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## **Gendered (Re)Visions**

Constructions of Gender in Audiovisual Media

In cooperation with Stefanie Hoth

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## Gender in Audiovisual Media: Introduction

Much has been said (and written) about representations of gender in audiovisual media and about their impact on cultural concepts of femininity and masculinity. In academic debates as well as in public ones audiovisual media have often been accused of perpetuating gender stereotypes and of confronting viewers time and again with outdated role models and rigid, binary concepts of masculinity and femininity. Maggie Humm, for instance, observes in the first chapter of her book on *Feminism and Film*: “Film [...] often and anxiously envisions women stereotypically as ‘good’ mothers or ‘bad’, hysterical careerists.”<sup>1</sup> In a similar vein Jonathan Bignell argues: “Melodrama presents characters as simplified types: for example, as good mother or bad mother, faithful spouse, conformist or rebel, princess or bitch.”<sup>2</sup> Images of masculinity more often than not appear to be equally limited; in genres such as the Western or the action film, for instance, the aggressive behaviour displayed by many male characters tends to be presented as the norm of masculinity. Yet audiovisual media have occasionally been praised for constructing innovative concepts of femininity and masculinity and for challenging the status quo with respect to the distribution of gender roles.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, films, television series and music videos increasingly show women and men who transgress the traditional gender dichotomy, exploring, for example, concepts of both heterosexual and homosexual partnerships that defy a rigid distribution of gender roles.

No matter whether audiovisual media are regarded as conservative or progressive in terms of their construction of gender roles, there seems to be a widespread consensus that audiovisual media inevitably disseminate ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman in a particular culture and in a particular period: “We do not create representations, even representations of

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1 HUMM, Maggie. *Feminism and Film*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997. 3.

2 BIGNELL, Jonathan. *An Introduction to Television Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008. 223.

3 Cf. MAREK, Joan Gershen. “*The Practice and Ally McBeal*: A New Image for Women Lawyers on Television?” In: *Journal of American Culture* 22,1 (1999): 77 – 84.

ourselves, in the abstract. Representations of gender identity occur within a massive sea of various and conflicting images of gender, many of which are propagated by the mass media.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, by influencing our notions of masculinity and femininity, audiovisual media are said to contribute to the sense of who we are and what we should – or could – be like:

Television [and other audiovisual media], like all forms of social discourse, helps to shape not only beliefs, values, and attitudes, but also subjectivities, people’s sense of themselves and their place in the world. Television portrays ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ social relations, defines norms and conventions, provides ‘common sense’ understandings, and articulates the preoccupations and concerns that define particular historical moments.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of audiovisual media can partially be explained as resulting from the enormous amount of time many people spend watching television or films.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the impact of audiovisual media on cultural gender concepts is often attributed to their function as a source of role models for children and adolescents.<sup>7</sup> In particular music videos may certainly be regarded as an important source of role models, since they tend to shape adolescents’ notions of fashion and sexuality. Yet, as E. Ann Kaplan emphasises, the human mind should of course not be seen “as a tabula rasa upon which TV images are graven”, and the “process of imitation” which may be triggered by audiovisual media is not “analogous to that which takes place in the family where the child models its personality on that of its parents”.<sup>8</sup> After all, audiovisual media constitute only one among several potential sources of cultural notions of masculinity and femininity.

In comparison to films and TV shows that were produced up to the 1980s, audiovisual media have certainly begun to present a significantly wider range of gender concepts in recent years. Nevertheless audiovisual media still often strike what may appear to be a somewhat awkward compromise between adhering to traditional gender roles on the one hand and challenging them on the other hand. This tension can sometimes already be observed in films and TV shows from the late 1960s and 1970s, i. e. from the time when the Second Women’s

4 PRESS, Andrea L. *Women Watching Television: Gender, Class, and Generation in the American Television Experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. 6.

5 MORREALE, Joanne. “Introduction.” In: Joanne Morrale (ed.). *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003. xi-xix. xi.

6 Cf. ABERCROMBIE, Nicholas. *Television and Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996. 3.

7 Cf. GUNTER, Barrie. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. London: John Libbey, 1986. 1–2; cf. also HUSTON, Aletha C. *Big World, Small Screen: The Role of Television in American Society*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. 30.

8 KAPLAN, E. Ann. “Feminist Criticism and Television.” In: Robert C. Allen (ed.). *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1987. 211–53. 222.

Movement was slowly beginning to influence the media. A TV series like *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981) is a case in point, since the series' "sexualised protagonists were contradictory signifiers for female audiences, suggesting the ideals of agency and self-determination through the narrative framework of the detective genre on the one hand, and passive objectification synonymous with the eroticised pin-up girl on the other".<sup>9</sup> The recent filmic remakes of this TV series still project a very similar message. *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007) is another TV series that seems to be caught in between traditional and progressive images of femininity. The two female protagonists, Lorelai Gilmore and her daughter Rory, in many respects defy a straightforward categorisation in terms of gender stereotypes. Lorelai became pregnant at the age of sixteen, has brought up her daughter on her own and is now her daughter's best friend as well as a career woman. But, all in all, her professional life tends to play only a minor role in the show. Instead of devoting much time to Lorelai's work at her country inn, *Gilmore Girls* focuses primarily on Lorelai's love life, on her relationship to her daughter and on her conflict with her parents, i.e. on the 'domestic sphere', which has traditionally been regarded as women's 'proper' domain. For most female characters on TV the workplace appears to play a secondary role; their family and their love life almost always come first. According to Andrea L. Press, "the advent of the feminist movement in the late 1960s coincides with, first, an increase in the number of working women depicted on television and, later, with an increase in the number of women shown both in the family and at work."<sup>10</sup> In the latter cases, the family is often clearly privileged, though. In several respects, representations of women on television tend to remain indebted to conservative assumptions about femininity, as Alison Griffiths points out:

if television women are now capable of articulating their identities in complex and contradictory ways, they remain constructed in line with a conservative ideology which deems that, however assertive they may be, they can never deviate too much from the 'feel good' ideology of the show's commercial sponsors and must almost always conform to accepted norms of beauty and behaviour. If sexist imagery is still alive and kicking on television, it is now often embedded within discursive systems that are far from straightforward in their evocation of cultural meanings, all of which makes coming up with hard and fast rules about how gender stereotyping works on television [and in other audiovisual media] a continuing challenge.<sup>11</sup>

One can presumably argue that the viewers may derive a considerable amount of pleasure from witnessing the complex renegotiation of traditional and in-

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9 GRIFFITHS, Alison. "Gender and Stereotyping." In: Toby Miller (ed.). *Television Studies*. London: British Film Institute, 2005. 94–97. 96.

10 PRESS. *Women Watching Television*. 6.

11 GRIFFITHS. "Gender and Stereotyping." 97.

novative concepts of masculinity and femininity in audiovisual media, as shows such as *Gilmore Girls* suggest.

Audiovisual media of course not only reflect and shape cultural gender roles by means of the plots they present and the stories they tell; beyond featuring 'gendered' storylines, audiovisual media use media-specific "images [that] are constructed through the mechanism of whatever artistic practice is involved; representations [...] are mediations, embedded through the art form in the dominant ideology".<sup>12</sup> Television, films and music videos use a wide range of visual and acoustic techniques in the process of constructing gender concepts, as Julie D'Acci emphasises:

gender is represented in the unfolding of the narrative, in the genre and in each of the techniques such as camera-work (close-ups and soft focus, for example); editing (romantic dissolves, for example); sound (authoritative speech or voice-overs, for example); and *mise en scène* (which includes lighting, make-up, costumes, sets, props and the way the characters move, and might, for example, generate a figure of typical 'macho' dimensions – a large white body, toting a gun, and jumping over rooftops).<sup>13</sup>

The different techniques used for constructing gender concepts in audiovisual media may reinforce each other, but there may also be a tension between visual and acoustic techniques as well as between the *mise en scène* and the plot level: audiovisual representations of female characters which clearly emphasise the characters' departure from traditional gender roles on the plot level may still reiterate conservative images of women as far as the *mise en scène* is concerned. The depiction of Emma Peel in *The Avengers* (1961–1969) and that of Buffy Summers in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) are cases in point. Both Emma Peel and Buffy Summers are female protagonists who in certain respects defy traditional gender roles and who have come to be regarded as icons of independent women on television. Both are superior to most of the male characters in terms of their physical abilities as well as their intelligence. Nevertheless one can very well argue that features such as the characters' make-up, their costumes and their movements tend to turn them into sexualised objects meant to attract the male gaze. As far as the tension between traditional and progressive gender concepts is concerned, one might also remember that Buffy's first sexual experience has disastrous consequences; the fact that her boyfriend Angel turns into a monster after having had sex with Buffy is reminiscent of fairly old-fashioned notions concerning the 'dangers' associated with losing one's virginity, thus expressing a 'warning' similar to the one that can be ascribed to

12 KAPLAN, E. Ann. "Is the Gaze Male?" In: E. Ann Kaplan (ed.). *Feminism and Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1983]. 119–38. 119.

13 D'ACCI, Julie. "Gender, Representation and Television." In: Toby Miller (ed.). *Television Studies*. London: British Film Institute, 2005. 91–94. 94.

nineteenth-century vampire stories such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. An analysis of gender which seeks to explore the relationship between the different levels on which gender is constructed may hope to illuminate such contradictory representations of femininity and masculinity.

The visual depiction of male and female bodies inevitably has to play a crucial role in any analysis of representations of gender in audiovisual media. Of the techniques employed for the audiovisual construction of gender, the visual representation of male and female characters is likely to have a particularly strong impact on the viewers "because the visual is epistemologically privileged in Western knowledge and [...] because cultural images often subtly, or not so subtly, codify and articulate 'backlash' misogyny".<sup>14</sup> As was pointed out above, any analysis of the visual aspects of the construction of gender in audiovisual media has to take into consideration a range of different aspects of visual generating, including camera techniques, editing and *mise en scène*, and their relationship.

Due to the focus on visual aspects of audiovisual media within film studies, the concept of the 'male gaze', which was coined by Laura Mulvey in her highly influential article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), has become one of the central concepts of feminist film studies. Mulvey argues that "[t]raditionally, the woman displayed [in films] has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen";<sup>15</sup> in other words, films, and other audiovisual media, privilege and create the 'male gaze'. The "dual analogy between the woman and the screen (the object of the look), and between the man and the viewer (the possessor of the look)"<sup>16</sup> described by Mulvey has increasingly given way to more diversified strategies of directing the viewers' gaze, making it possible to talk about the 'female gaze' as well as about the 'male gaze'. While women in genres such as horror movies have traditionally often been "punished for their appropriation of 'the gaze,' and a sort of masculine narrative order (what Lacan would call the Law of the Father) is restored",<sup>17</sup> women (both viewers and actresses) are now frequently invited to subject men to a 'female gaze' without being 'punished' for this transgression of traditional gender roles.

In gender-oriented studies of audiovisual media (as well as in studies of audiovisual media in general) the visual track tends to receive most of the

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14 HUMM. *Feminism and Film*. 3.

15 MULVEY, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." In: *Screen* 16,3 (1975): 6–18. 11.

16 FREELAND, Cynthia A. "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." In: David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.). *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1996. 195–218. 196.

17 FREELAND. "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." 197.

attention; yet the soundtrack may also play a central role in the process of gendering both characters and storytelling. This is of course particularly obvious in music videos, where a song's lyrics as well as the singers' voices and their style of singing may either reproduce or challenge gender stereotypes, as the articles by Linda Besigiroha, Martin Butler and Arvi Sepp in this volume demonstrate. Music may also contribute to the process of shaping notions of gender in films and TV series. In the film *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example, a scene in which the title character informs her boss and lover Daniel Cleaver, who has cheated on her, that she is quitting her job is accompanied by the song "RESPECT", sung by Aretha Franklin. This song, in which a strong, self-confident female voice demands RESPECT for herself, stresses that the scene constitutes a moment of empowerment and triumph for Bridget. The use of voice-over, which seems to have become increasingly popular in audiovisual media in recent years, may also have a significant impact on the processes of 'gendering' and the construction of gender concepts. In addition to presenting stories that revolve around female characters, the recurring use of voice-over provided by female voices in the television series *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* further enhances the emphasis on the female perspective (cf. the contribution by Stefanie Hoth in this volume).

An exploration of the significance male and female characters have for driving the plot onward is another crucial issue for any gender-oriented approach to the study of audiovisual media; in other words, "[a]nother question to ask about in assessing a film's [or TV series'] gender ideology concerns who moves the narrative along, who its chief agents are".<sup>18</sup> The fact that the central female characters in TV series such as *Golden Girls*, *Charmed*, *Gilmore Girls*, *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City* are usually the ones who 'move the narrative along', thus displaying female agency, is certainly one of the factors making these shows popular with female viewers. Traditionally male protagonists who have to face challenges all on their own and thus move the narrative along often became icons of masculinity. Countless Westerns, for instance the classic *High Noon* (1952), which is discussed in Birgit Neumann's contribution to this volume, as well as adventure and action films celebrate the 'loner' as the 'real man', as an incarnation of normative masculinity. In recent years some films have shown women in a similar role. In *Flightplan* (2005), for instance, the female protagonist, portrayed by Jodie Foster, has to face the challenge of finding her daughter, who has disappeared without a trace, all on her own. Further movies depicting strong, active women include *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004), *Erin Brockovich* (2000) and *The Brave One* (2007), where Jodie Foster stars as a vigilante seeking revenge.

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18 FREELAND. "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." 210.

The two basic plot patterns of the quest plot and the romance plot have traditionally been associated with a relatively stable distribution in terms of gender roles. The quest plot has typically featured a male protagonist embarking on an adventure, a journey of discovery (in the literal or in the metaphorical sense). Representatives of the male quest hero include stereotypically masculine characters such as Indiana Jones and James Bond. Female characters were usually assigned only minor roles in the quest plot, more often than not appearing as diversion or even downright obstacles. In recent decades, however, women have increasingly come to be shown as protagonists in their own right. They appear either as partners of a male quest hero (e.g. Dana Scully in *The X-Files*) or as quest heroines pursuing the quest (largely) on their own (Sidney Bristow in *Alias*).

The romance plot has been criticised from a feminist perspective because it is likely to disseminate one-sided gender concepts in so far as it often propagates the notion that all aspects of women's lives – job and friends, for instance – inevitably pale in comparison to love relationships. Romance plots are omnipresent in audiovisual media: many music videos depict at least fragments of romance plots; genres such as the soap opera, the sitcom and the 'dramedy' (a hybrid of drama series and comedy) often revolve around dating rituals, dwelling on new love, broken hearts and jealousy; genres such as the thriller, the professional drama, crime and science fiction frequently feature at least one plot strand which can be classified as romance plot. Romantic comedies, where the romance plot is at the centre of the story, have remained a popular filmic genre ever since the comedies from the 1930s and 1940s starring Hollywood legends such as Katherine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy and Cary Grant. Since the 1990s, romantic comedies including *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Notting Hill* (1999) and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002) continue to celebrate the heterosexual romance which, more often than not, reaches its climax in a wedding. Some romantic comedies depart at least partially from this plot pattern by, for instance, juxtaposing heterosexual and homosexual partnerships (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, 1994) or by showing a female protagonist who ultimately does not end up with 'Mr Right' (*My Best Friend's Wedding*, 1997). Yet even films that follow the pattern of the traditional romance, depicting the heroine's search for 'Mr Right', may seek to renegotiate gender roles to a certain extent, for instance by emphasising female agency, as the article by Marion Gymnich and Kathrin Ruhl on audiovisual retellings of Jane Austen's classical romance *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates.

As the preceding remarks on the correlation between gender and plot have already suggested, the relationship between gender and genre is another important issue for gender-oriented media studies. Annette Kuhn, for instance, points out that genres such as "[t]elevision soap opera and film melodrama"

have been regarded as 'gynocentric' genres, given the fact that they are aiming primarily at a female audience and, thus, presumably privilege women's interests and tastes, "construct[ing] woman-centred narratives and identifications", which are "motivated by female desire and processes of spectator identification governed by female point-of-view".<sup>19</sup> According to the assumptions on the part of those who are responsible for scheduling TV programmes, "[t]he soap operas' focus on human relationships, families and melodrama match[es] feminine interests".<sup>20</sup> Genres such as the action movie, the action series and the buddy movie (e. g. *Die Hard*, *Lethal Weapon* and *The A-Team*), in contrast, have usually been thought of as addressing a (predominantly) male target audience, since they reproduce rituals of male sparring and bonding.

Changes with respect to the distribution of gender roles can be observed in all audiovisual media in recent decades. Women's roles in professional dramas, for instance, have undergone significant changes. In her article on women lawyers on the 'small screen', Joan Gershen Marek emphasises that the representation of the role distribution in the workplace plays a crucial role for assessing how progressive a series is in terms of its depiction of women: "Are they competent and successful attorneys? Thus, do they do all types of legal work, or are they relegated to a support role and can only succeed with the help of a man? [...] Is their appearance the key to their success?"<sup>21</sup> These criteria for analysing gender roles certainly prove to be useful for a wide range of professional dramas as well as for crime series, as Kathrin Ruhl shows in her contribution to this volume, which explores the shifting gender roles in crime series. Moreover, Marek suggests that the depiction of the relationship between professional and romantic interests is directly relevant to assessing whether a series is progressive or conservative in terms of its representation of gender roles. With respect to Ellenor Frutt, one of the protagonists of the American drama series *The Practice*, Marek argues:

While she was lonely enough to resort to the personals section of the newspaper, she was strong enough to know that she did not have to accept the first man who was willing to have her. She felt she deserved more, was willing to wait for someone who appealed to her, and preferred to be alone than with the wrong man. This is a new message for television to be sending.<sup>22</sup>

19 KUHN, Annette. "Women's Genres." In: E. Ann Kaplan (ed.). *Feminism and Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1984]. 437–49. 437.

20 MEEHAN, Eileen R. "Targeting Women." In: Toby Miller (ed.). *Television Studies*. London: British Film Institute, 2005. 113–15. 113.

21 MAREK. "*The Practice* and *Ally McBeal*." 78.

22 MAREK. "*The Practice* and *Ally McBeal*." 79.

In other words, the female character's negotiation of her romantic interests plays a crucial role. Female characters in TV series, films and music videos more and more often make it clear that they want romance in their lives, but they also want other things, such as friends and professional success.

In film comedies, sitcoms and 'dramedies' references to gender roles may contribute to a central function of the genre, namely that of making the viewers laugh, as Klaus Scheunemann's article on the sitcom demonstrates. Both a strict adherence to traditional gender roles and a departure from gender stereotypes may potentially serve to amuse the viewers. Macho behaviour, hyper-sensitive female characters as well as effeminate male characters and bossy career women have been used in sitcoms such as *Who's the Boss?* and *Friends* to generate laughs. Since sitcoms typically rely upon recurring behavioural patterns for producing comic effects, a development of the characters in the direction of a less stereotypical depiction tends to be the exception rather than the rule in this genre. Thus, it comes as no particular surprise that sitcoms as a genre are relatively likely to reproduce and exploit gender stereotypes.

The so-called 'period dramas', which play an important role in British television, more often than not are adaptations of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century literary classics and thus, according to Jones, they "by their nature, broadly assert gender stereotypes. They tend to feature brooding male heroes and strong-willed young women whose main preoccupation and ambition is marriage."<sup>23</sup> Despite being partially confined within concepts of femininity and masculinity that were characteristic of nineteenth-century England, period dramas such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995), *Wives and Daughters* (1999) and *North and South* (2004) strive to emphasise and elaborate the progressive potential of female characters that can already be identified in the novels on which the above-mentioned period dramas are based. By means of a range of strategies, including the insertion of additional scenes, the period drama may seek to reinterpret gender relationships and introduce a modern perspective into classics (cf. the article by Marion Gymnich and Kathrin Ruhl in the present volume).

Given the fact that it is by definition set either in an alien world or in the future, science fiction seems to be a genre that is particularly suitable for challenging existing norms and developing alternatives to worn-out gender roles. Since the 1990s one can in fact observe an increasing tendency in science-fiction TV series to show female characters displaying assertive behaviour and/or fulfilling traditionally male roles: female captains, fighter pilots and/or engineers can be seen in *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001), *Firefly* (2002) and the

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23 JONES, Sara Gwenllian. "Gender and British Television." In: Toby Miller (ed.). *Television Studies*. London: British Film Institute, 2005. 97–101. 100.

new *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009). Thus, science fiction to a certain extent indeed seems to portray progressive and/or alternative concepts of femininity. One also quite often encounters a tension between traditional and alternative gender concepts in science fiction. The *Alien* movies, for instance, can certainly be read as a rejection of stereotypically feminine attributes such as passivity and motherliness. The female protagonist Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is shown to be an extremely active character, who becomes very aggressive when she is challenged. But she also seems to be “equipped [...] with a certain nurturing impulse”<sup>24</sup> in *Aliens* (1986), taking care of “a foster daughter, the orphaned Newt”.<sup>25</sup> The representation of robots and androids, which is discussed in the contribution by Marion Gymnich and Klaus Scheunemann, is another test case for the complex negotiations of traditional and innovative gender concepts in science-fiction films and TV series.

When old genres are drawn upon in audiovisual media, the process of adjusting generic conventions to current interests often includes an updating of gender concepts. This is particularly apparent in remakes of older movies and/or TV series. In an article on “The Image of Women in Film”, which was first published in 1972, Sharon Smith argues that women’s roles in films are much more limited than those of male characters:

The role of a woman in a film almost always revolves around her physical attraction and the mating games she plays with the male characters. On the other hand a man is not shown purely in relation to the female characters, but in a wide variety of roles – struggling against nature (*The Old Man and the Sea*; *Moby Dick*; *2001: A Space Odyssey*), or against militarism (*Dr Strangelove*; *Catch 22*), or proving his manhood on the range (any John Wayne Western). Women provide trouble or sexual interludes for the male characters, or are not present at all. Even when a woman is the central character she is generally shown as confused, or helpless and in danger, or passive, or as a purely sexual being.<sup>26</sup>

Genres which supported the gender dichotomy outlined by Smith have been modified to allow for a depiction of female agency in recent years. The Western, a genre that certainly tended to confirm conservative gender roles, has become increasingly varied in terms of its representation of gender roles since the 1990s. While *The Missing* (2003) shows a strong and active female protagonist (Cate Blanchett), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) features a homosexual relationship between two cowboys (cf. the article by Birgit Neumann in this volume). The

24 WILLIS, Sharon. *High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 1997. 120.

25 WILLIS. *High Contrast*. 120.

26 SMITH, Sharon. “The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research.” In: Sue Thornham (ed.). *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1999 [1972]. 14–19. 14.

*Shrek* movies engage in a (somewhat ambivalent) renegotiation of gender stereotypes that have been propagated in particular by Disney, as Martin Butler shows in his contribution to this volume. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies (2003, 2006, 2007) are further cases in point; in many respects they draw upon and quote the traditions of the Hollywood pirate movie, but the portrayal of Captain Jack Sparrow adds an unusual note to the genre. It is actor Johnny Depp's interpretation of the pirate Jack Sparrow by means of a mixture of bravura, manliness and kinky behaviour which has attracted particular interest and which has contributed substantially to the movies' success. Moreover, the female protagonist Elizabeth Swann (Keira Knightley) is certainly not merely a helpless and passive 'maiden in distress'.

Gender is a category that interacts with various other social categories in manifold, complex ways. In other words, research on the representation of gender in audiovisual media has to pay tribute to "the myriad other social identities upon which and against which notions of masculinity and femininity are produced: identities involving race, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality".<sup>27</sup> Today film and television increasingly feature a variety of social identities and lifestyles, whereas several decades ago in particular television tended to represent largely homogeneous notions of social identity, which, by virtue of their reiteration, attained a normative status. Thus, for instance, "normative femininity on early US television was represented as middle class, white, young, maternal and heterosexual".<sup>28</sup> Especially since the 1980s more and more TV series have explored a range of alternative identities with respect to class (*Roseanne*), race (*The Cosby Show*), age (*Golden Girls*), attitudes towards one's children (*Absolutely Fabulous*) and sexual orientation (*The L-Word*, *Queer as Folk*). In particular the depiction of homosexual life styles in a realistic or even empowering manner means breaking a taboo:

Until the late 1980s, explicit representations of lesbians and gay men were rare in television programmes. Where they did occur, they usually repeated the same old stereotypes: limp-wristed sissies like Mr Humphries in the British situation comedy *Are You Being Served?* (1972–84); confused and unhappy young men like Steven Carrington in the American soap opera *Dynasty* (1981–89); or aggressive butch lesbians like Frankie in the Australian prison drama *Prisoner Cell Block H* (1979–86). Lesbians and gay men were represented as deviant, tragic, predatory and/or comic figures.<sup>29</sup>

Today one can observe a tendency towards representing and 'normalizing' a wide range of identities and life styles, while the positioning of the individual

27 D'ACCI, Julie. "Gender, Representation and Television." 92.

28 D'ACCI, Julie. "Gender, Representation and Television." 92.

29 JONES. "Gender and Queerness." 109.

within the complex matrix of gender, race, class, age and sexual orientation keeps being negotiated in audiovisual media, as, for instance, the articles by Martin Butler, Arvi Sepp, Stella Butter and Matthias Eitelmann illustrate. Simultaneously, white, male, heterosexual identities cease being presented as unproblematic and normative, as the contribution by Verena-Susanna Nungesser argues.

Starting from the assumption that the construction of gender roles has become increasingly complex and diversified in the last decade, the articles in this volume primarily explore the construction of gender in contemporary media products. The contributions to the present volume seek to provide further insight into the manifold media- and genre-specific ways of constructing, perpetuating and challenging gender concepts in audiovisual media, taking into consideration the interplay of the different levels on which gendering operates in audiovisual media respectively the relationship between the forms of representation and the content. One of the central ideas behind this volume is the attempt to adopt a transmedial perspective, bringing together explorations of 'gendering' in different audiovisual media. Thus, two articles in the present volume address the processes of constructing, perpetuating and challenging notions of femininity and masculinity in music videos, while the other contributions focus on the analysis of gendering in films and/or television. The fact that most of the articles in this volume analyse American films, TV series and music videos pays tribute to the international importance of American media products ever since the invention of audiovisual media. While the 'hegemony' of the American film and TV industry has not gone unchallenged, especially in recent years (and 'Bollywood' has become an increasingly important rival), one can still assume that American movies and TV series have a large international audience and thus may also play a crucial role as far as the perpetuation of gender concepts is concerned. Although the gender concepts in American audiovisual media are certainly not simply adopted in the countries where American films and TV series are shown on a regular basis, they may indeed have contributed to a process of homogenizing gender concepts within the United States and in many European countries.

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## **Part I: Gaze – Body – Voice**



## **Revisiting the Classical Romance: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bride and Prejudice***

### **I. *Pride and Prejudice* revisited: Jane Austen's novels and their audiovisual adaptations**

All of Jane Austen's novels are beyond doubt part of the canon of world literature. They are regularly taught at schools and universities, and they are the subject of a large body of scholarly criticism. Austen's novels are not only discussed in an academic context, though. They also appear to have remained very much 'alive' in the popular imagination, as the allusions to Austen's works in a wide range of literary texts and films from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries suggest. Films with a biographical focus, such as *Becoming Jane* (2007) and *Miss Austen Regrets* (2008), provide further evidence of the interest in the nineteenth-century novelist. The lasting popularity of Austen's novels is certainly due to the liveliness of the characters she created in her works, but it also seems to result from the fact that her novels (and probably most of all *Pride and Prejudice*) have come to be seen as quintessential romances, which, apparently, can be adapted quite easily to changing moral values and gender concepts. After all, as Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield point out, "[t]he concerns at the center of Austen's plots – sex, romance, and money – are central concerns in our own era",<sup>1</sup> though the social conventions and the rituals of courtship have undergone radical changes since Austen's times.

It may perhaps come as no particular surprise that many women writers refer to Austen's novels in their literary works. In this way they claim the nineteenth-century novelist as their literary predecessor; yet frequently they also find fault with the moral implications and the happy endings characteristic of Austen's romance plots, which feature female protagonists who invariably overcome all obstacles and finally find their 'Mr Right' and thus privilege traditional female

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1 TROOST, Linda and Sayre GREENFIELD. "Introduction: Watching Ourselves Watching." In: Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (eds.). *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001 [1998]. 1 – 12. 3.

role patterns.<sup>2</sup> One also encounters references to Austen in what may appear to be far less likely places, for instance in postcolonial texts, such as Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family* (1982), and even in popular crime fiction, for example Anne Perry's *The Whitechapel Conspiracy* (2001). The existence of a remarkable number of literary 'spin-offs' (prequels, sequels and rewritings) based on Austen's novels clearly suggests that Jane Austen is still eminently 'marketable'. The movie *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2007), based on the eponymous novel by Karen Fowler, constitutes a 'spin-off' which is very loosely based on Austen's novels but is full of allusions to them. While the majority of the 'spin-off' novels, whose literary merit tends to be questionable, have gone largely unnoticed, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), which retells *Pride and Prejudice* in a contemporary setting, and its sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (1999) have become bestsellers.

The feature films and miniseries based on Austen's works which have appeared since "the mid 1990s Austenmania"<sup>3</sup> also testify to the lasting appeal of Austen's literary creations and further enhance the novels' status as canonical texts. In addition to those audiovisual adaptations of Austen's novels that remain at least largely faithful to the literary originals, including Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and Andrew Davies's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995)<sup>4</sup>, the list of films inspired by Austen's classics also includes movies that are much more loosely based on the literary texts. The film *Clueless* (1995), a "contemporary pastiche of *Emma*",<sup>5</sup> is a case in point, since it transfers the basic plot and character constellation of *Emma* to an American high-school in the mid-1990s. In a similar fashion, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) uses some of the plot elements and character constellations of *Pride and Prejudice* for a contemporary retelling

2 The narrator in Margaret DRABBLE's novel *The Waterfall* (1969), for example, criticises Austen's romance plots explicitly; at one point the narrator provides the following scathing comment on Austen's novels: "How I dislike Jane Austen. How deeply I deplore her desperate wit. Her moral tone dismays me: my heart goes out to the vulgarity of those little card parties that Mrs Philips gave at Meryton, to that squalid rowdy hole at Portsmouth where Fanny Price used to live, to Lydia at fifteen gaily flashing her wedding ring through the carriage window, to Frank Churchill, above all to Frank Churchill, lying and deceiving and proffering embarrassing extravagant gifts. Emma got what she deserved, in marrying Mr Knightley. What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley? Sorrow awaited that woman: she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill, if she could." (DRABBLE, Margaret. *The Waterfall*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971 [1969]. 57–58)

3 DÍAZ DE CHUMACEIRO, Cora L. "Induced Recall of Jane Austen's Novels: Films, Television, Videos." In: *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 14,1 (2000): 41–50. 48.

4 Andrew Davies was not only responsible for the adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*; he and Helen Fielding also wrote the script for *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*.

5 WIESENFARTH, Joseph. "The Garson-Olivier *Pride and Prejudice*: A Hollywood Story." In: Paul Goetsch and Dietrich Scheunemann (eds.). *Text und Ton im Film*. Tübingen: Narr, 1997. 81–93. 93.

of what is arguably Austen's most famous novel. The film *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) offers another 'cultural translation' of Austen's text, situating the romance in contemporary India and using various elements characteristic of the tradition of 'Bollywood' cinema, including colourful Indian costumes, dance scenes and singing.

In the following, we will examine the ways in which Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* has been transformed in four different audiovisual versions: Andrew Davies's successful BBC miniseries from 1995, starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth; Joe Wright's version featuring Keira Knightley and Matthew Macfadyen from 2005; the 'Bollywood' version *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), starring Aishwarya Rai and Martin Henderson; and, last but not least, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) with Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth and Hugh Grant. Each of these four audiovisual adaptations provides a somewhat different reading of Austen's protagonists, their relationship and the gender roles they represent. Both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bride and Prejudice* depart quite radically from Austen's classic in certain respects. Thus, what Joseph Wiesenfarth says about *Clueless* certainly also applies to these two films: "[...] *Clueless* is there to be enjoyed by those who have never heard of *Emma*."<sup>6</sup> In contrast to *Bride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, both Andrew Davies's miniseries and Joe Wright's film version are interpretations that stay relatively close to the novel, often even taking over entire dialogues word for word. Yet they also exhibit significant departures from the literary text, some of which are very interesting with respect to the performance of gender, as will be shown below.

It is in particular in terms of their depiction of the male protagonist that the adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* offer interpretations which differ from the literary original in a way that is clearly meant to make them appeal to a modern audience. Cheryl L. Nixon, for instance, argues that one of the characteristics of the BBC miniseries is the effort to 'flesh out' Austen's protagonist Mr Darcy.<sup>7</sup> According to Nixon, the process of 'fleshing out' the romance hero is a factor that has substantially contributed to the enormous success of this particular audiovisual adaptation of the nineteenth-century classic:

While the success of the current adaptations reveals a timeless love of Austen, they also reveal what we, the late twentieth-century audience, do not like about Austen – or at least what the filmmaker predicts the average filmgoer will not like about Austen. Most tellingly, it is what Austen's heroines fall in love with that we do not like: the male hero.

6 WIESENFARTH. "The Garson-Olivier *Pride and Prejudice*: A Hollywood Story." 93.

7 NIXON, Cheryl L. "Balancing the Courtship Hero: Masculine Emotional Display in Film Adaptations of Austen's Novels." In: Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (eds.). *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001 [1998]. 22–43. 23.

What was good enough for her female heroines is obviously not good enough for us; the films must add scenes to add desirability to her male protagonists.<sup>8</sup>

Nixon convincingly argues that the process of ‘fleshing out’ the male characters is not just meant to satisfy “a twentieth-century lust for the body”;<sup>9</sup> this strategy also introduces a “visual, indeed a bodily, vocabulary to express what is essentially an emotional redefinition of each character”.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the recent audiovisual interpretations of Mr Darcy make him look more passionate than the literary original by means of focussing on the actor’s body and his body language and especially by stressing the way he repeatedly gazes at Elizabeth. While many of the departures from the literary text involve the character of Mr Darcy, the female protagonist has also undergone several revisions, which appear to be informed by concepts of female gender roles characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the following we will discuss some of these revisions of the protagonists and their impact on the interpretation of the classical romance *Pride and Prejudice*.

## II. ‘Will find nice, sensible boyfriend to go out with’ – *Bridget Jones’s Diary*

Both Fielding’s novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and the eponymous movie refer to *Pride and Prejudice* on several levels. In the nineteenth-century romance as well as in its modern counterpart the heroine’s search for ‘Mr Right’ constitutes the central theme, and in both cases this search is at least partially motivated by social pressure. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth is constantly urged by her mother to find a husband, whereas Bridget, besides being confronted with very similar admonitions on the part of her mother, is eager to find a partner because of the social pressure exerted by various ‘smug married couples’, whom she keeps running into at parties and who apparently never tire of pointing out that she had better make haste if she wants to find a boyfriend/husband. While the goal in *Pride and Prejudice* is clearly to get married, Bridget hopes to find a boyfriend, and (at least initially) marriage is not on her mind, as her New Year’s resolution, quoted in the headline of this section, suggests.

Besides the protagonist’s search for Mr Right, further parallels to *Pride and Prejudice* can be found on other levels. Firstly, there are a number of similarities with respect to the character constellation. The names of the male protagonists – Mr Darcy (*Pride and Prejudice*) vs. Mark Darcy (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*) – already

8 NIXON. “Balancing the Courtship Hero.” 23.

9 NIXON. “Balancing the Courtship Hero.” 24.

10 NIXON. “Balancing the Courtship Hero.” 24.

alert the readers/viewers to certain parallels between the central male characters. Moreover, Bridget's parents clearly resemble Austen's Mr and Mrs Bennet in several respects, and Bridget's 'urban family', consisting of her female friends Jude and Shazzer as well as her gay friend Tom, constitutes a modern equivalent of Elizabeth's sisters. Secondly, Fielding's retelling of the classic romance even contains explicit references to Austen's novel. After having met Mark Darcy for the first time, Bridget (at least in Fielding's novel) observes: "It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party. It's like being called Heathcliff and insisting on spending the entire evening in the garden, shouting 'Cathy' and banging your head against a tree" (*Bridget Jones's Diary* 13). Thirdly, even though *Bridget Jones's Diary* translates many aspects of the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* into modern ideas concerning gender relationships, the basic plot pattern remains that of the romance, in which the protagonists have to overcome a number of obstacles before the happy ending is finally achieved. After a rather awkward first encounter, Bridget and Mark Darcy gradually correct their initial errors and finally realise that they are in love with each other. One of the obstacles Bridget and Mark Darcy have to face on their path towards their happy ending is a dashing rival for the heroine's affection: Daniel Cleaver (Hugh Grant) clearly resembles the notorious George Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*, but while the readers of Austen's novel may at best deduce that Elizabeth has a temporary crush on Wickham, Bridget, in accordance with changed moral standards and gender roles, has a (short-lived) affair with Daniel.

Those readers/viewers of *Bridget Jones's Diary* who are familiar with Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are likely to identify additional layers of meaning in the romance between Bridget and Mark. Familiarity with the nineteenth-century classic throws an ironic light on the behaviour of the main characters in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Moreover, it invites the readers/viewers to speculate about the ending: Will Elizabeth's modern counterpart end up with Mr Darcy or won't she? Although reading/watching *Bridget Jones's Diary* 'with' *Pride and Prejudice* may certainly add to the pleasure of witnessing Bridget's story unfold, familiarity with Austen's novel is certainly not a prerequisite for understanding and enjoying Fielding's novel and the film based on it. A reading of *Bridget Jones's Diary* is rendered even more complex by the fact that Helen Fielding's two *Bridget Jones* novels as well as their filmic adaptations also draw upon two other novels by Austen, *Persuasion* and *Emma*, as Kelly A. Marsh observes:

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* underlies *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* incorporates the plot of *Persuasion*. These allusions, even appropriations, are overt and obvious to readers of Austen's work; less obvious is Fielding's important appropriation from *Emma*. For all that Bridget's story resembles those of

Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, her character most closely resembles that of Emma Woodhouse [...]. Like Bridget, Emma is prone to resolutions that she fails to act on.<sup>11</sup>

Although Marsh is certainly right about the analogies between Bridget and Emma, it is in particular the focus on the body that reveals similarities between Bridget and Elizabeth Bennet beyond those suggested by the characters' largely parallel functions in the romance plot. While Emma and Bridget share the humbling experience of not being able to live up to their resolutions, one of the things Elizabeth and Bridget have in common is the experience of being considered not attractive enough to capture the interest of a man. Although the ideal of beauty in contemporary society is of course in many respects quite different from that in England at the beginning of the nineteenth century, both the nineteenth-century heroine and her modern counterpart are put down, at least temporarily, as being not particularly attractive – Bridget largely because of her weight, Elizabeth for reasons not specified. One may presumably even venture the guess that the experience of being unable to fulfil normative beauty standards is one of the factors that have endeared these two literary characters to many (female) readers.

Helen Fielding's two novels about the thirty-two-year-old single Londoner Bridget Jones as well as the films based on them suggest that the recent popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* is not just due to Austen's story and characters, but also to a particular audiovisual rendering of the novel, namely the BBC miniseries from 1995 starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth, which has been widely praised as an adaptation that is both faithful to *Pride and Prejudice* and appealing to a modern audience. When this miniseries was first shown in Britain and in the United States it was an enormous success<sup>12</sup> – and this success is explicitly commented on in Fielding's novels, since Bridget and her friends love to watch this miniseries (again and again). Clearly, the main attraction for them is the hero, Mr Darcy, as portrayed by actor Colin Firth. There is in particular one scene that fascinates Bridget, namely the 'wet shirt scene', in which Mr Darcy dives into a lake – a scene that is not based on Austen's novel but that is part of the abovementioned strategies serving to 'flesh out' the male protagonist in the BBC miniseries. Bridget's raving about this scene provides almost a kind of leitmotif in Fielding's novels, culminating in an interview with actor Colin Firth in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. In the *Bridget Jones* films, the explicit references to the BBC miniseries are missing. Yet the films and the miniseries are

11 MARSH, Kelly A. "Contextualizing Bridget Jones." In: *College Literature* 31,1 (2004): 52 – 72. 63.

12 Cf. HOPKINS, Lisa. "Mr. Darcy's Body: Privileging the Female Gaze." In: Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (eds.). *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001 [1998]. 111 – 21. 111.

linked by the fact that Colin Firth was cast as Mark Darcy.<sup>13</sup> Thus, as Angela Krewani points out, decisions in the production process were very important for linking the miniseries and the films.<sup>14</sup> Casting Firth as Mark Darcy made it necessary to exclude the interview with the actor Colin Firth which appears in Fielding's novel in order to avoid undermining the fictional illusion.<sup>15</sup> All in all, *Bridget Jones's Diary* has to be seen as being involved in a complex dialogue with both literary texts and at least one earlier audiovisual adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*.

### III. 'No life without wife' – *Bride and Prejudice*

*Bride and Prejudice* is another cultural translation of Austen's novel – both in terms of its setting and in terms of its music and visual aesthetics. *Bride and Prejudice* was directed by Gurinder Chadha, who also created *Bend it like Beckham*, a film about a young girl of Indian origin living in London who is crazy about playing football. Unlike *Bend it like Beckham*, *Bride and Prejudice* is partially set in India and makes use of many features traditionally associated with 'Bollywood' films, in particular songs and dance scenes. Songs and dance scenes of course also happen to be crucial ingredients of more conventional adaptations of Austen's novels. Yet *Bride and Prejudice* has very little in common with traditional films based on Austen's works as far as the visual and acoustic aesthetics are concerned, since colourful saris replace the period costumes and the dance scenes clearly adopt the conventions of 'Bollywood' cinema.

Chadha has introduced major changes in her Bollywood version of *Pride and Prejudice* by transferring the story from the nineteenth century into current times and adding, similar to Fielding, many comical scenes. With respect to the basic storyline, however, the cultural translation of *Pride and Prejudice* into *Bride and Prejudice* is quite straightforward. In *Bride and Prejudice*, which is set in Amritsar, Goa, London and Los Angeles, Mrs Bakshi, the mother of the female protagonist Lalita, tries to find husbands for her four daughters just as eagerly and desperately as Mrs Bennet does. She therefore enthusiastically agrees to the phrase "no life without wife" coined by Kholi, a relative living in Los Angeles, who comes to Amritsar in order to find a dutiful Indian wife for himself. Kholi is

13 A second actor was also cast for the BBC miniseries as well as for *Bridget Jones's Diary*: Crispin Bonham Carter stars as Mr Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* and plays a minor role as Bridget's colleague.

14 KREWANI, Angela. "Multimediale Selbstreflexivität in der Literatur nach 1945." In: Vera Nünning (ed.). *Kulturgeschichte der englischen Literatur: Von der Renaissance bis zur Gegenwart*. Tübingen/Basel: Francke, 2005. 282 – 90. 290.

15 Note, however, that the DVD of the film provides the interview as part of the bonus material.

a character who has clearly been inspired by Austen's Mr Collins, a relative whom Elizabeth despises but who, due to his status as a clergyman, is regarded as an 'eligible bachelor' by her mother. When British-born Indian Balraj Bingley arrives from England, Mrs Bakshi hopes that he will marry one of her daughters. Balraj, like his nineteenth-century counterpart Bingley, who finally marries Elizabeth's sister Jane, is accompanied by his best friend William Darcy, whom the heroine dislikes very much from the start because of the arrogant behaviour he displays. While Mr Darcy's arrogance in *Pride and Prejudice* is associated with his wealth and his superior social position, William Darcy in *Bride and Prejudice*, a rich American businessman, offends Lalita by saying disparaging things about the living conditions in India, Indian customs and Indian women, whom he considers to be very conservative. Lalita sees Darcy as the prototypical American, who is convinced of his superiority:

Darcy: "I just find the whole arranged marriage thing a little strange ... it is a little backward, don't you think? ... The groom asked his parents to find him a bride, actually – he was busy running his company. He wanted to keep it simple." Lalita: "I see, so he came here. Is that what you think, too – India is the place to go for simple women?"

Thus, while Austen's novel focuses on financial and social differences between the Bennets on the one hand and Bingley and Darcy on the other hand, both cultural and financial differences are of crucial importance in the Indian version of Austen's story and fuel the quarrels between the hero and the heroine.

#### IV. The visual presentation of female and male bodies in the audiovisual interpretations of *Pride and Prejudice*

As we will try to show in the following, the two adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* from 1995 and 2005 and the films *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Bride and Prejudice* differ significantly with respect to the ways in which they display the protagonists' bodies in scenes that constitute crucial turning points in the development of the romance plot. Yet in all of the abovementioned audiovisual adaptations there is a link between the visual presentation of the protagonists' bodies and the ways the characters are shown to look at each other. It is in particular through the emphasis on the characters' *perception* of each others' bodies that the presentation of their bodies is invested with additional meaning: When Darcy is shown to gaze intensely at Elizabeth in several scenes this can clearly be read as an expression of his increasing passion. The focus on the depiction of male and female bodies and on their perception seems to be an appropriate starting point for an analysis of audiovisual renderings of Austen's

novels, given the fact that ‘meaningful’ looks also play an important role in the novels.

Austen’s novels generally provide very little in the way of description as far as the appearance of the protagonists is concerned; instead, the protagonists tend to be characterised by references to their behaviour and in particular by a demonstration of their wit (or the lack thereof), leaving the question of what the characters look like primarily to the reader’s imagination. One of the few exceptions to this principle are Mr Darcy’s references to Elizabeth Bennet’s ‘fine eyes’ – an exception that is apt to stress the overall significance of looking and being looked at in *Pride and Prejudice*. Despite the lack of descriptions specifying the characters’ looks beyond referring to them as ‘handsome’ or ‘good looking’, the characters’ appearance turns out to be important in the interactions that are presented in Austen’s novels. After all, attractive bodies can be considered a significant ‘currency’ on the marriage market, which constitutes the main focus of Austen’s novels. This is for example made clear when Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth, saying that she “is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*” (*Pride and Prejudice* 59). The fact that Elizabeth is not attractive enough to capture Darcy’s interest lowers her value on the marriage market. The preoccupation of the female protagonist with the way she looks which is emphasised in Fielding’s novels thus does not seem entirely out of place in a modern rewriting of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In *Bride and Prejudice*, in contrast, the attractiveness of the female protagonist is never questioned. In fact, *Bride and Prejudice* demonstrates particularly well that the decision which actress is cast as Elizabeth Bennet (respectively her modern counterpart) has a significant impact on the interpretation of the female protagonist. Moreover, costume, make-up and filmic techniques such as close-ups, lighting and camera angles have influenced the presentation of (male and female) bodies. In *Bride and Prejudice* Bollywood star and former Miss World Aishwarya Rai plays the heroine Lalita. To enhance Rai’s beauty the camera invariably shows her in an advantageous light, and her clothes and make-up are always immaculate. In other words, the female protagonist is certainly meant to be perceived as unquestionably beautiful in this production. Actress Jennifer Ehle in the BBC miniseries is certainly attractive, too, but does not have the reputation of being a stunning beauty, and her dresses are certainly not always immaculate. In this version both the choice of the actress and the way she is presented by the camera support the idea that Mr Darcy only gradually begins to see her as an attractive woman. The most recent filmic version of *Pride and Prejudice* features another “acknowledged beauty”,<sup>16</sup> Keira Knightley, as Eliz-

16 CAMDEN, Jen. “Sex and the Scullery: The New *Pride and Prejudice*.” In: *Persuasions On-Line* 27,2 (2007): no pagination.

abeth, a choice that reflects today's beauty ideals rather than those of Austen's times. As Jen Camden argues, one can assume that "[t]he filmmakers [chose] to capitalize on her [Knightley's] appearance" and her "pre-existing celebrity status".<sup>17</sup> The American actress Renée Zellweger, in contrast, put on extra weight for the role of Bridget Jones, thus emphasising the fact that the character does *not* conform to current beauty ideals (her unsuccessful efforts to lose weight add to the comic potential, especially in the novel), which invests Mark Darcy's statement that he likes her 'just as she is' with additional meaning. In her discussion of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Marsh argues that "Bridget's voice is authentic because it reveals what we all know but rarely face, and perhaps never face with such high spirits: control is a myth, and the experience of being out of control [...] is authentic".<sup>18</sup> Among the (many) areas beyond Bridget's control is her body in general and her weight in particular.

While traditionally being attractive has been seen as a crucial asset for women rather than for men, in Austen's fictional world men's fortunes are likewise influenced by the way they look – a notion that is picked up and elaborated in the filmic adaptations. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* the female characters turn out to be very interested in the physical appearance of the opposite sex. When Elizabeth's sister Jane praises Mr Bingley for being "just what a young man ought to be [...] sensible, good humoured, lively" (*Pride and Prejudice* 62) and for having "happy manners" (*ibid.*), Elizabeth adds: "He is also handsome [...] which a young man ought likewise to be, if he possibly can. His character is thereby complete." (*ibid.*) With this statement the female protagonist claims the right to judge potential marriage partners on the basis of their looks, thus following the example of men and appropriating their behaviour. The attractiveness of the male characters is also highlighted in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, where it seems to result from a combination of good looks, professional success and gentleman-like behaviour. While the focus is on professional success and gentleman-like behaviour in Mark Darcy's case, Daniel Cleaver scores with his charm, cleverness and good looks, as Bridget puts it: "Daniel Cleaver, though. Love his wicked dissolute air, while being v. successful and clever" (*Bridget Jones's Diary* 18).

17 CAMDEN. "Sex and the Scullery."

18 MARSH. "Contextualizing Bridget Jones." 53.

## V. 'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me' – The first encounter

The moment when the hero and the heroine meet for the first time constitutes one of the core elements of all of the literary and audiovisual interpretations of Austen's romance. In *Pride and Prejudice* and its retellings the first meeting is invariably the moment when the initial antagonism and the friction between the protagonists are established. They are introduced to each other in the context of some kind of social event, be it a country dance (*Pride and Prejudice*), a wedding (*Bride and Prejudice*) or a New Year's turkey curry buffet (*Bridget Jones's Diary*),<sup>19</sup> and quickly begin to see each other in a quite unfavourable light. Their initial mutual dislike is based on the fact that the heroine considers the male protagonist to be extremely arrogant, while he perceives her as being beneath his standard in some way or other. Despite these basic parallels between the four versions of the romance, there are also significant differences between the ways this crucial moment is presented. These differences, which have important repercussions for the gender roles constructed in the four audiovisual narratives, are not only due to the dialogue, but are also caused by the visual rendering of the scenes, including features such as camera angles and the characters' facial expressions, as will be shown in the following.

In the 1995 BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice*, where the crucial first encounter is presented in a way that is very close to Austen's novel, Mr Darcy, after having been formally introduced to Elizabeth, refuses to dance with her when urged to do so by his friend Bingley. The reason Darcy gives for his refusal is, quite plainly, that Elizabeth is not attractive enough for him: "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men." When Darcy gives Bingley this blunt answer, which clearly refers to the significance beauty ideals have for women's social success, he is unaware of the fact that he is being overheard by Elizabeth, who is sitting very close by. Immediately before Darcy's condescending comment, the viewers quite literally adopt Elizabeth's point of view since they are shown Darcy and Bingley from her perspective by means of an over-the-shoulder shot. Thus, the camera at this point seems to privilege the female perspective – a technique that may additionally invite the viewers to adopt Elizabeth's attitude towards Darcy. The rest of the scene consists mainly of close-ups showing Darcy and Bingley, alternating with close-ups of the female protagonist. The latter's reactions to what she is hearing – first Bingley's praise of her and then Darcy's unfavourable comments – are portrayed exclusively by

19 Since Bridget and Mark Darcy are not aware of the fact that they already met as children, Bridget's mother informs them that Bridget "used to play naked in Mark's paddling pool".

means of close-ups revealing subtle changes of her facial expression. At first, she appears to be shocked by Darcy's negative assessment of her appearance, an emotion that is indicated by a slight twitching of her eyebrow, the movement and expression of her eyes, the fact that she opens her mouth a little and seems to swallow hard. Her resentment and mortification very quickly give way to what seems to be genuine amusement, however. The fact that Elizabeth is far from being humbled by Darcy's insult is additionally emphasised by the way she is smiling when she is walking past him towards her friend Charlotte Lucas. Elizabeth almost appears to be on the verge of bursting into laughter, and she actually starts laughing when she tells Charlotte what she just overheard. Although the viewers cannot hear what Elizabeth says, it is easy for them to deduce what is going on. When she is talking to Charlotte, she settles score with Darcy by way of telling looks, making it very clear that she is talking about him and, in all likelihood, making fun of him, and at the same time implicitly stressing that she will not be intimidated by his demeanour, which in turn attracts Darcy's attention. While Elizabeth's body language indicates growing amusement in this scene, Darcy's face, which is presented by the camera zooming in on him, suggests increasing embarrassment and unease, as he comes to realise that he has been overheard and is now even being laughed at. The protagonists' emotions in this crucial scene are presented almost exclusively by visual strategies, by the camera carefully tracking subtle changes of body language and in particular of facial expressions by means of close-ups. The depiction of the body language in this vital scene suggests that Elizabeth refuses to be humbled by the negative assessment of her looks; she thus shows a certain amount of independence of beauty ideals.

The most recent film based on *Pride and Prejudice* also relies very much on visual means to portray the two central characters' emotions during their first encounter; yet here the dialogue also expresses their feelings. This is in particular true for those segments of dialogue that are not taken over from the novel. The first encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy again features Darcy's famous line about Elizabeth being 'tolerable'. Yet the scene departs from the literary text as far as Elizabeth's behaviour is concerned. In this audiovisual version it is not Bingley who suggests to Darcy that he might dance with Elizabeth. Instead, the heroine addresses Darcy herself, asking him: "Do you dance, Mr Darcy?" When he replies quite bluntly "Not if I can help it" her facial expression indicates clearly that she feels slighted. It is some time after Elizabeth's question, which would certainly have been regarded as a breach of decorum in Austen's times, that she hears Darcy describe her as 'not handsome enough to tempt him'. The fact that Elizabeth tells her friend Charlotte she "wouldn't dance with him for all of Derbyshire" suggests that her pride has been wounded by his words. Moreover, in contrast to the novel as well as the BBC miniseries and *Bridget Jones's*

*Diary*, the heroine in this version makes absolutely sure that Darcy realises that his disparaging comment on her appearance has been overheard by her: She picks up his description of her being ‘tolerable’ when she points out that she considers dancing ‘the food of love’, even if one’s partner happens to be ‘barely tolerable’. In this scene Elizabeth has the last word; her triumphant look as she is proudly walking away from Darcy, while “the camera [is] focus[ing] exclusively on Elizabeth and [is] blur[ring] the other figures in the shot”,<sup>20</sup> additionally establish her as a strong, even bold character. The BBC version transports essentially the same message but uses arguably more subtle, visual means, and one could even claim that the portrayal of Elizabeth’s strength and independence of spirit in the 1995 version is enhanced by her *not* feeling the need to have the last word.

In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, the female protagonist is introduced to Mark Darcy by her mother, who tries to pair her off with the wealthy and successful lawyer. Even more than in the BBC version, the camera adopts the heroine’s perspective, thus inviting the viewers to identify with the female protagonist. At first Bridget sees only Mark’s back, since he is talking to someone else while she is walking towards him. Both the visual track and the soundtrack from this point on privilege Bridget’s point of view: in addition to seeing what Bridget sees, the viewers are granted insight into her thoughts, which are presented by means of a voice-over commenting on her mother’s matchmaking activities, but also expressing Bridget’s interest in finding a boyfriend: “Whew. Ding-dong. Maybe this time Mum had got it right. . . . Maybe this was the mysterious ‘Mr Right’ I’ve been waiting my whole life to meet.” When Mark turns around, both the use of slow motion and the music accompanying the visual track prepare the viewers for a romantic moment. Yet, after a very brief close-up of Mark’s face, the camera moves downward, revealing the somewhat childish reindeer jumper he is wearing. This camera movement, which apparently corresponds to what Bridget is seeing, is accompanied by another voice-over commentary, in which Bridget concludes her previous speculations about Mark potentially being ‘Mr Right’ with a laconic “Maybe – not”. Thus, in contrast to *Pride and Prejudice*, it is in this case the female protagonist who first criticises the other’s appearance. Even if this criticism is only revealed to the viewers, it still serves to privilege the female point of view and to stress female agency in romantic matters.

Nevertheless the scene also translates the female protagonist’s experience of being criticised as being not attractive enough to ‘deserve’ the hero’s interest into a contemporary setting. When Bridget makes an awkward attempt to strike up a conversation with Mark, his appalled reaction to what she is saying makes

20 ALLWOOD, Sarah. “‘What are men to rocks and mountains?’ Romanticism in Joe Wright’s *Pride and Prejudice*.” In: *Persuasions On-Line* 27,2 (2007): no pagination.

her feel that she is acting foolishly, which clearly causes her to get increasingly nervous. Soon he even leaves her standing on her own and a little later she overhears Mark saying to his mother: “Mother, I don’t need a blind date, particularly not with some verbally incontinent spinster, who smokes like a chimney, drinks like a fish and dresses like her mother.” Bridget reacts to this unflattering assessment of her shortcomings with a somewhat helpless effort to save her dignity, trying to hide her evident mortification by forced cheerfulness and a banal reference to the buffet: “Yummy ... turkey curry, my favourite.” That Bridget is really hurt by Mark’s criticism, despite the fact that she does not find him particularly attractive, is stressed by her voice-over, which summarises the bleak prospects she sees for her life:

And that was it. Right there. Right there. That was the moment. I suddenly realised that unless something changed soon I was going to live a life where my major relationship was with a bottle of wine. And I’d finally die, fat and alone, and be found three weeks later half-eaten by Alsatians.

Obviously Bridget’s devastating assessment of her current situation is a far cry from Elizabeth’s proud reaction to Darcy’s insult. While Elizabeth refuses to be humbled by Darcy’s assessment of her appearance, Bridget is mortified by her experience, which suggests that she is far more vulnerable than her nineteenth-century counterpart. Admittedly, in contrast to Elizabeth, Bridget wears a dress which she herself refers to as “a carpet”, and her attempt at small talk is a miserable failure. Thus, despite the fact that the scene at first seems to stress female agency in romantic matters, Bridget ultimately appears to lack the self-confidence which is characteristic of Elizabeth’s behaviour when she first meets Darcy.

In *Bride and Prejudice*, where the protagonists first meet at a wedding in Amritsar, the initial antagonism between the hero and the heroine appears to be relatively one-sided from the beginning. The American businessman William Darcy does not slight Lalita on account of her appearance, but, on the contrary, seems to find her very attractive right from the start, as his admiring looks suggest. Still, Lalita is clearly annoyed by what Will says about India and Indian women and refuses being categorised according to stereotypical notions. She interprets his comments on Indian women as an expression of an American neo-colonialist attitude and hesitates neither to accuse him openly of being arrogant nor to show him that she dislikes him: “Americans think that they have the answers to everything – including marriage. Pretty arrogant considering that they have the highest divorce rate in the world.” Thus, in this particular retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*, the cultural differences between the protagonists seem to constitute the principal obstacle in the romance. The heroine is allowed to utter her criticism of Darcy even more directly than in the 2005 version of *Pride and*

*Prejudice* – a strategy that clearly emphasises the protagonist’s self-confidence and female agency.

## VI. ‘Fleshing out’ the male protagonist – reversing the gaze

Jane Austen is famous for her lively and witty dialogues, and – true to Austen’s novel – the dialogues between the hero and the heroine also play a crucial role in the unfolding romance between Darcy and Elizabeth/Bridget/Lalita in the various audiovisual adaptations. Nevertheless the depiction of the (increasing) physical attraction also contributes to the romance plot, and audiovisual media of course provide ideal possibilities for portraying exactly this aspect of the romance. As was pointed out above, one of the characteristics of the recent audiovisual adaptations of Austen’s classic is the tendency to ‘flesh out’ the male protagonist. This visual strategy, as will be shown in the following, privileges the female gaze. Thus, it can actually be read as a reversal of the scene depicting the first encounter between the hero and the heroine, where the female protagonist is predominantly turned into an object of the hero’s gaze, being openly assessed by him in terms of her attractiveness (or lack thereof).

In Andrew Davies’s audiovisual adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Darcy is repeatedly shown in a manner that seems to privilege the female gaze: “*Pride and Prejudice* [...] is unashamed about appealing to women – and in particular about fetishizing and framing Darcy and offering him up to the female gaze”.<sup>21</sup> Lisa Hopkins even argues that “[t]he phenomenal success of *Pride and Prejudice* [...] is undoubtedly attributable in large part to the intense enthusiasm with which Firth’s portrayal of Mr. Darcy was received.”<sup>22</sup> When the hero and heroine meet for the first time Darcy is repeatedly shown from Elizabeth’s perspective (for instance by over-the-shoulder shots), as was pointed out above, although the viewers are not necessarily led to assume that this visual strategy is indicative of interest on the part of the heroine. When they meet again, at another country dance, it becomes clear that Darcy is interested in Elizabeth, since he keeps looking at her, as Charlotte Lucas notices: “Mr Darcy looks at you a great deal, Lizzy.” Yet while the hero is looking at the heroine, he simultaneously becomes the object of the viewers’ gaze. In the course of the second ball scene, his facial expression suggests that his feelings for Elizabeth have changed. In later scenes, his intense, ‘meaningful’ gaze increasingly makes it clear to the viewers that he has fallen in love with Elizabeth and while he is gazing at Elizabeth he repeatedly becomes the object of the viewers’ gaze in turn. The ‘fleshing out’ of Mr Darcy in

21 HOPKINS. “Mr. Darcy’s Body: Privileging the Female Gaze.” 112.

22 HOPKINS. “Mr. Darcy’s Body: Privileging the Female Gaze.” 112.

Davies's *Pride and Prejudice* is in particular achieved in a few scenes which are not based on the novel, including a scene where he is shown getting out of a bathtub and a scene where he is fencing.

The most famous among the scenes providing “‘extra’ Darcy in comparison to the novel”<sup>23</sup> is presumably the ‘wet shirt scene’, in which he is shown diving into a lake and walking towards his house wearing his wet clothes (a white shirt and tight trousers). According to Devoney Looser, this scene figured prominently in “the flurry of ‘Darcy Parties’ thrown in the UK in the summer of 1996 (in which groups of women got together to play and replay their videotapes of Colin Firth diving into the lake [...])”.<sup>24</sup> In Fielding’s novels, Bridget and her friends are shown to love this particular scene. In the audiovisual adaptation of Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* there is an indirect reference to the ‘wet shirt scene’, but here it is Daniel Cleaver (the counterpart of Wickham) and not Darcy who is turned into the object of the female gaze. During their mini-break Bridget and Daniel go rowing and Daniel, clowning around, loses his balance and falls into the lake. When Daniel emerges from the water he is totally wet, but he still wears his sunglasses, holds a can of beer in his hand and has a bent cigarette in his mouth. In other words, Daniel’s appearance correlates with his ‘bad boy’ image. While Davies seeks to show Darcy as a more passionate character, Mark Darcy in *Bridget Jones* appears relatively stiff and conservative, especially in comparison to womanizer Daniel. After having worn a reindeer jumper at the beginning of the movie, he is shown to wear shirt and tie in many of the following scenes, and his facial expression does not suggest a particularly passionate disposition. It is only in the final scenes of the movie that he ceases to appear uptight, as will be shown below. Similar to *Bridget Jones*, *Bride and Prejudice* does not present Darcy as physically attractive for Lalita. Although he is also ‘fleshed out’ in several scenes, this does not have any impact on her. In one scene, Lalita is lying near a pool with William Darcy and Kiran, Balraj’s sister. Darcy is not wearing a shirt, but his well-built body utterly fails to impress her; in fact, she does not even seem to notice it. He is later presented as a jogger on a beach, and whereas the viewer can see his sportive body, this is hidden from Lalita. The female (or rather Lalita’s) gaze in *Bride and Prejudice* is directed at Darcy’s rival, for example in a scene that seems to constitute an echo of the ‘wet shirt scene’, namely the first scene featuring Wickham. Here the latter accidentally meets Lalita on a beach, wearing only (wet) trousers and no shirt. Both *Bridget Jones*

23 STEWART-BEER, Catherine. “Style over Substance? *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) Proves itself a Film for our Time.” In: *Persuasions On-Line* 27,2 (2007): no pagination.

24 LOOSER, Devoney. “Feminist Implications of the Silver Screen Austen.” In: Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (eds.). *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001 [1998]. 159–76. 160.

and *Bride and Prejudice* thus predominantly expose the ‘bad boy’ to the female gaze rather than focussing on ‘fleshing out’ the hero.

In the most recent filmic version of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Darcy, portrayed by actor Matthew Macfadyen, for most of the film is not ‘fleshed out’ in the manner of the BBC version, either, and consequently tends to appear relatively stiff and uptight. The depiction of his behaviour and appearance changes in the two scenes when he declares his love for Elizabeth, however. The first proposal scene is reminiscent of the ‘wet shirt scene’, since Darcy has just been drenched by heavy rain when he proposes to Elizabeth (and is turned down by her): “For the first time in the film, Darcy’s physical appearance during the first proposal scene suggests that he is more than a stiff upright gentleman”,<sup>25</sup> as Sarah Ailwood argues, and a “new understanding of Darcy as a man of flesh and blood and, above all, passionate feeling”<sup>26</sup> is established. But it is only in one of the last scenes of the film, which will be discussed below, that he is really ‘fleshed out’ to appear more passionate than Austen’s hero does in the literary text: when he proposes again to Elizabeth, both his words and his facial expression suggest that he is after all a passionate character.

## VII. The happy ending

The ‘happy ending’ constitutes one of the quintessential ingredients of the classical romance, and Jane Austen’s novels invariably show the lovers happily united after having overcome all obstacles in the course of the romance plot. Nevertheless, the endings of Austen’s novels are likely to disappoint today’s readers because there are typically neither fervent declarations of love nor passionate kisses. Having followed the development of the romance plot, the readers may regard the happy ending almost as an anticlimax. The recent adaptations of Austen’s novels typically seek to remedy this ‘shortcoming’ by inserting a physical display of emotions, thus paying tribute to the viewers’ expectations.

Davies’s BBC miniseries stays very close to Austen’s novel with respect to the way the happy ending is presented: the two main characters admit their feelings in a dialogue that is taken over almost word for word from the novel. This scene may seem comparatively unromantic, exhibiting “a declaration rather lacking in the language of passionate feeling”.<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth and Darcy are walking next to each other, but they do not touch, kiss, gaze into each other’s eyes or offer other

25 AILWOOD. “What are men to rocks and mountains?”

26 AILWOOD. “What are men to rocks and mountains?”

27 HOPKINS. “Mr. Darcy’s Body: Privileging the Female Gaze.” 119.

obvious tokens of affection. In fact, they hardly even look at each other. Instead, subtle changes in the characters' facial expressions and in their voices serve to portray their emotions. This is a kind of 'emotional understatement' that echoes Austen's approach to depicting the happy ending. In the miniseries the long-awaited kiss occurs only *after* the wedding ceremony – in another scene that has been added by Davies. The scene shows the newly married couple kissing while they are being driven away after the wedding ceremony in a horse-drawn carriage. Given the fact that this particular audiovisual adaptation has sought to 'flesh out' the male protagonist up to this point, the ending and even the kiss may perhaps be unexpectedly chaste and devoid of passion; yet the final scenes once more emphasise the strategy of relying on a depiction of facial expressions in order to convey the characters' feelings and thoughts, which is characteristic of this audiovisual adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* in general.

Joe Wright's version of *Pride and Prejudice* adopts an entirely different approach to visualising the happy ending, departing quite radically from Austen's novel. Here, the viewer is confronted with a scene that is full of romantic clichés and that "provides the most explicit declaration of love of any adaptation of the novel – including *Bridget Jones's Diary*":<sup>28</sup> Darcy and Elizabeth accidentally meet in the fields near Elizabeth's home early in the morning, while the sun is just rising and birds are singing. Darcy walks towards Elizabeth "with his shirt half open and coat flaring behind him".<sup>29</sup> In contrast to the depiction of the declaration of love in both the novel and the miniseries, there is nobody else around, which allows Elizabeth and Darcy to express their emotions openly: "That neither Darcy nor Elizabeth is properly dressed and that this meeting would be socially considered as clandestine reinforce the fact that their relationship has been negotiated exclusively on their terms, largely in separation from social practices."<sup>30</sup> While they are talking about their love they are looking at each other, and Elizabeth kisses Darcy's hand. The scene shows Elizabeth and Darcy standing close to each other, bathed in the light of the morning sun, their foreheads touching lightly, and "the sun rises between them as they almost kiss".<sup>31</sup> To enhance the romantic quality of the scene it is accompanied by piano and string music. This version of *Pride and Prejudice* actually has two different endings – one that was shown in cinemas in Europe and one that was shown to audiences in the United States. In the American version the final scene shows Darcy and Elizabeth, apparently newly-weds, sitting on a balcony, talking about how much they love each other. This ending, which also shows the couple kissing

28 CAMDEN. "Sex and the Scullery."

29 CAMDEN. "Sex and the Scullery."

30 ALLWOOD. "What are men to rocks and mountains?"

31 CAMDEN. "Sex and the Scullery."

passionately, corresponds to romantic clichés even more than the scene described above – and departs in the most radical fashion from the understatement characteristic of Austen’s happy endings.

