the "feminism" of feminist films and filmmaking (115). The reception of feminist cinematic television series reveals a similar dynamic at play, whereby the series are either recognised as "feminist" or "cinematic" but rarely as both. *Girls* and *Transparent* highlight how gender politics can overshadow a series' aesthetic achievements. Both *Girls* and *Transparent* have been widely examined, both in academic publications and by popular media outlets, in terms of their contributions to

and engagement with popular feminisms, however, they are rarely situated within discussions of filmic aesthetics on television.

In this article I focus on a subset of feminist cinematic television that draws on an American indie cinema aesthetic, relies on a lack of bombast, and complicates narratives of authorship drawn from auteurism. This article examines series that deal with the everyday lives of women, which depend on a certain amount of verisimilitude, and employ a low-key style of filmmaking, including *Girls*, *Transparent*, *Better Things*, *Queen Sugar*, and *SMILF*. I contend that these series represent a distinctly feminist woman-centric kind of “cinematic” television, insofar as they are telling women’s stories using visual storytelling methods. I argue that the “cinematic-ness” of these series is indebted to their feminist sensibility and their women-centric authorship. However, as I go on to discuss, the loosely defined category of “cinematic television” has largely been formulated around male-centric series that draw on hi-fi film aesthetics and style (See Newman and Levine 5, Imre 392, Bignell 158, Geraghty 30). Feminist cinematic television is at once enabled by the conditions of the “peak TV” era and lacking the adequate interpretive and evaluative frameworks. Although not within the scope of this article, further examination is needed of the industrial conditions that enabled the cycle.

Feminist cinematic television troubles the existing parameters and definitions of cinematic television, and in doing so, it poses specific questions about authorship, aesthetics, and politics. This article uses the work of contemporary feminist film scholars to rethink the relationship between cinematic television as an interpretive and evaluative framework, feminist television as a specialised politicised category, and authorship as a concept that anchors both. First, I will outline how cinematic television has been conceptualised within television scholarship and the limits of these theorisations. Second, I will examine the relationship between cinematic television and discourses on authorship on television and the problem with importing conceptualisations of authorship from film studies. Finally, the relationship between feminism, authorship, and “cinematic-ness” on television will be explored through a close textual analysis of Adlon’s *Better Things*.

What is cinematic television?

Cinematic television is a category and framework that is inherently gendered, raced, and classed; and yet it persists as a key framework for evaluating contemporary US scripted narrative primetime television series. Both academic and journalistic publications use the concept of cinematic television to describe the aesthetic, tone, and mode of storytelling performed by so-called “quality” television series (See Thurm; Carroll Harris). Discussions of “cinematic” television often use US quality television dramas, such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Mad Men* (2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013), as exemplars. Dramas are often described as “cinematic,” but comedies or dramedies are rarely featured in this conversation. For instance, *Vulture* television critics Matt Zoller Seitz and Chris Wade produced a 15-minute video essay entitled “What does ‘Cinematic TV’ really mean?” (2015) where they draw on a wide range of contemporary drama series to explain that there is no singular understanding of

cinematic television. In his narration Zoller Seitz notes that cinematic television often “feels big” and “looks expensive.”

Cinematic television is typified by a large-scale production, a glossy style, and complicated camera set-ups. Deborah L. Jaramillo writes that, “‘Cinematic’ [in relation to television] connotes artistry mixed with a sense of grandeur” (69). It is perhaps this grandeur that audiences and critics most clearly identify as a marker of “cinematicness” on US television. Series most often identified as “cinematic” are big in scope and theme, such as *Game of Thrones* (2011-present), *True Detective* (2014-present), and *Fargo* (2014-present). These series take on big issues, such as mortality, masculinity, fate, violence, morality, and death. While verisimilitude is valued in these series, it is often coupled with high production values, large scale sets, costumes, and stunts, that create a sense of scope and scale. For example, *Breaking Bad* uses colour, the Albuquerque landscape, and costumes to create its vast world of criminality in suburbia. Television series that are labelled “cinematic” by critics often use complicated set ups and ostentatious camera work, such as the six-minute long take in the Cary Fukunaga directed season one of *True Detective*. In a similar vein, *Fargo* uses heightened absurdist violence reminiscent of feature films by the Coen Brothers and Quentin Tarantino. Furthermore, much is made of the scale of production and storytelling in *Game of Thrones*, which is often cited the largest and most expensive television series ever made. These large-scale productions have become synonymous with the idea of cinematic television (Zoller Seitz and Wade; Carroll Harris).

