

A Mother Is a Form of Time: *Gilmore Girls* and the Elasticity of In-Finitude

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That is what the time when my mother was alive *before me* is—History (moreover, it is the period which interests me most, historically).

—Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

HAHAHHA as much as i love gilmore girls..its truee.they talk way to fasttt and are too close lol

—Anonymous

A Surface Preface

It is true. They talk way too fast and are too close. Or, they talk their way to fast, as though speed itself were a destination.

On the September 18, 2005, episode of the animated Fox series *Family Guy*—less series than textual machine spitting out parodic encounters with other pieces of television—a somber male voice-over announces, “We now return to *Gilmore Girls*” (which aired on the WB/CW network during 2000–2007) as we cut from recurring characters Lois and Brian sitting on the sofa watching television to the embedded diegetic set. There, two animated brunettes who look strikingly like one another sit on a sofa themselves, presumably in front of another television, *mise en abyme*. The dialogue whizzes by, attribution barely possible to one body or the other; the whole thing takes less than thirty seconds: “Mom, I need to talk to you about Dean.” “Which Dean? Howard Dean, James Dean, or Jimmy Dean?” “Too old, too dead, and too fattening.” “You don’t have to tell that to my thighs.” “Can you ask your thighs if they borrowed my Gap capris?” “They did not and they’re insulted that you’d ask such a thing.” “As insulted as Kitty Kelley when people accuse her of taking liberties with her best-selling tell-alls?” “Almost. Wanna make out?” “Absolutely not.” “You’re so lying.” “I so am.” The animated (in both senses) mother and daughter begin carnal osculations on the couch.

Family Guy’s mode of address largely consists of these sorts of intertextual parodies, and they are assuredly the dominant pleasure of the show. But the structure of this *Gilmore Girls* bit is a mix of parody and fan fiction that takes the conceits of *Gilmore Girls* to a hyperbolic and excessive extreme: the narrative overclose friendship between mother and daughter on which that show is based becomes the saturated overcloseness of lesbian incest.¹ Hence the response to an online video of this *Family Guy* clip, given above as an epigraph: “HAHAHHA as much as i love gilmore girls..its truee. they talk way to fasttt and are too close lol.” What to make of that “as much as i love . . .”? Is the way to/too fast talking and too closeness a burden to the desiring viewer (as much as *I love them*, I do not love how they speak and what they are to each other?), or is it the case that the shouting laughter marked in the viewer’s response regards incestuous union as the fitting punishment for the fast-talking close-being dames? What is so “truee” about the *Family Guy* spoof? It is some truth that either contradicts or answers for that “as much as i love , . . .,” a truth that secures the exception of the viewer-writer’s desire for the show, a truth about talking, a truth about what “too close” means where mothers and daughters are

concerned. The *Family Guy* satire, like all parody, operates by failing to remain independent of and outside its target. The necessary distance between satirical approach and satirized object is transgressed in the hyperbolic representation. *They really are that close. Mothers and daughters should not be that close.* The parody goes by too fast and becomes formally too close to *Gilmore Girls*. *Family Guy* thus begins to enact the workings that it initially held at bay for critical mockery; the teasing dance between distance and closeness ends with the shows becoming overproximate—incestuous collapse becomes textual collapse. Perhaps that nervous written laughter is deserved: talking that fast, being that close—when sexual and textual differences are elided, nothing less than the normative familial foundations of television are at stake.

The textual trademarks of *Gilmore Girls* that are parodically reperformed in *Family Guy* are the same ones noted in nearly every piece of mainstream and academic discourse on the popular WB/CW network series: the speed of dialogue, the excess of cultural allusions, and the (over)closeness of the central characters, a mother and daughter who are separate in age by the narrow and meaningful gap of only sixteen years.² However, these identifying traits are routinely and problematically linked to an antiquated division of form and content: such claims posit that *Gilmore Girls*' formal language involves verbal speed and densely allusive language (marks ascribed to creator Amy Sherman-Palladino, with the auteurism reinforcing their function as pure style, pure formal device), while the content of the show is taken to be "about" the relations between mothers and daughters.³ This naturalization of the false dichotomy between form and content, surface and depth, forecloses the more provocative suggestion that I intend to advance, that *Gilmore Girls* is a show that is as much *about* speed, allusion, density, and excess as it is *about* mothers and daughters and, furthermore, that this is a series in which mother-daughter closeness is as much a formal strategy as any of the above traits of language. In regarding speed as a subject and the mother-daughter dyad as a form, the distinctions between periphery and center, form and content, and surface and depth all cease to mean a rigidly knowable difference. When we reverse the terms that have governed critical reception of the series—taking speed as a subject and the mother as a form of time—a new dimension emerges: in the midst of the plethora of playful allusions, vivid characters, and acclaimed rich narratives is a series that revolves around the surprising figure of finitude. We will come back to that.

The ground of my argument is that *Gilmore Girls* extends its own rabid intertextuality to the central form of the relationship between mother and daughter. The signs of intertextuality—the blurring of boundaries, the flow and movement between two forms, the devouring of texts through iteration—all become signs of mother-daughterness. The question of where one text stops and another begins becomes a question of where one body stops and another begins. The deferral of meaning that Julia Kristeva marks as so important in literary intertextuality is the deferral of a meeting between daughter and mother: the relation itself defined by a temporal and unbreachable gap.⁴ Intertextuality is one way of thinking about mother-daughter overcloseness (the central pleasure, anxiety, and affection of *Gilmore Girls* for itself and for its viewers) and the reason why allusions so pepper the narrative structures. This is, in the end, a series about what it means to be a little too close, about the problem of boundaries and the impossibility sometimes with family, with texts, and with television of knowing where one structure ends and the other starts. Unlike the televisual schedule, there is no matrix for fully determining this matter, for intertextuality is fundamentally a temporal problem. As Jim Collins writes, “There is no other medium in which the force of the ‘already said’ is quite so visible as in television, primarily because the already said is the ‘still being said.’ . . . [T]he various pasts and presents of television now air simultaneously.”⁵ But the specific temporal conjunctions of televisual past and present are given a familial form in *Gilmore Girls*. And more than a mere familial form, they are given a maternal form. The Mother, the Daughter: their relation becomes a collusion of past and present textual dimensions, the one equivalent to the “already said,” the other the essentially “still being said.”

While the *Gilmore Girls* spoof in *Family Guy* is a classic example of televisual intertextuality, *Gilmore Girls*’ work on other texts suggests television’s intertextelasticality, for it is not mere recourse or reference to other texts but instead is a rabid work on those texts, an elasticity that willfully stretches other prior and still-present works to their limits. Intertextuality persists in a relation of anteriority, forever importing representational history through déjà lu, déjà vu, and déjà entendu, while intertextelasticality insists on the possibility of an extended surface of perpetual presence. To this extent, it is a supremely televisual logic. Intertextelasticality has an insistently taut material presence. It stretches but never rips. The elasticity of televisual play in *Gilmore Girls* permits an extended relationship to surface meaning without collapsing back into a depth structure of uncover and recovery. We should be careful not to regard elasticity as a benign relation of stress to surface—it is always, also, a

dislocation. And in the resulting anamorphic representation is a distended vision of a different text, one related but not identical to the original; indeed, no such origin exists. The question of relations becomes central, as it is less a matter of parodic inversion or another logic of difference than one of affinity through elasticity, transposition through deformation, and interdependence through stresses that beat on and at the surface.

