‘Hey Doll’: Keeping Up with the Kardashians and the Construction of the Feminine Body

With a sturdy grip on the American popular culture landscape, the Kardashian sisters are the latest embodiment of femininity. Keeping Up with the Kardashians is part of a significant shift in television culture in which there has namely been a proliferation of reality television programs that feature all women, distributed by channels geared for women, and is ultimately watched by women. There is no question that reality programing is here to stay, thus, research in this area is critical considering it is shaping the trajectory of contemporary culture growing into a key component of the social, cultural, and political realms of everyday life. This specific program in the genre of reality television has lent itself to disseminate images that sustain a craving in our cultural diet that must consistently be fed with skewed images of women, in an attempt to portray “real” lives.

This paper is a critical analysis of the reality television show, Keeping Up with the Kardashians by way of Michel Foucault’s (1977) discourse on the “panopticon” and Laura Mulvey’s (1975) discourse on the male gaze. By putting Foucault and Mulvey into conversation with another, a lens forms to illuminate an understanding of Keeping Up with the Kardashians as a fundamental factor at work in the fashioning of the feminine body. A close examination yields that their “docile bodies” are fragmented through gender-specific disciplinary practices such as: close-up exaggerated shots of body parts, dieting and exercise to arrive at a particular shape and size, and an expectation of feminine movements and gestures. Moreover, in a wider social context, the Kardashian sisters have indirectly emerged as the paradigm of femininity that results in an exacerbation of the preexisting “panopticon” for all women. The familiarity and over consumption of reality television has produced a kind of virtual “panopticon” in which all women internalize an omnipresent—presumably male—gaze. While these reality shows are
centered on women, an intervention by way of inquiry into these reality shows is imperative to understanding society at large.

In the Fall of 2007 television season, the year *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* began, reality programming held 77.3 percent of viewership during the primetime block (Nielsen Research, 2011). The E! Entertainment channel is home to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and is purveyor of twenty-two reality television shows, with fourteen centering on women. In its first season the program snagged the number one spot for capturing the viewership of women between the ages of 18 and 34 (Kinon, 2007). The viewership of the Kardashians is causing significant rippling impressions in how women—and by extension all of society—are conceptualizing femininity. Clearly, audiences are investing time in watching the program considering that at the end of last year the program ranked number five on E! Online’s “Top 10 Reality Series of 2012” list (Mullins, 2012). Thus, the urgency to examine and address the consumption of reality television, particularly *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, has magnified.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1977) asserts that the “panopticon” as an architectural composition began as a component to keep prisoners under surveillance that prospered as the modern mechanism of discipline, surveillance and control. This mechanism targeted to manipulate the bodies’ “elements, its gestures, its behaviour”, terminating an era of public punishment that directly contacted the bodies of the citizens by the sovereign power (Foucault, 1977: 200). Instead, this shift in method of discipline constituted a “‘mechanics of power’” that “defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines”, producing “docile bodies”(Foucault, 1997: 200). This functioning of power assured that the prisoner never knew if the “supervisor” that stood in the
middle of the structures as the panoptic figure, was looking at him but knew that he “may always be so”, conditioning prisoners to a state of self-surveillance (Foucault, 1977: 201). As a ubiquitous presence, this mechanism has endured through space and time being utilized in schools, hospitals, and factories, and today, as I propose below, it is even reflected in reality programming formats.

The Kardashians are not legally prisoners, however, the viewer now becomes the panoptic “supervisor”. The Kardashian’s home functions similarly to a cell: an “enclosed [and] segmented space,” in which they are “observed at every point” (Foucault, 1977: 197). A space in which the “slightest movements are supervised and all events are recorded” (Foucault, 1977: 197). This “fixed place” is characteristic of the camera frame in which the Kardashians are continually locked in. In Foucauldian terms, the viewer takes on the role and monitors the Kardashians’ bodies to “assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits” (Foucault, 1977: 200). Foucault (1977) conveys that “the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action” hence, “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (195). In other words, when we think about Keeping Up with the Kardashians, regardless if the camera is on or off, they are conditioned to continuously inspect themselves. Sandra Lee Bartky (1997) speaks to this self-disciplining when she suggests that women who are constantly checking their make-up, hair, stockings, or their food intake have become “just as surely as the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, as self committed to a relentless self-surveillance.” (149). The body has become a site of social control in the method as Foucault describes it, and one in which the Kardashians and all women are accustomed to follow a system in pursuit of a continuously changing ideal that is ultimately unattainable.
"Keeping Up with the Kardashians" is committed to a new form of discipline dedicated to the manufacturing of femininity. It is indispensable to understand the connection between the femininity that is being produced by the Kardashians in their own disciplinary practices that is accordingly filtered to women consuming the program. Bartky (1997) argues that while Foucault (1977) accounted for disciplinary practices of institutions, he was “blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (132). Bartky’s (1997) work fills the gaps that Foucault overlooked pertaining to the “regulation of the body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gesture, and general comportment in space and the appearance of each of its visible parts” (131). Let’s not forget the countless hours women spend on not only pursuing an ideal shape and size but an ideal “ornamented surface” that requires the use of countless products such as a curling or flat iron, or even face masks and moisturizers that claim to “rejuvenate” women’s skin.