*Bride and Prejudice* likewise presents a happy ending that relies very much on romantic clichés. Here Darcy and Lalita meet again at Balraj’s wedding with Lalita’s sister Jaya. When the wedding guests arrive Lalita is obviously looking for Darcy, whom she at first cannot spot. Finally she sees that Darcy has joined a group of Indian musicians and is playing a drum – a scene that also indicates that Darcy now appreciates Indian customs. Lalita, who is very happy to see Darcy, walks towards him; they smile at each other and fall into each other’s arms. Beyond echoing romantic clichés, the scene also suggests that Darcy has overcome his initial reservations concerning Indian traditions and customs, one of the major obstacles in the romance.

Although *Bridget Jones’s Diary* does not show the protagonists’ wedding, it also contains a very romantic scene in which Bridget and Mark finally get together. The romantic elements in this scene are mingled with comic ones, though. In accordance with the conventions of the romantic comedy, the happy ending is once more postponed due to several obstacles. Mark, who seemed to have left England for good and even appeared to be on the point of marrying another woman, returns unexpectedly, catching Bridget just as she is about to leave for a weekend in Paris with her friends Shazzer, Jude and Tom. When Mark tries to kiss Bridget, her friends, who are watching them from a car, start cheering and honking loudly. This causes Mark and Bridget to postpone the kiss until they are inside Bridget’s apartment. Here, Bridget again suspends the kiss, because she wants to put on sexy underwear in preparation for the ‘big moment’ of having sex with Mark. While Mark is waiting for her, however, he starts reading Bridget’s diary and is confronted with the extremely unflattering comments Bridget wrote down about him when she first got to know him. Looking less than pleased with what he is reading, Mark hastily leaves the apartment. When Bridget discovers why Mark has left, she impulsively decides to run after him, wearing nothing but her underwear, sneakers and a cardigan she grabs on her way out. This scene reveals Bridget’s despair, but it is also another comic moment of the film. Just when Bridget begins to worry that she will not find Mark, he comes out of a shop, where he has bought her a new diary. He gives the diary to her, saying that he hopes she will make ‘a new start’. Then, at last, Mark kisses her passionately. In this scene Mark appears decidedly less uptight than in most of the preceding scenes and is definitely ‘fleshed out’.

## VIII. Conclusion

The recent audiovisual adaptations of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* prove the novel's lasting popularity as well as its status as a prototypical romance. In fact, it has been argued that the audiovisual versions tend to stress the romance plot at the expense of other elements of the literary text, such as the depiction of friendship, which also plays an important role in Austen's novels. Gaby Allrath also claims that the film based on *Bridget Jones's Diary* "seriously reduces the importance of Bridget's friends, thereby foregrounding the romance plot".<sup>32</sup> While the different audiovisual versions of the love story between Darcy and Elizabeth/Bridget/Lalita pick up moments that are crucial to the development of the romance plot as it is presented in the novel, they still provide interpretations of the characters and their gender roles which are clearly informed by current gender debates. The films for instance use visual strategies and/or the dialogue to make the male protagonist appear more passionate and more attractive and to enhance the agency of the female protagonist in romantic matters. Ultimately, however, the depiction of the female protagonist in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* seems to provide a very good starting point for portraying a strong woman whom modern viewers can like or even identify with: "Her bold self-determination ultimately secures her an intellectually equal partnership, and it is this privileging of the personal over the social, Austen's charting the psychology of two young people falling in love, which has ensured the novel's enduring popularity."<sup>33</sup> The lasting popularity of Elizabeth Bennet is also reflected in the recent semi-biographical movie about Jane Austen, *Becoming Jane*, which has clearly been inspired by *Pride and Prejudice* and suggests that Elizabeth Bennet can be seen as Jane Austen's alter ego. *Miss Austen Regrets* (by the BBC), however, shows Jane Austen informing her niece "My darling girl, this is the real world. The only way to get a man like Mr Darcy is to make him up", thus classifying the romance as the product of wish fulfilment. The idea that the interest in the romance and in *Pride and Prejudice* in particular is generated by wish fulfilment is celebrated most explicitly in what is to date the most recent audiovisual retelling of Austen's novel, namely the TV miniseries *Lost in Austen*, in which protagonist Amanda Price swaps London at the beginning of the twenty-first century for the world of Elizabeth Bennet and, despite the predictable initial dislike, ends up falling in love with Mr Darcy. Like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Lost in Austen* also pays tribute to the fascination with Mr Darcy and with

32 ALLRATH, Gaby. (En)Gendering Unreliable Narration: A Feminist-Narratological Theory and Analysis of Unreliability in Contemporary Women's Novels. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2005. 201, n.3.

33 STEWART-BEER. "Style over Substance?"

Colin Firth as Mr Darcy, since there are several references to Firth's portrayal of Darcy and an explicit reference to the 'wet shirt scene'. The miniseries thus once more proves that for many people today the image of *Pride and Prejudice* is not just dependent on the literary text, but also on its audiovisual adaptations, including their reinterpretation of gender roles.

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## Ways of Reclaiming Masculinity: Reactions to the ‘Crisis of the White Man’ in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia*, Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* and David Fincher’s *Fight Club*

### I. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Second Women’s Movement and the emancipation movement of the black as well as the homosexual community “the decentering of white masculinity and the parallel rise of identity politics”<sup>1</sup> have been addressed in a number of literary and filmic narratives. The depiction of white heterosexual men’s struggle with challenges of traditional concepts of masculinity has increasingly made its way into arts and popular culture. Sally Robinson claims that this struggle in fact constitutes a “master narrative of [masculine] identity politics”, which has been recreated again and again since it emerged in “post-sixties American culture”.<sup>2</sup> Drawing upon some of the ideas developed by Robinson in her study of literary narratives that address the crisis of white heterosexual men, this article will focus on three American films (all released in the year 1999) which stage this crisis with a range of audiovisual means.<sup>3</sup> Paul Thomas Anderson’s *Magnolia*, Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty*, and David Fincher’s *Fight Club* depict the attempts of their male protagonists to cope with their respective personal crisis within a society that challenges traditional concepts of masculinity. By confronting the viewer with rather drastic reactions to the supposed insecurity regarding masculinity, such as Lester Burnham’s attempts to recover his youth (*American Beauty*), Tyler Durden’s provocative masochism (*Fight Club*), and Frank T.J. Mackey’s absurd masquerade (*Mag-*

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1 ROBINSON, Sally. *Marked Men. White Masculinity in Crisis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. 4.

2 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 2.

3 Although ROBINSON’s study includes a discussion of three films – John Boorman’s adaptation of *Deliverance* (1972), Barbra Streisand’s adaptation of *The Prince of Tides* (USA, 1991), and Peter Weir’s *Dead Poets Society* (USA, 1989) – her analysis focuses on novels by John Updike (the *Rabbit*-series), John Irving (*The Water Method Man*, 1972; *The World According to Garp*, 1978), Philip Roth (*My Life as a Man*, 1974), Stephen King (*Misery*, 1987), James Dickey (*Deliverance*, 1970), Pat Conroy (*The Prince of Tides*, 1986), and Michael Crichton (*Disclosure*, 1993).

*nolia*), the three films contribute to the cultural discourse of a ‘wounded masculinity’. In my paper I will explore the distinct ways in which ‘male distress’ is staged and articulated in these films by means of media-specific ways of representation, taking into consideration that “[a]nnouncements of crisis are inseparable from the crisis itself, as the rhetoric of crisis performs the cultural work of centering attention on dominant masculinity”.<sup>4</sup>

One of the factors playing a crucial role in the filmic depiction of the ‘crisis of the white man’ is language, the ‘rhetoric of crisis’ which represents and simultaneously constructs and perpetuates the crisis. The significance of language manifests itself in particular in the respective protagonists’ recurring use of rhetorical strategies as an instrument of empowerment and as a means of articulating a feeling of being victimised and marginalised. Linguistic strategies also play a key role in the social phenomenon of male ‘grouping’, the phenomenon of men sharing their experiences in order to come to terms with a situation they perceive as being problematic. ‘Grouping’ is especially prominent in *Magnolia* and *Fight Club*, whereas the crisis experienced by the protagonist of *American Beauty* is increased by the very lack of this type of male bonding. According to Robinson, ‘grouping’ can serve three purposes within the context of striving for a redefinition of masculinity: “heal[ing] wounded white masculinity”, “re-masculiniz[ing] America” and “re-imagin[ing] the dominant meanings of white masculinity”.<sup>5</sup> These functions can also be attributed to the depiction of the phenomenon of ‘grouping’ in *Magnolia* and *Fight Club*, as will be shown below.

One of the striking similarities between *Magnolia*, *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* is the exaggerated depiction of the protagonists’ confusion concerning the male gender role. The films address both individual and social challenges resulting from post-liberationist changes. *Magnolia* juxtaposes a number of episodes telling the viewers (partially intersecting) stories about what people living in the same city experience on one day. One of these episodes focuses on Frank T.J. Mackey (Tom Cruise), a self-styled ‘sex guru’, who hosts popular dating seminars for men. It is already the very idea of such dating seminars that broaches the issue of gender confusion and male frustration in the episode featuring Mackey. The protagonist of *Fight Club* (Edward Norton), who remains anonymous throughout the film, displays symptoms of an identity crisis, which culminates in a split personality. The protagonist, who is shown to be in a state of rebellion against society’s value system, is unable to recognise his personality disorder, however. The fact that Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is not another person but merely a visualisation of the protagonist’s alter ego is only revealed at the

4 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 11.

5 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 11.

very end of the movie. Tyler Durden represents the strong, aggressive and stereotypically virile aspects of the protagonist's personality; in other words, those traits that the protagonist has learnt to suppress most of the time. *American Beauty* depicts the midlife crisis of forty-something Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) and the impact this midlife crisis has on his marriage to Carolyn as well as on his relationship to his daughter Jane and her best friend Angela. With its focus on a middle-aged man *American Beauty* contributes another important facet to the scrutiny of the alleged crises of the white man in contemporary films.

## II. Hyper-Masculinity as Masquerade: *Magnolia*

"Respect the cock and tame the cunt!"  
(Frank T.J. Mackey, *Magnolia*)

Frank T.J. Mackey's behaviour and in particular the aggressive dating strategy propagated by him, which is encapsulated in the misogynist formula 'Seduce and Destroy', can be regarded as a way of trying to cope with the sense of disorientation that some heterosexual white men allegedly suffer from. The film shows young white men flocking to Mackey's workshops. They seem to be hanging on his lips, eager for every word uttered by the self-declared sex-priest as he is lecturing on his idea of 'getting' a woman and controlling her. Gaining control over women is Mackey's solution to all sorts of problems and insufficiencies. Thus, for Mackey the key to reversing the perceived loss of masculine power is a return to outdated gender roles. A case in point is the scene in which one of the participants in Mackey's workshop talks about his unrequited love for a woman called Denise; the experience of sharing this feeling with the group of men is followed by a ritual of collectively damning the woman (with slogans such as "Denise, the beast", "Denise, the piece"). The participant's subsequent plan to change his attitude reflects the threefold outcome of 'grouping' outlined by Robinson, namely the interrelated processes of healing wounds, of re-masculinisation, and of re-imagining masculinity.

Mackey's performance – on stage during the workshop, in the commercials for his seminars and in an interview – is crucial for the ways of reclaiming masculinity depicted in *Magnolia*.<sup>6</sup> The dramatic nature of the performance is enhanced by the use of diegetic music: Mackey enters the stage accompanied by the impressive piece "Also sprach Zarathustra" ("Thus spoke Zarathustra") by

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<sup>6</sup> The DVD offers extra footage, including Mackey's TV commercial and an extended version of his seminar.

Richard Strauss.<sup>7</sup> Both Mackey's appearance (e.g. his black leather vest and leather bracelet) and his movements evoke stereotypical notions of virility. His speeches are consistently forceful and polarizing, relying on a very offensive, misogynist language.<sup>8</sup> Whenever Mackey is preaching his neo-patriarchal gospel,<sup>9</sup> he argues that his programme is "not just about digging up chicks and digging your cock. It is about finding out what you can be in this world. Defining it, controlling it, and saying: I will take what is mine." In Mackey's live show, his interview, his hotline ("1-877-TAME-HER") and his TV spots he re-invents himself as a 'sex guru', bombarding his audience with aggressive and catchy slogans ("We are men!"; "I'm the one in charge! – I'm the one, who says yes, no, now, here!"; "It's what you take!"). The 'grouping' presented in *Magnolia* thus seems to be based on a process of verbally reducing women to the status of objects ("females", "chick friends lying around", "bush", "pussies"). In addition to what he says, his body language on stage, most obviously the movements suggesting copulation, further expresses that he regards his notion of aggressive, egocentric sexuality as the key to reclaiming masculinity. Yet in the course of the story the psychological reasons for this hyper-masculine stance are explored, and ultimately Mackey's role as 'sex guru' turns out to be merely a masquerade.

After having been exposed to the bizarre hyper-masculine image created by Mackey, the viewer witnesses its rapid collapse. The fragile nature of his construction of masculinity is emphasised by the fact that the destruction of this image of hyper-masculinity is completed in a single day, while it had taken Mackey years to perfect his image as a self-proclaimed role model for 'lost men'. A single interview and the events shortly afterwards undermine the identity of the man who up to this point was shown as promoting himself relentlessly as an icon of virile strength and willpower. The intelligent and attractive African-American journalist Gwenovier quite effortlessly strips down his public image layer by layer. She reveals a feeling of hatred and loss which has shaped Mackey's personality and which has informed his public persona. Gwenovier discloses that Mackey's mother Lily, whom he claims to have been supportive, actually died when he was still young, while Mackey's supposedly dead father is none other than the rich and powerful media mogul Earl Partridge, who left his wife

7 This musical piece has been made famous by the soundtrack of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (USA/GB 1968).

8 Cf.: "... me and my brothers, we'd like to celebrate. And on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May we celebrate B-Day and come June, oho baby, it is the lick my spoon, come August we like to celebrate Saint-Suck-My-Big-Fat-Fucking-Sausage. I set goals to myself ..."

9 In the manner of a preacher, Mackey declares that he will "save" those who are open to his message and methods, that he will "enlighten" them, that he will "send [them] off into the now not so unknown future". To express his determination, he over and over makes use of martial language that is also strongly sexualised, e.g. "I have my lasers, I have my tasers, I have my ICBM's, I have my bazookas, I have my jets pointed right at you!"

and son, refusing to accept any responsibility as husband and father. As a consequence, Partridge has become both an enemy and a role model for Mackey. Desperately trying to cope with the hatred he feels for his father and with the loss of his mother he has turned himself into an American self-made man whom men adore and women try to bring down. After these revelations, the viewers are invited to conclude that Mackey's cherished maxim that trying to cope with the past is a waste of time<sup>10</sup> results from a denial of his own troubled past. Although Gwenovier actually expresses a feeling of empathy with Mackey, she fulfils her task as an investigative journalist unrelentingly. In the course of the interview, Mackey has to give up the persona of the eloquent entertainer and quintessential embodiment of the 'true rags to riches story' and begins to resemble a defiant boy. He finally refuses to answer the journalist's questions, being thus literally silenced by the female interviewer. Once the interview is over, he attacks Gwenovier verbally and physically, in this way expressing the crisis brought about by the experience. The crisis is intensified when, right after the interview, Mackey receives a phone call informing him that his father is dying. Instead of talking to Earl Partridge and confronting his crisis, he decides to go on the stage and to pick up his usual workshop routine, opting again for denial. But after only a few minutes Mackey's mask finally falls to pieces. Having been deprived of his hyper-masculine persona, he is forced to redefine his identity. A first step in this process is fulfilling his father's last wish, who wants to see his son once more before his death. Ultimately, Mackey has to realise that his carefully wrought strategies of denying his identity crisis have utterly failed, and he begins to look for alternative forms of facing his problems.

### III. Sado-Masochism: *Fight Club*

"Self-improvement is masturbation. Self-destruction might be the answer.  
It's only after you lost everything that you're free to do anything."  
(Tyler Durden, *Fight Club*)

Tyler Durden, one of the protagonists of *Fight Club*, resembles Mackey in so far as he also serves as a role model for disillusioned men who lack goals in their life. In contrast to the protagonist of *Magnolia*, who openly blames women for the crisis of masculinity, Tyler directs his anger against society as a whole, focusing in particular on capitalism and consumerism. Like Mackey, Tyler Durden seems to thrive on acting within or in front of a group of men, projecting a feeling of

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<sup>10</sup> "Facing the past is an important way of *not* making progress. This is something I try to tell my men over and over and over. [...] The most useless thing in the world is the one behind me – chapter three."

unity by means of his speeches. The target group of the speeches is essentially the same as in *Magnolia*: young, mostly white men who long for a clear direction and eagerly flock around someone promising to fill this void. At first sight Tyler appears to be the perfect leader: on the one hand, he stresses that he shares the feelings of those who look up to him; on the other hand, he embodies charisma, authority, courage, manliness and sexual potency. Tyler's function as a role model is reinforced by the fact that he acts like a rebel – and gets away with it. In one of his opening addresses at the Fight Club he sums up what he considers to be the dilemma of his generation: “We are the middle children of history. Men with no purpose or place. We have no Great War, no Great Depression. Our great war is a spirit war. Our great depression is our life.” This utterance expresses Tyler's assessment of the current crisis of masculinity as a widespread social phenomenon, which is also apparent in his habitual usage of “conspicuously historical terms”<sup>11</sup> to explain the necessity of Fight Club and its offspring, Project Mayhem. Both projects are supposed to provide their members with a task, a place in history, thus offering the promise of a meaningful existence.<sup>12</sup>

As in *Magnolia*, the question of what defines a ‘real man’ is of great importance in *Fight Club*. This becomes obvious in Tyler's appearance as well as in his way of speaking. Tyler's overt display of masculinity and his attempt to reclaim power are in particular centred on the penis. The penis is *Fight Club*'s “emblem for the text's conception of masculine identity” as well as “the phallic signature of the [...] charismatic and mischievous anti-hero”.<sup>13</sup> The film draws upon phallogocentric images to indicate the vulnerability of masculinity; these range from the realistic to the bizarre, including the self-support group of men suffering from testicular cancer, Tyler's reference to the Bobbitt incident, where a man's penis was cut off by his wife, and the gigantic dildo owned by Marla, the protagonist's lover. Tyler's reaction to the perceived threat to masculinity is to promote phallogocentrism by inserting frames from pornographic films into family movies, by urinating into the soup he serves rich industrials, and by threatening the chief of the police, who wants to take actions against Project Mayhem, with cutting off his testicles.

By inviting frustrated young men to join Fight Club, a place where the body is stylised and combat ritualised, Tyler offers men the chance of redefining their virility. The fights between the members become a spectacle structured by the

11 FRIDAY, Krister. “A Generation of Men without History: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom.” In: *Journal of Postmodern Culture* 13,3 (2003): §21.

12 As FRIDAY states, “it is not simply that contemporary consumer culture has emasculated men, but rather the identity crisis afflicting the (white) male subject should be read as the result of a postmodern ‘present’ bereft of historical distinctiveness or identity” (FRIDAY. “A Generation of Men without History.” §21).

13 FRIDAY. “A Generation of Men without History.” §2.

rules of Fight Club.<sup>14</sup> Violence, in this ritualised form, virtually becomes a substitute religion for the members of Fight Club, with Tyler as their guru. The nexus between religion, fighting and a feeling of being truly alive is expressed in the following comment by the protagonist: "Yes, these are bruises of fight and yes, I'm comfortable with it. I am enlightened." The wounded male body is stylised as an icon of the crisis of masculinity and creates a bond between the members. As soon as Fight Club has been transformed into Project Mayhem, the unity of the men is stressed even more by their identical looks: all wear black clothes and have shaved heads. The huge success of Fight Club and Project Mayhem once more suggests that many men feel the need to do something about their situation.

The spectacle in *Fight Club* is of a "sado-masochistic [manner], enacted through beating [...], during which the male body, marked by the punishment, is eroticised through stripping".<sup>15</sup> Remarks such as "Pitt has never been as exquisite as with broken nose and blood streaming down his cut body"<sup>16</sup> reveal that the appeal of the male body in this particular film is also due to actor Brad Pitt's fame as a male sex symbol. Throughout the film there are scenes presenting the spectacle of the wounded male body that have clearly sadistic and masochistic overtones. These scenes project an aesthetics of masochism that exposes white masculinity "as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body, [...] that [...] draws not only on the persuasive force of corporeal pain, but also on an identity politics of the dominant".<sup>17</sup>

In one of these scenes Tyler uses what appears to be masochistic behaviour as a strategy of gaining the upper hand: Being provoked by the owner of the bar in whose basement Fight Club meets regularly, Tyler accepts the blows dealt by his opponent passively, refusing to fight back and instead welcoming the pain by sighing, groaning and laughing. The intensity of the physical violence tolerated by Tyler without flinching is further accentuated by blood gushing down Tyler's body.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to this scene, the fight between the protagonist and 'the

14 Cf. NEALE, Steve. "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema." In: Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.). *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993 [1983]. 9–22.

15 HARK, Ina Rae. "Animals or Romans: Looking at Masculinity in *Spartacus*." In: Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (eds.). *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993 [1983]. 151–72. 152.

16 TAUBIN, Amy. "So good it hurts." In: *Sight & Sound* 103 (1999): 16–18. 17.

17 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 20.

18 For a detailed analysis of this scene as negotiating sadism, masochism and transgression, see MAX, Stephan. *Faust trifft Auge: Mythologie und Ästhetik des amerikanischen Boxfilms*. Bielefeld: transcript, 2004. 225–31. Apart from this scene, there are further references to masochistic behaviour: For instance, Tyler sets his mark by burning "the imprint of his lips into Jack's skin with pure lye" (TAUBIN. "So good it hurts." 17) – a ritual all members of Fight Club have to pass as the backs of their hands reveal.

Blonde One' has a sadistic streak. The fight, which leads to the total disfiguration of the Blonde One's face, is explained by the protagonist in an off-hand manner: "I felt like destroying something beautiful." The sadistic act of destruction leaves much to the viewer's imagination as the camera focuses on the aggressor, but the soundtrack provides noises that suggest very clearly what is going on.

The borderline between masochism and sadism becomes blurred in the fights between the protagonist and Tyler. As soon as the viewer realises that the protagonist and Tyler are actually one and the same person, their fights appear in a radically different light: they turn out to be acts of pure auto-aggression.<sup>19</sup> The attempts to reclaim masculinity by means of *Fight Club* or *Project Mayhem* are doomed to fail since the protagonist's auto-aggressive acts ultimately culminate in self-destruction as well as in the destruction of several buildings. The last images the viewer is exposed to are those of the protagonist covered in blood and of skyscrapers caving in, testifying to the effect of *Project Mayhem*.

#### IV. Hedonism: American Beauty

"I'm just an ordinary guy who has nothing to lose!"  
(Lester Burnham, *American Beauty*)

Lester Burnham, the protagonist of *American Beauty*, who also serves as voice-over narrator, resembles the narrator of *Fight Club* in so far as he likewise seems to represent what Robinson calls a "phantom figure",<sup>20</sup> namely the 'average white American man'. Lester, a married man and father in his forties, regards his own existence as totally insignificant and pointless, which causes him to speculate that nobody remembers him: "I would not remember me either". The protagonist is obviously in a midlife crisis, having long given in to the routine of everyday life, but still feeling deprived of the kind of full life he once dreamt of. He refers to himself as a "loser" who feels as if he was "sedated", and his marriage has failed. Moreover, the fact that Lester's disillusioned view of his life is provided retrospectively, from the point of view of the dead protagonist, to be precise, right from the start suggests that the efforts to reclaim his masculinity were doomed to fail, just as those of the protagonists of *Magnolia* and *Fight Club*.

Lester's attempts at changing his life are triggered in particular by his acquaintance with two young people, which initiates a "journey towards re-

19 Cf. KÜHN, Heike. "Verdrängte Wut: *Fight Club* von David Fincher." In: Margit Fröhlich, Reinhard Middel and Karsten Visarius (eds.). *Außer Kontrolle. Wut im Film*. Schüren: Marburg, 2005. 167–79. 174.

20 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 18.

demption, towards remembering who he is".<sup>21</sup> His daughter's friend Angela reawakens Lester's sexual desire, whereas the rebellious behaviour of his neighbours' son Ricky reminds Lester painfully of his own lack of freedom. Inspired by Ricky, whom he considers his "personal hero", Lester decides to quit his job. The protagonist, who used to be inconspicuous at work, blackmails his boss, leaving the office with a big cheque – and uses the money to buy the kind of car he wanted to drive as a teenager, a desperate effort to shape his identity along the lines of his own teenage dreams. He casts off all of his responsibilities and starts working in a low-profile job. Moreover, he tries to pursue a hedonistic lifestyle, for instance by smoking pot, listening to loud rock music, and lusting after his daughter's friend Angela.

Lester's attempts to redefine his self culminate in a preoccupation with his own body and his sexuality. Angela is repeatedly presented as the object of his desire and his gaze, and she seems to reciprocate his advances. After one of many overtures on the part of his daughter's friend, Lester's transformation from a "horny geek boy" into a man who is aware of his desires becomes apparent. Yet when his "seduction of the girl [has been] thwarted by the realisation that she is a virgin",<sup>22</sup> he adopts a paternal role as "he feeds and covers her and uses the opportunity to inquire about the well-being of his daughter".<sup>23</sup> Although Lester ultimately does not have the kind of sexual encounter he dreamt of, the recent developments return the smile onto his face – a smile that does not even disappear after he has been shot. Lester actually achieves his aim only on the very last day of his life. He describes himself as feeling "great" just minutes before he is shot. Thus, his daughter's remark to her boyfriend – "someone really should just put him out of his misery" – at the beginning of *American Beauty* comes true exactly at the moment when Lester has just made his peace with himself.

Lester's efforts to change his sense of his masculine gender identity also involve the conflict with his wife. In one scene, Carolyn wakes up in the middle of the night and realises that Lester, who fantasises about Angela, is masturbating. Not only does the ensuing discussion reveal the sexual frustration felt by both Lester and Carolyn, it is also the first step towards a change regarding the power politics in the Burnham household, since Lester obviously feels encouraged by having for once acted in a defiant manner in the presence of his wife. And even though his 'victories' may appear childish,<sup>24</sup> the verbal battles between Lester

21 KEMP, Philip. "The Nice Man Cometh." In: *Sight & Sound* 105 (2000): 24–26. 25.

22 MCKITTRICK, Casey. "'I laughed and Cringed at the Same Time': Shaping Pedophilic Discourse around *American Beauty* and Happiness." In: *The Velvet Trap* 47 (2001): 3–14. 6.

23 MCKITTRICK. "'I laughed and Cringed at the Same Time.'" 6.

24 "'Lester does some terrible things to the people who are closest to him,' [director Sam] Mendes observes. 'He does things that are irrational and stupid and angry and childish. But somehow he doesn't lose our sympathy. A lot of the ridiculous things he does are set in a very

and Carolyn reveal that Lester's demeanour is not as immature as it may seem at first. The quarrels are not simply about "masculine self-actualization"<sup>25</sup> or about making up for lost ground; they are also about recapturing one's self-esteem as well as the respect of others. Ironically, one of Lester's most triumphant moments is his encounter with Carolyn and her lover Buddy Kane at the drive-in window of Mr. Smiley's, the fast food restaurant where Lester works. Despite the fact that Lester is wearing his work uniform and is in the embarrassing position of having to serve his wife and her lover, he still manages to silence Carolyn by saying: "You don't get to tell me what to do ever again!" Of even greater importance for the redefinition of the protagonist's identity is Lester's shift from remarking "I would not remember me either" when Buddy Kane does not recognise him to observing "something tells me that you won't forget me this time".

In *American Beauty* the presentation of the crisis of masculinity is rendered more complex by juxtaposing the protagonist Lester with other male characters, who represent alternative concepts of masculinity and different strategies of dealing with the crisis. The family next door represents traditional gender roles and gender relations, including the silent housewife, the hyper-masculine, controlling husband and the rebellious son. Lester's neighbour Colonel Frank Fitts represents a conservative notion of masculinity, which is based on an aggressive assertion of patriarchal dominance. This behaviour turns out to be the result of a rigid suppression of his true self. Frank, who at first sight appears to be a prime example of a man and father who thinks in terms of gender norms and 'proper' masculine behaviour, is in fact a homosexual trying to deny his non-normative desire by adopting a hyper-masculine and homophobic stance. This denial has serious repercussions for Frank's relationship to his son. According to Frank's conservative code of masculinity, a true man should not reveal his (softer) feelings; thus, Frank resorts to aggression and violence in attempts to express his love for his sensitive son, who refuses to act in accordance with what his father considers manly and 'normal' behaviour.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast to his father, Ricky Fitts represents a new type of man, who rejects traditional gender concepts, even though or perhaps because he has been exposed to psychological and physical violence exerted by his aggressive father. At one point Ricky was even temporarily committed to a mental institution because his father had found out that his son was taking drugs and behaving aggressively towards other students. At first glance, Ricky seems to have given in to his father's doctrine of "structure and discipline", the keywords continually re-

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careful, complex story structure that creates a bond with the audience.'" (Mendes in KEMP. "The Nice Man Cometh." 25–26.)

25 MCKITTRICK. "I laughed and Cringed at the Same Time." 7.

26 In this context MCKITTRICK even talks about an "unspoken but eroticized father/son dynamics" (MCKITTRICK. "I laughed and Cringed at the Same Time." 8).

peated by his father. Yet Ricky still does as he pleases, sells drugs and smokes pot, while pretending that he earns his money as a waiter. He passes his father's regular drug tests by submitting samples of baby urine.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Ricky lulls his father into a false sense of security by echoing the latter's prejudices even more loudly and in a cruder tone.

The gay couple Jim and Jim, who live in the neighbourhood, constantly confront Frank Fitts with his fears and prejudices concerning homosexuality. Beginning to worry that his son might have "become a cock sucker", Frank repeatedly invades Ricky's privacy, entering the son's room and searching his belongings in order to find evidence for his son's homosexuality. The discovery of Ricky's recordings of Lester working out in the Burnhams' garage as well as ambiguous situations involving his son and his neighbour cause Frank to wonder whether his son might be in love with Lester. Homophobia, in combination with his own, suppressed homosexual desires, make Frank lose control. The scene in which he is waiting for his son in Ricky's dark room constitutes a significant turning point in the relationship between father and son.<sup>28</sup> In this scene Ricky initially sticks to his usual, submissive behaviour and refuses to fight back when he is attacked by his father, but then he pretends to be homosexual, fulfilling his father's fears and finally using the latter's homophobia to free himself from his tyrannical father's influence. Ricky claims that he earns his money as a male prostitute, thus fuelling his father's worst fears: "You're right. I suck dick for money. [...] Two thousand dollars. I'm that good. [...] You should see me fuck. I'm the best piece of ass in three states." Upon hearing this, the father, though still standing in a fighting position, begins to sob, being unable to either speak to his son or hit him. Feeling confused and desperate, Frank tries to overcome his long-standing denial of his own desires by coming out as a homosexual. When his assumption that Lester is homosexual turns out to be wrong, however, this leads to the fatal climax; by killing Lester, supposedly the embodiment of the threat to masculinity he is afraid of, Frank once more attempts to silence his confusion and frustration concerning his sexuality.

27 In BOURDIEU's terms, Ricky Fitts is a wayward son who symbolically destroys his father's 'project' by rejecting his father's way of living (cf. BOURDIEU, Pierre. "Das väterliche Erbe: Probleme der Vater-Sohn-Beziehung." In: Hans Bosse and Vera Kling (eds.). *Männlichkeitsentwürfe: Wandlungen und Widerstände im Geschlechterverhältnis*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus, 2000 [1997]. 83–91. 86). Only the act of rejecting the father's principles can lead to success – because failure (according to the father's definition) constitutes the key to success for the son (cf. *ibid.* 87). The father, who corresponds to a kind of border, has to be transgressed and left behind in order to enable the son to create a life of his own (cf. *ibid.*).

28 Throughout the film, Frank Fitts is often literally left in the dark. Being in the dark, thus, becomes a symbol for dark thoughts and fatal misunderstandings. In general, the contrast between light and darkness and the colour red are visual trademarks of *American Beauty*.

## V. Conclusion

The processes of speaking up, taking action and forming groups were central characteristics of the various liberation movements in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, these processes are recurring elements in the cinematic narratives addressing ‘the white man’s crisis’ analysed in this article. Films about ‘the white man’s crisis’ can be understood as cultural practices which open up a space for the renegotiation of cultural concepts of masculinity. What distinguishes cinematic narratives from their literary counterparts is in particular the emphasis on performance: by depicting dialogues and physical interactions, by staging gazes and corporality films may stress male attempts at redefining their identity by means of performative speech, body language and actions. Challenged cultural concepts of masculinity are thus rendered in a vivid fashion.

As was shown, the central male characters of the films “both resist and welcome the *marking* of their minds and bodies”<sup>29</sup> in order to step out of the invisibility that no longer seems to comfort, let alone privilege them. They defiantly mark themselves by performative speech and actions in order to display their ‘wounded masculinity’. “Exceptionality in Unity” seems to be the credo shared by Frank T.J. Mackey and Tyler Durden, two characters who stress their affinity to other white men in crisis and present the persona they create as a possible strategy for overcoming this crisis. Yet the struggle to stick to the hyper-masculine persona ‘invented’ by Frank T.J. Mackey, Tyler Durden, Frank Fitts and to a certain extent also by Lester Burnham ultimately is doomed to fail. Performances that are attempts to re-masculinise the character’s persona or to re-imagine masculinity turn out to be in vain: re-masculinisation is generally associated with old-fashioned ideals and images of masculinity, which lead to hyper-masculine, irresponsible and, more often than not, misogynist behaviour.<sup>30</sup>

Arguably, Ricky Fitts is the only one who has learnt to cope with ‘the white men’s crisis’ in a successful manner, even if this means accepting that he is considered a freak and an outsider. Indeed, he seems to welcome being marked as an outsider because it offers him more freedom than restrictions. Ricky uses his camera to express his feelings. Similar to the voice-overs and speeches of the other male characters, Ricky’s visual recordings introduce his perspective, and they invite the viewer to adopt Ricky’s point of view. Hence in this film the phenomenon of ‘grouping’ potentially includes the viewers. Lester’s final voice-

29 ROBINSON. *Marked Men*. 4.

30 Cf. HÖSS, Tilman. “Machismo als Gesellschaftskritik: *American Beauty*, *Fight Club*, *The Sea-Wolf*.” In: *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 49,4 (2001): 350–60.

over at the end of *American Beauty* in conjunction with Ricky's perspective<sup>31</sup> exhibits that in spite of everything they have gone through both Lester and Ricky have kept a certain sensitivity as well as the ability to see true beauty in life, even in objects that might not appear to be beautiful at first sight.<sup>32</sup> The link between Ricky and Lester becomes evident once more when Ricky watches the dead but still smiling Lester. The boy's gaze is staged as if he was looking into a mirror – a mirror that shows a way out of 'the white man's dilemma', but that is also reminiscent of the dangers involved in redefining masculinity.

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31 Cf. KEMP. "The Nice Man Cometh." 26.

32 While Lester is remembering his life, there is a shot from the clip Ricky considers the most beautiful thing he ever filmed: the dance of the bag in the wind he observed for fifteen minutes.

- McKITTRICK, Casey. 2001. "‘I laughed and Cringed at the Same Time’: Shaping Pedophilic Discourse around *American Beauty* and Happiness." In: *The Velvet Trap* 47: 3–14.
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## Re-Imagined Bodies and Transgendered Space: Sites for Negotiating Gender in the *Shrek* Movies

### I. 'Gender Trouble' in Far Far Away

DreamWorks' *Shrek* movies, which undoubtedly constitute one of the most successful series of computer-animated full-length films produced in recent years, have not only become popular with international audiences both young and old; the first part also convinced the Academy Award committee and won an Oscar as the best animated feature film in 2001. The movies, which one film critic labelled "Dreamworks' big green cash machine",<sup>1</sup> deal with the adventures of the ogre Shrek, his rescue of the enchanted ogre princess Fiona from the clutches of the cunning Lord Farquaard (*Shrek*, 2001), his visit to his parents-in-law in Far Far Away and his struggle with an evil fairy godmother and her narcissistic son (*Shrek 2*, 2004), as well as his mission to save the successor to the throne of Far Far Away after the death of the king (*Shrek the Third*, 2007). Basically, all three films draw upon the same recipe to entertain their (highly diverse) audiences; i. e. they employ a number of intertextual and intermedial strategies, which range from allusions to contemporary popular culture to the mocking of established fairy-tale conventions. Framing these features by a gripping and action-loaded plot, DreamWorks indeed managed to create three blockbusters that have entertained millions of viewers around the world.

Yet not all reactions to the films have been enthusiastic. Shortly after the release of DreamWorks' full-length animated movie *Shrek 2* in July 2004, for instance, the *Traditional Values Coalition* in Washington, D.C. published a short but unequivocal article concerning the contents of the sequel, in which the ogre and his princess, after their wedding, plan to spend some time with the royal family at the court in Far Far Away. The article harshly denounces the movie as part of a "transgender agenda" which sets out to "deconstruct the biological reality of male and female" and warns parents that *Shrek 2* "is billed as harmless

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1 SAVLOV, Marc. "Shrek the Third."

entertainment but contains subtle sexual messages”.<sup>2</sup> One of these ‘subtle sexual messages’, as the author of the parental warning observes, is encoded in the character of a transgendered bartender,<sup>3</sup> which is considered to be particularly nauseating, as he shows both male and female features – the observation that his “voice is that of talk show host Larry King”<sup>4</sup> seems to add to the critic’s confusion and disgust.

Granted, such a denouncement of the *Shrek* movies as a danger to the American people’s integrity is ideologically biased. Still, what we may infer from it is the fact that the movie, which predominantly received high praise from both critics and fans, may indeed carry ambivalent, perhaps even subversive potential as far as its cinematic configuration of gender roles is concerned. Indeed, *Shrek 2* serves as a typical example of a number of recent full-length computer-animated films that seem to deviate from what one might well call the rather traditional ‘Disneyfied’ stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that have been perpetuated ever since animated full-length movies entered the cinematic landscape in the United States and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

Starting from this assumption, my contribution sets out to explore the various strategies by which conservative concepts of gender, as they have been traditionally promoted by the Disney Corporation (among others), are renegotiated in the *Shrek* movies. My analysis is supposed to reveal that those rather traditional gender roles are, on the one hand, challenged by a range of

2 ANON. “Parents Beware: ‘Shrek 2’ Features Transgenderism and Crossdressing Themes.”

3 My use of the term ‘transgendered’ follows the working definition provided by Cressida J. HEYES, who “use[s] *transgendered* to describe anyone who lives a gender they were not perinatally assigned or that is not publicly recognizable within Western cultures’ binary gender systems” (HEYES, Cressida J. “Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender.” In: *Signs* 28,4 (2003): 1093–120. 1093, original emphasis). Thus, though “transgender is a tricky word to define”, as Jonathan ALEXANDER points out, I am among those who draw on the term as what he calls “a ‘catchall’ category for a range of those who ‘play with’ or ‘transgress’ gender norms, including cross-dressers, gender-fuckers, transvestites, drag kings/queens, and transsexuals” (ALEXANDER, Jonathan. “Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body.” In: *College Composition and Communication* 57,1 (2005): 45–82. 53).

4 ANON. “Parents Beware.” The article also critically deals with the characters of Pinocchio and the ‘gender-confused wolf’ that appear in the *Shrek* movies and will also be at stake in this contribution.

5 On the ‘Disneyfication’ of gender and the establishment of a ‘Disney norm’ of gender (representation), cf. e.g. BELL, Elizabeth. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop. Constructing the Pentimentos of Women’s Animated Bodies.” In: Elizabeth Bell et al. (eds.). *From Mouse to Mermaid. The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 107–24; ZIPES, Jack. “Breaking the Disney Spell.” In: Elizabeth Bell et al. (eds.). *From Mouse to Mermaid. The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. 21–42. Cf. also WASKO, Janet. *Understanding Disney. The Manufacture of Fantasy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001 (as well as the other relevant contributions listed in the bibliography).

alternative concepts outlined in the movies and, on the other hand, still seem to be present in the underlying plot patterns and character constellations of the movies. In order to illustrate the movies' potential to both undermine and perpetuate culturally and – given Disney's enormous impact on a worldwide audience<sup>6</sup> – also medially established gender stereotypes, the better part of my essay will be dedicated to an investigation of a number of characters and scenes from the *Shrek* movies which may well be conceived of as sites for negotiating gender. As the scope of this contribution is limited, I will also limit my argument and essentially concern myself with two of those sites which I find particularly revealing as regards the movies' ambivalence towards traditional gender roles: The first site for negotiating, or rather introducing alternative gender roles is created by the movies' providing room for transgendered characters and activities in a number of their subplots. The second site for negotiation are the movies' main characters, as both their physical (or phenotypical) features and their respective patterns of behaviour appear to deviate from the rather conservative 'Disney-norm' of gender representation and contribute to promoting alternative concepts of masculinity and femininity.<sup>7</sup> After having outlined the movies' subversive potential regarding their (re)configuration of gender, I will reflect upon the question of whether this potential may not, after all, be easily contained and absorbed by mainstream discourses on gender, both considering the polysemic nature<sup>8</sup> of the movies' texts and the institutional and commercial framework full-length computer-animated features are embedded in and shaped by.

## II. Isolated Instances of Transgenderism

One prominent strategy of offering alternative conceptions of gender in the *Shrek* films is the incorporation of transgendered characters and 'gender-confused'<sup>9</sup> fairy-tale creatures into various subplots of the three movies. Of course, one might well argue that it is, first and foremost, the comic potential of such characters achieved by their mocking of generic conventions and established

6 This impact of Disney, as Jack ZIPES observes, particularly manifests itself in the fact that “[i]f children or adults think of the great fairy tales today, be it Snow White, Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella, they will think Walt Disney. Their first and perhaps lasting impressions of these tales and others will have emanated from a Disney film, book, or artifact. Disney managed to gain a cultural stranglehold on the fairy tale” (ZIPES. “Breaking the Disney Spell.” 21).

7 In my contribution, I will focus on the representation of the female protagonist, Fiona.

8 For the notion of 'polysemy', cf. FISKE, John. *Television Culture*. London: Methuen & Co, 1987.

9 The term 'gender-confused', which already implies deviance from an established norm, is actually used by the fairy godmother to describe the wolf-character in the films.

patterns of the fairy-tale discourse that legitimizes their appearance in the films. I would, however, maintain that these characters also bear political and/or ideological implications, as they serve as sites for negotiating traditional gender roles and stereotypes. In doing so, they blur the clear-cut boundary between the male and the female, thus articulating a (potentially) subversive position within the normative discourse of heterosexuality.

We encounter, for example, a wolf who seems to like the grandmother's garments he once put on to trick Little Red Ridinghood. Having been only a minor character in the first and the second parts, this 'gender-confused' wolf has a more prominent role in *Shrek the Third*, in which he takes sides with Fiona and Shrek, being one of their constant companions in their struggle against Prince Charming and his evil fellows. The wolf's female clothes, which, in the fairy tale, served as a camouflage to delude the little girl bringing her grandmother bread and wine, have here become a standard feature of his appearance and reveal him to be a rather harmless and good-natured character. Thus, the cross-dressing tendencies of the 'big bad wolf' – which, if one follows an admittedly subversive reading of *Little Red Ridinghood*, are already laid out in the original tale – are pushed to the extreme in the *Shrek* movies. Here, however, the wolf's 'gender confusion' is not only visualized in order to create a comic effect; by presenting a creature who once embodied stereotypically masculine characteristics, such as cruelty and cold-bloodedness, in an effeminate way the movies also introduce an alternative to the clear-cut heterosexual mainstream conception of gender.

Another character who may well be regarded as subverting the gendered cosmos both of the majority of Disney features and of mainstream U.S. culture is DreamWorks' version of Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio, who appears among a range of traditional fairy-tale creatures and characters framing the main plot of the *Shrek* movies. That the well-known character of Pinocchio indeed bears the potential to serve as a site for negotiating questions of gender identity has long been proven by countless psychoanalytical readings of his story, in which the phallic implications of his growing nose and his intricate relationship to his 'father', which is characterized by the continuous struggle for eventual emancipation, have been discussed again and again.<sup>10</sup> In its own rendering of Pinocchio, however, *Shrek 2* adds a new dimension to the character of the wooden boy, as he is shown to be fond of wearing ladies' underwear during a mission (impossible) initiated by a group of fairy-tale creatures to help Shrek and Princess Fiona. Taking the above-mentioned Freudian innuendoes usually associated with Pinocchio into account, and regarding his ultimate intention of

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10 Cf. e.g. BRODY, Michael. "The Wonderful World of Disney – Its Psychological Appeal." In: *American Imago* 33 (1976): 350–60; cf. also ZIPES. "Towards a Theory of the Fairy-Tale Film and Carlo Collodi and Walt Disney."

becoming a ‘real boy’ in the original story (and in the *Shrek* movies), both the comic and the subversive potential of such a cross-dressing sequence is undoubtedly enhanced. One has to add, however, that Pinocchio’s thong does not appear to be acceptable for the movie’s characters. The young wooden boy is ashamed and vehemently refuses to admit that he feels more comfortable in ladies’ underwear. Moreover, though the discovery of his peculiar habit does not lead to a particularly severe kind of social sanctioning, such as exclusion from the rescuing mission, it still evokes a somewhat humiliating kind of laughter among those who see his underwear. Therefore, though this particular scene may indeed disturb mainstream conceptualizations of gender roles and behaviour, its subversive function appears to be limited since his cross-dressing is presented as a taboo by the movie’s staging of Pinocchio’s embarrassment, his denial as well as his friends’ amusement.

A third character that may be understood as a site for negotiating gender roles is the ugly stepsister, who works as a bartender in a spooky establishment called “The Poison Apple”. As we remember, this character, who indeed shows a number of male features (though s/he is dressed like a woman), was one of the prime targets of criticism in the above-mentioned article published by the *Traditional Values Coalition*, which pointed out that “the movie features a male-to-female transgender (in transition) as an evil bartender. The character has five o’clock shadow, wears a dress and has female breasts. It is clear that he is a she-male.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, what was polemically denounced by the *Coalition* for its potential to ‘delude’ the upright American child into homosexuality might well be regarded as yet another strategy of unmasking the idea of clearly separable spheres of the male and the female as an illusion, “effectively mock[ing] both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity”.<sup>12</sup> By exposing gender as a construct which can indeed take various shapes, the introduction of such characters also does justice to the changes in U.S. society, whose heterogeneous composition is constantly bringing forth new forms of gender transgression. The movies thus amplify an ideological position which, more often than not, remains unheard within the hegemonic and highly normative discourse of heterosexuality.

DreamWorks’ *Shrek the Third* even goes one step further and pushes the transgendered character of the ugly stepsister from the margins of the pixelled world of Far Far Away to its very centre. To be precise, s/he has passed the job at “The Poison Apple” on to another disdained and cross-dressing stepsister and now belongs to Princess Fiona’s closest circle of friends, which otherwise con-

11 In: ANON. “Parents Beware.”

12 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999. 174.

sists of the traditional fairy tale inventory, including Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and Rapunzel, who are characterized by a reviewer as “spoiled, catty suburban-princess types”.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it seems as if these ‘traditional’ princesses have given up their ‘built-in’ pastoral innocence, as they are portrayed as being blatantly superficial and exclusively concerned with their looks.<sup>14</sup> Having entered this royal realm of extravagant beauty, both the female ogre and the transgendered stepsister have given up their ‘camp’ positions and now take rank with those by whom they were formerly discriminated. The fact that they indeed make a good team is indicated by their collective attempt to rescue Shrek from the revengeful Prince Charming, who has taken control of the kingdom and its subjects.<sup>15</sup>

Against this backdrop, it does not seem to be surprising that some of the more conservative reviews of the third part emphasize the deluding potential of the character of the stepsister and polemically point out that “[r]ight in the midst of a warm ‘traditional family’ setting, the film writers place a man dressed as woman in with Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White (the good gals)”.<sup>16</sup> What is interesting about such a comment, however, is its characterization of Shrek’s and Fiona’s living ‘ugly’ ever after as a ‘traditional family’ setting. Though, of course, the inverted commas still hint at the reviewer’s somewhat ironical tone here, such a characterization inevitably leads to the question whether it is not this traditional family setting with its implied gender roles and constellations which lies at the very heart of the *Shrek* movies despite their subversive potential as regards the representation of gender. Yet, before I will take up this thought and discuss the ideological implications and gender politics of the three movies, I consider it helpful to take a closer look at a second site for negotiating gender, i. e. the films’ audiovisual strategies of presenting the body (and the behaviour) of the female protagonist.

13 GREYDANUS, Stephen D. “Shrek the Third (2007).”

14 Nevertheless they still largely seem to conform to their roles as passive and male-dominated beings waiting to be saved by a Prince Charming. It is Fiona who takes a leading part and is able to mobilize their hidden potential as emancipated and aggressive ‘riot grrrrls’, e. g. when they break out of Charming’s prison to help Shrek at the end of the third part. For a closer examination of the traditional Disney heroine, cf. e. g. BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.”

15 One should add that even the character of Charming, who in the third part sets up a conspiracy against the legitimate heir to the throne, is anything but what is generally, or stereotypically, considered straightforwardly masculine. To be precise, his touchy behaviour, his effeminate airs and graces as well as the fact that he wears pink ballet cuffs while rehearsing for a theatre performance turn him into an Adonis-like figure whose gender identity is far far away from being clear-cut. For a discussion of the ‘feminization’ of Farquaard, cf. TAKOLANDER, Maria and David MCCOOEY. “‘You Can’t Say No to the Beauty and the Beast’: Shrek and Ideology.” In: *Explorations into Children’s Literature* 15,1 (2005): 5–14. 18–9.

16 EATON, Fran. “Shrek: A Strange Setting to Promote Transgenderism.”

### III. Re-Imagining the Female ‘Disneyfied’ Protagonist

Hinting at the ideological implications behind any of Disney’s acts of creating animated worlds and characters, Elizabeth Bell claims that “[Disney] animation is not an innocent art form”.<sup>17</sup> After all, “nothing accidental or serendipitous occurs in animation as each *second* of action on screen is rendered in twenty-four different still paintings”.<sup>18</sup> Bell’s statement, which refers to the traditional animated features of the Disney Corporation, but which is, of course, also applicable to computer-animated films, thus highlights a particular characteristic and, as one may add, a particular potential of the animated movie: each of its (computer-generated) frames is deliberately put into place in order to give shape to the movie’s characters and their interactions. Therefore, animation, drawn or computer-based, indeed has the power to form worlds and characters more thoroughly than any other visual art form has. It is with animation, then, that we have to conceive of the ‘construction’ of bodily shapes and forms in its most literal sense, as “every pixel of every frame has been created, and there is thus very little room in animation for accidental visual stimuli”.<sup>19</sup>

Following from this, it is easy to imagine that, within the realm of (computer) animation, the “stylization of the body”<sup>20</sup> through the representation of physical shapes and gestures, movements and different styles plays an important part in the configuration and perpetuation of gender roles and stereotypes. Over the last decades, it has been the Disney Corporation in particular which, as one of the world’s leading producers and distributors of animated movies, helped establish certain images of the male and – what will be of primary interest for my analysis of the *Shrek* movies – the female body with the help of its gigantic media machinery.<sup>21</sup> Up to the present day, the Disney Corporation has not only produced and distributed feature-length animated films, which certainly constitute one of the more popular media formats,<sup>22</sup> but has backed up its core business by incorporating a number of other channels of communication and products: “To date,” as Tanner et al. point out,

17 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 108.

18 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 108. A number of arguments put forward in this section on the ‘Disneyfied Protagonist’ are informed by and indebted to BELL’s highly illuminating and insightful contribution.

19 UNGER, J.W. and Jane SUNDERLAND. “Gendered Discourses in a Contemporary Animated Film: Subversion and Confirmation of Gender Stereotypes in *Shrek*.” *Working Paper No. 124, Working Paper Series of the Centre for Language in Social Life, Lancaster University* (2005). 1 – 30. 27.

20 BUTLER. *Gender Trouble*. 179.

21 Cf. e.g. BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop” as well as the contributions listed in FN 5.

22 Cf. TANNER, Litsa Renée et al. “Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films.” In: *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 31 (2003): 355–73. 356.

the Disney corporation owns a major television network, cable television networks, and radio stations. Disney also develops children's books, cartoons, movies, videos, computer software and games, as well as many other products designed for children's use including backpacks, lunch boxes, and clothing.<sup>23</sup>

Against this backdrop, one must indeed not underestimate the impact of Disney's conceptualization of gender roles and relationships on both international audiences and on the animation industry in general, which, as it seems, cannot but resort to the repertoire of 'Disneyfied' elements and patterns of bodily representation to turn their own features into successful blockbusters.

As far as the depiction of female characters in Disney's animated movies is concerned, a number of scholars argue that the modes of representation have not changed significantly ever since the company's first full-length feature, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, was released in 1937, which "was to define the way other animated films in the genre of the fairy tale were to be made".<sup>24</sup> They maintain that, "while they may display far more intelligence and independence than Snow White, Cinderella, or Sleeping Beauty, the more modern Disney heroines (Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*, Jasmine in *Aladdin* or Belle in *The Beauty and the Beast*) still live in male-dominated worlds, and ultimately find fulfilment through romantic relationships with Prince Charmings",<sup>25</sup> with whom they eventually decide to live 'happily ever after'. Despite the changes that the Disney heroine has undergone (at least as far as her behaviour is concerned), evolving from an entirely passive and naïve into a more active character, one cannot but conclude that its modern 'version' still, and in a very literal sense, embodies the 'perfect girl', as Janet Wasko observes for Ariel: "Ariel has been viewed as a more positive role model than other Disney heroines, such as Snow White. She is intelligent, inquisitive and rebellious; but, of course, she exemplifies the beauty that characterizes all Disney heroines, with an extremely trim, shapely, even sensual figure."<sup>26</sup>

Seen in this light, Princess Fiona, the female protagonist of the *Shrek* movies who is trapped in a dragon's dungeon and waiting for a prince to give her the redeeming kiss in the first part, appears to be the prototypical princess modelled along the lines of her Disney predecessors. With her beautiful body and her

23 TANNER et al. "Images of Couples and Families in Disney Feature-Length Animated Films." 356. Cf. WASKO. *Understanding Disney*. 28 ff.

24 ZIPES. "Breaking the Disney Spell." 34. Cf. also WASKO. *Understanding Disney*. 116.

25 WASKO. *Understanding Disney*. 116. Among others, WASKO is here referring to COLBY O'BRIEN, Pamela. "The Happiest Films on Earth: A Textual and Contextual Analysis of Walt Disney's 'Cinderella' and 'The Little Mermaid.'" In: *Women's Studies in Communication* 19,2 (1996): 155–84; WARNER, Marina. "Beauty and the Beasts." In: *Sights and Sound* 2,6 (1992): 6–12. Cf. also ZIPES. "Breaking the Disney Spell."

26 WASKO. *Understanding Disney*. 135.

rather passive mode of behaviour, she takes her place in the ranks of Snow White and Cinderella – actually, the analogy between her and the popular Disney heroines is even drawn within the movie, when Fiona appears as a candidate in a dating show and has to compete with the abovementioned characters, which is supposed to emphasize the perfection of her body and her character.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, however, Fiona is not saved by a beautiful prince, but by Shrek, the ogre, whose appearance, whose patterns of behaviour and whose marginalized position in society do not at all correspond to the traditional image of the ‘Prince Charming’ she had been waiting for so patiently.<sup>28</sup> Though slightly confused about this deviation from the traditional fairy-tale plot, Fiona tries to save this “wonderful, romantic moment” of their first meeting both by reminding Shrek of what he is supposed to do according to the conventions of the genre and by employing an old-fashioned, cliché-ridden diction in order to evoke the atmosphere of a medieval romance. Yet Shrek, who only saves Fiona from the dragon in order to get back his swamp from the narcissistic tyrant Lord Farquaard, does not take up the fairy-tale discourse and spoils Fiona’s attempts to keep it alive. When offered her handkerchief as “a token of [her] gratitude” for rescuing her, Shrek strips off the symbolic potential of Fiona’s present, as he immediately uses it to dry his sweating face after his highly exhausting mission. Thus, the rather pragmatic speech and actions of the ogre make Fiona’s conventional behaviour and statements appear to be completely out of place; moreover, her exaggerated efforts to keep the traditional story of the beautiful princess and her brave prince going are in vain, as Shrek does not seem to be interested in her at all.

Granted, Princess Fiona’s strong ambition to live happily ever after with a beautiful and elegant prince is, on the one hand, part of the highly intertextual and intermedial mode of all of the *Shrek* movies, perfectly exemplifying the strategy of playing with the conventions of the traditional fairy-tale genre and the character constellation of the more traditional Disney features. On the other

27 Though Fiona is portrayed as a rather passive character at the beginning of the film, there are a number of instances in which she unfolds her potential as a highly active protagonist, the most prominent being a fight against ‘Robin Hood and his Merry Men’ in the woods (Cf. also TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. “‘You Can’t Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.’” 7). This scene, in which Fiona is presented as a person trained in martial arts, has become famous for drawing on the extreme slow-motion camera used in the science-fiction movie *The Matrix* (1999). Thus, as one may well argue, the scene does not primarily serve to outline a conception of gender, but is predominantly supposed to point to the film’s highly intertextual nature.

28 For a discussion of the marginalized position of Shrek as the male protagonist and the concept of masculinity embodied by him, cf. TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. “‘You Can’t Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.’” 5. To a certain extent, their analysis of the first two *Shrek* movies and my contribution cover the same ground and make a number of similar observations.

hand, her behaviour also fulfils a specific function within the story of *Shrek* in that it makes us become suspicious about her – and rightly so, as we learn later in the movie that Fiona is indeed hiding her ‘true’ identity from the public. Having been put under a spell in her childhood, she turns into an ogre at night, which shocks her: “I’m a princess and that’s not how a princess is meant to look”, she reveals to Shrek’s friend Donkey after he has found out about her ‘split identity’.

Though in the course of the movie Fiona cannot hide the ogre in her and turns from a rather passive girl dominated by the idea of being rescued by a Prince Charming into a more self-assured character, she still does not want anyone to see her during the night. It is, we may assume, this hidden identity that makes Shrek, who is still unaware of the fact that Fiona is of his species, eventually fall in love with her. However, though DreamWorks’ version of ‘The Beauty and the Beast’ ends, like its pre-text, in mutual bliss, as Fiona and Shrek finally find each other, it significantly deviates from the Disney model. Fiona, who was promised that she would adopt her true shape if she kissed her true love, does *not* turn into a beautiful princess, as expected by the movie’s audience, who is conditioned by culturally established fairy-tale plots appropriated and disseminated by the majority of the Disney features.<sup>29</sup> She remains an ogre instead, a fact which she can hardly accept and which makes her doubt whether she has really found her true love after all. Finally, it is Shrek who manages to dispel her disappointment, assuring her that for him she actually is beautiful, thus strongly stressing the fact that beauty is indeed a highly relative issue, depending on the eye of the beholder. Apart from deviating from the standard of presenting a beautiful appearance as promoted by the ‘Disney shop’,<sup>30</sup> the ogre couple also subverts the traditional notion of a prince’s and a princess’ central position in society by opting for a marginalized existence in the swamp, thus self-confidently living ‘ugly ever after’, as we learn from the storybook which ‘closes’ the movie.

In this vein, the first *Shrek* movie may indeed be regarded as questioning the Disneyfied ‘rules’ of bodily and behavioural representation, according to which the female protagonists of the company’s animated features have traditionally been portrayed as “beautiful, shapely, and often sexually attractive [...] thus perpetuating norms of physical beauty prevalent in mainstream American culture”.<sup>31</sup> Feminist critics who denounced Disney movies for their conservative configuration of gender roles have found even stronger words to stress the importance of bodily features and to hint at the one-dimensionality of most female characters in Disney movies, claiming that “[t]he only tests of most

29 For a more detailed overview of Disney’s modes of appropriating traditional fairy-tale plots cf. ZIPES. “Towards a Theory of the Fairy-Tale Film and Carlo Collodi and Walt Disney.”

30 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 107 ff.

31 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 116.

heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with: a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament".<sup>32</sup>

It is, to be sure, exactly these features that Princess Fiona is lacking in *Shrek 2*, which continues the patterns of subversion that were outlined in the first *Shrek* movie. Being a 'full-time ogre' now, the princess does not fulfil the physical and behavioural standards of the typical Disney heroine. Rather she is slightly overweight and has to shave her face on a regular basis. Though her bodily proportions appeal to her male counterpart, they are, at least considering the Disney model of perfect beauty, anything but perfect.<sup>33</sup> So is her behaviour, which clearly deviates from the Disney norm: Right from the beginning of the movie, Princess Fiona is an active agent in modelling her destiny as well as that of her husband Shrek. When the newly-weds are invited to spend some time with Fiona's parents, it is Fiona who takes matters into her own hands: She convinces her rather stubborn husband to accompany her. Once they have arrived in her parents' kingdom she does not allow her social environment, particularly her father, to dominate her.

Thus, while most of the young Disney heroines tend to be represented as 'perfect girls', whose beautiful body and elegant, often dance-like movements are supposed to mesmerize the audience,<sup>34</sup> Fiona's persistent way of achieving her aims indeed promotes an alternative concept of femininity, and it does so even more strongly than in *Shrek*. In the first part, Fiona was still ashamed of her ogre identity, but now she has grown into a self-confident character who no longer considers it necessary to hide herself. Moreover, when she is put under a spell by Charming's mother, which temporarily turns her into a beautiful princess again, she does not seem to identify with the 'perfect' body and the 'perfect' life that she had been longing for so badly in *Shrek*. Rather, she refuses to obey the courtly conventions in her parents' kingdom and to give in to Prince Charming, who is

32 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 116.

33 Of course, Princess Fiona is not visualized as an ugly and abominable creature. On the contrary, "the film directors have purposefully designed her to have a 'sweet, cherub face'" (UNGER and SUNDERLAND. "Gendered Discourses in a Contemporary Animated Film." 26). The question of whether the movie thus only introduces an alternative 'beautiful heroine' without entirely rejecting the concept of beauty is discussed in the fourth part of this contribution. In their analysis of the first film, TAKOLANDER and MCCOONEY also stress the emphasis on bodily features. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque (TAKOLANDER and MCCOONEY. "'You Can't Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.'" 10), they point out that "[t]he film appears to be carnivalesque – and therefore subversive – not only in its bodily references and bestial inversions, but also because it appears to offer a world that is extrapolitical and beyond the dominant ideology". They argue, however, that the carnivalesque element in *Shrek* "turns out, then, not to overturn but to reinforce official masculinist values" (ibid.), an assumption that will also be discussed later in this essay.

34 For the significance of dancing in Disney features, cf. BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 109 ff.

regarded as the better husband both by Fiona's father and by Charming's fairy godmother.

One of the most striking scenes epitomizing how Princess Fiona's behaviour subverts the standard Disney repertoire of representing gender roles appears at the very end of the movie when the dramatic story is about to reach its climax. In the guise of the beautiful princess, Fiona meets the narcissistic prince at one of the royal balls in *Far Far Away*. Charming pretends to be Shrek in another body and invites her to dance. After having hesitated for a moment, Fiona eventually lets him take her to the dance floor, but she does not really enjoy it. It is her unwillingness and her inability to let herself in for dancing with the prince and thus to find her place within the courtly environment that turns her into the exact opposite of the Disney heroines whose bodies "are built on the disciplined, expressive 'naturalness' of dancers"<sup>35</sup> and for whom dancing represents a ritualized form of confirming their romantic relationship with their princes, "at once representing and replacing the sexual act"<sup>36</sup>.

As soon as we allow ourselves to further follow Bell's argument,<sup>37</sup> we come to realize that the repertoire of representational strategies typical of Disney's animated full-length features is not limited to the rendering of the *young* heroines, but is, in fact, equally employed to establish a "cultural and somatic timeline".<sup>38</sup> Thus, apart from the perfect princess, as Bell argues, there are also middle-aged women like the Wicked Queen (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), Lady Trumaine (*Cinderella*) or Ursula (*The Little Mermaid*), who are usually modelled along the lines of the *femme fatale*, simultaneously representing feminine agency and wickedness.<sup>39</sup> With the "careful cosmetics of paint, cowls, jewelry, and 'clinging black dresses'",<sup>40</sup> these women are rendered as fatal, premenopausal beauties at middle age, which is portrayed "as a time of treachery, consumption, and danger in the feminine life cycle".<sup>41</sup> The third stage of this 'timeline' is the "aplomb of old age",<sup>42</sup> at which women appear as good grandmothers, as fairies, who are characterized by (literally) "supernatural feminine goodness"<sup>43</sup> and whose bodies are, in contrast to the middle-aged women, "nonthreatening, unavailable, and harmless. They reestablish and maintain the order that the *femme fatale* destroys".<sup>44</sup>

35 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 112

36 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 113.

37 Cf. BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 120 ff.

38 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 121.

39 Cf. BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 108, 115.

40 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 115.

41 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 116.

42 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 121.

43 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 118.

44 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 119.

Having outlined these different modes of representing the female body at various stages of the life cycle which are at work in most of Disney's animated films, Bell comes to the rather conciliatory conclusion that "the women in these films are not bifurcated into good and bad, but represent a continuum of cultural representations of women's powers and performances".<sup>45</sup> She goes on arguing that, in this vein, "the films celebrate the ambiguity, the diversity, and potency of women's bodies, and the multiple sites and sources of their cultural construction".<sup>46</sup> I maintain, however, that the majority of animated Disney films, though they may allow some room for diverse representations of the female body depending on its age, essentially tend to perpetuate conventional gender stereotypes and do not seriously challenge the culturally established and accepted ways of conceptualizing the feminine life cycle.

Still, leaving ideological questions aside for a moment, Bell's notion of a specific set of what she calls 'somatexts'<sup>47</sup> is not only fruitful in that it sheds light on the poetics and politics of gender representation in the full-length features of the Disney Corporation. At the same time, and more importantly, it provides us with an appropriate framework for an analysis of DreamWorks' *Shrek 2* and its potential to challenge and undermine the established modes of constructing the (male and the) female body. After all, it helps us argue that it is not only Fiona, but also the other female main characters appearing in *Shrek 2* who correspond neither to the Disneyfied images of the female body nor to feminine modes and patterns of behaviour. And indeed, as soon as we take a closer look at the other central female characters of the movie, we come to realize that the 'cultural and somatic timeline' described by Bell, on which various stages in the female life cycle are configured, seems to be inverted (to some extent). In *Shrek 2*, the audience is not only confronted with Fiona as the opposite of the traditional Disney heroine; we are also introduced to her mother who would be at a perfect age to unfold her wicked and sexually deluding potential, but does not show any *femme fatale*-like behaviour at all. Instead, in the course of the movie, she turns out to be the rational voice in the hysterical king's ear. It is her who keeps calm when everyone is about to lose their temper at the dinner table on the day of Shrek's and Fiona's arrival in the kingdom; it is her who takes a tolerant position when her husband is about to dismiss Shrek as his son-in-law. Finally, it is her who convinces her husband – whose stature, combined with his hysterical attacks on Shrek and his constant doubts about the ogre's capacities, turn him into a rather weak, if not ridiculously impotent character – to accept Shrek as the legitimate heir to the throne of Far Far Away.

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45 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 119.