There is a disarming lack of depth to intertextelasticity, but this is its virtue, not its deficiency. It is precisely in insisting on the value of surface—stretched thin to a plane of no depth whatsoever—that the form of *Gilmore Girls* comes to be, not represent or narrativize, its speed, its allusions, its overclose women. These traits suffice as the surface of the televisual text, and crucially, that surface comes to name *all there is*. The theoretical tradition that tries to locate in the textual object under scrutiny its deeper ideological, political, and textual meanings—for example, the plethora of cultural studies work on representations of gender, identity, motherhood, and class in *Gilmore Girls*—first and foremost refuses to suspect its own depth model. This interrogatory model, in privileging reading strategies of uncovering, retrieves interiority, hierarchy, and difference and opposition. Binaries of structured architectural order are privileged: hierarchized models such as form versus content, surface versus depth. In contrast to this method, television studies requires a theory that itself can stretch to accommodate elasticity. This model insists that the skin on the surface is not a plane to be broken, that richer treasures underneath might be mined, pillaged, and plundered, but that gloss, speed, sensation, and distance are themselves worthy of theoretical insight and time. Skimming and scanning are not only televisual logics, they are also theoretical praxis. If this theory is meant to examine elasticity, it must also become elastic, never fully taking on shape to then “apply to” textual objects (a logic spatially reifying inside/outside binaries of theoretical work) but always stretching in relation to the field in which its discourse is formed. If surface theory is mistaken for superficial theory, this is only due to the confusion between superficiality and surficiality. As the former implies a lack of depth, its relation to the surface can only be reinscribed into a binary that privileges its difference from another site; surficiality promises the notion of a surface as pure plane of being.

Although the terms *intertextelasticity* and *surficiality* might be used to talk about television more generally, I bring them up here in relation to *Gilmore Girls* because that show is routinely corralled into a model that problematizes surface and depth models of analysis. *Gilmore Girls* offers an ideal, unique, and productive example

of elasticity in relation to embedded representation. As we will see, instead of parody or reference or allusion, the show routinely enacts distensions, conversions, and far-reaching stretches in relation to other representational loci of reference. Most importantly, the show enacts these problems in the context of—and as a formal property of—the relationship between mothers and daughters. The oft-noted dialogical speed, dense allusions, and obsession with mother-daughter relations must be taken seriously, which is to say that these obviously superficial, surficial dimensions of the series must be read not as a preliminary to more penetrative criticism but instead as a way of theorizing the show's very relationship to representational elasticity. Taking the obvious seriously—not anterior to but as doing the work of theory—is one way to insist on the flexibility of a theory of surfaces, the only sort that can stretch in time along with televisual polysemy and flow as such.

Stating the Obvious

There are risks to taking the surface seriously. However, consider the obvious: that speed, these allusions, those girls.

Gilmore Girls is narratively centered on four generations of women sharing the same last name. The dramedy centers on Lorelai Gilmore, the daughter of an old-money Hartford family who became pregnant at age sixteen, decided to have and keep the baby, refused to marry the father (despite her parents' and his demands/requests that she do so), and ran away to raise the child alone, which she continues to do when the series opens sixteen years later. Worldly Lorelai and her cerebral daughter Rory live among and interact with the various quirky characters who populate the small idealized Connecticut town of Stars Hollow. Requiring money for Rory's education in the pilot episode, Lorelai approaches her wealthy Hartford-dwelling parents (from whom she is estranged), and the resulting "Friday night dinners," as payback for the loan, provide intergenerational and class-related conflict. Although the program appears to revolve around the various love interests of both "girls," and reproduction (in both senses—sexual and mimetic) is the central crisis of *Gilmore Girls*, the extremely close friendship between mother and daughter is roundly taken as the narrative starting point and ground of the show.

It all begins with a name, but unlike the law- and language-giving *nom du père*, which operates through a logic of inscription and entry (*breaking* the contiguity with the mother, *entering* the symbolic), the *nom de la mère* asserts a connection in language that

points to the pre-Oedipal closeness of mother and child. Lorelai's daughter, while called Rory, is named Lorelai, as her mother claims that her "feminism" kicked in along with the Demerol, and she decided that if men can name their sons after themselves, so could she. Thus the first allusion of the show operates within and without the logic of the bounded diegesis (it will become unbound). The title character's name points outside of the text: from Lorelai to Heine's *Die Lorelei*, the siren singing men to their deaths, and to Marilyn Monroe's Lorelei Lee from *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. However, the signature of this name also functions to draw a trajectory further into the text, into the allusion that the daughter's name makes to the mother's (as in the account Rory gives, "She named me after herself"—and *after* is, of course, reflexive and citational but also temporal and ordinal). If this double movement suggests the already-represented status of its own characters—Lorelai becomes *she to whom one can allude*—it also suggests that any daughter is a possible allusion to her mother. This structure manifests the intimate connection between allusion and generation, allusion and reproduction, and allusion and representation as a question of bodily, familial replication. Although one might argue that this form dematerializes the characters, it is more correct to suggest that it *rematerializes allusion*, materializing it to the letter—putting the Latinate *mater*; as in "mother" but also as in "origin" and as in that within which something takes form—fully at the heart of materialization. The figure that the series will turn on—who will die and when—is ultimately a dematerialization in the most literal sense; thus, each of these rematerialized allusions simultaneously stands in for what will *lose* the mother, each begetting also a figure of disappearance.

Allusions to popular culture are so taken for granted as comprising the program's textual strategy and pleasures that the DVD packaging of *Gilmore Girls* includes for each season a glossary pamphlet titled *Your Guide to Gilmore-isms: The 411 on Many of the Show's Witty and Memorable Wordplays and Pop Culture References*. The allusions are not ontologically equivalent—some are names from either representation or "real life" (for example, from the third season: Daisy Buchanan, Duane from *Annie Hall*, Gore Vidal, Norma Desmond, Ted Bundy, and Howard Roark). Other references are to famous lines from other texts ("Stella!" from *A Streetcar Named Desire*; "That'll do, pig" from *Babe*; and "Come back Shane" from *Shane*), and still others are to things or places (the Biosphere, the Bunny Ranch) that are themselves synonymous with their own representation in popular culture. This glossary is also a gloss, for it is a radically insufficient account of the excessive allusions that

cannot be said to merely pepper the show's dialogue but indeed comprise it.

As the *Family Guy* spoof of *Gilmore Girls* demonstrates, the free association from one series of signifiers to another is one of the most notable and distinctive features of the show's dialogue. If the series shares with much postmodern representation an interest in substituting an external real with simulacrum, it is the opacity of the totality of allusions in *Gilmore Girls* that makes it such a unique linguistic case. That is, while allusions to popular culture in *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003–7) or *Gossip Girl* (WB, 2007–13) are meant to be readable and translatable by a savvy viewer who then, in turn, feels inscribed into the inner sanctum of cool promised by such a reading strategy, the allusions in *Gilmore Girls* are meant to resist such a translation and discursive hailing. These allusions are so very obscure, so very quickly spoken, so dense and so odd, and so many, that despite the glossary's nod at revelation, it falls short in its own admission of noncompleteness (nota bene: *The 411 on Many of the Show's Witty and Memorable Wordplays*—many but not all). Although a viewer well versed in popular culture may accommodate and recognize the John Hughes references, this is not necessarily the same viewer who takes pleasure in citations from Dorothy Parker and Sylvia Plath or necessarily the same for whom Susan Faludi or Gore Vidal (let alone Yul Gibbons) ring familiar. If the heterogeneity of allusions, on the one hand, promises a hyperinterpellation, it remains hypothetical and virtual, addressing ultimately, in reverse, the auteurism of the show's creator, the single anchoring figure who, in birthing these wilds of allusions, remains the quilting point for their collective recognition without failure.

A saturated representational history may account for numerous cinematic, televisual, musical, and literary references, but the excessive generational span of these references gives them not only a represented history but also a recourse to a deep and archivable History, unlike teen culture's endlessly renewable, ever-present, and past-annihilating references. The program thus positions the viewer of *Gilmore Girls* in its own generational reach, always locating *through the allusions themselves* the viewer as a mother, as a daughter, as a figure related to others in time. While intertextuality in general functions to cull and reward knowledge, the generational heteroglossia in the text of *Gilmore Girls* ensures that nonknowledge, that a failure to comprehend, equally positions the spectator as one of the "girls," for a missed allusion simply emanates from the impenetrable, opaque realm of mother-language (*that must have been before my time*). Within all this excess is the possibility of failure, of a text that offers meaning by making meaning difficult; a surfeit

of allusions empties the text of meaning instead of pointing to a transparent relay between program and viewer.