Cinematic television does not only incorporate discourses on aesthetics and production conditions, but it also operates as an evaluative category that is used to deem some television series more culturally and critically valuable than others. As Brett Mills explains, “It’s clear that the term ‘cinematic’ is one associated with hierarchical ideas of quality, and is perceived to be a compliment” (63). Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine argue that the most “ubiquitous legitimating strategy [in US television] is cinematization: certain kinds of television and certain modes of experiencing television content are aligned with movies and the experience of movies” (5). “Cinematization” is a gendered strategy that legitimises certain kinds of male-centred scripted narrative television series by isolating them from television’s domestic feminine roots. This places women filmmakers and creators on US television within a double bind, whereby discourses of “cinematization” work to erase television’s woman-centred history, while at the same time what is recognised as “cinematic” draws on kinds of cinema and authorship that women have historically been alienated from. Therefore, recognisable feminist filmmakers and creators on television are a disruptive force by their very existence.

I contend that the current formulation cinematic television work to erase the feminist politics of some series and, therefore, there needs to be a reconfiguration of what it means to call television “cinematic” and what forms of authorship are recognised as part of this framework. Series like *Girls*, *Transparent*, and *Better Things* are quiet, slow, low-key, and meditative, but equally as “cinematic” as larger-scale series. They are small in their scale of production and their thematic content. For example, unlike the continent-spanning production of *Game of Thrones*, *Girls* is filmed in Brooklyn

inside apartments and cafés. The visual language of *Girls* is unobtrusive and inconspicuous, using a lot of wide medium-long shots that push in very slowly, in a way that is almost imperceptible. Intimate and emotional scenes between friends or lovers are often shot through door or window frames, creating a sense of voyeurism that draws attention to the staging of the scene for the camera. *Girls* uses what David Bordwell calls planimetric frame composition (167-168), as well as tableau presentation and slow push ins and pull outs. The camera is still and the action in the frame often seems to operate like a play, with characters moving in and out of frame without the camera following them. This is, of course, an over simplification of *Girls*' low-key style of filmmaking, but it is clear that there is a lack on bombast in the series' aesthetic style.

A number of the series that make up feminist cinematic television draw on indie or smart film aesthetics, including *Girls*, *Transparent*, *Better Things*, *One Mississippi*, and *SMILF*. These dramedies focus on the everyday lives of white urban middle-class protagonists. In this instance what makes these series "cinematic" is not scale, scope, or high production values, but their use of a low-key style that echoes particular kinds of American indie films. For instance, the treatment of death and dying in *One Mississippi* resonates with Holofcener's film work, in particular *Please Give* (2010), which deals with similar issues around guilt and death. There are also stark similarities between Soloway's *Transparent* and Tamara Jenkins' *The Savages* (2007) and Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) in terms of their examination of family dynamics and emphasis on dialogue and tone over narrative and story. In contrast, while *True Detective* also delivers emotional scenes that revel in discomfort, this is not what marks the series as cinematic, rather it is the scope, scale and grandeur of the series' aesthetic and its use of movie stars that marks it as "cinematic."

The concept of cinematic television extends beyond aesthetics to incorporate storytelling and authorship. Conventional or "regular" television is always moving the plot forward toward the episode and/or season's ultimate conclusion. What differentiates series like *Better Things*, *Girls*, and *Queen Sugar* from "regular" television is their willingness to sit in moments of discomfort and emotion, whether mundane or momentous. The "cinematic-ness" of *Better Things*, *Girls*, and *One Mississippi* is found in the quiet understated moments of reflection where the characters' faces and emotions are central. This is the opposite of the bombast that marks male-centric series, like *Game of Thrones* or *Fargo*, as "cinematic."