46 BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 121.

47 Cf. BELL. "Somatexts at the Disney Shop." 107.

Following this pattern of inversion, the fairy godmother that we encounter in *Shrek* is not presented in accordance with the ‘somatic timeline’ usually followed by Disney either: though she is definitely given an ‘old-age’-look, she is neither characterized by what Bell called ‘supernatural feminine goodness’ nor is she “calm, relaxed, cooperative, affable, warm, forgiving, sympathetic, soft-hearted, generous, affectionate, and kind”,<sup>48</sup> as any typical Disney godmother would be. Instead, her insidious plotting against Shrek and her ambitious project of marrying off her son, Prince Charming, with Fiona, make her appear as a power-crazed woman longing for dominance. Moreover, her body is far from being represented as “nonthreatening, unavailable, and harmless”.<sup>49</sup> This is apparent in the scene featuring the royal ball at the end of the movie, when she is posing lasciviously on the piano in a tight red sparkling dress beginning to perform Bonnie Tyler’s “I need a hero”, a song whose lyrics have strong sexual overtones. Thus, this scene not only underlines her dominant nature, but also stresses the sexual potency she still possesses, quite in contrast to the typical godmothers as rendered by Disney, who “wear no cosmetics, jewelry or adornment”.<sup>50</sup> After all, it is her who *disturbs* the order of the kingdom instead of restoring it (as would be expected) by putting a spell on Shrek and Fiona. Obsessed by the idea of putting her son on the throne she stops at nothing and ends up as an aggressive and wicked woman – the fact that her son Charming has become a rather helpless young man therefore does not really come as a surprise.

#### IV. The Containment of Subversion? – *Shrek* and the Mainstream

Though both the various instances of gender-bending or transgenderism and the atypical representation of Fiona (and the other main female characters) may well be said to serve as sites for negotiating traditional concepts of gender as perpetuated by the majority of Disney features, one must be extremely careful in asserting their subversive potential. Of course, the movies react to changes in Western societies by visualizing alternative gender roles and, at the same time, by exposing the clear-cut distinction between the male and the female as a mere construct. However, their alternative representations of gender are still framed by a rather traditional fairy-tale plot that reinforces and perpetuates certain gender stereotypes and patterns of behaviour. One might even get the impression that, in order to make the story appeal to a comparatively heterogeneous audience, DreamWorks’ *Shrek* movies actually cannot do without sticking

48 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 118.

49 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 119.

50 BELL. “Somatexts at the Disney Shop.” 119.

to some of the rules and conventions that are part of our cultural repertoire of fairy tales and that have been mediated on a large scale by traditional Disney animation.<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, the subversive potential of the movies' manifold deviations from the 'norms' of representing gender might be called into question once we acknowledge that the movies' stories are set in a male-dominated society and are generally structured along the lines of typically 'male' narratives.<sup>52</sup> The plot of *Shrek the Third*, for instance, takes up the traditional motif of the quest for a legitimate male heir to the throne after the death of the king, which, in the movie, culminates in the close-up of the successor's coronation and thus epitomizes male dominance, thereby putting the movie's radical potential of its depiction of gender roles to the test. Moreover, all of the three *Shrek* movies reflect the ideas of living 'happily ever after', of romantic love, of marriage and a family, which seem to be of particular importance even for ogres and, as we learn at the end of the second part, for such peculiar couples as Donkey and his dragon, whose hybrid offspring appears at the royal ball in *Far Far Away*. This domestic discourse on starting a family is taken up in *Shrek the Third* again, which exposes the movies' underlying, rather traditional conception of gender roles. In this discourse, which dominates Fiona's and Shrek's everyday life in the third part, both characters adopt rather stereotypical positions in their debate on having children. In contrast to Fiona's keen desire to have a baby, her husband is highly sceptical of her idea and is tormented by a series of nightmares and 'horrible' visions of family life. In contrast to the first two parts it is no longer the ogre

51 Cf. TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. "‘You Can't Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.’" 5 ff. In their illuminating analysis, TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY develop a range of arguments on the relationship between subversion and the mainstream with regard to gender roles in the first two *Shrek* movies, some of which are taken up or shared by this contribution. They point out that "[t]he humanist rhetoric celebrating *Shrek* as universally liberating is [...] deceptive," as "[t]he film, rather than celebrating Fiona's 'girl power' is a lesson to women about their authentic fate: to surrender themselves to their husbands [...]. In fact, the transgressive 'look' of the film provides something of a ruse or a diversion, while the actual elements of fairytale parody, the carnivalesque and female representation are manipulated only to reinforce the patriarchal status quo." (ibid. 5–6) For them, "Shrek [...] does little to offer a fairytale model that challenges these gender patterns" (ibid. 6). Though I basically agree with TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY here, I would not go as far as they do, concluding that "[i]n this purportedly humanist and revisionary film, this fundamental ideology of female subordination remains unchallenged [...]. What appears initially as carnivalesque inversion of official hierarchies turns out to be inversion in the service of patriarchy, which strategically presents itself as under threat" (ibid. 8 ff.). Instead – and hopefully without creating the impression of an all-too optimistic, or idealizing, view of popular culture as a form of resistance – I would like to end on a more positive note by emphasizing that the *Shrek* films, as sites for negotiating gender, do at least bear a highly ambivalent, if not subversive potential, which may or may not be exploited by their viewers.

52 Cf. TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. "‘You Can't Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.’" 6.

couple who deviates from the norm, as Shrek and Fiona appear to have become well-established members of the royal family (though, admittedly, they are not suited for their new jobs, as the opening scene reveals, when they are forced into completely inappropriate garments for an official appearance at court).

Though Princess Fiona tends to take matters into her own hands, her self-confidence is always combined with a strong urge to lead a harmonious life. Seen in this light, one may indeed ask what distinguishes Fiona from recent Disney heroines, who, according to Annalee R. Ward, “may adopt some of the contemporary feminist attitudes, including being morally vocal, being physically strong, and being self-sufficient, but [...] only find [...] fulfillment in romantic love”.<sup>53</sup> Thus, though the visualization of Princess Fiona may indeed be said to deviate from that of the Disneyfied body – which is, as Giroux critically observes, often “modeled after a slightly anorexic Barbie doll”<sup>54</sup> – and though her behaviour might not be (stereo)typically feminine, she is still equipped with some character traits that one could hardly label radically subversive. Moreover, the fact that the princess appeals to her male counterpart, who finds her extraordinarily attractive, indicates that the *Shrek* movies do *not* call the underlying idea of the importance of beauty as a prerequisite for a successful love relationship and a happy life into question. Thus, though the culturally accepted standards of representation and evaluation of bodily features may definitively be put into perspective, the movies do not reject the overall significance of a well-shaped and attractive body.<sup>55</sup>

The subversive potential of transgenderism and gender-bending as featured in the movies, which the conservative lobby suspected of spoiling the moral integrity of the younger audience, might also be called into question. The transgendered bartender in *Shrek 2* works in “The Poison Apple”, a place visited exclusively by the most peculiar characters and creatures one can imagine. Due to its spooky atmosphere, “The Poison Apple” thus represents a marginalized space that provides room for alternative conceptualizations of gender that are far

53 WARD, Annalee R. *Mouse Morality. The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Film*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. 199. To be sure, some of the more recent Disney features have introduced female protagonists that are indeed not, as GIROUX claims for *The Little Mermaid* and *The Lion King*, “constructed within narrowly defined gender roles” (GIROUX, Henry A. *The Mouse That Roared: The End of Innocence*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. 98). A case in point is *Finding Nemo* (2003), in which the female protagonist Dory appears as a multi-faceted character. Still, the plot remains male-dominated and does not radically reject a hierarchically structured patriarchal society in the end.

54 GIROUX. *The Mouse That Roared*. 99.

55 For a discussion of the (allegedly) subversive potential of ugliness and the significance of beauty in *Shrek*, cf. also TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. “‘You Can’t Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.’” 11 – 12.

from being accepted by the mainstream.<sup>56</sup> It is only in the third part that the transgendered character finally seems to be integrated at least partially into the court of Far Far Away.

To conclude, such readings, which all question the subversive potential of the *Shrek* movies, are not meant to demonstrate that DreamWorks' computer-animated *Shrek* movies completely fail to introduce alternative ways of thinking gender. They were rather supposed to show that the *Shrek* movies function against the backdrop of already existent schemes and stereotypes which turn them into highly polysemic texts which might well be read in a number of different ways. Thus, on the one hand one indeed finds support for the argument that the *Shrek* movies "distil [...] the fairy-tale and romance film discourses which are so prevalent in Western culture [and in the majority of Disney features] into the speech, action and appearance of a few protagonists, and proceed [...] to contest, to subvert and to complexify them".<sup>57</sup> On the other hand the movies' constant reliance on fairy-tale plot structures, characters and concepts also allows us to assume that their ways of contesting culturally established representations of gender roles perpetuate and perhaps even enhance stereotypes and clichés. One might add that this reliance on culturally accepted and disseminated modes of story-telling, which certainly limits the films' subversive potential, might well be explained by considering the institutional and economic framework in which they are produced and distributed: In order to turn their product into a popular and best-selling cultural commodity, producers of such features are well-advised to resort to already established frameworks of representing gender, which are seen as acceptable for the broad 'target audience' of the movies. Following from that, DreamWorks' *Shrek* movies cannot entirely reject the modes of representing gender as established and mediated by the Disney Corporation; and, as one may add, it does not want to do so, taking marketing-related considerations into account.<sup>58</sup> What it can do instead is offer sites for introducing alternatives and for negotiating traditional concepts of gender, which may, however, always run the risk of perpetuating those norms that are playfully put to the test, as one reviewer of *Shrek the Third* implied by pointing out that "what has happened [...] is that the series that took such joy in utilizing

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56 Gender-bending has even entered the universe of the Disney Corporation. Though not animated, but certainly supported by animation, Disney's trilogy *Pirates of the Caribbean* (2003, 2006, 2007) features a protagonist (Jack Sparrow) whose make-up, body language, facial expressions and peculiar ways of behaviour do not qualify him as the truly masculine hero one might expect to see in a movie about pirates. However, as Sparrow lives in a world of pirates, sea-creatures and monsters, his unusual appearance and behaviour do not at all challenge mainstream ideology. Thus, the mechanism of containment which is at work here very much resembles that of the *Shrek* movies.

57 UNGER and SUNDERLAND. "Gendered Discourses in a Contemporary Animated Film." 28.

58 Cf. TAKOLANDER and MCCOOEY. "'You Can't Say No to the Beauty and the Beast.'" 12–13.

all of the stereotypes from children's movies and making fun of those conventions has fallen into the trap of utilizing those very conventions."<sup>59</sup>

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## The Female Voice in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*: Voice-Over Narration in Contemporary American Television Series

### I. Introduction: Voice-Over Narration in Television Series

Voice-over is a constitutive part of many audiovisual formats, such as news, documentary films, commercials and sports commentaries. Although television series “usually have a ‘voiceless’ narrator, and thus normally do not give rise to the illusion that there is a ‘person’ or persona telling the story”,<sup>1</sup> some TV series make frequent use of voice-over narration, often achieving diverse and complex functions in this manner. Voice-over narration has over the past decades been used in various series and is for example a constitutive part of the TV series *The Wonder Years* (1988–1993), in which a distinctly adult male voice relates the story of his younger self. The log in the five *Star Trek* series is always presented via the voice-over of one of the characters;<sup>2</sup> in the 1980s cult show *Magnum* (1980–1988) the protagonist frames the story of each episode with his comments. In the series *A-Team* (1983–1987) each episode starts with the same words, spoken by the main character. Other television dramas only make use of voice-over narration in single episodes, thus loosening the customary structure of the show and challenging the viewer with this change of perspective.<sup>3</sup> Sitcoms

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1 ALLRATH, Gaby, Marion GYMNICH and Carola SURKAMP. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” In: Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds.). *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. Houndmills/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 1–43. 13.

2 The prevailing function of the log entries in *Star Trek* is to provide expository information at the beginning of each episode (e. g. about the setting and the mission which lies ahead of the crew) as well as to round off the story at the end, accordingly imparting a clear structure to the show. For a detailed analysis of voice-over narration in the *Star Trek* series, cf. GYMNICH, Marion. “Exploring Inner Spaces: Authoritative Narratives and Subjective Worlds in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*.” In: Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds.). *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. Houndmills/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 62–79. 63–68.

3 Cf., for example, the episode “The Stackhouse Filibuster” (2.17) of *The West Wing*, in which three different voice-over narrators take turns at relating the development of the episode, or several episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; cf. also ALLRATH, GYMNICH and SURKAMP. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 15.

such as *Friends* (1994–2004) and *The Nanny* (1993–1999) apply voice-over narration every now and then in order to verbalise a character's thoughts or feelings, as a form of interior monologue, thereby creating a comic or ironic discrepancy between what is said and what is thought. Although voice-over narration in fictional audiovisual narratives is anything but an occasional aberration, the implications which the corporeal presence of a narrating voice,<sup>4</sup> and in our case a female voice, has for the narrative have long been neglected:<sup>5</sup> “[D]espite a decade of attention by a few narratologists, the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality have remained on the margins of narratological inquiry”.<sup>6</sup>

Especially in the past fifteen years female characters seem to have dominated voice-over narration almost completely – and very successfully:<sup>7</sup> In the Golden Globe winning drama series *My So-Called Life* (1994–1995), 15-year-old Angela Carter relates the trials and tribulations of adolescence in diary-form. Shows like *Ally McBeal* (1997–2002) with its unconventional way of depicting the eponymous protagonist's feelings and thoughts followed suit and blazed the trail for no less successful series such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), or, more recently, *Desperate Housewives* (2004–) and the hospital drama *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–).<sup>8</sup> In comparison to the voice-over in the latter, which is rather conventional and

4 Cf. LANSER: “Oral and visual narratives attach to the body – and hence to *performed* sex, gender, and sexuality – in overt ways.” (LANSER, Susan S. “Sexing Narratology: Toward a Gendered Politics of Narrative Voice.” In: Walter Grünzweig and Andreas Solbach (eds.). *Grenzüberschreitungen: Narratologie im Kontext/Transcending Boundaries: Narratology in Context*. Tübingen: Narr, 1999. 167–83. 179)

5 Two rare exceptions are Sarah KOZLOFF (*Invisible Storytellers: Voice-Over Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988) and Seymour CHATMAN (“New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema.” In: David Herman (ed.). *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1999. 315–39), who deal with the structural and aesthetic possibilities of voice-over narration in fiction film. More recently, ALLRATH et al. (“Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 14–16) have briefly discussed different kinds of voice-over narration in popular television series. Manfred JAHN also includes voice-over narration in his “Guide to Narratological Film Analysis” (2002. <<http://www.uni-koeln.de/~ame02/pppf.htm>>).

6 LANSER. “Sexing Narratology.” 168.

7 Unlike in films, male voice-over narrators are a rather rare phenomenon in television series at the moment. Exceptions include the highly acclaimed hospital sitcom *Scrubs* (2001–) and the dramedy *Pushing Daisies* (2007–2009), in which a reserved narrator – reminiscent of a storyteller in a traditional fairy tale – frames the episodes. In the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* (2005–) the male protagonist tells his children in the year 2030 how he met their mother 20 years before.

8 Another popular television genre in which female voice-over narration plays a constitutive part is the telenovela, which deals with the love struggles of an underprivileged woman and in which the protagonist regularly communicates her wishes, feelings and thoughts via voice-over, normally in combination with a camera close-up of the actress. A case in point is the successful telenovela *Verliebt in Berlin* (2005–2007), the German version of the Colombian telenovela *Yo soy Betty, la fea* (1999–2001).

standardised, the two other shows are definitely worth taking a closer look at.<sup>9</sup> Their elaborate narrative transmission, paired with their characteristic mode of depicting issues typically assigned to women already points to the complex interdependencies between form and content, which are the focus of this paper.

The article aims at exploring the multiple forms and functions of female voice-over narration in the television series *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. After some introductory prolegomena on audiovisual narration and voice-over as such, the respective narrative situations of said programmes will be thoroughly described and analysed with special regard to the multi-mediality of audiovisual narratives and aspects of gender, as “sex constitutes a necessary and important element of a *formal* – i. e., structural and descriptive – poetics of narrative”.<sup>10</sup> Another point of interest is the role voice-over plays within the narrative, i. e. within individual episodes, a season (usually consisting of 23 episodes) and the entire series. The implications of distinctly female voices telling the stories<sup>11</sup> and addressing a wide range of topics will be explored in terms of the way in which the voice-over is realised, thus shedding light on the complex interplay between form and content in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*.

## II. Television Series as Multimedial Narratives

Like film, television series is a narrative genre with performative aspects. Kozloff, for instance, describes this performative aspect as “a core component” of television, explaining that it is “the quasi-presence of the actors and their independent contributions to the text, that links the medium with drama”.<sup>12</sup> Television combines those performative strategies with the telling of a story, which makes it “a multimedial narrative form”.<sup>13</sup> This can also be said about television series, which employ similar modes of representation. And of course,

9 Cf. BIGNELL, Jonathan. “Gender Representations: *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*.” In: Jonathan Bignell. *An Introduction to Television Studies*. London/New York: Routledge, 2008. 223 – 27.

10 LANSER. “Sexing Narratology.” 168.

11 As Susan LANSER notices, “sexual categories are as important to narrative meaning as person, level, order, and reliability, and indeed [...] they interact with these other elements in crucial ways.” (“Sexing Narratology.” 169)

12 KOZLOFF. *Invisible Storytellers*. 17.

13 Actually, JAHN talks about films, but his statement is also accurate for TV narratives (JAHN, Manfred. “A Guide to Narratological Film Analysis.” 2002. F1.2). Cf. ALLEN, Robert C. “Introduction to the Second Edition: More Talk About TV.” In: Robert C. Allen (ed.). *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled. Television and Contemporary Criticism*. London/New York: Routledge, 1992 [1987]. 1 – 30.

“[i]f TV series are narratives, one should be able to identify some kind of narrator”.<sup>14</sup>

Audiovisual narration is a highly multiplex phenomenon, and talking about narrative strategies in television series is a rather intricate issue as the predominant narrating agency in fictional audiovisual media – unlike in many literary texts – is non-anthropomorphic: “It [the narrating agency] presents the narrated world and thus tells the story, fulfilling the narrator’s function of *selecting* what viewers come to know by determining which events, locations or characters are shown.”<sup>15</sup> The narrating agency is a “composite of a large and complex variety of communication devices”,<sup>16</sup> *inter alia* the camera (angle, sector, etc.), the montage of the shots, and, if existent, voice-over narration. While Chatman uses the term ‘cinematic narrator’ to refer to the narrating agency,<sup>17</sup> Jahn deliberately refrains from this allocated personalisation of the act of narration in audiovisual media by introducing the term ‘filmic composition device’ (FCD),<sup>18</sup> which he defines as follows:

The theoretical agency behind a film’s organization and arrangement, assumed to be guided by maxims of giving efficient, sufficient, and relevant information. The FCD selects what it needs from various sources of information and arranges, edits, and composes this information for telling a filmic narrative. A film shows us what the FCD has arranged for us to see.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to other approaches, Jahn’s terminology has one major advantage: It allows a clear-cut differentiation between the (necessary) narrating agency and an (optional) narrator. Applying the term ‘narrator’ could turn out to be misleading in cases where there is an actual narrator in the guise of a voice-over. As soon as there is a voice-over in an audiovisual text the situation gets more complex as the act of narration becomes personalised and thus is “tainted with subjectivity”.<sup>20</sup> Voice-over narration changes the quality of the visual, adding a subjective note by implying that what the audience is watching has been chosen by the narrator. Voice-over narration in films as well as in television series has become rather conventionalised; viewers usually grasp the narrative situation

14 ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 13. Cf. KOZLOFF. *Invisible Storytellers*. 78 – 79; CHATMAN. “New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema.”; and LEVINSON, Jerrold. “Film Music and Narrative Agency.” In: David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (eds.). *Post Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press 1996. 248 – 82. 250 – 51.

15 ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 13 – 14.

16 CHATMAN. “New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema.” 134.

17 CHATMAN. “New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema.” 124 – 38.

18 JAHN. “Guide to Narratological Film Analysis.” F4.1.

19 JAHN. “Guide to Narratological Film Analysis.” F4.1.2. For an overview of the different terms used in this context, cf. KOZLOFF. *Invisible Storytellers*. 44.

20 KOZLOFF. *Invisible Storytellers*. 13.

when they can hear an extradiegetic voice. But an unidentified voice-over is also supposed to create curiosity on the part of the viewers, who try to collect information from the narrative as well as the visual channel as for the identity of the narrator.<sup>21</sup>

The fact that – unlike in literary texts – we can hear the voice of the narrator in audiovisual texts typically reveals information about the speaker’s state of mind (happy, sad, angry, etc.) and – even more importantly – about his or her identity. The corporeal quality of the voice enables the viewer to identify the sex of the narrator. Unlike in literary texts, in which it is possible (though not necessarily easy) to hide the sex of the homodiegetic narrator, voice-over narration in audiovisual media not only allows conclusions as to whether the narrator is female or male, but it can also hint at the narrator’s age or origin (if he/she uses a regional or social variety of a language), unless the voice has been technically distorted.<sup>22</sup> As Allrath et al. have it, “[m]ost instances of voice-over narration involve a homodiegetic narrator”,<sup>23</sup> i. e. a narrator that is part of the fictional level of the story as a character and thus is subject to restrictions concerning his/her knowledge about other characters or about what will happen in the future.<sup>24</sup> Looking at a series like *Desperate Housewives*, however, one can easily perceive that a voice-over narrator can also tell his or her story from a rather unusual angle. Usually, a voice-over narrator, such as Carrie Bradshaw (Sarah Jessica Parker), the protagonist of *Sex and the City*, has to explain the origins of the information he or she is revealing, thus authenticating his/her position as part of the fictional world.

The voice-over belongs to the non-diegetic sounds of an audiovisual narrative because it “does not come from a source located in the current scene”.<sup>25</sup> Jahn differentiates between two kinds of voice-over narration: firstly the representation of a character’s mental processes or interior monologue (the character

21 Cf. the film *Phone Booth* (2003). A more recent example is the television series *Gossip Girl* (2007-), in which an unidentified blogger spreads rumours about New York’s wealthy teenagers.

22 “Voice-over narrators in a film or on TV also differ from narrators in printed narratives in that they use *spoken language*. They are always to a certain extent individualized by their voice.” (ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 14)

23 ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 15.

24 Heterodiegetic voice-over narration is also possible in fictional audiovisual narratives: “Like narrators in literary narratives, voice-over narrators can be categorized on the basis of whether they double as character on the story level or not. If they do, they are homodiegetic narrators; if they remain restricted to the discourse level, they are heterodiegetic. [...] Occasionally [...], TV series feature an on-screen heterodiegetic narrator, who, in spite of not being part of the story, is intermittently visible to the viewers while narrating and, thus, is both acoustically *and* visually present.” (ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 14–15)

25 JAHN. “Guide to Narratological Film Analysis.” F3.2.

is visible but his/her lips do not move), and, secondly, the representation of a non-visible narrator's voice. In both cases the voice is present via voice-over.<sup>26</sup> Both *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* follow the second pattern: their narrators relate, comment and steer the plot, and thus frame the story.

At first glance the two television series seem rather similar: Not only do they – due to the presence of a voice-over narrator – show parallels in terms of their narrative structure, but they both also deal with the trials and tribulations of four female protagonists.<sup>27</sup> In both shows the predominant focus is on the characters' private lives. But a closer look reveals manifold differences: As for their narrative structure, although formally akin, they differ considerably as far as the voice-over's function within the serial narrative is concerned. Another, more obvious difference is their format: With its 22 to 25-minute episodes the length of *Sex and the City* is reminiscent of classic comedy shows like the sitcom,<sup>28</sup> whereas the 40 to 45-minute long *Desperate Housewives* can be subsumed under the category of 'drama series'. This article, however, refrains from any genre allocation (comedy vs. drama) based on a programme's length – not least since the increasing pluralisation and hybridization of television genres fall short of the diversity of different television formats.

### III. Tattling New York Tales: The Private Goes Public in *Sex and the City*

Welcome to the age of 'un-innocence'. No one has breakfast at Tiffany's and no one has affairs to remember. Instead, we have breakfast at 7 a.m. and affairs we try to forget as quickly as possible. Self-protection and closing the deal are paramount. Cupid has  
 flown the co-op.  
 ("Sex and the City", 1.01)

When *Sex and the City* was first aired in 1998, predominantly male but also quite a few female critics denounced the series for being "the biggest hoax perpetrated on straight single women in the history of entertainment".<sup>29</sup> Despite (or maybe due to) the critics' opprobrium *Sex and the City* became an instant hit, and it still

26 Cf. ALLRATH et al. "Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series." 15.

27 In later seasons of *Desperate Housewives* further female characters come to the fore, while the core quartet still remains at the centre.

28 Due to its hybrid form, Jonathan BIGNELL considers *Sex and the City* hard to place generically: "It is a series with serial elements, and a comedy with strong dramatic and character components that differentiate it from the gag-based or sketch-like forms of other sitcoms." (BIGNELL. "Gender Representations." 162)

29 SIEGEL, Lee. "Relationshipism: Who Is Carrie Bradshaw Really Dating?" In: *The New Republic* (November 18, 2002): 30 – 33. 32.

is among the most successful and famous television series not only in the United States but worldwide. Never before had a television series dared to depict sex as lavishly as *Sex and the City* and discussed private matters in such a casual way. Even though, as the quote from the pilot episode suggests, the series seemed to start off with the message that romance is dead, it soon became evident that the protagonists are indeed on a quest for Mr Right, as Joanna Di Mattia states: “Although promoted as a show about sex and the single girl, it features an active engagement by its female protagonists in the renegotiation of the classic romance fantasy”.<sup>30</sup> It is this balancing act between the quest for Mr Right (or Mr Big) and the individual need for development which is expressed by the voice-over narration of the series.

*Sex and the City* was created by the American producer and screenwriter Darren Star and was adapted from the eponymous book by New York journalist Candace Bushnell,<sup>31</sup> who – like her alter ego Carrie in the series – had been writing a column for a newspaper in New York.<sup>32</sup> The series aired on the American premium cable channel Home Box Office (HBO)<sup>33</sup> from 1998 to 2004. Not only did *Sex and the City* instantly after its premiere become a commercial success,<sup>34</sup> but it could also convince critics and won several awards, among them a Screen Actors Guild Award in 2002, several Golden Globes (2002, 2003) as well as Emmy Awards for Outstanding Comedy Series (2001) and actors’ performances.<sup>35</sup> Due to its immense success, two feature films based on the TV series were released in 2008 and in 2010.

30 DI MATTIA, Joanna. “‘What’s the Harm in Believing?’ Mr Big, Mr Perfect, and the Romantic Quest for *Sex and the City*’s Mr Right.” In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Sex and the City*. London/New York: Tauris, 2004. 17 – 32. 17.

31 BUSHNELL, Candace. *Sex and the City*. New York: Time Warner Books, 1996.

32 Bushnell’s columns “about negotiating the urban dating jungle” (AKASS, Kim and Janet McCabe. “Introduction: Welcome to the Age of Un-Innocence.” In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Sex and the City*. London/New York: Tauris, 2004. 1 – 14. 3) were published in the *New York Observer* in the mid-1990s.

33 The channel is protected from advertisers as well as government and industrial restrictions (cf. AKASS and MCCABE. “Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle.” In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Sex and the City*. London/New York: Tauris, 2004. 177 – 98. 196). By the late 1990s – with *Sex and the City*, *Six Feet Under* and *The Sopranos* – HBO was the “must-have channel for anyone who appreciated good television” (BLUM, David. “How HBO Lost Its Groove.” In: *New York Sun* (November 16, 2004): 18).

34 The hype around the show caused other networks to jump on the bandwagon and in 2008 two new series with similar character constellations and topics went on air, but both could not sustain. NBC’s *Cashmere Mafia* (again created by Darren Star) only lasted seven episodes; *Lipstick Jungle* (based on another one of Bushnell’s books) made it to 20 episodes and two seasons.

35 The awards in detail: Emmy, Golden Globe, Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series (2000), Golden Globe for Best Television Series – Musical/Comedy and Best Performance by Sarah Jessica Parker (2002), Emmy

The series deals with the vicissitudes of love, romance and sex of four thirty-something single women living in New York. The protagonist (and voice-over narrator) is Carrie Bradshaw, a freelance columnist for the fictitious newspaper *New York Star*, for which she writes the weekly column “Sex and the City”. She is joined by the Harvard-alumna lawyer Miranda Hobbes (Cynthia Nixon), the prudish gallerist Charlotte York (Kristin Davis) and the hedonistic PR agent Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall).<sup>36</sup> Although all four protagonists have got successful careers, the foci of the series are their private lives, i. e. their relationships and friendships. Especially in the early seasons the protagonists’ sexual satisfaction plays an eminent role and is often used as a “central motor of dialogue, action and the structural possibilities of shifting or returning to the initial situation of the series in which all the four women are living single lives in different ways”.<sup>37</sup> Often the four women are shown sitting in a coffee house or restaurant, discussing their recent dating or sexual experiences, frequently followed by flashbacks of the incidents themselves. These flashbacks, which are characteristic of *Sex and the City*, can also be triggered by phone calls: in the episode “The Turtle and the Hare” (1.09), for instance, Samantha calls Carrie, starting with “You are not going to believe the evening I’ve had.” She goes on telling her friend about a frustrating dating experience. The scene changes to what obviously is a flashback of the previous night.<sup>38</sup> Thus, when Carrie tells us what happened to Samantha in another part of town, the story is twice fractured in terms of its perspective: firstly in the story Samantha tells Carrie, and secondly in Carrie’s rendering of the story. The visual, however, obscures the perspectivity of what is shown at that time because – when not accompanied by Carrie’s voice-over narration – the picture and the diegetic sound of the scene seem absolute and an accurate display of what happened. These kinds of memory-induced flashbacks are also used for other characters, as an example from the same episode illustrates: Carrie is taking a walk with her homosexual friend Stanford Blatch (Willie Garson), when he starts complaining about the hardships of finding a partner: “You won’t believe what happened last week.” After this, the scene changes and Carrie’s voice-over starts: While Carrie is saying “Evidently, Stanford, tired of bars and blind dates decided to place a

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Awards for the actresses Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon and Kim Cattrall in 2003 and 2004.

36 The foursome seems to represent four different types of women (cf. FRITSCH, Esther. “Serial Gossip: Gossip as Theme and Narrative Strategy in *Sex and the City*.” In: Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds.). *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. Houndmills/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 153–67. 155).

37 BIGNELL. “Gender Representations.” 165.

38 Although it is not made explicit that what is represented is a flashback, it can be assumed that the audience grasps the situation because of its conventional introduction.

personal ad”, the visual shows him, waiting for his date and the personal ad he had put in a newspaper.

Voice-over narration is a constitutive feature of *Sex and the City*. Carrie’s voice-over provides the narrative frame of each episode. Via her voice-over the protagonist controls the major theme of each episode; in a prologue she sets the tone and introduces the topic. In the course of the episodes she frequently introduces new settings and “almost invariably establishes the time frame of each new scene”.<sup>39</sup> Sentences starting with “at the other end of town”, “down-town”, “meanwhile”, “two hours later” or “the next night” establish the spatial and temporal structure of each episode. But the voice-over in *Sex and the City* also serves manifold other functions, one of the most important being the protagonist’s self-portrayal and self-reflection in the act of narration: “Episodes always contain voiceover [sic] narration in which Carrie presents her self-doubt about her attractiveness, the state of her relationships with friends and lovers, her future, and the morality of her behaviour.”<sup>40</sup>

From Carrie’s privileged position as *prima inter pares*,<sup>41</sup> as both (embedded and frame) narrator and main character (as established in the opening credits) it can be argued that she is an autodiegetic voice-over narrator. On the one hand she partakes in the action on the diegetic level of the story, thus being subject to the same restrictions as the other characters; on the other hand her voice-over valorises her perspective on the extra-diegetic level.<sup>42</sup> “In *Sex and the City* Carrie is the one who speaks and very often the one who sees and frames and integrates other viewpoints into her narration”.<sup>43</sup> When relating occurrences she herself has not witnessed, she has to rely on other characters to tell her what happened. This is rather often the case, as many of her stories revolve around her friends’ love lives, dates and sexual experiences. In the course of *Sex and the City* the quality of her voice-over narration undergoes an abrupt change: While in seasons 1 and 2 she actually can be seen narrating, directly speaking into the camera, addressing the audience in asides, thus breaching the fictional frame,<sup>44</sup>

39 THOMPSON, Kristin. *Storytelling in Film and Television*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2003. 52.

40 BIGNELL. “Gender Representations.” 164.

41 FRITSCH, Esther. “Serial Gossip: Gossip as Theme and Narrative Strategy in *Sex and the City*.” In: Gaby Allrath and Marion Gymnich (eds.). *Narrative Strategies in Television Series*. Houndmills/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 153–67. 156.

42 Cf. FRITSCH. “Serial Gossip.” 160: “Carrie as a homodiegetic narrator is shown both as experiencing self and as narrating self and, as such, both as an embedded narrator and a frame narrator.”

43 FRITSCH. “Serial Gossip.” 162.

44 Esther FRITSCH (“Serial Gossip.” 161) holds that in these scenes Carrie “steps out of her role as experiencing self, as it were, and provides reflections and comments on events [and background information] while they are happening”. Kim AKASS and Janet MCCABE argue that “[t]hrough a combination of voiceover narration and direct address to camera, Carrie

in later seasons a more conventional narrative mode is pursued. In addition, in the early seasons shots from Carrie's point of view are a frequent means to indicate that someone is talking to her (cf. the episodes 1.01 "Sex and the City" and 2.02, "The Awful Truth").<sup>45</sup>

Although it seems rather standardised, the narrative structure of *Sex and the City* is more complex than it seems at first glance.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to other cases of voice-over narration in television series, Carrie's voice-over is not unmotivated: It is part of her weekly column "Sex and the City", which she writes for the fictitious newspaper *New York Star*. As the voice-over is strongly linked to Carrie's column,<sup>47</sup> her narrative is interstratified with witty remarks, ambiguous puns and intermedial alienations. This can also be seen in the episode titles, which – as is established in the pilot episode –<sup>48</sup> serve as the titles of Carrie's columns on the intradiegetic level as well: In titles such as "Bay of Married Pigs" (1.03), "Four Women and a Funeral" (2.05), "Politically Erect" (3.02), "No Ifs, Ands, or Butts" (3.05), "A 'Vogue' Idea" (4.17), "Unoriginal Sin" (5.02), or "Great Sexpectations" (6.02) established names, sayings, book or film titles appear slightly altered.<sup>49</sup> Hence her humorous style is used in order to entertain a twofold audience: on the intradiegetic level the readership of her columns and on the extradiegetic level the television viewers. What is more, the main character's use of language (particularly in her voice-over) is employed as a means of self-portrayal to characterise her as an intelligent, perceptive, and sometimes sassy woman.

Carrie's chatty style of narrating is clearly reminiscent of women's magazines. Bignell identifies three elements which *Sex and the City* shares with women's

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invites the viewer to participate in a dialogue and shared laughter." (AKASS and McCABE. "Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle." 178)

45 In point-of-view shots "[t]he camera assumes the position of a character and shows the object of his or her gaze" (JAHN. "Guide to Narratological Film Analysis." F.3.8); cf. also ALLRATH et al. "Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series." 20.

46 Cf. AKASS and McCABE. "Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle." 178.

47 FRITSCH ("Serial Gossip." 160) claims that Carrie's voice-over "is anchored to writing". That the protagonist's voice-over is inseparably tied to her job as columnist for the *New York Star* and to New York becomes evident when Carrie quits her job in order to follow her lover, an artist, to Paris at the end of season 6 ("An American Girl in Paris (Part Une)", 6.19). At this point, the voice-over narration stops. It is not until the protagonist's return to Manhattan (at the end of episode 6.20, "An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux)") that the narration sets in again, which may indicate that Carrie has taken up her column again, although this is not confirmed in the visual track.

48 The protagonist can be seen drawing a newspaper out of a box on the street, flipping through the pages. When she has found what she has been looking for, the viewer can descry a picture of Carrie in the newspaper. Next to it there is the headline "Sex and the City". The article begins with the same words as the episode ("Once upon a time"), and Carrie explains: "I explore these sorts of issues in my column and I have terrific sources: my friends."

49 Cf. AKASS and McCABE. "Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle." 186.

magazine discourse: “the trope of confession, the centrality of sexuality as the key to the expression of identity, and commodity fetishism”.<sup>50</sup> Each episode raises a new issue, which is also characteristic of women’s magazine discourse. Paired with the conversations of the four protagonists, Carrie’s voice-over perpetuates “the assumption that feminine identity is a perpetual struggle with dissatisfaction about oneself”; the overall aim is to enter “the process of learning and self-improvement”.<sup>51</sup> Sexual satisfaction is one of the aims defined in women’s magazines as well as in *Sex and the City*: “The prospects of sexual pleasure, or worry about the unavailability of sex, are themes that consistently recur, and the assumption that identities of characters are expressed through their sexuality is fundamental to the four women’s sense of themselves”.<sup>52</sup> Last (but not least), Carrie’s preoccupation with designer brands of shoes or clothes is another *leitmotif* of both the series and her voice-over.<sup>53</sup> It is not presented without a certain degree of self-deprecating irony, however: “There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of women like this in the city. We all know them, and we all agree they’re great. They travel. They pay taxes. They’ll spend \$400 on a pair of Manolo Blahnik strappy sandals. And they’re alone.” (1.01)<sup>54</sup> At the same time commodity fetishism is applied in order to present the protagonist as an ‘It-girl’ (or rather woman) and a trendsetter,<sup>55</sup> and to identify her as a member of New York’s social elite. Reminiscent of the discourse of women’s magazines, but also of the long-standing stereotype that women are interested in gossip, *Sex and the City* picks up the issue of gossip as another motif. Therefore, gossip strategies play an eminent role in the series, i. e. in the way Carrie obtains and passes down information.<sup>56</sup> The four protagonists only rarely talk behind each other’s backs, but in her columns Carrie is processing private information she gets from her friends, even though there are occasional hints that she conceals

50 BIGNELL. “Gender Representations.” 164–67.

51 BIGNELL. “Gender Representations.” 165.

52 BIGNELL. “Gender Representations.” 165.

53 Anna KÖNIG even poses the question: “*Sex and the City: A Fashion Editor’s Dream?*” (KÖNIG, Anna. “*Sex and the City: A Fashion Editor’s Dream?*” In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Sex and the City*. London/New York: Tauris, 2004. 130–43. 130)

54 Cf. also the episode “A Woman’s Right to Shoes” (6.09). Cf. ARTHURS, Jane. “*Sex and the City* and the Consumer Culture. Remediating Postfeminist Drama.” In: *Feminist Media Studies* 3,1 (2003): 83–98.

55 This extends to the extradiegetic world: Sarah Jessica Parker, who plays Carrie Bradshaw, owes her reputation as a fashion icon primarily to her role in the series.

56 FRITSCH (“Serial Gossip.” 154) identifies gossip as the dominant narrative strategy of *Sex and the City*, which “fulfils various functions including that of a repository of urban myths, a source of comparative information, a tool for fashioning the self-image of characters, and a narrative device.” Except for single episodes, however, gossip is rarely a topic, e. g. “The Cold War” (6.17), in which Samantha aggressively fights rumours that her boyfriend is homosexual and Miranda’s secret passion for gossip magazines is revealed.

their identities or those of her dates. She, for instance, employs a pseudonym ('Mr Big') for one of her love interests, whose identity is not revealed until the very last moments of the final episode. Occasionally her friends have to swear her to secrecy, for instance, when Charlotte tells her about an awkward sexual experience ("Secret Sex", 1.06).

Since Carrie can only relate what she herself has experienced or what she has been told by her friends, she is a rather unreliable narrator, although her voice-over is always corroborated by the visual track. Her voice-over, it seems, has a lead over the visual. She is unreliable in so far as she probably does not want to come off too bad because her columns are published to a broader audience. In that respect it is possible that she has ulterior motives and polishes up some of her stories in order to render them more interesting because

[a]s a journalist and narrator, Carrie speculates on the private motives behind interesting behaviour and actions and (like an ethnologist) tries to link them to broader and more general patterns of behaviour, particularly regarding interpersonal relationships.<sup>57</sup>

In contrast to other television series, the locale of *Sex and the City* is of special relevance to the narrative. The main setting of *Sex and the City*, New York, is introduced via the visual channel; above all the opening credits in which famous New York buildings and landmarks appear alternately with shots of the protagonist: the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, Brooklyn Bridge and up to 9/11 the World Trade Center. But also in the episodes themselves parts and buildings of New York appear regularly. It is not only on the visual track where 'the city' plays an important role: In the protagonists' discourse and, even more so, in Carrie's voice-over the importance and distinctiveness of New York (and Manhattan in particular) is emphasised, sometimes by a romantic idealisation (e.g. "I ♥ NY", 4.18, "Anchors Away", 5.01) or by comparing New York to other American cities (e.g. Los Angeles in "Sex and Another City", 3.14), international cities (e.g. Paris in "An American Girl in Paris (Part Une)" and "An American Girl in Paris (Part Deux)", 6.19 and 20), or life in the country ("Sex and the Country", 4.9). Thus Carrie's discourse is informed by her self-concept as an urbanite New Yorker and the stories she relates are said to be typical of this city and no place else. Once again the voice-over narration in the pilot episode serves as a case in point:

Once upon a time an English journalist came to New York [...] Elizabeth was attractive and bright and right away she hooked up with one of the city's typically eligible bachelors. [...] They met one evening, in typical New York fashion at a gallery opening [...] It was love at first sight [...] For two weeks they snuggled, went to romantic

57 FRITSCH. "Serial Gossip." 163.

restaurants, had wonderful sex and shared their most intimate secrets. [...] When she hadn't heard from him in two weeks, she called. He said he was up to his ears and that he'd call her the next day. 'He never did call, of course. Bastard.' She told me one day over coffee. 'I don't understand. In England, looking at houses together would have meant something.' Then I realized no one had told her about the end of love in Manhattan. (1.01, "Sex and the City")

Not only does this short opening sequence of the very first episode establish the locale, but it also introduces a female perspective on life in Manhattan. There are "the city's typically eligible bachelors", the couple meet "in typical New York fashion", and it is "the end of love in Manhattan". Right from the start New York is established as a place where romance – at least from a woman's point of view – is dead. The beginning of the pilot episode is reminiscent of a fairy tale<sup>58</sup> (which is corroborated by non-diegetic sounds). In combination with intermedial references to the classics *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and *An Affair to Remember* (1957) (both romantic films set in New York, episode 1.01) or *The Way We Were* (1973, "Ex and the City", 2.18), Carrie's slightly ironic commentary makes it clear that New York has its own dating and relationship rules. But her voice-over is reminiscent of another famous New Yorker storyteller: Her being a "neurotic, insecure, hyper-reflective writer-protagonist, the obsession with relationships, the talking back to the camera and other stylistic visual devices which frequently romanticise Manhattan"<sup>59</sup> brings her into the immediate vicinity of Woody Allen and his 'nervous romances',<sup>60</sup> thus joining the tradition of self-absorbed New York tales about relationships.

It has become evident that Carrie Bradshaw's voice-over in *Sex and the City* assumes manifold forms and functions. Apart from rather conventional functions such as establishing the setting and the theme of individual episodes, the voice-over in *Sex and the City* transcends conventions in so far as it broaches the issue of sexuality and relationships in a manner hitherto unknown. What was private before goes public in the protagonist's columns, which are inseparably connected to the voice-over narration and which explore "different narrative forms, often associated with women, to create new associations".<sup>61</sup> Regarding the representation of gender, *Sex and the City* can be argued "to perpetuate dis-

58 AKASS and McCABE ("Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle." 185) state that by "often adopting language associated with fairy tales, movie romance or other feminine fictions, her [Carrie's, S.H.] commentaries set up expectations that offer a playful perspective on what we see". The narrative mode of a princess fairy tale also hints at the column's (as well as the series') target audience: women.

59 GROCHOWSKI, Tom. "Neurotic in New York: The Woody Allen Touches in *Sex and the City*." In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Sex and the City*. London/New York: Tauris, 2004. 149 – 160. 149.

60 Cf. GROCHOWSKI. "Neurotic in New York." 160.

61 AKASS and McCABE. "Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle." 186.

courses about women's narcissistic self-absorption, the focus on heterosexual sex as the barometer of personal and social success, and the normalisation of commodity fetishism".<sup>62</sup>

#### IV. The Female Voice From Heaven: The Omniscient Narrator in *Desperate Housewives*

It's an odd thing to look back on the world, to watch those I left behind, each in her own way so brave, so determined, and so very desperate.  
(1.23, "One Wonderful Day")

Like *Sex and the City* the extraordinarily successful 'family drama'<sup>63</sup> *Desperate Housewives*, which has aired on ABC (American Broadcasting Company) since October 2004, belongs to those female *zeitgeist* series whose "characters and plots are discussed in the wider culture".<sup>64</sup> The appeal of *Desperate Housewives* for viewers and professional critics lies in its hybridity, which makes it possible to access the show on many different levels: "Social satire or trashy soap opera, ironic camp or damning indictment; beguiling and reactionary, peculiarly compelling and absolutely horrifying. The retro-cool, Lynchian overtones, bleakly comedic, anti-, pre- or post-feminist feel to it [...]".<sup>65</sup> Having been commercially successful right from the beginning, the series soon enraged family value campaigners like *Concerned Women for America*, who condemned the show for "treating infidelity as comedy and sex as gratuitous".<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless the series is among the shows with the highest audience ratings on its network and has not forfeited any of its popularity in its sixth year running. So far it has received several awards, among them a 2006 Golden Globe in the category "Best Television Series – Musical or Comedy", a 2005 People's Choice Award for

62 BIGNELL. "Gender Representations." 171.

63 Like *Sex and the City* *Desperate Housewives* is hard to place within the established genre canon. It has elements of the soap opera (e.g. the episodic pattern, cf. COWARD, Rosalind. "Still Desperate: Popular Television and the Female Zeitgeist." In: Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.). *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*. London: Tauris, 2006. 31–47. 36) as well as drama, comedy and crime series.

64 COWARD. "Still Desperate." 31.

65 AKASS, Kim and Janet McCABE. "Introduction: Airing the Dirty Laundry." In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*. London: Tauris, 2006. 1–14. 1.

66 A brief overview of the criticism can be found in AKASS and McCABE. "Introduction: Airing the Dirty Laundry." 6–8.

“Favorite Television Drama”, a Banff Rookie Award for “Best Continuing Series” in 2005 as well as several awards for actors’ performances.<sup>67</sup>

*Desperate Housewives* is set in Wisteria Lane in the suburbs of the fictitious town of Fairview, a seemingly perfect place to live and bring up children. The protagonists are four housewives, Bree Van de Kamp (Marcia Cross), Lynette Scavo (Felicity Huffman), Susan Mayer (Teri Hatcher) and Gabrielle Solis (Eva Longoria Parker). Occasionally (more frequently from the second season onwards) the foursome is joined by the man-eating Edie Britt (Nicolette Sheridan), and in the fourth season Katherine Mayfair (Dana Delany) moves to Wisteria Lane. A seventh ‘housewife’ is – most of the time – visually missing: Mary Alice Young (Brenda Strong), the voice-over narrator, who introduces herself at the beginning of the pilot episode in the following manner:

My name is Mary Alice Young. When you read this morning’s paper, you may come across an article about the unusual day I had last week. Normally there isn’t anything newsworthy in my life, but that all changed last Thursday. [...] I spent the day as I spent every other day, quietly polishing the routine of my life until it gleamed with perfection. That’s why it was so astonishing when I decided to go to my hallway closet and retrieve a revolver that had never been used. (1.01, “Pilot”)

As already insinuated above, what distinguishes *Desperate Housewives* from other voice-narrated audiovisual narratives is that its speaker Mary Alice Young tells her tale from the grave:<sup>68</sup> In the very first episode she commits suicide, only to take on the role as an omniscient voice-over narrator “commenting in dulcet tones each week on the trials and tribulations of her neighbours”,<sup>69</sup> exuding “calm authority and composed wisdom”.<sup>70</sup> Like Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City*, Mary Alice helps ease the transition between scenes. But, more importantly,

67 In 2005, Teri Hatcher received a Golden Globe for “Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series – Musical or Comedy”; in the same year Felicity Huffman was awarded an Emmy in the category “Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series”. Further awards are the Screen Actors Guild Award for “Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series” (2005, 2006), for “Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in Comedy Series” (Teri Hatcher in 2005, Felicity Huffman in 2006).

68 In classical cinema few disembodied voice-overs can be found, especially in terms of women’s voices. Kaja SILVERMAN traced one example: Addie in *A Letter to Three Wives* (SILVERMAN, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988. 48–49). A dead male narrator can be heard in *American Beauty* (1999), where the protagonist Lester Burnham posthumously narrates the story of his last days; cf. Verena-Susanna Nungesser’s contribution to this volume. TV series in which dead characters start to speak (and interact with other characters) include *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005) and *Pushing Daisies* (2007–2008).

69 AKASS and McCABE. “Introduction: Airing the Dirty Laundry.” 3.

70 JERMYN, Deborah. “Dying to tell you something: Posthumous Narration and Female Omniscience in *Desperate Housewives*.” In: Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (eds.). *Reading Desperate Housewives: Beyond the White Picket Fence*. London: Tauris, 2006. 169–79. 173.

she also frames the story: Each episode starts with her prologue, “often a pithy tale about the misplaced values of Suburbia”, in which she introduces the overall theme or picks up storylines from previous episodes, and ends with her epilogue, “often extracting some sage lessons based on what we’ve seen or tantalisingly pointing to the next twist in the tale”.<sup>71</sup>

The narrative structure of *Desperate Housewives* is established in the pilot episode. In her first voice-over the viewers can hear Mary Alice introducing herself and describing her last day (see quote above), while they are watching a woman who can be identified as Mary Alice doing the things the voice is narrating, the last thing being her holding a gun to her forehead and pulling the trigger. By committing suicide Mary Alice becomes the invisible storyteller who has to remind the viewer of her condition from time to time (“when I was alive”, “before my death”, etc.).<sup>72</sup> She vanishes as a visible character (except for flashbacks, photographs and dream sequences), and is only present via her voice. Although Mary Alice at one point belonged to the intradiegetic level of the story, she is no longer part of this world; she is situated outside of the action, and now seems omniscient with respect to what is going on in the lives of the people she left behind. Furthermore, she possesses a heightened sensitivity to her former neighbours’ emotional states and thoughts (“Yes, Gabrielle Solis knew without a doubt, she didn’t want to be a mother, but what she couldn’t know was just how much her husband wanted to be a father or that he’d been tampering with her birth control for months or that within one week’s time she’d be pregnant”, 1.18, “Children Will Listen”).

In order to be able to localise Mary Alice it is necessary to distinguish between two intradiegetic levels of the story: the world of the living (story level), and the world of the dead (intradiegetic discourse level),<sup>73</sup> which makes Mary Alice a heterodiegetic narrator,<sup>74</sup> who is “given a kind of free-floating bodiless status, ‘a voice from on-high’”.<sup>75</sup> Because of her death she has become omniscient and appears to be able to see behind her former neighbours’ façade, into their thoughts and dreams, which she relates from a non-specified place from where she can see and hear everything (see below). Unlike the female protagonists of

71 JERMYN. “Dying to tell you something.” 173.

72 Cf. the beginning of Season Two (2.01, “Next”): “It had been a year since my death and a lot had changed in Wisteria Lane.”

73 The latter must not be confused with the extradiegetic discourse level of the filmic composition device.

74 Even ALLRATH et al. forget about the possibility of heterodiegetic voice-over narration, but discuss only “host-narrator[s]”, “on-screen heterodiegetic narrator[s] who [...] [are] intermittently visible to the viewers while narrating and, thus, [are] both acoustically and visually present.” (ALLRATH et al. “Introduction: Towards a Narratology of TV Series.” 15)

75 STAM, Robert, Robert BURGOYNE and Sandy FLITTERMAN-LEWIS. *New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics*. London/New York: Routledge, 1992. 100.

*Sex and the City*, the women in Wisteria Lane do not tell each other everything; instead, they hide private matters from each other, conceal their ulterior motives and sometimes lie, which is, of course, debunked by their deceased friend: “Yes, each new day in Suburbia brings with it a new set of lies” (“Impossible”, 1.15).<sup>76</sup>

One of Mary Alice’s tasks is introducing the audience to the setting and the main characters. It is remarkable that she does this on a rather unusual occasion: “I was laid to rest on a Monday. After the funeral all the residents of Wisteria Lane came to pay their respects.” (“Pilot”, 1.01) In this short sequence the narrator specifies the main setting of the series, a suburban street with nicely painted houses and neat gardens, which was already shown in the first shot of the pilot episode. During this descriptive commentary, we see a wide-shot filmed from above, displaying people dressed in black approaching what seems to be the Young house. In the following, Mary Alice identifies the main characters, whom she introduces with short flashbacks on their way to her wake. Not only does this introductory information serve to point out the female protagonists (most certainly the audience – due to the name of the series – expects two or more women), but it also anticipates the potential for conflicts which shapes their relationships. One after another, they are introduced by Mary Alice, who takes a particular interest in the food the four women are bringing to her wake, linking the type of food to their characters. Her neighbour Lynette Scavo, for instance, brings fried chicken, which, according to the voice-over, she would not have had the time to prepare a couple of years ago, when she had a very busy job in an advertising agency. Now that she is a stay-at-home mother with four children she still has no time for preparing a meal, so she has to buy the fried chicken at a fast-food restaurant. While Mary Alice is providing this information – not without subtle irony – Lynette’s life is depicted in flashbacks: Lynette giving a presentation in her former job, her husband suggesting she should stop working while she is having her first ultrasound scan, and her forced smile at the thought of quitting her job. On the way to the wake Lynette looks stressed out, pushing a stroller while balancing the plate with the fried chicken and admonishing her three sons to behave themselves at the Youngs’ house. Although it is not explicitly mentioned in the voice-over by Mary Alice, but insinuated by her ironic undertone, the viewer is already suspecting that Lynette might not be very happy with her life as a housewife.

Another important function of the voice-over narration in *Desperate Housewives* is to create suspense. Mary Alice provides additional information the viewer cannot get from the visual track or the intradiegetic sound track: When her son Zachary is woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of a

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76 While in *Sex and the City* friends are a substitute family, friendship in *Desperate Housewives* always comes second after family ties.

shovel being used, she comments: “The sound that awakened my son was something he had heard only once before many years ago when he was quite young. But he recognized it instantly.” (“Pilot”, 1.01) While Mary Alice is narrating, a much younger Zach can be seen as he is walking down the stairs, leaving the house for the garden and catching sight of his father, who has drained the pool and is presently digging a hole into its floor. His reasons for doing this are not specified, but Mary Alice creates further suspense when she says: “It was the sound of a family secret.” (ibid.)

Another example of the creation of suspense through voice-over narration is the mystery of why Mary Alice has killed herself. Not giving away her secret, she only alludes to certain things, often misleading the viewer with ambiguous information. Sometimes she directly responds to what is being said on the intradiegetic story level. When her old friends clear out her wardrobe, Gabrielle notices that Mary Alice lied about her clothes size and believes that “we found the skeleton in her closet”. The narrator immediately contradicts this statement: “Not quite, Gabrielle, not quite”, thus insinuating that there are much darker secrets to be brought to light. In contrast to the characters on the story level the audience knows that there is a dark secret surrounding Mary Alice’s suicide, although the nature of the secret has not been revealed yet. Thus, the voice-over narrator increases suspense, firstly as to what her secret might be, and secondly as to how the mystery will be solved by the remaining characters. Moreover, it is the narrator’s task to set up the cliff-hanger (a sort of teaser encouraging the audience to tune in again for the following episode). Although the voice-over provides closure to each episode, it already hints at swelling conflicts, storylines transcending the episodes and new mysteries. For instance, at the end of the first season’s finale Mary Alice introduces the Applewhite family, who has moved to Wisteria Lane in the middle of the night, obviously keen on hiding something from their new neighbours.

As already mentioned, it is never quite clarified from where Mary Alice is speaking, but there are certain hints as to what her perspective on her former neighbours is like. Interestingly, those hints are not given by Mary Alice herself, but by the distinctive camera movement while she is speaking. After the opening credits, the camera moves in from high-angled shots above Wisteria Lane down to single houses or characters, “as if Mary Alice, in communion with the camera, were moving down from the heavens to accompany us into the scene”.<sup>77</sup> Analogously, at the end of an episode the camera often zooms out again, while Mary Alice is finishing her narrative. Another audiovisual device suggests that she is talking from higher grounds: After each “Previously on...”, in which she

77 JERMYN. “Dying to tell you something.” 175. This is sometimes even furnished with angelic choir music. Cf. ibid.

summarises the relevant storylines from past episodes, and before her opening prologue, there is a fade to white, although the dominant televisual convention is a fade to black. Deborah Jermyn holds that the white screen was consciously chosen, as it “carries with it connotations of the celestial, suggesting the movement towards a bright light that survivors of near-death and out-of-body experiences often describe, making Mary Alice’s ‘presence’ oddly visible”.<sup>78</sup> What is more, in visions or dreams of her former friends she often can be seen bathed in a white light; for instance when she appears to the overwrought Lynette and gives her a gun (“Guilty”, 1.08). She seems to be omnipotent in so far as she can trigger flashbacks; on the visual track the scenes matching her narrative are shown. Sometimes she even appears as a character on the story level, if the flashback is set prior to her death. In addition she makes it very clear that she knows what the future will bring (“From where I stand now I see enough of the road to understand how it must be travelled.” 2.23, “Remember”), but that she cannot partake in the action and tip off the bereaved (“If I could, would I tell them what lies ahead, would I warn them of the sorrow and betrayal that lie in store?” *ibid.*). It becomes obvious that the two worlds are firmly separated.

Mary Alice’s role as voice-over narrator changes in the course of the series. When the mystery surrounding her past and her suicide is solved at the end of season one, Mary Alice gradually becomes less entangled with the stories which she relates. This entanglement decreases even more when her husband Paul and her son Zachary leave Wisteria Lane and do not appear in the series anymore.<sup>79</sup> Only in passing she alludes to the fact that in her lifetime she also was a wife and mother like her friends she is watching now. Thus, Mary Alice’s role becomes more and more that of a reporter or commentator. But although the overarching storyline of season one is the mystery of her suicide, she always remains emotionally detached and distanced in her meandering voice-over and “never seems hugely interested in divulging th[e] information” concerning her criminal past, all the while holding “all the answers to the mystery”.<sup>80</sup>

Instead she exhibits a marked interest in all matters domestic and private happening in Wisteria Lane, which is also the primary focus of *Desperate Housewives*. Mary Alice explains: “Suburbia is a battleground, an arena for all forms of domestic combat” (1.6, “Running to Stand Still”), and that is exactly her point of interest: the look behind fake family idylls in a microcosm where everybody believes they know their neighbours. Behind the white picket fence

78 JERMYN. “Dying to tell you something.” 174.

79 Up to the end of the second season Paul as well as Zach Young belonged to the regular cast. In season three both appear occasionally, only to vanish completely by episode 3.13 (“Come Play Wiz Me”) and 3.15 (“The Little Things You Do Together”) respectively.

80 JERMYN. “Dying to tell you something.” 176.

the women of *Desperate Housewives*, dead and alive, surreptitiously rejoice in the others' failures and flaws, as the posthumous narrator puts in plain words:

Yes, everyone loves a scandal, no matter how big or small. After all, what could be more entertaining than watching the downfall of the high and mighty. What could be more amusing than the public exposure of hypocritical sinners. Yes, everyone loves a scandal, and if for some reason you're not enjoying the latest one, well, the next one is always around the corner. (1.16, "The Ladies Who Lunch")

Even more so than in *Sex and the City*, gossip is identified as one of the favourite pastimes of women in *Desperate Housewives*, thus corroborating the notion that gossip is an exclusively female phenomenon.<sup>81</sup> Not only is this indicated by Mary Alice's gossipy voice-over style, but it is also her former friends meeting once a week for a poker game, a cocktail and the latest tittle-tattle (someone's alleged marital or financial problems, substance-abuse issues, homosexuality, etc.).<sup>82</sup> Hence, gossip functions as the glue which holds together the social structure of the suburban microcosm; and even after her suicide Mary Alice is still part of this very contained world.

Despite her interest in rumours, Mary Alice is – once again contrary to *Sex and the City* – a reliable narrator. In fact, from her omniscient position she is able to confirm or refute the validity of her friends' outrageous stories and to look behind their façades, although she often withholds information from the audience (see above). Her being dead apparently eliminates any ulterior motives she might have had when she was alive, e. g. concealing that Zach is not her real son and the murder of his birth mother. Her integrity is not even compromised by the fact that she turns out to be a murderer: "Even the revelation about her deadly secret in the series finale [of season one; S.H.] does not discredit the truth of the observations on suburban life she has shared with us for the previous 22 episodes."<sup>83</sup>

In a nutshell, it can be reasoned that the narrative situation in *Desperate Housewives* is "quite without parallel in the history of television, for the manner in (and degree to) which it privileges female subjectivity, knowledge and ownership of the text".<sup>84</sup> The voice-over narration provided by Mary Alice Young is exceedingly multi-faceted and serves various functions within the series: the

81 Interestingly enough, this is challenged when Dr. Rex Van de Kamp, Bree's husband, who died from a heart attack in the first season's finale, takes over the voice-over narration (and its functions) for one episode ("My Husband, the Pig", 3.16), which focuses on the men of Wisteria Lane: "The place hasn't changed much since I left: as tasteful and tidy as ever. Everything perfect. At least, on the surface. My family was the same way."

82 As FRITTSCH ("Serial Gossip." 156) states for *Sex and the City*, "[t]alk among female friends while doing something else is a typical feature of gossip."

83 JERMYN. "Dying to tell you something." 176.

84 JERMYN. "Dying to tell you something." 169.

manifold tasks of the voice-over narrator include the introduction of the characters and the setting, the creation of suspense (e. g. providing cliff-hangers) as well as giving additional information, but also putting a distance between her story and the audience. In this respect it is not merely the content of her narrative, but above all the quality of her voice while narrating which is significant: “It’s her voice, in conjunction with image, which provides and enhances irony, humour, pleasure, insight and suspense”.<sup>85</sup> Her privileged position outside the story (in other words, her being dead) renders her an omniscient narrator, which leads to her reliability as a narrator. It is due to *Desperate Housewives*’ privileging a pronounced female perspective and female subjectivity that the show can be called a ‘female *zeitgeist* series’.

## V. Conclusion

As Susan Lanser points out, “the privileged status of narrators vis-à-vis narrated characters” has often been noted by narratologists with respect to literary texts;<sup>86</sup> fortunately, this has become true for audiovisual narratives as well. But taking into account the multimodality characteristic of television series and films, the literary narrator cannot be put on the same level as an audiovisual narrating agency. It is of vital importance to distinguish between an (obligatory) filmic composition device and an optional voice-over narrator. The consequences arising from this distinction for a gender-sensitive examination of voice-over in television series have been at the centre of the two analyses of *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*.

What should have become clear is that television series like *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* are sites for negotiating identity, which is inevitably shaped by issues of gender.<sup>87</sup> Juxtaposing two contemporary television series in the manner employed in this paper reveals some remarkable parallels but even more striking differences in the way female voice-over narration can be applied. It is possible to derive distinct categories for female voice-over narration in audiovisual media in general and television series in particular from what was said above. First of all, it is indispensable to take a closer look at the position of the voice-over narrator in the narrative: is the narrator part of the story or is she outside the fictional world? By dint of narratological categories such as heterodiegetic, homodiegetic or autodiegetic the tagging of the voice-over narrator’s

85 JERMYN. “Dying to tell you something.” 169.

86 LANSER. “Sexing Narratology.” 171.

87 Cf. NIEBERLE, Sigrid and Elisabeth STROWICK. “Narrating Gender: Einleitung.” In: Sigrid Nieberle and Elisabeth Strowick (eds.). *Narration und Geschlecht: Texte – Medien – Episteme*. Köln/Weimar/Wien: Böhlau, 2006. 7 – 19. 7.

status becomes easier. But it should not be forgotten that a series' idiosyncrasies always need to be taken into account: classifying Mary Alice as heterodiegetic narrator clearly falls short of the particular case of voice-over narration in *Desperate Housewives*. This leads to another imperative category: the degree to which the narrator is involved in the action; could she have ulterior motives for rendering her narrative in a particular manner? This question is linked to the voice-over narrator's reliability (or lack thereof). Carrie Bradshaw's voice-over, for example, is consistent with her column, which is published in the fictional world of *Sex and the City*, allowing the conjecture that a certain amount of self-manifestation and attention-seeking inform the voice-over narration.<sup>88</sup>

Of course, it is also necessary to draw conclusions about the character of the narrator from the voice-over: Not only does the content of what she says permit a characterisation, but also *how* she puts it, i. e. the narrative form or strategies, offer information about the narrator. When Carrie Bradshaw frames her stories in fairy-tale form, we are able to discern both the romantic plot pattern of *Sex and the City* and its being ironically broken down. The contents of the voice-over narration shed light on the issues which are important to a certain series: Questions such as 'Are the topics typically ascribed to women?' 'How is a topic approached (e. g. sexuality, motherhood etc.)?' are relevant in that respect. Last but not least it is essential to zoom in on the particular function of the voice-over narrator within the serial narrative. The conceptualisation of the narrator may range from being a mere moderator-narrator, who just introduces different spatial and temporal settings, to being a narrator with multiple functions including creating suspense, dismantling of feigned family idylls, providing comic relief and irony with respect to the issues addressed.

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88 Obviously these aspects always play a certain role on the extradiegetic level of the narrative, as it is always important to get the viewer's attention.

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## **Part II: Gender and Genre**



## (En)Gendering Laughter: The Representation of Gender Roles in the Sitcom

### I. Introduction

Since the middle of the twentieth century, television has become a medium of increasing cultural significance in Western societies. Today television rivals (and perhaps even surpasses) the newspaper as primary source of information and it has acquired the leading position as far as providing entertainment is concerned. The role television plays for everyday life is reflected in the fact that for many people “[t]elevision watching occupies more time than all other leisure pursuits combined and ranks with working and sleeping as time-consuming activities”.<sup>1</sup> Audiences do not just consume television programmes passively; people also tend to talk about what they watch. Similar to talk about the weather or the latest football results, “conversation about television programmes is a routine and taken-for-granted aspect of everyday social interaction”.<sup>2</sup>

Given the fact that television constitutes an integral part of everyday life for many people, one may assume that popular programmes are likely to have an enormous impact on people, on their values and norms. This is why the depiction of violence and rude behaviour/language on TV has often been blamed for a perceived loss of values and for the increase of aggressive behaviour among children and teenagers.<sup>3</sup> The question of just how extensive the influence of TV on people’s values and norms might possibly be is addressed by Morreale:

Television, like all forms of social discourse, helps to shape not only beliefs, values, and attitudes, but also subjectivities, people’s sense of themselves and their place in the

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1 ABERCROMBIE, Nicholas. *Television and Society*. Cambridge: Polity, 1996. 3.

2 ABERCROMBIE. *Television and Society*. 3.

3 Of course, it is all too easy to bash television if things go awry in society. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the role of the scapegoat has recently been largely transferred from television to another medium, namely computer/video games. The latter – and especially the First-Person Shooter – are inevitably blamed whenever a kid or young adult has run amok. Assigning the responsibility for such terrible events solely to video games and/or television, however, falls short of identifying the complex reasons for violence by a long way.

world. Television portrays ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’ social relations, defines norms and conventions, provides ‘common sense’ understandings, and articulates the preoccupations and concerns that define particular historical moments.<sup>4</sup>

The ongoing discussion about the effects television may or may not have on its audience centres mainly on programmes that challenge social norms and acceptable behaviour – through strong language, violence or political incorrectness. Yet “[t]elevision exists, on the whole, to offend as few people as possible. Because of the mass nature of the medium, it is likely that ideologies which are seen to be representative of the majority of viewers are those which are most common”, as Mills points out.<sup>5</sup> Since privately owned TV channels generally rely on their ratings (or, more specifically, on the revenues generated by commercials) they certainly do not seek to alienate viewers. Thus, those responsible for the programmes often seem to strike a balance between providing titillating entertainment and trying not to offend people by showing provocative content.

Since sitcoms constitute one of the most popular formats television has brought forth, the statement by Morreale quoted above may definitely be applied to this genre. But before taking a closer look at the impact the sitcom may have on society, some basic characteristics of this genre have to be sketched. Ever since its beginnings in the radio days, the sitcom (short for ‘situation comedy’) has been able to attract huge audiences. In the mid-1970s, for instance, eight of the ten top-rating shows in the USA were sitcoms,<sup>6</sup> and the success story of the sitcom continues; in the 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium shows such as *Friends* (1994–2004) and *Seinfeld* (1990–1998) were watched by millions of viewers. Admittedly, for every ‘blockbuster sitcom’ there are dozens that do not even make it into their second season, but it is still true that in “the medium of television, the sitcom has proven to be the most popular genre. Year after year, sitcoms appear in the top-ten ratings”.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the potential influence of the sitcom on what people regard as ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ behaviour should not be underestimated; it is exactly the “mass nature of the sitcom [that] is responsible for the impressive social effect it can have”.<sup>8</sup>

It is easy enough to pin down the principal aim of the sitcom: it is supposed to make people laugh. Perhaps it is because it caters primarily to the basic human

4 MORREALE, Joanne. “Introduction: On the Sitcom.” In: Joanne Morreale (ed.). *Critiquing the Sitcom*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003. xi–xix. xi.