The second obvious dimension of *Gilmore Girls* is the speed at which the two main characters offer up their dialogue. A 2002 *Wall Street Journal* article, to take one of many possible examples, links together “fast-talk pioneer” *Seinfeld* with shows such as *E.R.*, *The West Wing*, and *Gilmore Girls* to argue for a radical shift in dialogue pacing on television. In addition to noting that Sherman-Palladino eschews close-ups because their focus on one figure slows things down, the article describes how “she often employs a technique called ‘walk-and-talks’” in order to prevent dialogue from abating:

After each take of the three-page scene, the script supervisor called off the elapsed time to Ms. Sherman-Palladino. One take was one minute, 23 seconds—too slow for Ms. Sherman-Palladino. Finally, she was pleased with take 13. It lasted one minute, 20 seconds. She writes “*Gilmore Girls*” for 20-to-25 seconds a page of dialogue, more than twice as fast as the standard screenwriters’ page-a-minute formula.⁶

Caffeine is not only a character in the narrative world of *Gilmore Girls*, consumed voraciously by mother and daughter; the narrative pacing is itself caffeinated—jumpy, speedy, on speed. Speed in this text is about movement, not destination; it is antiteleological, anti-directional, antinarrative. It is less the case that speed constitutes a formal structure, a frame around language that has an independent existent ontology, than that speed is the language spoken by Lorelai and Rory. Speed is the surface that comes to constitute the text of the show.

This speed itself functions as yet another allusion. This primarily rhythmic allusion is to the famed cadence and foreplayic banter of 1930s and 1940s cinematic screwball comedy; Sherman-Palladino cites this genre as an explicit influence on the show’s quick wit and back-and-forth language speedplay.⁷ Screwball comedies were named for an errant, erratic pitch in baseball, one that “flutters and drops, goes in different directions, and behaves in very unexpected ways,” and the films in this genre were known for their “irreverent humour, vernacular dialogue, fast pace, and eccentric characters.”⁸ Ironically, although numerous accounts of screwball comedies locate their demise in the dissolution of the Hollywood studio system—which is, in turn, attributed to the ascendancy of that popular new medium, television—the fluttering and dropping, the variable directions, and the unexpected behaviors of screwball are very much like the logic of polysemic televisuality itself. Thus yet again, the allusory/elusory logic of *Gilmore Girls* points both

outside the text and inside the text—to both an external cinematic origin and to an internal logic of televisual workings, alluded to in that the allusion comprises a production of precisely those workings. There is one spectacular change, however, that *Gilmore Girls* performs on its screwball lineage: Whereas the speed of dialogue and directionality of the cinematic wit was almost always between male and female stars—the speed metaphorizing and comprising the war between the sexes with language as its weapon—here it fully exists between mother and daughter, woman and woman, uniquely between *girls*. If it was true of screwball comedy films, then, that “everything was a juxtaposition”—“educated and uneducated, rich and poor, intelligent and stupid, honest and dishonest, and most of all male and female”—in *Gilmore Girls* juxtaposition is de-binarized to reattach to relations of similarity and contiguity.⁹ The refusal to reinscribe wit as a weapon between (male-female) figures is met with the insistence that it is indeed the pleasure *among* (female-female) figures. If this spatial redescription likewise forecloses difference as a privileged binary but also posits the significance of similarity, it is to reimagine a screwball comedic form in which heterosexuality is not taken for granted but instead is available for fluttering misdirection that might truly “go in unexpected ways.”

The final and most obvious dimension to which we must attend is the narrative-premised, title-alluding *Gilmore girls* themselves. Writing on a subgenre of screwball comedies but taking us away from linguistic zips, Stanley Cavell attends to a structural omission that he views as crucial for the “comedy of remarriage” to attend to that necessary “re-”: “in the fiction of our films the woman’s mother is conspicuously and problematically absent.”¹⁰ The comedy of remarriage, for Cavell, is a distinctly post-Oedipal phenomenon in which a marriage of equals depends on the already-sexualized status of the adult female character, of which her absent mother is the essential sign. In “Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters,” Naomi Scheman critiques Cavell’s blithe assumptions of the pleasures of this structure: “The heroine’s acknowledgment of her desire, and of herself as a subject of desire, is for Cavell what principally makes a marriage of equality achievable,” even though this coming into being of desire requires the loss of other desires, principally ones for other women.¹¹ Following Freud’s theories of femininity, which likewise require the repudiation of the daughter’s attachment to her mother, Scheman figures heterosexuality as what “both depends on and reinforces the loss of a daughter’s attachment to her mother: that attachment is most likely to be rediscovered through an erotically experienced bond with another woman, or through the daughter herself becoming a mother.” In the comedies

of remarriage, “the absence of even the memory of a mother is a necessary part of the identity these women embrace.”¹² Although Scheman is writing about cinema rather than television, in this insistence on the post-Oedipal narrative structure of screwball comedies, one is reminded of Jane Feuer’s claim that television’s implied spectator “is not the isolated, immobilized pre-Oedipal individual described by Metz and Baudry . . . but rather a post-Oedipal, fully socialized family member.”¹³ To the extent that the implied spectator of television and the women of screwball comedy are both post-Oedipalized members of a symbolic network of laws, codes, language, and kinship, there would seem to be a contagious overcloseness, again, between televisual logic and screwball logic.

But if, for Cavell, this symbolic network is dependent on the exclusion of the heroine’s mother, in *Gilmore Girls* it is uniquely the mother to whom the screwball misdirects its erratic, errant aims. If for Scheman “the absence of even the memory of a mother” is a necessary prop that supports social relations in screwball films, in *Gilmore Girls* that memory is not only filled in but also floweth over. The lived constant *remembering* of the figure of the mother is what loans the series its title (all those generations of girls of earlier generations of girls), organizes its narrative conceit, and provides the melodramatic relations around which betrayal, smothering, love, and friendship circulate. Indeed, to the extent that psychoanalytic accounts of presymbolic relations with the mother emphasize contiguity and a lack of separation, the abundance of material proximity in the program effects a collapse between presymbolic and postsymbolic relations. The mother is everywhere, before and after, in body and in language; she is not missing—*pace* Cavell; she is instead inescapably and mater-ially present. *Gilmore Girls* thus imagines what going screwball-astray might look like if the masculinized binarism of the family structure were not a given and indeed if the mother were not only *not* a memory but instead was the very form and promise of future repetitions in her likeness. Mother and Daughter as figures of narrative invention are less a content contained, bounded, and made finite by an externally imposed form than they are a formal device itself, one that insists on contiguity and closeness as a competitive structuring device, directly challenging hierarchies, binaries, and systems of difference.

But what else is a mother? What else is a daughter? Other than regarding the former as a sign of absence required to ensure the presence of the latter in one type of symbolic logic, what are they to each other? Given our concerns here with spatial logics that prescribe and proscribe certain structures of meaning, reading, and desiring, it is Cavell’s insistent use of the binary of

appearance—presence/absence—to which we must attend. Luce Irigaray begins, like Cavell and Schemen, with a critique of Freud's insistence that daughters must renounce their mothers in order to take up heterosexual desire. However, she uses a notably different spatial structure to describe the symbolic dilemma facing women. She writes that "there is no *with you*" in a patriarchal economy. "A symbolism has to be created among women if love among them is to take place. Right now in fact, such a love is possible only among women who are able to talk to each other. Lacking this interval of *exchange*, . . . women's passions work . . . in a rather cruel manner."¹⁴ The problem facing women in their relation to each other is not, for Irigaray, a question of presence against absence; rather, it is a question of being *with*, a question of *exchange*, and, crucially for our purposes here, a question of women *talking to each other*. This exchange is a counterpart to the stasis forced upon feminine desire by an economy of fixed sexual difference; such a rigid economy results in "paralyzing her movements, her economy, her culture, her love or loves."¹⁵ For Irigaray, silence and stasis are both on the side of nonexchange, which in turn produces nondesire, nonrelation, and nonwithness between women. In this sense, we might regard the fundamental nonsilence and nonstasis of the central women in *Gilmore Girls* as one attempt to produce a maternal/filial *with*. These girls walk; they talk. That is largely what they do together, which is to say, this is what constitutes their relation to each other. Intertextelasticity repudiates the logic of presence/absence for the expanded relationality of this superelastic *with*. Elasticity emphasizes the supple movement and the withness of textual encounters; elasticity is always on the side of an economy of desire that repudiates stasis, fixity, and silence.