Defining cinematic television authorship

Cinematic television is inextricably tied to particular kinds of authorship, which are tied to filmic notions of auteurism. However, the cinematic concept of auteurism does not operate in the same way on television, which is generally understood as a writer's medium, unlike cinema which is a director's medium. In discourses on television, "author" can refer to either the writer or the director, and sometimes both. Television writers and directors who are linked to "cinematic" television make television that is distinct and identifiable. Unlike "regular" television which is often called generic and predictable, cinematic television is specific and unpredictable. However, authorship is more than aesthetics and style, it is also about marketing or what Jason Mittell calls

“authorial branding” (97). This is a relatively new phenomenon, which works to establish television as a creative medium worthy of serious critical attention, and in doing so draws the authors of particular television series into conversation with film and literature (Mittell 97-98). For example, *The Sopranos* creator-showrunner David Chase is often discussed as the “auteur” or “genius” behind the series (Biskind). This perpetuates the assumption that in order for a television series to be “quality” it must have a singular artistic vision.

Auteurist discourses rely on ownership and singularity (White 43), which is antithetical to the realities of television production. However, television writer-creator-showrunners such as Chase, David Simon, Matthew Weiner, Aaron Sorkin, and Vince Gilligan are positioned as the singular “authors” of their respective series. These television authors (often creator-showrunners) have become brands themselves and with their names come an expectation of “quality” (DeFino 8-9). It is not that the celebritisation of showrunners is inherently gendered, but rather the branding of them is gendered, because the marketing image of the showrunner is drawn from the idea of the “genius male auteur” (Newman and Levine 38-39). In the “peak TV” era, authorship has become a key way that television series are marketed as “cinematic” as series are advertised as ‘from the writer/director of...’ Authorship on television is still strongly associated with male creator-showrunners including Chase, Weiner, and Gilligan, and filmmakers, such as Fukunaga, David Fincher, and Martin Scorsese.

The gendering of authorship goes beyond marginalising women directors and their creative outputs, as both Christina Lane and Claire Perkins outline in their work on American indie cinema and woman filmmakers. Quoting filmmaker Allison Anders, Lane cites the idea of a “boy wonder myth” as a way of understanding the kind of prestige or allure that young male filmmakers are imbued with when their first feature film succeeds commercially and/or critically (199). Similarly, Perkins identifies the “maverick myth” as a historical and contemporary trend whereby discourses on indie cinema effectively cultivate male “star auteurs” (139). Filmmakers such as Tarantino and Steven Soderbergh, are labelled as “geniuses” for their early film work and praised as leading their respective generations of filmmakers (Lane 200, Perkins 140). The very public and excessive lauding of young male filmmakers reinforces an established cultural hierarchy that associates cinematic authorship with male directors.

US television contains and perpetuates many different kinds of authorship and authorial branding, including the author-star, the writer-director, the creator-showrunner, and the authorial team. Each of these can be found in the cycle that I am calling feminist cinematic television. It is crucial, however, not to employ gender essentialism when addressing the inequity experienced by women filmmakers and discussing the disproportionate ways their films and television series are valued and categorised. Precisely what constitutes female authorship as opposed to male authorship is highly contested, as Perkins notes in her examination of women filmmakers in American independent cinema and the lack of critical attention paid to women directors working in that section of the US film industry (141). Gesturing to what Judith Mayne called the “‘dreaded epithet’ of essentialism,” Perkins highlights the difficulty of assuming that “there is a connection between a writer’s gender, her

personhood, and her texts” (141). Despite the justified wariness of gender essentialism in conversations around female authorship, it is evident that woman-authored films and television series tend to highlight women’s stories, lives, and experiences. It is also clear that women filmmakers, in both cinema and television, experience materially different working conditions to their male counterparts and these manifests in their work.

Even in the era of the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, where there is intense scrutiny on women’s working conditions in the film and television industries, the concepts of “cinema” and “authorship” are still deeply tied to individual white men. In her recent monograph *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema* (2015), Patricia White offers an alternative conceptualisation of female authorship that she calls “elite auteurism,” whereby some women directors “have cannily negotiated discourses of female exceptionality both in their personae and their films” (22). For instance, both DuVernay and Campion’s series are marketed as “from the acclaimed director...” and both series feature protagonists who are themselves exceptional women. Both Campion and DuVernay are recognisable women-centric brands and they are marketed as such; however, they are still operating within an understanding of cinematic television that overlooks their work. These authors and their work are positioned as “exceptional,” meaning that they have surpassed the limits of their gender and the industrial conditions that marginalise their work. To absorb women directors into a discourse of auteurism is to ignore the embedded problems with this discourse. Furthermore, what of the women writers and directors who are not marked as “elite” or “exceptional?” As White notes, to focus too closely on “exceptional anomalies” is to attend to the discourses that render the work of many women-directors invisible (41).

