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„A Game of Genders:  
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complex television series *Game of Thrones*”

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# 1. Introduction

The television show *Game of Thrones*, which is based on George R. R. Martin's ongoing epic series of fantasy novels titled *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-), has, alike many other productions labelled as "Quality Television" (Feuer, et al. 1984), or, more recently categorised under the terminology "Complex TV" (Mittell, *Complex* 2012), developed into a world-wide pop cultural phenomenon, since it first aired on the private cable network HBO in April 2011. Popular culture is a term used to refer to images and narratives that circulate within mainstream culture and hence, are known to broad masses of society (Leavy & Trier-Benieck 12). Media, however, do not solely distribute dominant ideas of popular culture, but present one of the main agents of the socialisation process through which norms and values are internalised. Consequently, it is not surprising that socially constructed ideas about gender frequently originate in and are being perpetuated by popular culture (Leavy & Trier-Benieck 13). Therefore, the thesis first provides an overview of popular culture, which forms a part of the historical and political context and within which television constitutes the most prominent medium (Rixon 75). Furthermore, the paper ascertains stereotypically conveyed depictions of femininity and masculinity in the mass media, which are influenced by dominant societal ideals, and enquires into the leading forces in the construction of gender identities. According to Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony (1971), gender roles are not merely imposed upon society by the ruling elites, but the relationship between gender representations and the mass media is reciprocal: while the media mirror and reinforce existing societal gender norms and expectations, they also, less frequently, subvert them.

As the male hegemony prevails in the contemporary Western world, sexism, which is based on the belief of female inferiority, is far from obsolete in the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was shockingly demonstrated when Donald Trump, although his misogynist "Grab-'em by the pussy" (Bullock n.p.) remark was leaked during his presidential campaign in 2016, was, nevertheless, elected the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. More recently, after allegations of sexual assault against the film mogul Harvey Weinstein became public, the hashtag "me too" (Shugerman n.p.) unleashed a worldwide debate about the magnitude of systemic sexism, male entitlement and the objectification of women in contemporary society. Thus, the patriarchal boundaries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's culture, too, need to be investigated and compared to that of *Game of Thrones'* societal structures.

The persistence of stereotypical gender roles is closely linked to the workings of society's patriarchal hegemony, whose male-centred ideologies are represented in film and television (Bennett, Hickman, and Wall 253-254). The fantasy epic *Game of Thrones*, which currently presents the television programme with the highest daily audience demand of -11.28m viewers on average (Neddog n.p.), has, since it started broadcasting, faced enormous feminist criticism for its gratuitous sexualisation and consequent objectification of women, as well as the extent to which women encounter, predominantly sexual, violence on the show. Because gender representations in the media, and subsequently, also in the fictional universe *Game of Thrones*, do not simply emerge but have been carefully constructed to convey a specific dominant ideology of the ruling elites, the interconnection of the generic concept of 'complex' television and the amplification of gender inequality, the sexualisation of women and the perpetuation of sexism on screen is examined. Furthermore, in order to establish a connection between the series' sexist portrayal of women and the patriarchy, the society of Westeros is analysed with regard to existing male hegemonic power structures. For this reason, Westerosi society is examined by contrasting it with historical accounts on the medieval period, which functions as HBO's principal argument for the strong sexist undertone of the show. Moreover, the analysis of the social system of Westeros draws on Gayle Rubin's (1975) study of ancient paternalistic structures, which is founded on *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1949).

Sexism is still a dominant part of contemporary culture. Taking this fact into account, as well as television's central role in the shaping of gender norms, cultural representations, which "[...] can serve pernicious interests of cultural oppression [...]" (Hammer & Kellner xxxi), need to be included in the public debate. Predominantly, women are victimised by their portrayals in the media, which are founded on inherent systemic sexism and patriarchal power structures. Therefore, this diploma thesis takes an interest in the depiction of gender roles and sexism in the mass-reaching fantasy epic. While the academic discourse on femininity in *Game of Thrones* has mostly focused on the adoption of essentialist stereotypical gender roles, the interrogation of women's agency, or potential lack thereof, in regard to overthrowing imposed patriarchal confines present a gap in existing research on the pop cultural phenomenon. The primary aim of this thesis is, consequently to analyse whether female characters are aware of the patriarchal power structures to which they are confined, as well as to examine the women's employed tactics to fight the framework of patriarchy that puts constraints on them. Furthermore, the paper aims at revealing the underlying dominant ideologies of such gender

representations and their connectedness to sexism of the society in and by which mass media is being produced.

As the characters' endeavour of breaking patriarchal societal boundaries in *Game of Thrones* is inherently linked to the construction and performativity of gender roles, an analysis of, both, the extra- and intradiegetic level of narration is conducted. Firstly, this twofold investigation focuses on the extradiegetic level, the mode of production and the generic form of *Game of Thrones*. Secondly, gender performativity is highlighted on the intradiegetic level by the examination of selected scenes from the show's first to penultimate seventh season with respect to female characters' consciousness of the patriarchy which surrounds and oppresses them, as well as their agency, or absence thereof, in attempting to destruct the barriers of the male hegemony.

The investigation of the extradiegetic level of narration, thus *Game of Thrones*' production parameters as well as its generic form, is founded on Stuart Hall's concept of representation, which he introduces in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). In order to interpret the production choices of gender depictions and the widely critiqued sexualisation of women, which in the case of the fantasy show even resulted in the coinage of the term "sexposition" by the media critic Myles McNutt (n.p.), the frequently intersecting Foucauldian discourse analysis, which suggests a link between female oppression and patriarchal power hierarchies, too, is brought to bear on the series. Furthermore, the investigation is based on Roland Barthes's seminal concept of 'mythology' (1957) as well as Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytic notion of the "male gaze" (1975) that is almost inseparable from the post-network concept of 'quality' television, which the fantasy show *Game of Thrones* presents a prototype of. The hypothesis the analysis of the external story world follows is that the series *Game of Thrones* is predominantly produced by men for a male audience and therefore, the objectification and sexualisation of women is amplified in order to satisfy the male viewers pleasure. Additionally, the paper hypothesises that in the course of the series' narrative developments, representations of femininity and the amount of gratuitous female nudity have shifted due to external, counter-hegemonic, factors of feminist criticism and fandom. Hence, the 'quality' series is functioning as a mirror of transformations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's *Zeitgeist* on gender roles and presents an instance of societal and cultural self-reflection.

The inquiry into *Game of Thrones*' intradiegetic level of narration is conducted by analysing selected scenes from the show's current seven seasons, based on four criteria: women's ignorance of the patriarchal framework, women's awareness of the hegemony, but lack of agency, women's conscience and consequent attempt to fight it, resulting either in defeat or success of bending the gender roles and boundaries of the Westerosi patriarchy. In its examination of the intradiegetic level, the thesis takes Michel de Certeau's conception of "strategy and tactic" (1984: 35-36), which interlinks with the Gramscian theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony, as its prime point of reference. Moreover, the thesis draws on Judith Butler's crucial concept of gender performativity (1990), which is based on Simone de Beauvoir's account, who states in *The Second Sex* that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1973: 301). Gender thus, is not a fixed category with innate norms of behaviours as essentialist theoretics assumed, but is socially constructed. As a consequence, the adherence to or the breach of traditional, essentialist gender roles in the portrayal of femininity, as well as the bodily performance of gender, based on the examination of depictions of the female body in the media (Bartky 1988; Bordo 1993), are revealing of the reinforcement or subversion of gender dualisms and dominant gender ideologies. The diploma thesis aims to prove the hypothesis that ignorance or awareness of the patriarchal societal structures constraining women's lives in Westeros are interlocked with the female characters' respective gender portrayals: I hypothesise that females in *Game of Thrones* who are depicted as remaining unaware of the patriarchal hegemony adhere to stereotypical ideals of femininity and are exceedingly subjects to objectification and sexualisation. Conversely, I postulate the counter-hypothesis that women cognizant of the patriarchal framework and attempting to break the male hegemony, simultaneously bend normative gender roles of femininity.

Lastly, the subsequent conclusion compares the outcomes of the analyses of both, the extra- and intradiegetic level of narration and highlights parallels and contradictions between them. Due to the highly reciprocal relationship between the media and culture, the focus especially lies on establishing connections between the external and internal story world of the fantasy epic *Game of Thrones* and the 21<sup>st</sup> century's *Zeitgeist*. Thereby, the thesis aims at ascertaining to which degree the fantasy series embodies contemporary society's systemic sexism and the continuous "pornification" of culture (Mulholland 69) and in how far it reflects societal transformations regarding the perception of femininity and the roles of women in society. Moreover, by focusing on the rejection of cliché gender roles and the condemnation of the male supremacy on both narrative levels, the thesis attempts to answer the frequently posed question whether *Game of Thrones* could be interpreted as principled by a feminist agenda.

## 2. Popular Culture

Generally, popular culture serves as an umbrella term, encompassing all images and narratives that are well known to the masses. They are ‘popular’ in that they circulate within mainstream culture, to which the majority of society is exposed (Leavy and Trier-Bieniek 12). However, the process of defining popular culture is more complex, as it does not merely refer to culture being “well-liked by many people” (Williams 237), but, depending on the interpretation of both, the terms ‘popular’ as well as ‘culture’, allows for multiple definitions. While popular culture can, indeed, signify culture favoured by the masses, it can also, be regarded as “[...] mass produced commercial culture” (Storey 7), the opposite, inferior, category of so-called high culture, a distinction that, according to Pierre Bourdieu (2-6), functions as an ideological marker of social class and thereby, upholds class divisions.

This arbitrary categorisation into elitist high and popular culture and the inevitably contained classification of its respective consumers, however, is not applicable in regard to the pop cultural phenomenon *Game of Thrones*. The television series, alike *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008) and numerous other premium channel productions, especially by the network HBO, which seems to have specialised on the generic form of ‘quality’ television, bridges the gap between high and popular culture. The HBO show is highly critically acclaimed, which is reflected by its numerous nominations for and wins of awards of significance to the film and television industry, such as, among many others, 38 Primetime Emmy Awards and 12 Golden Globe Awards (HBO 2018). This factor could indicate the series’ sophistication and hence, secure its status as an instance of high culture. Nonetheless, the fantasy epic does not address an exclusively elitist audience, but on the contrary, as a “global blockbuster” (Lotz n.p.) and the most successful and illegally downloaded television series in the world (Locker n.p.), it reaches an immense, worldwide audience, across all social classes. Through this conjunction of elitist and commercial culture, *Game of Thrones* reveals that a simplified separation of these two cultural forms is impossible. The postmodernist approach to popular culture, which discards the distinction between high and low culture in contemporary society (Storey 9), facilitates to understand the underlying processes of *Game of Thrones* in bridging the gap between the arbitrarily categorised forms of culture. Thereby, the HBO series, and its predecessors, contradicts Theodor Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s claim that “culture today is infecting everything with sameness [...] Each branch of culture is unanimous in itself and all are unanimous together” (94). Although, many contemporary productions follow the same economic and stylistic formula, not all branches of mass culture, or productions within the same

branch, manage to span the gap between perceived elitist and popular culture as *Game of Thrones* does.

Popular culture, however, cannot solely be defined in terms of its intended audience of production and the perceived quality of its contents, but it can also be understood as a profound political site that is constituted by power relations (Fiske 19). In the aftermath of industrialisation and urbanisation, popular culture developed and, especially with the emergence of television as the major medium of the mass media (Biagi 150), triggered an unforeseen shift in culture's accessibility (Storey 10). Through the innovations of mass media and its ensuing omnipresence, members of all social classes gained access to culture. As a consequence, this led to major social and cultural changes, as the media's impact on public attitudes and beliefs began to be increasingly exploited. Especially, social and political institutions, as well as other privileged interest groups, including lobbyists, have since used the media in order to manipulate the audiences (Happer and Philo 321-322). Although the media have a tremendous influence on society and passive consumption does occur, the audience cannot be generalised and be patronisingly reduced to "deceived masses" (Adorno and Horkheimer 133). Thus, the audience does not present passive subjects on whom dominant ideologies are being imposed upon through their consumption of "culture industries" (1972) that are driven by capitalist imperatives, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, representatives of the Frankfurt School, suggest. The audience in general rather presents active participants, who do not accept and absorb the messages transported by the media in an unreflected manner (Philo 540). Popular culture therefore, constitutes a site of negotiation over the naturalisation of artificial medial constructions of social norms and, as John Fiske states, it "[...] always bears traces of the constant struggle of domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it" (19). This political reading of popular culture as a terrain of negotiation and struggle between dominant ideologies and resistance by subordinate groups is based on the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's development of the concept of cultural hegemony (Storey 8).

Traditionally, the term 'hegemony' has, in the Western political discourse, signified the domination or power of one political, social or economic agent over others (Bates 352; Lull 33). The basic premise of Gramsci's theory of hegemony purports that people are not solely ruled by force, but also by the hegemony of ideas (Bates 351). "The foundation of a ruling class", states Gramsci, "is equivalent to the creation of a *Weltanschauung*" (*Selections* 75). From his theoretical point of view, society denotes a marketplace of contending cultures and

hegemony is successfully secured when the dominant group's worldviews and ideologies are extended to subordinate groups who consent to them (Bates 353). Despite this hegemonic endeavour, dominant ideologies are not merely imposed from above, although this viewpoint was held by members of the Frankfurt School, including Adorno, Horkheimer (1972) and Herbert Marcuse (1968). Instead, scholars more recently follow Gramsci's notion of culture representing a "compromise equilibrium" (*Hegemony* 86) and claim that culture provides an area where "[...] dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements are 'mixed' in different permutations" (Bennett 96). Culture, thus, is neither merely imposed from above, nor does it spontaneously originate from below, but is created through the process of balancing contradictory ideological forces.