While televisual flow is marked by this repudiation generally, the particular unboundedness of *Gilmore Girls* forces these questions of speed/stasis and fixity/flow onto the scene of mother/daughter desire. All three surface features—allusions, speed, and mother/daughter withness—work together in *Gilmore Girls* as subjects for inquiry *and* as formal structuring devices; as insisted upon above, the binary that would partition and correspondingly value the distinction between form versus content comes to be demolished. But all three elements are likewise converted from some expected recourse to representation: screwball quickness becomes a sign not of the war between the sexes but instead of contiguity between women. Allusions point to the elasticity of language and representation, never fixed but always available for redescription (the central pleasure of the surface). Mothers and daughters become not a familial structure of presence or absence, adoption

or repudiation, but a site for imagining withness, contiguity, interval, and exchange.

From the beginning of the series, *Gilmore Girls* was structured around the tension that concerns Freud, Cavell, and Irigaray: whether a mother and daughter can retain a relation of exchange or whether the demands of normative heterosexuality will always produce an absent rend where the mother might have been. In the pilot episode, Lorelai and Rory are posited as best friends and enact a verbal economy that is structured around sameness, contiguity, and overlapping voices unto the singular. The trauma of the pilot occurs when Rory meets a beautiful boy named Dean and decides that she does not want to leave her public high school for the private school to which she has been accepted and for which her mother has made enormous personal and financial sacrifices. The two have a screaming fight, disrupting the intimate overcloseness of the first half of the episode. Although they reconcile at the end and the final image is of the two occupied with the mouth work of laughing, talking, and eating, the question of an intrusive male and Rory's post-Oedipal desire comes back time and time again over the course of the series' many years. Thus, despite all the other televisual instances of allegorical language or fast-paced dialogue across the entire schedule, it is the final term of speed and language between women in *Gilmore Girls* that so radically problematizes both aspects of mouth work. Mothers and daughters collide with speed and with allusion in a particular way. *Gilmore Girls* is not only a preeminent example of elasticity, it also importantly forces elasticity onto the scene of perhaps the most inelastic (because it is so threateningly nonpresent) dimension of love and speech between related women. In a rigid heteronormative economy, the quality of being daughter is a preliminary to becoming mother; it is transitional, only ephemeral. But if *Gilmore Girls* is insistent in its use of the last term of its title—that seemingly postfeminist “girls”—it is perhaps to suspend that process of becoming relational to heterosexual desire, to suspend (and thus maintain) the possibility of multiple *girls* relating only, uniquely, in the end, to each other.¹⁶

Generation Gaps

Relation is a surface relation, a relation to surface. Relation is not about difference; difference is only one historically privileged relation. But if difference is what is required for a multitude of intertextual relations—parody, satire, reference, recourse—it is worth asking how issues of relation perform relationality between texts.

The elasticity performed by a text *with* (not on) another text, the intertextelasticity described above, creates a relation to allusion that is not predicated on uncovering an origin. Relation comes to name the surface structures outlined above: speed is relative (more than an opposition to stasis, speed itself is relative to speed), allusions are a question of relation (not an opposition between a text and its translation, which is only one privileged relation), and mothers and daughters are in a relation of relation (neither the opposition of binary gender nor sameness as identity, they are literally related). The dispersal of relations over the entire representational logic of *Gilmore Girls* creates a scenario in which issues of relation (kinship, connection) come to figure as the surface mapping of representational desire, both desire through representation and desire for representation.

This surface praxis, whereby representation becomes yet another surface along which *Gilmore Girls* locates itself distinctly *with* other texts, is present in numerous episodes, but it is stunningly elastic in two episodes from the first half of the third season (2002): “They Shoot Gilmores, Don’t They?” and “A Deep-Fried Korean Thanksgiving.” The former episode follows a simple narrative trajectory: the small town of Stars Hollow is hosting a twenty-four-hour dance marathon to raise money for charity. Lorelai, unable to find, and then later to hold on to, a partner, convinces daughter Rory to dance with her. During the dance, Rory’s boyfriend Dean notices her growing attraction to the new delinquent in town, Jess, and Dean breaks up with her. The episode ends with mother and daughter alone on the dance floor, holding each other tightly under a spotlight. The scoreboard with the title “How long will they last?” ambiguously shifts its “they” over the course of the episode from Rory and Dean, to Rory and Jess (hypothetically), but settles, in the end, to fix that “they” on mother and daughter—the last couple left standing.

The title of the episode is a reference to Sydney Pollack’s 1969 film *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, itself based on a novel by Horace McCoy. Pollack’s film follows the grueling and tortuous maneuverings of the participants in a Depression-era dance marathon. Jane Fonda’s Gloria is the striking, brusque, and plaintive voice of the “living dead” that the contestants become; at the end of the film, her entreaties to partner Robert to “Help me” result in his merciful execution—a bullet to the head, an extinguishing of pain. *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* is saturated with many of the same structural and surface insistences of *Gilmore Girls*—speed, movement, the dance’s “around and around we go”—not to mention the trauma of finding and keeping a partner and what one in the

end must do, is willing to do, to and for that partner. The specific relation between Pollack's film and this episode of *Gilmore Girls* is maddeningly complex and frustrates the language that we might use to describe it. "They Shoot Gilmores, Don't They?" is not exactly a reperformance, not exactly an intertextual reference, not exactly a reimagining of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* It is not a mirror, a reflection, a refraction, a shadow, a satire, a mockery, a setting, a recasting, or a resignification. It is not a making present of some external film, made in 1969, starring Jane Fonda. The connections are neither knowingly parodic nor blithely contingent; nor, indeed, are they connections in the usual sense that take two discrete points as their anterior logic, brought together in the unifying word "connection." On the contrary, the relation between *Gilmore Girls* and Pollack's film is more like one of exchange, a relation of relation. For what Pollack's film comes to be is *with*; it comes to materialize with *Gilmore Girls*, alongside, distended, elasticized, stretched so thin that it is recognizable but only through a membrane that clouds our vision. The film is converted in peculiar, swollen, shrunken, and anarchic ways into the text that bears its almost name—a diminutive title, much like "Rory" to "Lorelai." The conversion is a question of generation: generation as a temporal gap and generation as the creation of something new. The *Gilmore Girls* episode is in a relation of *daughter* to Pollack's film, both alluding to it as it makes itself already an allusion, a gap apart, in a relation and also, simultaneously, in the elasticity of the coming into being of the later text.

The elastic relation of exchange takes multiple forms in this episode. Some relations preserve likeness, with the difference coming from the contextual swap: the historical gap of the production to the diegetic past is preserved (Pollack's 1960s to the 1930s; *Gilmore Girls*' 2000s to the 1960s to the 1930s). Unsurprisingly for reflexive televisual logic, the temporality of the *Gilmore Girls* narrative is radically compressed for the episode: a cinematic marathon of grueling weeks and months becomes a twenty-four-hour one, as though television could expand to imagine exhausting a full cycle of its own schedule but nothing more. The *mise-en-scènes* for the marathons are nearly identical; if a certain gloss is added to the contemporary scene, the gymnasium familiarity of bleachers, painted circles on the floor, and an insistent bounded squareness to the room remains intact. The award of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*—a much-needed cash prize for the destitute contestants—is revealed at the end of the film to be yet another mirage from which will be deducted the contestants' tabs, emptied out by the avaricious announcer for the marathon. This emptiness comes to

be literalized in the “big trophy” pursued in the *Gilmore Girls* episode; it falls as far as possible into the logic of an empty signifier to literalize what becomes of a seemingly material real award in the 1969 film. Finally, the cinematography for the two texts is strikingly similar—fluid, ever-continuous itself, following moving bodies while they dance. The announcers in both film and episode are filmed from a low angle, making their survey of the floor that much more imposing. In both, the final shot is a high-angle crane of the nearly empty dance floor, lights spinning, bodies barely able to stand, each dying in their own dying way.