Instead, following White’s lead, I look to how feminist cinematic television makes the work of women creators, writers, and directors visible. On *Queen Sugar*, DuVernay made the unprecedented decision to only hire women directors and primarily women of colour. Episode directors include indie filmmakers Julie Dash, Cheryl Dunye, So Yong Kim, Tanya Hamilton, Victoria Mahoney, and Kat Candler, and sitcom director Neema Barnette. The effect of this decision can be seen in the series’ aesthetics, tone, and style. *Queen Sugar* tells the story of the African-American Bordelon siblings who inherit their father’s sugar cane farm after his death. The story is small and intimate in its address, yet set against the vast landscape of the Louisiana farmland. The series’ aesthetic is informed by its politics, the characters are lit to emphasise their beauty and power. The frame composition often finds the characters clustered around the edges of the frame and intimate moments are held within the frame as to emphasise the emotion. For instance, the camera regularly holds on Charley Bordelon’s (Dawn-Lyen Gardner) face after a difficult discussion with her siblings, ex-husband, or son. The camera ensures that audience sits with her in those moments of reflection, whether they are fueled by frustration, joy, anger, exhaustion, or any other combination of feelings. DuVernay’s feminist and racial politics inform her decision to employ predominantly women directors of colour and the aesthetic, stylistic, and tonal work of the series bear this evident.

Case Study: *Better Things*

Better Things is a recent women-centric television series with a feminist sensibility created by frequent collaborators Pamela Adlon and Louis C.K. The series began airing in 2016 on basic cable channel FX, which has built a reputation in recent years for producing and distributing provocative programming with strong identifiable authors. The basic cable network's flagship series include the Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk-produced anthology series *American Horror Story* (2011-present) and *American Crime Story* (2016-present), Joe Weisberg's period spy drama *The Americans* (2013-2018), Noah Hawley's anthology drama *Fargo* (based on the Coen Brothers film of the same name), and Donald Glover's genre-defying half-hour series *Atlanta* (2016-present). Each of these series have a specific style, tone, and aesthetic that is closely associated with their writer-creators and/or producers. While *Better Things* does not have the same media profile as these series, it does employ a particular aesthetic, an identifiable tone, and a specific mode of storytelling that is closely tied to author-star Adlon.

Unlike Dunham's *Girls* or Shaw's *SMILF*, the authorship of *Better Things* is contested. Adlon and C.K. are credited as co-creators and co-writers on the majority of series' 20 episodes. Despite this, it is Adlon who I situate as the primary author of *Better Things*. The series is based on Adlon's life; the protagonist Sam Fox (played by Adlon) is a working actress, voice-over artist, and single-parent to three daughters – Max (Mikey Madison), Franky (Hannah Alligood), and Duke (Olivia Edward) – living in Los Angeles, California. Sam's biographical details are taken directly from Adlon's life, including that Sam (like Adlon) was a child-actress and that her mother (like Adlon's) lives across the street from Sam and her daughters (Ifeanyi). It is Adlon's perspective and authorial voice that drives the series and she is the credited director on a number of episodes from the first season and the whole of the second season.

C.K.'s claim to authorship of the feminist-leaning *Better Things* is further complicated by recent allegations by a former employee, who claims that he masturbated in front of her. The allegations surfaced after production on the second season of *Better Things* had wrapped. Since then Adlon has distanced herself from C.K., and FX has severed ties with the once renowned comic. Adlon was a credited writer on C.K.'s series *Louie* (2010-2015), yet that series very much circulates as "his show." As such, I suggest that the same is true of *Better Things*, despite C.K.'s now-contentious involvement as a co-writer and co-creator, *Better Things* is best understood as Adlon's work and to credit C.K. or to taint Adlon's series with C.K.'s name is to undermine the achievements of this woman-centric series. Ultimately, I contend it is Adlon's authorial vision rendered on screen in *Better Things*, not C.K.'s.