With respect to popular culture, the hegemony of ideas, or ideology, presents a crucial conceptual category (Turner 182), as the media have an important ideological effect in producing consensus, constructing legitimacy (Hall, *Culture* 342) and thus, establishing hegemony. The ruling elites of the media, like the controlling forces in Gramsci's theory, manipulate societal beliefs and values by conveying and reinforcing "[...] their own philosophy, culture and morality", in order to "[...] perpetuate their power, wealth and status" (Boggs 39). Through the omnipresence of popular culture and the accumulating exposure to it, the dominant social or political group's ideologies, which are transmitted and aim at the maintenance of the status quo and the existing social hierarchy, are naturalised and perceived as the norm. Once these artificial constructs become invisible to the audience, cultural hegemony is achieved (Fitzgerald 350). Popular culture, especially through American and ever increasingly Japanese exports, dominates the cultural landscape of the world, reflects its *Zeitgeist* and functions as a primary agent in the process of socialisation. Hence, it has a severe impact on the construction and dissemination of social norms and values (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 14) as well as on "[...] the shaping of public opinion and social perception" (Donsbach 573). Consequently, it is no surprise that ideas about gender identities, too, originate in and are being reinforced by mass medial depictions, as "all forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions" (Wood 231). This manufacture of gender stereotypes preserved by the mass media gives rise to questions; for instance, about who the ruling elites involved in the production of mass media are; who perpetuates these ideologies aimed at the creation of a 'false consciousness' in order to conceal and distort the reality of subordination and oppression (Storey 2-4); and who is being harmed or ostracised by these constructions (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 13).

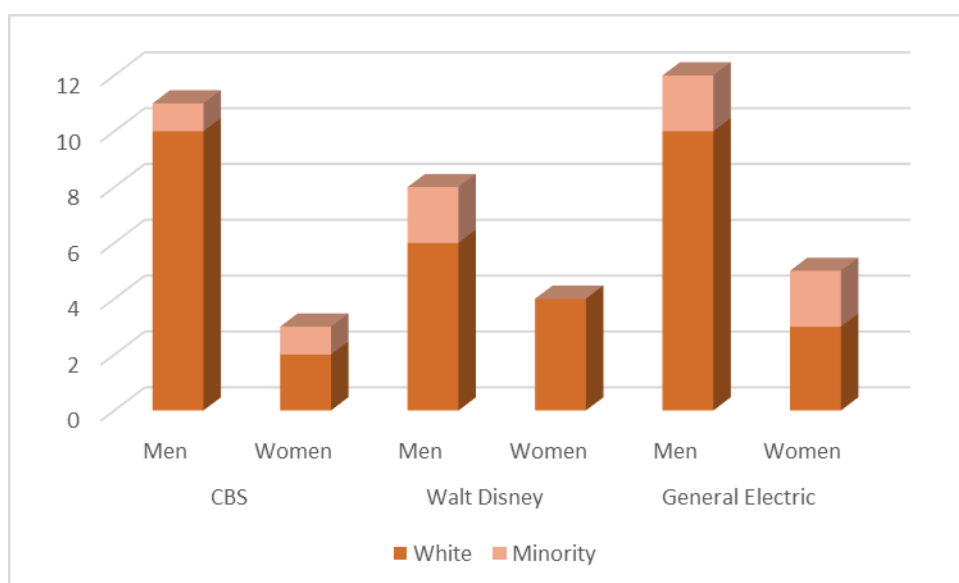
An analysis of the controlling forces of the mass media reveals an overwhelming gender disparity across all media platforms: print, broadcast and digital media. The demographics of women in the media demonstrate that media culture is far from anything resembling gender equality, but indeed presents a prime example of male supremacy (WMC 9). The paper's focal point are the constructions of femininity in *Game of Thrones*, which are inherently linked to general contemporary media representations of women and thus, aid to unveil the pop cultural phenomenon's potential function as a reflection of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century society's *Zeitgeist*. Therefore, the focus needs also be laid on the number of women in the television and film industry, who could influence the representation of females. With respect to the boards of three major US television networks, the gender disparity in the American televisual landscape becomes obvious: the board of directors of the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), which are owned by the Disney and the General Electric corporation respectively, and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) overall comprise over three times more male than female directors. On the Walt Disney Company's board 4 out of 12 members are women, the board of General Electric consists of 17 directors, of whom 5 are women, and on the CBS' board of directors there are only 3 women out of 14 members (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). These demographics of the major US television studios' boards are signifying the reality of male hegemony in the media industry.

	Number of board members	Men	Women		White Men	White Women	Minority Men	Minority Women
CBS-Columbia Broadcasting System	14	11 78.6%	3 21.4%		10 71.4%	2 14.3%	1 7.15%	1 7.15%
The Walt Disney Company (a)	12	8 66.7%	4 33.3%		6 50%	4 33.3%	2 16.7%	0 0%
General Electric (b)	17	12 70.6%	5 29.4%		10 58.8%	3 17.6%	2 11.8%	2 11.8%

**Figure 1: Major US Studios – Board of Directors**

Note: a. includes ABC, b. includes NBC

Sources: CBS Corporation 2018; General Electric 2018; Disney 2018;



**Figure 2: Major US Studios -Boards of Directors: Distribution of Sexes and Minorities**

The demographics of Hollywood executives further demonstrate this male supremacy in the mass media, as in 2014, 83% of the executives were male and 92% of these men white (WMC 65), which functions as an indicator of the absence of ethnic diversity and the deficient depiction of minorities in the mass media, in addition to the media's shocking gender disparity and male hegemony. The male prevalence in the media industry, according to Martha Lauzen's *Boxed In Report*, also expands to other key behind-the-scenes positions in broadcast networks, cable and streaming platforms, comprising creators, directors, writers, producers, executive producers, editors and directors of photography, positions that to 72% were held by men in 2017 (3). Furthermore, the fact that there has not been a significant development in the employment of women in these key behind-the-scenes roles, with their numbers only increasing by two percentage points to 28% on broadcast network, cable and streaming since 2016, is exposing of the slow, incremental progress towards gender parity in the mass media. Of the programmes analysed in the survey, appearing on broadcast, basic as well as premium cable and streaming services, 48% employed four, or even fewer, women in behind-the-scenes roles in 2017, only 3% of programmes employed four or less men (Lauzen 3-7). While the presence of at least one female executive producer, director or writer positively relates to the numbers of female characters on screen (Glascok 662; WMC 101), the strong correlation between the disproportionate employment of men and women in behind-the-scenes positions and the underrepresentation of females in films and television prevails (WMC 88-90).

In prime-time film and television, less than a third of films feature a female lead or co-lead and for every speaking or named woman portrayed on screen three men were depicted (WMC 95), unveiling scarce changes since the early 1990s (Basow 159). In representing women significantly less than men, the media are promoting the construction that men are more important than women and reflect the cultural standard (Wood 231), because “[...] knowledge of an individual’s social role can profoundly influence gender stereotypes regarding that individual” (Lauzen, Dozier and Horan 201). Moreover, the absence of female portrayal in the media is also distorting the actual population gender ratio, as women make up almost half of the world’s population (UN 12). The film and television industry’s misrepresentation of societal demographics is based on their reconstruction of society after the mass media’s controlling forces, white men. As those involved in the production of mass culture strongly influence who is represented and how (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 17), the ideologies of the male hegemony are perpetuated. Stereotypes, as generalisations “[...] about people on the basis of their group membership” (Donelson 40), reinforcing the in-groups’ power, present an effective means of securing gender hegemony. Consequently, stereotypes are utilised as “hegemonic tools” that are “[...] designed to construct an “other” that is regarded as lesser than the declared and constructed [male] ideal” (Merskin 135), aimed at presenting these constructions as natural and the norm. The intention of stereotypical depictions of femininity, thus, is twofold: firstly, traditional images are naturalising the social construction of gender, and secondly, they are reinforcing the gender hegemony and thereby, the values of the patriarchal order (Milestone and Meyer 40). Therefore, the orientation on heteronormativity, presuming heterosexuality, results in the normalisation and prevailing adherence to binary representations of gender. Such limited and heteronormative portrayals of femininity are directly linked to the sexist contemporary society and its ruling elite, as sexist representations stem from sexism innate in the production of popular culture (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 16).

## **2.1. Depicting Femininity and Masculinity in the Mass Media**

While stereotypical images reinforce the power of in-groups, they simultaneously subordinate out-groups. Women, while not a minority, represent one of the out-groups that have persistently been subject to stereotypically traditional and sexist depictions in the media. Quite commonly, the media “[...] reiterate the cultural image of women as dependent, ornamental objects whose primary functions are to look good, please men, and stay quietly on the periphery of life” (Wood 233). Because, “[...] stereotypes rely on repetition to perpetuate and sustain them” (Merskin 134), the media’s pervasive misrepresentations of gender identities facilitate their perception as natural and desirable (Wood 232). Thus, the insistent and constant corroboration of such gendered roles across multiple medial platforms, increase the media’s enormous impact on the assumption of credibility and truth of these depictions (Merskin 134; Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan 201). As a consequence thereof, the long history of stereotypical depictions of femininity and masculinity in the media, which reflect prevalent existing social attitudes toward the genders, enable these stereotypes to develop into an image of reality that even women and men strive to perpetuate (Wolff 205-207). The following subchapter provides an overview of the traditional values of femininity (Gill 11) and masculinity that are frequently being conveyed by the media and function as agents of social control.

The first common stereotype of women in the media is their underrepresentation, a fact that has been mentioned in the section on popular culture above. The term ‘stereotype’ refers an incomplete picture typically associated with a specific social group (Lippmann 79-94). Stereotypes imply information about people, as well as generate anticipations about their behaviour and qualities and while they are not necessarily untrue, they might present a constraint and promote discrimination (Dovidio et al. 7). As representation and consequently, also a lack thereof, functions as a signifier of social existence (Gerbner 44), the media’s marginalisation as well as stereotypical portrayal of women, which represents an inaccurate reflection of society, systematically turns women into subjects of “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman 8). Whenever women have attained visibility in the mass media, which “[...] present the chief common ground among the different groups that make up a heterogeneous national and international community” (Gross 20), their depictions have epitomised narrow and stereotypical portrayals of femininity (Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory 174). Women have a long history of underrepresentation in the film and television industries, and this female invisibility triggered portrayals that “[...] reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda” (Gross 21). As the media, a crucial agent in the process of socialisation and a

controlling force in shaping society's perceptions of gender identities, present a prime instance of male hegemony, it is important to note that the portrayed binary characterisations of the sexes are dominated by what might be called the 'male voice' (Wolff 207). Society regards both men and women through conscious and unconscious "lenses of gender" (Bem 1993), which assumes that men inherently present the dominant sex and that differences between the sexes are natural and legitimate (Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory 171). The media, too, employ such biased lenses of gender: several studies on the portrayal of women in film and television have been conducted, which have revealed that the mass media mostly reinforce the traditional social construct of femininity (Glascok 2001; Signorielli and Bacue 1999; Elasmr, Hasegawa, and Brain 1999), aimed at maintaining the gender hegemony and upholding the dominant patriarchal social order.

By awarding women with significantly less behind-the-scenes and on-screen positions, the male elite have reinforced the societal belief of male hegemony. The media's acculturation of "[...] men and women into separate gender roles based on their sex" (Carter 370), resulting in the subsequent on-screen promotion of traditional gender identities, further perpetuates the myth of female inferiority. Due to such pervasive misrepresentations of female gender identity by the media, the perception of the naturalness and desirability of these stereotypes is facilitated (Wood 232-233). As the binary gender division is a double-edged sword, and narrow heterosexist and normative depictions of gender harm, both, men and women to an equal extent (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 17), the social forces constituting the patriarchy cannot be discerned without realising the gendering of both sexes (Craig 1). Men's understanding of masculinity and thus, their gender expectations, have been equally heavily influenced by binary medial gender depictions. In modern American culture this results in the expectation that men participate in and uphold the patriarchal system, and that traditional stereotypes of masculinity are constructed to seem natural and right so that men believe their domination over and exploitation of women to not only be expected but actually demanded (Craig 3). As Jack Demarest and Jeanette Garner state, "the media may be described as an agenda of social control that reinforces traditional sex roles, a mirror of society that reflects current attitudes about women's roles, or sluggish agent of social change" (359). The media's controlling force of the societal perception of the gender hegemony and the reinforcement of the patriarchy has been strongly connected to the political realm, as changes in the media's imaging of women and their perceived roles over the last few decades reveal.

The 1950s, which presented the advent of television's first golden age' (Press, *Gender* 139), superseded by the second golden age at the turn of the century, especially reflect the impact of the political domain on the media and consequently, societal structures. Women, who constituted an essential workforce during the Second World War, were recruited in great numbers by the governments of the nations involved in the war to support the "vital machinery of war" (Yellin 39). In the United States recruitment was accomplished by means of the popular propaganda image of Rosie the Riveter (Santana 3), which quite ironically has since been transformed into a frequently used symbol of feminism designating women's equality. After the war, however, the same-sex role stereotypes directed at women that were propagated by the media taught them to revert their focus again upon the domestic sphere (Tuchman 37). This showed in that the "[...] notions of marriage, home, family and romance", which are crucial aspects in the depiction of characters, tended "[...] to be much more developed in female characters than in male characters" (Signorielli 589). The female characters who embody these traditional ideals of femininity were almost exclusively defined according to their life-related role and frequently characterised as loyal housewives, angelic helpmates, resurging the Victorian ideal of the 'angel in the house', and subservient victims (Wood 233), who were completely relegated to the domestic sphere and had "[...] no identity beyond the home and little real power within it" (Dow 264). Furthermore, the portrayal of these prototypical women complied with the binary gender division, depicting men and women as naturally oppositional poles. So, while in the portrayal of femininity, passivity, nurturing and dependency was stressed, men's portrayal emphasised aggressiveness, competitiveness and independence (Ivory, Gibson and Ivory 171).