Other relations are more abstract, more anamorphic and awry: these persist in their one-off quality. Again, it is less a case of reference, which presumes a stability, than of distension of the former representation. Some instances are minor and seemingly trivial. The announcer in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* talks nostalgically one night about traveling with his faith-healer uncle (“he thought it was him they believed in, but it was me”); this becomes the one-off relation in which Taylor Doose, the announcer for the Stars Hollow marathon, exhausted and punch-drunk late in the night, babbles about how he always wanted to be a magician. But most striking is the way in which, while characters are not in a one-to-one relation (it is not a question of identity and substitution), the structural relationships, traumas, and even spoken dialogue are preserved in “They Shoot Gilmores,” although distended, broken apart, and made multiple. The three most significant instances of this fracturing and stretching of Pollack’s film occur in relation to the pairs Sookie/Jackson and Rory/Lorelai and the love quadrangle Rory/Dean/Jess/Shane.

In Pollack’s film, of the numerous wretched poor exhausting themselves on the dance floor, perhaps none have more pathos than a young pregnant woman and her husband. Prior to the marathon, she tells Gloria (Fonda) that they were “ridin’ box-cars.” Gloria spits back at her, “What’s the use of having a kid if you don’t have dough to raise it?” She famously presses: “Do you intend to keep it? Why not drop another sucker into this mess?” As the marathon progresses and the pregnant woman’s visage is notably strained with the tortuous requirements of dancing oneself to death, it is clear that she will either miscarry before the marathon is over or certainly if they do win (as those winnings are revealed to be a sham) that it will make little difference to their abject state. In “They Shoot Gilmores, Don't They?” at the opening of the episode, Lorelai’s best friend and colleague Sookie St. James runs up to her, panicked because her new husband told her the night before that he wants “four-in-four” (four children in four years). A stricken

Sookie asks Lorelai for advice, to which Lorelai demurs, saying only “Four kids is a lot. And four years without a cocktail?” Later at the marathon, Sookie and her husband Jackson approach Lorelai, who is standing with Luke (Lorelai’s prospective love interest in the series); flighty Sookie has garbled her words and told Jackson that it was Lorelai who thought “four-in-four” was crazy. “That *is* crazy,” Luke replies. “Drop another sucker in this mess.” The question of abortion/adoption/raising a child from Pollack’s film (Fonda’s harsh “will you keep it?”) becomes in the *Gilmore Girls* episode a question of conception. And yet in both cases a gruff but lovable character speaks identical words—words that are meant to take on that double movement identified above in relation to representation in *Gilmore Girls*. One wonders about that line from Pollack’s film: surely, though it remains within the diegesis to speak to the abject poverty of the Great Depression, it must have been equally available for an audience in 1969 to imagine that “this mess” was the chaotic turmoil of the present historical moment in which Pollack’s film came out. Likewise, the *Gilmore Girls* episode aired in 2002, and one wonders whether the “mess” of the post-9/11 West was being alluded to at the same time that it was concurrently pointing to its double historical lineage in the 1930s and 1960s.

Although Luke speaks Gloria’s famous line, he does not take up her structural position or characterization entirely; rather, she is dispersed onto at least three characters: Luke, Lorelai and Rory. Rory is Gloria in the romantic quadrangle of Rory/Dean and Jess/Shane, which matches onto the pairs Gloria/Robert and Alice/Rocky. Alice’s bleached blonde hair and flighty demeanor even reappear in Shane’s peroxided, pouty look and vaguely empty demeanor. Like Gloria/Robert and Alice/Rocky, the couples exchange partners over the course of the episode; one man leaves (there, Rocky; here, Dean), and one woman is left out (there, Alice, who becomes psychotic; here, Shane, who is dumped). As with all anamorphic elasticities, there are aspects of Pollack’s film that change and become more or less visible: Rory and Jess do not end up together (nor does she reunite with Dean). If Gloria and Robert’s “last couple left standing” quality can be said to apply to anyone, it is, as written above, Rory and Lorelai who are left holding each other on the dance floor at episode’s end.

Rory and Lorelai thus make up a curious couple counterpart to Gloria and Robert. The mother and daughter’s dance marathon number, pinned to their clothes, is 67—the same number that Gloria and Robert wear in Pollack’s film. Rory and Lorelai come to be each other’s partners in a nearly identical manner to that in which Gloria and Robert find each other: Gloria is in line to register for

the marathon when her partner is deemed too sickly to participate. “Get yourself another partner,” the bandleader shouts at her; desperate for a partner, she corrals the reluctant cowboy to dance with her, although he insists that he is only there to watch. In “They Shoot Gilmores,” Lorelai has and then loses a dance partner (the impediment of physical frailty in the film becomes in the television episode the impediment of a jealous wife who does not want her husband dancing with another woman) and must convince the reluctant Rory to dance with her, although Rory had only wanted to go and watch the marathon “sitting down.” The stakes of this denied spectatorship are extraordinarily high in Pollack’s film; its narrative includes what appear to be flashbacks, but we come to realize that they are flash-forwards of Robert being interrogated by the police for his murder of Gloria. The dangers of not being permitted to watch and being dragged into the thick of the marathon are arrest, charge, and sentence. If Pollack’s film insists that ethical involvement must trump passive spectatorship, he surely insists as well on the significant risks of “involvement” (taken as broadly as would a 1960s audience). Likewise, the *Gilmore Girls* episode implies that had Rory been able to watch the marathon with Dean, then the two likely would not have fought and would not have broken up. The mother’s conscription of daughter for partner leads to nothing less than the death of the daughter’s relationship.

One could go on, but the important question has not yet been asked: What is the status of these representational exchanges? Are they quotations? Parodic references? Like many surface phenomena, the question is most productive when kept distinctly open, for the status of these representations is precisely to throw the status of these representations into question. Luke may be quoting “Drop another sucker in this mess” from Pollack’s film, but this seems highly unlikely, as the character regularly insists that he is unfamiliar with cinema—for example, in an episode in which Lorelai is stunned to learn that he has never seen *Casablanca*. If he is quoting Pollack’s film, what then is the reference to “67” on both Gloria/Robert and Rory/Lorelai—is it a citation, a knowing nod at Pollack’s film? But if so, who exactly knows here? In other words, is the world of *Gilmore Girls* one in which Pollack’s film exists at all? Unlike numerous other cultural references, there is no mention by name of Pollack’s film within the diegetic text, nor is *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* a reference to which a definition is appended for the third-season DVD glossary. There is a sensibility attached to *Gilmore Girls* that is aware of Pollack’s film—that auteurist mark in the cinematographic and chromatic references and in the one-off episode title—but in what world that film has a materiality is left

entirely unclear. The dematerialization of the certainty of Pollack's film existing comes to throw the ontology of both that film and *Gilmore Girls* into question. Instead of intertextual representations securing the postmodern mediascape reality of the diegetic text into which such references are imported, the televisual intertextelasticity in this episode destabilizes any knowingly fixed space of representational being or meaning. The textual stretching undoes the certainty of a bounded, finite, existent text. It comes neither to be the case that Pollack's film preexists the *Gilmore Girls* episode that bears its diminutive name nor that it is reimagined, reperformed, or even resignified at a later moment. Rather, there is a question of stress at the surface, pressure on the 1969 film by the 2002 television series, which produces a distended, supple, elasticized other surface. We might say that instead of recollecting Pollack's film (a repetition backward, notes Kierkegaard in this article's epigraph), the *Gilmore Girls* episode participates in "genuine repetition": recollecting it forward, recasting the film as being *with* the televisual text, a witness that is perpetually about to arrive.