5 MILLS, Brett. *Television Sitcom*. London: British Film Institute, 2005. 146.

6 Cf. HORWITZ, Susan. “Sitcom Domesticus – A Species Endangered by Social Change.” In: Horace Newcomb (ed.). *Television: The Critical View*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. 106–11. 106.

7 STAIGER, Janet. *Blockbuster TV. Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era*. New York/London: New York University Press, 2000. 2.

8 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 152.

need to laugh that the sitcom has not been regarded as part of 'high culture' and thus traditionally has not received much academic attention. This has changed in the course of the last decade, however, when the content and history of the sitcom have been explored in a number of books and articles. One of the issues addressed in discussions of the sitcom is the relationship between the content of the sitcom and the viewers' reality, the society they live in; different cultures seem to bring forth different types of sitcoms, as Mills observes:

The comic force of characters such as David Brent [in the British series *The Office*] [...] lies in the gap between how they wish to be seen by others, and how they actually appear. It is their lack of self-awareness that's funny. This means that while American sitcom often invites us to laugh *with* its characters, Britcom instead offers the pleasure in us laughing *at* them.<sup>9</sup>

An all-encompassing definition of the sitcom, somewhat surprisingly, has yet to be found. Viewers seem to be able to identify a sitcom in an instant, but it is nearly impossible to find characteristics shared by *all* sitcoms. The features mentioned most frequently in this context include: a) a running time of about half an hour; b) the presence of a live audience in a studio during the production; c) the laugh-track; d) they are supposed to be amusing. Although these characteristics can be identified in many sitcoms, there are exceptions. The teenage sitcom *Clarissa Explains It All* (1991 – 1994), for example, was shot in a studio, but not in front of a live audience, and, as a consequence, the show does not feature a laugh-track. *Married with Children* (1987 – 1997) was not produced in the presence of an audience, either, but here a laugh track was added in post-production (so-called 'canned laughter'). *Scrubs* (2001-) is shot on location in an old hospital, which is very unusual for a sitcom, and it does not feature a laugh-track. Although *Scrubs* is primarily amusing, there are also scenes and even entire episodes that are melancholic and even tragic. The running time of individual episodes is not a fool-proof criterion, either, as the British show *Only Fools and Horses...* (1981 – 2003) demonstrates: Here, the length of episodes varies considerably; there are episodes of 30, 35, 50, 60, 65, 70, 75, 80, 85, 90 and 95 minutes.

As was pointed out above, television constantly projects values and notions that may shape the world view of the viewers, but that may of course also provoke criticism. If the content of a TV show is considered offensive by certain groups, conflicts are likely to erupt, as Mills puts it:

In most cases, problems occur because it's felt that media portrayals conform to limiting and outdated assumptions about people, based on such characteristics as race, age, gender, nationality and sexuality. This is the process known as stereotyping. [...] it

9 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 42.

is seen as feeding into understandings of people outside media, so that society makes assumptions about groups and individuals which fail to account for their complexity.<sup>10</sup>

Given the fact that “[g]ender, that is the feminine or the masculine, is not born into us but, rather, emerges as we develop and experience life”,<sup>11</sup> it is hardly surprising that television has also been seen as contributing to our notions of what it means to be feminine and masculine. Since the 1950s many studies have tried to prove that television is one of the social forces that have a say in the formation of gender concepts. The general results of these studies (at least until the mid-1980s) were summarised by Gunter in *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping* (1987). His analysis of television as a potential source for the process of learning about gender differences leads him to the following conclusion: “According to the results of investigations of television content over the last three decades there is good reason to be concerned about the kind of impact television portrayals might have on what people think about the sexes.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, so far at least, there is no reliable data that could help us decide to what extent the portrayal of male and female characters on television actually affects the viewers. Gunter sums up prevalent theories concerning the influence of TV on its viewers by pointing out:

It is assumed that mass audiences assimilate information, often incidentally, from television programmes, which may influence the way they think about the world around them. Continuous exposure to television may cultivate public beliefs about various social entities that are consonant with images of these entities portrayed on television. Thus, stereotyped television portrayals (and the ‘messages’ they convey) concerning sex roles may give rise to stereotyped beliefs about men and women especially among heavy viewers and those individuals whose beliefs on these matters are at an early stage of development (i. e., children).<sup>13</sup>

As can be seen in Gunter’s tentative formulations with many a ‘may’ and ‘assumed’, the exact terms of the correlation between television and gender stereotypes are far from certain. Other media critics are not as cautious as Gunter, however. Kaplan, for instance, criticises the assumptions put forward by Meehan:

Meehan’s model has serious problems. First, it represents the human consciousness as a tabula rasa upon which TV images are graven. Images are seen as models that viewers imitate because they ‘read’ them as real people. Second, it is assumed that this process of imitation is analogous to that which takes place in the family where the child models

10 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 103.

11 CAMPBELL, Neil and Alasdair KEAN. *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. 189–90.

12 GUNTER, Barrie. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. London/Paris: John Libbey, 1986. 5.

13 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 27.

its personality on that of its parents. What this view obviously leaves out is that fictive characters are *not* real people, and therefore viewers are forced to take a very different position toward them.<sup>14</sup>

It would indeed be simplistic to assume that the audience is a kind of ‘sponge’ that absorbs everything that is shown on TV. Kaplan acknowledges this critique in Robinson’s approach:

Robinson refuses to fall into Meehan’s trap of conceiving her audience as completely vulnerable to the images provided. She argues, rather, that women do not necessarily accept what they are shown, and that the images are merely ‘one of the factors that *influence* the consciousness of women’ but do not provide the whole story [...].<sup>15</sup>

For the following reasons it seems doubtful whether TV characters are ever really adopted as role models by the audience: firstly, they are fictional characters; secondly they are often too exaggerated to be taken seriously (especially in sitcoms, since exaggeration is one of the prime ways of producing comic effects). This implies that “the ways in which comedy is signalled to audiences, conventionally through performance excess, means that such a camp performance has a different meaning in a comic context from that which it might have in a serious drama”.<sup>16</sup> A *direct* influence of sitcom characters on the behaviour of the audience can more or less be ruled out. Nevertheless the humorous depiction of female and male characters in sitcoms for the sake of entertainment allows certain conclusions with respect to what is perceived as normal or normative, since what departs from norms may make the viewers laugh.

## II. The sitcom as an indication of social change

On the basis of what was argued above several conclusions concerning sitcoms can be drawn: Sitcoms are watched by large audiences and thus may be considered to have at least *some* impact on people. They tend to fall back on settings, characters and stories that are easily recognisable for the audience. To be perceived as amusing, at least some of the characters in sitcoms usually depart from acceptable social behaviour in general and from gender norms in particular. Often the characters correspond to ‘types’ that are regarded as funny. If one assumes that sitcoms draw at least part of their entertainment value from the discrepancy between the characters’ behaviour and accepted social norms, then the genre can be seen as an ‘archive’ of the development of social norms and

14 KAPLAN, E. Anne. “Feminist Criticism and Television.” In: Robert C. Allen (ed.). *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1987. 211–53. 222.

15 KAPLAN. “Feminist Criticism and Television.” 224.

16 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 109.

patterns of behaviour in the last few decades. This (unintentional) function of the sitcom is in fact recognised by Mills, who points out: “Sitcom has been a reflection of social changes, rather than an intervention into them. This means that it ‘has remarked upon almost every major development of postwar American history’ (Hamamoto, 1991, p. 2), and the same might be true of British series.”<sup>17</sup> What Mills suggests in a fairly general way is applied specifically to the issue of sexuality by Levine, who also addresses the role television (and especially the sitcom) may play with respect to social change:

Because comedy has long been a staple of American television entertainment, and because the comedic treatment of sex was one major way that the medium constructed the new sexual culture, television’s sex with a laugh track is exceptionally revealing of the medium’s tendencies when it comes to social change.<sup>18</sup>

The relationship between television and social change, which Mills and Levine disagree upon, is highly complex. Since its early days, television has been under pressure from two opposing forces in society: on the one hand the defenders of the status quo – the conservative part of society – who want TV to promulgate certain values and norms and feel offended by deviations from these values and norms; on the other hand the groups that want TV to depart from traditional patterns and to depict what they see as reality. The latter are often advocates of the rights of a specific social group – for example ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian people. More often than not TV shows have fuelled heated debates between ‘conservatives’ and ‘lobbyists’.<sup>19</sup> Since television ideally wants to reach as large an audience as possible, programmes are usually tailored to suit the taste of the majority. Thus, television generally tends to be indicative of what is perceived as ‘normal’ by the majority. This tendency has been observed by Campbell and Kean for the early days of television:

Its mediation of the home tended to reinforce a precise set of values and beliefs that were firmly rooted in traditional patterns of family, home, gender, class and race. In this regard, television guards its own myths of family and resists any representation which is too extreme, problematic or controversial. This guarding of ideology was noticeable

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17 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 45.

18 LEVINE, Elana. *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2007. 207.

19 Depending on the social group a sitcom primarily aims at, the show may try to construct group identities, as MILLS (*Television Sitcom*. 11) explains: “Comedy often involves an understanding of who is ‘us’ and who is ‘them’, with ‘them’ often being the butt of jokes made by ‘us’. [...] In doing this, the comedy serves to construct a simplistic version of ‘us’ in which a variety of individual differences are glossed over for the group bonding to function successfully.”

in the early programming of domestic comedies which in many ways presented an ideal American family that stood for fundamental, almost sacred, beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

Since television is an omnipresent medium, it has often been criticised by those who feel ridiculed or at least not properly represented by it. Interest groups accuse TV of conveying wrong impressions about certain social groups.<sup>21</sup> In addition they want TV to spearhead social change by showing what the world *should* be like – a demand that is relativised by Fiske:

Social change does occur, ideological values do shift, and television is part of this movement. It is wrong to see it as an originator of social change, or even to claim that it ought to be so, for social change must have its roots in material social existence; but television can be, must be, part of that change, and its effectivity will either hasten or delay it.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, according to Fiske, TV in and of itself cannot initiate social change. But it can be instrumental in promulgating social change by exposing the viewers to ‘new ways’ and thereby familiarising the audience with new social developments. If television ignores social change and uses its huge public appeal to defend the status quo, it may actually hinder changes, as Fiske states. A third option for television is staying ‘neutral’, which means that social change is initiated in society and only picked up by television *after* its implementation. In this case, TV takes on the role of an ‘electronic canvas’ on which contemporary reality is projected.

What role TV plays with respect to social change ultimately is a matter of power, which raises the question of who decides whether TV shows support of changes in values and norms or not. The various ‘makers’ of TV – the networks, channels, producers, writers and creators – are dependent on the viewers’ approval, which is expressed in a show’s ratings. All the makers of TV can do is offer the audience a multitude of choices, and the viewers pick the ones they like best. Thus, only what appeals to many viewers will be continued, which suggests that TV is after all a rather democratic system.

The social power attributed to a show as far as initiating changes in terms of norms and values is concerned partially depends on the genre, as Mills points out with respect to the sitcom:

[...] the debate concerning sitcom and social power rests on the assumption that it *matters* that the genre conforms to power-based social structures, a concern far dis-

20 CAMPBELL and KEAN. *American Cultural Studies*. 275.

21 Examples of such interest groups in the USA include GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) and NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Cf. MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 102.

22 FISKE, John. *Television Culture*. London/New York: Routledge, 1987. 45.

proportionate to the social position which sitcom itself is seen to occupy by audiences and regulators; after all, it's only sitcom.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that sitcoms are extremely popular is sometimes seen as indicative of the inferiority of the genre; at the same time, the appeal of the sitcom makes the genre particularly interesting for groups who wish to use it as a vehicle for social change. The fact that comic effects constitute an integral part of the sitcom is probably an additional reason for the guardians of the status quo and their opponents alike to keep a close watch on this genre. Thus, Mills comes to the conclusion that the sitcom “can challenge social structures without being a high cultural form”.<sup>24</sup>

### III. Sitcoms and the representation of gender

The options for making sitcom characters amusing include presenting them as being at odds with accepted gender roles as well as exaggerating their gender-specific behaviour. One of the prerequisites for the success of a sitcom, as Mills puts it, is that its characters are perceived as entertaining right from the start, and not only after having been developed and fleshed out for half a season:

For the sitcom, whose primary intention is the creation of comedy, ‘immediacy is imperative, and to find a character immediately funny that character must be recognisable as a type, a representative embodiment of a set of ideas or a manifestation of a cliché’ (Medhurst and Tuck, 1982, p. 43).<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, most characters featured in sitcoms in fact embody clichés or types to a certain extent, as the following examples will illustrate. The depiction of typical and atypical masculine and feminine behaviour tells the viewers something about the society that indulges in watching the sitcom, as Mills points out:

In terms of representation [...] the genre has been read as a useful reflection of general social attitudes, with the growth and reduction of certain character types over time mirroring broader attitudes in society (or, perhaps more accurately, within the television industry which produces the series and the institutional bodies which regulate them).<sup>26</sup>

Of course, in order to map changing gender roles as portrayed by sitcoms, a diachronic analysis would be necessary, spanning decades’ worth of sitcoms and

23 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 153.

24 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 154.

25 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 7.

26 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 102.

the characters they feature. In this article, only a few examples can be drawn upon.

The sitcom *Two and a Half Men* (2003-) revolves around a male trio living under the same roof: While Charlie Harper (Charlie Sheen) is a hedonistic, rich, carefree and successful jingle writer, his brother Alan (Jon Cryer) is a repressed, hen-pecked, inflexible chiropractic wishing to please everyone around him. The 'half man' is Alan's son Jake, an average (although underachieving) boy who is ten years old in the first season and who likes his 'cool' uncle Charlie. In the bonus feature "In the Beginning" on the first DVD of season one, Sheen describes the character constellation of the show as "*The Odd Couple* with a kid", referring to a sitcom from the 1970s about two men with very different habits and attitudes sharing an apartment.<sup>27</sup> After having been thrown out by his wife Judith, Alan finds shelter in Charlie's big house on Malibu Beach. Thus, the 'family' in *Two and a Half Men* consists of two brothers and their son/nephew.<sup>28</sup> This constellation continues a trend observed by Mills from the 1970s onward: "Since then, the American (and British) sitcom has repeatedly centred on surrogate families, symbolising the fragmentary nature of the family in contemporary society."<sup>29</sup>

The characterisation of the main cast is established almost immediately in the first episode. After having moved in with his brother, Alan wants to know what Charlie's life is like ("Pilot"):

ALAN: Charlie, what about you? What's going on with you?

CHARLIE: Well, Alan, there's not much to say. I make a lot of money for doing very little work. I sleep with beautiful women who don't ask about my feelings. [laughter] I drive a Jag, I live at the beach ... and sometimes in the middle of the day, for no reason at all, I like to make myself a big pitcher of margaritas and take a nap out on the sundeck. [laughter]

What is interesting, besides the actual characterisation, is the fact that in this case Charlie himself is telling his brother as well as the audience how he ticks. The laughter after his reference to "women who don't ask about my feelings" indicates that the audience assumes that emotions and their expression in re-

27 *The Odd Couple* ran from 1970 – 1975 and featured Jack Klugman and Tony Randall.

28 EATON states that in the sitcom the "two basic situations used continually over the years are 'home' and 'work'. [...] it would seem that these basic situations provide material for the constant repetition of character and theme, and fit the economic demands of the company's budget in allowing for the use of stock sets, and little or no use of filmed footage." (EATON, Mick. "Television Situation Comedy." In: Tony Bennett et al. (eds.). *Popular Television and Film*. London: British Film Institute/Open University, 1981. 26 – 52. 34) Since Charlie's and Alan's jobs are only very rarely (if at all) of consequence to the storylines, *Two and a Half Men* could in this respect be regarded as an exception to the rule.

29 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 44.

relationships are characteristic of women, while men (whose ‘spokesperson’ Charlie is in this case) do not like to think or talk about what they are feeling.<sup>30</sup> Thus, gender stereotypes are called upon right from the beginning. While Charlie characterises himself early on in the first episode, Alan’s mindset is presented some minutes later by his wife Judith (“Pilot”):

ALAN: Judith, I can change.

JUDITH: Please, Alan. You’re the most rigid, inflexible, obsessive, anal-retentive man I’ve ever met. [laughter]

ALAN: Rigid and inflexible? Don’t you think that’s a little redundant? [laughter]

As is already apparent after just a few minutes into the first episode, the two brothers are complete opposites. Their very different approaches towards the upbringing of ten-year-old Jake, to relationships and to everyday life serve as the main source of the series’ comic effects.

One might at first assume that in this series Alan, with his neurotic ways, is always the butt of the jokes, while Charlie lives the hedonistic dream shared by many men, but this is not the case. Charlie and his way of life are also ridiculed on a regular basis, as in one of his first conversations with his nephew Jake (“Pilot”):

JAKE: How come you don’t have any kids?

CHARLIE: I don’t know. Maybe because I love me more than anything in the world. [laughter]

The reaction of the audience indicates that such egocentricity, in particular when it is voiced so openly, is either regarded as inappropriate in a grown man or is just what is to be expected of the type of character Charlie represents – the egoistic, spoiled, rich bachelor. In fact, much of the comedy in *Two and a Half Men* is produced by Charlie openly showing attributes that are indicative of a thoughtless and denigrating attitude towards women. Charlie regularly voices stereotypical assumptions about women – for instance when his brother asks him for his permission to stay with him for some time (“Pilot”):

ALAN: Look, okay, this is just until things settle out. A couple of days max. She will come to her senses.

CHARLIE: Yeah. That’s what women do. [laughter]

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30 The laugh track is an important device in several regards. MILLS (*Television Sitcom*. 14) describes one of the functions of the laugh track as follows: “Laughter is important to the sitcom not only because it is the genre’s intention, but because the use of studio audiences and canned laughter means that it is part of the text.” In other words: the viewers at home are provided not just with the original ‘action’ of the show but at the same time with the reaction of the live audience to it (or canned laughter), influencing the viewers’ reactions to specific scenes. For the analysis of a sitcom the laugh track is a valuable tool because it shows what the audience perceives as funny (or, in the case of canned laughter, what the producers think of as funny).

Charlie's ironical comment suggests that he does not regard women as being able of showing common sense in a situation that is emotionally charged. The laughter of the audience in this scene may result from two different reactions: Either Charlie's comment is seen as a ridiculous reiteration of an old prejudice, resulting in laughter *at* Charlie for voicing such an opinion, or the audience thinks this was a clever thing to say and agrees with him, laughing *with* him. Thus, it is difficult to judge whether laughter in scenes like the one quoted above is actually misogynist or not. As reiterating the stereotype of women being more emotional than men has become politically incorrect, the laughter may also result from the realisation that Charlie has just said something 'forbidden', that he has transgressed a borderline and voiced unabashedly what the men in the audience dare not say. If this is the case, Charlie has violated a norm, and (at least part of) the audience is enjoying it. In general, the violation of norms contributes in no small degree to sitcoms being perceived as amusing, as Mills points out: "An audience's reading of a sitcom depends on their ability to understand the norms presented by the programme while simultaneously finding pleasure in their destruction."<sup>31</sup>

As already demonstrated, Charlie is the epitome of the rich bachelor for whom a superficial relationship is desirable. What makes this character entertaining is that he has no qualms whatsoever regarding his behaviour and he talks unashamedly about it, but without being downright mean. When he wants to get rid of a flock of seagulls that have taken up residence in one of his rooms ("Big Flappy Bastards"), he explains his plan to his brother in the following way:

CHARLIE: We're gonna throw the bait out the window to lure the birds out of the house.

ALAN: Oh, that's pretty clever.

CHARLIE: Yeah, it's a variation on something I do with women and tennis bracelets.  
[laughter]

The laughter proves that the comparison does not have to be explained to the audience; the absurdity of Charlie using a tactic for getting rid of girlfriends in order to lure birds out of his house is grasped immediately. Charlie's superficial attitude towards women is reiterated time and again, generally evoking comic effects by means of stressing his desire to keep his female acquaintances at arm's length. When in the episode "Did You Check with the Captain of the Flying Monkeys?" one of his former lovers tries to call Charlie, his nephew Jake picks up the phone and later informs his uncle about the call:

JAKE: She wants you to call her back.

CHARLIE (ironically): Yeah, that'll happen. [laughter]

JAKE: Why not?

31 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 141.

CHARLIE: Because I never said I'd call her back. Remember this, Jake ... never make promises to women that you don't intend to keep. And you know how to do that?

JAKE: Always keep my promises?

CHARLIE: That might work. [laughter] A better way is: never make promises.

The trifecta 'Charlie-woman-unanswered calls' is picked up repeatedly in *Two and a Half Men*, obviously playing with the assumption that men (after the first night) often try to avoid further contact while women hope for a stable relationship. Much to Charlie's annoyance, he cannot always avoid running into old acquaintances, as his chance encounter with Olivia demonstrates, whose calls he of course never returned ("Did You Check with the Captain of the Flying Monkeys?"):

OLIVIA (furious): You said I was very special to you.

CHARLIE: You were.

OLIVIA: Yeah, me and three other women.

CHARLIE: I said you were special, not unique. [laughter]

OLIVIA: Drop dead, you bastard. (pours her drink into his face) [laughter]

Apart from the obvious wit in Charlie's reply, this scene draws much of its comical effect from the awkwardness of the situation as well as from the foreseeable result. That this scene is regarded as amusing by both women and men might be attributed to different perspectives, however: Men might envy the nonchalance Charlie shows with regard to the subject of having multiple relationships at the same time, whereas women might enjoy the humiliation he has to endure at the hands of Olivia. Such differences suggest that laughter in the sitcom may indeed be regarded as being 'gendered'. Both reactions, however, are based on the wish of male and female viewers to be able to act from time to time without caring about social conventions or about what others think. After all, the characters in a sitcom enjoy a freedom that most people can only dream of.

The presumed insensitivity of men, epitomised by Charlie, is alluded to in a conversation in the episode "If They Do Go Either Way They Are Usually Fake". After one of Charlie's girlfriends has met his nephew Jake, Alan admonishes his brother:

ALAN: Charlie, when I moved in here, I said it was vital that we create a wholesome atmosphere for Jake. And you said 'I understand'.

CHARLIE: Alan, there's something you should know about me. When I say 'I understand', it doesn't mean I agree. It doesn't mean I understand. It doesn't even mean I'm listening. [laughter]

ALAN: Then why do you say it?

CHARLIE: It seems to make people happy, and that's what I'm all about. [laughter]

ALAN: That's very altruistic, but I would prefer if you'd just be straight with me.

CHARLIE: Fine.

ALAN: All I'm asking is that you keep in mind that we have an impressionable 10-year-

old boy living here.

CHARLIE: I understand.

ALAN: Thank you. (turns away, stops, thinks, then grasps the meaning of Charlie's comment) [laughter]

Not only does Charlie in this dialogue say something he does not mean, he also openly admits that he says 'I understand' only because this is exactly what people want to hear. Later in the same episode, Charlie talks to Judith, Alan's wife, who now thinks she might be a lesbian:

JUDITH: It's hard enough going through this transition all by myself. Alan at least has you, I have no one. Except my parents, and they're completely toxic.

CHARLIE: I understand. [laughter]

JUDITH: Do you?

CHARLIE: I think I do.

JUDITH: Thank you. That means a lot to me. I mean, I've always been the good daughter or the good wife. And you know what? Outside of those relationships, I don't know who I am. Am I gay, am I straight? Who the hell knows? I'm scared about this, Charlie, and I'm totally alone. (she cries)

CHARLIE: You know what? I understand. [laughter]

JUDITH: Thank you for listening.

The social convention of uttering the phrase 'I understand' as a sign of sympathy when someone else is speaking about his/her problems is clearly made fun of in these two dialogues. Charlie could not care less what other people feel (and the audience knows this). For him, saying hypocritically 'I understand', and thus conforming to the convention, is the easiest way of achieving the goal of being left alone and in peace. Feigning sympathy backfires, though, because – to the astonishment of his brother – he suddenly becomes Judith's best pal and confidant. The comic effect in this situation results from the fact that Charlie is totally unconvincing in his declarations of empathy. Nonetheless, Judith takes his 'understanding' at face value, reiterating the stereotype that women want men to understand them, and that many men say they do only to further their ends. Of course one could also argue that Judith's acceptance of an unconvincing 'I understand' indicates some sort of superficiality on her part.

As the examples discussed so far illustrate, *Two and a Half Men* regularly turns existing stereotypes about men and women into laughs. And this is no prerogative of this particular sitcom. In fact, stereotypes and sitcoms go together like horse and carriage, as Hood and Tabary-Peterssen explain:

In comedy shows [...] it is assumed that certain situations will be experienced as funny by a large portion of the audience; their views on a wide variety of questions, from the relationships between the sexes to class and racial relations, are taken for granted and

the jokes are made to fit these assumptions. In this process stereotypes play an important part.<sup>32</sup>

Especially stereotypes regarding the behaviour of the main characters play an important role for garnering laughs, as the audience often can predict how the protagonists will react to a given problem. It is consistent with the stereotype of the rich bon-vivant that Charlie turns out to be absolutely incompetent when it comes to household chores. Consequently he is devastated when his housekeeper Berta quits her job. Just how overtaxed he is by the simplest household tasks is demonstrated by the following dialogue with his brother (“If I Can’t Write My Chocolate Song, I’m Going to Take a Nap”):

CHARLIE (staring at the coffee machine): She left before she made the coffee.

ALAN: So? We’ll make our own coffee.

CHARLIE (clueless): How? [laughter]

(Alan switches the coffee machine on) [laughter]

CHARLIE: So now we just wait?

ALAN: Yes, it takes a couple of minutes.

CHARLIE (sits down): Alan, this goes beyond coffee. Berta’s been with me forever. She does everything. She’s like a wife that leaves before you wake up, and doesn’t mind if you sleep around. [laughter]

ALAN: Charlie, I’ve been trying to figure out a way to repay you for letting me and Jake stay here. Why don’t I take over the housework?

CHARLIE: Berta did the shopping, too.

ALAN: I can do that.

CHARLIE: She did my laundry.

ALAN: In her way, yes. But I can handle that, too. And look... (he pours him a cup of coffee). I even made your coffee.

[...]

CHARLIE: I’ll just go read my paper (he turns to the table in front of him). Oh, no. Where is my paper?

ALAN: I don’t know. You might try looking by the front door.

CHARLIE: No, no, it’s usually right here on the table.

ALAN: Okay, so before you got up, Berta started the coffee and got you your paper?

CHARLIE (exasperated): I don’t know the mechanics of it, but, yeah. [laughter]

ALAN (gets up): I’ll go get it.

It is interesting to note that in this scene Charlie is clearly the butt of the joke because he does not know how to do his shopping, his laundry and even lacks the know-how to operate a coffee machine. In a 1950s sitcom or movie, these tasks would clearly and unquestioningly have been the domain of the housewife. Today, such blatant ignorance displayed by a man regarding the simplest household chores is bound to evoke laughter. Alan’s familiarity with these tasks,

32 HOOD, Stuart and Thalia TABARY-PETERSEN. *On Television*. Chicago: Pluto, 1980. 25.

on the other hand, is regarded as normal, and the audience consequently does not laugh when he proposes doing the laundry, etc. As this scene clearly demonstrates, the traditional gender roles have changed in the course of the last few decades: The simple formula ‘the man earns the money, the woman takes care of house and children’ no longer applies. If a man does not even know how to make himself a cup of coffee or get his newspaper, this is regarded as entertaining.

The primary character constellation in *Two and a Half Men* is spiced up with several recurring female characters. One of the most important (and interesting) ones is Evelyn, the mother of Charlie and Alan. Like the two brothers, Evelyn can easily be categorised: she is the archetype of the domineering, egocentric, snobbish and extraordinarily self-confident mother. Both brothers have serious issues with their mother, as can be seen in the following dialogue from the episode “Go East on Sunset until you Reach the Gates of Hell” (the title refers to Evelyn’s residence):

(Alan and Charlie are sitting in the back of a cab, drunk, and talk about their mother.)

DRIVER: Your mother sounds like a real piece of work.

CHARLIE: Ah, you have no idea, my friend. My mother took my baby brother and dipped him in sissy sauce and turned him into the people-pleasing control freak you see today.

ALAN: That’s right! And she made him so scared of intimacy that he has just this endless stream of gorgeous girls running in and out of his life.

CHARLIE: Damn her! [laughter]

The brothers see their mother as the person responsible for many of their shortcomings because Evelyn did not act like a ‘real mother’ in their childhood. In fact, today their mother instils just the same fear in Alan and Charlie as when they were boys. This becomes clear in the very first episode of the show, when Charlie collects Alan and Jake after the two stayed at Evelyn’s for some days (“Pilot”):

CHARLIE: Alan, we’ve got to get him [Jake] away from her. I mean, look what happened to us. (Evelyn walks into the room)

EVELYN: And what happened to you?

CHARLIE (insecure): Hi, Mom. [laughter]

EVELYN: Charlie, you’re a grown man. Perhaps it’s time to stop blaming your mother for your own shortcomings. (she turns to Alan and snips her fingers) Alan, the divan is not for sitting. (Alan gets up) (to Charlie, menacingly) Charlie, get off the couch! (Charlie gets up, both men stand in front of her like children)

JAKE (coming in, shouting): Uncle Charlie!

EVELYN (grabs and hugs Jake): There’s my good boy. And what did I tell you about yelling in the house?

JAKE (muffled): Grandma, I’m suffocating. (Evelyn smiles and keeps hugging)

CHARLIE (to Alan): Sounds familiar?

ALAN: You’re right. This madness must end. [laughter]

It is interesting to note that Evelyn does not show any of the characteristics typically considered to be 'feminine'. Gunter, for instance, states that "traits such as nurturance, dependence and passivity are typically classified as feminine, while dominance and aggression are generally considered as masculine."<sup>33</sup> It becomes obvious early on in *Two and a Half Men* that Evelyn clearly sports some of the characteristics stereotypically attributed to men (in particular dominance).

Mother-son issues like those between Charlie, Alan and Evelyn could easily develop into a serious conflict in a drama series. In the sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, however, this problem is turned into gags by means of exaggeration and because of the fact that none of the characters is really hurt by the biting remarks of the others. The exaggerated nature of the conflict between Charlie and Evelyn is demonstrated by the following scene, a quarrel over who should carve the Thanksgiving turkey ("Merry Thanksgiving"):

EVELYN: Charlie, now you're being foolish. Give me the knife and sit down.

CHARLIE (points the knife at her menacingly): Back off, lady. [laughter] Every Thanksgiving, you took the knife away from Dad, and when you did that (he starts carving), you took away his manhood. (he cuts aggressively, but without skill) You're not gonna take it away from me. There, see, it's carved! [laughter] (he cuts away furiously, meat is flying around) Carved! It's carved with my manhood! [laughter]

The tradition of the male head of the household carving the Thanksgiving turkey is challenged in this scene in a humorous way. Charlie interprets the prerogative of carving the turkey as a symbol of manhood. That his mother regularly took this prerogative away from his father and is now trying to do the same with Charlie is perceived by him as a direct attack on male dominance and independence. The fact that it is ultimately hardly important who carves the turkey as well as Charlie's obsessive and exaggerated behaviour regarding this point is what makes the scene amusing.

The character of Evelyn is further explored in the course of the series. Because of her commanding and sarcastic ways she is usually not the butt of jokes. But once in a while her obsession with appearing younger is used for comic effects. The obsession with youth and beauty is an important aspect of American society. To what lengths Evelyn goes in order to maintain the impression of being a couple of years younger is demonstrated in the following scene from the episode "Alan Harper, Frontier Chiropractic":

(Evelyn is at Charlie's house, spending some time with her grandson Jake and talking with a friend on the phone)

EVELYN: No, I'm just spending a little quality time with my grandson. [laughter] Oh,

33 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 29.

he's an amazing boy. We're very close, two peas in a pod. [laughter] What? Hold on. (covers receiver and walks towards Jake) Jake, how old are you? [laughter]

JAKE: Ten.

EVELYN (into receiver): Seven. [laughter]

JAKE: I said 'ten'.

EVELYN (covers receiver again): If I'm 55, you're seven. [laughter] (Jake shrugs his shoulders) (into receiver) Oh, he's an adorable boy, and he just loves me so much. (to Jake) Jake, Jake. Tell my friend, Cheryl, how much you love Grandmommy. (hands him the receiver) Go on, darling.

JAKE (into receiver): I'm ten. [laughter] (hands receiver back to Evelyn)

The premise of this gag is that it is generally of no great importance whether a person is 55 or 58 years old. That Evelyn lies about it to a friend is bad enough, but that she also 'bends' obvious truths like Jake's age to suit her deception – and all this for just three years – is ridiculous. The reactions on the part of the viewers show that they are aware of the inappropriateness of Evelyn's behaviour. It is left open, however, whether the audience laughs at Evelyn's vanity, or at a society which basically forces its older members (especially women) to lie about their age just to be respected.

That Evelyn regards her grandson Jake as an asset to boast about in front of her friends has become clear in the previous scene, but the presence of Jake can also be a nuisance because his existence proves Evelyn to be a grandmother, which prevents her from appearing younger. In the episode "Did You Check With The Captain Of The Flying Monkeys?" Evelyn has invited her sons over to her house to meet her new lover. Charlie and Alan accept her invitation, but – to Evelyn's chagrin – they bring Jake along:

JAKE (at the front door): Hi, Grandma.

EVELYN (in mock-happy tone): And look, you brought Jake to meet my new beau. (to Jake) Come here, sweetheart. Now, tonight you and I are going to play a game. And the name of the game is: 'Don't call me Grandma'. [laughter]

JAKE: What kind of game is that?

EVELYN: It's a fun game, honey. It only has one rule. You have to call me Evelyn.

JAKE: Okay.

EVELYN (menacingly): Try it! [laughter]

JAKE: Evelyn.

EVELYN: See? We're having fun already. [laughter]

Evelyn's desire for amorous relationships is not used as a source of gags, and neither her sons nor the audience ever sneer at her when her new conquests are discussed. There were times when a sexually active woman in her late 50s would have been ridiculed on TV for that very reason. Although *Two and a Half Men* is a sitcom (and therefore all of its characters are prone to become the target of laughter), Evelyn is one of those characters that rather make searing remarks on

others than becoming their butt. That Evelyn is not made fun of because of her interest in sex may very well indicate a change in society's perception of the generation 50+ (and especially of women), whose desire for personal relationships and sexuality is increasingly acknowledged and respected. The obsession with youth, however, still (perhaps even more so than before) seems to be an issue, as can be seen at the end of the same episode the scene above is taken from. Evelyn's new beau has dumped her, and her two (more or less) concerned sons check on their sulking mother:

CHARLIE: Okay, what happened?

EVELYN: He dumped me.

CHARLIE: Mom, I'm sorry. The thing between me and his daughter happened years before you even met the guy.

EVELYN: This has nothing to do with you, Charlie. God, you're a narcissist. [laughter] No, Tommy left me for some fresh-faced 45-year-old bimbo. [laughter]

ALAN: I am sorry, Mom. I know he meant a lot to you.

CHARLIE (hesitatingly): Yeah, I'm ... I'm sorry, too.

EVELYN: Thank you, Alan. Nice try, Charlie. [laughter]

Two factors contribute to the laughter in this scene: First, Evelyn is obviously not so deeply hurt as to lose her sarcasm and her habit of attacking Charlie. Second, her reference to her 45-year-old rival as a 'bimbo' – a derogative term usually applied to young, sexually provocative women – is used as an ironic reminder of the fact that differences in age are relative. For 58-year-old Evelyn, the 'younger woman' is still the 'bimbo'. Though it can be regarded as funny, this scene comments on the fact that 'younger' is often regarded as 'better'. Nonetheless, self-confident, sexually active, and entirely self-centred Evelyn is a type of character hardly to be found in older TV series. It could be argued then that this character represents changing gender roles, a process for which, according to Campbell and Kean (referring to the sitcom *Roseanne*), television is at least partially responsible: "there has been a script of gender and sexuality established in post-war America that has in recent years come under increased questioning."<sup>34</sup>

Although characters like Evelyn are relatively new on television, that is not to say that *Two and a Half Men* always ventures along largely untrodden paths as far as its character concepts are concerned. In the episode "The Last Thing you Want to Do is Wind up with a Hump", for example, Alan and Charlie encounter several so-called 'soccer moms'. The American cliché soccer mom is a divorced, middle-aged woman, desperately and aggressively in search of a new lover/husband, who to this end roams the fringes of her kid's social activities. When Charlie decides to date a soccer mom, Alan warns his brother: "Charlie, you have no clue

34 CAMPBELL and KEAN. *American Cultural Studies*. 210.

what you're getting involved in with these divorced soccer moms." It turns out, however, that Alan himself has no clue: He accepts an invitation by one of the mothers (an obvious pretext) and is nearly seduced by this woman and her friend (another soccer mom). Both women appear pathetic as they rival aggressively for Alan's affection, while Alan simply does not realise what is going on.

Despite the fact that *Two and a Half Men* is a sitcom, the reiteration of the 'soccer mom' cliché might be regarded as offensive.<sup>35</sup> However, the show also offers a different, more realistic version of this type. Charlie dates one of the soccer moms – the congenial Kate, newly divorced, with a son at Jake's age. When Charlie picks her up in his car, the following dialogue ensues:

KATE: Charlie, I have a confession. I haven't been out with a man other than my husband in 12 years.

CHARLIE: That's not a problem. A couple of things have changed. I can bring you up to date.

KATE: Please do.

CHARLIE: All right, well, nowadays, women pay for dinner. [laughter] (Kate raises her eyebrows) And of course, sex is a given. [laughter]

KATE (grins): I'll tell you one thing. I am not paying for dinner.

CHARLIE: Rats! [laughter]

The tongue-in-cheek and mature way in which Kate responds to Charlie's statement (probably meant as a joke – but one never knows with Charlie) corresponds much more to the image of today's self-confident, emancipated woman than the cliché soccer moms Alan has to deal with.

*Two and a Half Men* (like many other sitcoms) draws many of its comic effects from scenes in which men or women do not act according to gender norms. In fact, the scenes that draw most laughter are those in which a role reversal takes place. A case in point can be found in the pilot episode. Charlie has just become fond of his nephew Jake (who has moved out again with his father) and in bed talks about him to one of his girlfriends:

CHARLIE: You got to love a kid like that.

[...]

GIRL: Charlie, I haven't seen you in two weeks. You finally got the house back to yourself. Now, do you want to talk about your nephew, or do you want to have sex?

CHARLIE: Oh, sex. Definitely sex. [laughter] (they kiss) Let me ask you something.

GIRL: Yeah?

CHARLIE: Do you ever think about having kids?

35 One has to keep in mind that the 'soccer-mom cliché' itself would have been unthinkable in the 1950s or the 1960s as in these decades a single, divorced mother aggressively in search of a new partner would have been unacceptable for society. Insofar, this cliché itself is an indicator of social change.

GIRL (exasperated): Whoa, Charlie, we've got a good thing going. Can't we just leave it at that? (she gets up and starts to dress)

CHARLIE: What are you doing? I thought we were gonna have sex.

GIRL (angry): How am I supposed to have sex while your biological clock is going off? [laughter]

(the telephone rings; it is Rose; Charlie picks up)

CHARLIE (to Rose): Listen, let me ask you a question. Is there something inherently wrong with asking a woman you're involved with if she wants kids?

ROSE: Ach, Charlie. We got a good thing going, why do you want to mess it up? (hangs up) [laughter]

The comic effects in the scene quoted above clearly result from a role reversal: While women are typically associated with the proverbial 'biological clock', in a relationship men are said to be mainly interested in sex. Here, the traditional roles are reversed. The macho Charlie suddenly appears to take over the 'feminine' part, and his lover is clearly turned off by his sudden interest in wanting to have children. Laughter is triggered again when the situation is reiterated in a conversation between Charlie and Rose, who is stalking Charlie. In her line the laughter is mainly generated by the absurdity of her claim to 'have a good thing going' with Charlie, as she intrudes into his privacy on a regular basis and Charlie does not want to have anything to do with her. Thus, the same line ("We got a good thing going, ...") is amusing for two very different reasons: In the case of Charlie's girlfriend the comic effect is generated by the role reversal; in the case of Rose it is based on her distorted perception of reality.

Besides genuine role reversal, behaviour that is perceived as unsuitable for a character's gender may also provoke laughs. In the episode "Merry Thanksgiving", for example, Charlie meets an old (and cherished) girlfriend. They hug:

LISA: How many times did you change your shirt before you left the house? (he did so four times) [laughter]

CHARLIE: I wanted to look pretty for you.

LISA: You're such a girl. [laughter]

CHARLIE (grins): Thanks. You too. [laughter]

Charlie's vanity as well as his choice of words ('pretty' is usually not an attribute considered flattering when used to refer to men) amuses the audience. He adopts stereotypically feminine patterns of behaviour in this scene, but, obviously, in an ironical manner, as he is aware that Lisa knows about his vanity.

In the dialogue between Lisa and Charlie both participants are aware of him behaving in an 'unmanly' fashion, but the show also features many scenes in which one character is unaware that he or she is not living up to expected gender roles. Alan very often is the butt of this kind of joke, as he sports many behavioural patterns and attitudes usually attributed to women. Alan's extensive familiarity with household chores is apparent in many episodes. As Charlie is lazy

and does not lift a finger to help with the housework, Alan repeatedly nags his brother in the episode “Big Flappy Bastards”. In one scene, Charlie is watching TV when Alan enters the room:

ALAN: All right. I put Jake to bed, I folded the laundry, I put the groceries away ...

CHARLIE (without turning away from the TV set): The guilt thing doesn't work with me, Alan.

ALAN: Yeah, well, it's all I've got. [laughter]

Here, Alan's behaviour clearly echoes the stereotype of the nagging housewife. The laughter is provoked by the fact that Alan is well aware (as is Charlie) that his reference to all of the chores he has completed is a strategy of evoking guilt in another person. Besides suggesting that a man takes over a traditionally feminine role in the household, this scene also pays tribute to the old movie and series *The Odd Couple*, which was one of the inspirations for *Two and a Half Men*. Alan Harper is not only the epitome of the fussy male homemaker, he also sports another alleged 'feminine' attribute, namely emotionality:

A prominent stereotype of women in our culture is that they are more emotional than men. The emotional woman is believed to become flustered in the most minor crisis; she is seen as sensitive, often fearful and anxious, and generally depends on male help and support in all kinds of personal and professional situations.<sup>36</sup>

In *Two and a Half Men* it is usually Alan who is emotionally overpowered by minor crises. In the episode “Go East on Sunset until you Reach the Gates of Hell”, Alan starts crying when Jake's pet guinea-pig Porky dies:

ALAN: No, this is about my life. (sobs) Everything is going to hell.

CHARLIE (dumbfounded): Okay, well, don't cry. We can still be friends. [laughter]

ALAN: What? [laughter]

CHARLIE: I'm sorry. It's the only thing I know to say when someone cries around here. [laughter]

ALAN: I'm so sorry, Porky. (sniffs) You just kept running around in your little cage trying to make everybody happy. And what do you get? You get dead! [laughter]

CHARLIE: You do know the pig can't hear you, right? [laughter]

ALAN: Don't you get it? I am the pig!

CHARLIE: Okay. I'm just asking, because your reaction doesn't seem very healthy to me.

ALAN: And what do you think would be healthy, Charlie?

CHARLIE: I don't know. Why don't we toss Porky in the ocean and go get bombed? [laughter]

ALAN (crying angrily): How could you? How could you? (sniffs, then meekly) Okay. [laughter]

36 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 11.

This scene draws its comic effects from several factors: First, Alan's emotional and irrational reaction (especially when he compares his life to that of a guinea pig) is so over the top that it cannot be taken seriously. Second, Alan's 'feminine' overreaction and Charlie's 'masculine' insensitiveness are very likely to be seen for what they are by the audience: gender stereotypes – but presented in an entirely improbable situation. The punch line, finally, derives its effect from Alan suddenly switching from a 'feminine' back to a 'masculine' stance: He at first attacks Charlie for being insensitive, but then he agrees with Charlie to toss Porky and to get drunk – the traditional 'male' answer to emotional crises (not the tossing, of course).

#### IV. The construction of homosexuality in the sitcom

Representation is a vital concern of Media Studies generally, for the ways in which individuals and groups are presented to mass audiences are seen to presume something – whether casual or merely correlative – about the ways such individuals and groups are understood outside the media. Furthermore, the existence of those representations is often seen as reinforcing the appropriateness and validity of them.<sup>37</sup>

As Mills aptly remarks, the depiction of minorities on TV may tell us much about how these groups are perceived by society, and TV can reinforce existing notions about minorities. The depiction of homosexuality on TV has undergone some significant changes since gay and lesbian characters began appearing on the small screen on a regular basis. Huston states that by “the mid-1970's, gay and lesbian characters appeared on almost every situation comedy, drama, and talk show on prime-time television.”<sup>38</sup> Yet these characters were oftentimes portrayed in a way that was far from flattering. In fact, homosexuals (especially in comedies) more often than not served as the butt of jokes. This later on changed to some extent:

By the later part of the 1970s, gay characters and themes had begun to play a different sort of role in TV comedy. Instead of serving as the butt of derisive jokes or an occasion for lessons about tolerance, gayness began to stand in for the new sexual culture, or at least one element of it.<sup>39</sup>

It is worthwhile analysing how *Two and a Half Men* – 25 years after the 'turn' with respect to the depiction of homosexuality perceived by Levine – addresses the issue of homosexuality. Since one of the characters – Alan's wife Judith –

37 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 7.

38 HUSTON, Aletha C. et al. *Big World, Small Screen. The Role of Television in American Society*. Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992. 31.

39 LEVINE. *Wallowing in Sex*. 187.

comes out as a possible lesbian right at the beginning of the series, the issue of homosexuality is bound to be addressed on a regular basis.<sup>40</sup> Especially Alan, who is still in love with Judith and refuses to give up on their marriage, has a hard time accepting his wife preferring women. It is remarkable, however, that it is not Judith who is made fun of because of her (potential) homosexuality, but Alan. Whenever one of the characters mentions that Judith left Alan because she is a lesbian, the audience tends to react with amusement. Given the stereotype that it is the man's fault if a woman prefers sex with other women, the laughter in these scenes is presumably not directed at Judith as a lesbian, but at Alan for being a wimp.

Charlie shows a relatively relaxed attitude towards his sister-in-law's sexual orientation. After having gained her confidence, he suggests to his brother to show support in order to remain on good terms with Judith. In the episode "If They Go Either Way They Are Usually Fake", Alan's ex-wife Judith makes friends with Cindy, one of the women Charlie is interested in. Alan comes to think that Judith and Cindy might be more than just friends and he – heeding his brother's advice – is trying to be supportive of what he considers to be her homosexual relationship. But instead of being grateful, Judith is appalled at what Alan is hinting at:

JUDITH (furious): You think I'm sleeping with her?

ALAN: Nooo. No.

JUDITH: I just got out of a 12-year marriage and you think I would jump into bed with someone I just met? Man or woman?

ALAN: No. No.

JUDITH: You should be ashamed of yourself.

ALAN: I am. I am.

JUDITH: Two women becoming friends and you jump to the conclusion they're having sex! Where do you get that kind of sleazy thinking?

(Alan is clearly afraid and points at Charlie, who is standing on the porch) [laughter]

This scene derives its comic effect mainly from Alan's embarrassment. His well-meant support backfires because he (along with the audience) assumes that the blossoming friendship between Judith and Cindy is more than that. Alan's assumption that a lesbian who is friends with another woman *must* seek a sexual relationship is answered with an angry and well-deserved tirade. It is conceivable that the writers of the show not only wanted to get a laugh out of this embarrassing situation, but also aimed at ridiculing the assumption that homosexuals cannot be just friends with members of the same sex.

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40 In the course of the series this changes, however. After thinking she might be a lesbian directly after her divorce from Alan, she returns to dating men exclusively from the second season onwards.

Alan's problem with Judith's alleged homosexuality is again picked up in the episode "Alan Harper, Frontier Chiropractor". Here, Judith has a date with another man. Alan is angry about this:

ALAN (furiously): What does she think she's doing? She's straight, she's gay, she's straight again. Place your bets. Where she lands, nobody knows. [laughter]

CHARLIE: Alan, it's no big deal. Women get to experiment with their sexuality. It's only guys who have to make a choice and stick with it. [laughter]

ALAN: Where do you get this stuff?

CHARLIE: I make it up. [laughter]

Alan's exasperation is understandable: he has come to terms with the notion that his wife left him because she cannot stand being in a relationship with men generally. But now that she dates another man, he feels that Judith just did not want to be with *him*. And it is not Judith's indecisiveness regarding her sexual orientation that makes the audience laugh but again Alan's emotional reaction. The second source of laughter in this scene is Charlie's ridiculous distinction between male and female sexuality. His statement is funny because he presents in a nutshell general assumptions about the different sexual leeway granted to men and women. That, in the punch line, he claims having "made it up" ridicules these prevalent assumptions even more.

*Two and a Half Men* clearly avoids making fun of the only regularly appearing homosexual character in the show. In fact, Judith is possibly the character least likely to be laughed at in the series. Yet stereotypes about gay men are reiterated for the sake of a laugh from time to time. When Judith is dating a man in the episode "Alan Harper, Frontier Chiropractor", Charlie prompts his brother to get back into dating himself. To this end, Alan has to buy suitable clothes. After many fruitless efforts to find appropriate clothes for Alan, Charlie suggests finding a "gay guy" to help with this problem. Thereby, he reiterates the stereotype that gay men generally have good taste in clothing. But the real joke in this scene is that they actually find a "gay guy" (who is not even an employee of the store), and he indeed helps them find the right outfit for Alan.

Another scene that has the potential of ridiculing general assumptions regarding homosexuality occurs in the pilot. Charlie wants to hook up his brother with women in order to get his mind off the pending divorce. To this end he and his brother (along with Jake) go to the supermarket, which Charlie regularly roams in search of new acquaintances:

ALAN: I am not comfortable with this. I mean, maybe I should go wait in the car.

CHARLIE: You're not waiting in the car. Trust me, this is a great way to meet women.

ALAN: I don't want to meet women. I'm still married.

CHARLIE: Come on. Your wife's out messing with chicks, why shouldn't you? [laughter]  
(Jake's singing the Maple Loops Song which Charlie wrote; a blonde girl notices him;

Alan and Charlie approach)

BLONDE: Your son is just adorable

ALAN (flustered): Thank you.

BLONDE: You and your ... life partner must be so proud. [laughter] (she leaves)

(Alan looks at his brother; Charlie nods)

CHARLIE: You're right. Go wait in the car. [laughter]

Being seen as a homosexual may cause embarrassment for a heterosexual man. Sitcoms frequently make use of this, for such misunderstandings apparently guarantee laughter.<sup>41</sup> As stated above, this scene could also be read as criticism of the general assumption that two men, venturing into the public sphere without female company, are likely to be suspected of being gay. This scene, thus, may very well be an ironic wink at today's tendency to see homosexuals where there are none. That Charlie himself is not free from harbouring stereotypical views of homosexuals is shown in the episode "Merry Thanksgiving", in which Charlie suggests to Alan a trip to Las Vegas over Thanksgiving:

ALAN: That sounds kind of fun. Two single guys, rocking out in Las Vegas ... the glitz, the glamour ...

CHARLIE: Dude, don't gay it up. [laughter]

Glitz, glamour and two guys suggest homosexuality in Charlie's opinion – or at least Charlie is aware of this widespread notion. Once again, *Two and a Half Men* reiterates a stereotype while at the same time possibly ridiculing it – for the audience knows very well that Alan is definitely not gay.

Regarding the depiction of homosexuality in sitcoms one can observe a number of changes if one compares productions from the 1970s with more recent ones. But these changes have been far from radical, as a closer look reveals. For the 1970s, Levine states that "the dominant messages about sex offered through these laughs affirmed heterosexuality, monogamy, and premarital chastity as norms and relied upon such 'new' developments as gayness and promiscuity as comedic foils."<sup>42</sup> Although premarital chastity is no longer a norm (and tends to be made fun of in today's comedy), monogamy and heterosexuality still appear to be largely normative. Promiscuous and/or homosexual characters are the 'exceptions' and stand in stark contrast to the 'regular' characters. The many watch groups (especially in the USA) that monitor the content of TV shows seek to ensure that no abuse of their clientele (ethnic minorities, women, gays and lesbians, etc.) remains undetected and uncriticised. While the writers and producers of sitcoms may refrain from openly ridiculing a character – for example Judith in *Two and a Half Men* – for

41 Chandler in the series *Friends* has to endure this on a regular basis.

42 LEVINE. *Wallowing in Sex*. 196.

his or her ‘otherness’ in order to avoid trouble, on an underlying level deviations from the norm are still used to get a laugh:

The constraints upon the portrayal of the homosexual [...] result from sitcom’s humour occupying a mass social position in a society which is still prejudiced towards gays, and in which one of the generic factors of the sitcom is that homosexuality is laughable.<sup>43</sup>

It is evidence of the skill of the writers of sitcoms that the instances where homosexuality is made fun of – as shown above – could also be read as a critique of the stereotypes shared by the majority.

## V. ‘Who’s the man’ in sitcoms?

It is interesting that sitcom characters can ‘get away’ with socially unacceptable behaviour and still are liked by the audience. Gunter claims that “[a]mong children and adults alike, attention to and liking for television characters may depend on whether viewers feel that their behaviour is altogether appropriate or acceptable to their particular sex, a judgement that is grounded in already well-formed opinions about sex roles”.<sup>44</sup> This may be true for drama series or soap operas, but not for the sitcom because “[t]he notion of excess is vital to comedy, and is a central principle of sitcom”.<sup>45</sup> Sitcoms virtually thrive on the exaggerated personalities of their characters. In a non-comic series, a character like Dr. Cox from *Scrubs* would in all likelihood be the antagonist of the main character, and Alan from *Two and a Half Men* would possibly just be considered a whining annoyance. In a sitcom, however, these character types are fun to watch. The types depicted in sitcoms typically display certain character traits in an exaggerated manner, and this is in fact even expected by the audience. That is the reason for the popularity of so many sitcom characters whose behaviour is certainly not perceived as appropriate to their sex.

This brings us to the general correlation between gender and age in sitcoms: As shown with the example of Evelyn, men and women are expected to act in a manner deemed appropriate to their age, and what is perceived as socially acceptable may change over time. What has not changed in the last decades, however, is that in particular men are expected to behave in a responsible and mature manner, as Fiske points out:

43 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 126.

44 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 80.

45 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 33.

One aspect of masculinity in our culture is its connection with maturity. 'Be a man' is a frequent admonition to young boys that requires them to behave more maturely than their physical age. Many popular narratives dramatize the 'boundary rituals' whereby a youth crosses into manhood.<sup>46</sup>

It is especially the disparity between age and maturity that is used for comic effects in sitcoms. Frequently, sitcoms present male characters who do not accept responsibility for their actions and do not react in a mature way when confronted with a crisis. The refusal (or inability) on the part of male characters to act in an appropriate way can be observed in Charlie (*Two and a Half Men*), Joey (*Friends*), Jim and Andy (*According to Jim*) as well as in J.D. and Turk (*Scrubs*), to mention just a few examples. These characters oftentimes display immature behaviour, and therefore their behaviour is regularly at odds with prevalent notions of masculinity. A show like *The Big Bang Theory* even revolves around a group of male characters who would generally be perceived as immature. The fact that such behaviour by male characters is used to produce comic effects today suggests that Fiske's comment, made more than 20 years ago, still holds true, for sitcoms draw their laughs largely from deviations from social conventions. Female characters acting in a similarly immature fashion are far less frequent in sitcoms.

While the rejection of maturity is something the characters in many sitcoms appear to choose, male sitcom characters sometimes are forced into situations where they are deprived of their masculinity *against* their wishes. Most often, such situations are associated with the loss of power and control, attributes which Fiske regards as integral traits of masculinity.<sup>47</sup> Fiske argues: "But society frequently denies males the means to develop these qualities by placing them in institutions (such as work) which deny them the opportunity either to express their individuality or to exert any power or control."<sup>48</sup> Again, what, in reality or in a drama series, would be perceived as a critical situation, challenging masculine self-confidence is used as a source of laughter in sitcoms. Alan, for example, is not very much in control of his life. Another example of a powerless male character who is not in control of his life is Al Bundy from *Married With Children*, who, because of his bossy wife and his job as a shoe salesman (which is totally devoid of social prestige) is left virtually emasculated – obviously to the amusement of the audience.<sup>49</sup>

46 FISKE. *Television Culture*. 200.

47 FISKE. *Television Culture*. 201.

48 FISKE. *Television Culture*. 201.

49 FISKE (*Television Culture*. 204) sees a close link between the genre and the prevalent type of gendering in the narrative: "Our cultural development of masculine and feminine identities has built into it notions of male superiority. These 'inferior' and 'weak' characteristics of the feminine are repressed in the masculine psyche and *exscribed* from the masculine narrative

Men's loss of power in relationships has been a recurring theme in sitcoms since the 1970s, when the Women's Rights Movement began to leave its mark on society. Since then, sitcoms regularly feature couples that vie for control, and oftentimes the woman 'wears the breeches'. Levine states that in sitcoms since the 1970s "women's sexual liberation was the new norm and men's sexual dominance was a relic of the past".<sup>50</sup> Though this is not one of the themes explored on a grand scale in *Two and a Half Men*<sup>51</sup> – Alan has no relationships to speak of, Charlie's relationships are extremely short-lived –, other popular sitcoms including *King of Queens* (1998 – 2007) and *According to Jim* (2001 – 2009) feature male protagonists who regularly succumb in their marital sparring.<sup>52</sup>

## VI. Conclusion

Although this paper focused on just one sitcom – *Two and a Half Men* – many findings are also valid for other sitcoms, past and present. This is mainly due to the intrinsic qualities of the genre of the sitcom. First of all, the sitcom has to present easily recognisable characters, or, as Mills puts it: "While sitcoms may develop more fully 'complex' characters over a number of series, the characters within it must be easily recognisable in the first instance in order for audiences to find them funny at all."<sup>53</sup> In *Two and a Half Men* the main characters are outlined already at the very beginning of the pilot. Once the viewers have categorised Charlie as a hedonistic bachelor and Alan as a repressed control-freak, they know exactly what to expect of the two for the remainder of the series. To ensure that the viewers get an immediate impression of the characters, the latter usually are mere types that reflect common stereotypes.<sup>54</sup> And as individual

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[action series, for example]. Exscription, the opposite of inscription, is the process whereby a discourse writes out of itself topics that are ideologically discomfoting." What may be true for action series does not apply to comedy. In the sitcom the feminine/weak behaviour of men is often inscribed as a source of laughter.

50 LEVINE. *Wallowing in Sex*. 200.

51 At least not in the beginning. Later, Charlie as well as Alan have some relationships that last longer, and in these, the question of who changes whom is indeed a factor.

52 Marital power struggles in sitcoms are additionally fuelled by gender differences, as MILLS (*Television Sitcom*. 121) points out: "Many sitcoms use the conflict between the desire for a stable heterosexual relationship and the inability to understand the opposite sex as major comic force, as shown by *Men Behaving Badly*, *Seinfeld*, *Marion and Geoff* and *Scrubs*."

53 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 101.

54 MILLS (*Television Sitcom*. 101) elaborates on this: "[...] it's argued that such character types aren't insignificant and instead they must draw on wider social assumptions about people for their effectiveness. That is, the six character types on show in *Friends* are not only funny because they act in the programme, but because they relate to dominant social assumptions about rich Jewish daughters (Rachel), new-age hippies (Phoebe), actors (Joey), university

characters in sitcoms rarely change their behaviour over time the viewers often already know how a given character will react in a specific situation. This possibility of 'seeing it coming' is one of the reasons for the continuing success of the sitcom, because "the pleasure of comedy comes from [...] the reiteration of the known".<sup>55</sup>

Hopefully, this paper has shown that the depiction of gender in sitcoms is often a major source of comic effects. To be regarded as amusing, the sitcom tends to make use of stereotypes and exaggerated character traits. As was pointed out above, given the comic character of the sitcom, the depiction of stereotypes is unlikely to have a direct impact on the viewers' attitudes towards gender; in other words, viewers in all likelihood will not choose male and female characters from this genre as role models. But it is a viable question whether the act of reiterating stereotypes on television in and of itself ultimately strengthens these stereotypes anyway and serves to embed them in the subconscious of the viewers, even if they are only drawn upon to produce comic effects. Gunter for instance argues that "stereotyped beliefs were significant factors affecting how people perceived themselves and have an effect particularly on levels of personal self-esteem".<sup>56</sup> Huston concurs, claiming that "[i]n the domain of sex stereotypes [...] the evidence that points to the powerful influence of television is relatively strong".<sup>57</sup> While Huston and Gunter refer to the possible influence of television on a general level, their findings can be transferred to the genre of the sitcom in so far as the sitcom is an eminently successful genre. *Two and a Half Men* has its fair share of gender stereotypes and gendered character types. However, as was shown above, by reiterating a stereotype this stereotype can also be exposed to ridicule. Thus, two or even more viable readings of one and the same situation may be possible. Which one of these readings the viewers 'see' is open to debate.<sup>58</sup> Gunter is aware of this problem:

It is one thing to classify and describe the content of television programmes, but it is quite a different matter to establish that certain 'messages' or 'meanings' supposedly conveyed by television portrayals are being apprehended by viewers and absorbed into their existing belief system.<sup>59</sup>

No matter how debatable the influence of sitcoms on public assumptions concerning gender may be, their significance for depicting prevalent gender roles

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lecturers (Ross) and so on. Sitcom can, then, be read as an indicator of the ways in which the audience it's produced for feels about individuals and groups."

55 MILLS. *Television Sitcom*. 15.

56 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 1.

57 HUSTON. *Big World, Small Screen*. 33.

58 As MORREALE ("Introduction: On the Sitcom." xvi) puts it: "meaning is determined by readers [viewers] rather than solely dictated by narrative strategies within a text [...]."

59 GUNTER. *Television and Sex Role Stereotyping*. 76.

can hardly be doubted.<sup>60</sup> Feuer even alleges that the genre of the sitcom is especially suitable for discussing social change:

[...] if we look at the sitcom in terms of what might be called its plot, we find little development or innovation. The situation has always been a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manners of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy and ideological conflicts. In fact, one could say that it has been the *ideological flexibility* of the sitcom that has accounted for its longevity. The sitcom has been the perfect format for illustrating current ideological conflicts while entertaining an audience.<sup>61</sup>

And the change of gender roles in the wake of the Women's Rights Movement has of course been one of the most important ideological conflicts since the 1970s. Sitcoms exist primarily to entertain the viewers, but if some of them pave the way for new ways of thinking, so much the better.

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60 MILLS' assumption that "sitcom becomes not only a representative of a culture's identity and ideology, it also becomes one of the ways in which that culture defines and understands itself" (*Television Sitcom*. 9) may go a bit too far, though.

61 FEUER, Jane. 2001. "Situation Comedies, Part 2." In: Glen Creeber (ed.). *The Television Genre Book*. London: British Film Institute. 67–70. 69–70.

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## The Changing Construction of Women in Crime Series: The Case of *Tatort*

### I. Gender and crime series

Due to its general function as a producer of cultural meanings, television is an influential force in the construction of the dominant images of women in a society. For a long time women on TV were mainly featured in domestic roles or as sexual objects. However, a variety of factors, including the changing role of women in society, feminist criticism of the one-sided and sexist depiction of women on TV, and the recognition of women as a consumer group, have led to an implementation of a ‘female’ perspective and of women’s issues within the media, which ran parallel to a development towards assigning women a more central role within the plot.<sup>1</sup> This shift towards featuring women in a more central way is the general theme of this article. Crime series and in particular the construction of female inspectors in the successful German TV series *Tatort* (the German word for ‘crime scene’) constitute an ideal test case for examining this development.

*Tatort* is the longest running show on German television and it still is also one of the country’s most popular crime series. Since its first episode was broadcast in November 1970, more than 700 episodes of *Tatort* have been aired. It is produced by ARD, one of the biggest German TV stations, whose federal structure is reflected in the conception of *Tatort*, in which the regional variation of the German *länder* is meant to be visible.<sup>2</sup> Every contributing regional station

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1 Cf. DYER, Helen. “Women and Television: An Overview.” In: Helen Baehr and Gillian Dyer (eds.). *Boxed In: Women and Television*. New York: Pandora Press, 1987. 6–16. 6–7.

2 ARD is the acronym of *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. It was founded in 1950, encompassing the regional German broadcasting corporations that had been established after 1945. More than 70 inspectors or investigating teams have been introduced by the 14 stations that take part in the production of *Tatort*, including an Austrian station since 1971 and the Swiss TV in the period between 1990 and 2001. The first joint production with the DFF, the TV station of the former German Democratic Republic, began right after 1989, and since 1992 an East German team has in-

has its own inspectors and place of action, which entails a variety of characters and settings.<sup>3</sup> The opening credits, which have not been changed for decades (and have achieved cult status by now) hint at the serial structure of *Tatort*. Since *Tatort* has been enormously successful in Germany and tends to have very high ratings, it is a particularly suitable test case for exploring the relationship between social changes and the shifting construction of female characters in TV series.

There is a set of core features that can be regarded as characteristic of the genre of the crime series in general. At the beginning of each episode there typically is a challenge to the social order by some kind of criminal force, which is subsequently dealt with either by the police or private investigators. The conflict between the police/private investigator and the criminal as well as the question of whether the police/private investigator can detect or reveal the criminal produces the basic tension of the narrative.<sup>4</sup> In the framework of this basic conflict the narrative of crime series tended to subscribe to a 'masculine' model, more often than not celebrating supposedly masculine values, such as distanced rationality. Traditionally, the male authority figure is the one who is able to restore the social order that has been disrupted by crime.<sup>5</sup> Given the long-standing masculine bias of the crime series, the process of replacing the male protagonist by a female one is not simple. This process tends to transform the role of the investigator in certain respects and it affects the plot, since a convincing female investigator should be "more than just an honorary male, reinforcing the masculine identity of the characterisation by her aberrant, but temporary, occupation".<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the substitution of the male protagonist with a woman requires a profound reassessment of the characterisation of the detective.

Since the protagonists of crime series have traditionally been men, this genre not only produces meanings about the protection of the public by the police, but also about male power.<sup>7</sup> D'Acci argues that references to the law may be used "to

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investigated for *Tatort* (cf. WACKER, Holger and Almut OETJEN. *Tatort. Das große Buch für Fans*. Berlin: Schwarzkopf & Schwarzkopf, 2002. 9).

3 Cf. RIEDER, Maria. "Mit falschen Goldbarren fing alles an." In: *Frankfurter Rundschau* (April 6, 2002): 27.

4 Cf. CASEY, Bernadette, Neil CASEY, Ben CALVERT, Liam FRENCH and Justin LEWIS. *Television Studies. The Key Concepts*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002. 44.

5 Cf. REDDY, Maureen T. *Sisters in Crime: Feminism and the Crime Novel*. New York: Continuum, 1988. 5.

6 CRANNY-FRANCIS, Anne. *Feminist Fiction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990. 143.

7 Some crime series replace the police with private investigators, such as the following successful US shows from the 1980s: *Magnum* (Tom Selleck), *Simon & Simon* (Gerald McRaney and Jameson Parker), *Remington Steele* (Pierce Brosnan and Stephanie Zimbalist). In Germany *A Case for Two* [*Ein Fall für zwei*] is a popular series, which has been running since 1981, showing a lawyer (changing actors) and a private detective (Claus Theo Gärtner).

articulate the connection between the police hero, general social order, and masculine supremacy”.<sup>8</sup> She bases this hypothesis on the following three premises: first, social order and law are associated with a consensus, implying a belief in social plurality and in the equality of all citizens. In crime series, just like in reality, the basic task of the investigators is to maintain and restore legal order. While some of the investigators in TV series proceed according to the rules of the consensus, others occasionally break the law themselves. According to D’Acci’s second premise, this leads to a process in which the meaning of social order moves from being connected with the established consensus towards being associated with the investigating person, which implies that the law becomes virtually indistinguishable from the moral (mis)judgements of the inspector. This is additionally connected to a focus on the body of the investigator, either on his physical strength or on his equipment, i. e. weapons, technology, and cars. The investigator is presented as being capable of negotiating the space between social order and lawless disorder. As a consequence, the meaning of the law and the consensus becomes more abstract, whereas the character of the investigator is almost turned into an equivalent of the law, which leads to the third premise: “The cop hero and his moral code become the stand-ins for the Law as male power. This force, exchanged between men and exclusive of women, then becomes the basis for the social order”.<sup>9</sup>

D’Acci’s premises only partially apply to the German series *Tatort*, however. *Tatort* presents members of the police as protagonists, suggesting a strong connection between any of their actions and the law.<sup>10</sup> *Tatort* has largely refrained from showing an investigation that is marked by an extensive use of physical force and weapons; therefore, the focus on the body is less pronounced in this show than in many other crime series.<sup>11</sup> If the notion of a ‘focus on the body’ is understood in a broader sense and is not limited to the actual display of physical prowess and shooting, however, D’Acci’s argument proves to be right. Even if the *Tatort* inspectors do not often make use of physical force and of their guns, they certainly have the possibility of doing so. The actual use of force, thus, is not necessary to raise an awareness of the investigating person as being able to cover the space between social order and lawless disorder. Even if D’Acci’s assumptions cannot be applied directly to *Tatort*, her line of thought still provides interesting ideas for an analysis of women’s roles within crime series and

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8 D’Acci, Julie. *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey*. Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991. 115.