During the mass media's early years, hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), the culturally idealised form of what it means to be masculine (Donaldson 645), promoted and complied with the binary gender belief that heterosexual masculinity presents the antithesis to any feminine behaviours (Jewkes et al. 113). As a consequence, the depictions of men embodying the exact oppositional characteristics attributed to femininity, reflected simplistic, clichéd images of masculinity, such as the stereotype of men being emotionally restrained. The creation of these manifestations of stereotypical masculinity were established in relation to marginalised groups of effeminate or homosexual men, which were perceived as unmanly. This resulted in men's rejection of possessing any characteristics deemed feminine (Donald 124), as character traits associated with femininity exhibited by men were judged as weak, abhorrent or as signifiers for homosexuality (Gilbert 62). Rather, representations of masculinity that were reinforced in order to uphold and legitimise male hegemony, and that men strove to comply

with, emphasised machismo and male sexual prowess (Beynon 20). Furthermore, the myth of men as resilient, self-controlled, capable, invulnerable and courageous machos was constructed (Donald 125;136) and perpetuated through the mass media. Especially the film industry amplified these traditional stereotypes of men as assertive, successful, and violent misogynists through their productions. Men were frequently portrayed as heroic *homme fatales*, which embodied a “Playboy lifestyle” that questioned faithfulness and monogamy of the conservative period of conformity (Gilbert 30). The post-war period, however, also taught men that masculinity was not solely achieved by emulating a desirable, yet unattainable, hero figure, but that men could, in this middle-class utopia of domestic bliss, also exert their masculinity through control over their family, as patriarchal breadwinners (Gilbert 29; Beynon 14;22). Although, this normative ideal of masculinity, based on the underlying belief of male superiority, was only enacted by a minority of men, it achieved ascendancy through popular cultural representations (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). Due to the exposure to such stereotypical images of masculine behaviour, men accultured to the unobtainable and problematic myth of masculinity, which assumes women’s physical and intellectual inferiority, constructed in order to uphold and justify the male privilege.

Gender, therefore, as a socially constructed system of power relations, was used by the media to promote and legitimate the male hegemony. Thus, the myth that “maleness signals authority, status, competence, social power, and influence, and femaleness signals lack of authority, low status, incompetence, and little power and influence” (Stewart and McDermott 521) was perpetuated. Women were constructed as the perpetual ‘other’, whose identity and value is inevitably dependent on their relationships to men (Donelson 1999, cited in Lauzen, Dozier, and Horan 201), whereby the perspective of male dominance and female nurturance was reinforced (Glascock 658). These asymmetrical relationships between men and women, which promoted unequal “agentic capabilities” (Bussey and Bandura 701) and status of the sexes, were perpetuated through mass medial depictions. They were aimed at promoting the perception of female incompetence and helplessness (Wolff 211) and consequently, the maintenance of the gender hegemony. Women complying to the patriarchal ideal of femininity that is tied to domesticity and subservience, were portrayed and deemed ‘good’ women and were prized for their emotionality and vulnerability, whereas those not fulfilling or conflicting these gender expectations were condemned ‘bad’ women (Wolff 208-210). These bad women, considered the counter image to the good women, were portrayed in the media as evil witches, bitches, femme fatales, or whores who are hard, cold, and aggressive, and thus, possessing all the characteristics a good woman was not supposed to have (Wood 233). Women’s confinement to

the home and family setting in their depictions in the early period of mass media and television (Press 139) and the condemnation of women not adhering to this norm, reflected a political initiative, which was enforced by the media. The intent of the portrayal of “these visions of domestic bliss” that even in contemporary society “continue to fascinate” (Oren 78), was to re-establish women’s domestic role, in order to prevent another depression after the close-down of the wartime economy (Field 675). The mass media were consequently deployed as a pawn to restore the pre-war status quo and maintain the traditional social order.

Popular culture, however, in the Gramscian understanding of ‘cultural hegemony’, presents a domain of negotiation and resistance. Hegemony therefore, does not remain constant, but is persistently subject to the counter-hegemony, which is challenging and resisting the dominant ideology (Stevenson 17). Thus, the audience can no longer be considered an ignorant mob, but have to be viewed as “[...] a positive or potentially positive social force” (Williams 31) that is ascribed agency in the shaping and subversion of societal norms and values. Since the 1950s, various modifications have occurred in television program content and the portrayal of stereotypes “[...] along the lines desired by protesting groups” (Davis, *Portrayals* 326). This demonstrates the highly reciprocal relationship between constructions of gender representations depicted by the mass media and the agentic capability of the masses.

The era of the 1960s was marked by a wide array of social and political transformations, including Second Wave Feminism that extended its contribution to society and found entrance into popular culture’s portrayal of femininity (Cruz and Guins 9). While the media outlets continued to perpetuate the myth of women’s subsidiary importance by presenting women as relegated to the domestic scene (Wolff 211), the Second Wave Feminists’ combatted women’s “[...] subjugated status in a patriarchal society” (Hollows 53). Their counterculture against the conformity of the 1950s, based on Betty Friedan’s publication *The Feminine Mystique*, which contested post-World War ideals of femininity, simultaneously triggered the repudiation of previous depictions of femaleness. The Second Wave Feminists’ struggle for equal rights and women’s sexual liberation, females’ control over their sexualities and reproductive rights, facilitated by the pill, led to the emergence of portrayals of empowered women on screen (Douglas, in Lee and Wen 102). This rise of a new concept of femininity from the 1960s onwards, that incorporated feminist ideals and was “[...] informed by and commented on the changing role of women in American society” (Dow 263), resulted in contradictory images of femininity being distributed on the medial platforms. Lesley Gore explicitly promoted the feminist agenda in the music industry with her 1964 song *You Don’t Own Me*. In the

emancipated hit-single, she challenges hegemonic gender roles by extolling women's autonomy from men and criticising unequal gender expectations in heterosexual relationships (Stos 124-125). Series, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-77) and *Maude* (1972-78) fostered the ideal of an emancipated, independent, working woman (Imre 394) and thereby, further deconstructed gender norms of the obedient and dependent wife that continued to permeate the media (Dow 272). However, while the female protagonists indeed exhibited features of lifestyle feminism, the minor female characters continued to reiterate stereotypical notions of femininity and traditional feminine roles (Press, *Women* 4).

During the late 1960s and the early years of the 1970s, the Flower Power movement originated, which not only opposed and peacefully protested against the Vietnam war, but, also, strove for liberation from previous conformist ideals. While the sexual revolution, the aiming for "individualism and personal autonomy in the sexual realm" (Rutter and Schwartz 104), continued to be of strong importance, especially in hippie culture, a subgroup of the Flower Power movement, the counterculture's focus predominantly lay on the ideological value of peace and social permissiveness. In its attempt to peacefully protest the Vietnam war, the group's social activism and liberalism affected social gender roles, specifically in regard to what has traditionally been perceived as masculine. In their attempt to dissociate from the masculine culture that had initiated this war, the pacifist activists heavily relied on symbolic significance, such as that of flowers as symbolisms of peace. By wearing their hair long and also embroidered with flowers, which has traditionally been associated with femininity, men who were part of the movement promoted a subordinate masculinity (Connell 1987), thus, opposing the traditional hegemonic masculinity, and thereby, challenged the archetype of the stoic, patriotic hero, promoted by the war campaigns. Through these alternative performances of masculinity as well as through the American soldiers' eventual defeat in the war, the masculine identity that had hitherto existed could not be preserved (Blaschke 40). As a consequence of the questioning of the archaic myth of masculinity through alternating performances of gender, deviating from the paternalistic norm, the media attempted a process of re-masculinisation of politics and culture (Jeffords 1989) to revert the perceived "loss of manliness" (Beynon 18). Specifically, the film industry, with its accelerated commercialisation of masculinity in the 1980s and 1990s (Beynon x), played a crucial role in this endeavour: through Hollywood productions that thematised the Vietnam war, such as the well-known feature films *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Rambo I* (1982), and *Platoon* (1986) traditional depictions of masculinity and machismo were promoted, aimed at the reaffirmation of masculine power and the re-establishment of the status quo (Blaschke 40).

The conservative and moralistic backlash, also titled the “neoconservative turn” (Imre 392), which began to grow at the dawn of the Ronald Reagan era in 1981, however, did not confine itself to the resurgence of stereotypical depictions of masculinity, but promoted the general return to “traditional family values” and thus, traditional gender expectations (Rutter and Schwartz 113). A decade after the emergence of emancipated depictions of women in the media, as a response to Second Wave Feminism, the conservative press and mass media embraced the conservatives’ backlash on feminism and its purported association with extremism and men-bashing (Basow 160). This resulted in receding to depictions of masculinity and femininity conforming to and reinforcing the gender dichotomy. The media, again, fully cooperated with politics with the purpose of returning women to their traditional roles (Wood 234) by reverting to constructions of “[...] male dominance, pretty female sidekicks”, and “female homemakers” (Basow 160). Women were again stereotyped as dependent, overly emotional and, if working, confined to low-status jobs, while men on the other hand were shown as acting in direct, venturous and pursuing ways (Bussey and Bandura 701). These binary gender constructions exhibited, clearly did not capture the feminine experience and women’s life models accurately, but presented women from a male perspective (Wolff 218).

Another ten years later, in the early and mid-1990s, a time characterised by considerable feminist ferment (Lee and Wen 102) and the middle classes’ rise to a more sophisticated and cosmopolitan lifestyle, new masculinities and femininities emanated again (Abel 404). During this period, third-wave of feminism emphasises the theory of intersectionality, the interrelation of discrimination based on class, race, sexual orientation, disability and gender. Through the importance of the concepts of intersectionality, gender identity and multiculturalism, also black feminism and lesbian criticism have gained importance in the academic discourse (Fernandes 99-102). The third wave of feminism thus, does not represent a collective movement and consequently, cannot be characterised by a unison goal, but addresses manifold issues, including ageism, sexism, racism, classism and sexuality. Most importantly, however, the third-wave of feminism, inspired by the philosophical import of Jacques Derrida’s (1967) theory of deconstruction, triggered the questioning of the essentialist definition of gender and challenged the perceived natural dichotomy of femininity and masculinity. As a result thereof, a non-essentialist definition of gender was formulated, stressing the distinction between sex and gender and opening up the concept of gender performativity (Butler 1990).

Additional to the social changes, including the emergence of third-wave feminism and its entering of the public discourse, in the post-backlash 1990s, a global deregulation and conglomeration of the media industries occurred and new “hybridized genres” (Lee and Wen 94), such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), a horror, fantasy, teenager-drama series, emerged. The interplay of these televisual transformations - the breakdown of traditional network television as it had been previously known and cable television’s increasing share of the airwaves – gave birth to the proliferation of a decidedly postfeminist new image of femininity (Press, *Gender* 143; Imre 394-395). The incarnations of this new third-wave feminist womanhood, postulated the ideal of young, single, successful and independent women, who are not committed to a romantic relationship or marriage and thus, free from familial and domestic pressures (Elasmar, Hasegawa, and Brain 33). Such televisual depictions of female employment in professional careers have remained a crucial component in the consideration of women’s representations as progressive (Lotz, *Women* 146). Although, third-wave feminism and intersectionality had already entered the academic discourse, television shows in the 1990s continued to portray second-wave images of femininity. Popular television series in this period, such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), and *The West Wing* (1999-2006), whose protagonists are exclusively white, unwed, and successful career women (Imre 394), evidently continued to purport second-wave themes of female independence and autonomy of decisions. However, all series’ protagonists share a traditionalist focus and preoccupation with dating and relationships, which almost undercut the shows’ support of feminist themes and values (Press, *Gender* 144). Although the series profess liberal politics and provide female characters with narrative space, the strong emphasis on finding the right partner to marry nevertheless, undermines and minimises the protagonists’ professionalism and reveals the ambivalent nature of the characters’ construction (Lotz, *Women* 162). Furthermore, the depictions of femininity, work and family were not solely underscored by the focus on women’s romantic relationships, but also by the white, middle-class, heterosexual biases of their representations (Press, *Gender* 144), which even apply to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, whose heroine has frequently been regarded as a third-wave ‘girl power’ icon, negotiating her patriarchal nemeses (Pender 164). As Amanda Lotz (*Women*, 146) points out, the propagated freedom of choice limited the representations to white, upper-middle-class, educated female characters, the only women who actually had the ability to make such choices.

In terms of third-wave feminism's aims of deconstructing gender binaries and the strong emphasis on the importance of intersectionality, the television series of the 1990s definitely lag behind. The shows are characterised not only through the absence of diversity in regard to age and sexuality, but, especially, in terms of ethnicity and class. The characters featured present prototypes of heteronormativity, by fitting the characteristics of being exclusively middle-class and predominantly heterosexual and white. Moreover, it could be argued that the series of the 90s function as examples of postfeminist television, which opened up a wider variety of televisual depictions of femininity, by offering narrative spaces to female protagonists. However, the term postfeminist television is ambiguous, as it does not denote the promotion of feminist values, but, on the contrary, the revitalisation of traditional 1950s family values. By depicting women in a superficial work identity, while simultaneously emphasising their need for romance or dependency to the domestic realm, postfeminist series actually undercut feminist perspectives (Press, *Women* 38). On the surface, *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) stresses the female protagonists' (sexual) independence, however, the characters' deep longing for a lasting romantic relationship is obvious. Clair Huxtable, the female protagonist of *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), further presents such a superficial feminist image of femininity, as although she is a professional woman, she possesses traits deemed stereotypically feminine and her profession is solely of subsidiary importance, while the domestic sphere, her family, remain her main priority. In *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), the lead character can be considered as being extremely led by a feminist agenda, however, her ideals are constantly subject of her ridicule. Feminism has a humorous function in the show, outlining the bad characteristics and attributes associated with a woman considered a feminist (Press, *Women* 40-41). While feminist ideas are indeed incorporated in these shows, feminism is repacked in order to neutralise or domesticate it (Steiner 369). This reveals a clear discrepancy between popular cultural portrayals of femininity and the gender theory of the academic discourse, stressing performativity and intersectionality. Also, popular cultures' propagation of second wave themes and the undercutting of third wave ideals in representing women is revealing of the male elites, the hegemony's, attempt to reconstruct previously existing power hierarchies and thereby, re-establish the status quo. Nevertheless, despite this prevalent heteronormativity and the adherence to second-wave feminist themes, these new depictions of femininity embodied an unprecedented variety that facilitated increasingly innovative television images to emerge in the new millennium (Press, *Gender* 146).