However, as with many anamorphoses, that other surface can hide as much as it reveals. If one central operation of the televisual intertextelasticity between *Gilmore Girls* and *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* is to throw the stability of both texts' ontologies into question, the other crucial operation is to make present so very much from Pollack's film that the one thing that goes missing has that much more of a frame, calling attention to where the elasticity failed to reach. I am speaking finally of the figure of finitude that subtends this entire series: finitude as a limit of understanding and comprehension, finitude as a limit of being, and finitude, paradoxically, as a limit of referentiality itself, which promises but also troubles infinite deferral. The question is this: Where does death go in the *Gilmore Girls* episode? Given all the conversions and reappearances and distended stretches of "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?," it is uniquely the apparent absence of traumatic death that marks the potentially traumatic loss (or limits) of elasticity. Why, then? Why is death the single absent aspect of the cinematic text here, that which apparently fails to be subject to that "genuine repetition" forward? This lack of visibility does not mean that it has disappeared. Death has simply been stretched beyond recognition.

Death in Pollack's film has the double quality of being ultimate trauma and ultimate possibility for transcendence. It is both pain and the alleviation of pain, the cruelty of life and a tremendous gesture of love. Death attaches itself as signifier to the "horses" of the film's title, made visible in Robert's flashback to his childhood

farm; then to the “living dead” marathon contestants; and finally to Gloria, whose slow-motion execution to the head literalizes the metonymic movement from horses to contestants to girl as she falls from the city street into a field, graphically matched to the scene with the horses from the beginning. Pollack’s film is heartbreaking, wrenching in its images of the body in pain and the ambivalent relief of self-annihilation. One could thus argue that *Gilmore Girls* performs a classic redemptive postmodern logic on Pollack’s film—adopting the visible signifiers of its fashion while emptying it of its “real” substance—but this would reinscribe the dichotomy between form and content away from which this argument has been moving since its beginning. Or, one could posit that *Gilmore Girls* performs fan fiction–like work on Pollack’s text, reimagining it with a “happy ending,” much like a latent lesbian narrative in a cult television show might be literalized in fan fiction as its own version of a romantic resolution for the two diegetic protagonists. But I do not think, in fact, that either of these textual versions is correct. So very much of *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* is imported into the elastic surface of *Gilmore Girls*—converted, made multiple, stretched and distended, same but one-off, or replicated identically—that it is the unique figure of finitude that appears to go missing in the elastic pull.

As the sole traumatic blank, in fact, death comes to be the structuring absence of the *Gilmore Girls* episode, its negative ontology. This is not to say that it becomes metaphorical (the “death” of the young girl’s relationship) but instead that finitude as the material quality of finiteness simply goes elsewhere. In this way, it becomes the ultimate anamorphosis of the elasticized text. Finitude becomes redirected from the sacrificial love relationship between Gloria and Robert onto the relationship between Lorelai and Rory, mother and daughter. After all, the “horses” of the film’s title—the linguistic placeholder for all subsequent signs of death in the film—becomes “Gilmores” in the grammar of the episode’s title: *They Shoot X, Don’t They?* “Gilmores” becomes the sign of that-which-is-in-pain, of that-which-is-finite. If the episode was only referencing the saturated reds and blues of Pollack’s film, numerous melodramatic films would have sufficed; likewise, if the episode merely meant to import a 1930s-style dance marathon, other citations would have been as playful and legible as cultural references. But the specific linguistic substitution in the title and the specific and exhaustive conversions of lines, characters, and structures in the episode make it clear that there is an existential relationship between the film and the television episode. The trauma of the conversion between film and episode, however, is so great that it

cannot be contained by the episode that makes direct reference to Pollack's film. Indeed, although the space of the dance floor (which in the film is the cinematic space of the "living dead") comes to be aligned with mother and daughter holding each other at the end of the episode, the harrowing significance of this couple's link to finitude is not fully elaborated until two episodes later. Finitude is a sufficient narrative disruption that its conversion from *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* leeches out of the episode that makes reference to the film and spreads its sign across the reenlivenings of the diegesis. If seriality is one way in which television asserts its (ideological) relationship to flow, presence, and immediacy (it always returns, marking the passage of time by its return), this portion of the *Gilmore Girls'* third season returns only, time and again, to the sign of death. The living death of movement without end, the contestants' telos unto nothingness, their exhaustion and their finiteness become, in televisual logic, yet another movement without end, yet another exhausting return. But it is, make no mistake about it, a return to the question of mortality. For one name for finitude is: *Mother*.

Time before Me

Roland Barthes's definition of History, which serves as one of the epigraphs to this essay, is also one way of defining History as a sign of finitude. In Barthes's meditation on photographs of his dead mother, this *time before me* is a sign of her own mortality. We should also think of this *time before me* as the sign of our own relationship to the finite. One need never become a mother. But to *have* a mother is to be finite. To say "my mother" is to be mortal.

In the history of philosophy, finitude has referred either to the material condition of being finite (Heidegger's being unto death) or the incomprehensibility of the world (the unbridgeable gap between language and referents). Both of these definitions rely on the question of failure—a failure of material integrity and persistence, a failure of legibility or understanding. To theorize finitude at the surface, it must become a question less of failure (or absence, limit, or nonbeing; these are terms that the surface problematizes) than one of distance. As theorized in *Gilmore Girls* through the elasticized screen of Pollack's film, finitude is not a failure of being or a failure of knowledge; it is a nonapproachability in time. Finitude here is a matter of speed. Or, rather, it is a mater of speed.

The episode following "They Shoot Gilmores, Don't They?" takes place the diegetic day following the marathon, as an exhausted

and stumbling mother and daughter recover from their night of sleeplessness. The narrative follows Rory in her newly formed relationship with Jess, her guilt about her breakup with Dean, and various other transitions related to the move from one boy to the other. The question of finitude appears to have been suspended, but in the following episode it reappears radically distended and, yet again, through the screen of cinematic representation. (One could argue that despite the numerous references in *Gilmore Girls* to music and television shows, the show uniquely puts the burden of televisual elasticity on its cinematic interlocutors.) The pre-credit sequence of “A Deep-Fried Korean Thanksgiving” opens, as do many episodes of *Gilmore Girls*, from behind the girls’ television set. In this and sequences like it, the camera takes the place of the diegetic television, and the first image of the mother and daughter is as spectators to televisual representation. The projective function of the camera becomes geographically aligned with the receptive function of the television set, in turn suggesting that the set and its representations are themselves projective. The watching characters directly face the watching viewers without mediation; this requires the viewer to take the place of the television, identify oneself with the very diegetic material surface on which diegetic allusions take place. Although there are scenes with Lorelai and Rory in movie theaters, the vast majority of their cultural work (speaking over the lines, talking about and redirecting representation) occurs in front of their television set, perhaps mimicking (or modeling) the interactive cultural work required of any *Gilmore Girls* viewer to decode and resignify its own cultural allusions.