9 D’Acci. *Defining Women*. 116.

10 The majority of the *Tatort* inspectors act in accordance with the law. An exception is Horst Schimanski (Götz George), one of the most popular *Tatort* inspectors ever.

11 Schimanski, again, is an exception. An account of how German crime series are usually set up and how they have developed over the last few decades will be given in the following section.

illuminates the discrepancy between women's and men's positions and between the ways they are portrayed within the story. In crime series, the role of those who break the law has generally been occupied by male characters, whereas women traditionally have tended to be presented as victims rather than as criminals. Therefore, the presentation of men as being both the ones who uphold the law and the ones who violate it is in stark contrast to the role of women, who, more often than not, have been cast as mere bystanders. For a long time women were predominantly featured as secretaries or assistants, and – last but not least – as victims. They were also frequently cast as the criminals' wives and girlfriends or as prostitutes. Thus, while male characters within crime series are typically positioned as subjects and often function as positive role models, the role assigned to women was primarily that of an object – and hardly one viewers were likely to identify with.

Even in crime series featuring female investigators the female protagonists used to conform to a narrow set of stereotypical images up to the 1980s. One of these stereotypes is that of the elderly, sharp-witted woman who investigates privately; she sometimes works together with the police, but just as often she interferes in the official investigations.<sup>12</sup> The prototype of the female amateur detective is Agatha Christie's Miss Marple (played in films and TV series by the actresses Margaret Rutherford, Angela Lansbury and Joan Hickson). The same type is exemplified by the protagonist of *Murder, She Wrote* (Angela Lansbury). Another stereotype is that of the female investigator who is active, successful, and very attractive, but who, ultimately, proves to be subordinate to a male boss or partner. In *Charlie's Angels* three good-looking and bright ex-policewomen work as private investigators for a male boss and combine beauty and bravura. Jennifer Hart (Stefanie Powers), the attractive and intelligent wife of a self-made millionaire in *Hart to Hart*, is another example of this type. A totally different approach to the depiction of female investigators is adopted in *Cagney & Lacey*, where both protagonists (Sharon Gless as Christine Cagney and Tyne Daly as Mary Beth Lacey) work as police detectives.<sup>13</sup> D'Acci argues that this series was a

12 This type of female investigator is usually thoughtful, energetic, and financially as well as emotionally independent. The elderly detectives profit from their experience and are good at drawing logical conclusions and at spotting conflicts in a family or a social circle. All of these attributes usually are combined with inquisitiveness and an interest in investigating. Many characters, including police officers, easily confide in the 'spinster snoops' (cf. KEITEL, Evelyne. *Kriminalromane von Frauen für Frauen. Unterhaltungsliteratur aus Amerika*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998. 65).

13 The development from a female amateur detective to a female professional investigator in TV series correlates to a development in detective novels. Whereas in the nineteenth century and in the 'golden age', the heyday of the detective novel in the inter-war period, women detectives were amateurs, the female protagonists of the 1980s and 1990s earn their living by investigating crime. Additionally, the plots of detective fiction featuring female investigators

potential forum for feminist discourse, offering women an opportunity for identification.<sup>14</sup>

In the course of the last decades women have gained increasing importance in crime series and have been cast as protagonists much more frequently. In an analysis of the British series *Widows*, a show from the 1980s featuring widows of criminals who carry out crimes themselves, Brundson identifies two trends which account for this development: First, the new prominence of women in crime series is an attempt to increase the number of viewers by offering female viewers a character they can identify with in a traditionally male-biased genre. Second, the presentation of strong female protagonists can be interpreted at least partly as a response to feminist criticism and to changing female role patterns in society.<sup>15</sup> One could presume a third trend being responsible for the increasing number of female protagonists: in recent decades women have reached higher positions in the employment sector in general and in the media in particular. More and more women have become scriptwriters, directors, producers, and editors, and these women may have used their influence to feature women's lives in a more diversified way and to assign women a more central part in TV narratives.

Crime series traditionally exhibit relatively conservative gender roles, as was pointed out above. Showing women in the traditional male role of the investigator thus requires a number of difficult negotiations. The growing number of women inspectors and the changing role of women in crime series has led to contradictions as far as the portrayal of power and gender is concerned. By simply exchanging male and female body, genre conventions as well as cultural codes relating to appearance, movement, and areas of action and activity for women on television are violated. But replacing men with women ultimately does not challenge the conventions of the 'masculine model' of crime series and the framework of male police structures and leaves the analysis of women's relationship to the law and the existing consensus untouched.<sup>16</sup>

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have adopted characteristics of male hard-boiled crime stories, where violence, action, and pursuits are described in detail. Unlike in the 'golden age', the plots of detective fiction with female protagonists no longer tend to focus on the private sphere. A shift in the narration from privileging a male perspective to showing female perspectives is also part of this development. In recent female detective fiction, the (female) protagonist often appears as first-person narrator (cf. KEITEL. *Kriminalromane von Frauen für Frauen*. 26 and 74).

14 D'ACCI. *Defining Women*. 170.

15 BRUNDSON, Charlotte. "Women Watching Television." In: *Medien Kultur* 4,2 (1986): 100–21. DYER ("Women and Television." 11) argues that the implementation of female inspectors was not only a response to feminist demands, but also a reaction to criticism of American and British police series for presenting excessive violence. The incorporation of female investigators was meant "to portray the police in compassionate and caring terms" (ibid.).

16 Cf. D'ACCI. *Defining Women*. 117; DYER. "Women and Television." 10–11.

## II. The German crime series *Tatort*

Before the assumptions about the relationship between women and crime series can be applied to *Tatort*, some general characteristics of this crime series and of some similar German productions should be described. In the 1970s, the decade in which *Tatort* became popular, there was a general increase in the production of crime series in Germany, a development that contributed to the emergence of a distinct style of German crime series and to an emancipation from Anglo-American models, which had strongly influenced earlier German productions, such as *Stahlnetz* (1958–68) and the TV films based on Francis Durbridge's novels. Nevertheless, British and American models continued to have a significant impact on German crime series. The latter remained in particular indebted to the tradition of the British 'whodunnit' stories, in which the emphasis is on the riddle and the detection and not on physical violence. Additionally, German series sometimes exhibit the rapid camera movements and fast editing which mark many American crime series.<sup>17</sup> The starting point of the new era of German crime series was *Der Kommissar*, which was broadcast from 1969 to 1976 on ZDF, a public television station. It featured two elements that turned out to be very successful: the claim of authenticity in the presentation of police work and the construction of the main character, inspector Herbert Keller (Erik Ode), as a father figure.<sup>18</sup>

The first *Tatort* inspector, who took up investigations in 1970, was Paul Trimmel (Walter Richter). He was portrayed as merciless patriarch and displayed a self-righteous attitude. Trimmel's brusque manner, his old-fashioned clothes, and a lack of respect for suspects from higher social classes enhanced his recognizability.<sup>19</sup> Due to the structure of the ARD, several regional TV stations

17 Cf. BRANDT, Ulrich. "Der Freitagabendkrimi in der ARD." In: Christian W. Thomsen and Werner Faulstich (eds.). *Seller, Stars und Serien. Medien im Produktverbund*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1989. 116–30. 127–29.

18 The construction of the central character as a father figure can be traced back to the influence of the BBC production *Maigret* (cf. KOEBNER, Thomas. "Tatort – Zur Geschichte und Geist einer Kriminalfilm-Reihe." In: *Augenblick. Marburger Hefte zur Medienwissenschaft* 9 (1990): 7–31. 8; HICKETHIER, Kurt. "Die umkämpfte Normalität. Kriminalkommissare in deutschen Fernsehserien und ihre Darsteller." In: Karl Ermert and Wolfgang Gast (eds.). *Der neue deutsche Kriminalroman. Beiträge zu Darstellung, Interpretation und Kritik eines populären Genres*. Rehberg-Loccum: Evangelische Akademie Loccum, 1991 [1985]. 189–206. 193). This concept has successfully been applied to the German series *Der Kommissar* and has been used by other ZDF productions since then, such as *Derrick* (1974–98) and *Der Alte* (since 1977).

19 Cf. EISENHAUER, Bertram. "Tatort Deutschland. Sozialgeschichte und Mentalitäten im Spiegel des Kriminalfilms." In: Claudia Cippitelli and Axel Schwanebeck (eds.). *Das Mord(s)programm. Krimis und Action im deutschen Fernsehen*. Frankfurt/M.: Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik, 1998. 63–87. 74.

have contributed to *Tatort*. Therefore, *Tatort* could develop a considerable number of different main characters. In the beginning, most of the protagonists adhered to the tradition of the patriarchal inspector in his fifties or early sixties who approaches his cases in a matter-of-fact, rather unspectacular way. But there was also room for inspectors who were younger than the 'league of patriarchs' and who, moreover, represented a different type of investigator, for instance Kressin (Sieghardt Rupp), a vain and immoral macho, or Heinz Haferkamp (Hansjörg Felmy), a sceptical and conscientious realist. *Tatort* inspectors have always been shown to be very dedicated to their job, which means that they are constantly available professionally, spending virtually all of their time on their cases. Thus, the protagonists typically are loners, who are usually neither married nor part of a traditional family. Today the majority of the *Tatort* inspectors still is divorced, widowed, or single. There are a few inspectors who are married or have a partner, but these relationships are often depicted as problematic. All in all, the inspectors appear to be 'married to their jobs' and to live in 'surrogate marriages' with their colleagues.<sup>20</sup>

Right from the beginning, *Tatort* differed from the ZDF crime series not only in terms of the variety of settings and the construction of its characters, but also with respect to its underlying tone and its portrayal of society. The crimes in the ZDF series *Der Kommissar* and *Derrick* tend to be caused by greed and passion, and the investigators are rather conservative, providing a moral centre in the face of crimes that originate in ethical corruption on a personal level. The episodes of *Tatort* pursue a different approach, often focussing on crimes that are associated with current social and political problems, thus raising an awareness of problems inherent in society.<sup>21</sup> The social problems addressed in *Tatort* include child prostitution, religious sects, pollution, racism, and unemployment. To a certain extent the episodes thus have mirrored the problems, values, and the *zeitgeist* of German society in the last decades. Additionally, *Derrick* tends to focus on the upper middle class, whereas in *Tatort* almost the entire range of social classes and groups is featured.

Casey et al. point out that the complex interrelationship of crime series to

20 Cf. WACKER and OETJEN. *Tatort*. 20. A good example of this type of investigators is the team from Cologne, Max Ballauf (Klaus J. Behrendt) and Freddy Schenk (Dietmar Bär). Freddy Schenk is married and father of two daughters, but his family life and marriage are depicted as problematic and unhappy. Max Ballauf lives alone in a hotel room. Together they form a very close team and are shown to be investigating literally day and night. In some cases the investigating teams even share apartments. This is usually not presented as a planned activity, but the interim solution (one of the investigators has lost his or her own apartment) usually leads to a permanent arrangement, as in the cases of Paul Stöver (Manfred Krug)/Peter Brockmöller (Charles Brauer) and Lena Odenthal (Ulrike Folkerts)/Mario Kopper (Andreas Hoppe).

21 WACKER and OETJEN. *Tatort*. 10.

other genres, social conditions, audiences, and media institutions accounts for some of the changes one can observe in this genre over time.<sup>22</sup> This is also true for *Tatort*, where four major changes have taken place in the course of the last decades:

- (1) The investigators of the 1970s, e.g. Trimmel and Haferkamp, worked on their own. In the following decade, however, a shift towards working partnerships took place. Teams often replaced the individualist.<sup>23</sup> In recent *Tatort* episodes, broadcast in 2001 and later, however, there seems to be both an emphasis on the inspector who investigates on his/her own (like Charlotte Lindholm (Maria Furtwängler) and Cenk Batu (Mehmet Kurtulus)) and teams (Franz Kappl (Maximilian Brückner) and Stephan Deininger (Gregor Weber), Thorsten Lannert (Richy Müller) and Sebastian Bootz (Felix Klare)). Some other recent *Tatort* inspectors get support from a person who is not an inspector himself/herself. Frank Thiel (Axel Prahl) works together with the pathologist Professor Karl-Friedrich Boerne (Jan-Josef Liefers) and Klaus Borowski (Axel Milberg) with the police psychologist Frieda Jung (Maren Eggert).
- (2) There has been a shift towards an increasing emphasis on the private sphere of the protagonists. The focus of the early episodes was entirely on the case, the investigation, and the suspects; therefore, the inspectors were hardly shown to have a private life. This began to change in the 1980s with the introduction of Schimanski, who was the central character of the story and attracted the viewers' attention, providing them with glimpses of his private life. Since then, the investigator has increasingly become the centre of attention in *Tatort*.<sup>24</sup>
- (3) The nature of the crimes depicted in *Tatort* has undergone a change as well: from murder as an extreme and helpless reaction to unbearable conditions to a more complex view of atrocities situated within a network of organised crime, exploitation, and dependence. Crime in *Tatort* has more and more become indicative of the negative ethics of a reckless society. This has had significant implications for the role of the investigator, who can no longer be seen as someone who restores the social order by finding the culprit.<sup>25</sup>
- (4) While the 1970s and 1980s were dominated by male inspectors acting as individualists and by investigating teams, the number of female characters

22 CASEY et al. *Television Studies*. 44.

23 Cf. BRÜCK, Ingrid. *Einem Erfolgsgenre auf der Spur: Forschungsstand und Auswahlbibliographie zum westdeutschen Fernsehkrimi*. 1996. <<http://download.philfak2.uni-halle.de/download/medienkomm/halma/halma4.pdf>> (accessed: January 17, 2009). 23.

24 WACKER and OETJEN. *Tatort*. 13.

25 Cf. KOEBNER. "Tatort." 28; EISENHAUER. "Tatort Deutschland." 67.

has considerably increased since the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the introduction of female inspectors, female characters in general have been depicted in more individualistic terms. The growing importance of female characters within *Tatort* will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

### III. The representation of women in *Tatort*

Various types of investigators as well as a variety of interpersonal arrangements among the investigators were introduced in *Tatort* in the 1970s and 1980s. The loner was gradually replaced by the investigating team, but the leading characters still were (almost) invariably male. In most episodes women played merely a secondary role. They generally appeared as secretaries, wives, or girlfriends of victims and suspects. They were also shown as victims and sometimes as perpetrators and occasionally as pathologists, assistants, or public prosecutors. From time to time, women were cast as murderers, although, as Koebner has shown in an analysis of eighty episodes from the period of 1971 to 1989, there were three times more male than female murderers in these years in *Tatort*.<sup>27</sup> In addition to being cast in non-recurring roles, women also appeared in recurring, though still more or less minor, roles. A case in point in the 1970s was inspector Haferkamp's ex-wife Ingrid (Karin Eickelbaum), whose role basically was that of an understanding woman who supports her ex-husband, although she sometimes got involved in the investigation. An example of the recurring female minor character from the 1980s is Sonja Bach (Almut Eggert), inspector Hans-Georg Bülow's secretary. She was hardly individualised, and her primary function was to support the portrayal of her boss, whom she admired, as an elderly gentleman and womanizer.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a more independent type of woman in *Tatort*. Assistant Miriam Koch (Roswitha Schreiner) had a leading role in the episodes featuring inspector Bernd Flemming (Martin Lüttge) and was shown to have a strong personality and to be very self-confident. But her physical attributes weakened her position. The actress was short and thin and looked very young and girlish. Moreover, she often wore short skirts and high heels, which, combined with her long hair, were important factors in the construction of her femininity. Although Koch was overtly fighting male prejudice, her appearance suggested the opposite. The reason why she finally left the team is also in ac-

26 Cf. SCHWANEBECK, Axel. "Detective-Stories & Co. Der Kriminalfilm – ein populäres Fernseh-Genre." In: Claudia Cippitelli and Axel Schwanebeck (eds.). *Das Mord(s)programm. Krimis und Action im deutschen Fernsehen*. Frankfurt/M.: Gemeinschaftswerk der Evangelischen Publizistik, 1998. 15 – 22. 18.

27 KOEBNER. "Tatort." 24 – 25.

cordance with traditional gender roles because she quit in order to get married and have children. While Koch was a more independent woman within the police force, Hannelore Schmiedinger (Rita Russek) played this part within the private sphere. She was the partner of inspector Ernst Bienzle (Dietz Werner Steck), who investigated in *Tatort* from 1992 to 2007, and the development of their relationship occupied a substantial part of every episode featuring these characters. Hannelore Schmiedinger, a book illustrator and painter, was shown to be Bienzle's equal, and sometimes she was even depicted as the dominant partner in their relationship. She was characterised as an intelligent and self-assured person and often contributed to her partner's work, thus transgressing the line between private and public life.

The changing construction of women in supporting roles ran parallel to another development: women have increasingly been cast for the part of the inspector. The first female inspector to appear in *Tatort* was Marianne Buchmüller (Nicole Heesters), who investigated in just three episodes in 1978. She was followed by Hanne Wiegand (Karin Anselm), who was the main character in eight episodes produced between 1981 and 1988. Wiegand's successor was Lena Odenthal (Ulrike Folkerts), who has been investigating since 1989 and who has become not only the female protagonist appearing in the largest number of episodes but also the inspector having been 'on duty' the longest. Lena Odenthal remained the only female inspector in *Tatort* up to 1997. Since then, however, a steady increase in the number of women inspectors can be observed.<sup>28</sup> In 1997 two new women inspectors were introduced: Inga Lürsen (Sabine Postel) is still one of the protagonists of *Tatort* today, whereas Lea Sommer (Hannelore Elsner) starred in only two episodes. Three more women appeared as inspectors in 2002: Charlotte Lindholm, Charlotte Sängler (Andrea Sawatzki), and Klara Blum (Eva Mattes). In 2008 Eva Saalfeld (Simone Thomalla) started investigating together with her ex-husband.

The following analysis of the changing construction of women inspectors and gender roles in general in *Tatort* is based on the portrayal of four female characters: Hanne Wiegand, Lena Odenthal, Inga Lürsen and Charlotte Lindholm. They have been chosen because they have appeared in a considerable number of episodes of *Tatort* and, therefore, the characters could develop over time. They have been shaped by different notions of what a woman can and should do in the

28 The growing number of female inspectors in *Tatort* in the 1990s ran parallel to a similar development in the ZDF, where two new crime series with female protagonists were introduced in 1994 (Hannelore Hoger as *Bella Block* and Iris Berben as *Rosa Roth*). Since then, more shows with female investigators have been developed – women are shown either as part of a team (e. g. *Ein starkes Team* with Maja Maranow) or as main character (e. g. *Kommissarin Lucas* with Ulrike Kriener and *Das Duo* with Charlotte Schwab and Lisa Martinek, who replaced Anne-Kathrin Kramer).

police force, suggesting that the picture of the emancipated woman in the 1980s was different from today.

#### IV. Sensitive and struggling – Inspector Hanne Wiegand

Hanne Wiegand, a woman in her forties, is clearly constructed in accordance with culturally predominant notions of femininity. A woman who has pursued a career in the male-dominated police force certainly requires a certain amount of strength, but the overall conception of Wiegand as a character as well as the construction of the episodes she appears in still reflect stereotypical notions of femininity, suggesting in particular vulnerability and sensitivity. Wiegand, who typically wears elegant but simple clothes and has short blond hair, generally appears to be fragile and sensitive. However, at times she is also very persistent. She usually acts according to her own ideas, refusing to be advised by others. She stands her ground in conflicts with colleagues, suspects, witnesses, and her boss. Wiegand's behaviour suggests that she realises that, as a woman in a male-dominated profession, she has to be able to put up a fight in order to get recognition and respect. She does not raise the issue of gender explicitly, but simply insists on the power that comes along with her position as inspector. In "Peggy Is Afraid"<sup>29</sup> ["Peggy hat Angst"], for example, Wiegand tells a male assistant to make a phone call. When he takes his time, pouring himself a coffee first, she reminds him of her superior position, pointing out that when she asks him to do something 'soon', she expects him to do it immediately. Wiegand's gender is not only an issue as far as the respect and the hierarchies within the police force are concerned. In "The Leather Heart" ["Das Lederherz"], the first episode featuring Wiegand, the suspect pretends to be interested in her. She seems to be responding, but her behaviour could be interpreted as an attempt to make use of the situation in order to determine whether he is guilty or innocent. The fact that Wiegand is approached sexually already in her very first case, however, undermines her position as a figure of authority and reproduces the stereotype of women as sexual objects.

D'Acci's claim that the substitution of the female body for the male body in crime series requires difficult negotiations is confirmed by the presentation of Hanne Wiegand. The Wiegand episodes do not simply feature a female protagonist instead of a male one, but they display characteristics which clearly show the impact of gender norms on the narrative. Hanne Wiegand's overall style of investigation is marked by sensitiveness, intuition, and perseverance, which – especially in combination with her low voice – creates an atmosphere of

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29 The titles were translated by the author.

calm and care. Additionally, the Wiegand episodes tell a type of story that is apparently meant to meet dominant notions of femininity: the episodes featuring this character move more slowly than the male-dominated ones. This is particularly true of “The Leather Heart”, which is set up like a studio theatre. Another characteristic of all of the Wiegand episodes is the detailed description of the circumstances of the crime, including a lengthy analysis of the psychological disposition of both the murderer and the victim, which reveals to the viewers the reasons for the deed.

The gender stereotype of women being more emotional and passionate than men also seems to have a certain impact on the type of story in which a woman takes on the role of the investigator. This applies both to the investigator’s behaviour and to the reason for the crime. Although Koebner’s survey of motives in *Tatort* has shown that the majority of the *Tatort* episodes broadcast between 1971 and 1989 involve crimes of greed, with passion ranking only second,<sup>30</sup> seven out of eight crimes in episodes with Hanne Wiegand are motivated by passion. When Hanne Wiegand investigates for the first time in “The Leather Heart”, the case revolves around the issue of failed marriages, and Wiegand has to find out whether a woman has committed suicide or has been killed by her husband. Additionally, Wiegand’s cases are not about planned murders or about a criminal network. Only the last episode featuring Wiegand is an exception to this pattern, with respect to the murder and its motive. In “Snapped” [“Ausgeklinkt?”], the perpetrator is motivated by greed: the director of a medical clinic who has been carrying out illegal drug experiments tries to hide his deed by killing a journalist who is on his track. Hanne Wiegand sees through the doctor’s game and, trying to prove his guilt, even makes use of illegal methods. She asks a criminal, whom she knows from another case, to deactivate the security system in the doctor’s house in order to get in and steal the evidence. Although she finds out that the doctor is guilty of murder, she does not manage to get him convicted. Using illegal methods means the end of Wiegand’s career in the police force. Her insistence on the conviction of the doctor highlights once again her persistence and her tendency to rely on her own ideas. Although she used tricks on the border of legality before,<sup>31</sup> she had never gone as far as in “Snapped”.

The character of Hanne Wiegand incorporates widespread notions of what it meant to be a career woman in the early 1980s. As a woman in the police force, she represents women who have been successful and independent and who are not restricted to the domestic sphere, but her success is limited and she is struggling to assert her position. Wiegand also had to choose between child and

30 KOEBNER. “Tatort.” 25.

31 For instance, in “It’s All Over” [“Aus der Traum”] Wiegand makes the suspect believe that he has killed another person.

career. She does not have any children and is either divorced or widowed. Regarding the latter she is similar to the male *Tatort* inspectors, who are also dedicated entirely to their jobs, and lack stable relationships.<sup>32</sup>

## V. Strong and self-assured – Inspector Lena Odenthal

Lena Odenthal is a completely different type of female inspector than Hanne Wiegand. Odenthal appears to be more self-assured, charismatic, and she is presented as a tough person who says what she thinks and is not afraid of facing conflicts. Sometimes she raises her voice and uses swear words, thus displaying ‘masculine’ verbal aggressiveness. Although she often appears to be distanced and cold, she takes a lively interest in her cases, which, in contrast to those Wiegand is faced with, do not predominantly centre on crimes of passion. Although Odenthal usually seems to be able to keep things under control, she occasionally shows a certain amount of weakness. In “Death in Space” [“Tod im All”] she gets increasingly confused by the turns of the case and by dubious phone calls. At one point she has become so nervous that she almost shoots her cat, mistaking it for a burglar. Since her first appearance in *Tatort*, Odenthal has undergone a number of changes. In the first years she typically wore jeans, checked shirts, a leather jacket, and boots; later on, she began to opt for less casual clothes and to dress in a more stylish manner. This shift correlates with a change of behaviour: whereas she was shown to be particularly stubborn and quick-tempered during the first years, recently she has become less so. She seems to be calmer and more reflective. Another characteristic of Lena Odenthal is her sportive figure, and in many episodes she is presented doing exercises, e. g. jogging or martial arts. Overall, a great emphasis is put on her body, as will be shown later.

Unlike Wiegand, Odenthal is respected within the police force and has a good relationship to her male colleagues. Her assistant, Mario Kopper (Andreas Hoppe), was introduced in 1997, and since then they have investigated as a team. Kopper and his Italian mother even function as a surrogate family for Odenthal, who seems to have no close relatives or partner. At one point, Kopper moves into Odenthal’s apartment, which she normally shares only with her cat. The fact that she addresses him by his surname most of the time while Kopper calls her Lena corresponds to her psychological disposition: she dislikes admitting feelings

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32 The actress Karin Anselm criticised the character of Hanne Wiegand because the female inspector was always shown focussing exclusively on her cases, having no private life that could provide her with strength (cf. Pressestelle und Abteilung Öffentlichkeitsarbeit des WDR. *Tatort 300!* Köln: Pressestelle der ARD, 1995. 33).

and prefers presenting a rough surface. Her former boss functioned as a father figure who supported her up to his death, but also sometimes worried about her style of investigation, which occasionally exposes her to life-threatening situations. Nevertheless, he always respected Odenthal and repeatedly referred to her as one of his best inspectors.

The presentation of Odenthal is in line with the *Tatort* tradition in so far as she is single and is only rarely shown to have an affair. Her romances tend to be short-lived and to have negative overtones. In “The Black Angel” [“Der schwarze Engel”] she falls in love with a colleague, who turns out to be a criminal, and in “Fly, Little Angel” [“Engelchen flieg”] she is attracted to a journalist, who, however, has only approached her in order to obtain information about her current case. Although Odenthal has been shown to be heterosexual in these episodes, in “Big Warriors” [“Fette Krieger”] she kisses the ex-girlfriend of the victim. For some years the actress Ulrike Folkerts has been openly talking about being a lesbian; therefore this kiss can be interpreted as a tribute to her private life. This incident does not imply that the figure of Odenthal is presented as lesbian from this moment onward; in the following cases this issue is left aside.

In the Odenthal episodes body movement is used in an entirely different manner than in those with Wiegand. While the latter refrains from displays of physical prowess and thus acts according to gender norms, Odenthal transgresses those norms by sometimes drawing her gun and even using her fists. For example, in the episode “Death in Space” she is looking for a suspect in a night club; when she tries to arrest the heavily built man, he pushes her away and hits her in the face. As she is lying on the floor, being pummelled by the suspect, none of the bystanders makes any attempt to help her. Finally, however, Odenthal is able to overwhelm the attacker with several hits and kicks. As a result of the fight, the suspect has to be taken to hospital, whereas Odenthal only suffers a minor wound on her lip and is able to go to work the following day. The depiction of Odenthal as a ‘fighter’ defies traditional gender constructions. The incident is also interesting in terms of the reactions of her male colleagues. On the morning after the fight, Kopper asks Odenthal whether the wound is from shaving, and another colleague is clearly impressed by her behaviour. Her male colleagues thus appear to respect her transgression of gender norms and, as Kopper’s comment suggests, consider her to be ‘one of the boys’. Since the fight in the night club has no immediate bearing on the case in the episode, the primary purpose of showing the fight seems to be contributing to the characterisation of Odenthal. Her depiction as a ‘fighter’ is further emphasised in another scene of the episode, where the viewers see a long shot of a gym where people are doing Asian martial arts. One cannot identify the sex of these people, because everybody is wearing the same gear. Kopper, dressed in regular clothes and not involved in the training, walks around among the fighting pairs. He approaches a

pair of training partners, and Odenthal turns out to be one of them. Kopper talks to Odenthal in order to inform her about the latest news regarding the current case. Distracted by Kopper she gets knocked down. She is bleeding but it does not bother her; she seems much more interested in the news about the case.

Although she is generally respected as an inspector, Odenthal sometimes has to defend herself against male prejudice. She not only does that by means of physical action, but also verbally insists that she is in charge. A crucial scene in this respect can be found in the episode “Close Combat” [“Nahkampf”], which is set on an Army base. When Odenthal and Kopper first appear in the barracks to take up their investigation they talk to a colonel. Odenthal addresses him by his surname, but he condescendingly points out that she has to include his rank. Before they start discussing the case, the colonel wants to know who is in charge of the investigation and shows contempt upon hearing that it is a woman. Odenthal subsequently asks the colonel whether there are no women in the army and is told that they certainly cannot reach high positions. As the conversation moves on, the colonel addresses her as ‘Mrs. Odenthal’, and she reminds him that he has to address her as ‘Inspector Odenthal’. This scene emphasises that Odenthal knows how to tackle male prejudice and how to deal with a male-dominated environment.

## VI. Negotiating motherhood and career – Inspector Inga Lürsen

Inga Lürsen represents a type of woman that differs from both Odenthal and Wiegand; she is neither a comparatively soft character like Wiegand nor as tough as Odenthal. Lürsen also differs from Wiegand and Odenthal regarding her relationship to her colleagues. Although she gets along with her partner Nils Stedefreund (Oliver Mommsen), who joined the team in 2001, she does not see him as surrogate family – unlike Odenthal and many male *Tatort* inspectors. Nor does she have problems, in contrast to Wiegand, with asserting her authority. Unlike Wiegand and Odenthal, Lürsen is shown to have a private life, and in fact the viewers get to know quite a lot about her background. One could argue that this is the result of general changes in the conception of *Tatort*, where the attention has increasingly moved towards the investigating person – including her/his private life – in contrast to the earlier focus on the case. Lürsen is energetic and dedicated to her job, and she mixes her private and her professional life, which means that the dividing line between the two spheres is blurred. Lürsen is divorced and has a daughter named Helen (Camilla Renschke), who temporarily lived with her. Since Lürsen works long hours they cannot spend much time together. The dedication to her job often means keeping her daughter waiting or not being able to keep promises she has made to

her – in fact, she is presented as a mother who does not live up to traditional norms of a ‘good mother’.<sup>33</sup> Although the relationship between mother and daughter is sometimes difficult, they are also shown as friends. Helen takes part in almost every episode and is often involved in the story around the cases. Lürsen is shown as a woman who wants to have both a career and motherhood and who, as single parent, has to negotiate the difficulties between those different demands. She therefore embodies a more flexible image of women than that allowed by traditional constructions of femininity.

Lürsen’s past does not correspond to the traditional female role pattern, either. Lürsen, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, did not meet her parents’ idea of an ideal daughter. In the 1970s she was politically active, and this past catches up with her in the episode “Shadows” [“Schatten”]. When she was young, Lürsen was a member of a group of left-wing activists who at one point broke into the building of a local newspaper. In the course of action a guard got killed and it is still unclear which member of the group was responsible for his death. More than twenty years later, a journalist who used to be one of the political activists is murdered and it seems likely that the reason was that he has blackmailed his former companions, who have reached influential positions by now. Due to her personal involvement in the case, Lürsen is suspended and decides to investigate on her own. Not only does this episode illustrate the blurring of Lürsen’s professional and private life, but it also provides the viewers with a further example of a transgression of gender roles. In the crime genre an illegal investigation by a suspended inspector is usually associated with male investigators; being a woman, Lürsen is not expected to be a risk-taking law-breaker.

That Lürsen’s behaviour is all in all a relatively complex negotiation of gender norms is exemplified in the episode “The Horseman of the Apocalypse” [“Der apokalyptische Reiter”]. Here, she acts according to given gender norms in that she reveals her fear and despair and is on the verge of crying from fear when it becomes clear that the murderer intends to kill her as well. In an interrogation of the suspect she plays the role of the ‘good cop’, while a male inspector pretends to be the ‘bad cop’. In a later scene involving a crazed gunman on a rooftop, however, Lürsen does not act according to predominant images of women’s roles. Although she arrives later than other police officers, she immediately goes up onto the rooftop to stop the man. She manages to get his attention and to talk

33 Traditionally, the problematic combination of professional and private life or the lack of ‘motherly/parental care’ has not been an issue regarding male *Tatort* inspectors; it has only been introduced with more recent inspectors, such as Jan Casstorff (Robert Atzorn) and Felix Stark (Boris Aljinovic), who appeared in *Tatort* in 2001. This fact can partially be interpreted as a consequence of changing gender roles for both women and men; another reason is that in previous decades *Tatort* inspectors were presented as characters without a private life.

to him. While he is still looking at her, she surprises the man with a punch and knocks him out. Thus, she uses an approach that corresponds to a 'masculine' type of behaviour, involving a very active and determined stand as well as physical prowess.

## VII. Independence in professional and private life – Inspector Charlotte Lindholm

Being one of the women inspectors who were introduced in 2002, Charlotte Lindholm is depicted as a modern woman in her late thirties. Lindholm dresses fashionably, but in a sportive way. She is very pragmatic, which fits in well with her work, as her cases are often located in the countryside around Hannover, which means that she frequently has to investigate on farms, in fields and woods. Charlotte Lindholm is a smart woman who has a university degree; she has a keen perception, is self-assured and dedicated to her career within the police. She is down-to-earth, has a great sense of humour and can easily link with people, but she does not hesitate to put somebody in her/his place when she disagrees with her/his behaviour, either.

Like the majority of the *Tatort* investigators, Lindholm is unmarried. She lives together with a male friend, who is a successful author of crime stories. While she treats him as a friend whom she can rely on, Martin Felser (Ingo Naujoks) is in love with her, something which she is unaware of at first. Lindholm is depicted as a thoughtful investigator, but chaotic person who frequently forgets her personal belongings and who makes a mess in her home. Felser sorts out her life – he takes care of the apartment, cooks for her and follows her to remote places of investigation when she once again has forgotten an important item. Although Lindholm appreciates his support, Welser occasionally gets on her nerves because she sometimes feels controlled and overprotected by him.

While other inspectors work in teams and often have close relationships to their colleagues, Lindholm does not have a partner, which meets her need for independence. Lindholm usually gets support from the local police in order to solve the case, but she is clearly in charge of the investigation. The relationship to the local colleagues is often depicted as problematic, and Lindholm does not seem to be a good team-worker, preferring to take decisions on her own. Since the relationship between the inspectors or within the team is a central theme of *Tatort* episodes, Martin Felser has become a central figure.

A second character had a leading role in both the private and the professional life of Charlotte Lindholm for three episodes: in "Forest of Fairytales" ["Märchenwald"] Lindholm meets Tobias Endres (Hannes Jaenicke) and falls in love

with him. Endres is Permanent Secretary in the Home Office and also involved in the case in the episode “Dark Paths” [“Dunkle Wege”], where he belongs to the crisis team in charge. Lindholm’s and Endres’s love relationship is a central issue in this episode, and the amalgamation of private and professional life becomes even more prominent in “Difficulty in Breathing” [“Atemnot”]. The managing director of a large food company is killed in a car accident. Since the company was involved in a food scandal in the past, the police presume that the car crash was planned. During her investigation Charlotte Lindholm detects that a large law firm, which has defended the food company during the scandal, plays a major role in the intrigues and the murder. She gets increasingly confused when she finds out that her boyfriend worked in this law firm at the time and that he was even involved in the case. Since Endres seems to hide important information from her and since many pieces of evidence point to his guilt, Lindholm wonders whether she can still trust him and experiences an emotional crisis. Only in the very end can Lindholm detect that Endres has been the victim of his former boss, who manipulated pieces of evidence in order to make Endres appear guilty. In a dramatic showdown, where Lindholm confronts Endres’s former boss with the truth, he pulls his gun, unwilling to give up. He intends to shoot Lindholm, but Endres saves her life and gets hit instead. Tobias Endres dies in Charlotte Lindholm’s arms, in a scene which is dramatic and emotionally intense. But Endres’s death, ultimately, is in line with a pattern typical of *Tatort*, because from now on Lindholm is again without a stable partner.

Charlotte Lindholm is the first inspector ever having a baby in *Tatort* and the first woman inspector shown to be pregnant.<sup>34</sup> Other inspectors, both male and female, either are childless or already had children when they were introduced (e.g. Freddy Schenk, Felix Stark and Inga Lürsen). Lindholm had a short-lived affair with a married colleague from Spain. She decided not to tell him about her pregnancy and to raise the child as a single parent with the help of Martin Felser and her mother. This choice again demonstrates Lindholm’s need of independence. In “To Whom Honour is Due” [“Wem Ehre gebührt”] Lindholm investigates while being pregnant in the fifth month and in “Harvest Festival Registered Association” [“Erntedank e.V.”] she actually is on maternity leave but is bored and therefore starts investigating undercover. Lindholm is realistically shown struggling with the difficulties and prejudices women have to face when they want both career and children.

While Lürsen is presented as a mother who departs from the norms of motherhood and often feels she does not spend enough time with her daughter, Lindholm tackles this task differently. She wants to be a working mother and

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34 Introducing the pregnancy and the baby were decisions on the part of the producers because the actress was not pregnant.

regards this neither as a problem nor as a lack of ‘motherly care’ – even if others (like her boss) confront her with a more traditional view and try to impose their standards on her. The depiction of Charlotte Lindholm as a successful, highly qualified inspector and as an independent, attractive woman with endearing weaknesses creates a character that is likely to appeal to a broad range of viewers.

### VIII. Conclusion

Over the past decades, the role of women in crime series has undergone significant changes. Women have ceased to be shown merely in supporting roles and have increasingly been cast as investigators. Since crime series traditionally projected a rather conservative notion of gender roles, the appearance of female investigators has required a number of difficult negotiations. This has been demonstrated with reference to the German crime series *Tatort*. This series has set up female characters that are depicted in diverse ways. Up to the 1990s, women tended to remain supporting characters, and they can hardly be seen as progressive role models for female viewers. In recent years, however, female characters have quite often been assigned central roles and have been presented as both more individualised and more active. Moreover, the growing number of female inspectors has gone hand in hand with the creation of more distinctive female supporting roles. Whereas in the 1970s and 1980s women were typically depicted as admiring secretaries and ex-wives, since the 1990s *Tatort* has increasingly presented them as partners and assistants with a stronger personality.

The notion of the career woman as reflected in *Tatort* is far from being stable; it has been influenced by concomitant social changes in the prevailing notions of gender roles. While Wiegand, the first female inspector in *Tatort*, appears to have been constructed in accordance with a fairly conventional concept of ‘femininity’ and, thus, displays sensitiveness and struggles to assert her position, Odenthal is constructed along very different lines. She is endowed with a strong personality. Wiegand often seems to have a hard time within the police force and appears to lead a generally unhappy private life, whereas Odenthal is clearly dedicated to her job and apparently does not mind that it leaves no room for a private life. Odenthal’s success and her dedication can be seen as a transgression of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity because a career in the police force is associated with a male role pattern. But the presentation of Odenthal as a woman without a private life also implies that women have to make a choice, that a successful woman cannot have a family – and in so far Odenthal is shaped according to conventions. Lürsen appears to occupy an intermediate position between the role patterns represented by Wiegand and Odenthal; she represents women’s refusal to choose between children and a career. But Lürsen

is cast as being stuck in the struggle of striking a balance between her duties as inspector on the one hand and those as a mother on the other hand. Lindholm is presented as a successful inspector who knows what she wants and who lives according to her notion of gender roles. She is the first *Tatort* inspector ever to *become* a parent and she refuses to live up to gender roles others try to impose on her.

Each female inspector constructed in *Tatort* in the last decades reproduces social gender norms to a certain extent and is shaped by a particular moment in history and culture, by constructions of femininity and feminine subject positions which exist at a point in time. Ultimately, however, the depiction of women as following given gender norms or as departing from them within a TV series not only echoes cultural norms, but, due to the role of television as a producer of cultural meanings, also contributes to a reinforcement or subversion of norms. A TV series like *Tatort* actively shapes how women perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others.

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## What are Men Made of? Fictions of Masculinity in Western Movies: Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952) and Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

Frontier town, home of the western hero  
Frontier justice, dealt with the iron hand  
    He wore a long coat to ground  
He wore big boots that made a sound  
    He wore a six gun on his hip  
    But now he doesn't carry it  
Sure enough, he was a western hero.  
    Neil Young, *Western Hero* (1994)

### I. Introduction

The scene is familiar: A lone rider, sitting easily in the saddle of his dusty horse, travels across the plains towards a small Western town with muddy streets and lively saloons. He wears a tattered, wide-brimmed hat, a loose-hanging vest, a bandanna round his neck, and one gun rests naturally at his side in a smooth, well-worn holster...<sup>1</sup> Instead of just evoking the 'star image'<sup>2</sup> of the classical hero of the Western – the solitary cowboy, pitting his strength against the forces of nature – the scene evokes stories of glory and suffering, heroism and savagery, nature and civilisation, love and sacrifice and – above all – of masculinity. Indeed, the figure of the horseman conjures up “worlds of meaning and value, codes of conduct, standards of judgment, and habits of perception that shape our sense of the world”.<sup>3</sup>

The majority of Western films is obsessed with the figure of the ‘Westerner’,

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1 Cf. WRIGHT, Will. *Six Guns & Society. A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1977 [1975]. 4.

2 DYER, Richard. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute, 1979; and DYER, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies. Film Stars and Society*. London: Macmillan, 1987.

3 TOMPKINS, Jane. *West of Everything. The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 6. The cultural significance of the Western is also stressed by LENIHAN: “The western movie is one of the mechanisms a democratic society used to give form and meaning to its worries about its own destiny at a time when its position seemed more central and its values less secure than ever before.” (LENIHAN, John H. *Showdown. Confronting Modern America*. Chicago, IL: Illinois University Press, 1980. 9)

the white male hero in arms. Historically, pioneers and cowboys have occupied the symbolic centre of American masculinity. Over the decades, cowboys and their heroic masculinity became fused in a particularly powerful configuration with representations of American maleness: “John Wayne, the actor whose name is synonymous with Western films, became the symbol of American masculinity from World War II to Vietnam.”<sup>4</sup> In Westerns, American patriotism was increasingly associated with the virtues of manhood, and the idea of the West and the frontier as its ultimate test and opportunity. This view is epitomised in Frederick Jackson Turner’s understanding of the frontier as a natural industry for the production of American manhood.<sup>5</sup> By representing the American West as a highly idealised “place where adventures took place and men became heroes”<sup>6</sup> the Western films charged America’s “will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer and rule”<sup>7</sup> and offered their audience “imaginative identification with powerful and exciting forms of [...] masculinity”.<sup>8</sup> In this way, images of American cowboys and stories of the pioneer gradually became the imaginative heart of thinking and fantasising of masculinity, a process which was and still is continually enhanced by the regular emergence of new Western films and their new heroes in the perpetual struggle for land, liberty and civilisation.

This paper focuses on the role Westerns have played in perpetuating and reinforcing notions of masculinity, and, at times, helping to affirm the norm of manhood. It argues that Western films are a central means of cultural self-fashioning through which American society negotiated and still negotiates concepts of masculinity. Westerns are an important element of what one could call the ‘embodiment of masculinity’, thus providing compelling answers to the question of what it means to be a man. They organise “imaginative investments in the gendered heroes whose deeds they relate and make available, as public representations which in turn may invite identification”.<sup>9</sup> In line with Richard Dyer,<sup>10</sup> the Western hero can be described as a ‘media star’ in the literal sense, i. e. as a culturally and aesthetically constructed ‘star image’, which embodies “ideal ways of behaving”.<sup>11</sup> Due to this idealisation the Western hero and the ‘star

4 TOMPKINS. *West of Everything*. 5.

5 Cf. TURNER, Frederick Jackson. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984 [1893].

6 GREEN, Martin. *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*. London: Routledge, 1980. 3.

7 GREEN. *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*. 37.

8 DAWSON, Graham. “Stars of Empire. Victorian Soldier Heroes and Boyhood Masculinity.” In: *Journal for the Study of British Cultures. Masculinities* 2 (1996): 117 – 32. 129.

9 DAWSON, Graham. *Soldier Heroes. British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities*. London/New York: Routledge, 1994. 46.

10 Cf. DYER. *Stars*; and DYER. *Heavenly Bodies*.

11 DYER. *Stars*. 22 – 23.

image', respectively, could become the focus of powerful imaginative investment and identification on the part of its audience. Once formed, a star image can be constantly enriched with new, culture-specific knowledge and variously inflected as to respond to culturally pressing challenges and modified needs.<sup>12</sup> Two films – Fred Zinnemann's classical Western *High Noon* and Ang Lee's revisionist Western *Brokeback Mountain* – are used to illustrate my argument. Both films derive much of their fascination from their inquiry into questions of masculinity, patriarchal law and heroism. Before I tackle this project, however, I briefly want to summarise the role of Western films in the process of constructing and disseminating fictions of masculinity.

The history of Western fiction dates back to the nineteenth century, and there is little doubt that the genre is American in origin. From the 1860s to the 1900s so-called 'penny dreadfuls' and later the dime Westerns were hugely popular. These cheap books presented fanciful yet supposedly authentic stories about cowboys and settlers, who tried to tame the 'Wild West' in the name of civilisation and refused to simply withdraw in the face of trouble. It was in 1903 when Edwin Porter produced *The Great Train Robbery*, the first Western film, starring Broncho Billy Anderson. The film's tremendous success opened the door for Anderson to become the screen's first cowboy star, making several hundred Western movies. The historical conditions for the process were brought about by the fast development of the culture industry from the 1890s onward and the concomitant development of a popular consumer market. Influenced in form and content by the cultural politics of boys' fiction, heroic representations of Westerners became increasingly popular. As a response to tremendous social changes, political instability and a growing diversification of American society at the beginning of the twentieth century, Western masculinity became fused with rousing tales of patriotic achievement and American imperial identity. The uncivilised frontier was seen as the touchstone of moralised virility. Since then, the Western has become not only a favourite genre of moviegoers, but has also emerged as the most powerful condensation of American male values: "Within the framework of the Western, a man could do what he had to do with an instinctive natural awareness of right and wrong."<sup>13</sup> Eventually, Western films came to be seen as the epitome of genuinely male norms and the metonymic essence of manliness. John Cawelti argues that "the Western affirms the necessity of society" by presenting and resolving "the conflict between key American values like progress and success and the lost virtues" of male honour, heroism,

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12 Cf. DYER, *Stars*.

13 LENIHAN, *Showdown*. 15.

and natural freedom.<sup>14</sup> Through their plot structure, characters and iconography Westerns provide male viewers with simplified, but relatively coherent frameworks or models for interpreting their reality:

This model was not for women but for men: Westerns insist on this point by emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal. It is not one ideal among many, it is *the* ideal, certainly the one worth dying for. It doesn't matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a sheepherder, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a *man*.<sup>15</sup>

Essentially, Westerns are films in and through which men describe, discuss and make sense of their male experiences in the American West. Western heroes embody and explain culture-specific ideals of manliness. More than any other genre, the Western communicated the values of masculinity in American culture to American men as part of their embodied self-understanding, and to others as a means for apprehending the gender codes of the period. For society, these adventurers served as idealised role models for patriotic masculinity, "so narrated as to stimulate in the [audience] a desire for emulation".<sup>16</sup> The images, codes of conduct and values evoked by the Western are instrumental in what one might call the 'imaginative making of masculinity', something that is neither natural nor stable, but discursively and performatively constructed.<sup>17</sup> Western films convey fictions of masculinity, which are closely interlinked with culturally prevalent norms, values and systems of ideas.<sup>18</sup> In classical Westerns, these codes usually contain a yearning for adventure, for testing the limits of physical endurance and the horror of effeminate behaviour and thus generate an ethos of muscular and patriotic masculinity. In a sense, Western films constitute guides "for becoming a man, a rulebook for appropriate male behaviour, in short, a manual of masculinity".<sup>19</sup> In Westerns, men (or rather male bodies) can be seen

14 CAWELTI, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green Popular Press, 1971. 80.

15 TOMPKINS. *West of Everything*. 17–18.

16 DAWSON. "Stars of Empire." 123.

17 Hence, as manifold feminist studies on gender and, more recently, contributions to the subject of masculinity have shown, notions of gender-specific codes, such as the code of 'masculinity', are not to be understood as trans-historical and trans-cultural constants. Rather, they are the product of culture-specific signifying practices, a web of discourses and power-relations. Masculinity is defined in relation to the gender order as a social practice negotiated by men and women (cf. CONNELL, Robert W. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). Therefore, gender identities are most usefully understood as cultural formations which not only depend upon but also help stabilise a system of power structures.

18 MURPHY, Peter F. "Introduction: Literature and Masculinity." In: Peter F. Murphy (ed.). *Fictions of Masculinity. Crossing Cultures, Crossing Sexualities*. New York/London: New York University Press, 1994. 1–20. 1.

19 STRATE, Lance. "Beer Commercials: A Manual on Masculinity." In: Steve Craig (ed.). *Men, Masculinity and the Media*. London: Sage Publications, 1992. 78–92. 78.

‘in action’ as they shape, explain and unfold meaning. What is evoked are physical sensations and bodily excitement imbued with the dynamics of manliness.

The classical Western, as Will Wright has shown in his study *Six Guns and Society*, is set in the western United States and presents an essentially melodramatic portrayal of men performing virile, courageous deeds designed to restore order in society. “It is the story of the lone stranger who rides into a troubled town and cleans it up, winning the respect of the townsfolk and the love of the schoolmarm.”<sup>20</sup> The Western film revolves around the “relation between law and morality”<sup>21</sup> and portrays the conquest of the wilderness in the name of civilisation. The hero’s male identity is shown to be inextricably linked to the duties he owes to the American community.<sup>22</sup> The narrative structure that has organised the imagining of potent American masculinity is the adventure quest. This quest involves – in the words of Northrop Frye – a “perilous journey” into the ‘wild’ West, remote from the domestic and civilised.<sup>23</sup> The Western drama is rarely resolved without some use of masculine violence. The action concerns intense physical struggles and usually culminates in a combat between the protagonist and his enemies.<sup>24</sup> Victory ensures that the protagonist is recognised as hero and makes possible the affirmation of his manliness. Together with this idealisation “goes the hatred against others, who are painted in the darkest colours”.<sup>25</sup> The idealisation of the Western hero is based upon a direct contrast with certain types of villains, who constitute the hero’s adversaries and who are, most often, not only disqualified as ‘uncivilised’ but also as ‘unmanly’. The Western hero can shine all the brighter in stark contrast to his demonised and effeminate enemy (often Native Americans), who are held responsible for threatening the order of civilisation and manliness. In this vein, masculinity is frequently revealed as a defensive construction, a precarious state that has cast off a gendered, sexualised other. In Western films, homosocial bonding in conjunction with homophobia is part of the intricate process of constructing gendered identities by severing self from other.<sup>26</sup>

20 WRIGHT. *Six Guns & Society*. 32.

21 BAZIN, André. *What is Cinema?* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971. 145.

22 ROTUNDO, Anthony E. *American Manhood. Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1993. 2.

23 FRYE, Northrop. *The Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957. 187.

24 TOMPKINS. *West of Everything*. 38.

25 KLEIN, Melanie. “Love, Guilt and Reparation.” In: Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere (eds.). *Love, Hate and Reparation*. London: Hogarth Press/Institute for Psychoanalysis, 1937. 78–115. 97.

26 BASSNETT, Susan and Gisela ECKER. “Editorial.” In: *Journal for the Study of British Cultures. Masculinities 2* (1996): 99–102.

Accordingly, Westerns can be regarded as masculinising agencies, which are inevitably tied to the display of power structures. Western films *produce* agreed-upon codes of masculinities and popularise certain values, biases, and epistemological habits by contrasting ‘manliness’ with ‘unmanliness’. Both *High Noon* and *Brokeback Mountain* are prominent examples of the process of imagining masculinities. However, while Zinnemann’s Western is a potent example of the ethos of patriotic and muscular masculinity, Lee’s film systematically turns the generic set of rules upside down and thereby dismantles the Western genre of hegemonic and one-sided concepts of masculinity. The re-interpretation of the quintessentially male genre serves to undermine prevailing gender identities, replacing standardised masculinity with alternative masculinities.

## II. The Constitution of Masculinity in Fred Zinnemann’s *High Noon*

*High Noon* is a simple, stark, low-budget Western classic directed by Fred Zinnemann and released in 1952. This tightly-scripted, austere black-and-white film tells the tale of a lone, stoic, honour-bound marshal past his prime and already retired, Will Kane, who is abandoned by the Hadleyville townspeople, whom he had faithfully protected for many years. When four revenge-seeking gangsters return to Hadleyville the corrupted town becomes the testing-ground for the manly virtues of bravery and emotional self-control. By passing the test with flying colours, thus triumphing in the public sphere, Kane (played by Gary Cooper) becomes the embodiment of the core values of American masculinity, characterised by a potent combination of authority, martial prowess and white racial superiority. In his obsessive need to perform and to be recognised as a man, Will Kane – whose name already points to his will-power – constantly tests the limits of his physical endurance and moral strength. Fearful but duty-bound, he ultimately vanquishes the enemy, thereby sparing the town the imposition of barbaric frontier justice brought by the outlaws.

The film opens with Will Kane resigning as marshal of Hadleyville in order to marry Amy Fowler, a pacifist Quaker woman. Already the first words uttered by Kane during the wedding ceremony testify to his exemplary orientation towards the world of action: “I do.” The new marshal to replace Kane is expected to arrive the following day, and the town’s senior selectman, Henderson, reassures everyone: “This town will be safe ‘til tomorrow.” In his last act of office, Kane takes off his marshal’s star, a common Western icon, and pins it on his gun holster, amidst the applause of the wedding guests. Immediately after the

wedding ceremony, however, word is received that the outlaw Frank Miller, a man Kane personally arrested, was pardoned a week earlier and released on parole. Ben Miller, James Pierce and Jack Colby, three members of Miller's former gang, plan to reunite with their pardoned leader, who is to arrive on the noon train at Hadleyville. Being fully aware that Miller has first and foremost come back in order to seek revenge on Kane, his friends encourage him to leave town with Amy. Yet, during their retreat, Kane has second thoughts, reminding himself of his responsibility and his Western code of honour: This code does not allow him to leave but demands that he stand his man and fight the intruder. His conflict about leaving is reflected on his physically-pained face as he notifies Amy that he has to go back: "It's no good. I've got to go back, Amy. [...] This is crazy. I haven't even got any guts. [...] They're making me run. I've never run from anybody before." When his new wife insists that it is no longer his responsibility to fight the gang and begs him not to be 'a hero', he resolutely explains to her that he is still the 'same man' and that it is his moral compulsion to stay and fight Miller. Being a pacifist Quaker, who deplors violence, Amy threatens to leave him. Kane, however, is so preoccupied with his own code of masculinity that he accepts his wife's departure. Masculinity, in this sense, is shown to be a defensive construction: it is characterised by the detachment from femininity, which Kane has to attain and to safeguard as a man.<sup>27</sup> As in many classical Westerns, the 'masculine plot', that is, the plot which aims at the affirmation of hegemonic styles of masculinity<sup>28</sup> is shown to be in contention with the 'marriage plot'. Western heroes find themselves pushed and pulled between the public world of adventure and the feminising influence of the private home. If, however, they want to affirm their manliness they have to leave the safety of the private domain behind, resist the feminising impetus and prevail in the public world of action.

The pattern that organises the imagining of Kane's potent, idealised masculinity is primarily one of contrast. The pattern of contrast first and foremost operates along the manly/effeminate opposition. Kane is contrasted to the other men of the town in such a way that for each of their character traits the opposite is claimed for Kane's character. Back in Hadleyville, Kane is, at first, resolved to get special deputies and friends to support him in his fight. However, when he tries to find help, most of the fearful and complacent townspeople abandon him. Percy Mettrick, the judge who sentenced Miller, leaves the community because he is frustrated by the prevailing frontier justice. A certain Sam Fuller hides in

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27 KRAMER, Jürgen. "Lying as Surviving in *Heart of Darkness*. Colonial Masculinity in Conrad's Novella." In: *Journal for the Study of British Cultures. Masculinities* 2 (1996): 133–47. 143.

28 Cf. SUSSMAN, Herbert. *Victorian Masculinities. Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

his house and gets his embarrassed wife to say that her husband is absent. While in hiding, Fuller seems to transform into the 'female' inventory of the house, revealing that he is unable to succeed in the public sphere of men. After the marshal has left, Fuller excuses his deceitful cowardice when he explains to his wife: "Well, what do ya want? Do you want me to get killed? Do you want to be a widow, is that what you want?" Moreover, the potential deputies refuse to support Kane, betaking themselves in specious excuses. One of them is willing to fight only under the proviso that he is supported by other deputies in the struggle. When he mentions his responsibility for his wife and his children, Kane places him on a par with the latter: "Go home to your children." Complemented by a vision of domestic femininity, at home with the children and requiring protection, Fuller is contrasted to the manly Kane, thereby affirming the latter's privileged status as an agent of exemplary masculinity.

Kane's young deputy, Harvey Pell, is bitter that Kane did not propose him as his successor, passing over him in favour of a marshal from another town. He accuses Will of speaking against him because he was possibly "too young", or because his current girlfriend Helen is Will's former mistress. When Kane declines to support the young deputy's appointment as successor, Harvey, eventually, betrays Will: he quits and removes his badge. His subsequent reaction is in direct opposition to Will's norms of masculine behaviour: while Will has distanced himself from his wife in order to affirm his masculinity and to defend American civilisation, Harvey takes flight into the arms of his mistress, hoping for her to ascertain his sense of manliness. However, upon Harvey's return to Helen, she expresses her lack of faith in him and scornfully asks him to "grow up". She openly expresses what has become obvious all along: Kane is a real man whereas Harvey is nothing but a self-righteous weakling. After Helen has kicked him out, Harvey, deprived of his badge, holster and mistress, goes to the saloon, gets drunk and, in the process, appears to lose his manliness entirely. Increasingly drunk, he is unable to sit upright and becomes more and more passive, thus leaving the male realm of action behind. Two destitute Natives in front of the saloon, commonly associated with effeminacy in Westerns, underline Harvey's position outside the order of manliness. A masculinity oriented in this way towards passivity and femininity is clearly not compatible with the heroic image of an idealised Westerner.

Finding himself abandoned by the deputies and his friends, Kane is resolved to get support from another one of the town's institutions – the church. He interrupts the Sunday service, explaining his dilemma to the church-goers: "It looks like Frank Miller's coming back on the noon train. I need all the special deputies I can get." A number of men spontaneously offer to volunteer, but are held back by Cooper, one of the members, who reminds them that Kane is no longer in office. What follows is a lengthy debate about why the townspeople

should or should not support Kane, a debate which seems to be a miniature performance of democracy. In *High Noon*, however, this democracy symbolised by the pious citizens who refuse to help is revealed as ineffective, futile and corrupt, counteracting the Western ethos of muscular, active and patriotic masculinity. Whilst the citizens concur that Will Kane was the best marshal they ever had, they maintain that a violent shoot-out would create an unfavourable reputation for their town. Therefore, they urge Kane to flee town for the good of the local economy, insisting that “he didn’t have to come back here today”. They agree that Kane, provoking Miller to return and take revenge, is the true cause for the trouble. Realising that his demand for assistance is to no avail, Kane leaves the church after a quickly-spoken “thanks”. Outside the church, groups of children struggle in a tug-of-war, symbolising the tensions within the Western community. Their falling to the ground is a fitting expression of the failures of the town’s democratic system, thus once again emphasising the need for the Western hero’s principles: since society is weak, unmanly and unable to bolster support for civilisation, the Westerner has to rely only on himself if justice is to be done.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimately, all the scenes in which Kane tries to gather support from the town’s citizens serve one and the same purpose: they emphasise Kane’s masculinity. There is no doubt that it is due to the ethos of masculinity that Kane refuses to leave the town, even if this refusal may seem unreasonable and may ultimately cause his death. However, it is exactly his willingness to accept death as the last consequence of this moral compulsion that so effectively highlights his manliness: not only by taking risks, “but also by taking more risks than anyone else”,<sup>30</sup> thus by an intensified self-discipline, he proves that he is manlier than all other citizens. Will Kane can shine all the brighter as the sole representative of the Western ethos of masculinity in sharp contrast to the weak and effeminate townspeople: “The hero is free from dependence on the will of others, and he is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society. Society, of course, fulfils neither of these requisites.”<sup>31</sup> The ubiquitous encounters between Kane and the other men of the town provide the audience with the clearest answers to the question of what ‘real men’ are made of. The film noticeably privileges the austere rigour of violent masculinity over the debilitating effects of marriage and the effeminacy embodied by the town’s citizens, thus reaffirming hegemonic styles of masculine identity. Masculinity is

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29 WRIGHT. *Six Guns & Society*. 155.

30 KIRKHAM, Pat and Janet THUMIM. “You Tarzan.” In: Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (eds.). *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993. 11–26. 23.

31 WRIGHT. *Six Guns & Society*. 138.

fashioned by 'othering' physical and moral weakness and by discrediting them as feminine.

Masculinity, then, the film suggests, cannot be taken as a given but is rather something that men must constantly live up to. This need to perform is expressed by Helen: "It takes more than broad shoulders to be a man." What is at stake with regard to notions of masculinity are not physical attributes but attitudes, that is, a moral virtue of manliness. In this vein, *High Noon* exposes some of the most pertinent rules of the Western genre. It illustrates that the Western hero has to reinforce his manliness by repeatedly testing the limits of his courage anew: the greater the challenge, the more triumphantly can his manliness be affirmed. Masculinity is thus understood as a quest, i. e., as a narrative of continual progress driven by a morally sanctioned purpose. On a structural level, this preoccupation entails the continuous effort to embody the norms of masculine behaviour in accordance with moral prescriptions: the moral virtue of manliness must be translated into a body practice. That is to say, the quest-structure depicts masculinity as a performative process which must be reiterated again and again in the form of gender-specific "techniques of the self" and of the body.<sup>32</sup> It is with respect to these techniques of the self and the body that the film's camera work is to be understood. Kane's status as the acknowledged agent of manliness is effectively emphasised by the film's many high-crane shots. While all other figures are predominantly shown from above, firmly placed within a group in closed rooms, Kane's stature is time and again slowly 'erected' from the ground. Kane produces an almost "flawless surface"<sup>33</sup> of potent masculinity. The camera pulls up and away from the lone, abandoned figure of the marshal and thus highlights his outstanding heroic status. What is evoked in the film are physical sensations and bodily excitement imbued with the dynamics of masculinity: Kane becomes the embodiment of the brave white male hero in arms.

Ultimately, Kane is left to fight the revenge-seeking killer and his gang alone. In the final shoot-out sequence on Hadleyville's main street, Kane is betrayed and isolated, walking up the abandoned streets of the ghost town toward the four tough killers: a solitary man against the world. The spectacular combat, one man fighting against a seemingly invincible number of gangsters, is at the imaginative heart of the film. What we see is the sheer physicality of muscular masculinity. At no point do we learn anything about the fears that Kane must have had at the

32 FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Use of Pleasure. The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992; BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies That Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York/London: Routledge, 1993.

33 DYER, Richard. "Rock – The Last Guy You'd Have Figured." In: Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumim (eds.). *You Tarzan. Masculinity, Movies and Men*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993. 27 – 34. 30.

thought of risking his life. Great emphasis is put on dramatising the ability to inflict and endure violence as the hallmark of manliness. Again, crane shots are employed in order to erect Kane's male body carefully, suggesting complete self-government. As, according to the patriarchal order, power and masculinity are more or less synonymous, it comes as no surprise that the filmic representation links masculinity with strength and physical ability. Violent action figures as the exemplary signifier of the masculine; it is portrayed as a vital part of what being a man involves: "The social definition of men as holders of power is translated not only into mental body images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body."<sup>34</sup> By translating the 'social definition of men as holders of power' into the 'feel and texture of the body', the film literally naturalises and legitimises the superiority of men. The male body is fashioned into a heraldic sign of socially privileged identity.

Kane eventually defeats the gang. Significantly, it is this victory that opens up a space for the recognition of the protagonist not only as a hero, but as a *national* hero: Through the successful fight Kane spares the town the infringement of barbaric frontier justice brought by the four-man group of outlaws, thus fulfilling his civilising mission. Hence, the combat not only constitutes an exciting and energising myth of masculinity, but also of American nationalism. By representing the fight as space where men can reassert their manliness *and* American civilisation, the film charges America's will with the energy to go out into the world, explore, fight and civilise. Resolving the tension between civilisation and martial spirit into an ideal unity, the heroic image of Will Kane "effects a 'magic' reconciliation of the apparently incompatible terms".<sup>35</sup> Thus, the film provides the viewer with a most potent example of idealised manliness, an example that inspires emulation and readiness for self-sacrifice. In this vein, Kane's saintly self-sacrifice for American civilisation figures as a mobilising fantasy of masculinity that could – and probably still can – offer the viewers "the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and may be realized".<sup>36</sup> Envisaged in this way, the affirmation of the masculine in *High Noon* also aims at a subjugation of that which deviates from the prevailing systems of civilisatory power, a process which arguably asserts hierarchical oppositions between self vs. other, manly vs. unmanly, civilised vs. uncivilised. As a performance of masculinity *High Noon* provides highly normative codes of understanding male identity. By gratifyingly reasserting

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34 CONNELL, Robert W. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987. 85.

35 DYER. *Stars*. 30.

36 DYER, Richard. "Entertainment as Utopia." In: Rick Altman (ed.). *Genre. The Musical*. London: Routledge, 1981. 175–89. 177.

American imperial virility the film tailors national myths to help America fashion its own self-image and to legitimise its claim to power and authority.

### III. Dislocating Masculinity in Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005)

The Ang Lee film *Brokeback Mountain* is a Western, though a Western with a twist: the highly praised movie, based on a short story by Annie Proulx, is a tale about two homosexual men. The film tells the love story of two young Wyoming ranch hands who meet as teenagers in 1963, fall in love and continue their agonising affair, secretly, over the next twenty years. To most people, the image that is associated with Westerns and their heroes is not likely to be that of homosexual men. Thus, through *Brokeback Mountain*, commonly considered a 'gay cowboy movie', Lee tackles one of the most potent fictions propelled by the Western: the fiction of the Western hero as a privileged form of hegemonic – and by implication heterosexual – masculinity in North American cultures. Both Ennis and Jack, the two protagonists, always seem to be pushing at the boundaries of masculinity, their gayness unsettling, inflecting, exploring the question of what it means to be a man, dismissing “simplistic biopolarities based on equations of male=male and female=female”.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the heroes subvert the security with which ideas of masculinity, normality and heterosexuality are held in classical Westerns. *Brokeback Mountain* not only challenges established masculinity but offers alternative masculinities in a genre that is the paradigmatic masculine form. It thus draws the viewers' attention to “the multiple possibilities of [...] social formations, the variability in the gendering of the biological male, and the range of such constructions over time and within any specific historical moment”.<sup>38</sup>

*Brokeback Mountain* is a tragedy about the devastating emotional consequences of erotic self-repression.<sup>39</sup> The first scene of the film shows a cowboy standing against a wall in a small town, Signal, Wyoming, his hat tipped down as if he were asleep, poking his booted heels into the ground and staring at his toes. Another fellow, scarcely more than a boy, turns up in an old truck and joins him waiting. Evidently, both are looking for a job. They fall silent, the gusts of wind

37 BASSNETT and ECKER. “Editorial.” 100.

38 SUSSMAN. *Victorian Masculinities*. 8.

39 Cf. MENDELSON, Daniel. “An Affair to Remember: *Brokeback Mountain*, a film directed by Ang Lee, based on the story by E. Annie Proulx.” In: *The New York Review of Books* 53,3 (2006): 23.02.