In contemporary popular culture gender narratives are not homogenised and thus, increasingly alternative images to stereotypical masculinity and femininity are offered (Leavy and Trier-Benieck 17). The awareness that there is no fixed masculine or feminine essence (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994), but that gender can be expressed in numerous forms (Beynon 1), resulted in the dissolution of the clear-cut distinction between masculine and feminine attributes as polar opposites. Although, the archaic image of the tough, heroic, mythic masculinity is deeply ingrained in the Western psyche, and numerous contemporary productions continue to present the traditionally tall and lean he-man, especially in films of the action or superhero genre, also increasingly dysfunctional images or hybridised masculinities are portrayed (Beynon 6). The myth of masculinity has evolved, allowing the representation of subordinate masculinities (Connell 1987), which are not corresponding to the stereotype of the muscular macho, but are rather displaying feminine characteristics, and thus, diverge from the paternalistic ideal. Regarding the portrayal of alternating femininities, David Gauntlett (247) even reports that the traditional perspective of women as housewives or low-status workers has been supplanted by the imagery of the courageous and successful ‘girl power’ icons. Due to the success of such female-led high-profile films in recent years, an increasing disconnect developed between what might be perceived as the current status of women and the actual status of women in film (Lang n.p.).

The illustration of “girl power icons” (Gauntlett 247), embodying feminist qualities and attributes that have stereotypically been deemed ‘masculine’, such as being ambitious or successful, are increasingly amplified on screen, nonetheless, stereotyped representations do prevail. Women’s portrayals as excessively emotional, less intelligent and dependent, which are perpetuating the binary gender division and belief of male superiority, dating back to the establishment of mass media (Davis, *Portrayals* 325-326) persist. Continuously, women are cast younger than their male counterparts and more likely to be characterised solely by a life-oriented, rather than work-oriented role (Lauzen 2-3). While women’s occupations have indeed, become less stereotyped, the number of female characters depicted working outside of the home has not significantly increased (Ivory, Gibson, and Ivory 175). Still, less than half of all female characters portrayed are playing work-oriented roles (Lauzen 11). As a consequence, women’s value is still overwhelmingly founded on their archetypal identification as mother, wife, or lover (Lang 2015). The continuing reinforcement of outdated stereotypes as well as the imaging of portrayals of new femininity is revealing of the existence of “[...] traces of hierarchy and utopian promise in all forms of popular culture” (Guarneri 192). This conflict of maintaining

and subverting the social order is further conveyed by the absence of true diversity in female characters.

In comparison to the portrayal of women on television throughout the preceding decades, the vast majority of contemporary shows indeed present a more diversified picture of women's social class, sexuality and race (Press, *Gender* 146). However, film and television productions to this day underrepresent women and if they feature female characters, they are predominantly young, heterosexual and white. In 2016, 34% of top-billing films at the box office featured a female lead or co lead and only 8% of these few female characters had a non-white, ethnic background (Smith et al. 1). In general, the percentages of underrepresented characters from African American, Hispanic and Asian ethnic minorities have stagnated since 2007 (Smith et al. 2). Especially, Asian and Latino females, which were unrepresented in 66% and 72% of films in 2016, respectively, are affected by the epidemic of women's invisibility in film (Smith et al. 4).

Regarding the depictions of LGBT characters, their underrepresentation and the disparity in representation of the sexes and ethnicities is even more distinct. While covertly gay characters also appeared in television history before the 1970s, it was this period which marked the beginning of openly gay or transgender characters being featured on broadcast television. Initially, they constituted minor characters, reappearing on an unregular basis, such as Steve in the 1971 *All in the Family* (1971-1979) episode "Judging Books by Covers" or the black transgender woman Edie in the 1977 sitcom *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), produced by Norman Lear. Lear also first introduced a gay couple in the recurring, although short-lived, network production *Hot l Baltimore* (1975). In 1977, the television series, *Soap* (1977-1981), starring an openly gay lead character, probably the most-well known early gay character on television, started to air. Only two decades later, did ABC broadcast *Ellen* (1994-1997), a show featuring the eponymous, first openly lesbian protagonist, who came out in the 1997 "The Puppy Episode" (Shattuck 2017). Since then, the presence of gay characters has established a secure place in television programming and numerous series have featured gay characters in their cast, including the critically acclaimed shows *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), and *Modern Family* (2009-) (Becker 137). Also, a number of series depicting lesbian or bisexual women have emerged, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The L Word* (2004-2009) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), however, there exists an obvious divergence in the amount of representations of gay and lesbian characters featured on television. This discrepancy between LGBT characters on television is even more pronounced in regard to transgender

characters, which still, with the exception of *Transparent* (2014-) starring a transgender protagonist, predominantly remain supporting characters. Furthermore, the fact that the majority of characters portrayed are white presents another issue in respect to lacking diversity and narrow casting choices.

This demographical discrepancy between LGBT characters and the absence of ethnically diverse representations also applies to the film industry. Whereas an increase in the numbers of gay males portrayed in film can be noted, lesbian and female bisexual characters remain ostracised. An overwhelming 91% of the 100 top films in 2016 failed to depict one lesbian or female bisexual character and none of the films produced featured a transgender character (Smith et al. 8). Moreover, even within the small amount of LGB characters portrayed on screen the disparity between white and minority as well as the relegation of older characters is sustained: for the vast majority, almost 80%, of LGB roles in 2016 white actresses were cast, of which more than half were situated on the age range under forty. This reveals the continuity of the primary adherence to traditional heteronormative portrayals of femininity, which, due to prime-time television's crucial role in establishing acceptable societal attitudes on women's, gay, lesbian and minority right struggles and general societal beliefs (Press, *Gender* 147), uphold the societal status quo and the patriarchal hegemony.

Stereotyping of women, however, is not solely based on the media industry's ostracism of women and the reinforcement of heteronormative biases through the overwhelmingly clichéd portrayals of female characters. Popular culture, which officiates as "ideological machine" (Storey 7), also manipulates women's gender identity and negatively affects their body image and self-esteem (Weibel 142) by illustrating "narrowcasting" (Licklider 212) in regard to female physicality. Television, thus, does not solely reflect traditional cultural definitions of femininity, but also of beauty standards that women should adhere to (Davis, *Portrayals* 330). Although progressive images of femininity that rely on intellect and competence, rather than on beauty and appearance (Zurawik 1), are distributed too, female characters portrayed in the media mainly conform to conventional beauty standards. In order to be perceived conventionally beautiful, women need to fit the Western beauty criteria of being small, thin and having long and silky hair (Milestone and Meyer 93). As Susan Bordo states, especially the image of a slender body, which became increasingly thinner and more idealised throughout the centuries, overdetermines the contemporary ideal of female attractiveness (204-205). The portrayals of female stars in film and prime-time, who are embodiments of thinness and conventional beauty, perpetuate the idea that women function as decorative objects and that

their worth is dependent upon their compliance with medially constructed beauty norms (Wood 236).

Despite the idealised image of beauty being unattainable (Smith and Cook 17) and the attempt of achieving it involves numerous obstacles of physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual nature, women continue to chase after artificial standards (Berberick 13). Self-objectification, body shame and anxiety, which are triggered by the process of striving for the fulfilment of an unachievable beauty norm are also reinforced by the overwhelmingly sexualised and objectifying portrayals of women in the mass media (Smith et al. 14-15). Female characters, unlike their male counterparts, are often depicted in sexy attire, such as tight or revealing clothing that draws attention to their curves and angles. Additionally, their status as sex objects is encoded by the display of cleavage, waistline and high upper thighs, thus partial nudity, or full nudity, involving the exposure of nipples, buttocks or genitals (Downs and Smith 725). Quite shockingly, the sexualisation of female teenagers and young adults in film and television, in terms of sexually revealing clothing as well as partial nudity, significantly outpaced that of middle-aged women in 2016 (Smith et al. 16). The fact that teenage girls are to an equal extent as female adults under forty referenced as attractive and portrayed in sexy attire, including nudity, manifests contemporary consumer culture's hyper-sexualisation of girls and women alike (Kehily 258). Particularly, the representations of women of ethnic backgrounds are troublesome: on the one hand, they are severely subjected to racial stereotyping and thus, symbolic racism in their portrayals, and, on the other hand, by being more likely to be presented in a sexual light than white female characters, and characterised as the 'exotic other', their depictions strongly correlate with sexism (Cortese 15; Smith et al. 25). Women of colour are often presented as sexual predators, Latinas as inarticulate and subservient sex symbols and Asian women as passive, sensuous sexual prey (Cortese 102-108). This vigorous focus on sexuality and nudity that all depictions of women, specifically those of minority origin, seem to share, facilitates the further demarcation and 'othering' of females (Smith et al. 25). As Anthony Cortese notes the inequity in "ethnic and gender representations" is "[...] intricately linked to social arrangements and the power structure" (14-15). Thus, the focus on outer appearance and female physicality aids the maintenance of the male hegemony.

The primary focus in the portrayal of femininity lies on women's physical appearance, which eventuates in the degradation of women to passive objects of male desire in their depictions. By emphasising women's "bodily property", their possession of a "[...] young, able-bodied, heterosexual, sexy body" (Gill 91), women are bereaved their agency. According to John Berger, the binary notion that "[...] men act and women appear" (47) is thereby perpetuated, which supports and reinforces the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Furthermore, by pursuing a male-dominant, heterosexist agenda in the construction of female sexuality, contemporary sex-saturated culture has been constructing and amplifying the image of women as sex objects (Jensen 140; Smith and Cook 13). The increasingly overt sexualisation of both sexes, although predominantly women, is contingent upon the "pornographication of the mainstream" and its "incorporation of pornographic imagery and iconography into [...] popular culture" (McNair, *Mediated Sex* 137). Such characteristics of pornography that the media have incorporated are sex, violence and women's domination by men (Basow 317), which have frequently been expressed in images "[...] presenting sadistic behaviours as pleasurable, brutalizing and pain as enjoyable, and forced sex or abuse as positive" (Wood 238). Through the mainstreaming of pornification and the infiltration of eroticised imagery into capitalist popular culture (McNair, *Mediated Sex* 137), media messages aid to substantiate rape myths, contribute to violence and abuse of women (Wood 238-239) and reinforce women's inequality (Tyler and Quek 11). Although television has been gendered since it originated (Imre 392), resulting in problematic depictions of femininity as well as masculinity, the advent of the "post-network era's" (Lotz, *Television* 50) concept of 'quality' television and its compliance with the capitalist rationale 'sex sells' has further enforced the already existing victimisation of women and the exploitation of female bodies.

## 2.2. From television towards Quality TV

Television, which presents the most pervasive mass medium, has been undergoing constant changes and multiple shifts since its initiation in the 1950s and its development towards the concept of so-called “Quality TV”, coined by the media scholars Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi in the 1984 publication *MTM: QTV*. In the network era, television established itself as a fixpoint to bring the outside world into the domestic home (McCarthy 32). The mass medium was tightly integrated into the domestic sphere in the 1950s and familial life was organised around it. In the beginning of this Golden Age of television, programme options in the United States were limited to the contents aired by the three national networks – ABC, NBC and CBS – thus, the viewing experience was characterised by minimal choice and control. The big three networks barely differed in their programming and their unvaried and predictable schedules did not provide the audience with any programme choice. Nevertheless, these limitations to audience’s agency of programme control did not hinder the medium’s development of a status as ritualised, shared cultural experience (Lotz, *Television* 51-52). Television captioned its viewership and, with ever increasing popularity, became to be perceived as the “hearth of modernity” (Turner and Tay 1). The medium has soon after its introduction become subject to severe criticism, such as by Adorno, who as one of the first critics of television claims that “[...] the majority of television shows today aim at producing [...] smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that seem to fit in with totalitarian creeds” (222). Although by the 1950s television might have been considered less a status symbol than a sign of “bad taste” (Spigel 49), the medium evolved into the most successful mass medium of the modern period, holding enormous influence over the shaping of societal perceptions (Biagi 150).

By the late twentieth century, the network era of television found itself amid profound adjustment. Through revolutionary technological innovations, especially the proceeding digitalisation, the advent of cable services was triggered. This resulted in a vast proliferation of content and the emergence of new forms of television in the 1980s and 1990s and thus, audiences gained the benefit of a wider variety of choices of when and what to watch. The number of cable channels expanded rapidly and increasingly the targeting of niche audiences and tastes began in their programming, which soon diversified and multiplied further (Lotz, *Television* 49-58). During this period of televisual transition, the modification of key components and testing of content and genre boundaries, which were designed in television’s formative period in the 1950s, started to become a prominent feature of television programming

(Thompson, *Television* 19-20). This especially applied to productions of high-profile programming that growingly started to touch upon socially and politically significant issues (Logan 147-148). Hence, they provided the origin for so-called 'quality television' (Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi 1984) programmes, which, rather than reflect superficial themes of life, are frequently devoted in their representations to the exploration of serious matters. Quality series focus on the contemporary societal and political situation and offer a symbolical reading and reflections on broader societal issues in their programming (Cardwell 26).

These transitions in the televisual landscape, referred to as 'quality television', resulted in the proclamation of the second golden age of television by media scholar Robert J. Thompson (1996) in the 1990s. The term 'quality television', which was introduced in an academic context by Feuer, et al., presents the most frequently used umbrella term to describe the televisual trend emerging since the 1980s. Around this ground-breaking televisual shift, a *termine ombrellone* (Eco 24), a wide spectrum of terminologies, has established, in order to define the recent phenomenon. Besides "quality television", also "high-end" (Nelson 2007), "complex" (Mittell, *Complex* 2012), or lately "transgressive" (Däwes, Ganser and Poppenhagen 2015) television are commonly used terms to classify the genre. The emergence of such numerous classifications for this single new phenomenon emphasises its importance to the televisual landscape (Nesselhauf and Schleich 17). The term quality television, however, does not solely function as generic description of content programming, but inevitably brings in its wake a positive critical evaluation. Its 'quality' tag is misleading, as it is not synonymous for good or artistic television productions, although many series produced under the framework of quality television, indeed present instances of critically acclaimed television (Cardwell 21;33).