The textual work of *Better Things*, Adlon's authorship, and the series' paratexts are indelibly intertwined. The first episode of the series ends with Sam standing in the centre of a stark empty white room. She has just told the director she is working with that she does not want to perform a sexually explicit "funny" scene and he has responded unsympathetically, instructing her that she needs to perform the unspecified lewd act. Sam expresses her resistance to simulating sexually explicit acts for the

camera, because she does not want to embarrass her daughters. As Sam stands alone in the centre of the room in a full face of makeup and a tight dress, pulling at her Spanx, Adlon's dedication "for my daughters" appears in the bottom righthand corner of the frame. The irony is literally writ large as Sam and Adlon embrace the overt and inherent contradictions in this performance of motherhood and authorship. Moreover, this scene positions both Sam and Adlon in contrast to discourses that construct female authorship as elite and exceptional. *Better Things* overtly underlines the mundanity of Sam's life, and the series' low-key aesthetic style and meandering storytelling do not call attention to themselves or Adlon's authorship.

The distinction between author, actor, and character are further blurred in the paratextual credit sequence, which is constructed as a glimpse into Sam and her (fictional) daughter's lives through home videos. The credit sequence uses personal videos of the actors during their earlier years to create a sense of intimacy and shared history. The credit sequence, like the series, centres on motherhood. Unlike most depictions of maternity and mothering on US television, *Better Things* does not present an idealised version of motherhood, rather Sam is flawed and angry, and perhaps most importantly unexceptional. This resonates with depictions of motherhood from recent American indie films *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Tully* (2018). Sam's style of parenting could be described as combative, as there are many instances when it seems as though she is engaging in an ongoing war with her daughters. In response, Max and Franky are shown to enjoy provoking their mother into a rage. Through Sam, motherhood is depicted as love and frustration in equal measures.

Over the course of two seasons, *Better Things* cultivates a specific aesthetic, narrative, and tonal style that I contend is "cinematic." This is developed through an emphasis on visual storytelling. There is very little expositional dialogue and the characters rarely explain their relationships to one another or outline why they are in a particular setting. There is also often a lack of explicit causality between scenes. This is unusual for US television which uses expository dialogue to engage casual viewers. Like *Girls*, *Better Things* uses a low-key style of filmmaking whereby the camera work does not make itself overly apparent through framing, editing, or movement. Occasionally the series does use flashbacks; though, these are momentary glimpses into past events that cast the present in a new light.

Better Things prioritises the emotional lives of its central characters over everything else, including, plot cohesion and clarity. The episodes are structured around themes and ideas rather than plot. As such there is a lack of solid narrative structure within each episode or across seasons, which is atypical of contemporary television. This is especially rare in a US television landscape dominated by what Mittell calls "complex serial poetics" (18-19), where complex television is highly valued, both critically and culturally. This lack of causality results in a somewhat disjointed experience both within episodes and across seasons, as the characters move seemingly without cause or consequence across spaces and situations. For example, in the second episode of the first season, a sombre scene of Sam discussing the failing marriage of a friend cuts directly to a scene within a scene, in which Sam is filming a traditional family sitcom. The tonal shift between two scenes is stark and it is made more so by the lack of

establishing shot or segue into the subsequent scene. This is reminiscent of the short vignettes typical of “smart” films, as explored by Perkins in her book *American Smart Cinema* (62-63).

Much of *Better Things* takes place in interstitial spaces, such as cars, beds, kitchens, and waiting rooms, rather than in traditional televisual spaces where things “happen,” such as work, school, and social gatherings. The audience seldom sees Sam and her daughters when they are “doing” things. Sam is rarely depicted as “working,” instead she is in the makeup chair talking to others in the trailer or goofing off with a co-star between takes. The audience is not privy to Franky’s soccer games, but rather it is in the car ride to and from the game that the camera lingers. There is an emphasis on the mundane and the lack of excitement. As seen in the second season when an intense emotional moment between Sam and an old flame occurs while she is shopping for a generator. This mundane moment becomes charged with history and emotional resonance.