“doing all the talking”.<sup>40</sup> There is something wary in their silence, and the entire scene conjures up Sergio Leone’s Western *Once upon a Time in the West* (1968). Leone’s heroes were waiting for a train, the means of transportation which ultimately meant the death of the ‘old mythic West’; these boys are about to fall in love, a love which will eventually not only cause the death of one of the protagonists, but which also becomes the very symbol of the ‘death’ of the traditional Western genre and its heterosexual norm. At last, we learn the names of the two protagonists: Ennis del Mar (played by Heath Ledger) and Jack Twist (played by Jake Gyllenhaal). After a short interview with a boorish farmer they are hired for the summer to tend the herds on Brokeback Mountain, and that is where we follow them for the first act of their story.

The love story takes place early on in the film, and does not last very long: a summer’s idyll on the open Wyoming plains, during which the two men, reserved Ennis and high-spirited Jack, fall into bed, and then in love, with each other.<sup>41</sup> One evening, a drunken Ennis, cold and lonely on a remote campsite, shares Jack’s tent, and there is wordless unbuckling of heavy belts. They become entangled in an act of sex that is as romantically intimate as it is lustily intense. Not once do they mention the word love. In fact, the only visual representation of their happiness in love is a single brief shot of the two shirtless youths cuddling in the grass. Importantly, that shot is silent: it turns out that what we get to see is what Ennis’ and Jack’s boss observes through his binoculars as he controls their work and – by implication – their sexuality. We see male bodies stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not a direct one; it is mediated by the look of their boss. And his looks are marked by hatred and aggression, thus blemishing their love as deviant.

After their brief summer idyll in the mountains – because their love for each other cannot be fitted into the lives they think they are supposed to lead – they lose the Eden they have created for themselves. They go separate ways and their chance of happiness dies. Indeed, “*Brokeback Mountain* does to its heroes what no movie cowboy wants to have happen: Things change in the world around them. They complete the shepherding and rejoin society.”<sup>42</sup> (Ennis mumbles: “This is a one-shot thing we got goin’ on here.”; Jack confirms: “Nobody’s business but ours.” “You know I ain’t queer.” “Me neither.”) They separate and do what they think they have to do: get married and raise kids. Ennis weds Alma, a conventional, earnest girl; Jack weds a rodeo rider named Lureen. However, these marriages are loveless and wearisome unions: piercing betrayals, which

40 LANE, Anthony. “New Frontiers. *Brokeback Mountain* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*.” In: *The New Yorker* (December 12, 2005): 117–19. 117.

41 Cf. MENDELSON. “An Affair to Remember.”

42 MENDELSON. “An Affair to Remember.”

finally destroy the two men and their respective families. If misery and despair prevail, it is not because Ennis and Jack are homosexual, but because they fail to acknowledge that they are. In their frustration, the men inflict pain on others, and these others are primarily their wives and children. Jack's wife, Lureen, successively devolves into a frail shrew, her ever more sophisticated hairstyles figuring as a fitting marker of the increasing deception and alienation that presides over the couple's relationship.<sup>43</sup> It is significant that, just as in the classical Western, the 'masculine plot' is counteracted by the feminising influence of the home and the private domain of family life. However, in *Brokeback Mountain*, the masculine plot does not aim at establishing and reaffirming hegemonic forms of heterosexual masculinity, but, on the contrary, at ushering in new, pluralised forms of masculinity, which open a space for new cultural significations of gender codes.

After four years, the two men get together again, supposedly for private 'fishing trips', and from then on they meet as often as they can. The brief and infrequent vacations that they are able to take together cultivate their love as much as they taint it. Increasingly, their trips are haunted by the vision of the happier life they might have led, had they been but courageous enough to acknowledge their love. Their final trip is overshadowed by mutual reproaches and bitter accusations. "I wish I knew how to quit you," the now nearly middle-aged Jack cries out in pain, mortified by years of searching sexual solace in the arms of Mexican prostitutes. "It's because of you that I'm like this – nothing, nobody," Ennis weeps as he collapses in the dust. He feels reduced to being "nothing" because Jack has made him aware of his real passion, a passion that has, however, no future, since they are unable to integrate it into their lives. Time and again Ennis rejects Jack's proposition to live together and run "a little cow and calf operation", being even unable to imagine what such a life could look like. His voice, which is rarely more than a mere mumble, is a fitting expression for his emotional inhibition. Evidently, he hopes "that, by swallowing his words, he can swallow his feelings too".<sup>44</sup> It is this inability to acknowledge his feelings that brings him, when parting from Jack after their first summer, to punching a wall, as if he was desperately trying to beat himself senseless. Violence, in *Brokeback Mountain*, is not directed against others nor does it serve as a privileged instrument of the Western hero to affirm his male identity. Rather, it is a form of self-aggression, revealing Ennis's incapability of accepting his own identity and to reconcile the Western code of male honour with his own needs and desires.

One reason Ennis is incapable of even dreaming of a life with his lover is a horrid childhood memory, presented in a series of flashbacks, of being forced by

43 Cf. MENDELSON. "An Affair to Remember."

44 LANE. "New Frontiers." 118.

his father to closely look at the dead body of a gay farmer. The rancher was obviously tortured and beaten to death with the consent of the village community. This reference to Ennis's childhood trauma suggests, once again, that *Brokeback Mountain* must be seen as a specifically gay tragedy:<sup>45</sup> dread and horror were implanted at an early age, and so Ennis had little chance but to despise the way he loved. Visually, Ennis's self-loathing is given startling expression. The discomfited, almost hobbled quality of his pace, the tense and rigid gestures, the fact that he hardly opens his mouth when talking – all aptly testify to the torture of a man who is afraid of himself, his body and his desires. Male anxiety is expressed in material appearance and Ennis's inarticulacy figures "as the signifier of inner emotional turmoil and agony".<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the classical Western, in which speech is displaced onto outbursts of violence against others, in *Brokeback Mountain* it is relocated into 'acts of self mutilation'. Not violence, but tortured and silent suffering operates as "telling signifiers of the masculine",<sup>47</sup> which highlight the conflicts, anxieties and contradictions at the heart of masculinity.

The scene of the tortured farmer prefigures Jack's own death. Ennis – as well as the audience – learn about Jack's death when a postcard that Ennis sent to his lover comes back stamped DECEASED. When he calls Jack's wife Lureen she tells him that Jack died when he was trying to pump up a flat and the tire blew up. Supposedly, the force of the explosion slammed the rim into his face and knocked him unconscious. By the time someone came along to help Jack had already drowned in his own blood. Yet, the simultaneous visualisation of this incident contradicts Lureen's narrative, suggesting that Jack was beaten up with the tire iron by Lureen's and her father's friends.

The blatant violence against the gay protagonist might insinuate that Ennis' and Jack's thwarted love constitutes a social tragedy, inflicted by the irrational strictures and deformations of society. This, however, is not the case. As Mendelsohn rightly points out, their tragedy is a psychological tragedy.<sup>48</sup> Jack and Ennis never rail against society; they do not despise the prevalent system of norms and values, but deeply loathe themselves. Theirs is a tragedy which emerges on the uneasy terrain of gender and identity as they leave the "security of heterosexuality"<sup>49</sup> and of normative masculinity behind. It is a "tragedy of psyches scarred from the very first stirrings of an erotic desire which the world around them – beginning in earliest childhood, in the bosom of their families, as Ennis's grim flashback is meant to remind us – represents as unhealthy, hateful,

45 Cf. MENDELSON. "An Affair to Remember."

46 KIRKHAM and THUMIM. "You Tarzan." 24.

47 KIRKHAM and THUMIM. "You Tarzan." 24.

48 MENDELSON. "An Affair to Remember."

49 DYER. "Rock – The Last Guy You'd Have Figured." 23.

and deadly”.<sup>50</sup> And more than that: their tragedy as well as the violence directed against the gay men remind us to what extent dominant heterosexual masculine identities are founded on homophobia and must thus be regarded as defensive constructions, which have “cast off a gendered sexualized Other”.<sup>51</sup>

The topics of repression, confinement and emptiness are repeatedly taken up throughout the film, and it is particularly through the semanticization of space that these issues are displayed. Semanticization of space serves as a powerful instrument to explore imaginatively the established boundaries between the strictures of culture on the one hand and the freedom offered by nature on the other. Significantly, the two lovers are only happy together in unfenced outdoors and open plains, surrounded by enormously wide skies and vast landscapes. Through this setting, the film not only literally ‘naturalises’ their love, thus semiotically empowering the culturally marginalised.<sup>52</sup> Rather, it is also suggested that Ennis and Jack are possessed of an innocence that society – which exists on a lower plane, beneath the mountains – can only corrupt and violate. Thus, just as in the classical Western, this version of “American Rousseauism”<sup>53</sup> underlines the close connection between nature, liberty and men’s law (even if turned upside-down), suggesting that it is only in the uncivilised wilderness that men can live according to their own ethos. By contrast, whenever Jack and Ennis are shown indoors, the failure and breakdown of their domestic and social lives becomes startlingly evident. Both look anxious, claustrophobic and utterly displaced, pacing back and forth in their respective homes like locked-up animals. Especially Ennis is time and again seen in reflection, his face being disfigured and fragmented in various mirrors. The fragmentation of his features impressively illustrates the extent to which he feels alienated from the life he leads, unable to see and accept his true self. Thus, their social lives are depicted as a traumatising form of self-alienation, which – as Hubert Zapf aptly put it in a different context – “in their one-sided hierarchical oppositions between culture and nature, mind and body, power and love, lead to death-in-life situations of paralysed vitality”.<sup>54</sup> Ennis and Jack know what they are not – gay – but do not have the faintest idea what they are. In this way, the two protagonists are doubly trapped. They cannot be together because they are unable to find ways of reconciling their specific desires with their pertinent self-images. And they cannot live up to the code of manly honour which presides over Western heroes, because

50 MENDELSON. “An Affair to Remember.”

51 BASSNETT and ECKER. “Editorial.” 101.

52 Cf. ZAPF, Hubert. “Literature as Cultural Ecology. Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts with Examples from American Literature.” In: *REAL. Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature* 17 (2001): 65 – 100. 93.

53 LANE. “New Frontiers.” 118.

54 ZAPF. “Literature as Cultural Ecology.” 93.

that code is incompatible with their particular needs. They are caught in the tradition of masculine culture which allows little space for the exposure of feeling and which brands any departure from standardised heterosexual identities as ‘unmanly’.

Ultimately, the semantic oppositions between the culturally separated spheres of culture and nature, indoors and outdoors yield the emotional climax of *Brokeback Mountain*, that is, three consecutive scenes which revolve around literal closets.<sup>55</sup> In the first scene, Ennis, who is now in his late thirties and has just learned about Jack’s death, visits his ex-lover’s childhood home in Lightning Flat. There, he proposes to Jack’s parents scattering their son’s ashes at Brokeback Mountain, claiming that this has always been Jack’s wish. Yet, as was to be expected, his parents refuse and maintain that their son is to be buried in the ‘family plot’. It thus seems that, even after his death, Jack is denied the happiness and freedom which he was never able to achieve during his life-time. Again, he is caught in the prevailing ideological system of Puritanism that the film reconstructs as a formative ideological force of American history and culture.

In the following scene Ennis visits Jack’s almost bare childhood room. In a tiny closet, which is a shallow cavity with a wooden rod braced across, he discovers two worn-out shirts – the shirts he and Jack were wearing during their summer herding sheep in the blue-green Wyoming Mountains, with stains indicating that they have not been washed since. The two shirts are carefully encased in one another, the sleeves of Ennis’ shirt sentimentally worked down inside Jack’s sleeves, like two skins, one inside the other. At the end of their summer, Ennis had thought that he had lost his shirt; only now does he realise that it was stolen by Jack and hidden inside Jack’s own shirt. Ennis presses his face into the fabric of the shirt, obviously hoping to capture the scent of Jack and their shared time. However, all there seems to be left is what he holds in his hands, nothing but the memory of a time long lost. The two shirts hidden in the closet, kept together by a complete embrace which the two lovers were never able to fully indulge, become a powerful symbol of the love affair between the two men who never dared to call it that. Realising too late how much he was loved by Jack, Ennis lingers on in the windowless space, caressing the shirts and weeping bitterly.

In the following scene, another mislaid piece of clothing and another cramped closet inflict a similar moment of tragic epiphany. Ennis del Mar, who is now living by himself in an old trailer, is visited by his adolescent daughter, who announces that she will get married soon. “Does he love you?” the concerned father affectionately asks, as if wanting to signal that he has understood that this is all that matters. After his daughter has left, Ennis notices that she has left her

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55 Cf. MENDELSON. “An Affair to Remember.”

sweater behind. When he opens his tiny wardrobe to stow it away, we perceive that Ennis has hung his and Jack's shirt, one still inside the other, on the closet door. Above the shirts, he has pinned up a postcard, showing Brokeback Mountain. Just when the viewer's gaze is lured into the wardrobe and the tightness of the shirts' embrace, the camera pulls back to grant us a wider view, exposing a little window, which allows a glance at a field of flowers, the width of the mountains and the sky. Ennis steps back and looks at the ensemble through some tears. The wind seems to strike the trailer, eases, dies away, and leaves a momentary silence.

The juxtaposition of the tiny and cramped closet and the vastness of the landscape not only becomes a telling symbol of the discrepancy between the life they led and the one they could have lived. It also suggests that there is always an open space between what one knows and what one tries to believe.<sup>56</sup> It is in this vein that Ennis looks at the closet and mumbles: "Jack, I swear—," knowing at the same time that Jack never asked him to swear anything and that he himself is not the type to make promises. He leaves the sentence unfinished, just as he leaves his own life unfinished, unable to hold on to his dream. Contrary to the classical Western, *Brokeback Mountain* does not end with the affirmation of the hero's physical and moral integrity but confronts us with a broken, forlorn man, who is in grief as he has to realise that he never had the courage to fit his love into his life.

Hence, the remarkable thing about Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* is that it draws heavily on the conventions of the Western genre while pushing them at the same time to accommodate explicit gay sexuality. As a revisionist Western, *Brokeback Mountain* confronts the traditional genre with a tragic love story between two men. By doing so, it subverts and transforms traditional concepts of masculinity, implicitly revealing those power structures which define 'being a man' as opposed to 'not being a man'. In this context it is certainly important to stress that the only major deviations from Proulx's short story are two scenes which clearly aim at underlining Jack's and Ennis' macho behaviour, that is, forms of behaviour which are commonly not regarded as 'typically' gay. In one scene Jack forcefully speaks up against his ill-mannered father-in-law at a Thanksgiving celebration, thus affirming his position as head of the family. In another scene Ennis hits two bikers, who have been provoking him, at a Fourth-of-July picnic.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, the scene ends with the image of Ennis standing tall against a background of exploding fireworks, thereby powerfully displaying his manliness. Evidently, the point that the film tries to make is that there is no such thing as one standardised form of masculinity or typically gay behaviour.

56 Cf. MENDELSON. "An Affair to Remember."

57 Cf. MENDELSON. "An Affair to Remember."

The fact that both of these scenes evoke two genuinely American holidays should be understood as the attempt to bring the experience of homosexuality into the familiar “heart of America”, as one of the print ad campaigns puts it.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, the re-interpretation of masculinities from a queer perspective is a complex and ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorise new and plural forms of masculinities. The representation of these new forms is not a simple reflection of pre-given male traits, but implies a proactive gesture, a radical ‘politics of difference’ (Lyotard) that defies all notions of essence and truth. The differences are produced performatively by means of feeding back and reintegrating the culturally repressed and stigmatised into the prevailing system of gender *and* genre. Through the act of reinterpretation, the Western emerges as a highly innovative and unsettling cultural form that initiates new signs of identity and that strips ‘normal maleness’ of ‘heterosexual maleness’. *Brokeback Mountain* unsettles the heterosexual norm and introduces incommensurable cultural knowledge into the dominant cultural system. In this vein, Lee’s Western becomes a bearer of the marks of Otherness. *Brokeback Mountain* sets out to free maleness from the hegemonic assignment of dichotomised attributes such as active vs. passive, strong vs. weak, self vs. other, thereby disclosing the problematic aspects of the term ‘masculinity’ itself.

#### IV. Conclusion

Imagings of masculinity are discursively constructed – and Western films as highly condensed performances of masculinity take an active part in this process. Both *High Noon* and *Brokeback Mountain* are not only a passive reflection of culturally circulating concepts of masculinity; they are an active force in their own right, thus contributing to the culture-specific generation of thinking and fantasising about masculinity. Within US-American society, Western heroes provided a primary vehicle for the dissemination of preferred forms of masculinity. The appeal to the traditional Western hero has always gone hand in hand with the construction of American national identity. Westerners’ stories have provided a particularly powerful cultural focus around which the national (male) community could cohere. In the course of the twentieth century, heroic masculinity became linked in an especially potent configuration to representations of American nation building. Patriotism was increasingly associated with the virtues of manhood, and the notion of the West and the frontier as its ultimate testing-ground. Desirable masculinities were imagined and recognised first and foremost in terms of their particular contribution to the process of forging the nation. Will Kane with his absolute devotion to duty, his utter

fearlessness, moral courage and physical strength epitomises these core values of American masculinity.

This idealisation of the ethos of muscular, heterosexual and patriotic masculinity is challenged in Lee's revisionist Western *Brokeback Mountain* through his display of a homosexual love affair between two cowboys. *Brokeback Mountain* strips the myth of the Western – one of America's most powerful foundational myths – of culturally hegemonic forms of masculinity, replacing the notion of standardised masculinity through alternative and plural masculinities. In this way, *Brokeback Mountain* activates the culturally repressed and marginalised and inscribes it into the prevailing categories of the cultural imaginary. By bringing the repressed to the “surface of cultural consciousness and communication”<sup>58</sup> the film can figure as a catalyst for the renewal of culturally dominant notions of masculinity.

In conclusion, I would like to provide a brief assessment of the value that the cultural analysis of Western films may have for gender studies and for cultural history in general. The investigation of Westerns belies the idea that films are mere passive reflections of prevailing gender models. Rather, it reveals that these artefacts play an eminent and creative role in cultural signifying processes. Western films, like the narratives, myths, and norms they imply, were and still are a central means of cultural self-fashioning, through which social groups negotiate collective ideals of manliness. Western films form “a distinct, persistent and significant cluster of cultural traits”,<sup>59</sup> which has a coherent structure and fulfils manifold cultural functions. Because so much cultural significance was and still is attached to the Western genre within American society its analysis can shed light on the collective ideals and values of those who have consumed and promoted it. It allows insights into what communities believe themselves to be, insights into their mental make-up and, hence, into their gender politics. Because communities are not only held together “by the stories [they] generate about [themselves]”<sup>60</sup> but also by the pictures they produce and disseminate, the analysis of films is a fruitful endeavour for all those who explore questions of cultural and national values and of “representational politics”.<sup>61</sup> Thus, taking a fresh look at the changing cultural functions that Western films have fulfilled for perpetuating images of masculinity and exploring the role that

58 ZAPF, “Literature as Cultural Ecology,” 93.

59 MANGAN, J.A. “Prologue: Britain's Chief Spiritual Export: Imperial Sport as Moral Metaphor, Political Symbol and Cultural Bond.” In: J.A. Mangan (ed.). *The Cultural Bond. Sport, Empire, Society*. London: Frank Cass, 1992. 1 – 10. 1.

60 ARATA, Stephen. *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. 1.

61 ERMARTH, Elizabeth Deeds. *The English Novel in History 1840–1895*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. 125.

films play in transforming and criticising prevalent gender roles can further enrich our understanding of cultural history.

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## ‘A World Without Gender’? – Robots, Androids and the Gender Matrix in Films and TV Series

### I. Introduction

Robots, androids and cyborgs are among the staple features of science fiction and already appear in early science-fiction films, including classics such as *Metropolis* (1927). In many movies and TV series artificial creatures are presented as a threatening collective consisting of machines which are entirely devoid of human characteristics. The Cylons in the *Battlestar Galactica* series from the 1970s and the Borg in *Star Trek*, “half-human, half-machine beings with a single collective mind”<sup>1</sup>, are cases in point. Yet there are also films and TV series in which robots, androids and cyborgs are more or less individualised and resemble human beings in certain respects. Quite often, the process of individualisation singles out just *one* mechanical being from an otherwise undifferentiated collective, as the film *I, Robot* (2004) and the episode “I, Borg” from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1992) illustrate. Typically, such individualised mechanical beings are shown to be struggling with their identity, inviting the viewers to ponder whether artificial intelligence may be similar to a human consciousness or not. After all, according to Michèle and Duncan Barrett, the predominant function of non-biological intelligent creatures in science fiction is serving as a contrast to qualities that are regarded as characteristic of human beings: “The function of cyborgs, androids and holograms is to counterpoint the specifically human.”<sup>2</sup>

Gender is one of the basic coordinates along which human beings define both themselves and others, as numerous approaches to identity theory – ranging from Nancy Chodorow’s and Carol Gilligan’s psychoanalytical approaches to Judith Butler’s radical reconceptualisation of gender identity – emphasise. One might assume, though, that robots, androids and cyborgs are *not* inscribed in the

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1 GREGORY, Chris. *Star Trek: Parallel Narratives*. Houndmills/London: Macmillan, 2000. 49.

2 BARRETT, Michèle and Duncan BARRETT. *Star Trek: The Human Frontier*. Cambridge: Polity, 2001. 122.

gender matrix due to their being exempt from biological reproduction, which is replaced by non-biological replication. In her well-known article “A Manifesto for Cyborgs”, Donna Haraway in fact assigns cyborgs a pivotal role in her vision of “a world without gender”.<sup>3</sup> According to Haraway, the cyborg “is a creature in a post-gender world”<sup>4</sup> because it is free from sexuality as well as from the necessity of striving for a coherent identity: “Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; i. e., through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos.”<sup>5</sup> The cyborg as described by Haraway replaces “[o]rganic sex role specialization” by “[o]ptimal genetic strategies” and “[s]ex” by “[g]enetic engineering”.<sup>6</sup>

By and large, those robots, androids and cyborgs that appear exclusively as part of a collective indeed seem to be exempt from the categories of sex, gender and sexuality. Yet a tendency towards individualisation usually goes hand in hand with at least a minimal degree of gender marking. When androids and cyborgs are portrayed by actors it is relatively difficult to avoid gendering in any case. But even digitally created beings, such as the robots in *I, Robot*, often trigger a certain amount of gendering. On the most basic level, gender marking results from providing a mechanical being with a voice that is perceived as ‘male’ or ‘female’ by the viewers. Additionally, a wide range of other features, such as body language, clothes and behavioural patterns, may cause the viewers to categorise a mechanical or semi-mechanical creature as ‘male’ or ‘female’. The impact of the voice on the process of gendering is exemplified in the movie *The Black Hole* (1979), in which some of the robots have male voices and thus appear to be gendered, although they do not display any further gender attributes. Likewise, the robot C-3PO in the *Star Wars* films is likely to be categorised as ‘male’ because of its voice, despite the fact that its behaviour is far from stereotypically masculine. If anything, C-3PO’s constant bickering, talkativeness and even the robot’s gestures are rather reminiscent of female gender stereotypes. The robot R2-D2 in *Star Wars*, in contrast, neither shows gender characteristics in terms of its appearance nor does it have a male or female voice. Still, one could argue that R2-D2’s often daring actions serve as a contrast to C-3PO’s ‘effeminate’ behaviour and make R2-D2 resemble a reckless boy. As the examples from *Star Wars* illustrate, gendering may be triggered by a whole range of factors, and even

3 HARAWAY, Donna. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s.” In: Donna Haraway (ed.). *The Donna Haraway Reader*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004. 7–45. 8.

4 HARAWAY. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” 9.

5 HARAWAY. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” 9.

6 HARAWAY. “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.” 21.

robots that do not resemble human beings as far as their appearance is concerned are often gendered by other visual or acoustic means.

The fact that individualised robots and androids tend to be marked for gender testifies to the enormous importance the category gender has for human perception and categorisation in general as well as for constructions of identity in particular. The tendency to assign gender even to what is mechanical and thus certainly does not have to be seen as 'male' or 'female' correlates with Judith Butler's insight that gendering is not simply an identification of something that 'is there'; instead, according to Butler, gender is produced by means of performative acts: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."<sup>7</sup> If one assumes, following Butler, that gender is constructed "through the reiteration of norms",<sup>8</sup> it is hardly surprising that robots and androids are *not* generally exempt from the categories sex and gender and, indeed, are often categorised as 'male' or 'female' by viewers, provided that norms related to sex and gender are reiterated with respect to the mechanical creatures.

In general, in films and TV series featuring robots and androids the category gender tends to be relevant especially in two ways: Firstly, in films and series that address the relationship between artificial intelligence and identity, gender may be one of the factors that shape the robot's/android's sense of itself. Yet, despite the fact that individualised mechanical (or semi-mechanical) beings tend to be gendered, gender often plays at best a peripheral role in their struggle to define who or what they are. The notion of the self that is expressed through the robots' and androids' quest for identity, thus, generally seems to echo traditional, relatively gender-neutral concepts of identity development, such as the one put forward by Erik H. Erikson in his influential study *Identity and the Life Cycle*.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the gender marking of robots and androids is often used as a critique or parody of gender stereotypes: mechanical beings displaying clearly exaggerated versions of 'masculine' or 'feminine' appearance and/or behaviour expose gender stereotypes to ridicule. The parody of gender stereotypes is reinforced by the fact that in these cases there simply cannot be any grounds for

7 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York/London: Routledge, 1990. 25.

8 BUTLER, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*. New York/London: Routledge, 1993. 10.

9 The concept of identity developed by ERIKSON has had a significant impact on identity theory, but has been criticised by representatives of feminist identity theories because of its neglect of gender differences. See, for example, CAROL GILLIGAN's *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), which constitutes one of the classics in the field of feminist identity theory.

assuming the link between biological sex and social gender that is generally supposed to 'naturalise' gender.

## II. Gender and identity development

Whenever fictional texts and audiovisual media depict artificial beings that resemble humans with respect to their looks and/or their intelligence, the question of whether these creatures possess any kind of identity and individuality seems to be raised almost automatically, as classics such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) demonstrate. Given the widespread assumption that identity and gender are closely linked, one might assume that the issue of gender is often addressed in this context. Yet in many movies and TV series featuring robots or androids in which matters of identity and individuality are addressed, gender turns out to play a relatively marginal role.

The movie *I, Robot*, which was inspired by Isaac Asimov's short stories, is a case in point. In this vision of the future, robots have become indispensable helpers in daily life. The action sets in at a point in time when a new type of robot, the NS-5 or Nestor series, is about to be launched. In contrast to the older models, the robots of the NS-5 series have a 'face' that resembles human faces to a certain extent, although it is still obvious that the NS-5 are mechanical beings. While the faces and bodies of the NS-5 do not provide any visual gender marking, the robots' voices can definitely be categorised as 'male'. Gendering by means of their voice and the name of the series (Nestor) supports the idea that these robots are meant to serve as a kind of butler. Indeed, the robots at first seem to be prototypical butlers, appearing to be polite, obliging and dignified. It comes as no surprise to viewers familiar with genre conventions that the robots eventually turn against their human creators. In addition to depicting the growing threat the NS-5 constitute as a collective, the movie singles out one of the robots, which can act independently because it has been equipped with a special programming by the scientist who created it. This robot is also the only one bearing a name – Sonny – and the only one that can dream and experience emotions, which makes Sonny similar to human beings in crucial respects.

The movie *I, Robot* depicts Sonny's search for a self – a process that correlates with Sonny adopting human traits and habits and that is fostered by his growing friendship with Detective Spooner (Will Smith). In his quest for identity, Sonny ponders in particular questions concerning ethics, fate and moral responsibility. The issue of gender and sexuality does not complicate this quest significantly. Because of the crucial role played by voice characteristics in the process of gendering the viewers are likely to assign a male gender identity to Sonny on the basis of his male voice. Throughout the movie Sonny's male gender identity is

neither challenged nor stressed in any way. Still, one might argue that the very process of individualisation Sonny goes through is reminiscent of the 'mirror stage' (Lacan), in other words, a developmental stage that has masculine associations. The mirror stage, which, according to Lacan (1977), constitutes the foundation of human identity, is marked by entering into the symbolic order through language acquisition and acculturation. The symbolic order, having been shaped by patriarchal society, excludes the feminine order (the imaginary). That Sonny's individuality is made possible by his 'father', the male scientist who is responsible for the robot's special programming, and is further encouraged by Sonny's 'male bonding' with Detective Spooner reinforces the masculine bias of his process of identity formation.

In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) the androids, referred to as 'replicants', are individualised and resemble human beings in virtually every respect, which also means that they are almost indistinguishable from human beings as far as their appearance is concerned. There are, however, two crucial differences between the replicants and their human creators: Firstly, as the replicants have been primarily built for labour and military uses, they are stronger and faster than humans. Secondly, they have only been granted a life expectancy of four years in order to prevent them from developing emotions and values. Although there are both male and female replicants, the issue of the replicants' gender as such is not addressed. Individuality and mortality are the crucial themes of *Blade Runner*. Gender seems to be very much taken for granted, since the replicants are marked as male and female by their appearance and behaviour, but the potential implications of this gendering are not explored.

The android Data in the series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (TNG, 1987–1994) is perhaps the most famous example of a mechanical being in search of his individuality. That he is far more than a simple machine is already indicated by the fact that he is a respected member of the crew of the starship Enterprise and even has the rank of an officer. Data – at least in the beginning – appears to be unique, the masterpiece of a scientific genius who has vanished under mysterious circumstances. The android, who is impersonated by actor Brent Spiner, certainly looks human, but features such as the extremely pale colour of his skin, his yellow eyes and most of all his superhuman cognitive capacities as well as his mechanical interior, which is revealed from time to time, still make it obvious that he is not human. Probably even more than the features just mentioned it is Data's lack of emotions – one of the recurring themes of *The Next Generation* – that sets him apart from human (and alien) crew members. Yet the fact that Data typically fails to provide the emotional response that is deemed appropriate in a given situation does not turn the android into a cold and soulless machine; instead, this lack of 'emotional intelligence' rather seems to suggest that Data is

an innocent and childlike being.<sup>10</sup> One of Data's fundamental characteristics is his wish to become more human – a wish that turns him into an acute observer of his crewmates' behaviour. His efforts to imitate them fail time and again, either because of his lack of 'emotional intelligence' or because he is just too 'perfect' to be truly human. The failure to copy 'normal' human behaviour often produces comic effects, but it has also turned Data into an immensely popular and likeable character for many fans of *Star Trek*.

Like Sonny in *I, Robot*, Data has a male voice; moreover, Data also definitely looks male. In most episodes which address the question of Data's individuality the issue of his gender is at best raised in passing. Yet the episode "The Measure of a Man", where a visiting scientist claims the right to disassemble Data, suggests that individuality and gender are linked. This link is already indicated by the fact that Data is referred to with the neutral pronoun 'it' by those characters who deny his individuality, whereas those who believe in his individuality and in his rights use the masculine third-person pronoun 'he' to refer to the android. Ultimately, sexuality turns out to play a crucial role in the attempts "to prove that Data is an independent and sentient being"<sup>11</sup> – and thus cannot be used for experiments against his will. Data's individuality and therefore his inalienable rights are "finally proven by Data's display of his holographic 'keepsake' of the late Tasha Yar",<sup>12</sup> whom he had sex with in the episode "The Naked Now".

There are two *Star Trek: TNG* episodes in which the question of gender plays an even more prominent role for the identity of the android. In the episode "In Theory" the issue of gender is brought up in the context of Data's attempts at imitating the kind of behaviour that is expected of a (human) man in a romantic relationship. A female crewmember shows an obvious romantic interest in the android, and Data decides to enlarge his experience of human interaction patterns by dating this woman, even though the android, as he repeatedly points out to his 'girlfriend', is completely incapable of experiencing emotions. One of the sources of comic effects in this episode is Data's tendency to use a scientific diction when trying to pay his 'girlfriend' compliments: "You remain as aesthetically pleasing as the first day we met. I believe I am the most fortunate sentient in this sector of the galaxy." Moreover, Data tries to fulfil his new role by adopting a whole range of patterns of masculine dating routines he draws from fiction. Because of this strategy his dating behaviour essentially is a collage of clichés. He, for instance, calls "Honey, I'm home" upon entering his girlfriend's quarters, which makes the android sound very much like a character from a TV family series from the 1950s. The various fictional role models imitated by Data,

10 Cf. GREGORY. *Star Trek: Parallel Narratives*. 119.

11 GREGORY. *Star Trek: Parallel Narratives*. 50.

12 GREGORY. *Star Trek: Parallel Narratives*. 50.

with their flamboyance, aggressiveness and nonchalance, turn out to be equally ridiculous. The episode thus presents a parody of traditional gender roles in the context of dating rituals.

In “The Offspring”, Data constructs an android called Lal, whom he refers to repeatedly as his ‘child’, thus comparing the construction of a mechanical being to the process of biological procreation. Yet, in contrast to biological creatures, Data’s offspring can actually choose its sex. When ship’s counsellor Troy asks Data “Why didn’t you give it a more human look, Data?” the android replies: “I have decided to allow my child to choose its own sex and appearance.” Once this choice has been made, however, it appears to be irreversible. At least Data assumes that sex indeterminacy can only be temporary; otherwise the ‘child’ would be unable to fit into the crew. In its ‘neutral’ state, the new android Lal comes up with a ‘shortlist’ of four different options. The set of four very different possibilities, namely a female Andorian, a male Klingon, a female human and a male human (which are also presented visually in the episode) stresses that neither gender nor race are determined ‘naturally’ in this case. Lal ultimately settles for adopting the appearance of a human woman. From this moment onward, Lal is referred to and (largely) seen by the crewmembers as a woman, which stresses the impact the physical appearance has on gendering. Despite the fact that Lal looks like a human woman, her lack of social skills and particularly her violation of conventional patterns of behaviour still give away that she is an android. Like Data she apparently cannot appear fully ‘human’, and expectations related to gender constitute one of the major stumbling blocks on Lal’s path to being perceived as a human being.

The series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009), a remake of an eponymous series from the 1970s, assigns robots and androids a very prominent role and, in contrast to the old series, also explores the issue of gender in complex ways. Although the basic premise of the old series is maintained, the new series differs from the old one in several respects, for instance with respect to its visual aesthetics, its much more elaborate plotlines and in particular its depiction of the enemies, the Cylons. As far as gender in general is concerned, the casting is important. While the old series relied mainly on male protagonists, female characters play a very significant role in the new series. Some originally male roles have been reassigned to women, a particularly striking example being the reckless, cigar-smoking crack pilot ‘Starbuck’. The increased importance of female characters is also mirrored in the fact that now about half of the fighter pilots are female. Moreover, there is an important new female character: Laura Roslin, the President of the Colonies.

The premise of both the old and the new *Battlestar Galactica* is that the Cylons, robots that are sworn enemies of humanity, have destroyed most of the human population, forcing the survivors to escape on board the last surviving

battleship and a rag-tag fleet of civilian vessels, in search of a new home. In contrast to *Star Wars*'s C-3PO and R2-D2, which are comparatively minor characters and often produce comic relief, the robots in *Battlestar Galactica* are powerful and dangerous antagonists of the human race. The Cylons in the old *Battlestar Galactica* series lack individual traits and are thus perceived as a collective, consisting of a multitude of indistinguishable 'Centurion' warriors and a few boss-robots. This overall lack of individualisation correlates with the fact that the robots do not show any gender characteristics, except for their male voices. The 'reimagined' new series suggests that the Cylons have evolved, and this evolution includes a very clear gender marking. In addition to the robot-like Cylons (again called 'Centurions'), some of the Cylons (the advanced models) seem to be very human-like beings and can easily be categorised as 'male' or 'female' on the basis of their appearance. Yet their striking similarity to humans is undermined by the fact that there are multiple copies of just a few basic models.

The fact that the new Cylon models are nearly indistinguishable from humans introduces new dramatic possibilities with respect to the presentation of human-Cylon interaction. The new series' focus on the human-like Cylons is already signalled in the opening sequence of the first episodes, which announces: "The Cylons were created by Man. They rebelled. They evolved. They look and feel Human. Some are programmed to think they are Human. There are many copies... And they have a plan." This premise immediately draws the viewers' attention to the Cylons' identity. Since one of the most important functions of the human-looking Cylon models is infiltration, they are constructed and programmed so as to blend in perfectly. This implies that the Cylon models have to correspond to human notions of masculinity and femininity in terms of looks and behaviour. Moreover, one aspect of the Cylons' plan is the creation of a human-Cylon hybrid, which presupposes the existence of female Cylons who are capable of giving birth and are apparently genetically compatible with human men. In this respect, two of the Cylon models play a major role: Sharon 'Boomer' Valerii and the Cylon model referred to as 'Six'.

Six at first seems to correspond to the stereotype of the *femme fatale*, since she seduces scientific genius and womanizer Gaius Baltar in order to further the Cylons' plans. In the course of the series it becomes apparent, however, that Six and her motives are much more complex than one might assume at first. Her strong religious beliefs and her increasing emotional bond with Baltar add to the character's depth and prevent her from remaining a mere stereotype. Moreover, the viewers are likely to modify their initial impression of Six once they are confronted with different 'incarnations' of the model. The version of Six that appears in the episode "Six Degrees of Separation", for instance, initially seems to be far less sexually provocative than Baltar's Six, at least until she makes a

move on Commander Adama. When yet another version of Six is introduced in the second season, she is at first hardly recognisable because she has been brutally beaten by humans. The presentation of this version of Six is even likely to make the viewers feel compassion. After she has been rescued by Baltar, she behaves in a very professional, matter-of-fact manner and thus differs from the version of Six the viewers are most familiar with, who usually behaves in a seductive fashion.

The version of Six that is depicted in most detail first appears in the pilot episode. Although she is obviously killed in a massive explosion she helped to bring about, she reappears shortly afterwards. Now she can only be seen by Baltar, however; this is demonstrated in numerous scenes where the scientist interacts with her in the presence of other characters, who clearly do not perceive her. For a long time, the viewers are left to wonder whether the Six Baltar sees is a product of his imagination or whether she is projected by an implant in Baltar's brain. Six, who appears in just about every episode, is not only a love interest for Baltar; she also turns out to be a highly competent advisor and prompter, and it is information provided by her that allows Baltar to maintain his reputation as a genius. But Six also causes problems for Baltar. Her mere presence more than once exposes him to ridicule; after all, he is sometimes arguing animatedly with someone who is invisible to everyone else. In addition, she repeatedly provides sarcastic comments on Baltar's actions and on his motivation. Six, moreover, continuously tries to convert the atheist scientist to her monotheistic creed and to convince him that he is a crucial instrument in a divine plan.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the episode "Home, Part II", Six even describes herself as "an angel that God sent to protect you, to guide you, to love you", which in the end of the series turns out to be true. Baltar at first rejects Six' beliefs, but slowly starts to accept his role as the 'hand of God', as the eponymous episode in the first season puts it. The power Six wields over the scientist is often hinted at by shots which have Baltar looking up to his somewhat taller 'guardian angel'. In combination with her sexual provocativeness the strong religious component informing the depiction of Six stands in stark contrast to traditional gender norms.

Another prominent female Cylon in the series is Sharon Valerii, who likewise exists in multiple incarnations. Two of these turn out to be important in the series: one who has been a member of the Galactica crew for a long time and one who first appears on the planet Caprica. The Sharon serving on Galactica (call sign 'Boomer') is a Cylon sleeper agent, programmed to think that she is human. Thus, the revelation that she is a Cylon shocks her deeply. The viewers in all likelihood are also surprised when they discover that Boomer, who was pre-

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13 The humans believe in the 'Lords of Kobol', apparently constituted by the Greek pantheon, which makes them polytheists.

sented as a very likeable character, is not human. While Six is predominantly presented as a sexually provocative *femme fatale*, Boomer rather evokes the stereotype of the 'nice girl from next door'. Her affair with Deck Chief Tyrol seems to result from mutual, sincere affection rather than being part of a plan on the part of the Cylons. In comparison to the cunning Six, Boomer is a character whose involvement in a Cylon infiltration plan is much harder to accept. When Boomer starts to suspect her true nature, she is desperate, a reaction which is again likely to evoke the viewers' sympathy. Her evident inner struggle, which culminates in a suicide attempt, emphasises her innocence; while Six seems to play an active part in the Cylons' plans, Boomer appears to be an unwilling instrument. This becomes obvious when her hidden programming kicks in, causing her to attack Commander Adama. Immediately after the assassination attempt she is confused and shocked by what she just did. In the first season, Boomer is shown to suffer from an intense inner struggle between the loyalty she feels for the crew and her hidden Cylon programming. The episode "Downloaded" shows that she despises the Cylons for the way they used her.

In contrast to 'Boomer', the Sharon on Caprica (much later given the call sign 'Athena') knows exactly what she is and what she wants. When she begins an affair with Helo, a pilot who is stranded on Cylon-occupied Caprica, she initially does not feel genuine affection for him. Thus, unlike 'Boomer', she appears calculating and manipulative. Despite the fact that she falls in love with Helo after a while, she remains very goal-oriented and resolute. That she bears Helo's child, a human-Cylon hybrid, plays a vital role in the Cylons' plans, as Baltar is told by Six. Athena's attitude towards her unborn child evokes traditional concepts of motherhood, since she seems to be prepared to do literally everything it takes to protect the child's life. She even destroys an entire Cylon fleet attacking Galactica to make sure that her child will survive ("Flight of the Phoenix"). When her child is taken away from her shortly after having been born and she is made to believe that the baby has died, she reacts first with rage, later on with depression and defiance – a reaction that makes her appear very human. In seasons three and four, 'Athena' proves time and again that her loyalties lie with her husband Helo and the human race. She gets commissioned as a lieutenant and works as a pilot, just as Boomer did before her. Her integration into the human crew of Galactica is complete when she is finally given an official call sign – Athena – by her comrades, which finally in their eyes sets her apart from her 'predecessor', whose place she took aboard Galactica. In the course of seasons three and four, the fact that Athena is a Cylon is less and less commented on by her comrades. She is accepted as a highly professional and reliable pilot as well as a caring mother and loving wife. In fact, the android Sharon 'Athena' Agathon (the surname of her husband Helo) seems to be the prototype of a modern, emancipated 'superwoman' – she is beautiful, intelligent and com-

petent, successful in her job, her marriage and as a mother. Ultimately, the Cylon 'Athena' is the only female character in the series who turns out to be successful and happy in her private as well as her professional life.

As the discussion of Six and Boomer/Athena, two of the main characters of *BSG*, has shown, the presentation of the Cylons is extremely complex in the new *Galactica* series. The androids in this series, who are preoccupied with love relationships and biological procreation (besides the destruction of mankind and a mysterious plan), are clearly a far cry from Haraway's vision of a 'post-gender world' without procreation. The Cylons, not least because of their gender marking, are so similar to the humans that it even seems necessary to remind the viewers from time to time of the true nature of Six and Boomer/Athena by having the characters comment on the differences between human beings and Cylons. It is also interesting from the point of view of gender studies that the male Cylon models play a far less important role than the female ones and mostly are not provided with comparable depth. At the end of season three it is revealed that two of the (previously considered human) male protagonists are Cylons as well. Both characters – Chief Tyrol and Colonel Tigh – are psychologically complex, but their status as Cylons does not seem to affect their definition of masculinity in a way that is comparable to the nexus between gender and the status as an android that can be perceived with the female models.

### III. 'Fembots' and 'Stepford wives': Parodies of gender attributes

Since the late 1960s, when the Second Women's Movement started to draw increasing attention to the role of the media in the process of constructing and perpetuating gender stereotypes, a number of films and TV series have featured robots and androids displaying exaggerated masculine and feminine gender attributes (in terms of their appearance and/or with respect to their behaviour). To a certain extent, such parodies of gender attributes are presumably indicative of a growing cultural awareness concerning the category gender and its implications; as gender roles are undergoing fundamental changes in Western culture, science fiction occasionally seems to use hyper-feminine and hyper-masculine robots and androids to look back almost gleefully upon gender stereotypes that (supposedly) have been cast aside by society. The gender stereotypes that are embodied by mechanical beings in audiovisual media react to gender clichés that exist(ed) in society at large. Moreover, they allude to specifically *fictional* stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity, which can be found in literary texts, in movies and on TV. In the final section of our article, we are going to look at some examples of robots and androids which have been used to criticise gender stereotypes and to expose the traditional

tendency of audiovisual media to show “women as either overwhelmingly domestic creatures (housewives, mothers) or as sexual prizes and accessories to men”.<sup>14</sup> Admittedly, films and TV series that ridicule gender stereotypes differ very much with respect to the actual *critical* potential one can plausibly ascribe to the exaggerated depiction of gender attributes.

The *Star Trek* episode “I, Mudd” (1967), for instance, uses androids to expose gender stereotypes without establishing a critical stance towards these stereotypical notions. In this episode, the USS Enterprise is hijacked to a planet inhabited by androids, but ruled over by a human, namely petty criminal Harry Fenton Mudd. When Mudd’s spaceship crashed on the planet, the androids, eager to learn from human beings, chose Mudd to rule over them, but effectively turned him into their captive. The ‘female’ androids that were constructed in accordance with Mudd’s wishes look very much like pin-up girls and are dressed in a manner vaguely reminiscent of a stereotypical Oriental harem – or perhaps of another TV character, namely the jinn Jeannie from the sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965 – 1970). The notion of the harem is additionally supported by the fact that Mudd has ordered the androids to construct no fewer than five hundred copies of ‘Alice’, his favourite android model. Not only do the female androids look like pin-up girls; their behaviour also largely corresponds to gender stereotypes: they are flirtatious, eager to please men, but also at times moody and pouting. In striking contrast to the stereotype of the attractive, overly feminine woman embodied by most of the androids, there is one android that has been constructed so as to resemble Mudd’s wife, whom he remembers as the prototypical ‘dragon’, an ugly woman constantly nagging her husband. This android was built on Mudd’s order to remind him of the difference between his former life and his present one and, last but not least, to provide him with the satisfaction of finally having the upper hand in matrimonial disputes. The juxtaposition of the ‘dragon’ on the one hand and the obedient and seductive ‘harem girls’ on the other hand in this *Star Trek* episode simply reproduces a dichotomous and one-dimensional concept of gender roles, since the androids lack any depth or psychological complexity. Within the episode “I, Mudd”, gender stereotypes appear to be very much taken for granted by the characters; there is nothing that would suggest a criticism of the clichés alluded to. At best, one might assume that low-life criminal Mudd’s view of women as readily available commodities is criticised implicitly by the overall negative characterisation of Mudd. The punishment that is finally imposed on Mudd by the crew of the Enterprise for trying to take over their spaceship serves to confirm the gender stereotypes referred to throughout the episode, however: the crew

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14 CASEY, Bernadette, Neil CASEY, Ben CALVERT, Liam FRENCH and Justin LEWIS. *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*. London/New York: Routledge, 2002. 105.

members leave Mudd on the planet in the company of multiple copies of his wife, all of which are just as aggressive as the original (and cannot be silenced by Mudd). Thus Mudd, the prototypical ‘pasha’, seems to be punished for his stereotypical notion of women in an appropriate manner. Yet while the crew of the Enterprise oppose Mudd’s plans to imprison the crew on the planet and to use their ship, they do not criticise his misogynist views. In fact, the male crew members themselves appear to be quite enthralled by the beautiful ‘women’ they encounter on the planet.

As was pointed out above, parodies of gender stereotypes in films and TV series quite often allude to the perpetuation of these stereotypes in audiovisual media, exposing the role of the media as “an arena [...] for the construction of stable notions of gender (through *stereotyping* and *generic convention*)”.<sup>15</sup> Prominent examples of this strategy can be found in the films *Spaceballs* (1987) and *Austin Powers* (1997). *Spaceballs*, a parody of the original *Star Wars* trilogy, features a robot called ‘Dot Matrix’, which is clearly meant to be perceived as a ‘female’ version of C-3PO, as is indicated by the robot’s voice as well as by a metallic ‘skirt’ and metallic ‘hair’ imitating Princess Leia’s hairdo in the original *Star Wars* film. The robot’s ‘feminine’ attributes and its behaviour as a chaperon are meant to produce a comic effect, since they appear to be at odds with the robot’s mechanical nature. Moreover, the fact that comic effects are created by Dot Matrix’s ‘feminine’ attributes suggests that robots are expected to be ‘male’ by default.<sup>16</sup> The gendering of androids also produces comic effects in *Austin Powers*, a parody of the spy genre in general and the James Bond movies in particular. A scene in which protagonist Austin Powers encounters a group of androids trying to block his path to arch-villain Dr Evil serves as a parody of the notorious encounters between Bond and various seductive female opponents. The comic effect produced by this scene is mainly due to its reference to the depiction of agent 007 as the quintessential womanizer. The humorous nature of the ‘fight’ is intensified by the fact that the identical-looking robots with their long blonde hair and their pink, scanty clothes embody an outdated ideal of femininity, which is reminiscent of the 1960s, when the first Bond movies were produced. (Since both Dr Evil, who constructed the robots, and Austin Powers

15 CASEY et al. *Television Studies*. 104.

16 That robots seem to be categorised as ‘male’ by default corresponds to the way the mind/body dichotomy has traditionally been gendered in Western philosophy. As Elizabeth GROSZ, for example, points out, Western thinking has been shaped by “the coupling of mind with maleness and the body with femaleness” (GROSZ, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994. 4). Given the fact that robots do not possess an organic body and are often shown to be equipped with superior cognitive capacities, they seem to represent the traditionally ‘male’ pole of the mind/body dichotomy particularly well.

are from the 1960s and were ‘cryogenically preserved’ – that is, ‘asleep’ – for thirty-odd years before being ‘woken up’ again in the 1990s, it seems plausible that Dr Evil’s ‘fembots’ do not correspond to beauty ideals of the 1990s.) The bodies of the doll-like fembots, who try to seduce Powers, are presented as both tempting and dangerous – a combination that can often be encountered in the depiction of ‘female’ androids. Ultimately, however, the fembots turn out to be unable to resist the 1960s ‘charm’ of Powers, who, as the film repeatedly emphasises, was generally admired as a sex symbol in the ‘swinging 60s’. It is the exaggerated nature of the seduction scene in terms of its portrayal of gender clichés that draws the viewers’ attention to the stereotypical depiction of gender roles in the Bond movies as well as to the changes that gender concepts have undergone since the 1960s, both in society and in audiovisual media. Seduction scenes that were meant seriously in earlier films and TV productions, such as in the first Bond movies, now serve as point of reference for a parody which makes fun of womanizer James Bond and his ‘Bond girls’ as well as the gender stereotypes of the 1960s.

Another example of androids being used to provide a parody of gender stereotypes is Frank Oz’s *The Stepford Wives* (2004), a remake of a film from 1975. Oz’s movie focuses on Stepford, an apparently idyllic community in Connecticut, consisting of wealthy couples who act somewhat strangely: in terms of their looks as well as their behaviour, the women in Stepford correspond to conservative female gender stereotypes, being both perfect housewives and totally obedient to their husbands. In the course of the film the viewers find out that nearly all of Stepford’s female inhabitants used to be high-powered career women who have been transformed both physically and mentally (by means of a brain modification procedure). The transformation has been forced upon the women by their husbands, whose immature demeanour suggests that they resorted to the transformation because they simply were no match for their successful wives. The ‘Stepford wives’, that is career women turned into physically immaculate and obedient housewives, at first only seem to be a projection of their husbands’ wishes. At the end of the film, however, the viewers learn that the mastermind behind the idea of Stepford is a woman, who explains the intention behind establishing the community of Stepford as follows: “All I wanted was a better world. A world where men were men and women were cherished and lovely.” She is the only one among the female characters who has actually chosen to live after the Stepford fashion, who has voluntarily adopted a very traditional gender role. The fact that the Stepford community is the idea of a woman alludes to the potential complicity of women with conservative gender stereotypes, which may be fuelled by a feeling of nostalgia for a supposedly idyllic past.

The image of women cultivated within Stepford largely corresponds to gender

stereotypes that are associated with the 1950s. In fact, the opening credits of the movie already remind the viewers of this period, showing clips that are reminiscent of TV commercials from this era, featuring elegantly dressed housewives taking care of a range of household chores with obvious enthusiasm, surrounded by flashy new kitchen equipment. These clips expose the tendency of commercials to project a vision of housework as being women's domain; they suggest that "such work is quickly and magically accomplished",<sup>17</sup> which serves to trivialise domestic work. The opening credits are part of the movie's highly ironic portrayal of the ready-made image of womanhood that has been shaped by post-war American consumer culture, which was criticised by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>18</sup> With their glossy looks, their dedication to housework and their eagerness to please their husbands, the Stepford wives seem to belong to the world constructed in the pseudo-commercials shown in the opening credits. They correspond to stereotypes, possessing no individual character traits whatsoever, as the striking similarities between the ways the modified women dress, behave and speak suggest.

In its first scenes, *The Stepford Wives* establishes a vivid contrast between the 'happy' world based on an idealised and trivialised image of the 1950s, (represented by both the clips in the opening credits and the Stepford community) and the 'battle of the sexes' introduced in the scenes following upon the opening credits. At the beginning of the movie the female protagonist, a TV executive, presents several new TV shows that seem to aim exclusively at disrupting relationships and humiliating men. The film thus juxtaposes extremes as far as gender roles and gender relationships are concerned. What the extremes have in common, though, is that they allude to the impact TV programmes – and the media in general – have on the social construction of gender concepts. The role of the media in propagating concepts of gender is also ironically referred to by the pseudo-commercial produced in Stepford, which is meant to praise the benefits of the transformation process practised within the community. Although this pseudo-commercial, which also imitates a style of TV commercials that was used in the 1950s is bound to look utterly ridiculous to viewers today, it again refers to the marketing of gender roles and gender ideals in the mass media.

Unlike many other science-fiction films and TV series depicting transformation processes, *The Stepford Wives* does not even venture anything approaching a scientific explanation of the metamorphosis undergone by the characters; instead, the movie remains ambiguous with respect to whether the Stepford wives are actually turned into cyborgs or not. The final scene of the

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17 CASEY et al. *Television Studies*. 105.

18 Cf. FRIEDAN, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

movie suggests that only the women's brains have been tampered with, as deactivating the implants seems to return the wives instantly to their original state. Yet there are several scenes in the movie which imply that the transformation process has after all been a cognitive *and* physical one, turning the women into cyborgs. Perhaps the most telling scene in this respect is one where a woman becomes an ATM, ejecting banknotes from her mouth. If one takes the deleted scenes on the DVD into consideration, the robot-like nature of the women is confirmed, as the additional scenes show women possessing a grotesque body, featuring various built-in household tools. These scenes suggest that wives are made 'perfect' by depriving them of their organic body – and thus, presumably, of their own needs. While the exact physical nature of the transformed women remains ambiguous (at least without the deleted scenes), there is a male character that is beyond doubt a robot, as the end of the film reveals. It is highly ironical that the character who up to this point appeared to be the mastermind behind the Stepford idea ultimately turns out to be merely a 'robot husband', constructed by the real (female) mastermind.

As the revelation concerning the 'Stepford husband' already suggests, the criticism of gender stereotypes in *The Stepford Wives* is not restricted to women's gender roles. Though the transformation from high-powered career women into pretty, obedient housewives certainly plays the most prominent role in the film, male gender stereotypes are highlighted and questioned as well. The fact that the only character in Stepford who displays stereotypically masculine behaviour is not human ironically undermines traditional concepts of masculinity: the 'robot husband' at first appears to be the quintessential patriarch, the one 'who is in charge', who makes all of the important decisions and who assumes the responsibility for the entire community. Yet he turns out to be the product of a woman's wishes, having been constructed so as to correspond to his 'wife's' notion of an ideal man. The only man who is actually shown to undergo the Stepford transformation process is homosexual. Given the ultra-conservative gender concepts perpetuated in Stepford, one might at first suspect that it is his sexual orientation that is changed. But this is not the case. Instead, the man's behaviour as well as his political attitudes are altered. His partner wants him to be turned from a liberal intellectual displaying flamboyant, camp behaviour into an ambitious, conservative-looking Republican politician, who declares his newly found identity in the following words: "now I know that being gay doesn't mean a guy has to be a feminist or flamboyant or sensitive. I'm no sissy." The transformation of this character provides an ironic comment on conservative images of masculinity predominant in American politics. Moreover, the two instances of 'Stepford men' suggest that men are certainly not exempt from expectations related to gender.

In the TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), robots and androids,

on the whole, do not play a very prominent role, since the series, which is set in a fictitious southern Californian town called Sunnydale, mainly portrays the title character and her friends battling more 'archaic' creatures, such as demons, vampires, and demigods. Nevertheless, there are a few episodes in which robots do play a crucial role and in which these mechanical beings are used to express a criticism of gender stereotypes. In the episode "Ted" from the second season Buffy meets her mother's new boyfriend Ted. Buffy is immediately suspicious of him, while both her mother and her friends seem to like Ted very much. In some respects, Ted appears to be perfect – he is an excellent cook, extremely successful in his job and seems to show a sincere interest in Buffy's mother. Despite these apparently positive features, Buffy notices less appealing aspects of his personality, such as a compulsive need to be right and an extremely patronising manner, which shows, for example, in his habit of addressing Buffy as 'little lady' and telling her what to do. The viewers, who witness Ted displaying these facets of his character, are likely to share Buffy's negative assessment of him and, presumably, like the protagonist, wonder why the other characters are so taken with Ted. This mystery is solved when it is revealed that the food Ted prepares contains drugs altering the perception of those who eat it. The growing tension between Ted and Buffy reaches a climax when Ted hits Buffy, and the slayer, hitting him back, causes him to fall down the stairs. At first Buffy is shocked because it seems that Ted has been killed by this fall, but then she is both relieved and vindicated when Ted turns out to be an android – an outcome that Buffy even anticipated when she referred to Ted's strange demeanour as being 'like Stepford'. Ted's patriarchal behaviour is clearly reminiscent of those traditional male gender stereotypes portrayed in many American movies and TV series from the 1950s, where the father is the undisputed head of the family. Thus, just as in the movie *The Stepford Wives*, the android displays an extremely stereotypical and somewhat outdated gender concept. Buffy's rejection of Ted's behaviour mirrors the viewers' likely reaction to old-fashioned notions of the ideal family where *Father Knows Best*, as the title of an American TV series, which was originally broadcast from 1954 to 1960, puts it. Right at the end of the episode, the notion of Ted as the perfect head of the family is further undermined by the revelation that he hides the corpses of his previous wives or girlfriends in his apartment: the 'perfect' head of the family turns out to be a serial killer. Thus, beneath the gender stereotype of the perfect head of the family, which was propagated in many TV series, there is lurking a significantly older stereotype, that of the Bluebeard, which can be traced back to fairy tales and folk literature.

While the depiction of the android Ted falls back on traditional male gender concepts, other episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* use androids to criticise female gender roles. In "I was Made to Love You", one of the series' recurring minor characters, Warren, builds a 'female' android as his 'perfect girlfriend'.

This android, which he calls April, has been constructed so as to have only one aim: to please Warren in every possible manner. As far as her looks are concerned, April presumably corresponds largely to the beauty ideal of American teenagers. April's fixation on Warren is clearly shown by her behaviour and by shots that adopt April's perspective. In the latter, the viewers see what options April has been provided with for her actions, ranging from neck-massages and listening sympathetically to a whole list of sub-programmes for sexual intercourse. Yet Warren soon loses interest in his 'creation' because he has made her 'too perfect': she never does anything unexpected and he does not have to do anything to make sure she continues to 'love' him. Bored by April's predictability, Warren has fallen in love with a fellow student and has left the android behind in his college dorm, expecting it to run out of power eventually. This plan, however, does not quite work out, as April shows up in Sunnydale, searching for Warren literally night and day. Features such as April's exaggeratedly precise pronunciation and, most of all, her superhuman strength quickly make it clear to Buffy and her friends that April is a mechanical being. The discrepancy between April's fragile looks and her extraordinary strength challenges traditional notions of women being physically inferior to men. The fact that April's strength is completely at odds with her physique is reminiscent of one of the main characteristics of the protagonist Buffy, who, after all, is a young girl possessing enormous physical strength. The series *Buffy* in general undermines traditional concepts of femininity by turning the blonde girl, who generally tends to be a victim in need of (male) help in the horror genre, into a heroine whose determination and extraordinary physical strength enable her to take on any kind of villain. Moreover, April's fixation on Warren teaches Buffy a valuable lesson, that is, not to give up one's personality for the love of another person. Even sexist Warren seems to have learned something, as he now prefers a complex individual to an obedient android, suggesting that he has modified his idea of a desirable partner. Someone else, however, has not learned that lesson (yet) – the vampire Spike, whose love for Buffy is unrequited and who forces Warren to construct another android, one that looks like Buffy – the so-called 'Buffybot'.

In the episode "Intervention", the 'Buffybot' constructed by Warren plays a major role and creates a number of comic effects, as it is mistaken for the real Buffy by her friends, who are nonplussed by 'Buffy's' unaccountable behaviour. They are particularly disturbed by the android's apparent fixation on Spike, which results from the Buffybot having been constructed as a substitute girlfriend and which is completely at odds with the real Buffy's contempt for the vampire. The Buffybot's way of speaking and acting is perceived as unusual by Buffy's friends, but they explain it as a reaction to the recent death of Buffy's mother. Consequently, they only realise that they have been fooled by an android when they finally see the Buffybot and the real Buffy together. What makes the

Buffybot different from its human counterpart is in particular its lack of social skills, which causes the android time and again to react in an inappropriate and apparently naïve manner. The viewers are again shown the android's perspective, in which the options for its behaviour as well as the information about the other characters it has access to are displayed. All in all, in "Intervention", the android mainly creates comic effects, which partially result from the fact that actress Sarah Michelle Gellar has a double role as Buffy and Buffybot in this episode. Since the Buffybot is programmed with some characteristics of the real Buffy as well as with part of her knowledge, it serves as a parody of the slayer. When the Buffybot, like the real Buffy, patrols the local cemetery to hunt down evil creatures, its motto 'Vampires of the world, beware!' parodies the real Buffy's witty remarks, which are characteristic of the series. Thus, in *Buffy* androids are not just used as a parody of gender stereotypes in general, but also as a self-reflexive parody of the series' conventions.

In the first two episodes of season six of *Buffy* ("Bargaining I & II"), the Buffybot appears again, but now the comic effects produced by the Buffybot are toned down and serious issues clearly dominate. Even the reason for the Buffybot's reappearance in these episodes is a serious one: at the end of the fifth season, the protagonist Buffy died, and to keep the evil creatures in Sunnydale at bay, Buffy's friends now use the Buffybot to create the illusion that the slayer is still alive. Although they try to make the Buffybot appear as lifelike as possible, they are constantly reminded of its mechanical nature by the robot's 'behaviour'. Other characters, however, do not guess the truth. The Buffybot's reactions to what it sees and what other characters say account for much of the comic potential of the episodes. The comic effects in particular result from the discrepancy between the viewers' awareness of the inappropriateness of the Buffybot's utterances and the fact that the minor characters are fooled by it. For example, when a teacher explains to a group of parents the philosophy of the school that Buffy's sister Dawn attends, the Buffybot, falling back on one of the definitions it has been programmed with, enthusiastically proclaims: "School is where you learn." While both the viewers and Dawn realise that this utterance is embarrassing, the other characters, after a brief moment of hesitation, take this remark entirely seriously – and even agree wholeheartedly.

The comic effects created by the incongruous behaviour of the Buffybot are juxtaposed with the feeling of loss Buffy's friends and her sister display when they are reminded of the slayer's death by the Buffybot. The Buffybot looks like a young woman and is largely seen as one, despite its odd behaviour. And even Dawn seems to regard the Buffybot as a partial substitute for her sister, although she knows that it is not human. Dawn feels so lonely that she at one time even gets up at night and lies down next to the Buffybot. The fact that the robot is in the process of being recharged at this time, something that emphasises its ar-

tificial nature, demonstrates the extent of Dawn's despair. Spike, who originally had the Buffybot constructed as a replacement for the unreachable real Buffy, now is annoyed, even disgusted, by displays of the robot's admiration for him. Its behaviour is a painful reminder of the fact that the real Buffy is lost forever, and the Buffybot obviously cannot fill her place. Thus, the contrast between human beings and merely human-looking androids, which do not possess anything approaching a human identity, is stressed.

#### IV. Conclusion

As the discussion above has shown, the depiction of robots and androids in films and TV series since the 1960s does not support Donna Haraway's concept of mechanical beings as "creature[s] in a post-gender world".<sup>19</sup> Instead, as our analysis of a number of science-fiction films and TV series has shown, the depiction of robots and androids attests to the importance of the category gender. It seems to be virtually impossible to imagine an individual being, even a mechanical one, which is not inscribed in the gender matrix. The growing awareness of the notion of gender and its manifold implications, especially since the Second Women's Movement in the late 1960s, can also be seen as a prime reason for the growing number of parodies of gender stereotypes. In general, there is a big difference between the depiction of robots and androids in movies and TV series from the 1960s and in those since the 1990s. No matter whether they are literary or audiovisual, visions of the future often set out to critically re-examine or even challenge existing gender roles. Quite often, though, as Chris Ferns has observed in his study on the genre of the utopia, the vision of the future "reinscribes the very norms of gender relations that it purports to challenge".<sup>20</sup> The overt parody of gender roles can be seen as one possible reaction to this dilemma.

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19 HARAWAY. "A Manifesto for Cyborgs." 9.

20 Cf. FERNS, Chris. *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999. 220.

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## Performing Gender in the Music Videos of 50 Cent and the G Unit

### I. Introduction: On Music Video, Gender, the Aim and Scope of this Contribution

Already in 1993, the editors of *Sound and Vision*, one of the landmark volumes in the field of music video studies, pointed to the social and cultural significance of music video, emphasizing that it “is one of the most important emergent cultural forms in contemporary popular culture. It has had a profound impact both on music, fashion, and youth culture, and on the codes and forms that operate across television, film and advertising”.<sup>1</sup> More than fifteen years later, it seems as if technological advances in the production and the (legal and illegal) dissemination of music and music videos via the internet have continuously added to this significance. As a major form of popular cultural expression, the music video thus still (or more than ever before) “deserves serious attention from students of popular culture”,<sup>2</sup> not only due to its media-specific – and highly complex – aesthetic make-up, but also due to its intriguing role in processes of image-formation and in the mediation of norms and values. In her illuminating study on rap music, Tricia Rose hints at this ethical dimension of music video, arguing that

the visualization of music has far-reaching effects on musical cultures and popular culture generally, not the least of which is the increase in visual interpretations of sexist power relationships [...], the increased focus of how a singer looks rather than how he or she sounds, the need to craft an image to accompany one’s music, and ever-greater pressure to abide by corporate genre-formatting rules.<sup>3</sup>

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1 FRITH, Simon, Andrew GOODWIN and Lawrence GROSSBERG (eds.). *Sound and Vision. The Music Video Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. No pagination.

2 GOODWIN, Andrew and Lawrence GROSSBERG. “Introduction.” In: Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). *Sound and Vision. The Music Video Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. ix-xi. ix.

3 ROSE, Tricia. *Black Noise. Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover/London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994. 9. Our contribution is, to a considerable degree,

Starting from Rose's observations on the potential of music video in the negotiation of gendered power constellations as well as on its overemphasis of the visual in the construction of identities, our contribution sets out to explore how this medium contributes to creating and communicating concepts of masculinity and femininity. After a very brief theoretical reflection on the specific medial and generic characteristics of music video as well as on the concept of gender that we draw upon in our analyses, we will provide close readings of a selection of music videos, which are supposed to illustrate the complex relationships between gender and this specific form of audiovisual expression. In order not to get lost in sight of an overwhelming variety of video clips from different musical genres and styles, which would all very easily lend themselves to being analyzed in this regard, we decided to limit the scope of our contribution: Our analysis thus deliberately turns to male African-American gangsta rap as represented by rapper 50 Cent and the members of his crew, the G Unit.<sup>4</sup> By incorporating a detailed examination of the verbal and the visual dimensions of the video clips and an examination of the music video's status both in the context of African American hip hop culture and in the economic and institutional framework of the music (video) business, our contribution is supposed to reveal the forms and functions of audiovisual narrative strategies of negotiating gender identities in the videos at stake. Though, to be sure, such a focus enables us to examine a range of videos in detail, we must not forget that it also bears the risk of deducing assumptions concerning the relationship between gender and music video which seem to be of a general nature, but which, in fact, do not hold true for other musical genres. Being entirely aware of this potential pitfall, we still hope to provide some insights into the intricate aesthetics and ethics of music videos as regards their role in the negotiation of gender identities.<sup>5</sup>

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indebted to Rose's highly illuminating study on rap music and draws upon some of her ideas on the politics of gender in rap music and – especially in section IV – upon her insightful explorations of hip hop culture and the position of rap music (video) in the music industry in order to contextualize the audiovisual representations of gender in the videos at stake.