While quality television does not count as a true genre, as it is itself characterised by ever increasing genre hybridity, several continuities within this group of programming prevail (Cardwell 25): quality series are characterised by their experimental and innovative forms and narratives, large ensemble casts, dense visual fields, an, in comparison to mainstream television, accelerated pace, and narrative velocity in order to dramatize the "labyrinthine complexity" (Logan 148) it provides (Lane 32). Moreover, series qualify as quality programming when they exhibit high production values, aesthetic camerawork and editing, as well as the creation of an aural style through original music scores and careful visual aesthetics. In order for quality productions to also qualify as 'good' television, the features of style of camerawork, mise-en-scène, themes and type of performance need to be well integrated into a coherent whole. While the classification 'quality television' itself does not signify the quality and value of a

programme, many attributes characteristic of a QTV production also constitute a ‘good’ programme (Cardwell 26-30).

In the 1990s, Thompson also established a list of characteristics innate to, what he described as, ‘quality’ television productions, including such features as the addressing of a sophisticated audience, complex narratives, hybridised genres and self-reflexivity of such programmes, adducing the shows *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), *St. Elsewhere* (1982-1988), and *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005) (*Television* 13-15;42;75;). Especially *NYPD Blue* is of significance to the characteristic features of quality television in that the series presents the forerunner in terms of the contemporary notorious depictions of sex and nudity in prime-network productions (Logan 148). Thompson, however, classified quality television and proclaimed the second golden age of television previous to the occurrence of tremendous shifts in the television landscape at the turn of the century. Triggered by the premium cable networks’ endeavour of producing original contents, specifically the pay-tv channel HBO’s original series productions *Oz* and *The Sopranos*, quality television gained a new momentum in the late 1990s (Armbrust n.p.). These original HBO productions initiated numerous other premium cable channels to issue their own original programming and thereby triggered a sheer flood of aesthetic and narrative experimentations and innovations. Since the airing of the *The Sopranos*, televisual formats narrate more experimentally than ever before (Nesselhauf and Schleich 17), which transformed and challenged the televisual norms in the era from the late twentieth to the twenty-first century (Mittell, *Narrative* 29). Although, Thompson proclaimed the second golden age of television prior to these trailblazing innovations in the televisual landscape and before the four canonical productions *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing*, *Breaking Bad* and *Mad Men*, which are considered the primum mobile, the milestone shows, for quality television (Nesselhauf and Schleich 11), the list of criteria he created in the 1990s are still valid to classify contemporary productions as instances of quality television.

Due to the later emerging crucial transformations of the “super genre” (Thompson, *Quality* xvii) quality television, the period of transition from the Golden Age of television to a continuous flow of programme contents and a more varied and individualised viewing experience in the 1980s and 90s can, in retrospect, be referred to as “multi-channel transition” (Lotz, 50). The origin of the second golden age of television can thus, be set at the turn of the century with the emergence of premium, subscription-based cable channels and their ever-increasing innovative productions, which has lead up to the individualistic, cinematographic television experience prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through these revolutionary developments and stylistic

transformations which the televisual landscape underwent, the medium of television ceased to exist in its previous form and entered into a new, post-network televisual, phase (Spigel 2), heralding the second golden age of television with its extravagant productions (Nesselhauf and Schleich 9).

Following Pierre Bourdieu's assumption that taste is socially formed (12-13), the cultural legitimization of televisual productions from 'popular' to 'legitimate' taste has presented an ongoing process since the emergence of television broadcasting (Newman and Levine 4; Nesselhauf and Schleich 14). Commercial television, when it did not present an object of derision, presented a guilty pleasure for intellectuals (Anderson, *Overview* 26). The subscription-based channels, whose start into original programming marked the difference between network and premium cable television (Logan 148), tied in with this critical perspective upon commercial television. As a consequence, the premium channels purposefully draw on the innate value judgment of their generic form of quality television in order to lure paying subscribers to their networks. Indeed, the term 'quality' presents a successful example of audience targeting, and its association with culture and elitism functions merely as a pretext to reach consumers (Polan 281). HBO and other premium channels obviously direct their productions at the cultural elite, a self-perceived, sophisticated audience and marketing plays a crucial role in audiences' perception of material and content as qualitative (Logan 151-152). The premium channel HBO further emphasised this distinction between common network television and its premium programming with its popular slogan "It's not TV – It's HBO" (Armbrust n.p.). Thus, the "middle-brow term" (Caughie 210) 'quality television' is used to allow subscribers of pay-television channels, who purchase premium cable consumer products in order to distinguish themselves from other audience cohorts, to affirm their cultural elitist status through their 'elevated' cultural pursuits (Logan 148). As Michael Newman and Elana Levine state "aesthetics is a discourse of power, claimed as the exclusive property of dominant classes as a club to use against the 'debased' tastes and preferences of the lower order" (166). The association of premium cable shows with the quality genre hence, does not merely fulfil the function of generically classifying these productions, but rather, with the choice of the terminology 'quality' and its associated value, to allow the targeted audience to indulge in television consumption, which they perceive as elitist aesthetics, without the trace of a bad conscience (Nesselhauf and Schleich 10). The 'quality' tag, thus, is consciously used by premium channels to market their subscription-based products and bring about a sense of sophistication and superiority in its viewership. However, these 'quality' productions are not necessarily qualitative per se. Consequently, the term "complex television" (Mittell, *Complex*

2012) is more suitable to objectively describe this unconventional televisual format without any accompanying evaluative judgement and thus, is henceforth used throughout this paper.

The concept of complex television, marketed as quality television, does not solely fulfil the purposes of acquiring high levels of audience engagement (Cardwell 27) and legitimising television consumption. To a greater degree, productions categorised as complex television specifically use their classifying criteria, such as complex narratives, and especially their freedom from the Federal Communications Commission's censoring restrictions, in order to attract wide audiences to the pay-television contents. Private networks, such as HBO, cannot be received over the airwaves and therefore, they are not constrained by the FCC's strict regulations of nudity and profane language<sup>1</sup>, consequently, pay-tv channels present a haven from the puritan ideals governing television channels. The premium channels, however, exploit and celebrate this independence from censorship and aim at creating a brand identity exactly through thriving on provocative original serial content productions to lure and retain paying subscribers to their channels (Blanchet 38; Stemple 168). The fact that the excessive display of, foremost female, nudity and exceeding violence developed into characteristic features of complex television (Nesselhauf and Schleich 10), further raises the question for whom the self-promoted 'quality' genre is designed (Hass 107) and how qualitative it actually is.

Contemporary complex television presents, like most pop cultural media, an instance of male hegemony and consequently targets the male audience. Therefore, it inevitably displays and reinforces the 'male gaze' (Hassler-Forest n.p.). The tag 'complex', however, has not always been associated with male-dominated programming. On the contrary, initially, the shows produced under the generic classification of 'quality' television were intertwined with a feminist agenda, the prime example therefore being the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) (Hass 107-108). Due to the multiple and ever-increasing premium channel providers, however, complex television programming presents an intensive and risky undertaking as media corporations have to make significant investments. Moreover, the audience have to devote their time and emotion to remain captivated by the narrative structures, to make such extensive productions profitable (Anderson, *Television* 85). Consequently, the subscription-based networks have entered in a "quality war" (Davidson n.p.) for compelling productions. Thereby, capitalism, and its age-old credo "sex sells", is the driving force behind most complex television

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<sup>1</sup> Established in 1934, the FCC regulates telecommunication (radio and television broadcasts) in all 50 U.S. states. Led by a puritan agenda, it prohibits content deemed obscene, indecent or profane - the description or depiction of sexual conduct, sexual organs, or the usage of offensive language, respectively - which they consider objectionable to public moral (FCC 2017).

productions and thus, most contemporary premium providers' resort to violent and sexist portrayals in order to successfully lure paying audiences (Reichert and Lambiase 103). Thus, although, the terminology might describe premium channels' programming as 'quality', the contents displayed do not always conform with this evaluative judgment.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, media per se is tremendously sexist, with advertisements heavily drawing on sex and nudity to sell products, triggering the increasing sexualisation of both men and women (McNair, *Mediated Sex* 137). This precipitates a downward spiral as the media have to persistently accumulate images of violence and shockingly sexist depictions in order to break through the clutter and consequently, gain attention and high viewership numbers (Reichert and Lambiase 103). Portrayals of, predominantly female, nudity and sexual violence and abuse yield channels major viewership numbers, which is telling not only of the obvious gender bias in complex television (Hass 107), but also, as these productions mirror the *Zeitgeist*, the standing and status of women in contemporary society. In general, the media is severely influenced by the increasing sexualisation and pornification of culture. Especially, the porn industry's favourable representation of female subordination and degradation of women, the depictions of sadistic behaviours as pleasurable and forced sex or abuse as positive (Wood 238), impact gender portrayals in complex television programming.

As the depictions of sexual violence prove to be more efficient audience magnets than the display of consensual sex, complex series heavily feature rape scenes to attract higher viewership numbers. Quite obviously, such images of male dominance and sexual violence towards women, which are prevalent in the majority of R- and X- rated films (Cowan et. al 1988), and even more overwhelming in premium cable productions, have a negative impact on gender roles. These depictions enforce the stereotype of women as sexual objects and helpless victims to abuse and harassment and thereby, normalise these behaviours against women (Wood 238). Nevertheless, complex television also possesses the ability to challenge and critique existing gender relations. Many complex series certainly produce more nuanced female characters than commercial film and television productions and provide a focus on women that in some instances could be claimed to have been influenced by a feminist agenda. Especially plot and character developments enable complex television to either reinforce or deconstruct traditional images of gender. Most complex television shows, however, seem to have issues with progressive gender representations, especially regarding depictions of femininity, and fail to present portrayals that challenge the prevailing narrow stereotypes (Hass 106-118).

Although some complex series reflect and perpetuate progressive gender roles, they are usually simultaneously recreating the sexist conditions of the period and society they portray. Moreover, complex television does not eroticise the male body to an equal extent or in the same ways as the female body and thereby, neglect to reflect a female gaze in its contents. As the stereotypical depictions of femininity frequently intersect with hypersexualized portrayals and the display of nudity, complex series are heavily guided by a male gaze, facilitating the amplification of women's sexualization and objectification in their narratives. Thus, women in complex television programming are frequently only ascribed worth in relation to men as their bodies are aestheticized as erotic objects. Female nudity, however, is only perceived as aesthetic and valuable when it conforms to dominant beauty ideals and satisfies the desires of the targeted male viewership. The depictions of female characters on screen, however, are not solely worrisome due to the vast amount of violence and abuse they suffer for the sake of high audience quotes, but also, because in their portrayals issues in regard to body images and diversity of body forms can be noted, even in cases of otherwise progressive gender representations. The majority of productions under the framework of complex television feature characters, both men and women, adhering to the beauty standards prevalent in the period of production. However, it is essential to also address the bodily desires of men and women who do not comply with these body ideals. While women not conforming to dominant beauty standards, when featured in a complex production, are frequently allowed to desire, their desire mostly remains unfulfilled. As a consequence of such stereotypical and flat portrayals, any intended feminist message is completely lost through the depictions and adherence to narrow body ideals (Hass 106-114).

### 3. Westeros and the West

George R. R. Martin's medieval fantasy saga *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as well as its serial adaptation *Game of Thrones*, is predominantly set on the fictional continent Westeros, which is separated from the vast continent of Essos by the Narrow Sea. The geographical outlines of the continents Westeros and Essos, that are depicted in the series' opening credits, bear a stark resemblance to those of the United Kingdom and the European mainland that are separated solely by the narrow English Channel. Thus, the fantasy world of *Game of Thrones* can be regarded as an allegoric, "cracked-mirror reflection of medieval Europe" (Tucker n.p.). While the continent of Westeros is divided into several small kingdoms with their respective regional customs, it is united in a political entity referred to as the Seven Kingdoms, reflecting the political structure of Britain in the Middle Ages. The reign over the Seven Kingdoms, a name dating back to when seven independent kingdoms governed the continent, after a war of conquest now includes nine regions, the North, the Iron Islands, the Vale, the Westerlands, the Stormlands, the Riverlands, the Crownlands, the Reach, and Dorne, is synonymous with a monopoly on power. Consequently, numerous noble Houses engage in a struggle for the Iron Throne, which functions as a metonym for the ultimate power exercised by the monarchical ruler who conquers it. Hence, Martin's medievalist saga reveals, in terms of both the fantasy epic's geography and politics, a dominant Eurocentric perspective (McCutcheon n.p.).

Indeed, the European Middle Ages function as Martin's leitmotif for *Game of Thrones*. Especially, medieval England and the 'Wars of the Roses' for the succession to the English throne in the late Middle Ages, between the Houses of York and Lancaster, the devastation it brought to both sides, the corruption and militarisation, functioned as the primary source of inspiration for the fantasy epic (D'Addario n.p.; McCutcheon n.p.). Due to Martin's orientation on medieval Europe for the creation of his pseudo-medieval fantasy world, the society of Westeros, to some extent, reflects the political and social organisation prevalent in the medieval period. However, the fantasy genre is not obliged to portray society in a realistic or truthful manner. On the contrary, per definition it allows for the subversion of common tropes, norms and values. Regardless of all the imaginary freedom the fantasy genre provides, it is per se always shaped by its context and therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from the period in which it is being produced in (Jackson 3). "Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it: it exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that 'real' world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite" (Jackson 20). Consequently, Westeros does not merely present a fictional universe, but is strongly

interconnected with the 'real' world and thus, demonstrates numerous parallels to the European Middle Ages as well as the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as a close analysis of Westerosi society reveals.

Mirroring the Middle Ages, Westerosi society is structured by severe inequality of class, gender, and ethnicity, originating from the dominance of the political system of feudalism, which enforces such a classist society (McCutcheon n.p.). While Christianity dominated the Western world during the medieval period, Westerosi life is governed by the faith in the Old Gods, a polytheistic religion worshipped in the North, and the New God, a monotheistic faith dominant in all the other regions of Westeros. Despite the differing religious beliefs, however, religion in the society of Westeros is of equal centrality as was Christianity for the social structure in the Middle Ages, as religion, in both instances, presents the basis for the feudal social order, which is underlined by the belief in the 'Great Chain of Being'. The 'Great Chain of Being', or 'Divine order', is based on the assumption of everyone's allocation of a specific role within the universe by God, and orders social life in a linear sequence, placing God at the top of its hierarchy (Nee 429). The King who conquers the Iron Throne is believed to be appointed by God and is situated at the top of the secular social hierarchy, exercising ultimate power, followed by the clergy and nobility, the chivalry and lastly, at the very bottom of the hierarchy, the peasantry, which, however, constitute the majority of the population.