Over the whining, singing, inarticulable sounds of mother and daughter Edith and Edie Beale (“Big Edie” and “Little Edie”) from the Maysles’ Brothers documentary *Grey Gardens* (1975), we hear from Rory, “I like these women.” Lorelai counters, “I love these women.” We first see mother and daughter desiring the embedded representation and the embedded avatars for their own characters. We cut to an image of the television set with a surrounding image of the room (bookcases, the wall behind the set); on it is an image of Little Edie singing as her mother, sitting behind her, tries to talk her out of it. It is no accident that the chosen clip from *Grey Gardens* not only has mother and daughter trying to outtalk and outing each other (a question highly germane to its reappearance in *Gilmore Girls*), but the words that Little Edie is singing, specifically, are “with you . . .” in a vocal anamorphosis that extends the final vowel seemingly forever (aurally unforgettable to anyone who has seen the film). The camera cuts back to Rory and Lorelai watching; the two talk over the documentary (“Poor Edie . . . she’s just trying to

sing and her mom won't stop talking," says Rory, perhaps as a thinly veiled projection). When the camera next cuts to the television set, the shot is a close-up of the *mise en abyme* film, contiguous with our own bounded television screens. The shot/reverse shot structure of the editing makes Lorelai and Rory one party to a virtual conversation/exchange with the Edith/Edie dyad. The close-up on the embedded representation not only aligns our viewing practices of *Gilmore Girls* with their diegetic viewing practices but also visually suggests the encroachment of the embedded representation. If this loss of context appears to be quasi-cinematic (pointing to a loss of subjectivity in totalizing representation), it is also typically televisual (in the profusion of so many screens). The reverse shots of one set of "girls" watching another emphasizes the televisual logic of reflection instead of immersion and above all familial reflection. The close-up of Little Edie singing as her mother is heard screaming in the background foregrounds the problem of language (and specifically mother-daughter language) that is worked out and worked on in *Gilmore Girls*. In a final cut back to Lorelai and Rory, they talk about their affection for the Edies: "There's something beautiful about them . . . they're cool, they're free. . . . They had their cats," Lorelai says. Rory adds, ". . . and each other." "Add a few years and they're us," beams Lorelai. As the sounds of *Grey Gardens* persist in the background, Rory says, "Yeah," her smile fading. Lorelai's concerned, furrowed "Yeah . . ." ends the precredit sequence.

Much could be said about *Grey Gardens*, but a few observations should suffice. The cult documentary follows an aging mother and daughter who live together in a decrepit, decaying mansion in the Hamptons. Edith and Edie Beale share the *nom de la mère* nomenclature of Lorelai and Rory, in which the daughter's name is a diminutive allusion to her mother's; in both texts, this figures a threatening/comforting/alluring contiguity between the two beings. The decay of the house (and also their bodies and their language) is matched by a fiercely quirky and (as Lorelai says) very beautiful independence. The film is, in an important way, about the language(s) between mothers and daughters: the two Edies repeat each other's words, finish each other's sentences, sing to each other and over each other, bicker, shrill, whine, scream, ignore and overattend, and desire and hate, and yet they persist. *They talk too fast and are too close*. Although the strange mix of cruelty and adoration unique to mothers and daughters is largely absent in *Gilmore Girls* (or, rather, the relation is split, with the cruelty emanating from Lorelai's mother to Lorelai and the adoration emanating from Lorelai to Rory), the doubling on every narrative level in the Maysles' documentary persists unchanged. When "Big Edie" sings

“Tea for Two,” it makes of the mother-daughter dyad the romantic “last couple left standing” that Lorelai and Rory become in “They Shoot Gilmores.” Numerous other connections could be made between the two texts (the rejection of marriage, the excessive consumption of food by both sets of mothers and daughters), but first and foremost one should note the way that dueling language in screwball becomes the weaving overlaps of mother and daughter in the documentary and, as I have argued, in *Gilmore Girls* itself. The question of the overclose relation between mother and daughter becomes the struggle for differentiation more generally—indeed, one struggle for differentiation is the television series’ own status as close to and yet apart from its cinematic love objects. Language for the two Edies is a sign of a closeness that is always rebelling against itself, trying to create a distance where (the documentary seems to argue) between this strange mother and odd daughter there can be none. Little Edie’s constant whispers to the filmmakers that “I gotta get away from here/this place/this icebox” becomes the daughter’s utter inability fully to separate from her mother. But this nonseparation, if fascinating, is also not pathologized in the documentary or in the *Gilmore Girls* episode. For if those final frowns of “yeah . . .” are signs of recognition, it is unclear whether the critique of that recognition arises from Lorelai and Rory themselves or from their sense of the problematic representation of such overcloseness in a patriarchal culture so dependent on a radical splitting of daughter from mother. Furthermore, to the extent that “girls” is an affectionate sign of youth, friendship, and desirable closeness between Lorelai and Rory, Little Edie’s statement that “I see myself as a little girl” becomes potentially redeemable in the subsequent logic of the Gilmore girls’ reviewing of the documentary.

The scene that opens the *Gilmore Girls* episode is from quite late in the Maysles’ documentary. Big Edie has forbidden Little Edie from singing the song we hear at the opening of “A Deep-Fried Korean Thanksgiving,” and the latter’s persistence creates a rich aural tapestry of performance and simultaneous critique, not unlike the simultaneous critiques levied by Lorelai and Rory at the film. On a formal and structural level, that is, the women recognize themselves in, through, and by the logic of the film and are furthermore recognized by it. The Thanksgiving episode narratively centers on four dinners that the girls have promised to attend: after the credits, as they anticipate the day of excessive consumption, Lorelai remarks, “We’re mad, Edie,” to which Rory responds, “We’re us, Edie.” The frowns from the opening have become reclaimed marks of excess and full collapses of identification into the tautology “We’re us.” The girls skip along, delighted at their

promised day of too-muchness. (These *Gilmore Girls* moments of wild excessive gastronomic intake suggest yet another textual *with* in something akin to the exuberantly unbound feasts of word and food and mischievous female being-together in Vera Chytilová's 1966 *Daisies*, a bond that locates the television series on something like the complex and contested timeline of radical feminist visual representation.)

A few minutes after the scene that is excerpted for the television episode, and only a few minutes from the end of *Grey Gardens*, Little Edie says of her mother "She's a lot of fun. I hope she doesn't die." If that wish has a Freudian antiwish attached to it as well, we do no service to the text by insisting that it is *only* ambivalence; it would be replicating patriarchal language to not take that "I hope she doesn't die" seriously and at (sur)face value. For despite the screaming (indeed because of it to the extent that it creates a private language between mother and daughter), Edie loves her mother. She hopes her mother does not die. *They talk too fast and are too close*. When Lorelai says "Add a few years and they're us," it becomes an open question to the viewer familiar with the Maysles' documentary whether their subsequent frowns are in recognition of the abject overcloseness of mother and daughter or if it is the futurity of "add a few years" that secures that some day Rory will be saying of an aging Lorelai "I hope she doesn't die." In other words, it is left entirely open whether it is the overclose relation or the possibility of its termination that provokes the frowns of recognition from the mother and daughter. The decay of the mansion in the film metonymizes the inevitable decay of the body, of the mother, of the mother-daughter dyad. The mother is a sign of a history that will come into being, a sign of the passing of time as much as is the decay of the raccoon-nibbled walls in the Edies' house. The death that goes missing at the end of "They Shoot Gilmores, Don't They?" reappears two episodes later in this opening encounter, with the futurity of the daughter's hope and the inevitability of that hope's utter failure. *They talk too fast and are too close*.

Grey Gardens establishes its pathos through the juxtaposition of two excessive relations: one overclose (mother/daughter language) and the other impossible and irreconcilably separate (mother/daughter time). "Mother" is one name for finitude because it is the sign of that which no speed can ever approach. Daughters never catch up to their mothers—it is a necessity of temporal and material finitude that nonidentity implies nonapproachability implies a distance that can never be traversed. The generation gap is radically insurmountable. The generation gap, however, is also a gap of generation: the breach produces a prodigious amount of textual

work that both points to and attempts to overcome that space of death. *They talk too fast and are too close*. This generation works—fast, on speed—to the point of exhaustion and beyond; the question of problematizing exhaustion becomes central to the logic (and narrative, as in the dance marathon) of *Gilmore Girls* in its relation to its own elasticity on itself and on other texts. The nonexhaustible exhaustion is of language, intertextelasticity, the text itself, speed, and allusion. And we should ask: What is an allusion that cannot be exhausted, that endlessly defers its resting ground, that refuses its own allusive death in the final finding of its referent? These surficial elements—allusion, speed, mother/daughter-ness—are intervals that refuse their own closure. Speed is a sign of movement in and as movement and flux. Allusion is a deferral of the meeting of language with its referent. And mother and daughter are the signs of the gap in time of finitude—call it History, after Barthes. This beyond of exhaustion (an exhaustion always in the process of becoming beyond; in other words, an exhaustion that does not exhaust itself) is the essential logic of televisual flow, deferral through openness. If this endlessness is one televisual manifestation of its logic of commodification, it is also the sign of television's own formal elasticity. Elasticity is what secures the pleasure of *Gilmore Girls*, a series that is about all that it means for Daughter to say of Mother, sign of her own future finitude, "I hope she doesn't die." Speed is thus the subject of this series, not merely a characteristic of the tempo of the spoken dialogue, and speed is the formal impulse that attempts to close the gap that generates failure, history, finitude, and the ontological gulf of mother-daughter time itself. Speed cannot catch up, but it is the force and pressure and impulse of that hope.

