“MTV’s ‘HILLS’ of Money: How MTV Tapped the Postfeminist Demographic in an Age of Extreme Media Convergence.”

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**Slide:** This recent People Magazine cover has generated a great deal of controversy over the past few weeks: countless gossip pages, respected news sources, and websites have been condemning and weighing in on twenty-three year-old Heidi Montag’s recent plastic surgery spree, which included a total of 10 procedures. Headlines make proclamations and diagnoses like addiction, and extreme self-hate or self-esteem problems. And, some even speculate that it stems from the emotional abuse coming from her husband. But, what they don’t point to as a cause or culprit, because they are a part of it themselves, is an unremitting and increasingly prevalent culture of surveillance that’s a growing part of youth media today, and may have played a part in Montag’s obsession with trying to attain the ideal femininity. In fact, because the advent of new information communication technologies has rapidly changed the impact of television in popular culture, and specifically narrowed MTV’s impact on the youth demographic, we can arguably interpret Montag’s excessive femininity as a product of MTV’s changing programming strategies. MTV has confronted an inherently dynamic youth culture that is increasingly moving online, by clinging tightly to more stable gender demographics that have served corporate culture well historically. Montag’s embodiment of excessive femininity reflects MTV’s attempts to corral various audiences, largely defined by sex, into profitable and dependable categories—the feminine consumer being particularly profitable.

**Slide:** Montag, for those of you who haven’t seen an US Weekly cover in the past 4 years, is the villainess of MTV’s hit reality show *The Hills*. Her recent escapades under the knife, and the controversy surrounding it, illustrates an overall tension and the blatant contradictions between the
production of a quote-on-quote “empowering” girl culture on MTV, and the disciplinary practices of femininity that are part and parcel of that girl culture. Using *The Hills* as an illustrative text, I am going to discuss the relationship between surveillance and disciplinary femininity, in general, in order to understand the contradictory tension surrounding surveillance for young women like Montag in today’s mediated environment. In order to do this I’ll contrast the girl’s rhetoric of empowerment and claims to be role models with the ways in which the show’s surveillance practices and ties to consumer culture are helping to produce, reproduce or strengthen some of the disciplinary aspects of femininity that already operate in society. I’ll do this by reading *The Hills* through the lens of Sandra Lee Bartky’s 1990 critique of Foucault’s theory on the discipline tied to surveillance. *For the sake of time I take for granted a basic understanding of Bentham’s panopticon and Foucault’s reading of it in relationship to modern power. Slide*

Before the invasion of reality TV, the explosion of social networking sites, twitter, and other popular forms of surveillance, Bartky critiqued Foucault’s theory of the disciplinary practices of surveillance in order to open it up to the discussion of gender. She writes: “Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the account of disciplinary practices that engender the “docile bodies” of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?” (Bartky, 65). Bartky uses Judith Butler’s understanding of femininity as an artifice and as “a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms” in order to examine the ways in which women’s bodies are subjected to excessive forms of disciplinary practices that in turn produce the feminine body.

**Slide:** Bartky focuses on three main ways women’s bodies are disciplined: 1) to be a certain size and configuration, 2) to embody certain gestures, within a restricted movement and 3) to display their body as ornamented surface. Implicit in her analysis is that women, more than men, are, and have historically been, the objects of both actual and virtual gazes that regulate these practices. Thus,
they are subject to more disciplinary practices of surveillance than men. But, now as surveillance becomes an even more encroaching aspect of popular culture, I argue that these practices are heightened, not just in the extreme on shows like *The Hills*, but for most middle class girls who participate in mediated surveillance online, in virtual worlds, with smart phones, or on social networking sites.