Such an establishment of classism can also be observed in numerous capitalist societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in which class is inherited and ownership of land, concomitant with capital and power, is extremely class-based and unequally distributed among the population, resulting in a severe gap between the classes, the rich and the poor. The social model of the United States differs in its underlying ideology from a society stratified by class, in that it is characterised by the American Dream. Consequently, class does not present the dividing factor in the U.S. society, but the ethos 'from rags to riches', the pursuit of capital, which is equated with wealth, power and status, through ambition and hard work alone, regardless of one's social or economic background, has superseded classism. However, quite ironically, especially in the United States wealth inequality is reaching a peak with the elites and oligarchs, who constitute one percent of the population, possessing the vast majority, 95%, of capital. While the middle classes are eviscerated (DeGraw n.p.) and are degraded to the "serfs" of the ruling elites that are multinational corporations and "the deified market" (Duvall 87), the rich increasingly accumulate wealth in this "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 46) that domineers the economic system of contemporary societies. This "hardening of divisions in society"

presents “the backbone of neofeudalism” (Bauer n.p.), and while the American social structure ideologically enables social and income mobility, wealth, like class in Old Feudalism, increasingly is inherited and the broad masses fail to ‘make it’ in U.S. society, revealing the American Dream to be an illusionary ethos. Thus, the Old Feudalism displayed in *Game of Thrones* does not merely reflect the political and legal system that was prevalent in the European Middle Ages, but it very much corresponds to the New Feudalism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Neofeudalism, labelled ‘liberalism’, which is governing the contemporary Western world (Duvall 83) mirrors the medieval social order as it, too, is characterised by a static social hierarchy that is thriving on inequality, such as the increasingly hardening division between the few rich and the majority of the population in most capitalist societies demonstrates.

Precisely this significant difference in distribution of wealth among the population of capitalist countries, in which failure to succeed in the social system immediately implies a lack of effort and sacrifice, might contribute to *Game of Thrones*’ appeal. The Old Feudalism, building the basis for the strict social hierarchy in Westerosi society, presents a stark contrast to the highly competitive contemporary capitalist cultures that are decisively directed at individualism, and thus, the series might function as an instance of escapism: while in an increasingly capitalist world everyone is responsible for one’s own social standing, the Great Chain of Being inevitably determined one’s social role in the medieval period. This God-given social structure can be a symbol of relief, in terms of attempted and failed upward mobility. Regarding the ethos of the American Dream, *Game of Thrones*’ enormous commercial success might suggest a certain disillusionment with the underlying ideological project of the U.S, as well as a discontent with modern capitalist values and the strive for a ‘simpler’ life.

While the power structures in *Game of Thrones* can be interpreted as a critical allegory of the social order of New Feudalism, the series additionally strongly reinforces a neoliberal ideology, by setting the focus on hyper-individualism and constant competition, factors that have triggered feudalism’s return (McCutcheon n.p.). Westerosi society is shaped by the raging war for power, the so-called ‘game of thrones’. In the first season the audience learns that “when you play the game of thrones, you win or you die. There is no middle ground” (1.07; 10:52-10:58), thus, Westeros reflects a highly predatory society, in which survival is the main objective and personal profit is pursued at any cost (Genz 246). At the centre of oppression in Westerosi society stands a distorted notion of freedom surrendering any form of compassion and social responsibility to mere necessities of survival, which are subject to competitive enterprise (Genz 253). The fictional universe of *Game of Thrones* consequently mirrors what

Henry Giroux describes as the 21<sup>st</sup> century's "Darwinist, survival-of-the-fittest world" (163), which undermines democracy, solidarity and social values. Instead, capitalist Western cultures are characterised by corruption that is located at the very heart of politics, as well as the condemnation of a rising number of people to the status of disposable populations (Giroux 165-170). The same conditions of contemporary Darwinist societies also exist in the fantasy country of Westeros, which presents an ideologically fraught society that, too, is ruled by a corrupt patriarchy and capitalism (Genz 244), which reinforce the dominant ideologies of the ruling elites and misrepresent those as the general societal norms and values (Duvall 85).

In addition to essential classism and capitalism, the society of Westeros is also characterised by being fundamentally paternalistic. Kinship and social systems reflect organisation, which in turn confers power (Rubin 174) that in Westeros is a male privilege. Men, presuming their superiority, restrict women's autonomy and thus, uphold the patriarchal order. Although kinship systems and their practices differ enormously from one culture to another, all are characterised by the unison feature of sex-oppression. Organisational power is solely bestowed on male kin, aiming at keeping women in their assigned, inferior place within these patriarchal societies (Rubin 163-171). In Westeros, "power is reproduced through dynastic privilege" (Ferreday 33). Theoretically, the law of male-preference primogeniture allows only first-born sons to inherit the Iron Throne (Frankel 161). Practically, however, in the fictional continent of Westeros, as well as in the history of the European Middle Ages, the throne cannot solely be inherited by primogeniture, but also by usurpation<sup>2</sup>. Hence, both, the male-preference succession custom, as well as usurpation cement the belief of female inferiority, in that power is exclusively entrusted upon male kin in Westeros. The myth of male supremacy is further fostered by the homophobic, classist, sexist and racist concept of chivalry (Goguen 214), which "exalts the sword that protects and devalues the body that cannot protect itself" (Goguen 207). Thereby, by perpetuating the belief of female helplessness and women's inability to fend for themselves, chivalry affirms the notion that women are not self-reliant but entirely dependent on men for their survival (Frankel 163). Such systemic practices of inheritance and social customs have engraved members of society with the gender convention of masculine superiority (Rubin 183) and have manifested the concept of male hegemony that is reflected in the general patriarchal social organisation of Westerosi society. The concept of male hegemony has

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<sup>2</sup> After Aegon Targaryen conquered and united the Seven Kingdoms, a century long reign of the Targaryen dynasty followed, which was ended by the late King Robert Baratheon's rebellion. The death of the 'usurper King', as he was labelled by his enemies, causes a (rightful) debate about the legitimacy of his heirs and consequently, triggers the 'game of thrones', the war for the Iron Throne.

constructed the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), which, in Westeros as well as in the contemporary West, is associated with hyper-masculinity and heterosexuality and, through patterns of practice, secures the continuation of men's dominance over women. Although, hegemonic masculinity presents an instance of gender performativity and is enacted only by a minority of men, the multiple forms of masculinities that evolve in contrast with it, are always discriminated against in relation to this unreachable ideal. By benefitting from the male supremacy, however, even men, who do not enact the hegemonic version of male dominance, exert "complicit masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832), furthering the legitimisation of the patriarchal order. Consequently, the patriarchy severely influences the performativity of, both, masculinities and femininities.

The society of Westeros is governed by the Law of the Father, the strong regiment of paternalism (Genz 247) that reinforces a strict gender binary and encodes each person with their appropriate status within the system (Rubin 183). The pervasive gender hierarchy, which structures the neo-medieval society of Westeros mirrors the believed to be God-given social order of the European Middle Ages. In the medieval period, such as in Westeros, the profound gender binary was of crucial importance and deeply impacted the life options of men and women, serving the maintenance of the male hegemony (Bennett, Karras and Mazo 1-2). Westerosi society is dominated by a rigid gender dualism, disregarding individualism and promoting traditional gender concepts of masculinity and femininity. As both parts of a dualism are mutually dependent, it renders the definition of femininity impossible, without also negating masculinity, and vice versa (Klinger 340-341). Consequently, the construction of the stereotypical female gender identity, according to the patriarchal norm, simultaneously promotes the unattainable ideal of hegemonic masculinity: while women are restricted to the domestic sphere, to child-rearing, passivity and servitude, men are associated with active agency, are archetypes of brave and strong fighters and rulers (Gebhardt 206; Frankel 161). The two sexes in this binary system, consequently do not possess the same rights nor futures (Rubin 193), as power is deeply gendered in the patriarchal society of Westeros (Ferreday 34). Femininity has hitherto been preferred one passively responding to the desires of male others, while not actively desiring or taking on any agency themselves (Rubin 182). The mad king Joffrey, the first Baratheon successor to the Iron Throne, claims that women should do what they are told, "[...] because that's what intelligent women do" (3.02; 12:35-12:37), emphasising that female passivity and subservience are also perceived the ideal mannerisms of a woman in Westeros. Thus, Martin's fantasy epos *Game of Thrones*, is not solely located in an inegalitarian

neo-medieval world, but its society, too, is characterised by a proto-patriarchal social structure (Genz 244).

Women in the patriarchal hegemony of Westerosi society are not solely oppressed by the limited, archetypal gender roles of mothers, wives and prostitutes that they are assigned to, but further, by the patriarchal control exercised over their bodies (Ferreday 33). Historically, men have claimed rights in their female kin, which they in turn did not even possess in themselves. Through such asymmetrical relationships by which women fall prey to men, women become oppressed in society.

A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold itself is money. (Rubin 158)

Especially, the patriarchal mechanism of exchanging women that has a long tradition in kinship systems and is therefore, also prevalent in Westeros, has manifested social life as the locus of female oppression (Rubin 158-177). Women in the past were “given in marriage, taken in battle, exchanged for favours, sent as tribute, traded, bought, and sold” (Rubin 175). Being female in Westeros does not differ severely from these ancient customs as it, too, regardless of class affiliation, means embodying nothing more than “key assets in the struggle for power and the creation of political networks” (Mares 148). Consequently, women in *Game of Thrones* have no rights and merely function as pawns in men’s game for money and power<sup>3</sup>. By degrading women to such a status of objects of exchange, thus robbing them of their agency, men are reinstated as the superior sex, enforcing the myth of female inferiority.

While the majority of Westerosi women are indeed trapped within these rigid gender expectations of femininity that are founded on the belief of male supremacy, the life of women in Westeros cannot be generalised. As Westeros is a vast continent, encompassing several kingdoms with diverse social customs, women’s status in Westerosi society can, as well as the lives of women in the medieval period and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, differ enormously depending on their origin, ethnicity and class affiliation (Morrison 5-6). One such exception within the fictional fantasy universe of *Game of Thrones* presents the society of peoples living in the harsh climate conditions, reminiscent of the ice-age, beyond the great Wall, which separates Westeros from the rough and mostly unexplored North. Due to their nomadic and anti-monarchical

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<sup>3</sup> As Westeros presents a pre-democratic, feudal society, agency obviously is strongly intertwined with class. Thus, depending on their class affiliation, women’s agency could differ considerably, and men of the peasantry, the lowest class in the Great Chain of Being, clearly did not possess any agency as well. However, it has to be noted that throughout the classes of the feudal system women consistently possessed less agency than their male counterparts.

societal structure, these societies, organised in tribes, which refer to themselves as ‘Free Folk’, are labelled ‘wildlings’ by the self-perceived ‘civilised’ people living on the feudal, monarchical southern side of the Wall. The concept of the ‘tribe’ presents an important organisational unit of social life in pre-modern societies, creating a bond of alliance through shared, even if remote, ancestors, culture and religion. The Free Folk’s kinship structure, thus, demonstrates the “[...] dominance of the social over the biological” (Lévi-Strauss 479), as loyalty is sworn based on common heritage and values and not due to consanguinity. This reveals a stark contrast to the South, where affiliation to a House is based on blood relationship and fealty is demanded and regulated through the strict feudal social hierarchy. Further, wildling societies differ from the feudal South in that, although they are defined by a pre-capitalist, simple-social structure, they are neither dominated by a male hegemony, nor are gender roles subject to a binary division. Unlike typical pre-capitalist kinship structures, which were dominated by a ‘taboo’ against the sameness of men and women (Rubin 178), labour beyond the Wall is not divided by sex, suggesting that no such ‘taboo’ against the egalitarianism of the sexes is in place in wildling communities. Women are not obligated to remain in the domestic sphere, as it is the case in the patriarchal South, but, as the wildling characters Ygritte and Osha reveal, they can and must fight as equals alongside men in order to secure survival.

Furthermore, it is typical for men in the Wildling society to engage in ancient tribes’ customs of taking women by force to prove the warriors’ capability of annexing the riches of others (de Beauvoir 83). Although this Wildling custom of bride-stealing, which reflects the ancient northern European tradition recited in the medieval epic of the *Nibelungenlied*, appears objectifying and rapist on the surface, it also allows wildling women to possess agency over their own bodies. Wildling societies differ in values and religion from the South as they believe in the polytheistic religion of the Old Gods, mirroring Paganism, which historically presented the dominant belief in pre-Christian indigenous communities (Davis, *Pagans* 26-27). The highly patriarchal concept of the holy matrimony is consequently not practiced in wildling communities and women are not shamed and their value does not decrease if they engage in pre-marital intercourse. Additionally, men never own their stolen brides, thus, women are allowed to fight their husbands and always have the option of leaving this non-binding relationship if it seems unsatisfactory to them (Frankel 68-69). In the pre-capitalist wildling society traces of sexism prevail, however, it seems more egalitarian than the ‘civilised’, neoliberal culture south of the Wall. This supports Gayle Rubin’s suggestion that “the world historical defeat of women occurred within the origin of culture, and is a prerequisite of culture” (176). Although, capitalist cultures follow a long tradition of sex-oppression (Rubin 164), they,

such as feudal Westerosi society, which projects the gender inequality of the series' period of production, have naturalised the systemic sexism and through their binary gender hierarchy, strict social customs and relentless pursuit of profit, amplify female oppression to enforce the male hegemony.