Sam is often located in waiting rooms (for doctors, teachers, auditions), she is almost always just outside of the spaces where things are “happening.” It is in these in-between spaces that the emotional lives of the characters and the series dwell. These spaces are at once private and public, they are intimate yet exposed. The interstitial spaces are rendered in ways that are distinctly woman-focused, feminist, and Sam-centric. The camera sits with Sam as she waits for Franky to finish soccer practice or Max to finish dance class. The camera takes on Sam’s gaze as she watches her kids through windows and doors. It is in these moments that the series centres the emotional and maternal labour undertaken by Sam and the continued displacement of her needs, in favour of her children’s wants, needs, and desires. While Sam’s priority is often her daughters, the series’ priority is Sam. In the series’ second episode, a tracking shot follows Sam from the car to her daughters’ school. The camera holds Sam in the centre of the frame, even as other action begs for attention from Sam, the camera, and the audience. Franky and Duke move in and out of the frame, the camera does not follow them, but stays on Sam, while their voices dominate the soundscape. This is a visual motif that reoccurs throughout the series. While other characters speak, react, cry, yell, laugh – they are always peripheral to Sam’s experience of a situation and the frame composition makes this literal.

Better Things is reminiscent of the filmic work of Kelly Reichardt, Holofcener, and Polley, whose films are invested in the everyday minutiae and emotions of women’s lives. The series is invested in Sam’s life and the lives of the women around her. Even if Sam is not always interested in the everyday minutiae of those around her, the series is. For instance, Sam’s mother Phil (Celia Imre) is largely presented as a peripheral presence within the series. Sam is often frustrated with Phil, in particular her hoarding tendencies, but the series takes the time to appreciate her world. Season two features a Phil-centric episode, where the audience spends the day with her as she volunteers at a museum, gets asked to leave after attempting to steal an ancient artefact, and then deliberately injures herself at an unattended worksite. The audience has access to aspects of Phil’s life that those within the diegesis do not. The camera holds on her face for comedic and emotional affect, emphasising her disappointment and showing how

her daughter often dismisses her feelings. For this episode, Phil's feelings and perspective are at the centre of the story and the frame.

The final episode of season two depicts the high school graduation of Sam's eldest daughter Max. The *mise-en-scène* is cluttered both with people and with things, as family members and friends descend on Sam's house to celebrate Max. *Better Things* moves across literal and emotional terrain in a way that appears effortless and seamless yet loaded with meaning and history. While the series shows Sam and Max negotiating how her graduation party will proceed, what alcohol will be allowed, and whether Sam will be present, we do not see the party itself. The same can be said of the graduation ceremony, the series shows Max getting ready and the logistical negotiations of who is going to take Max to the graduation rehearsal, but we do not witness the ceremony. It is the minutiae, the tension and emotions between Sam and Max on this important day, that are given pride of place within the episode, rather than the pageantry and performativity of the ceremony itself. The "cinematic-ness" of *Better Things* is in its mundanity. Adlon's authorship is evident in every frame of *Better Things* and the series uses cinematic forms of storytelling drawn from smart cinema and American indie cinema to tell its women-centric story.

Conclusion

Better Things highlights how some feminist cinematic television series are aesthetically, tonally, and narratively in conversation with feminist indie cinema. However, the use of indie and smart styles of filmmaking and aesthetics are not limited to feminist television creators, writers, and directors. This tendency can also be seen in Neil LaBute's *Billy & Billie* (2015), Judd Apatow's *Love* (2016-2018), Joe Swanberg's *Easy* (2016-present) and the Duplass Brothers' *Togetherness* (2015-2016), which all work rather seamlessly within each filmmakers' cinematic body of work. So why focus on women-centric, feminist-authored television series? Because the aesthetic and cinematic work of male filmmakers on television is rarely marginalised and erased in the same way the work of women is.

Using the work of McHugh, Lane, White, and Perkins as a way into women-centric television makes apparent their cinematic-ness and their feminist sensibility. Current constructions and articulations of "cinematic" television do not account for the ways that feminist television is cinematic and cinematic television is feminist. This lack of adequate evaluative and interpretive frameworks, means that these series cannot be accurately categorised as operating within particular filmic or television traditions. Feminist filmmakers and television creators are increasingly asserting themselves, their storytelling, and their politics on television and while television distributors and audiences seem to have made room for them, evaluative and interpretive frameworks also need to be reformulated accordingly. Better yet, perhaps we should abandon the frameworks that ignore and marginalise women's work and employ those that recognise it, which in this instance is those found in contemporary feminist film studies.

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