The original young women on *The Hills*—the star Lauren Conrad, her co-worker Whitney, her roommate Audrina and her ex-best-friend Heidi—as well as the newer members are all perfect manifestations of the ‘docile bodies’ of femininity, which becomes apparent through their weekly performances on the show, but is particularly visible on their May 2008 *Rollingstone* cover shot. *(Slide)* Notice how they all represent an ideal style of the feminine figure in today’s understanding—a white, western, affluent femininity that is—they are taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and slim like a young girl instead of a women. And, although they rarely discuss dieting within the show (which Bartky suggests is a method of disciplining this body), multiple scenes on the show have been centered on Lauren working out—a manifestation of a disciplinary practice, which on the show, instead of being discussed as such, is laden with the aspirational rhetoric of self-determination and self-improvement, which is a staple in the reality television genre.

Moreover, the girls’ gestures and posturing in this cover shot reflect Bartky’s notion that “women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality” (67). In line with Bartky’s argument, notice how they keep their arms close to their bodies, and their backs arched low and passive. Their knees are bent and while only two of the four actually direct their gaze to the camera, they do so in a coy and passive flirt receding away from it. The girls exemplify the confined and restricted disciplinary practices of the feminine body, which they have been taught and expected to enact most of their life according to Bartky. For me, this enactment, instead of being natural or ‘real’ as the show likes promote, appears as performance interpellated and exaggerated by the act of being surveyed by the cameras. The girls on *The Hills*, know how to pose
Because the girls experience considerably more freedom and independence of movement and labor than women of the past, given that they can live on their own, support themselves and their extravagant lifestyles, and navigate the city of Los Angeles alone and without a man—at first glance the girls don’t seem to reflect Bartky’s second level of disciplinary practices of femininity, which is tied to restricted movement. However, not necessarily because they are women, but because of their participation under surveillance, their movements are severely controlled and restricted, representing how contemporary practices of surveillance culture, particularly mediated surveillance, can exaggerate and exacerbate the disciplinary practices of femininity, originally described by Bartky. Thus subjecting women to perhaps an even more incessant discipline than before. This excessive discipline is especially apparent when looking at how the show’s surveillance is inextricably tied to consumerism and the demands of the market.

As Elizabeth Affuso notes in her analysis of the show’s embedded ties to corporate sponsorship in a recent Jump Cut article, “Through a series of corporate partnerships with companies such as Bolthouse Productions, Epic Records, Teen Vogue, and by extension their parent corporations, the narrative of The Hills exists to promote these companies products, arguably solely to promote these products” (emphasis mine). The girls’ movements are therefore restricted to those clubs and institutions tied to the show’s corporate partnerships. Like attending Lady Gaga’s concert, who was the new “it” artist for epic records. This is not to mention the fact that the girls have to plan out their schedules with MTV producers at the beginning of each week in order to secure the proper permits for filming, or the fact that the girls’ celebrity statuses have restricted their movements even further as, for example, sitting in a café’s outdoor terrace allows paparazzi access to unlimited shots and thus subjects them to a bombardment of flashing light bulbs which can disturb possible “scenes.”

Lastly, the girls on The Hills also enact Bartky’s third manifestation of the disciplinary practices of femininity by displaying their bodies as ornamental surfaces, which is also heightened to
the level of excess through the shows ties to consumerism. In her discussion of female bodies as ornamental surfaces, Bartky focuses on a women’s expected arrangement of hair and the application of cosmetics, and while the girls on The Hills live up to these highly stylized expectations of female ornamentation—through their always-perfect hair and makeup—they are particularly illustrative of clothing and fashion as an aspect of ornamentation, which Bartky neglects in her analysis. (Slide)

Affuso elaborates on how the girls’ style is constructed and disciplined in her article, paying special attention to how Teen Vogue’s corporate sponsorship of the show required that the girls change their hair, makeup and wardrobe to fit the Teen Vogue brand. This expected makeover illustrates how their bodies are disciplined and constrained by their ties to consumerism, but particularly how their femininity is controlled and produced through the show’s surveillance and marketing commitments.