4 Gangsta rap is a particularly explicit and aggressive form of rap and emerged during the late 1980s in Los Angeles. It "narrates experiences and fantasies specific to life as a poor young black, male subject in Los Angeles. Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, Ice-T, Ezy-E, Compton's Most Wanted, W.C. and the MAAD Circle, Snoop Doggy Dog, South Central Cartel, and others have defined the gangsta rap style. The Los Angeles school of gangsta rap has spawned other regionally specific hardcore rappers, such as New Jersey's Naughty by Nature, Bronx-based Tim Dog, Onyx and Redman, and a new group of female gangsta rappers, such as Boss (two black women from Detroit), New York-based Puerto Rican rapper Hurrigan Gloria, and Nikki D" (Rose. *Black Noise*. 59).

5 For analyses of gender representations in other rap songs and in other musical genres, cf. the contributions in HELMS, Dietrich and Thomas PHELEPS (eds.). *Clipped Differences. Geschlechterrepräsentationen im Musikvideo*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003.

## II. Sound, Vision, and the Body: On the Semiotics of Music Video and the Performativity of Gender

Though it might seem evident that music videos follow their own generic conventions and restrictions, they have often been analyzed with the help of the theoretical and methodological repertoire available in the field of film studies. Such approaches, however, frequently turn out to be problematic, as Paul McDonald has it, pointing out that “[t]he danger of reading music videos through film theory is that evident formal differences between music video and realist narrative film become interpreted as disruptions of a classical form.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently, one needs to be aware of the fact that the aesthetics as well as the functions of music videos differ significantly from those of a (film) soundtrack: “Unlike a soundtrack, which provides an atmospheric environment for the visual content, the pop video is essentially a specific visual representation of the musical content.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, applying the concept of a ‘classical realist text’ film to the analysis of music video, most probably, does not do justice to the specific aesthetic make-up of the genre.<sup>8</sup>

In order to elicit an awareness of the specific qualities of the music video (without going into detailed theoretical and methodological discussions), we would like to start with some general reflections on the genre, which are supposed to guide our close readings in the middle section of this contribution. It might therefore be sufficient to point out that more recent approaches to music video usually focus on the intricate relationship between sound and image without losing sight of one or the other and thus acknowledge the fact that the effects of a music video are the result of an intricate interplay between these dimensions. In so doing, these approaches move away from the assumption that music video “had made ‘image’ more important than the experience of music itself”, which would bear “the risk that theatricality and spectacle would take

6 McDONALD, Paul. “Feeling and Fun. Romance, Dance and the Performing Male Body in the Take That Videos.” In: Sheila Whiteley (ed.). *Sexing the Groove. Popular Music and Gender*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. 277–94. 280. McDONALD here draws upon Andrew GOODWIN’s ‘warnings’. In his article, he also provides an approach towards the analysis of the relationship between gender, body, and music video, some ideas of which are taken up in our contribution as well.

7 WHITELEY, Sheila. “Seduced by the Sign. An Analysis of the Textual Links Between Sound and Image in Pop Videos.” In: Sheila Whiteley (ed.). *Sexing the Groove. Popular Music and Gender*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. 259–76. 260.

8 Cf. McDONALD. “Feeling and Fun.” 280. Again, McDONALD refers to GOODWIN’s thoughts here. Cf. also KAPLAN, E. Ann. *Rocking Around the Clock. Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture*. New York/London: Routledge, 1987. 125 et passim. Among other clips, KAPLAN analyzes Madonna’s “Material Girl” and its deviation from this ‘classical realist text’. In her chapter on “Gender address and the gaze in MTV” (89 ff.), KAPLAN also draws upon LACAN’s ideas, some of which will be employed in this contribution as well.

precedence over intrinsically ‘musical’ values”.<sup>9</sup> By taking an integrative perspective, they also take the musical dimension of the videos into account and thus, ultimately, meet the complaint that “even extremely basic musicological terms like rhythm or timbre are usually missing from the lexicon of music video analysis”.<sup>10</sup> One of these more recent approaches is provided by Nicholas Cook, who, in his 2001 study *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*, shows how the visual and the acoustic elements of ‘musical multimedia’ (including music videos) interact on the basis of what he calls “enabling similarities”.<sup>11</sup> According to Cook, this interaction is not a mere ‘mixing’ of medial features, but “a reciprocal transfer of attributes that gives rise to a meaning constructed, not just reproduced, by multimedia”.<sup>12</sup>

Within these processes of meaning constitution, the recipients of a music video play an active role and, due to different foci of attention while watching and listening, may come up with different ‘readings’ of one clip.<sup>13</sup> In a similar vein, Dietrich Helms describes the typical situation of watching music videos, pointing out that they are most often consumed during the act of doing something else such as cooking, washing up or cleaning one’s room. Therefore, there are no ‘interpretive communities’ in the sense of Stanley Fish, which could function as a social system that would, in turn, tend to enforce consensus among its members.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the typical mode of perception we ‘put on’ while watching

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- 9 STRAW, Will. “Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s.” In: Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). *Sound and Vision. The Music Video Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. 3–21. 3. STRAW here refers to the claim of a “first wave of treatments” of music video which “tended to come from the culture surrounding rock music and from those who were primarily interested in music video as something which produced effects on that music” (ibid.).
- 10 GOODWIN, Andrew. “Fatal Distractions: MTV Meets Postmodern Theory.” In: Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). *Sound and Vision. The Music Video Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. 45–66. 46.
- 11 COOK, Nicholas. *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 72 et passim.
- 12 Cf. COOK. *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*. 66 ff. Cf. also RÖSING, Helmut. “Bilderwelt der Klänge – Klangwelt der Bilder.” In: Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (eds.). *Clipped Differences. Geschlechterrepräsentationen im Musikvideo*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003. 9–25. 19–20. RÖSING here elaborates on COOK’s ideas, which, in turn, draw on the ‘congruence-associationist-model’ as outlined by Sandra Marshall and Annabel Cohen (cf. COOK. *Analyzing Musical Multimedia*. 67 ff.).
- 13 Cf. RÖSING. “Bilderwelt der Klänge – Klangwelt der Bilder.” 19, again referring to COOK. In his contribution, RÖSING provides an insightful analysis of the interplay of the senses in the perception of music videos.
- 14 Cf. HELMS, Dietrich. “In Bed With Madonna. Gedanken zur Analyse von Videoclips aus medientheoretischer Sicht.” In: Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (eds.). *Clipped Differences. Geschlechterrepräsentationen im Musikvideo*. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2003. 99–117. 109. Cf. also McDONALD. “Feeling and Fun.” 280.

music videos on television might well be characterized as a ‘distracted glance’.<sup>15</sup> Following from that, and quite in contrast to the idea that “music video would result in a diminishing of the interpretive liberty of the individual music listener, who would now have visual or narrative interpretations of song lyrics imposed on him or her”,<sup>16</sup> ‘reading’ an audiovisual text indeed turns out to be a highly individual matter. The visualization of music thus does not “result in a semantic and affective impoverishment of the popular music experience”,<sup>17</sup> but in a highly complex semiotic structure which, through the incorporation of distinct sign systems, provides the basis for highly specific and individualized listening and watching experiences.

In order to theoretically conceptualize the interface between music video and gender, our analysis is not only framed by the understanding of music video as an intricate semiotic structure, but also draws upon the notion of gender as a socio-cultural construct, which was outlined by Judith Butler (among others). In her study *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, she argues that gender identities are by no means naturally given, but are in fact the result of a set of social and cultural practices. These practices, in turn, are governed by what she describes as a ‘heterosexual matrix’ – a highly normative regulatory framework “that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality”<sup>18</sup>. For Butler, gender is thus “the effect rather than the cause of discourse”.<sup>19</sup> In other words, gender identity does not exist “beyond the expressions of gender; [it] is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”<sup>20</sup>. Against this backdrop, gender turns out to be a strategic instrument in the negotiation of power relationships; it becomes what Butler calls “a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘performative’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning”.<sup>21</sup> Starting from this radically constructivist notion of gender, we consider music videos to be among the forms of cultural expression that actively engage in the construction (and deconstruction) of gender identities. Since they are an integral part of the general media discourse on gender, we believe that music videos are indeed both shaped by and contribute to shaping representations of gender, gender difference, and gender hierarchy and thus can

15 McDONALD. “Feeling and Fun.” 280. McDONALD here refers to John ELLIS’s *Visible Fictions. Cinema, Television, Video*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.

16 STRAW. “Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s.” 3. Here and in the following quote, STRAW again refers to the ‘first wave’ of approaches towards music video (cf. FN 9).

17 STRAW. “Popular Music and Postmodernism in the 1980s.” 3.

18 BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London/New York: Routledge, 1990. 31.

19 SALIH, Sara. *Judith Butler*. New York/London: Routledge, 2002. 80.

20 BUTLER. *Gender Trouble*. 25.

21 Cf. BUTLER. *Gender Trouble*. 139.

be considered as providing a range of medium-specific (re)articulations of culturally available conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

As the depiction of masculinity and femininity in the music videos at stake revolves in particular around the representation of (parts of) the male and female body, our analysis focuses on the audiovisual strategies which contribute to ‘gendering’ the body, thus eventually turning it into both a site for and a result of negotiations of power relationships and social hierarchies. In doing so, we follow Michel Foucault, who, similarly to Butler, claims that bodies are indeed “effects of power, symbolically *produced* in social relations by discourses of sexuality, medicine, education, and so on”.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, Foucault argues in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* that the sexuality attached to the (gendered) body can be instrumentalized as a strategic tool. He points out that “[s]exuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality”<sup>23</sup> and continues that it is thus “useful to the greatest number of manoeuvres and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies”.<sup>24</sup> As an “element in power relations”, sexuality and the body thus turn out to be highly social phenomena, as both masculinity and femininity have to be re-enacted and constantly displayed through a set of culturally available practices and forms of expression in order to maintain the ‘instrumentality’ of sexuality. In this vein, Judith Butler points out that

[t]he body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own.<sup>25</sup>

Against the backdrop of the assumption that the body is indeed “constituted as a social phenomenon” in the first place, that it inevitably has a “public dimension” and only later becomes ‘private property’, music video – as a form of mass entertainment – turns out to be an important ‘agent’ in the formation of the (male and the female) body and thus functions as a highly potent medium of negotiating and communicating gender identities.

Framed by the theoretical considerations both on the intricate semiotics of music video as well as on gender as the ever-shifting result of a performative

22 RAMAZANOĞLU, Caroline and Janet HOLLAND. “Women’s Sexuality and Men’s Appropriation of Sexuality.” In: Caroline Ramazanoğlu (ed.). *Up Against Foucault. Explorations of Some Tensions Between Foucault and Feminism*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. 239 – 64. 242.

23 FOUCAULT, Michel. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. 103.

24 FOUCAULT. *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. 103.

25 BUTLER, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York/London: Routledge, 2004. 21.

process, the following analysis of a selection of rap videos revolves around the representation of the body. It centers on four recurring motifs, which seem to be of particular significance in the construction of masculinity and femininity within the audiovisual narratives of the videos at stake. These motifs, whose forms and functions will be illustrated by a number of close examinations of exemplary scenes and excerpts from the corresponding lyrics, are 1. the dominance of ‘sexual iconography’,<sup>26</sup> 2. the materialization of the female, 3. an aesthetics of the muscular and 4. the motif of the gang fight.

### III. On the Audiovisual Strategies of Making Gender: Representations of the Male and the Female in the Music Videos of 50 Cent and the G Unit

My flow, my show brought me the dough  
That brought me all my fancy things  
My crib, my cars, my pools, my jewels  
Look nigga I done came up, and I ain’t changed.<sup>27</sup>

In the music videos to the songs of 50 Cent and the G Unit, one particularly powerful way of staging masculinity is the incorporation of symbols of material wealth (such as expensive jewelry, diamonds or ‘grills’) into the audiovisual narrative of the video. Interestingly, among the many accessories that, in sum, constitute what Jennifer Hurley has called ‘sexual iconography’, the most significant ones seem to be luxurious cars by Ferrari, Mercedes Benz or Rolls Royce: Right at the beginning of his song “Wanksta”, 50 Cent already hints at the significance of cars in the construction of the rappers’ masculinity by introducing himself as “50 a.k.a. Ferrari F-50”, and a number of videos feature a range of expensive cars.

That this verbal and visual demonstration of material wealth is directly linked to the symbolic boasting of the rappers’ sexual prowess becomes obvious once we acknowledge that, as a rule, the rapping protagonist is not only surrounded by cars, but, at the same time, by numerous girls in scanty clothes, which already suggests that both objects of desire seem to be closely related. In order to illustrate and, what is more, to explore this relationship, let us have a closer look

26 The concept of sexual iconography is introduced and elaborated on in HURLEY, Jennifer M. “Music Video and the Construction of Gendered Subjectivity (or how being a music video junkie turned me into a feminist).” In: *Popular Music* 13,3 (1994): 327–38.

27 Taken from “Wanksta”. If not otherwise noted, the transcriptions of the song lyrics are taken from <<http://www.azlyrics.com/19/50cent.html>>. Yet, whenever our own listening differed from the lyrics provided there, we changed them accordingly. Occasionally, we also corrected apparent typographical errors.

at one particular scene from the music video “Ride With” starring rap artist Joe featuring the G Unit: In this scene of the video, the rapper watches a beautiful young woman who is approaching a car, with the detailed visual depiction of her appearance, her gracious movements and, consequently, Joe’s growing desire being emphasized by a slow-motion camera. “Look at what we got right here, such a work of art”,<sup>28</sup> the rapper sums up his impression of the woman, but still hesitates to approach her first. However, he eventually takes matters into his own hands and moves towards the girl, who is already awaiting his caresses. The visualization of this seemingly romantic ritual is underlined by a musical pattern that differs from the traditional rhythmic beat of rap and, through its soul-like flow, is supposed to contribute to the amorous atmosphere created on the clip’s verbal and visual levels. However, as Joe gets close enough to the woman to touch her, he does not do so. Instead, he touches the car parked next to her, with his movement highlighted by a slow-motion camera close-up of his hand on the shiny metal of the car’s front. The moment his palm touches the car, Joe indulges into a fantasy about an erotic encounter, which is implied by two bright flashes that interrupt the visual flow of the video’s narrative, thus signaling the beginning and the end of the dream-like sequence. The beginning of this sequence is also underlined by the acoustic track, as it marks the transition from Joe’s rapping the verse to a set of background vocals performing the first part of the song’s chorus. It seems that Joe’s touching the car enabled him to ‘perform’ sexually, to provide him with the potency necessary to handle “such a piece of art”. The prospect of material wealth, or even his mere touching it, thus seems to have strengthened his virility.

One could argue that the scene once again highlights the equation of women with luxurious cars, thus implying both a materialization of the female body as well as an eroticization of the material object. One could, however, also approach the scene from a psychological or psychoanalytical perspective, and – being fully aware of the problems attached to such an approach – read it against the backdrop of Lacan’s notion of the phallus. Seen in this light, Joe’s touching the car (as a token of material wealth) instead of the woman turns out to be an example of what Lacan describes as an attempt at substituting the missing phallus, while, simultaneously, ‘masking its lack’. The woman, in her desire for the phallus, offers herself as an object of male fantasy and thus eventually enables Joe to confirm his phallic potency. As Lacan argues,

[t]he intervention of an ‘appearing’ [...] gets substituted for the ‘having’ so as to protect it on one side and to mask its lack on the other, with the effect that the ideal or typical

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28 Our transcription.

manifestations of behaviour in both sexes, up to and including the act of sexual copulation, are entirely propelled into comedy.<sup>29</sup>

Following Lacan, we may be able to explain why we, as viewers, cannot avoid a feeling of amusement, as the scene's characters and their actions during their more or less erotic encounter are indeed "propelled into comedy". Moreover, as a Lacanian reading highlights the strong interdependence of material prosperity and sexual potency, we might also conclude that a lack of material wealth, to turn it the other way round, would imply a degrading or even a loss of male (sexual) power.<sup>30</sup> And indeed, a scene taken from 50 Cent's video "Wanksta" seems to confirm this assumption of a quasi-conditional relationship that seems to work in both directions: on the backseat of a huge black SUV,<sup>31</sup> which is accompanied by an escort of women on motorbikes, 50 Cent approaches a crossing and stops at the red traffic lights. Next to his car, another fellow is sitting in his vehicle, which apparently broke down, as we may deduce from the vapours of steam coming out of the car's engine block. As 50 Cent's physical and verbal eyeing up reveals, the broken car's driver seems to be a former friend, whom 50 Cent starts to make fun of, rapping: "Damn Homie, in highskew you was the man, homie / What the fuck happened to you?" Not only does the correlation of these lines with the depiction of the broken car on the visual track of the video epitomize 50 Cent's disrespect towards his former "homie",<sup>32</sup> it also triggers the association of the now burnt out engine of the car and a loss of masculine power on the part of its owner. When his car was still intact, the line quoted above suggests, he was "the man". Now, manhood is gone and with it his girlfriend, who was sitting next to him as long as the engine was running full throttle. She jumps out off the car and makes her way down the street, for she presumably cannot stand her now impotent boyfriend any longer. A camera close-up of her face, which expresses her lack of understanding, her disappointment and a certain air of ridicule once

29 LACAN, Jacques. "The Meaning of the Phallus." In: Rosalind Minsky (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and Gender. An Introductory Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1996. 269 – 80. 278. For a more detailed account of the phenomenon of anxiety in sexuality, cf. SALECL, Renata. "Love and Sexual Difference: Doubled Partners in Men and Women." In: Renata Salecl (ed.), *Sexuation*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2000. 297 – 316. 304 – 06.

30 Of course, we are well aware that such a reading should not lead to general assumptions on the interdependence of material wealth and sexual potency in rap videos, or hip hop culture at large. Moreover, reading the scene through LACAN perhaps also bears the risk of 'overpsychologizing'. However, we believe that LACAN's concept of the phallus, here and elsewhere, might help explain the apparent eroticization, or sexualization of material goods.

31 Abbreviation for *Sports Utility Vehicle*, the usual term for an oversized all-terrain car.

32 I.e. *friend*. We refer to a glossary of rap terminology provided by ANDERSON, Darnell. *The Portrayal of African American Women in Rap Music Video*. Unpublished dissertation. Wayne State University, Detroit, 1999. 183.

more emphasizes that he has not only lost his car, but with it, at least symbolically, his sexual power and dominance.

Besides cars, there are other kinds of material goods that belong to the 'standard equipment' of the male rapper and that are all, in one way or another, associated with sexuality. As hinted at above, rappers such as 50 Cent and Lloyd Banks of the G Unit usually wear expensive jewelry, diamonds, gold chains and grills that – time and again – are highlighted by a special blinking effect in their music videos. Moreover, there seems to be a relatively regular featuring of sloshing bottles of champagne that, with the gushing of the liquid stream (most often in slow motion), function as a visual metaphor for the sexual climax, thus highlighting the sexual potency of the videos' male protagonists. Masculinity is thus indeed performatively enacted by means of a set of attributes and 'rituals' whose continuous staging functions as a practice of self-legitimization supposed to maintain male dominance and power.

In this 'game' of staging masculinity, women 'play the role' men have assigned to them. More often than not, they are represented as men's counterparts, constantly confirming their sexual potency<sup>33</sup> through what Lacan has called female 'masquerade', the logic of which is as follows:

[A]lthough her penis-envy makes her want to *have* a phallus, she can only do this by *being* the phallus – supporting the status of the man's phallus through involving herself in the masquerade. So she inevitably ends up giving the man a phallus (to confirm his phallic power) which she herself does not actually possess, although her Desire is constructed in relation to the phallic term.<sup>34</sup>

Though we are well aware that Lacan's approach is reductionist as it delineates and explains the relationship between men and women exclusively via the symbolic significance of the phallus and a male-centred perspective, the notion of 'masquerade' helps elucidate the complex interplay at work in processes of constructing gender and gender relationships. In other words, it stresses the fact that both the male and female body are constantly re-enacted vis-à-vis the Other. Consequently, the construction of sexually potent men is complemented by a depiction of women as highly sexualized objects offered to and 'owned' by the rappers. Let us consider, for instance, another scene from the video "Wanksta", immediately preceding the sequence analyzed above, which stresses the notion of women as material goods: In this scene, we encounter 50 Cent sitting in his SUV, rapping: "Shorty she's so fine, I gotta make her mine / An ass like that gotta be of a kind." Interestingly, the very moment 50 Cent articulates his claims, the

33 On the concept of female 'masquerade', cf. LACAN. "The Meaning of the Phallus." 278–79.

34 MINSKY, Rosalind. "Lacan: The Meaning of the Phallus." In: Rosalind Minsky (ed.). *Psychoanalysis and Gender. An Introductory Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1996. 137–77. 166, our emphases.

visual flow of the video's superordinate narrative is interrupted, and we are confronted with a short visual fill, in which a girl is dancing in front of a car. However, it is not (only) the combination of the dancing girl and the car which is striking here. What immediately catches the recipients' eyes is the intriguing resemblance of the car's license plate and the design on the backside of the girl's pants, which are deliberately positioned very close to one another in order to stress the similarity of the objects they are attached to. Moreover, both the plate and the patch read "G-Unit", which contributes to the verbal and visual degradation of women to the status of material goods in this scene. The video clip thus not only fashions women as objects of male sexual possession; by implicitly establishing the analogy woman-car, it also "effectively annihilate[s] any possibility of a self of their own".<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, it is not by chance that it is the girl's *behind* which is marked with the name of the rapping crew in the "Wanksta" video. As Rose points out, "[i]ncreasingly, black women's asses are being depicted as the primary target for male predatory sexual behaviour. Some videos represent an exaggerated mode of real-life visual and verbal tracking and stalking of women's behinds."<sup>36</sup> Consider, for example, the beginning of the first verse of "Wanna Get to Know You", in which Young Buck, another member of the G Unit, declares that "I'm lovin' how you look in my eyes, swingin' them hips when you pass / I'm visualizing my name tattooed on that ass baby",<sup>37</sup> thereby hinting at another, more aggressive and (almost) irreversible form of marking women. Such a treatment of women's behinds as 'private property', as Rose argues, "contributes to an already entrenched understanding of women's bodies as objects of consumption".<sup>38</sup>

The verbal and visual foregrounding of women's behinds is only one of many strategies employed to construct images of the male and the female body in 50 Cent's music videos. Yet it may be seen as symptomatic for the videos at stake, in which the male protagonists usually adopt highly active and very central positions, taking up large parts of the visual frame. Moreover, as they are rapping the lyrics, they also dominate the acoustic track. In contrast to this, the women who are featured and whose only regular activities seem to be dancing and admiring their male counterparts whenever the camera is zooming in on their faces, usually constitute the visual background of the videos.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in the male-

35 MINSKY. "Lacan: The Meaning of the Phallus." 162.

36 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 168–69. With her statement, ROSE characterizes black female rap videos. Yet, as she points to the similarities between male and female rap videos, we consider it legitimate to apply it here. In this context, ROSE is also concerned with the 'objectification' of women typical of male rap videos.

37 <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gunit/wannagettoknowyou.html>>.

38 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 169.

39 That women only work as the supporting cast and, more often than not, are staged as mere

centered narratives of 50 Cent's and the G Unit's rap videos, the rapper's black, muscular body is juxtaposed with the sexually appealing and lascivious black female body.<sup>40</sup> In this complementary relationship, the male erotic gaze at the female dancers "is without alibi, overt and even blatant, because the more the female is objectified, the more masculinity seems to be guaranteed to the hero",<sup>41</sup> while the girls' adoration of the male protagonist, their getting "wet over [the rapper's] fame",<sup>42</sup> as Lloyd Banks has it in his lyrics of "Wanna Get to Know You", also contributes to highlighting the rapper's sexual potency.

Though, usually, the music videos at stake underline male sexual power, there are also moments in which the male anxiety of losing sexual attractiveness by losing status is highlighted. This anxiety is expressed e.g. in the video to 50 Cent's "21 Questions", in which the rapper explicitly reflects on the relationship between material wealth and male potency, being fully aware of the fragility of exactly this relationship:

If I fell off tomorrow would you still love me? [...]  
 If I went back to a hoopty from a Benz would you poof and disappear, like  
 some of my friends? [...]  
 If I ain't rap 'cause I flipped burgers at Burger King  
 would you be ashamed to tell your friends you feelin' me? [...]

As the verse reveals, the rapper's dominant position, which directly correlates to his social rank, or, to draw upon psychology again, exclusively depends on his ability to obscure his lack of a phallus by way of substitution, is indeed felt to be highly precarious. Consequently, as the verse implies through the use of the conditional 'if', the very moment the male subject cannot take on his symbolic function as a bearer of the phallus e.g. due to a lack of the respective material substitute ("a Benz") or a 'career setback' ("flipping burgers at Burger King"), he runs the risk of falling victim to symbolic castration, being thus no longer of any interest to women.<sup>43</sup>

In order to enhance the idea of male dominance and potency, the videos also

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accessories of male gangsta rappers, becomes particularly apparent in the uncensored version of 50 Cent's and Snoop Dogg's co-production "P.I.M.P.", in which, right at the beginning, three girls with bare breasts caress rapper 50 Cent. As the camera focuses on the male protagonists' bodies and voices, the women – quite literally – 'frame' the male center of the video both on the visual and on the acoustic level.

40 On the representation of the female body in hip hop, cf. QUEELEY, Andrea. "Hip Hop and the Aesthetics of Criminalization." In: *Souls* 5,1 (2003): 1–15. 13. Cf. also ROSE. *Black Noise*. 166 ff.

41 MACKINNON, Kenneth. *Representing Men. Maleness and Masculinity in the Media*. London: Arnold, 2003. 30.

42 <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/gunit/wannagettonowyou.html>>.

43 ROSE also hints at this relationship between the lack of material wealth and the 'decline' of male potency in her analysis of Salt'N'Pepa's song "Independent" (cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 151).

frequently close up on the extremely well-trained torsos of the rappers. In the video clip to 50 Cent's song "Many Men", for example, we encounter a number of short sequences which – integrated into the audiovisual narrative about his being attacked and shot down by hostile gang members – show the rapper in a shady room in greenish colors. Due to a high level of contrast to his black skin, the proportions of his toned body are stressed. Moreover, a thin layer of sweat covers his body, which, due to the shiny reflection, also emphasizes his physical strength and, consequently, his masculinity. This aesthetics of the muscular is underlined by a slow-motion camera that automatically directs the attention to the movements of 50 Cent's body, once again highlighting the performative character of masculinity, which is here enacted through a set of physical features including body modification (i. e. tattooing), body-building and a specifically male code of dressing and posing. What we can observe here is thus very much in line with Butler's concept of gender, which she understands as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being".<sup>44</sup> In a similar vein, Kevin Williams hints at this 'stylization of the body' particularly in the audiovisual medium of the video clip, arguing that the performer's body is indeed a 'coded' one:

Video performers are masks, signs, even when they appear as 'themselves'. They are signs that announce drummer, singer, guitar player, rapper: The length of hair, the shape of the shoulders, the degree of nakedness, the kind and quality of looks, the artistry of the movement, and the codes of dress work to establish the body as a coded body [...].<sup>45</sup>

Interestingly, in the case of "Many Men", the boasting of the performer's masculinity through his 'coded' body, which signifies strength and power, not only takes place on the visual level, but is also supported by the lyrics of the song. Let us have a closer look at the first verse, in which the speaker, or rapper of the song, 50 Cent, elaborates on his being shot down and his plans for taking revenge:

Now these pussy niggas putting money on my head  
Go on and get your refund motherfucker, I ain't dead  
I'm the diamond in the dirt, that ain't be found  
I'm the underground king and I ain't be crowned  
When I rhyme, something special happen every time  
I'm the greatest, something like Ali in his prime  
[...]

<sup>44</sup> BUTLER. *Gender Trouble*. 33.

<sup>45</sup> WILLIAMS, Kevin. *Why I [Still] Want My MTV. Music Video and Aesthetic Communication*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2003. 158.

I walk around gun on my waist, chip on my shoulder  
Till I bust a clip in your face, pussy, this beef ain't over.

Here, 50 Cent verbally rehabilitates his masculine power that was lost as he was hit by the bullets, both by degrading the members of the enemy gang to “pus-s[ies]”, thus turning them into effeminate creatures, and by upgrading himself to “a diamond in the dirt”, “the underground king” and “something like Ali in his prime”. Consequently, the exaggerated display of his male body on the visual track corresponds with the song’s verbal narrative, as it is on both levels that the rapper sets out to re-establish himself as a most virile and strong character who will eventually be able to take revenge for the attack of the enemy gang.

In general, gang fight, or rather prevailing in a gang fight seems to be another motif that is frequently taken up not only in rap lyrics, but also in the audiovisual representation of these lyrics in music videos. Let us, for instance, consider the clip to the song “Heat”, which deals with the war between street gangs taking place in what is stylized as ‘the ghetto’<sup>46</sup> and which ‘uses’ the motif of the gang fight as a means to create a strong sense of masculinity. The music video tells the story of a gang that is settling the score with a hostile gang member: “So there’ll be no white flags and no peace calls”, rapper 50 Cent sums up the ‘message’ of the song, and the painful mistreatment of the captured gang member seems to leave no doubt about that. The visual track, at least at the beginning of the clip, bears strong resemblances to the numerous reality TV shows that seem to have become part and parcel of twenty-first century television entertainment. The amateur-like, hand-held camera movements suggest that what is taking place is not faked, but a real-life event which, as the perspective of the camera suggests, was filmed by one of the gang members. The clip’s verisimilitude is only distorted when 50 Cent starts to rap his lyrics in front of his filmed friends, bullying the defenseless victim. Interestingly, as soon as his rapping begins, a rhythmical pattern sets in which enhances the aggressive character of the entire clip, as it consists of sampled sounds of a gun that is being loaded; moreover, the beats on the snare drum are highlighted by sound samples of a fired gun and, time and again, there are ‘transgressive sounds’ like those of a machine gun, of squeaking car tires and of a police car siren, which are supposed to add to the atmosphere of the clip.<sup>47</sup>

46 For the significance of the ‘ghetto’ as a “central black popular narrative” and its role in rap music video production, cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 9 ff. ROSE also hints at the importance of the gang, pointing out that “[w]hen I asked seasoned music video director Kevin Bray what comprised the three most important themes in rap video, his immediate response was, ‘posse, posse, and posse ...’” (ibid. 10).

47 For the technique of using ‘transgressive sounds’ in rap music, cf. BEST, Steven and Douglas KELLNER. “Rap, Black Rage and Racial Difference.” In: *Enculturation* 2,2 (1999); cf. also KELLNER, Douglas. *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London/New York: Routledge, 1995. 177.

What is even more, there are close-up camera shots of guns and bullets that interrupt the visual narrative throughout the clip, which not only foreground the significance of weapons as an adequate and seemingly 'legitimate' means to 'survive in the hood', but also highlight their phallic nature as symbols of male dominance and power. Thus, taking part and prevailing in a gang fight, considered as part of a "never ending battle for status, prestige, and group adoration" that constitutes hip hop,<sup>48</sup> could well be regarded as a way of affirming one's masculinity. It implies a "sense of manhood based upon aggression, control, and the illusive notion of 'respect'", which, in turn, "requires a harsh response to any threat to one's status".<sup>49</sup> Consequently, success in a gang fight and male dominance are closely related, as 50 Cent suggests himself when he unmistakably points out in his song "Heat": "Keep thinkin I'm candy till ya fuckin skull get popped".

#### IV. By Way of Conclusion: Rap Music Video in the Contexts of Hip Hop Culture and the Music Industry

So far, our contribution has been predominantly concerned with sexist representations of women and the significance of these representations for the construction of male superiority in gangsta rap videos. Our primary intention was not to show *that* the videos at stake include such sexist representations; rather our endeavour was guided by the question of *how* the medium of music video stages femininity and masculinity, i. e. *which* verbal, musical and visual strategies interact in *what ways* in order to create a particular image of the male and the female body. Nevertheless, one is indeed tempted to argue that the 'objectification' of the female body and the (complementary) boasting of male potency seems to be a typical feature of the genre, though one should always bear in mind that the means of staging masculinity and femininity in the clips at stake are not (necessarily) representative of gangsta rap at large. Yet once we take into account that the explicit sexism which we find in rap lyrics and in the respective music videos can also be found in other musical genres, such a claim might not be too far-fetched. Lisa A. Lewis, for instance, argues in her analysis of 'male-addressed videos' on MTV that

[m]ale address videos draw fundamentally on the connection between male adolescent licence and adult male rule by activating textual signs of patriarchal discourse. Reproducing coded images of the female body, conventionally positioning girls and

48 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 36.

49 PINN, Anthony. "Gettin Grown: Notes on Gangsta Rap Music and Notions on Manhood." In: *Journal of African American Men* 2 (1996): 61 – 73. 68.

women as objects of male voyeurism, are effective strategies for associating male adolescent desire and male dominance. Representations of females are inflected in ways that facilitate their integration into the specific vision of male adolescent discourse.<sup>50</sup>

She further argues that “in the case of male address on MTV, the hegemony of gender inequality and male adolescence is manifested in the exclusion of girls from male discourse, and in their coded and semiotically-impooverished textual representation”.<sup>51</sup> Against the backdrop of these more general claims, the prejudice that “rappers have infected an otherwise sexism free society”<sup>52</sup> indeed seems to be illegitimate and, as Tricia Rose argues, is particularly due to a highly biased form of critical treatment of rap music. “These reactions to rap’s sexism”, as she points out, “deny the existence of a vast array of accepted sexist social practices that make up adolescent male gender role modeling that results in social norms for adult male behaviours that are equally sexist”.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, one should keep in mind that there actually is a range of ‘male’ rap songs which are highly critical of the sexist attitude towards women and rather stress the role of men in the context of the family while, at the same time, underlining the significant contribution of women to black cultural production.<sup>54</sup> In addition, rap music is no longer a male-only domain. Indeed, there is a range of songs and videos produced and performed by female rappers, which (though not in all cases) suggest quite a different image of the female than the typically ‘male’ videos which are at stake here.<sup>55</sup>

Yet, despite these ‘balancing’ tendencies and developments, one can still observe a general sexist notion in rap music videos, and, as Andrew Ross maintains,

we cannot expect these powerful masculine legacies to disappear simply by denouncing their most powerful manifestations (as in rap lyrics) in the name of moral hygiene, least

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50 LEWIS, Lisa A. “Being Discovered: The Emergence of Female Address on MTV.” In: Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.). *Sound and Vision. The Music Video Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1993. 129 – 51. 135.

51 LEWIS. “Being Discovered.” 136.

52 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 15.

53 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 15. In this vein, ROSE further observes that “[r]ap’s sexist lyrics are also part of a rampant and viciously normalized sexism that dominates the corporate culture of the music business” (ibid. 15).

54 Cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 150.

55 Cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 146 ff. In this context, ROSE underlines that, despite female rappers’ often critical attitude towards the sexist attitude expressed in male rap, they “cannot be situated in total opposition to male rappers; they support and critique male rappers’ sexual discourse in a number of contradictory ways” (ibid. 150). Accordingly, she points out that “male rappers’ sexual discourse is not consistently sexist, and female sexual discourse is not consistently feminist” (ibid.).

of all when the offenders in question are drawn from, or represent some of the most economically denied sectors of the population.<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, Ross's statement not only underlines the power and the prevalence of the gender stereotypes we find in rap music, but also hints at the socio-economic contexts in which these stereotypes emerged. In the final part of our contribution, we would like to take up this hint and set out to situate rap music in the broader contexts of both hip hop culture and the music industry, which, we believe, might contribute to elucidating potential *functions* of such representations, both on the side of the 'producers', or artists, and among the audiences of rap music videos. Such a contextualization (which we can only touch upon here briefly and primarily by way of consulting some prominent voices from this field of research) could thus help explain the omnipresence and the persistence of stereotyped representations of the male and the female in the rap videos at stake.

Once we conceive of rap music as an integral part of hip hop culture, we have to take into account that the construction of gendered identities in rap music videos is closely related to other markers of social distinction, e. g. ethnicity and class. Herman Gray, for instance, points to the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity in the representation of 'black masculinity', stating that "self representations of black masculinity in the United States are historically structured by and against dominant and dominating discourses of masculinity and race, specifically (whiteness)".<sup>57</sup> Consequently, as he argues, representations of black masculinity might undermine discourses of white masculinity "even as they rewrite and reproduce forms of patriarchal authority, enveloping some of its most disturbing aspects in black vernacular style and expressive performance".<sup>58</sup> Next to the intersection of gender identities and discourses on ethnicity, one can also observe a correlation between representations of masculinity and femininity in rap music and a specific social status. Pierre Bourdieu has pointed to this interdependence between gender and class in general, arguing that

the whole set of socially constituted differences between the sexes tend to weaken as one moves up the social hierarchy and especially towards the dominated fractions of the dominant class [i.e. intellectuals], where women tend to share the most typically male prerogatives [...].<sup>59</sup>

56 ROSS, Andrew. "The Gangsta and the Diva." In: Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.). *The Visual Culture Reader*. London/New York: Routledge, 1998. 344 – 49. 348.

57 GRAY, Herman. "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture." In: *Callaloo* 18,2 (1995): 401 – 05. 401. In his contribution, GRAY is concerned with a variety of branches of African-American cultural production, among them rap.

58 GRAY. "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture." 402.

59 BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge, 1994. 382 – 83.

Starting from Bourdieu's observations on the correlation of socio-economic background with gender differences, the sexist attitude towards women expressed in the music videos could well be related to and explained by what Tricia Rose describes as the "dominant cultural formula that equates male economic stability and one's capacity to be a family breadwinner with masculinity, thus making black men's increasingly permanent position at the bottom of or completely outside the job market a sign of emasculation, dependence, or femininity".<sup>60</sup> The hyperbolic mode of demonstrating sexual potency and domination over women through a set of verbal and audiovisual strategies may therefore be regarded as an attempt at compensating for a lack of economic power.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, with the institution of marriage losing its social, cultural, and, most importantly, its economic significance in American society at large, the dependence of women on men has been constantly decreasing.<sup>62</sup> As Robin Kelley argues, "these transformations have had tremendous impact on the way in which masculinity is constructed by [rappers] [...] especially in their [audio-visual] narratives about sexual relationships. 'Bringing home the bacon' is no longer a measure of manhood."<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the male rapper relies on what – as an appropriation of Bourdieu's terminology – could be labelled 'subcultural capital', i. e. his street credibility among the members of his gang, which, in turn, is dependent on his (staged) sexual potency, with the 'objectified' women confirming the gangsta's symbolic power as a 'pimp'.<sup>64</sup> However, according to this logic of compensation this power can only be maintained as long as women are reduced to the status of material goods through a set of discursive and representational practices, as Anthony Pinn observes:

These gangstas believe that women are suspect because they emasculate black men, negating their manhood and reducing the respect received from others. [...] Women must be controlled through language (reduced to 'hos', 'bitches', and 'skeezers') and sex as a weapon of damage, domination, and control.<sup>65</sup>

Against the backdrop of these observations, the sexist representation of women and the boasting of male sexual potency in gangsta rap music videos might thus indeed be read as an attempt at "reliev[ing] [the rappers'] lack of self-worth and limited access to economic and social markers for heterosexual masculine

60 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 171.

61 Cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 15.

62 Cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 171.

63 Robin Kelley, quoted from ROSE. *Black Noise*. 171.

64 For an excellent account of the pimp figure and "pimp poetics" in gangsta rap, cf. QUINN, Eithne. "Who's The Mack?: The Performativity and Politics of the Pimp Figure in Gangsta Rap." In: *Journal of American Studies* 34,1 (2000): 1 – 15.

65 PINN. "Gettin Grown." 66.

power”.<sup>66</sup> Prestige, in other words, is thus no longer based on a ‘regular’ way of life including a job at honest pay and a loving wife and family, but on one’s credibility in the gang.<sup>67</sup>

Apart from examining the larger contexts of hip hop culture in order to better understand the persistence of sexist representations in rap music videos, one might also turn to the processes at work during the music videos’ production and reception. First of all, “[m]usic video production is a complex and highly mediated process dictated by the record company in what is sometimes a contentious dialogue with the artists’ management, the chosen video director, and video producer”.<sup>68</sup> Consequently, the aesthetic make-up of a music video is, more often than not, determined by a number of different interests and does not lie exclusively in the hands of the artist him- or herself. What is more, considering the mainstream appeal of most gangsta rap videos as well as their prominent role in the marketing of a particular song (or album), it seems obvious that the audiovisual narratives employed in these videos primarily serve a commercial purpose.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, if it is true that music videos are produced in order to promote a song (or album), if it is true that they also “establish and cultivate a certain image for an artist” or “modify an established performer’s public identity”,<sup>70</sup> would it not be legitimate to argue that the overtly sexist tone of the gangsta rap videos at stake is a mere marketing strategy? Once we take up this argument (and, as we have indicated, there is good reason to do so), we should ask for the target audience of such a marketing strategy. Who, in other words, is attracted by such an overtly clichéd representation of the male and the female? Rose, in her study on rap music, provides a differentiated answer to that question, arguing that rap

66 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 15.

67 This shift is indicated by rapper Lloyd Banks in the video clip to the song “Wanna Get to Know You”, when he, in a scene in which he is having sexual intercourse with one of the female gang members, makes clear that “I’m not your boyfriend, I’m your homie”. He thus unmistakably reassures himself and his girlfriend of his priorities ‘through language’, as for him, the gang membership seems to be more important than the love relationship. For an examination of a similar tendency in rock bands, cf. COHEN, Sara. “Men Making a Scene. Rock Music and the Production of Gender.” In: Sheila Whiteley (ed.). *Sexing the Groove. Popular Music and Gender*. London/New York: Routledge, 1997. 17–36. 22.

68 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 12–13. ROSE also points out that “[s]atisfying the record companies, artists, and managers is only half the battle; MTV, the most powerful video outlet, has its own standards and guidelines for airing videos” and thus also contributes to shaping their aesthetics (ibid. 14).

69 For a detailed account of the position of rap within the contexts of the music industry as well as on rap music video production and its importance for the promotion of rap, cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 3 ff.

70 BANKS, Jack. “Video in the Machine: The Incorporation of Music Video into the Recording Industry.” In: *Popular Music* 16,3 (1998): 293–309. 296.

music, like other African-American forms of cultural expression, “speak[s] to both a black audience and a larger, predominantly white context”.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, however, “increasing sales figures [...] suggest that white teenage rap consumers have grown steadily since the emergence of Public Enemy in 1988. Middle-class white teenage rap consumers appear to be an increasingly significant audience”.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, with the 1989 launch of *Yo! MTV Raps* and regular broadcast of rap videos, the ‘mainstreamization’ of this form of cultural expression has even been enhanced.<sup>73</sup> Andrew Ross also points to this ‘success story’ of rap among white teenagers, stating that, whereas gangsta rap traditionally provided

the most articulate frame for *black* anger available for its young devotees [...], the shoe is now on the other foot, as white kids seek to integrate into black-and-brown culture in ways that their civil-rights-generation parents find difficult to understand.<sup>74</sup>

Thus, despite, or rather due to its embeddedness in African-American hip hop culture, rap (at least in its mainstream form) has increasingly been affecting a white middle-class audience, which, it seems, has been “fascinated by its differences, drawn in by mainstream social constructions of black culture as a forbidden narrative, as a symbol of rebellion”.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, one could well argue that both gangsta rap lyrics and the respective music videos, with their (often) sexist portrayal of women, their hyperbolic representation of masculinity and their appraisal of crime, establish narratives of deviance and disobedience and, in so doing, serve to fulfill a distinctly “white voyeuristic pleasure of black cultural imagery”,<sup>76</sup> providing a middle-class audience with visions of the exotic, and erotic, Other. To be sure, such an argument would not do justice to the fact that “[e]ven though rappers are aware of the diversity of their audiences and the context for reception, their use of the ghetto and its symbolic significances is

71 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 5.

72 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 7. At the same time, ROSE elaborates on the problems attached to estimates of actual reception based on what she calls ‘sales demographics’. Accordingly, “[i]t is quite possible [...] that the percentage of white rap consumers in relation to overall sales is being disproportionately represented, because bootleg street sales coupled with limited chain music store outlets in poor communities make it very difficult to assess the demographics for actual sales of rap music to urban black and Hispanic consumers” (ibid.).

73 Cf. ROSE. *Black Noise*. 8.

74 ROSS. “The Gangsta and the Diva.” 348.

75 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 5. The fascination rap music videos (and hip hop culture in general) exert on these white middle-class teenagers may also be explained by drawing on Lisa LEWIS’s ideas on the significance of the image of ‘the street’ as a particularly ‘male’ setting in music videos. In rap music, the image of the street is indeed central, as it represents the central locale for the rappers’ actions and interactions, and, as such, “perfectly summarizes male adolescent quests for adventure, rebellion, sexual encounter, peer relationships and male privilege” (LEWIS. “Being Discovered.” 136).

76 ROSE. *Black Noise*. 12.

primarily directed at other black hip hop fans”.<sup>77</sup> Nevertheless, against the backdrop of increasing sales figures and, what is more, a growing, apparently transnational popularity of gangsta rap, it remains convincing and might help explain why (some of) the stereotypical representations of femininity and masculinity have been so prevailing indeed.

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<sup>77</sup> ROSE. *Black Noise*. 12. Moreover, in its simplistic and reductionist way, such an assumption would certainly not take into account that “rap’s ghetto imagery is often intensely specific and locally significant, making its preferred viewer someone who can read ghetto-centricity with ghetto sensitivity” (ibid.).

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Linda Besigiroha

## Independent Women? Feminist Discourse in Music Videos

### I. Introduction

My first experience of the ‘battle of the sexes’ happened in music. I was about six or seven years old, standing on the lawn in front of the humble abode of one of my uncles. We were sorting through the family’s treasured collection of worn and weathered audio tapes, in a time when today’s modern technologies of the mp3 player and internet downloads were still unimaginable, listening to Dolly Parton’s voice wafting over the quiet surroundings of rural Uganda from a battery-manned radio. Parton’s lines “My mistakes are no worse than yours/ Just because I’m a woman” drifted to my ears seconds before my uncle snorted in disgust and said something to the effect of, “Just because I’m a woman! What sort of nonsense is that?” Looking back now, I can analyse his disgust at those lines of music, a disgust that made no sense at all to my young mind. My adult understanding has since been exposed to the realities of the yawning gap of difference between ‘a man’s world’ and ‘a woman’s world’, and to the fact that just about everything in this life is a gendered experience. My uncle listened to that song then as a man – as a patriarch, the head of a family of seven; as a traditional man, whose culture dictated that a woman’s place was in the kitchen; as a religious man, whose interpretation of the Christian faith backed his convictions. Taking all this into account, it is no wonder that a few random lines in a song struck chords of disagreement with my uncle. That day, I listened to the same song, as a six- or seven-year old helping my uncle dust his audio cassettes. If the same moment was to be replayed right now, the highly gendered woman in me, I would even dare to say, the feminist in me, would not let my uncle get off with a snort and a disparaging remark.

It is recollections like the ones sketched above, recollections of growing up in a patriarchal third-world society, my personal experiences as a woman, my exposure to the theoretical and scholarly aspect of feminism at university and my love for music that aroused my interest in taking a closer look at feminist

discourse, or rhetoric, in contemporary popular music and at the relationship between text, music and the visual dimension in music videos.

The songs analysed in this article are “Can’t Hold us Down” (Christina Aguilera, 2002), “Independent Women” (Destiny’s Child, 2001), “Roll it Gal” (Alison Hinds, 2005), “Kimafia” (Harriet Kisakye, 2007) and “I don’t Need a Man” (Pussycat Dolls, 2005). These songs have been chosen because of the feminist discourse, or rhetoric, in them and not based on whether the musicians are feminist or not. A closer look at the songs revealed that women today still face the same struggle to redefine the meaning of the word ‘woman’ to represent themselves that were faced by early women’s rights activists from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the message of the five songs is feminist, the musicians are problematic from a feminist point of view. The concerns range from a controversial name like “Pussycat Dolls” to how these musicians dress. Yet the fact that these popular musicians are not necessarily self-proclaimed feminists makes the discussion of feminist discourse in their songs and videos even more interesting.

## II. Empowered Voices: Singing Resistance to Patriarchal Constructions of Womanhood

Singing empowerment in a male-dominated popular culture is about self-representations that resist those constructions of femininity and womanhood that have been handed down to women from generations past. The fact that there are women out there who are singing their own versions of womanhood and sexuality, despite the influence of often misogynist music forms such as rap and rock, is something to be celebrated regardless of the controversy surrounding many female pop stars. Janell Hobson and Dianne R. Bartlow note in their introduction to Volume 8,1 of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* (2008) that even though women’s vocal music and lyrics have always ranked low in scholarly research – with men’s instrumental skills often being favoured – women’s ‘voices’ are being rediscovered both in terms of artistic genius and in terms of self-expression and resistance. Women’s resistance to patriarchal structures has taken on quieter, yet more pervasive forms in comparison to the time when feminism was noticeably alive in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was marked by mass public protest. Women’s singing voices are one example of the more pervasive forms of feminism that can be observed today.

Representations of women have always concerned feminist thinkers, in particular media representations of women – hence theories like Laura Mulvey’s

concept of the ‘male gaze’.<sup>1</sup> Whereas concepts such as Mulvey’s assume a pessimistic view of representations of womanhood as being almost always fixed and passive, postmodern constructions and theorists of ideology such as Louis Althusser<sup>2</sup> and Antonio Gramsci<sup>3</sup> argue for a discourse of negotiation in which power is never fully decided. Feminist art history and feminist film theory developed in Britain in the 1970s propagated the opinion that representations, whether true or distorted, are not merely reflections of reality, but rather the product of an active process of selecting and presenting and, as Susan Thornham puts it, of *making things mean*.<sup>4</sup> This manner of thinking differed from American ideas at the time, which, even though they were also concerned with media representations of women, regarded such representations as being invariably false images of women, stereotypes which damaged women’s self-perception and limited their social roles. The British approach thus aimed at moving away from discussions of how true representations of women were in terms of mirroring ‘real’ historical women like ‘us’ to discussions addressing the processes through which such representations became signifiers of their subjects.

Claire Johnston adopted Althusser’s definition of ideology as a system of representations of reality which is the product of a specific social structure but which presents itself as ‘universal’ or ‘natural’ to us, its subjects.<sup>5</sup> Johnston, however, adapted Althusser’s approach to analyse not capitalist ideology but patriarchal ideology. According to Johnston,<sup>6</sup> women were traditionally presented as what they represented for man, thus making woman *as woman* by definition absent from film. In a manner reminiscent of Laura Mulvey’s approach to film theory, Johnston argued that the image of woman operates in film as a sign, but as a sign which derives its meaning not from the reality of women’s lives but from men’s desires and fantasies. Johnston argued therefore that it was useless to compare media stereotypes of women to the reality of women’s lives since patriarchal myth is the dominant ideology and has deprived the sign ‘woman’ of its meaning in relation to real women, instead replacing it with male fantasy. What must be looked at therefore is *how* the sign ‘woman’ operates within a specific audiovisual text or *what* meanings it is made to bear.

Johnston’s approach is also applicable to the discussion of representations of

1 MULVEY, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In: *Screen* 16,3 (1975): 6–18.

2 Cf. ALTHUSSER, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” In: John Storey (ed.). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Essex: Pearson Education, 2006. 336–46.

3 Cf. GRAMSCI, Antonio. “Hegemony, Intellectuals and the State.” In: John Storey (ed.). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Essex: Pearson Education, 2006. 85–91.

4 THORNHAM, Susan. “Feminist Media and Film Theory.” In: Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones (eds.). *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998. 213–31.

5 THORNHAM. “Feminist Media and Film Theory.” 216.

6 THORNHAM. “Feminist Media and Film Theory.” 216.

women in popular music. Notions of hyper-masculinity prevail in contemporary popular music. It would seem that a hyper-masculine myth of control and grandiosity pervades music forms such as rap music and the hip-hop culture in general. In music videos rappers are seen surrounded by wealth, enjoying power over female subjects, embodied by the 'video girl'. The meanings that have been given to the signifier 'woman' in contemporary popular music seem to be a fiction; here, women tend to be either hypersexual objects of gratification for the male or signifiers of men's own masculinity; i.e. in presenting themselves as superior to women in their lyrics and videos, many male musicians bluntly confirm their own power.<sup>7</sup> As Jacques Derrida argues,<sup>8</sup> meaning is always deferred, never fully present and always both absent and present. Thus, the meaning of one term in a binary opposition such as 'girl/boy' and 'good/bad' invariably depends on the other term for its meaning. According to Derrida, there can be no pure opposites; instead, each component of a binary opposition is ultimately dependent on the other and is motivated by the absent other for its own presence and meaning. In order to maintain a masculine image of power and control in much of today's music, there has to be a corresponding image of a submissive, controllable object at the other end of the binary formation, namely that of the woman, and, in some instances, that of the homosexual man. Observations on the male-dominated music industry and the prevailing male gaze in music production and reception processes would therefore seem to correspond to Johnston's notion of 'woman' always being absent *as woman*. 'Woman', more often than not, seems to be a mythical construction of male fantasy with no connection to real historical women.

Another perspective in feminist theory focuses on instability in gender identity and celebrates the multiple and varied pleasures and meanings that can be found in the media. Much like Judith Butler's concept of the process of being gendered as a process that is never complete,<sup>9</sup> such a reading allows for an understanding of womanhood as a complex site of constant construction. Susan Thornham sees such a postmodern sensibility of celebrating multiplicities of being in many recent feminist studies about Madonna. Madonna's work displays a fluidity of identities which resists definition. Concentrating too much on multiplicities of identity and the playfulness of spectator identifications with the observed however runs the risk of downplaying the power of the media in identity construction.<sup>10</sup> Thornham explains that the fluidity of identity which is

7 Cf. the article by Martin Butler and Arvi Sepp in this volume.

8 Cf. STOREY, John. "Structuralism and Poststructuralism." In: John Storey (ed.). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. Essex: Pearson Education, 2006. 87–100. 98.

9 Cf. BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York/London: Routledge, 1990.

10 THORNHAM. "Feminist Media and Film Theory."

mirrored in Madonna's videos "conceals [...] the way in which her body has been obsessively disciplined and regulated in order to produce these representations".<sup>11</sup> A Gramscian concept of hegemonic negotiation thus seems suitable for readings of womanhood in relation to cultural phenomena such as the media, and, in this case, specifically popular music.

Within film studies, an interactive model of the relationship between text, audience and context helps to grasp the complexity of the viewing process. Combining film theory with ethnographic research, Jackie Stacey developed the model to account for the complexity of the viewing process, showing that the three elements of the model are closely intertwined.<sup>12</sup> In the framework of a discussion of feminist discourse in popular music, the text/audience/context model is also crucial for developing a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of messages of empowerment and codes of resistance that can be read in the songs of female pop artists today. Music and the message in it have to be seen as a delicate balance between technological factors, audience-related issues and the media-built and media-relayed image of the musician. As Imani Perry puts it, "the space a musical artist occupies in popular culture is multi-textual. Lyrics, interviews, music and videos together create a collage, often finely planned, out of which we are supposed to form impressions".<sup>13</sup> Given this and the fact that pop music is distributed through more media than any other form of popular culture, popular musicians also provide us with the chance of seeing what kind of information about ourselves is encoded in the way musicians are portrayed.

### III. On the Right to be Intelligent *and* Sexy: Negotiating Sexual Emancipation

Models, movie stars, sports stars, footballers' wives, just about everyone in the limelight apparently has to show some skin if they are to be taken notice of at all. Female music stars in particular have become harnessed to the images that have been created to sell their music, images that are increasingly adopting pornographic codes. Feminism took on the fight to achieve sexual liberation for women, but the definition of sexual liberty has become increasingly hard to pin down. Estelle B. Freedman points out in *No Turning Back* that sexuality has

11 THORNHAM. "Feminist Media and Film Theory." 227.

12 STACEY, Jackie. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London/New York: Routledge, 1994.

13 Quoted in LEVANDE, Meredith. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 293–322. 300.

gradually come to be understood in two important ways: first, as erotic sexuality, that is, from the word sexual, meaning ‘capable of sexual feelings’.<sup>14</sup> By the year 2000, sexuality had become ‘a critical marker of identity’ in Western cultures. This meaning of sexuality, which is not connected to biological reproduction, has increasingly turned into an important factor in defining one’s identity. The second notion of sexuality is that of a ‘quest for sexual pleasure’, which has increasingly become commercially reinforced, especially in urban, industrialised democracies. A look at the music industry shows that sexuality has been commercialised for its selling potential – ‘sex sells’.

While questions concerning the choice to use contraception have been answered for many women, it would now seem that the debate about sexual liberty is built around what the parameters of sexuality are. How much sexuality is allowed outside the private realm of the bedroom without being offensive? The music industry faces the problem of having to please an erratic, irrational and largely unpredictable audience. One commodity that has never failed to sell, however, is the female body, and the industry is cashing in on what was previously a taboo domain. Women have now come to combine democratic ideas about the freedom of the individual with ideals of control over the female body, which was traditionally regarded as belonging to a patriarchal figure, be it a husband or a father. Traditional notions of women being reproductive bodies or solely ‘for the pleasure of man’ have increasingly been rejected in favour of interpretations of womanhood which allow women to choose how they enjoy their own sexuality.

While Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who is regarded as one of the earliest American feminist writers, emphasised the importance of issues specific to the well-being of women, she and others still rejected the idea of sexual freedom being important to women’s emancipation. Gilman, for example, feared that overemphasising female sexuality, as many young women in the 1920s did, would have a negative effect on women’s emancipation, ultimately keeping them chained to their traditional notion of their place in society and in relationships.<sup>15</sup> In the nineteenth century women were called upon to free themselves from patriarchal control, with writers like Mary Wollstonecraft insisting that women be allowed a life of the mind as well as a life of the body. They were reminded that they “could be sexual beings but had the right to form their minds at the same time”.<sup>16</sup> The song “Roll It” (2005) by Alison Hinds still insists on this view in the lines “go to school gyal and get yuh degree”.

Capitalism and the ensuing commercialisation of culture however led to

14 FREEDMAN, Estelle B. *No Turning Back*. New York: Ballantine, 2003.

15 Cf. FREEDMAN. *No Turning Back*.

16 FREEDMAN. *No Turning Back*. 214.

changes in the cultural meanings of the female body. In her landmark text *The Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan discusses what she refers to as ‘sexual sell’ in the American culture of her time.<sup>17</sup> She argues that a sexualisation of American culture emerged in the years after World War II. Freedman, in contrast, points out that the practice already originated in the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> More recent attacks on the commercialisation of the female body, such as the protests of radical feminists in the 1960s and 1970s, have been counteracted by calls for new, positive portrayals of female sexuality, as was the case in third-wave feminism in the 1990s, which demanded that the feminist approach be reworked to represent new notions of femininity. When “Roll It” insists that “if yuh smart and yuh know that yuh sexy/ Never let dem abuse yuh body/ Show it off and let de world see”, the song expresses the feminist rejection of the demeaning of the female body by patriarchal systems. Songs like Hinds’ instead celebrate the female body and reclaim control over it. Destiny’s Child sing of “independent beauty” (2001), while Hinds gives the female body “class, pride, sexiness and intelligence” (2005), all in one package.

Yet feminists have had to become aware of both the dangers and the pleasure of sexuality. They have often demanded sexual freedom without vulgarity, for instance when Hinds, in “Roll It”, reminds women to hold onto not just their sexuality and liberty but their pride and dignity as well. Freedman is one of those scholars who have recognised a dependence of women upon male protectors in patriarchal cultures all over the world. The fear of rape and images of female vulnerability have meant that many women are “fearful of expressing sexual desires outside of these privileged relationships”.<sup>19</sup> Discussions concerning the new ‘rape culture’ in America since the 1990s have intensified feminist discussions that link female sexuality and sexual violence. Sabine Sielke describes feminist efforts to free female sexuality from patriarchy as increasingly doing this through a fight against sexual violence.<sup>20</sup> The rap in Alison Hinds’ song refers to this kind of violence when women are urged to “never let dem abuse yuh body”, and the Pussycat Dolls seem to imply that women can now choose how to express their sexuality without fear in their song “I don’t need a man”: “Cause there are some things I won’t do/ And I’m not afraid to tell you” (2005). Destiny’s Child reaffirms this new-found confidence by singing: “Child of Destiny/ Independent beauty/ No one else can scare me” (2001).

17 FRIEDAN, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963.

18 FREEDMAN. *No Turning Back*. 209.

19 FREEDMAN. *No Turning Back*. 255.

20 SIELKE, Sabine. “Postfeminism as Cultural Amnesia: *Sex and the City* and the Seriality of Feminist Practices.” In: Heike Paul and Alexandra Ganser (eds.). *Screening Gender – Gendered Screens: Geschlechterszenarien im gegenwärtigen US-amerikanischen Film und Fernsehen*. Münster: LIT, 2006. 33–58.

Although by the end of the twentieth century it had become acceptable to use the female body, coloured and white, as a commodity in the promotion of international marketing strategies, the repercussions of this practice would be felt mainly by women of colour. The politics leading to this attitude have their origins in a complicated history of race and identity problems in the United States and beyond. In her discussion of Alison Hinds as a singer who subverts traditional representations of womanhood, Jennifer T. Springer points out that Caribbean feminists, like African-American or African feminists, have also criticised the exclusion of black women from womanhood.<sup>21</sup> Concepts of the term 'lady' have affected generations of women – and black women in particular – because traditional connotations of womanhood and lady-like behaviour stem from a colonial culture which defined white women while denigrating black women as being what a lady is not. Shanara Reid-Brinkley, like Springer, argues that these Victorian ideals of womanhood were traditionally associated with white, middle-class womanhood, and they in turn became the values by which people judged black women's behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

Black women therefore constructed a good girl/bad girl dichotomy as a means of going round historical subjugations of the black female body and hence gaining access to the white definition of womanhood. Just like claiming victimisation was a means of gaining patriarchal protection from being attacked in America's rape culture, black women to some extent felt the need to perform or mimic white femininity to gain patriarchal protection. The good/bad black woman dialectic is also present in the ho/queen dichotomy of popular culture. To draw upon Derrida once again, a construction of black ladylike behaviour or the concept of a black queen (a label usually worn by middle and upper-class black women), cannot function without the existence of an opposing 'jezebel', in Reid-Brinkley's terms, that is, an over-sexualised, lower-class black woman.

In local settings like Uganda, sexuality is still not an easy topic to address in public. Traditionally, relatives, such as elderly aunties, were responsible for the sexual education of girls but only for the purposes of pleasing their husbands to be. As international feminists expanded their campaign for the liberation of women to include the right to determine their sexuality and sexual practices, local feminisms did not react in a uniform way, due to the specific historical processes in different nations. I agree with Freedman, who points out that sexuality in many places outside Europe and North America is still associated with reproductive, familial relationships; the struggle for survival, basic rights to

21 Cf. SPRINGER, Jennifer Thorington. "‘Roll it Gal’: Alison Hinds, Female Empowerment, and Calypso." In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 93–125.

22 REID-BRINKLEY, Shanara R. "The Essence of Res(ex)pectability: Black Women's Negotiation of Black Femininity in Rap Music and Music Video." In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 236–60.

marital and reproductive choice being more pressing than access to positive images of sex. Third World feminists including Latifa Zayat from Egypt,<sup>23</sup> have said before that women in the Third World would like to be liberated, but from an economic and not from a sexual point of view. In developing countries the public discussion of sexuality may still be seen as a sign of immorality. In the video to “Kimafia”, a song by Harriet Kisakye from Uganda, the women are dressed rather provocatively for Ugandan standards; yet they are ‘allowed’ to do so since they are acting out a musical role. Women who wear short skirts and tight pants are still heckled and jeered at on the streets of Uganda. All the same, attitudes are changing, as events such as the launch of the *Red Pepper* tabloid show – a gossip paper with images that are intended to shock its readers. One of Uganda’s leading musical acts is an all-girl group called Obsessions, which, like the Pussycat Dolls, consists of women who were originally in a dance troupe. Like the Pussycat Dolls, they have a sexualised image, even appearing topless in a music video in which they warn their listeners to protect themselves against AIDS.

Restrictions resulting from respectability and appropriateness of behaviour, though being helpful in maintaining a certain necessary level of moral attitudes, however prevent us from acknowledging that some women embrace their sexuality and should not be punished for this. Based on her analysis of video production, Mako Fitts argues for a shift away from stating the obvious in analyses of women in popular music, namely, that women are treated as male objects of desire in the music industry.<sup>24</sup> Instead, scholars should address the question of why women choose their careers in the music industry, becoming singers, cosmetics experts, fashion designers, producers and directors or even a victimised ‘video ho’ or video dancer. For writers like Springer, women who seem to flaunt their sexuality are performing an act of resistance. By challenging existing notions of respectability, these women are expanding the possibilities of womanhood, rejecting definitions that promote and perpetuate a white colonial or Victorian respectability. Whitney A. Peoples argues along the same lines when she says, with regard to black women, that female musicians who flaunt their sexuality “disrupt black community norms that silence black female sexuality and encourage shame around it for black women and girls”.<sup>25</sup>

Unlike some other female musicians, female rappers including Foxy Brown and Lil’ Kim, who features in one of Christina Aguilera’s videos, “Can’t Hold us Down” (2002), do not simply ‘talk back’ to the sexism in male-produced music;

23 Cf. FREEDMAN. *No Turning Back*. 267.

24 FITTS, Mako. “Drop it like it’s Hot.” In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 211 – 35.

25 PEOPLES, Whitney A. “‘Under Construction’: Identifying Foundations of Hip-Hop Feminism and Exploring Bridges between Black Second-Wave and Hip-Hop Feminisms.” In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 19 – 52. 24.

they have gone further, embodying the image of black female sexuality. Although embodying sexist images as Lil' Kim does seems problematic, personalities like her are catalysts of a particular kind of discussion and self-critique concerning the interpretations of womanhood that have been shaped by male figures in the music industry. By using hard-hitting and provocative lyrics, in the style of male rappers, and a sexualised way of dressing including low-cut tops, tight leather and revealing clothes, Lil' Kim attempts to take the 'ho'<sup>26</sup> image that male musicians have created for black women and resignify this 'slut' persona to represent strength, character and independence. Yet it is very important to note that Lil' Kim's hypersexual image was not created by herself but by the group of male rappers and producers with whom she worked, that is, Notorious B.I.G and Sean 'P. Diddy' Combs. Peoples therefore argues that black women will not find sexual and individual liberation by adopting Lil' Kim's public persona, but that a discussion of her public persona should be initiated to enable empowering self-critique.<sup>27</sup> Radicalism therefore is not expressed by the image of Lil' Kim as a black woman who enjoys sex, but in the dialogue between her music, her persona and the oppressive community norms that deny black women sexual agency.

That being said, there are those who fit neither in the category of feminine respectability nor in that of outright rebellion against such structures, and these actually constitute the majority of women today. At the beginning of her article, Springer describes her own ambivalence as a black Barbadian woman with respect to the resistance to constricting definitions of womanhood, which Alison Hinds displays in her music.<sup>28</sup> In the video to her song "Roll It" Hinds is seen to be dancing in a beach setting, wearing beach wear, that is, a swim suit with a loose shirt over it. The end of the clip however dimmed my initial euphoria at having discovered a female singer who celebrates womanhood without reducing it to sexuality. The clip ends with a dance scene in which attractive boys and girls, or rather men and women, are seen dancing under a night sky. I felt that the Caribbean dancing styles of grinding a woman's bottom against a man's crouch or her bumping of her bottom played down the message of the song. While Hinds is singing "Roll it gyal/ Control it gyal", the moves look more like loose abandon than like control. Further clips with images of Hinds herself backing up into a male MC in typical 'wuk up' style raised conflicting feelings in me as I watched them. 'Wukking up/wining' is a Caribbean dance style in which women move their hips and bottom in exaggerated winding movements. The ambivalence Springer talks about, which I also recognised in myself, had her asking herself

26 I use this term as it is employed by Whitney PEOPLES. The term 'ho' (whore) is a derogatory term usually used by African Americans to refer to a woman who is not considered 'respectable'. Video hos are female dancers and actresses in male hip-hop videos.