They talk way too fast and are way too close.

The popular-culture allusions, the sheer celerity of the dialogue in *Gilmore Girls*—these are not distractions from the "real work" of the narrative content, nor are they surface pleasures on top of deeper meanings. These allusions and their too-fast spoken pacing are themselves one structure of finitude, the infiniteness of meaning against finite apprehension. Finitude is the daughter who will never catch up in time, in history, to the mother. The mother, the daughter—together these create a form of exchange, a form of the nonapproach to the origin, the impossibility of catching up fully (and to that which we most adore). Television's metatextual logic, manifested so stunningly in the cases described here, is thus one of *in-finitude*. The double play of this term suggests its paradoxical and irreconcilable nature. Television is both *in* finitude—utterly about the nonapproachability of a speed that

cannot catch up to close a gap (between Daughter and Mother, text and its repetition), bounded, failing, finite, exhaustible, and material—and, at the same time, infinite (open, boundless, endless, and most importantly, elastic). In-finitude is also the double pull in which the viewer of *Gilmore Girls* finds herself. Crucially, it is always a viewer *herself*, for the inability to catch up to the speed, the allusions that will always run over any glossary attempt to corral their usage or significance, makes all viewers of *Gilmore Girls* into a daughter, given self-definition by the necessarily impossible-to-breach gap between us and the text. Inverting Tania Modleski's claim that soap opera viewers are positioned as the "ideal mother" of the diegetic world, with its various children to be watched over, *Gilmore Girls*' intertextelasticity makes every viewer into a daughter who will fail to ever close the gap between herself and her mother.¹⁷ Every viewer of this allusion-riddled series is thus positioned not only as a daughter but also as a future *grieving* daughter. The viewer is utterly saturated in the world of finitude as sign of death and yet pulled into the realm of the infinite through the elasticized anamorphosis of intertextelasticity between texts, which reimagines a plenitude even if that plenitude is only a mirage produced by televisual stretch. It is precisely the inability of viewership to match the speed and fecundity of allusion as such in the series that makes it so that we will never catch up, just as the daughter who comes after cannot catch up. Neither she nor we will make up the ground. The mother is the form of the future death that the daughter—by sheer virtue of her temporal position—will have to watch take place. This is the mother-daughter contract, and it is also the visual, ethical, and temporal contract that governs *Gilmore Girls*. If televisual intertextelasticity formally suggests a model of plenitude, in-finitude, and renewable play, this is always, in this series, set against the stilling of all that generation in the fundamentally brute, sad, small reality that the mother is a form of a gap in history that no daughter, no viewer, can close, a temporal rend that cannot be sutured but only ever mourned.

This is all to say: speed is surely how love works here.

Notes

The epigraphs are from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 65; Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, *Kierkegaard's Writings VI*, edited and translated by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131; and unsigned comments posted on YouTube

in response to the *Family Guy* spoof (“The Perfect Castaway,” season 4, originally aired September 18, 2005) of *Gilmore Girls*.

¹In a way, this slash-like production of mother/daughter incest outslashes slash, for as one Internet collection of *Gilmore Girls* fan fiction negatively admonishes, “Slash for the show *Gilmore Girls*: Lorelai/Rachel, Paris/Rory, Luke/Max, Dean/Tristan, Sookie/Lorelai, Lane/Rory, and anyone else you can think of. NO Lorelai/Rory. No way! Besides that, anyone else is cool.” Available at <http://tv.groups.yahoo.com/group/GilmoreGirlsSlash/>.

²See, for example, the essays in David Scott Diffrient, ed., *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), and the essays in Ritch Calvin, ed., *Gilmore Girls and the Politics of Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).

³These allusions are usually described as being to “popular culture,” but that term is debatable: while the Pixies’ reunion tour, William Shatner’s album of spoken classic songs, the remake of *Bewitched*, and *The Donna Reed Show* might qualify as popular culture, certainly *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Swann’s Way*, and *A Menckan Chrestomathy* trouble if not devastate any association of popular culture with low or teen culture. See also Justin Rawlins, “Your Guide to the Girls: Gilmore-isms, Cultural Capital, and a Different Kind of Quality TV,” in *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*, eds. David Scott Diffrient and David Lavery (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 36–56.

⁴Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). See also Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48.

⁵Jim Collins, “Television and Postmodernism,” in *Channels of Discourse*, ed. Robert Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 333–34.

⁶Emily Nelson, “A Laugh a Minute? In TV Today, That’s Not Fast Enough—From ‘ER’ to ‘Gilmore Girls,’ Writers Pack In Dialogue; Humor-Insurance Policy,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 12, 2002, A1.

⁷“Because the show centers around three generations of Gilmore women (the grandmother, played by Kelly Bishop, is also a central character), it has a reputation as being a ‘chick show’—which isn’t right, Sherman-Palladino says. If anything, the thing that divides audiences isn’t gender but appreciation for rapid-fire dialogue. The show is frequently compared to classic screwball comedies such as ‘His Girl Friday’ because the characters chatter away at breakneck speed. ‘The Gilmore Girls’ is not for the hard of hearing: ‘You like it or you don’t,’ she concedes. . . . ‘Nothing can be fast enough for me. To me comedy that goes slow is not comedy. It is not funny, there’s no energy, there is no life. What banter does for me, it says there’s a rhythm between these people, that they know each other. It’s a connection.’ The characters are not just connected, though, they’re supernaturally clever. Cultural references, some dizzily obscure, gush from the mouths of her characters. Sherman-Palladino says that’s at the heart of the show’s objective.” Mark Olsen, “WB’s ‘Gilmore Girls,’ Now a DVD Set, Didn’t Waste Episodes Finding Itself,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 2004.

⁸Andrew Bergman, quoted in “Screwball Comedy,” *Modern Times*, www.moderntimes.com/screwball, originally published in Liz-Anne Bawden, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 621.

⁹ "Screwball Comedy," Modern Times, www.moderntimes.com/screwball.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 18.

¹¹ Naomi Scheman, "Missing Mothers/Desiring Daughters: Framing the Sight of Women," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 1 (1988): 66.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin's), 103.

¹⁴ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁶ On postfeminism in *Gilmore Girls*, see Eugenie Brinkema, "More *Gilmore Girls*: Rory, Lorelai, Donna, Stella, and Lucy," *Studies in Popular Culture* 30, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 51–64.

¹⁷ Tania Modleski, "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas: Notes on a Feminine Narrative Form," in *Feminist Television Criticism*, ed. Charlotte Brunsdon, Julie D'Acci, and Lynn Spigel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39. My inversion of Modleski's argument should be read in relation to the numerous articles that oppose *Gilmore Girls'* form to melodrama (noting, for example, the absence of close-ups, which might "slow down" the pace of the series). This sort of comment is a typical description of *Gilmore Girls*: "An hour-long drama funnier than any sitcom, the series . . . ambitiously melds novelistic texture with lowbrow buddy comedy, screwball verbosity with class criticism and rustic nostalgia with pop-culture satire. Overblown melodrama is dispensed with in favor of poignant gestures: Episodes often climax with a wistful glance in an Edward Hopper-esque coffeeshop, rather than the vacuous bedhopping typical of prime-time soaps." Jared Sapolin, "Different for Girls," *Time Out New York*, no. 480 (December 9–15, 2004). As with most binaries, the posited one between understated poignancy and histrionic melodrama ought to be regarded with suspicion.

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