The presence of the male gaze and the voyeuristic aesthetic of the reality television format share a mutual relationship in maintaining the status quo of women’s quest of femininity. Since its explosion into the primetime slots, reality television has joined the media landscape in an enduring tradition of constructing women as a spectacle for voyeuristic pleasure. A possible avenue to understanding this enduring tradition is to look at who is producing this lucrative style of programming. The production companies Ryan Seacrest Productions and Bunim/Murray Productions, who are known as pioneers in the reality television genre, produce "Keeping Up with the Kardashians." Within these production companies and Comcast Corporation who owns E! Entertainment, only men serve in decision-making positions. The 2011 revenue of reality shows for Comcast Corporation totaled 55.8 billion dollars (Who Owns the Media?, 2013).

While men still carry weight in decision-making positions, women still show up in small
numbers. In a recent report on the current status of women in the media, only 26 percent of creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors, and directors of photography, are women (Lauzen, 2011: 3). The same report stated that “viewers were more likely to see female characters on reality programs where they accounted for 46% of all characters”, meaning that women are not only less likely to have control in the production aspect of reality programs but are more likely to be a part of the spectacle (Lauzen, 2011: 2). It is no surprise then that Kris Jenner is the only female producer of Keeping Up with the Kardashians. The function of men in positions of power behind the camera is a historically visited conversation within film theory that was first marked by Laura Mulvey in 1975. She drew attention to the male gaze in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” illuminating ways in which “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey, 1975: 1). Similarly, the “man controls the film phantasy” in the program, and is “the bearer of the look of the spectator” (Mulvey, 1975: 5).

The reality television format used for Keeping Up with the Kardashians echoes what Laura Mulvey (1975) describes as the male gaze, specifically placing Kourtney, Kim, and Khloe on display in their own homes. Mulvey (1975) argues that, “[i]n 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.” (4). In Foucauldian terms, this being looked at and being displayed, is akin to the approach used to locate “docile bodies” in the “panopticon”. Parallel to the method in which prisoners are observed in their cells with backlighting, the Kardashians are “perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (Foucault, 1977: 200). As a stage, their home, and virtually everywhere they go, functions as an arena set up for their display with abundant close-ups of their bodies, similar to the cinematic tendencies used in films that featured Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, who
were known for their luring gaze into the camera (Mulvey, 1975).

For the purpose of this presentation, I will hone in on two examples. In this example, Khloe is approached to pose naked for PETA’s “I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” campaign in an effort to encourage the public to refrain from purchasing clothes made from animal fur. When she is approached about this, she explains in her confessional: “I really don’t know if I have the right look for this. I’m just really not like that super model type of girl…I don’t have that skinny body” (“I’d Rather Go Naked Or Shopping”, 2009). This frame of mind comes as no surprise considering most women, do not fall within the model measurements of 5 foot 11 inches and 117 pounds and are consistently told that it is the norm, when the actual measurements for women in the U.S. is 5 foot 4 inches and 140 pounds. (Bissell and Risk, 2010).

Khloe’s brief breakdown in this episode concerning her body image can be juxtaposed with the Kardashian sisters countless endorsements with diet companies. Khloe meets with a plastic surgeon to undergo a procedure called VelaShape, a procedure that has been previously used by Kim, and is “the only FDA cleared device that effectively and safely contours, shapes and slims the body by reducing cellulite and firming problem areas in as little as 4 treatments” (VelaShape, 2013). Kourtney remembers Khloe having “body issues” and calls her “delusional” for wanting to get the procedure. But Khloe explains to the doctor “when I wave nothing should wave back at you” (“I’d Rather Go Naked Or Shopping”, 2009). She does this while she lifts up her arm and waves at the doctor.