27 Cf. PEOPLES. "Under Construction."

28 Cf. SPRINGER. "Roll it Gal."

the same questions.<sup>29</sup> Right from the time of her childhood, a certain shame was attached to Caribbean dance moves like wukking up, and this shame is still perpetuated today, evidenced in the carnival season when dichotomies exist between ordinary carnival bands and ‘more respectable’ bands where dance styles like wukking up are not tolerated. Drawing upon colonial notions of respectability, girls were cautioned against wukking up in public. Moreover, the shame was threefold for darker-skinned children from a working-class background. The ambivalence surrounding the multiple ways of performing womanhood is a space of negotiation that every woman faces today. This space of negotiation involves inner conflicts that have you turning your nose up at the dancers in the latest hip hop sensation’s video yet find you bopping to the same tune in a night club on the weekend.

#### IV. Music or Pornography? The Dark Side of Sexual Emancipation

For contemporary critics like Meredith Levande and Mireille Miller-Young, the growing tendency of musicians to show more and more skin in public is related to the world of pornography and the employment of pornographic codes to market female stars.<sup>30</sup> While they both see similarities between images of women in popular music and pornography, Miller-Young allows for a different reading of the sexuality of women, one that challenges fixed ideas of respectability and provides room for self-actualisation and empowerment. She discusses the new porn genre of hip-hop pornography and its relationship to the hip-hop music industry. Her findings are therefore mainly based on work with Black women. Levande, on the other hand, takes on pop music in general to explore the connection between the media and the porn industry. Her findings show that big media companies making profit from adult entertainment have pushed pornographic imagery into mainstream media.

Levande’s explanation for the fact that pornographic images are increasingly becoming a crucial part of the business and corporate model is their pervasiveness. Pornographic images are everywhere, just as music is. The adult entertainment industry is cashing in on increasingly liberal attitudes that tolerate topless models on public television and nude shots in films. Anyone who dares to

29 Cf. SPRINGER. “Roll it Gal.”

30 Cf. LEVANDE. “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.”; and MILLER-YOUNG, Mireille. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography.” In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 261–92.

question this new level of tolerance is likely to be hit with accusations of backwardness and unnecessary prudery.

While the consumption of what is also referred to as adult entertainment was previously held in check by people's shame in being caught enjoying such images, the internet offers countless opportunities to do so now with all the privacy that comes with it. Previously, consumers only had the opportunity to visit sex theatres. The VCR era allowed for home-viewing, but this still necessitated going to video stores to get adult entertainment videos. Levande observes that once these barriers were removed through pay per view television and the internet, "images of women in popular media not only grew increasingly suggestive but they began to mirror attitudes, body language, and behaviors seen in actual pornographic fare".<sup>31</sup> Consider, for example, how Nelly's "Tipp Drill" rap video was banned from being aired on television and still anyone can watch versions of it on the internet. The Telecommunications Act, which Levande refers to as the factor that pushed pornographic codes into mainstream media, was passed in the United States in 1996 to deregulate media ownership, thus allowing media companies to own several outlets at the same time. Viacom is one of the large media groups in the United States which profited from the Telecommunications Act. It is made up of cable networks like VH1, the well-known MTV and BET. "Tipp Drill" was shown for the first time on BET's late-night programme, called *Uncut*. *Uncut* features suggestive and uncensored music videos which depict oversexed images of black women. With fewer media conglomerates owning more of the public media outlets the outcome is that media companies are being "given the power to dictate culture not reflect it".<sup>32</sup>

The culture that is being imposed on American society, and thus on worldwide audiences through the effects of globalisation, is one that encourages the fetishisation and commodification of the female body. There are some who would claim that technology changed pornographic viewing practices, while others say that pornography revolutionised technology by playing a major role in the popularity of home video entertainment formats and the internet.<sup>33</sup> These forms of entertainment consumption offered users of pornographic material a significant increase in privacy as compared to public cinemas and video rental services for example. Either way, it must be remembered that the proverbial 'whore' figure has always existed in societies, even dating back to Biblical times. The world of illicit sex has always had a niche in society. The interesting thing therefore is not that women are being commodified, or that sex is being sold, but how women are marketed.

31 LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." 296.

32 LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." 299.

33 Cf. LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." 295.

The video to “I Don’t Need a Man” (2005) by the *Pussycat Dolls* appears to be an example of women being shown as empowered individuals; yet a closer look reveals them to be subject to a male gaze and male power. When analysed on their own, the lyrics to the song suggest agency and freedom: “I don’t need a man to make it happen/ I get off being free/ I don’t need a man to make me feel good/ I get off doin’ my thing/ [...] So let me break it down/ I can get off when you ain’t around”. The *Pussycat Dolls* however begin their song with the lines: “I see you looking at me/ Like I got some things for you/ And the way that you stare”, the crucial point being the words ‘looking’ and ‘stare’, which suggest the presence of a gaze – a male gaze. Women seem to have cultivated the belief that there is a certain sense of power in being looked at. Levande draws her readers’ attention to the increasing use of the camera within the camera to symbolise both the male gaze and surveillance.<sup>34</sup> This is observable in Nelly’s video “Tipp Drill”, for example, where girls are seen being filmed within the video as they move about on a wide, four-poster bed in a sexually suggestive manner. Such a camera shot serves the satisfaction of someone watching the music video itself but also reflects the breakdown of the boundaries between our private lives and our public lives. The private realm of the bedroom is now in the focus of the camera; numerous clips on the internet support this point, as individuals share images of private moments with millions of strangers on the worldwide web.<sup>35</sup>

In the case of the video from Pussycat Dolls to “I Don’t Need a Man” (2005) it quickly becomes obvious that there is a jarring contradiction between the lyrics of the song, which claim complete independence from men, and the dance moves and gestures of the women in the video. The women start off by jumping about in a frisky manner, and then we see Nicole Scherzinger, the lead singer, begin to sing. She is fully dressed, in contrast to the other women, who continue to behave in a frisky manner with a pink background, their antics and the background reminiscent of Hugh Heffner’s Playboy bunnies or a Wild West saloon setting. One of the women, wearing a tiny pair of shorts, puts her foot up on a chair and leans down slowly to paint her toe nails, occasionally turning to pout into the camera. Scherzinger twirls a strand of hair, and the expression on her face is sexually suggestive. Moreover, she is running her hands over her chest

34 Cf. LEVANDE. “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.”

35 The Madonna-Britney Spears kiss at the 2003 MTV Video Music Awards is evidence of the increasing pressure for girls to make out with one another as a sign of sexual power. As LEVANDE (“Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.” 303) notes, however, this power would not work unless men are watching because unless there is a male gaze, this sort of making out can be interpreted as lesbianism, which for many, in the words of REID-BRINKLEY (“The Essence of Res(ex)pectability.” 245), is still “not cool”. Female musicians like the Russian teenage duo *Tatu* have thus been marketed on the wave of a performed lesbianism which would not work without the male gaze.

and waist all the time, something the other women in the video do as well at different points. Another woman appears wrapped in a short towel, with water running out of a prop shower. Yet another one throws her head back to dry her hair with an electric dryer, constantly moving her body like someone posing in an erotic photo shoot. The six band members are then seen sitting on chairs in a row, facing the camera. They alternately cross their legs and spread them open, leaving little to the imagination. An image of a woman dressing behind a screen, revealing her silhouette, comes up next, and we later see her pulling a t-shirt with the words 'I don't need a man' written across it. There is a woman shaving her legs in a bathtub, leg raised high in the air, pouting into the camera as if in a late-night television advert for call-girls. In the last shots, all the women are wearing black outfits, which even though they are tight and in some ways revealing, are not as exposing as those in the preceding shots with the pink background. They now perform a dance routine which continues the motif of sexual play initiated in the preceding shots. They run their hands through their hair and slide them over their chests, accentuating the sexual tone of the video by running their hands down their torsos in the direction of their crotches. The video ends with them dancing under a rain of confetti as if in celebration of their emancipated sexuality, but the gestures and moves of the women in the preceding shots make this celebration seem hollow. They do not reflect the attitude of not needing a man in any way; instead, everything about how they are dressed and the way they move literally shouts out 'I need a man', as one internet user pointed out. This is only one piece of evidence supporting Levande's claim that pornographic codes are regularly employed by female artists in their music videos.<sup>36</sup> Almost all of the female pop acts in the business perform pornographic codes such as the ones described above in their videos, in a more or less obvious manner.

As reflected in the Telecommunications Act mentioned above, a real connection between the pornographic industry and popular music seems to have been established beyond the mere use of pornographic codes in popular music. Female musicians and women dancers in male music videos act and are portrayed in a highly sexualised manner, which Miller-Young even calls "nearly soft-core pornography".<sup>37</sup> Levande argues that today's music videos are an invitation to purchase the 'real thing' by signifying the availability of 'on demand' porn.<sup>38</sup> Both the soft-core and the more explicit (uncut) music videos act as signifiers that adult entertainment exists and is available. Feminist ideology has often been appropriated to praise sexual liberty as a signal of power. Interviews carried out by Mako Fitts show that video girls feel a certain sense of empowerment because

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36 Cf. LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography."

37 MILLER-YOUNG. "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz." 263.

38 LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography."

of being able to move and act in a sexualised way in order to get what they want in the industry, namely upward social mobility and money.<sup>39</sup> Levande even goes as far as to say that “[f]eminism has been hijacked” to sell the ‘popular myth’ that equates stripping, prostitution and pornographic imagery with power.<sup>40</sup>

This phenomenon has been reinforced by the relationship between pop stars and the marketing of consumer products, that is, the cross-marketing potential of musicians. Fashion lines are started by the latest hot musician on the scene, stars lend their names to brands and fragrances, they endorse and sell their own creations, accessories, cosmetics and they even start restaurants and similar businesses. This kind of relationship ties in with Simon Frith’s and David P. Marshall’s observations that creating stars rather than selling records is what makes up a record company’s business.<sup>41</sup> Creating stars is dependent on the cross-marketing potential of musicians. The interesting thing, though, is that female stars very often find themselves in situations in which they have to strip in front of the camera to sell their own music, and, in the case of video girls, to sell male singers’ music. For Levande (2008), it is not the fact that sex or sexuality is selling products that is the main problem, but spreading the notion that exchanging women’s bodies for profit is acceptable, more so when this exchange is presented as being empowering to the women it is exploiting.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless the new image of ultimate empowerment seems to be that of the ‘stripper’ or pole dancer as the exotic, alluring woman who dances for money, to be watched but not to be touched. Stripper clubs are visited by all sorts of people, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and are favourite venues for stag-parties and hen-nights, but it is ultimately the male gaze that is satisfied. In private settings, exotic dancers do the same thing for smaller audiences at home or at college parties, as the Duke University incident of 2006 showed. A black woman hired by Duke Lacrosse team players to dance at a private party reported being gang-raped that night. This incident was broadly covered in the media. Janell Hobson therefore introduces her poem “Hip-Hop Hegemony” with an ironic dedication to “the woman who reported being raped on March 13, 2006 by Duke Lacrosse team players, who hired her for \$400 to dance at their private party”.<sup>43</sup> The irony is evoked in Hobson’s explanation for the rape: “probably

39 Cf. FITTS. “Drop it like it’s Hot.”

40 LEVANDE. “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.” 301.

41 Cf. FRITH, Simon. “The Popular Music Industry.” In: Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (eds.). *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 26 – 52; and MARSHALL, David P. “Introduction.” In: David P. Marshall (ed.). *The Celebrity Culture Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 1 – 16.

42 Cf. LEVANDE. “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.”

43 HOBSON, Janell. “Hip-Hop Hegemony.” In: *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8,1 (2008): 15 – 18. 15.

because she resembled the hip-hop music video dancer that they had seen on Viacom-owned TV<sup>44</sup> – as if to ridicule the notion that all women of colour somehow ask to be treated like the music video dancers. Hobson’s poem partly deals with the conflict between the right to control one’s body and objectification, which women need to be aware of. Similar to Levande and Miller-Young, who observe a nexus between corporate media business behaviour and the increasing hypersexualisation of women, Hobson sees a link between media companies like Viacom and Viacom-owned BET. BET, according to Hobson’s poem, represents people while denigrating them, and new media conglomerates have manufactured the ‘video ho’ to market desire.

While women had been objectified by the camera long before the Telecommunications Act, the difference between then and now is that “women are presented as subjects while being re-objectified”.<sup>45</sup> Previously, few women had careers as pop stars. With the exception of girl bands and a few solo-career artists such as Madonna, the 1980s were dominated by videos in which women were simply decorative figures in male musicians’ videos. They danced or acted out a storyline. Today, we have more women starring in their own music videos. Thus, they seem to have a voice and they appear to have agency, and yet most of the dance moves and the actions accompanying their singing do not suggest a performance of independence and agency. In other videos, women continue to play their earlier role of objects while appearing to have control over what they show of their own bodies. In the latter, we also have men who lord it over the women, assuring us they are the masters who are in charge, as seen in 50 Cent’s “P.I.M.P.” for example. One thus wonders whether there can be such a thing as female agency when even in those videos where the male figure is absent the male gaze is always present, when even while women claim independence and seek to challenge the double standards of society that favour men they are still moving and dressing in a manner suggesting subordination to the male gaze.

## V. Double Standards of Society

Feminist concerns seem to be serial. In her article on post-feminism, Sielke (2006) concludes that shows like *Sex and the City* do not present any new feminist arguments. Instead, the old issues of single life, namely finding the perfect partner and work, were taken up again in TV series and renegotiated. In *Ally McBeal*, a show dating from pre-*Sex and the City* days, the same concerns were dealt with. Ally, a single lawyer, makes quips like ‘if women really wanted to

44 HOBSON. “Hip-Hop Hegemony.” 15.

45 LEVANDE. “Women, Pop Music, and Pornography.” 306.

change society, they could do it. I plan to change it. I just want to get married first' or 'We're women. We have double standards to live up to'. What TV series such as these and current developments in the world of popular music show us is nothing new. Women have always had to fight double standards in society; the means of fighting these double standards have just taken on different forms over the years.

As seen earlier, the problem of multifaceted womanhood leads to ambivalence and inner conflicts. Some women condemn video girls for their behaviour on the screen but go on to act the same way on the dance-floor, convincing themselves that if it is done 'for them' it is not the same as performing on screen or that if they do it in the privacy of their bedrooms, it is not the same as doing it in public. They can watch other women doing what they do on screen and can be fans of musicians like Hinds and Aguilera because spectatorship offers some kind of protective mantle for one's respectability. The conflict between public space and private space has always been at the centre of constructions of femininity and womanhood. Calypso for example traditionally was regarded as a public space inaccessible to women. Springer notes that "[t]his public space of leisure and play contrasts with the public space of work and thus complicates the ways that many Caribbean women occupy public and private spaces".<sup>46</sup>

According to Springer, girls in the Caribbean are urged at a young age to master the wukking up skill in order to display a level of cultural competence.<sup>47</sup> Girls who cannot wuk up are made to feel as if they do not quite belong to the inner circle, "the wuk up at this point is viewed not as disrespectful but as a cultural rite of passage".<sup>48</sup> In addition, according to Springer, it is the dance of the hunted that is often criticised, not the dance of the hunter. The metaphor of the 'hunter' and the 'hunted' has been developed by male calypsonians such as Edwin Yearwood:

Male calypsonians often register a call for men to hunt and locate a woman's 'bottom' to 'wuk up on.' [...] These male performers participate in reinventing a social hierarchy in which women are subjugated and men empowered. The woman's 'bottom' becomes just an object to be pursued for male enjoyment.<sup>49</sup>

Why do women get all the criticism for wukking up and nobody has anything to say about male dance forms or behaviour in the Caribbean?

The example of the Janet Jackson-Justin Timberlake affair at the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show demonstrates that women are often unfairly victimised. The public outcry at Janet Jackson's exposed nipple was directed at her and not at the

46 SPRINGER. "Roll it Gal." 97.

47 SPRINGER. "Roll it Gal." 106.

48 SPRINGER. "Roll it Gal." 106.

49 SPRINGER. "Roll it Gal." 104.

man who actually committed the act of ripping her shirt, causing Levande to argue that this incident says more about what the American public does not see than about what it sees. It sees a woman's exposed breast but it does not see that women's bodies are corporately owned by media conglomerates. The incident was treated as a broadcasting indecency issue, yet "Timberlake's dry-humping moments before would have been just another day at the office for CBS if the breast had not been exposed", Levande writes.<sup>50</sup> Timberlake himself admitted that he got off lightly in comparison to Janet Jackson and that he should probably have been held responsible for what he did, remarking that America "seemed to be harsher on women and particularly harsh on ethnic people".<sup>51</sup>

In "Can't Hold Us Down" (2002), Christina Aguilera takes a defiant stance against double standards in society that victimise women for the kind of behaviour displayed by men in public. The video begins with a street shot in what is probably a Lower Eastside neighbourhood in Manhattan. Children are playing, men are going about their business and Aguilera sits chatting with a group of women. She stands up to walk down the street, wearing a tank-top and a very short pair of shorts. A coloured man grabs her bottom in passing, which causes Aguilera's mien to change. Up to this point, the only music has been repetitive base-line beats. Aguilera sings her first lines after the bottom-grabbing shot, "so what am I not supposed to have an opinion/ Should I be quiet just because I'm a woman?", an angry expression accompanying this verbal attack. As more and more people realise that there is a fight on, a crowd gathers around Aguilera and the man, the men on one side and the women on the other. The observers are of all ages, but they are all mainly coloured and Latino. This perhaps lends more authenticity to the Lower Eastside Manhattan setting. Each group takes sides with either Aguilera or the man, expressing their support by means of their body language. The argument is further captured in the imagery of dance, using the street battle tactic employed by hip-hop artists, where they confront each other in impromptu street challenges or in organised hall settings to match their rap or dance skills against each other. The men and women take it in turns to dance, reflecting the verbal argument. The action is interrupted now and then by close-up shots of Aguilera, her face expressing defiance. She then points at a particular woman, who happens to be the female rapper Lil' Kim. Lil' Kim thus has her cue and proceeds to back up the arguments Aguilera sings about in rap. Lil' Kim is dressed even more provocatively than Aguilera is. She wears a revealing bikini

50 LEVANDE. "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." 310.

51 Quoted from Moss, Corey. "Justin Timberlake's Future Shock." 2008. <<http://MTVNews.com>>. In the case of misogynist music forms such as hip-hop or rap videos one might of course very well wonder why male musicians are blamed for their lyrics and videos, for denigrating and objectifying women, while all those women who participate in the video production process are simply ignored (cf. PEOPLES. "Under Construction." 35).

and confidently dances in high heels that add more bite to her appearance. The confrontation ends with Aguilera spraying the men with a water hose, which she holds between her legs at some point, parodying the male penis.

The main point made by Aguilera and Lil' Kim can be found in the second stanza sung by Aguilera: "If you look back in history/ It's a common double standard of society/ The guy gets all the glory the more he can score/ While the girl can do the same and yet you call her a whore." Lil' Kim points out the same double standard in her rap, with the added twist of encouraging women with cheating men to turn the tables on their men and do the same thing to them: "To all my girls with a man who be trying to mack/ Do it right back to him and let that be that." For Aguilera and Lil' Kim, the time has come for women to "come together and make a change/ start a new beginning for us".

Recalling the inappropriate male behaviour towards women at the Spring Bling events, Byron Hurt, in his documentary movie *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, spoke to women who felt that they had the right to dress the way they did without being treated with disrespect for it.<sup>52</sup> The BET Spring Bling Event is an annual event organised by Black Entertainment Television (BET). The event is a mixture of activities, contests, gift giveaways and music performances by the most current acts on the popular music scene. The kinds of sentiments expressed by the women Hurt spoke to are in effect what starts off the argument in Aguilera's video. The lame excuses men give for stepping out of line should not be tolerated any more is what Aguilera's video seems to say. Worse still, men would seem to resort to insult when reproached for their behaviour, as reflected in the lines "call me a bitch cos I speak what's on my mind/ Guess it's easier for you to swallow if I sat and smiled/ When a female fires back/ Suddenly big talker don't know how to act/ So he does what any little boy will do/ Making up a few false rumors or two". Hurt observes exactly the kind of behaviour Aguilera sings about at the Spring Bling events: women who did not respond favourably to men's advances were promptly labelled whores, skizzers, and the like.<sup>53</sup> Attempts to silence women should not be given in to, as Aguilera advises, because no one should be allowed to hold women down. When men try to talk women down, women should shout louder:

This is for my girls all around the world/ Who've come across a man who don't respect your worth/ Thinking all women should be seen, not heard/ So what do we do girls?!/ Shout out loud/ Letting them know we're gonna stand our ground/ Lift your hands high and wave them proud/ Take a deep breath and say it loud/ Never can, never will, can't hold us down. ("Can't Hold Us Down")

52 Cf. FITTS. "Drop it like it's Hot."

53 Cf. FITTS. "Drop it like it's Hot." 222.

As Miller-Young noted, rappers in their music videos tend to perform the role of the pimp instead of being studs, that is, the male version of the video ho.<sup>54</sup> In her study of hip-hop music and pornography, Miller-Young observes that the hypermasculine performance of rap music constructs a masculinity that is directly tied to the performance of male fantasy: “fantasies of entrepreneurial empowerment, of sexual prowess, and of power over women and other men”.<sup>55</sup> The interesting thing, though, is that unlike video hos, whose on-screen characters often follow them in their off-screen lives, the male rapper cannot be the stud in his own video because doing so would mean having to live up to a ‘standard’ (at least ten inches long) that very few men can achieve. Miller-Young explains that these rappers prefer to perform the pimp or player because performing the stud would open up their performances to critique and vulnerability.<sup>56</sup> Aguilera and her girls play with this invented masculinity, as she tauntingly sings, “You’re just a little boy/ Think you’re so cute, so coy/ [...] All you’ll do is annoy/ You must talk so big/ To make up for smaller things”. Aguilera accompanies this barb with the action of provocatively sliding her hand up and down the hose head, which represents the male sexual organ that she is ridiculing even as the male dancers in the video touch their crotches in rebuttal.

“Can’t Hold Us Down” ends with Aguilera striding away from the scene of the confrontation, with a confident smile on her face. A little boy is dancing somewhere down the street, oblivious to his surroundings. This image of the boy summarises the kind of masculine behaviour that has been ridiculed in the video, that is, a childish and immature demeanour – certainly not the hypermasculine figure that many men have adopted and perpetuate. The last image in the video is that of a robust mother leaving the scene, carrying her baby in one arm and shaking her fist as if to underline the defiant stance put forward by Aguilera and Lil’ Kim. The song is therefore not only an act of defiance against double standards of contemporary society; it also serves to encourage female listeners and viewers to aspire to a new kind of agency – one that acknowledges its own sexuality and also defends the right to express it.

At the other end of the world, in Uganda, Harriet Kisakye, in “Kimafia”<sup>57</sup>, attacks the same kind of double standards Aguilera addresses, urging women to pay men back for their disrespect in the same way that Lil’ Kim does in “Can’t Hold Us Down”. Kisakye’s Uganda is no stranger to hypocrisy which makes

54 MILLER-YOUNG. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz.” 274.

55 MILLER-YOUNG. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz.” 274.

56 MILLER-YOUNG. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz.” 274.

57 The Ugandan music scene is alive and active, but production skills still are behind Western ones. The storyline of “Kimafia” is poorly organised and therefore very difficult to follow. The flow of events as given here is therefore not based on the flow of the camera shots employed in the video clip but rather serves to give a coherent account of the basic storyline.

excuses for men's shortcomings while severely punishing women for theirs. The video begins with a shot showing two old women peeling cassava in an outdoor kitchen. The outdoor kitchen, with its sooty walls and ashes on the ground alludes to the simple life these women lead, a standard of living many Ugandans still have to endure. The old women lament about men and how they have changed for the worse. An old man appears round the corner of the house to sit down beside them and announces that he has brought meat home. This is probably a polygamous relationship, as one of the old women stands up to insult the man, who is presumably the husband of the two women in this scene. She accuses him of taking all the good meat to his other, young women and bringing home the miserable rest. As mentioned before, this scene does reflect the life of many women in Uganda, who are still dependent on their spouses for everything from food to luxuries such as new dresses or getting their hair done. These are certainly not women who are in a position to boast about 'buying their own diamonds and rings' as the girls of *Destiny's Child* claim in "Independent Women". Disparities of this sort stress the importance of more specific feminisms which answer the needs of even the poorest women in the world.

In the next scene of "Kimafia" we see a couple lying in bed. The man slowly gets up to sneak out of the room, unaware that his wife is not asleep and has seen him leave. A closer camera shot captures the look of anger on her face, but this is quickly replaced by a look of determination. Kisakye then begins her song and we realise why there is a new determination in her mien. "Men have gone crazy," she sings, "what we have got to do as women is to turn the tables on them as well". She continues to tell women that "we should begin a new way of doing things/ [...] I would like to encourage you/ Let's get our homes in order." Her next lines are addressed to the kind of men she is talking about: "Oh yes, we are really fed up/ Of your little lies gentlemen/ [...] we have suffered in silence/ [...] but watch out gentlemen, we are going to show you the way". As she is singing, an expensive-looking pick-up truck has pulled up outside a house under the cover of night. Women jump out of the back of the truck with Kisakye as their leader. She is dressed in a trouser-suit that lends her a 'masculine' kind of authority, especially because the others are dressed in a more feminine manner, in shorts, short dresses and knee-high boots. Kisakye gives a sign, pointing towards a house.

As the chorus begins we are able to see where the husband who sneaked off earlier has ended up. He is meeting another woman for a drink in a motel, a typical meeting place for cheating husbands and partners. He and the woman are surprised by Kisakye, who followed them. Kisakye may be playing the part of the angry wife, or her actions may be interpreted as those of a strong woman taking revenge on behalf of weaker women. While the cheating husband is trying to get up, Kisakye grabs his shirt collar to force him back into his seat, a scene that

resembles an interrogation in an action movie. A woman who has accompanied Kisakye holds the cheating husband down with her foot, leaning in towards him menacingly. The mafia metaphor used as Kisakye is singing about getting her home in order can only have been taken from the many action movies that can be watched in the local cinema circuit of Uganda's capital city, Kampala. "It's a new way of things/ [...] It's the mafia-style of doing things/ Wake up from your sleep [women]/ Let's get our homes in order/ If your man treats you wrong/ Turn the tables on him/ If he goes for a meeting/ Spend the night dancing/ He will reform".

Adopting the global mafia metaphor in the local setting of this video can be read as an act of rebellion against patriarchy as the mafia world is known to be a man's world. When she tells her fellow-women to go out dancing when their men go for 'meetings', Kisakye refers to the excuses cheating men give for their absences from home. As pointed out earlier, a great number of women in Uganda are still dependent on their husbands' income, which has further consequences for them. Their husbands determine many aspects of their lives, for example where, with whom and how often they go out. Women in Western societies may find this hard to believe. Telling Ugandan women to leave the home and go dancing if they feel like doing so therefore should not be taken lightly and should be read as an act of defiance as some men do not even allow their women to go dancing at all. In the video it turns out that the woman the husband met up with in the motel is actually one of Kisakye's friends; the husband has fallen into the trap the women prepared. The new mafia-style is not restricted to a certain age, as is seen when the old women from the first camera shot tell their husband they are leaving him to find someone who can buy them proper meat. They literally march away from the homestead with their belongings.

Meanwhile, in yet another scene, a woman walks in on a couple cuddling on a bed. The man sits up in fright as the newcomer is his real partner. The girl he has been cuddling with tries to leave but her way is blocked by two mean-looking women who proceed to bundle the man up and carry him outside where the red pick-up truck from before is waiting. Kisakye is playing the leader of the troop again. She supervises the others, standing at the bottom of the truck. The women throw the cheating man in the back of the truck under her watchful eye. They all get into the truck and it drives off. We do not get to see its destination but the cheating man is presumably driven back home where he belongs since Kisakye sings about "getting homes in order" to the chorus of "Kimafia". The image of Kisakye as a masculine-style figure wearing a suit, who gives orders to her band of women, coupled with the pick-up truck onto which the cheating partner is bundled alludes to Uganda's police force, which uses pick-up trucks as vehicles of duty. Criminals, when arrested, are treated in much the same manner that Kisakye and her band treat the cheating partner. With this image "Kimafia" seems to say that men who behave like criminals should also be treated as such.

The main gist of Kisakye's song is therefore: do unto the men as they do unto you. She laments all the times she herself has been approached by men interested in her but has rejected their advances because of her relationship and warns her man that he will one day know the pain she herself has endured. The song, however, should not be reduced to the story of love and cheating but should be read with its video, acknowledging a new fighting spirit among Ugandan women – one that challenges restrictions imposed by men on their freedom and seeks to find a voice for years of silent suffering at being disrespected. Subversive forms of resistance in music, as reflected in “Kimafia”, point to new interpretations of womanhood which demand that women be treated with the respect that is due to them.

## VI. Looking Forward

It is apparent that women can achieve much more today than they would have been allowed to in years past. Everywhere there are examples of women succeeding in fields that formerly were male domains. What women's increasing visibility hides, however, is the continued disparity in terms of numbers: there are still more men who benefit from a good education and pursue a promising career than women, especially in the developing countries. Moreover, the visibility of women, especially in the media, does not necessarily have to be a good thing. The fact that there are more women in different roles on television, on the internet or on the radio should not stop us from asking ourselves not only who is being seen and heard but *how* are they seen and heard? The format of the music video provides us with ample opportunities of showing that women are still being harnessed to sexist and sexualised portrayals. Although some female singers, such as Tracy Chapman, have managed to capture their audiences fully clothed and with only the power of their voices, there are many others who are hard-pressed to survive in the shark-infested waters of the music industry if they do not ‘show some skin’.

It would therefore seem that the idea of emancipation being sold to listening and viewing audiences of popular music today is increasingly misleading, not only because the distorted idea that sexual power is emancipation is being spread. As pointed out before, attaining control over one's sexuality is only *one* way among numerous others of leading a fulfilled life. Furthermore, the emancipation embodied by female artists is itself one that is performed within the confines of the music industry. My analysis is not based on an empirical study, which would definitely be necessary to capture more fully in how far female musicians are role models for their fans, to explore the ways in which fans see or interpret the representational status of female musicians as empowered

women and to investigate what feminist discourse in popular music means to them as individuals. Do these fans admire female pop stars for their music and their success in the music industry or do they admire them more for their looks? For now, it would seem fitting to end with words taken from a poem written by Janell Hobson, a kind of prayer that women will one day “[w]ake up, [...] Take back the mike/ And take back the night/ And take back the right/ to rhyme/ Unmolested and Uncoopted/ By corporate-controlled media”.<sup>58</sup>

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## Film, Urban Legends and Gender – The Subversive Play with Urban Legends in *Urbania* (2000)

Hear any good stories lately? Let me see if I know any. Oh, I've got a good one. And this one really happened.<sup>1</sup>

Urban legends constitute a pervasive part of our everyday life and may fundamentally shape our experience of the world. The ubiquity of urban legends and their power of disseminating and reinforcing patriarchally informed gender stereotypes is explored and challenged in Jon Shear's remarkable film *Urbania* (2000), which is based on David Reitz's play *Urban Folk Tales* and has won several prestigious awards.<sup>2</sup> This essay aims to show how the complex interrogation of urban legends as a genre in *Urbania* is not only staged on the level of the story, but how the film itself is gradually transformed into a grand urban legend, thereby fundamentally undermining conceived notions of gender and sex roles. In the following, a brief discussion of forms and functions of urban legends will provide the starting point for gauging the sophisticated treatment of this genre with regards to gender politics in *Urbania*.

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1 *Urbania* quote taken from the protagonist Charlie's introductory monologue, at 00'15. In the following, the time references in brackets refer to the UK DVD release.

2 Daniel Reitz's play *Urban Folk Tales* is – contrary to its adaptation *Urbania* – very linear, composed of seven scenes. Together with director Jon Shear, Reitz rearranged the plot of the play when adapting it to the medium film, placing the protagonist Charlie at the centre of things and thereby emphasising the subjective viewpoint (cf. THOMAS, Kevin. "'Urbania' director finds a new niche." 2000. <<http://judgingamy.tvfans.org/amy/news/a000917lt.htm>> (accessed: January 30, 2006)). The many awards *Urbania* won include the Grand Jury Award at the L.A. Outfest, the Audience Award at the Provincetown International Film Festival and the Award for Best First Feature at the Sanfrisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival (all 2000); *Urbania* was also nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival (2000).

## I. Urban legends and gender

“We are not aware of our own folklore any more than we are of the grammatical rules of our language.”<sup>3</sup> Folklore forms a part of every individual’s daily life for we all participate in informally transmitting ‘lore’, i. e. cultural wisdom and accepted social codes passed on to us. The process typical of legend formation and dissemination entails the transcoding of the ‘lore’ into a clear story-line (narrative folklore), and in those cases in which the story is alleged to be true, a legend is born.<sup>4</sup> In modern times, the legendary plots about knights fighting against dragons or saints dying as martyrs have been supplanted by so-called urban legends, whose events “center around any of the trappings of a city life-style”.<sup>5</sup> Urban legends as one contemporary form of folklore

are narratives about bizarre, unnatural, or ironic events purported to have happened in the recent past, often in the local community, to an unspecified person (the woman from Murphy or there was this girl who ...), to people at a couple of removes from the narrator (a friend of a friend), or to famous people.<sup>6</sup>

Rooted in contemporary society, urban legends reflect the hopes and anxieties of a particular group, and they issue warnings about potentially dangerous modes of conduct and assumptions.<sup>7</sup>

One of the key characteristics of urban legends is their presentation in a conversational style or rather an oral framework. An individual’s propensity to believe a legend may vary according to the context in which the legend was told, the teller and the supporting evidence; the discussion of the truth status of a legend forms an important activity, for in deciding whether the legend is based on a true core or not one is simultaneously relating the legend to current systems of belief.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that lack of verification does not

3 BRUNVAND, Jan Harold. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker. American Urban Legends & their Meanings*. New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1981. 1.

4 Cf. BRUNVAND. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*.

5 SEELHORST, Mary. “‘The Assailant in Disguise’: Old and New Functions of Urban Legends About Women Alone in Danger.” In: *North Carolina Folklore Journal* 34,1 (1987): 29–37. 30. For a broad overview of definitions of folklore and urban legends as well as multi-faceted analyses of their forms, performance contexts, functions and relations to other genres, cf. HAND, Wayland (ed.). *American Folk Legend. A Symposium*. Berkeley et al.: University of California Press, 1971; DORSON, Richard (ed.). *Handbook of American Folklore*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983; BENNETT, Gillian and Paul SMITH (eds.). *Contemporary Legend. A Reader*. New York et al.: Garland, 1996.

6 WHATLEY, Marianne H. and Elissa R. HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...? Contemporary Legends, Folklore and Human Sexuality*. New York/London: New York University Press, 2000. 2.

7 WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...? 2*.

8 Cf. WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...? 3*.

undermine the appeal urban legends have for us: we tend to believe or half-believe them precisely because they tap into contemporary anxieties. Even if a story is identified as ‘just an urban legend’ and therefore not believed to be true, this does not necessarily diminish the impact of its warning message.<sup>9</sup> The explanatory coda often occurring immediately after the telling of an urban legend not only testifies to individual or group anxieties, but it also constitutes ‘oral literary criticism’.<sup>10</sup> The plots of urban legend are elliptical in the sense that they invite the teller and listener to make explicit the plot lying behind the one that is told on the surface level of the story.<sup>11</sup> In the pattern common with the ‘campus’ or ‘horror-story’ type of urban legends, for example, there is an initial ellipsis because the interdiction which has been violated is only implied.<sup>12</sup> As Daniel Barnes convincingly argues, what makes urban legends so compelling “is not the story they tell but the one they *don’t* tell”,<sup>13</sup> and the often ensuing discussions after the telling of an urban legend point towards the need of the tellers and listeners to identify the implicit or rather hidden plot – to make sense of apparently random events. Due to the fact that urban legends force us “to assume the role of interpreters”,<sup>14</sup> they may be said “to function as meta-interpretive texts”.<sup>15</sup>

A closer look at urban legends shows that issues of gender and sexuality are at the heart of many popular or rather widespread urban legends. More often than not, patriarchal notions of masculinity, femininity and norms of sexual behaviour are expressed and reinforced by sexual folklore.<sup>16</sup> “A particular item of

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9 Cf. WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...?* 4.

10 DUNDES, Alan. “Metafolklore and Oral Literary Criticism.” In: *The Monist* 50 (1966): 506–15.

11 Cf. BARNES: “[U]rban legend plots *conceal* functions [...]. In both urban legends and detective stories, what is to be discovered (un-covered) is the ‘real plot’ as opposed to the apparent plot.” (BARNES, Daniel R. “Interpreting Urban Legends.” In: Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (eds.). *Contemporary Legend. A Reader*. New York et al.: Garland, 1996. 1–16. 3) The explanatory coda “may be shown to serve a variety of possible functions, depending upon whether the analyst views the individual narrators [of urban legends] as feeling compelled to assess guilt or innocence (fixing blame, for example, or sympathizing with victims), justify harsh punishments, assure us of their own reluctance to suffer a similar fate [...], or simply teach a lesson in local history (“‘This is why the road is called ‘Hangman’s Road’”). But in a more general sense, all such impulses reveal as well the need to ascribe some kind of intentionality to behaviour that seems senseless and random, and accounts and reports of which (unlike their counterparts in the fable and proverbial tale, to which they seem closely related in many ways) are otherwise mute where the ‘moral of the story’ is concerned.” (ibid. 2)

12 BARNES. “Interpreting Urban Legends.” 8.

13 BARNES. “Interpreting Urban Legends.” 11.

14 BARNES. “Interpreting Urban Legends.” 11.

15 BARNES. “Interpreting Urban Legends.” 3.

16 Cf. WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...?*

folklore will exist only as long as there is some need for it.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, urban legends always fulfil specific functions, “whether of education, social control, expression of attitudes and emotions, or strengthening of social bonds”.<sup>18</sup> In the case of sexual urban legends, the dominant functions often appear to be (patriarchal) sex education, the establishment of sexual taboos and gender norms by issuing warnings about the hazardous consequences of aberrant behaviour. On the level of structure, the use of clear-cut binary oppositions (e.g. male/female, good/bad, perpetrator/victim) common in patriarchal discourses of the social historical context often ties in with a *status quo* affirming function of urban legends: “[Urban legends] disseminate and reinforce existing attitudes by stereotyping, not just people, but also beliefs and attitudes”.<sup>19</sup> Given the strong influence of prevalent urban legends with regard to maintaining patriarchally informed gender and sex roles, it is the creation of a critical awareness with respect to this “stream of unselfconscious oral tradition”<sup>20</sup> in our contemporary culture which constitutes a decisive step in the process of questioning and subverting patriarchal norms.<sup>21</sup> As the following film-narratological analysis will reveal, *Urbania* subscribes to such a project of critically ‘de-mythologising’ patriarchal gender stereotypes.

## II. *Urbania's* competing plot versions

In keeping with the elliptical plot structure of urban legends, the film *Urbania* starts *in medias res* (initial ellipsis) and calls on the recipient to try to identify the deep-structural logic underlying the chaotic surface structure of the events portrayed. The attempt to provide a lucid synopsis of *Urbania* posits a challenge due to the non-linear structure of the narrative, the blending of different time levels as well as numerous signals of unreliable narration. Despite these caveats, the unfolding story can be summarised as follows. The protagonist Charlie (Dan Futterman) is trying to come to terms with the brutal murder of his long-term boyfriend Chris (Matt Keeslar). Charlie and Chris were attacked in the street by a

17 WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...?* 3.

18 WHATLEY and HENKEN. *Did You Hear About the Girl Who...?* 3.

19 SMITH, Paul. “Contemporary Legend: A Legendary Genre?” In: Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (eds.), *Contemporary Legend. A Reader*. New York et al.: Garland, 1996. 103 – 12. 108.

20 BRUNVAND. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. 1.

21 Cf. Bengt KLINTBERG, who argues that because urban legends “correspond with people’s preconceptions of other ethnic and social groups [...] it is an important social task of the folklorist to reveal the folklore character of modern legend material and make the public aware of what is the real, hidden message of these narratives” (KLINTBERG, Bengt. “Modern Migratory Legends in Oral Tradition and Daily Papers.” In: *Arv: Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 37 (1981): 153 – 60. 153).

group of homophobes, whose leader (Samuel Ball) first sexually degraded Chris and then brutally murdered him by slitting his throat. Charlie was pinned down and forced to watch the whole time. After several weeks or months (the amount of time elapsed does not become clear in the film), Charlie happens to briefly spot Chris's apparent killer. That very night, he restlessly wanders around Manhattan embarking on a quest to find the killer again. He meets a host of bizarre characters, each of whom tells him an urban legend. Finally, in a bar aptly named Karma, he meets the murderer (Dean) again, who does not recognise him. Charlie manages to win Dean's confidence and, after roaming the city together, drives Dean to a deserted place, where he confronts him with his crime and humiliates him. Originally, Charlie had planned to kill Dean in revenge (taking "total eye for an eye", 86'40), but when Dean suffers an epileptic fit, Charlie helps him and spares his life. The closing scenes of the film hold the promise that a healing process has begun in Charlie.

As previously mentioned, this neat and linear summary of the film's plot constitutes a problematic over-simplification of the film's complex narrative structure – a structure which demands great efforts on the part of the recipient to create coherence. This is additionally complicated by the movie's indecisiveness about its genre. While it starts as a typical *film noir* with a close-up shot of Charlie driving towards the illuminated night skyline of Manhattan, the film turns into a 'gay movie' – with clichéd typescenes such as a gay bash (obligatory transvestites included) and the AIDS-infected friend<sup>22</sup> – as soon as the viewer figures out Charlie's homosexuality. Yet, after having served this genre, the film returns to a mix of *film noir* and drama.

Depending on how one reads the events unfolding in the film, one could construct at least two different plot versions. First, the film starts out with Charlie driving next to Dean and recounting the events leading up to this moment, i. e. luring Dean to a deserted place. As far as Charlie's revenge against Dean is concerned, the viewer does not know immediately whether Charlie kills Dean or spares his life, because there is a sudden cut to an apparently later point

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22 It is interesting to note that in the film itself it is never explicitly stated that Charlie's close friend Brett (Alan Cumming) does in fact have AIDS; Charlie and Brett merely talk about a deadly disease. Nevertheless, the common assumption of viewers seems to be that Brett is HIV-positive (cf. for example BUSACK, Richard von. "Night Tales. A Man Searches through Layers of Legends in 'Urbania'." In: *Metro: Silicon Valley's Weekly Newspaper* Sept. 14 – 20 (2000). <<http://www.metroactive.com/papers/metro/09.14.00/urbania-0037.html>> (accessed: February 18, 2006); and HORNE, Jed. "Urbania. An Innovative Approach to a Tired Genre." In: *The Tech* 120 (2000): 45. <<http://www-tech.mit.edu/V120/N45/urbania.45a.html>> (accessed: February 18, 2006), to name only two of numerous film reviews in which the AIDS infection of Brett is asserted). One could argue that the revelation of a missing AIDS implication confronts the viewer with current prejudice (and internalised urban legends): Do we automatically assume that Brett must suffer from AIDS only because he is a homosexual?

in time: Charlie's meeting with Chris, during which he tells him about what he did to Dean. It is crucial to note that Chris's death is never explicitly referred to in the film. Statements such as 'a recent tragedy' or Charlie being 'in mourning' could allude to the death of the relationship, and not necessarily to Chris's literal death. According to this plot version, then, Chris was sexually humiliated and brutally beaten up, but not killed. Charlie and Chris broke up because they could not deal with the trauma they had undergone. Chris basically tells Charlie that he has to move on and let the healing process start. This plot version offers a straightforward explanation of Charlie's meeting with Chris, and it is also in keeping with Charlie repeatedly leaving messages on Chris's answering machine asking him to speak to him. (According to this reading, the implication of these phone calls is that Chris is still alive.) However, there are a number of elements in the story which render this first plot version highly implausible and which suggest a different plot version.

An alternative plot version, according to which Chris was murdered, regards Charlie's night journey as partly realistic, partly hallucinatory. In his struggle to overcome the loss of his boyfriend (thus, 'mourning' is taken literally, and leaving messages on Chris's answering machine is just a desperate attempt to hear his voice again and again), Charlie gives in to conscious and unconscious desires. The reconstruction of this second plot version is the result of an increasing awareness of unreliable narration.<sup>23</sup> There are three elements in particular which signal unreliable narration: first of all, there are a number of discrepancies on the level of characters and the story. Paradigmatic for these discrepancies is the fact that in view of the serious injuries Chris suffered during the attack, he should be covered with scars, but when Charlie meets him, Chris's skin is immaculate. More to the point, however, is the second element in the film: the prevalence of and play with urban legends as a genre. The sheer quantity of references to urban legends in the film, which are not only told but also enacted or rather visualised in the process of telling, creates a surreal atmosphere. This surreal atmosphere is heightened by the fact that the whole city seems to be the scene of urban legends actually taking place; for example, Charlie really does encounter a woman who shortly afterwards tries to dry her wet dog in the

23 One might reconstruct a third plot version that calls the veracity of the events portrayed into question even more radically: Due to the fact that both in the early and in the final scenes of the film Charlie is shown lying on his bed, a viewer could take these scenes as a clue that all of the unfolding events are part of a nightmarish dream. Such a reading of the film is also basically the result of a strategy which seeks to naturalise striking inconsistencies and ruptures within the chain of events. On the concept of naturalization, cf. CULLER, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics. Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975. 138.

microwave with fatal consequences.<sup>24</sup> The truth value of urban legends is repeatedly foregrounded and critically explored. Against this backdrop, Charlie's statement at the beginning of the film implicitly characterises him as teller of an urban legend: "Hear any good stories lately? Let me see if I know any. Oh, I've got a good one. And this one really happened. I swear." (00'15) The alleged truth claim of the story told is, as mentioned before, a key constituent of an urban legend. By characterising the story unfolded in the film as an urban legend, the viewer will draw on his/her cultural knowledge of urban legends, which includes the debated issue of whether they are based on real events or not, as a frame of reference in the viewing process and his/her sense-making activities. In other words, the viewer inevitably starts to question whether the urban legend Charlie recounts is true or not. Moreover, Charlie's enmeshment within a world of urban legends illustrates that he himself is no longer sure of what is real and what not. The boundaries between fact and imagination are blurred. The precarious ontological status of the environment perceived by Charlie becomes especially clear when he repeatedly encounters a severely injured young man, who apparently needs his help, but who always suddenly mysteriously vanishes as quickly as he appeared. One gains the impression that Charlie himself suspects that the injured young man may be a figment of his imagination.

The third element crucial for the impression of unreliable narration is the emphasis on the subjective nature of the events portrayed; i. e. Charlie acts as a first-person narrator. Common techniques to convey first-person narration in films are point-of-view shots and voice-over narration (and, as already mentioned, the film starts with Charlie's voice-over). However,

in films, the narrator's presence is only salient at the moment he or she speaks. Otherwise, the combined forces of the diegetic visual and sound images dominate, giving the impression that things are happening right there before us. It is easy to forget by the end of the film that it was begun by a voice-over narrator.<sup>25</sup>

In *Urbania* this danger of forgetting that the film was begun by a voice-over narrator is countered by continuous metanarrative comments, i. e. recurrent references to the telling and transmission of stories, and by the unusual look of the world portrayed. The film was shot in Super-16 mm, thus making the world look different: "the colors are saturated but the grain is slightly heightened".<sup>26</sup>

24 For a discussion of the urban legend "The Microwaved Pet", cf. BRUNVAND, Jan Harold. *The Choking Doberman and Other 'New' Urban Legends*. New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1984. 151 – 52.

25 CHATMAN, Seymour. "New Directions in Voice-Narrated Cinema." In: David Herman (ed.). *Narratologies. New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1999. 315 – 39. 322.

26 FUCHS, Cynthia and Jon SHEAR. "Interview with Jon Shear." <<http://www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/shear-jon.html>> (accessed: February 19, 2006). In order to retain this visual

One gets the feeling of watching “a surreal documentary”<sup>27</sup>, which fits the film’s curious blend of myth and reality. Moreover, this film style emphasises the subjective mediation of the fictional world portrayed.

### III. *Urbania*’s complex play with urban legends

*Urbania* engages in a sophisticated and ironic treatment of urban legends. This complex play with urban legends may be illustrated by the first two urban legends recounted and staged in the opening scenes of the film. The first urban legend takes the form of a man buying a hot dog containing a disgusting looking mass, which the woman standing next to him categorises as ‘mystery meat’. The same woman lures him into a hotel room with the promise of sexual gratification. The man wakes up the next morning, only to find that one of his kidneys has been removed. The combination of these two well-known urban legends, which go under the names “Mystery Meat” and “The Kidney Heist”,<sup>28</sup> throw each other into ironic relief. In “The Kidney Heist” the woman is portrayed as a phallic agent who violates the bodily integrity of man and reduces him to (passive) meat, a donor of organs, in the course of what started out as a sexual encounter. Ironically, the motif of meat has already been introduced through the first urban legend and significantly the mystery meat takes the shape of a longish something hanging limply down between the bread buns. This non-phallic visual image stands in clear contrast to the high angle shot of the towering building of the hotel (a clearly phallic image), where the man has been bodily violated. In patriarchal culture, the penis is equated with the phallus (*sensu* Lacan). If one reads the visual imagery of these two staged urban legends, then the limp mystery meat hints at the vulnerability of man (he does not possess the phallus) – a point which is driven home by the sharp contrast of the man’s bodily violation and the immediate phallic image of the tower. On the one hand, the urban legend of “The Kidney Heist” as such is indicative of male anxieties about the potentially castrating power of woman.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the combination

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effect, the film was transferred to a digital recording and then to thirty-five millimeter. This technical achievement is the first of its kind in independent cinema. With more than 1500 cuts, *Urbania* is also the first independent film to exploit the processes of digital recording to its most effective means (cf. THOMAS. “‘Urbania’ Director Finds a New Niche.”).

27 FUCHS and SHEAR. “Interview with Jon Shear.”

28 On the urban legend of “The Kidney Heist” and a discussion of its social-historical ramifications, cf. BRUNVAND (*The Baby Train & Other Lusty Urban Legends*. New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993: 149–54); on “Mystery Meat”, cf. BRUNVAND. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. 81 ff.; and BRUNVAND. *The Choking Doberman and Other ‘New’ Urban Legends*. 118 ff.

29 The fact that in most versions of “The Kidney Theft” it is the woman who is responsible for

of this urban legend with “Mystery Meat” and the visual imagery introduced implies that the dominant notion of masculinity, which forms the basis of such male castration fears, is a fiction: man does not possess the phallus. As this example shows, the combination of specific urban legends in the film ultimately serves to undermine patriarchal gender stereotypes. Each of the urban legends shown in the film picks up, mirrors and expands elements previously introduced by other urban legends. The urban legends in the film are dialogised, thereby generating new meanings.



The visualised contrast of limp (male) phallus (02'12) and erect (female) phallus (04'23)

A second strategy of combatting patriarchal gender norms conveyed in urban legends to be found in the film is a critical interrogation of the truth claim of urban legends on a metadiscursive level. A prime example of this strategy occurs in Charlie's accidental meeting of Chuck and Deedee – a heterosexual couple who live in the flat above him. Deedee narrates the urban legend of the “AIDS Mary”, who seduces a businessman into having an unprotected one-night-stand with her. The next morning he wakes up, deserted, and reads the lipsticked message on his mirror: “Welcome to the world of AIDS”.<sup>30</sup> While Deedee is convinced that this story really happened to a friend of friends, Charlie's and Chuck's reaction to the story calls this truth claim into question: they burst out laughing, and Chuck emphasises that he has heard this story before in a slightly different version. They both recognise the genre characteristics of the urban legend and therefore do not believe in its truth. The legend becomes just a story. This reaction implies that the moment you categorise a story as an urban legend,

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the kidney theft offers proof that this urban legend indeed voices male castration anxieties. For a discussion of organ theft narratives as medical and social critique, cf. CAMPION-VINCENT, Véronique. “Organ Theft Narratives as Medical and Social Critique.” In: *Journal of Folklore Research* 39,1 (2002): 33 – 50.

30 On the urban legend of the “AIDS Mary”, cf. BRUNVAND, Jan Harold. *Curses! Broiled Again! The Hottest Urban Legends Going*. New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1989. 195 ff.

you class it as fictitious. An interesting turning point, however, is introduced when Charlie aggressively takes issue with Chuck's disbelief in the truth claim of urban legends and starts telling them a story, which the couple first take to be another urban legend because he makes use of the typical markers of this genre:

You don't think shit like that happens? [...] Shit like that happens, but not to people like you. [...] A guy like you, damn straight. But you know what, Chuck? I have to confess I know a story. And this one really happened. (55'31)

However, they soon realise that Charlie's story of a homosexual man masturbating to the sounds of a heterosexual couple making love is indeed a true one: they are the couple and Charlie is the masturbating man. While it takes some time for the couple to realise the implication of Charlie's story, the viewer knows for sure that his story is true due to the fact that s/he witnessed this very scenario in one of the earlier scenes of the film. With this ad hoc urban legend of the masturbating homosexual, Charlie displays an acute genre awareness. More to the point, he makes use of urban legends as a performative strategy to vie for a position of dominance in interaction with (homophobic) others. By recognising Chuck's homophobic tendencies and through an awareness of urban legend patterning, Charlie is able to manipulate Chuck (and Deedee) and aggressively exploit their suppressed sexual anxieties. Through Charlie's alleged urban legend the heterosexual intercourse becomes 'homosexualised' – for Charlie is with them, or rather especially with Chuck, "in spirit" (57'03).

Scenes such as the one described above render the truth value of urban legends undecidable. On the one hand, stories appear to be classed as 'fictitious' as soon as they are recognised as belonging to the genre 'urban legends'; on the other hand, Charlie presents a new urban legend rooted in fact. Moreover, in several cases of urban legends told in the film, a key characteristic is changed and thus the truth claim is further heightened: instead of the legend being recounted as having happened to a person one instance removed from the teller, the tellers claim that this story happened to themselves ('I as witness').

Charlie's assertion of power through the telling of an urban legend points to another central theme of the film. In his initial narration at the beginning of the movie, he associates the brutal attack on him and Chris with an absolute loss of control over his life: "It's another example of the universe saying, just when you thought you were safe, just when you thought you had it all under control, wrong place, wrong time." (00'40) Throughout the film, on his quest for revenge, Charlie repeatedly asserts that he is in control of things. Against this backdrop, urban legends represent a mechanism for potentially 'controlling' the urban environment. In the city as a place where one is confronted with masses of anonymous strangers, urban legends provide clear-cut categorisations and

codes for survival.<sup>31</sup> The people Charlie meets conform to the flat and stereotypical characters of the invoked urban legends.

Charlie's guilt complex with regard to Chris's supposed death is ultimately in keeping with his attempts to regain control over his life. Charlie feels guilty not only because he, as the 'buck' in the relationship, was not able to protect his boyfriend, but also because he believes he may have provoked the attack through his erotically-charged gazing at Dean. Moreover, regaining control over his life also means refashioning himself as a man, retaining his virility and reasserting his masculinity (as Chris comments sarcastically, "So you're the *man* now", 86'59). The relationship he had with Chris was in fact based on traditional roles, with him taking the male part (the 'buck') and Chris taking the female part (the 'bitch'). Having been unable to protect Chris in the fateful night, Charlie's gendered self-image or sense of identity was also fractured.

It is crucial to note that, due to the blurring of the boundary between fact and imagination, we can never really be sure that the man Charlie identifies as Chris's killer, i.e. Dean, really is the murderer. On the contrary, the way Dean is portrayed as the incarnation of a stereotypical homosexual fantasy (or in Dean's words: "I got the look these fuckers like", 68'07) and the increasingly erotically charged relationship between Dean and Charlie may be taken as clues that Dean is merely a projection of Charlie's mind. The pronounced guilt complex played out in his relationship with Dean is ultimately also a symptom of Charlie's excessive need to be in control of his life: if the attack is his fault, he could have changed the outcome of this fatal evening by his behaviour – it would not have been chance (i.e. 'wrong place, wrong time').

#### IV. Urban legends and trauma

Apart from employing urban legends as a means of regaining control over his life, Charlie also uses them as a therapeutic means of coming to terms with the trauma he has suffered. The trauma manifests itself in the cyclical narrative structure of the film or rather in the continuous disruption of a linear order in the form of sudden flashbacks as well as in the blending of different time levels.<sup>32</sup>

31 Cf. SEELHORST. "The Assailant in Disguise." 35.

32 Cf. HERMAN: "The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. [...] Trauma arrests the course of normal development by its repetitive intrusion into the survivor's life. [...] Traumatic memories [...] are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into an ongoing life story." (HERMAN, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992. 37)

Not only does the blending of present and past testify to the continuous presence of the trauma, but the fact that Charlie's quest of finding the killer takes place in the night which is stretched an extra hour by the switch from daylight-savings to standard time points towards a compulsory travelling back to the past. The theme of setting the clock back one hour that night is a skillful play with literal and metaphorical meaning. Charlie ultimately wants to "erase" (90'06) the traumatic events ('set the clock back') or rather re-write the events in such a way that he and Chris come out on top. The situation in which he humiliates Dean mirrors the night of Chris's attack in terms of Charlie quoting and mimicking Dean's words and actions during the assault. This re-writing appears as a strategy of trying to make sense of the traumatic events retrospectively.<sup>33</sup>

Charlie's sense-making activities focus on the transformation of the traumatic attack into a "better story" with the linear structure of "beginning – middle – dead" (89'21), with 'dead' in this story referring to the killing of Chris's assailant. The story Charlie is striving to create, however, is not just any story, but an urban legend – a point explicitly stated in the film when Charlie says to Chris that in such a better story they would be "the stuff of legend" (89'31). The message of this new urban legend, which Charlie aptly introduces with "You ever hear the one about the guy [...] who hung out in the big city with his buddies, lurking around a certain kind of urban nightlife" (78'28), basically reads as 'Homophobic violence will be retaliated with vengeance'. More importantly, Charlie emphasises that the urban legend would be true; this "would've made it all *almost* worthwhile" (89'37; emphasis added). Charlie refrains from killing Dean and thus fails to create this particular urban legend. Although Chris stresses that Charlie would never have been able to kill Dean because he, Charlie, does not have the heart of a murderer, one can also argue that Charlie's attempt of living an urban legend as a 'therapeutic means' is doomed from the start because he has chosen a self-defeating strategy.

There are several reasons why Charlie's therapeutic use of urban legends appears as a self-defeating strategy. First of all, his guilt complex inscribes itself into the patterning of his own urban legend. A closer look at the night of the assault (or at least the way Charlie remembers it) shows that an eroticised triadic structure is established between Charlie, Chris and Dean from the start. The erotic energy between the homophobe and Charlie is invoked early on by the

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33 One of the ways in which trauma manifests itself is the inability to make sense of the events one has suffered: "Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning." (HERMAN. *Trauma and Recovery*. 33) Traumatised people often "feel impelled to [...] reenact the traumatic moment with a fantasy of changing the outcome of the dangerous encounter" (ibid. 39). It is precisely this fantasy of undoing the traumatic moment which constitutes the driving force of Charlie's quest and ultimately his reenactment of the confrontation with Dean.

locking of their gazes. Significantly, during the assault, Dean says to Charlie before he scars him above the heart (!) “So you’ll always know you are mine” (82’47), thereby (unwittingly) quoting a previous romantic interchange between Charlie and Chris.<sup>34</sup> Given the fact that Dean forces Charlie to watch how he coerces Chris to sexually touch him, not much translation is needed to read this scene as a form of displaced homoerotic act between the homophobic Dean and the unwilling Charlie. The homoerotic attraction between Charlie and Dean is actually voiced several times in the film. When Dean leads Charlie to an underground gay hang-out in order to have some ‘fun’ (i. e. beat up and severely injure homosexuals), he introduces himself and Charlie to the elderly homosexual who is trying to chat them up as a couple. Later on, when Charlie replays the assault mimicking Dean’s acts and repeating his orders, Dean gets a hard-on. If one takes into account that Charlie explicitly equates the knife he is wielding against Dean with a penis – “the real thing” (84’45) –, then within this metaphor Charlie’s murder of Dean with the knife, i. e. Dean’s death by hand of Charlie, would appear as a sexual union between the two, which is prevented by Dean’s epileptic fit.

On the level of character and story, Dean’s epileptic fit, directly after having been forced by Charlie to take the knife/penis into his mouth, can be read as the result of a censorship through his homophobic super-ego. On the level of discourse, Charlie’s weaving of a new urban legend must also break off or rather be censored by his super-ego, because Charlie’s originally intended ending of the legend reads – in psychoanalytic terms – as an ultimate betrayal of Chris. As mentioned earlier, it is questionable whether Dean is really the killer or whether he is just a projection of Charlie’s tortured mind. In keeping with the basic undecidability of fact or imagination in the film, one is presented with both signals for (e. g. Dean is prone to committing violent acts against homosexuals, Charlie is definite in his identification of Dean) and against Dean being the killer (e. g. the high degree of stylization of Dean). In the face of Charlie’s latent guilt complex – the assault could be his fault because of his erotic gazing at the assailant –, it does not appear far-fetched to argue that the portrayed development of a homoerotic attraction between him and the apparent murderer Dean can be read as a patent manifestation and exploration of his feelings of guilt.

Charlie’s therapeutic use of urban legends also constitutes a self-defeating strategy because the linear structure and the rigid binary oppositions charac-

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34 Ironically, the statement “You are mine” is also an intra-/intertextual echo of the psychopath’s threatening the frightened baby-sitter on the phone (11’27) – taken from the film *When a Stranger Calls* (1979), which itself draws on the urban legend of the baby-sitter being constantly called by a mad killer from upstairs (cf. BRUNVAND. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*. 53 ff.) and which is the film that Charlie is watching while masturbating to the ecstatic sounds of his love-making neighbours Chuck and Deede.

teristic of the genre urban legend lead to an over-simplification of a morally complex and heterogeneous reality. The traumatic event *per se* resists immediate access.<sup>35</sup> Charlie, however, tries to transform his trauma into a straightforward, teleological sense-making pattern with a clear ending – the implication being of course that with the ending of the story, his pain will also end. Not only does Charlie try to assume narrative control – he is the one who “figure[s] out the ending” (01’33, emphasis added) –, but the clear-cut categorisations of the urban legends allow for easy orientation within the urban environment. In the end, however, Charlie recognises the futility of trying to make sense of the traumatic events with a simple story-line of revenge and redemption: “There’s no point in him at what he did to us. There was no point in me at what I was going to do to him. [sic]” (88’21). Charlie, having been forced to acknowledge the complexities of urban life, is able to now ‘embrace the healing process’ (89’15), for he has explored his feelings of guilt and accepted that he cannot set the clock back.

## V. *Urbania’s* complex critique of urban legends

Although it may be granted that the urban legend as a genre allows Charlie to explore his feelings of guilt and therefore does have a positive therapeutic effect on him, it is important to note that the evaluation of the functions of urban legends as a genre can only be analysed within the film as a whole. *Urbania* stages a thorough critique of gender stereotyping and binary categorisations. The film does not leave the viewer in doubt that urban legends are part of the problem: Dean’s homophobia, which forms the decisive motive for his hate crimes, is nourished and strengthened by homophobic urban legends. This becomes clear, for example, when he tells Charlie that homosexuals screw animals<sup>36</sup> – to name only one homophobic urban legend cited in the film. The previously discussed triangular character constellation within *Urbania* implies that the dissemination of homophobic urban legends is motivated by heterosexuals’ repressed homosexuality, which ultimately vents itself in brute force. According to Charlie’s reinvented urban legend, this homophobic violence will in turn backlash on

35 Cf. CARUTH: “[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempts to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and language.” (CARUTH, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 4)

36 Dean’s homophobic attitude is explicitly marked as an urban legend by Charlie when he comments “I didn’t know *that* one” (65’57). Interestingly, one of the deleted scenes contained in the US DVD release extends this scene, envisioning the homosexual couple as incorporating a budgie into their love-making.

violent homophobes, for they will be forced, so to speak, to take the 'knife' in their mouths. Seen in this light, Charlie is no better than Dean if he in turn solely interprets the world around him along the clear-cut binary oppositions in urban legends (e.g. perpetrator/victim). The adoption of this highly problematic patterning will not lead to a subversion of fortified patriarchal gender roles and the dissolving of prejudice. On the contrary, it leads to a perpetuation of hate crimes. Whereas Charlie's attempt at creating a new urban legend appears thus in a critical light, the film as a whole succeeds in using the genre of urban legends to subversive effect.

The metanarrative comments, the sheer quantity of urban legends and the multi-layered playing off of urban legends against each other potentially creates an awareness of the structuring force of urban legends in daily life and of their highly problematic perpetuation of patriarchal gender norms. An awareness of the genre characteristics of urban legends and of their social influence is a first step towards a process of de-mythologising in the sense of critically questioning established role models, assumptions and codes of behaviour. The critical interrogation of patriarchal value systems inscribed in widespread urban legends as well as the exploration of the energies driving the specific story patterning within this genre constitute the process of de-mythologising staged in *Urbania*.

In order to involve the viewer in the critical interrogation of established gender norms, the aesthetic possibilities of the medium film are exploited to the full. On the one hand, we gain the impression of immediacy when watching a film because we actually see events unfolding in front of us. The urban legends appear as true because we actually see them happening. On the other hand, *Urbania* plays with this impression of immediacy, and by extension veracity ('seeing is believing'), by combining the visualising or rather enacting of urban legends with an emphasis on the act of telling. As already discussed, the hypodiegetic narrator Charlie is an unreliable narrator, and this unreliability is staged through specific filmic codes. The surreal quality of the world portrayed not only testifies to a subjective viewpoint, but the world appears as also dreamlike due to its rich (one is almost tempted to say exaggerated) symbolic texture. *Urbania* is resonant with colour symbolism, leitmotifs, telling names and themes which link the episodic structure of Charlie's nightmarish quest into an intricate semiotic web.

The rich semiotic structure as well as central themes are already introduced in the opening scenes of the film. The traffic junction omnipresent in these few shots can be read as a visual metaphor for different paths that have to be weighed against each other, decisions that have to be taken, as well as (retrospectively) for a (fateful) intersection of these different paths in terms of 'wrong place, wrong time'. The writing *URBANIA* transposed on a passing lorry then inscribes itself onto the pedestrian bridge which itself bears the reflections of the traffic junction and the busy traffic of the city. Significantly, the viewer is not fully granted



Urban texture: The opening sequence of *Urbania* (01'38)

direct visual access to the traffic junction, but sees it mostly in terms of a mirrored reflection on the pedestrian bridge. In a similar vein, the presentation of *Urbania's* fictional world is mediated through Charlie's subjective consciousness – the viewer is never granted a 'direct' or rather authorial version of the events which take place. The bridge itself can be interpreted as a visual representation of a filmic leitmotif: '(making) connections'. These connections encompass both the interweaving of past and present and Charlie's attempts at making connections in terms of sense-making activities. Furthermore, the opening scenes with their blending of the title URBANIA with the pedestrian bridge also visually stage the merging of urban environment and text: the city appears as a textual world – each place a palimpsest of stories. Rich colour symbolism may also be noted: the combinations of red and white, which traditionally refers to blood and bandages, and black and white. The prevailing colour motifs in this tableau are to be found again and again throughout the film (alongside further colour but also acoustic leitmotifs, such as the smashing of glass and the howling of an ambulance siren). While the red and white is linked to the issue of *trauma* (Greek 'wound') as a central theme of the movie, the black and white points to the dimension of textuality explored in the film. Last but not

least, the film title *URBANIA* itself invokes a complex set of interconnected dimensions. The name ‘urbania’ as such characterises the city as a world of its own; the italicizing of the last four letters of the film title in the opening scenes hints at a blend of ‘urban’ and ‘mania’ – which not only describes the manic chaos of the city, but also foreshadows the theme of the desperate attempt to aggressively overcome a traumatic loss.

It is exactly this semiotic overkill which stands in sharp contrast to Charlie’s attempt at reducing his complex world to the simplified structure of one single urban legend. Through the recontextualization of the urban legends within this teeming semiotic web, their linear structure, clear-cut stereotypes and warnings are destabilised as they are caught up in a complex intertextual play, which generates a host of new meanings. The film takes on the guise of an urban legend while at the same time undermining the genre of urban legends as an acceptable cognitive frame to make sense of the world. In this respect, the film functions as a ‘meta-interpretive text’ on urban legends as ‘meta-interpretive texts’ by challenging us to ponder our own internalised ‘gender lore’.

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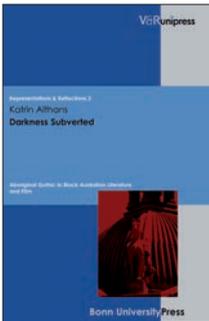
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