Power in the fantasy country Westeros is believed to reside in masculinity, however, the male hegemony and the dominant binary gender ideology are also subject to counter-hegemony. The gender binary, which associates strength with masculinity and vulnerability with femininity, becomes increasingly blurred in Westeros (Genz 246). Both, numerous women and men fail or refuse to conform to the archetypal images of femininity and masculinity that dominate the neo-medieval, feudalist Westerosi society, frequently resulting in their social ostracism and revealing the performativity of gender. Women like Brienne of Tarth, Yara Greyjoy and Arya Stark demonstrate that women do not take on an inferior standing in the society of Westeros due to the natural superiority of the male sex, but, because of biological determinism and the hierarchical arrangement of male and female genitals (Rubin 194). Brienne, Yara and Arya, who are strong and independent female fighters, display character traits and behaviours traditionally deemed 'masculine', while simultaneously not annihilating their status as women. They embody, to varying degrees, attributes associated with masculinity and femininity, thus, emphasising the social construction and performativity of gender identity. Furthermore, the three female warriors possess more agency than women typically do in Westerosi society, which also stems from the fact, however, that Brienne, Yara and Arya stem from nobility and consequently, as descendants from a high social class have more agency and life choices than women, and men, of lower classes in the Great Chain of Being. Nevertheless, they are nullifying the myth of female inferiority and demonstrating that the phallus is closely interconnected with perceived maleness and not the male sex itself, revealing that "power resides where men believe it resides" (2.03; 43:20-43:24).

Although men take a superior standing in the society of Westeros, due to the perceived supremacy of the male genitals, men unable to fulfil the stereotypical ideal of masculinity are not conferred the power associated with the male sex, the symbolic phallus. Tyrion Lannister, although a legitimate and 'high-born' son, lacks the privileges conferred to his older brother Jaime, because he was born with dwarfism and consequently, his masculinity is being questioned. Physical deformity also results in the loss of Theon Greyjoy's and Jaime Lannister's phallus. Theon who, after having been castrated and partially skinned in captivity, is mentally disturbed, is disowned by his father as he cannot fulfil his manly duty of furthering the family

line<sup>4</sup>. Jaime's castration on the other hand, occurs on a more symbolic level: the previous embodiment of the ideal of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1987) is deprived of his traditional masculine identity as knight and protector of the realm, and simultaneously his male supremacy, after his sword hand is amputated (Ferreday 29). This leaves him in the need to redefine his masculinity and place within the patriarchal order. However, physical deformity is not the sole reason of losing phallus. Merely the fact of not embodying the archetypal character traits of masculinity can result in the absence of phallus as Samwell Tarly reveals: as the eldest noble-born son and heir to a dynasty, he is outcast by his patriarchal father, due to his cowardice and unwillingness to fight, thus, his inability to fulfil attributes of masculinity. Nevertheless, strength and physical appearance alone do not aid the bestowment of symbolic phallus, birthright and thus, class affiliation is necessary as well, as male bastards never receive the same privileges as legitimate heirs. Moreover, men frequently acquire the phallus, power, by employing mechanisms of female oppression to enforce their male supremacy.

One such mechanism of oppression, besides a proto-patriarchal social structure and traditional values, securing the male hegemony in Westeros is "masculine intimidation" (Rubin 163). Especially, rape culture, which is "the product of gendered, raced and classed social relations that are central to patriarchal and heterosexist culture" (Ferreday 22), presents the dominant mechanism of the suppression of women in Westerosi society. Westeros is shaped by female oppression, brutality and torture, and women, regardless of their class affiliation and status, in particular are victims of this inexhaustible violence and sexual abuse (Genz 244; 246). Consequently, *Game of Thrones* is not an instance of escapism, presenting an image of nostalgic romanticism that glorifies the Middle Ages, but rather mirrors the social issues of inequality, corruption, war and sexism prevalent in the medieval period. While historically rape constituted a felony in civil law courts in the Middle Ages, and the rape of a virgin even presented an offence that could be punished by death or blinding (Gravdal 123), women "were put through an excruciatingly painful, degrading and humiliating set of procedures before an attacker could be put on trial for his crime" (Pistono 40). The difficulty and degradation faced by women in the process of receiving justice, resulted in the silencing of the medieval victims' accounts.

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<sup>4</sup> Theon, throughout the series' seasons, enacts "complicit masculinity" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832), holding a position of privilege through his maleness alone. However, he continuously struggles to define his masculinity in relation to the ideal of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 1987), which he is striving, but unable, to attain, emphasising the influence the patriarchal system exerts upon men's identities as well.

Similarly, although rape is omnipresent in the neo-medieval society of Westeros and a punishable felony, as Tyrion Lannister once remarks that rapists “were given a choice [...] – castration or the Wall” (1.02; 25:57-26:03), they are seldom prosecuted. Furthermore, most women in this patriarchal world are shamed into silence and never share their experienced trauma with others. This reflects the stigmatisation and victim-blaming still encountered by women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, discouraging them from speaking out about their traumatic experiences. Moreover, the rape culture prevalent in Westerosi society is strongly reminiscent of contemporary’s distinct college rape culture and the male hegemonic abuse of power, such the case of the allegations of sexual assault and abuse against film mogul Harvey Weinstein in 2017 reveal. “The silencing of women is intimately bound up in the lived, embodied and affective experience of women as mediated subjects in late capitalist culture” (Ferreday 26). Women have been muted by the male-hegemony and their censoring of female voices since the dawn of time (Burnett et al. 469) and the silencing of women continues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as contemporary culture’s focus on “bright male futures” (Ferreday 22), as in the 2012 Steubenville and the 2016 Stanford college rape cases, rather than on the long-term effects rape has on victims tragically illustrates. Additional to the emphasis on the male hegemony, instead on the aftermath of rape experienced by women, another parallel between contemporary capitalist and the neo-medieval society of Westeros is the strong association of rape with the foreign. Rapes in Westeros are frequently committed by socially marginalised people and strangers, perpetuating the dominant rape myth of the interconnection of sexual abuse and the exotic Other (Ferreday 31).

The fear of the Other also dictates Westeros’s border policy, as the continent is divided from the vastly unexplored North by a monumental “continent-barricading Wall” (McCutcheon n.p.). The boarder wall that is 700-foot in height and 300-foot in width clearly resembles Hadrian’s wall, the most famous Roman frontier, guarding Britain from barbarian invaders (English Heritage n.p.). According to Westerosi mythology the Wall in the North was built thousands of years ago and “ancient spells were carved into its foundation, strong magic to protect men from what lies beyond [...]” (6.10; 52:48-52:58). Initially, it was erected for the purpose of protecting the population from an army of magical undead creatures, referred to as White Walkers, who bring darkness and ice in their wake, themselves a possible allegory of climate change, which presents an urgent threat to contemporary’s environment. Over time, however, since the disappearance of the White Walkers, their existence has evolved into a perceived myth, resulting in the Wall being considered a fortification shielding the South from potential threats posed by the indigenous population inhabiting the harsh North, the Wildlings, as well as

magical creatures, such as mammoths and giants (McCutcheon n.p.). Consequently, the Wall in present-day Westeros primarily serves the purpose of preventing the intrusion of foreign peoples with differing cultural backgrounds and religious orientation, who are dismissed as ‘uncivilised’. This resonates with the xenophobic urge of contemporary nations to increasingly erect new borders in a presumably more globalised and interconnected world. The purpose in contemporary societies, as in Westeros, is to stop the immigration of *persona non-grata*, who possess alternating ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This is exemplified by the border wall currently being built between the United States and Mexico by the Trump administration, as well as by the numerous barriers created by countries such as Hungary, Austria, Greece, etc., during the refugee wave caused by the Syrian Civil War.

## **4. Game of Thrones' levels of narration**

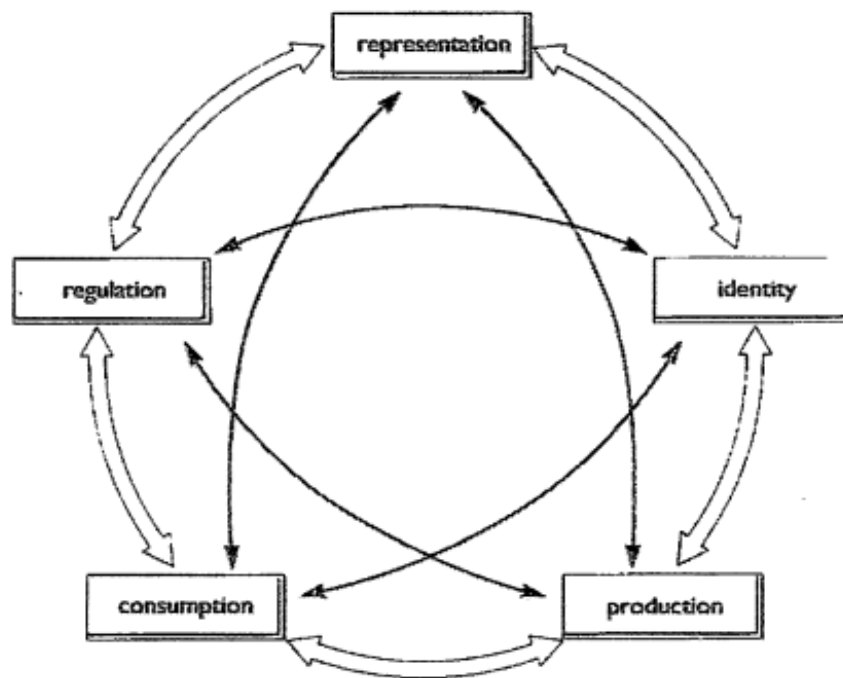
The subsequent chapters serve the purpose of illuminating the existing patriarchal boundaries as well as attempts of subverting and breaking patriarchal norms governing *Game of Thrones'* extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of narration. Lawrence Grossberg's notion of "radical contextuality" (20) purports that a cultural practice cannot be analysed without taking into account external relations by which it is influenced and shaped. Thus, the sexism and patriarchal framework interpenetrating *Game of Thrones* cannot be examined by solely focusing on the series' intradiegetic level of narration. Instead, the analysis also needs to focus extensively on the extradiegetic level of narration, including the mode of production and underlying political power structures.

### **4.1. Extradiegetic level of narration**

As the previous analysis of the society of Westeros and the contemporary West has already established, the fantasy epic *Game of Thrones* depicts numerous parallels to the culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the period in which the series is being produced. Sexism and a severe patriarchal framework, however, do not merely present constants in the pop cultural phenomenon's intradiegetic, as well as modern-day society's, societal structure, but also strongly pervade the show's extradiegetic level of narration. The subsequent analysis focuses on revealing the underlying forces governed by patriarchal norms that condition the production parameters of the fantasy epic. Additionally, it illustrates how the prevalent social power structures of the male hegemony and capitalism have informed particular production choices, including the show's notorious trademark, the gratuitous display of nudity. Moreover, informed by Stuart Hall's cultural studies (1977), Michel Foucault's discursive approach (1979), and studies in semiology, as conducted by Roland Barthes (1957), the patriarchal creation of representations and myths in *Game of Thrones*, as well as their potential effects on the spectatorship in terms of shaping the process of socialisation, body image and gender identity, are illuminated. Lastly, the chapter highlights the potency of counter-hegemonic strategies for transformations in the pop cultural landscape, drawing on the alterations made in regard to the series' exaggerated depiction of sexualised violence, evoked by feminist fandom and criticism.

#### 4.1.1. (Under) Representation

Culture, which pervades all of society, is constituted by a set of social practices by which meaning is produced. Since “all social practices entail meaning, all practices have a discursive aspect” (Hall, *Discourse* 201). Thus, the practice of representation, too, creates meaning. The *symbolic* domain even holds a crucial function in the process by which meaning is created and exchanged between individual members of a culture. Especially, the mass media of popular culture, the audio-visual form of representation, are of significant importance in the circulation of representations and the negotiation of meanings within and also across different cultures (Hall, *Representation* 2-15). According to Stuart Hall’s model of the ‘circuit of culture’ (see Fig. 6), the creation of meaning functions at several different sites and circulates through equally crucial processes and practices (Hall, *Representation* 3) – *representation*, *identity*, *regulation*, *consumption* and *production* – which are interrelated and co-construct each other. In the ensuing subchapters, I discuss each of the model’s individual elements in relation to the pop-cultural phenomenon *Game of Thrones*.



**Figure 6: The Circuit of Culture**

Source: Hall, Stuart. *Representation*. 1997

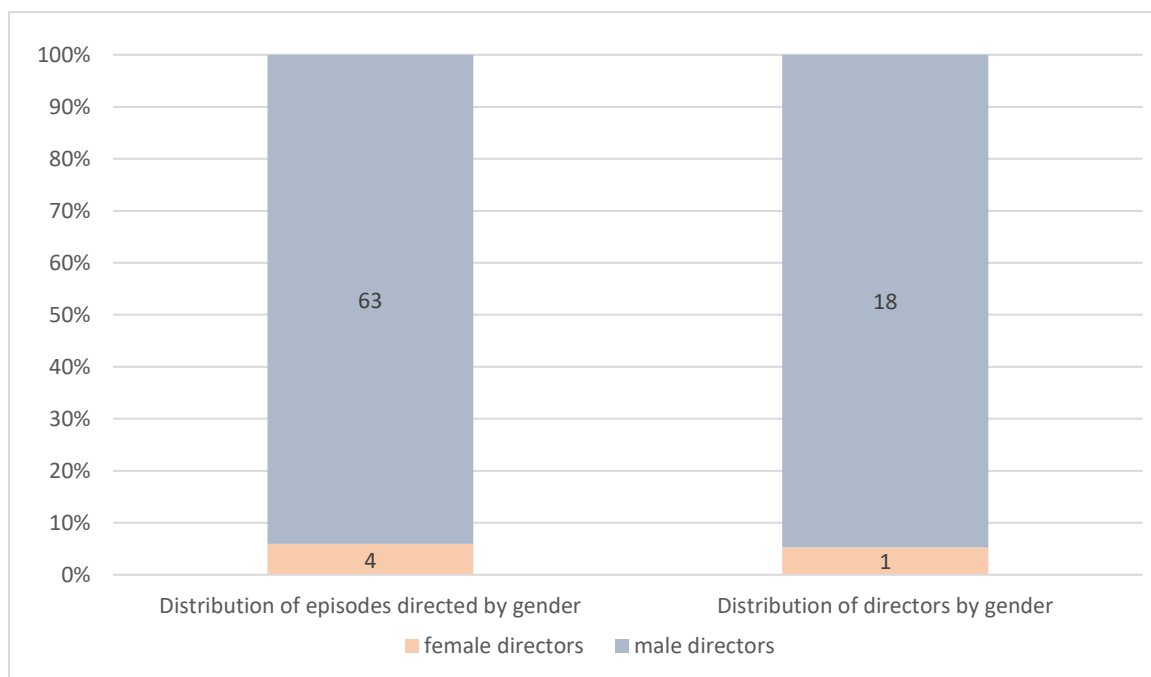
Representations never merely reflect reality, but are always informed by discourses that entail dominant ideologies and create “knowledge that serves the interests of a particular group or class” (Hall, *Discourse* 202). Thus, representations are informed by discourses based on the ruling elites’ ideologies and in turn, reinforce and propagate these dominant cultural ideals of the hegemony to the broad masses. Consequently, discourse presents not only a process that implicates power, but it is the system through which power circulates and the specific knowledge that is constructed in the process of meaning-making itself exercises power (Foucault, *Power* 201). Discourse, thus, can never be ideologically neutral or ‘innocent’ but is strongly intertwined with relations of power, as it is power, rather than reality, that constructs what is perceived as ‘truth’ within a society (Hall, *Discourse* 203). As Michel Foucault rightfully claims in his influential work *Discipline and Punish*,

We should admit that power produces knowledge [...] That power and knowledge deeply imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute [...] power relations. (27)

Historically, this reciprocal relationship between power and the creation of knowledge has presented a male hegemony, founded on the belief of female inferiority and, through the dominance over the construction of discourse, continuously legitimated it (Klinger 329). Those involved in the production of knowledge, consequently, also hold the power to enforce the validity of the discourse (Hall, *Discourse* 205). As visual representations in contemporary times present a crucial repository of social and cultural values it is of significance to acquire who the ruling elites in the production process of *Game of Thrones* are and whose ideologies are being supported and reinforced.