The doctor, who is a woman, then suggests to Khloe that she should try out the Velashape procedure because it is “less invasive” to fix the areas that are “bothering” her. Khloe follows this by lifting her arm up once more, while pulling at her under arm saying, “this is an obese fat
cow that’s stuck here” (“I’d Rather Go Naked Or Shopping”, 2009). Later Khloe encounters an entertainment blog with comments left by people referring to her as a “beast”, and says, “after reading this shit I wanna kill myself“ (“I’d Rather Go Naked Or Shopping”, 2009).

What is at work here is in addition to seeing the support of the medical institution, as shown by the female plastic surgeon, in reinforcing these disciplinary practices the viewer is now seeing a kind of endorsement of Velashape by the Kardashians that could potentially provoke women to undergo this treatment.

For Khloe’s photos shoot, she is made up to look like a “cave woman”, with high heels, messy locks and bronzed skin. During the photo shoot Khloe’s manner of posing is constrained. While she is posing nude, she poses with her back slightly back to the camera with her arms folded at the elbow to somewhat cover her breasts. The following shots from the camera are of fragments of her body. With wind blowing in her hair she is shown posing with her arms out in front of her with a slight bend in her knees and her backside sticking out. The camera filming the photo shoot focuses on capturing exaggerated close-ups of her face, then pans slowly from her arms to her stomach covering just enough to cover her nude body.

In the second example I would like to focus on Kim’s photo shoot with Playboy. Kris describes the photo shoot as a “gorgeous pictorial”, with “class”, presuming that she will get a cut of the check because she is Kim’s manager (“Birthday Suit”, 2007). Initially, Kim completely rejects the idea, referencing her past saying, “ever since the sex tape scandal I have to be very careful of how I am perceived” (“Birthday Suit”, 2007). However anxious Kim is at first about what others will think of her, she agrees to do the “celebrity” cover.

What is significant about this particular example is the excessiveness of the male gaze.
By excessiveness I mean that the technique in which the photo shoot was caught on film for the program was nearly pornographic. When the photo shoot begins, Kim’s eyes are suddenly bedroom eyes and she is wearing a hot red one-piece with a deep v-cut neckline, nearly exposing her breasts, with her hair tousled. She is posing on her knees with wind blowing in her hair while the photographer directs her with the words “bring the breasts to me” (“Birthday Suit” 2007). At a low angle, the camera serves as the window for the peeping viewers. At one point the “art director” of Playboy magazine approaches Kim on set to let her know that “Hef was serious about pumping this up” (“Birthday Suit” 2007). Meaning, Kim needed to take off all of her clothes for the photographs.

Although Kim’s contract states that there will be absolutely no nudity, with enough probing from Hugh Hefner himself, she is convinced to pose nude. Kim became “more comfortable” with the idea of posing nude for Playboy once she knew that Marilyn Monroe had posed nude for the first cover in 1953 (“Birthday Suit” 2007). Once Kim returns to the studio for the second photo shoot, the photographer takes her by the hand to the set. These few seconds in this scene have been edited to a slow motion low angle shot, letting the viewer observe Kim’s robed body taking in her every move. The following scene is a frame of the photographer hand gesturing at a close proximity to Kim, for her to take off her robe. Again, the camera is at a low angle. Kim miraculously felt comfortable to throw pearls and diamonds on and pose nude. Her body became ornamented with long strands of pearls dangling from her neck barely covering her nude body. As female viewers watch Kim transform into a flawless woman on a cover of Playboy magazine what is a work here is the reinstating of a disciplinary power that convinces Kim to pose nude in the guise of looking classy similar to iconic sex symbol Marilyn Monroe. These examples are two representatives on one continuum. On the one hand, Kim
At this point, with the time remaining I would like to play a minute of a video I created as a component to this paper that will visually illuminate what I have been describing to you here today. I recently made this video for my visual culture research methods course. In the last few months of working on this paper the challenge has been to illustrate with words. However, the challenge for this video became the minimal use words but more images to get my point across. My approach was to use clips and put them in conversation with each other to develop a counter-narrative that depicted the gender-specific disciplinary practices of exaggerated shots of body parts, dieting and exercise to arrive at a particular shape and size, and an expectation of feminine movements and gestures.
Works Cited