Now, I want to draw your attention to another telling magazine cover, this time on US Weekly, with another character from The Hills. In this issue of US Weekly, Stephanie Pratt a secondary character on the show, goes into detail about her addiction to drugs and alcohol at a young age, and how even after rehab, her interaction with her surgically and cosmetically enhanced castmates on The Hills drove her to bulimia. Despite this perfectly staged PR confession about how the disciplinary practices of femininity under increased surveillance had pushed her to one of the most destructive bodily extremes, Pratt later claimed to MTV news that "The Hills' did not make me bulimic. It was my own issues with self-esteem, and if anything, my life on 'The Hills' has only helped me get healthy, 'cause I know how lucky I am to have this job and to have the chance to be a role model."

Stephanie continued by saying that she wanted to shed light on eating disorders to help parents recognize whether their children have the same problem. Stephanie’s sentiment, as representative of The Hills philosophy, is a perfect example of how both Third Wave Feminism and Postfeminism in particular have problematically embraced the visibility of a hyper-feminine consumer culture. At one time, second wave feminists vehemently critiqued this type of visibility as
limiting and counterproductive to the goals of feminism, but contemporary feminists, many of whom
have tried to distance themselves from the finger-wagging and often pedantic nature of second wave
feminism, hope that this visibility will transform the kind of empowerment tied to being recognized
as an important market segment into a social or political empowerment usually represented in terms
of feminist subjectivity (Banet-Weiser, 124). And, because The Hills is one of MTV’s most
profitable shows at a time when it’s struggling to keep up with an inherently dynamic youth culture,
its success illustrates how MTV has exploited and manipulated the “visibility” of a female consumer
culture to capitalize on the economic potential of its resultant femininity.

For example, when asked what she thought she represented as a “brand” Lauren says, “It’s
about empowering girls. You’re gonna have bad boyfriends and best friends-turned-enemies. You
need to be yourself, you need to work hard, and you’ll get there” (Stack 2008, 30). With Lauren’s
comment “It’s about empowering girls,” she’s implying that in her visibility she can act as a role
model, despite or maybe perhaps because of her role as human advertising billboard for the products
tied to disciplinary femininity. Thus, her surveillance is “empowering” despite its disciplinary
aspects. The hard work that she speaks of is not that of labor in the traditional sense, but rather the
labor of femininity, driven to excess under disciplinary surveillance. And however hard it might be
for Conrad, Montag and the others, it has nonetheless given them immense economic empowerment
and role model status, but maybe not in the ways that they think—they are walking contradictions for
young girls, who may be struggling to understand the relationships between femininity and feminism
today.

The Hills illustrates how the popular culture of surveillance is implicated in the increased
engendering of the ‘docile bodies’ of contemporary femininity. Mark Andrejevic claims that Reality
TV emerged to make our society more comfortable with the surveillance needed to drive the newly
emerging online economy. By equating surveillance with self-expression and self-realization, he
argues that reality tv rehabilitates Big Brother so that we are more likely to give marketers
information about ourselves. However, he fails to acknowledge the fact that TV may have embraced surveillance and encourages participation in it because it produces, heightens and encourages femininity as well. Femininity is an expensive construct that needs many products to help build it— and, as we all know, the economic structure of TV depends on selling products. In fact, because the advertising potential and corporate sponsorships are embedded so seamlessly into the narrative of *The Hills* and onto the bodies of its feminine stars, the show and its multi-media brand becomes the perfect answer to the challenges TV networks are facing with the increased use of DVRs and internet streaming, which skip over traditional advertisements.

As shows like *The Hills* and other reality shows make it more and more appealing to be under surveillance and as teens freely embrace social networking sites where the survey each other, I can’t help but think that all of this surveillance is going to continually promote a disciplinary femininity that stripes so many girls of the individuality and personality that makes them unique and gives them the freedom to pursue something more rewarding or more “empowering” than the ideal construction of female identity—which Montag is obviously striving for.