*Game of Thrones* is strongly governed by a rigid patriarchal framework and shows issues with the representation of women – not exclusively in on-screen depictions – as an investigation of the popular series’ production process and the number of women in the show’s behind-the-scenes positions demonstrate. Of the seven seasons’ 67 episodes that have aired on HBO to date, solely four have been directed by a woman, which accounts to mere 5.97% of all episodes (see Fig. 3). Taking into account that in television productions usually a unique director is responsible for several episodes and that 19 directors have in total worked on the show’s 67 episodes that have aired since 2011, the statistics of women in directorial positions on *Game of Thrones* turn out to be even more depressing: the four episodes from Seasons 3 and 4, “The Bear and the Maiden Fair” (3.07), “Second Sons” (3.08), “Oathkeeper” (4.04) “First of His Name” (4.05), have all been staged by one female director, Michelle MacLaren. This revelation

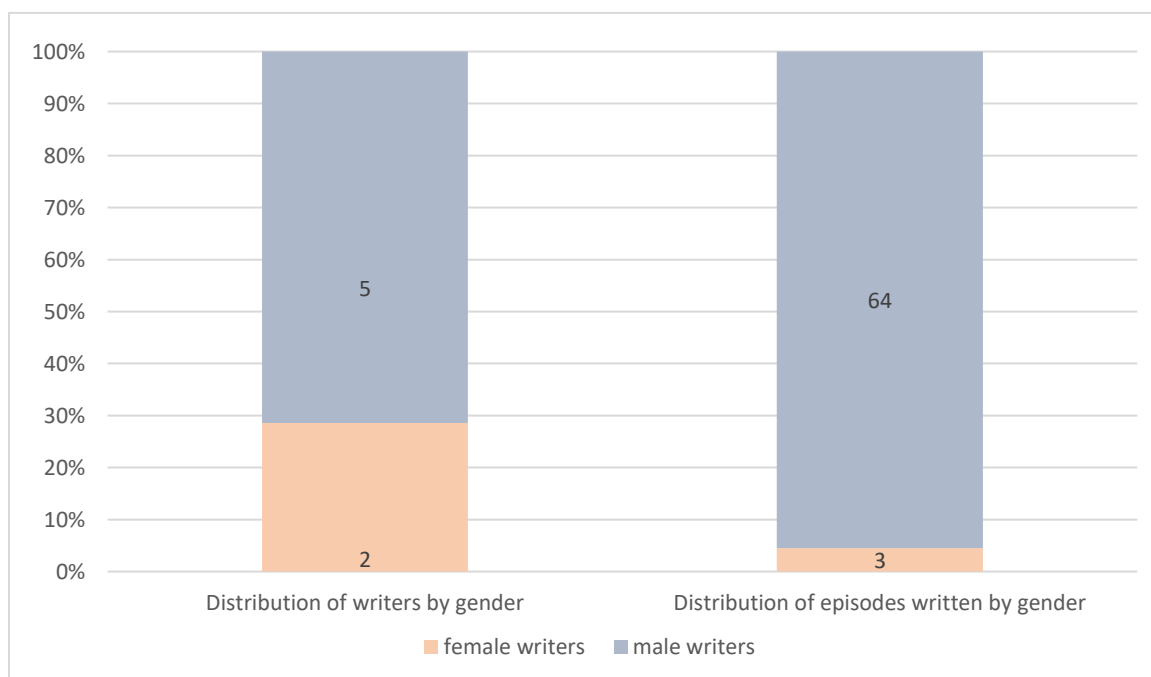
shockingly displays that only 5.26% of directors responsible for episodes of *Game of Thrones* are female (see Fig. 3), and furthermore that the gender disparity in the series' production has dramatically rocketed, since no individual episode has been directed by a woman since MacLaren's 2013 episode "First of His Name". Moreover, the unequal gender distribution will not be resolved in the series' future, as the announcement of the exclusively male directors – Miguel Sapochnik, David Nutter, who both won an Emmy for their directory achievement on *Game of Thrones*, as well as the two show runners David Benioff and D.B. Weiss (Hibberd, *Directors* n.p.) – discloses, making MacLaren the only woman to ever have directed an episode of the HBO show *Game of Thrones*. Although the list includes artistically valued directors who have staged many episodes that are considered to be fan favourites, the directorial decisions certainly raise the question why the show's producers have decided on an all-male cast to stage the series' suspected feminist showdown.



**Figure 3: Distribution of directing by gender**

Source: IMDb 2018

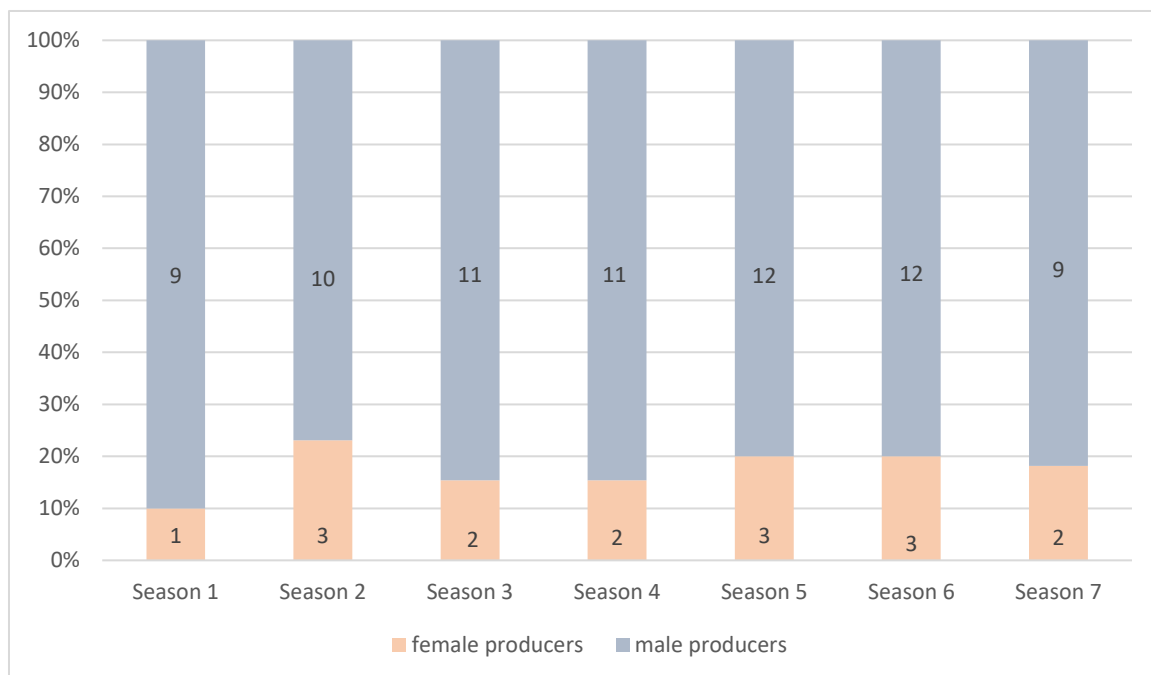
While the female underrepresentation in regard to the writing team of the series is not as dramatic as it is the case with women in directorial positions, the number of female writers nevertheless mirrors the gender trouble of *Game of Thrones*. Since its debut season, the popular show has employed a small writing staff, consisting of seven writers – Bryan Cogman, Dave Hill, *ASOIF* author George R.R. Martin, Jane Espenson, Vanessa Taylor and creators Benioff and Weiss – who are responsible for the current 67 episodes. Of these seven writers only two are women (28.57%) whose teleplays account for merely four (5.9%) of the episodes aired (see Fig. 4), even including the episode “A Golden Crown” (1.06) for which Espenson earned her sole and shared credit with creators Benioff and Weiss. Since Taylor’s third and last scripted episode “Dark Wings, Dark Words” (3.02), following the Season 2 episodes “Garden of Bones” (2.04) and “The Old Gods and the New” (2.06), the show’s writing team has further contracted to the four exclusively white male core members Cogman, Hill, Benioff and Weiss, with Martin last contributing an individual episode, “The Lion and the Rose” (4.02), in Season 4. As the series progresses, the male hegemony underlying its storytelling will certainly not be disrupted, as it has been reported that these four men are also going to share the writing duties for the final eighth season (Miller n.p.). So quite ironically, while female characters are increasingly becoming empowered on the show and are cultivating agency, *Game of Thrones* has for several years been deprived of a female perspective and voice and will continue to follow this paternalistic approach in the series’ future.



**Figure 4: Distribution of writing by gender**

Source: IMDb 2018

The behind-the-scenes production team of a television show additionally include producers, executive- and co-executive producers, which account for the highest number of female crewmembers involved in the production process of *Game of Thrones*. Of the 16 producers in the course of the series' seven seasons to date women have made up four of them, constituting 25% of the production crew. However, their involvement in the show's individual episodes ranges from 11% to 30% in the course of the series' progression. Solely one of the nine producers engaged in Season 1 was female (11%), a number which rocketed to three female producers out of ten producers in total (30%) a year later in Season 2. Since then, women have in average comprised 21.8% of crewmembers bound into the production processes of Seasons 3 to 7 (see Fig. 5). Although the number of female producers working on individual episodes of *Game of Thrones* (21.8%) is generally higher than the numbers of female directors and writers per episode combined (11.45%), the statistics are nevertheless revealing a significant gender disparity among the crewmembers of the fantasy epic. Furthermore, the four women that have been part of the series' production crew – Carolyn Strauss, Vanessa Taylor, Bernadette Caulfield and Lisa McAtackney – are not involved, and hence, hold no influence over the process of driving the storytelling, consequently, unable to offer their female perspective to the male-dominated show.



**Figure 5: Distribution of producers by gender**

Source: HBO 2018

The fact that women present a minority in the production process of *Game of Thrones* is not solely an issue regarding the popular HBO series, but, as it has been established in the chapter on popular culture, the underrepresentation of women in executive and behind-the-scenes positions is penetrating the entire contemporary media landscape. Indeed, most primetime television and cinematic productions fail to employ women in directorial, writing and production positions. According to the annual report of diversity in television directing released by the Directors Guild of America (DGA 2017), solely a fifth of all episodes (21%) are directed by women, of which the majority (80.05%) are Caucasian, revealing a severe lack in gender as well as ethnic diversity in directorial positions. While HBO generally belongs to the studios that are stronger in hiring female directors for their shows (33.3%), their most successful television production does not emphasise any commitment for inclusion, as 94.03% of all episodes have been directed by men who are almost exclusively Caucasian (94.74%). Overall, the number of female crewmembers employed in the production process of *Game of Thrones* is, even compared with the low count of women in behind-the-scenes positions on average, underwhelming. Regarding the involvement of female producers (21.62%) and writers (28.57%), the show mirrors the general statistics that women working in television indeed fare best as producers (39%) or writers (33%) in behind-the-scenes roles than as directors (17%) (Lauzen 3). However, in respect to *Game of Thrones* the number of women working in all three of these positions is below-average. Thus, the production process of the fantasy show is not only reminiscent, but even amplifying the male white hegemony, which is domineering the popular culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The male supremacy of the television industry does not solely affect further male-centred hiring decisions and thus, the maintenance of the male supremacy in behind-the-scenes positions (Lauzen 3), but additionally it has severe effects on the images conveyed on screen. As it has already been established, discourses follow certain “purposes, aims, objectives, motives, interests and strategies” (Hall, *Discourse* 204) of the ruling elites, who hold the power to manipulate societal beliefs and values. Because the ruling elites of *Game of Thrones*’ production process are white men, it is, consequently, their male hegemonic *Weltanschauung* (Gramsci, *Selections* 75) that is perpetuated and moderates off-screen, as well as, on-screen representations.

#### 4.1.2. The production's male gaze

*Game of Thrones* could be considered as reflecting an inherently male perspective, as it is based on the fantasy novel series of George R.R. Martin, a male white author. Moreover, the fantasy genre itself has always been notorious for its unilateral focus on a male audience. However, the serial adaptation with its audio-visual form and its following of storylines alternating the source material needs to be regarded as a separate entity that hence, could have employed a female perspective by hiring women in crucial behind-the-scenes positions. Furthermore, the male-domination of the fantasy genre proves to be a misconception in regard to *Game of Thrones*, as women already accounted for two million (42%) of the show's 4.8 million viewers in 2013 (Watercutter n.p.). Although, brutality, nudity and sexual violence also dominate the books, as Martin did not want to depict romanticised, egalitarian and sexless "Disneyland Middle Ages" (Martin in Hibberd, *Violence* n.p.), the show exceeds the novels' sexualisation and sexist portrayal of women. Partly this could stem from the adaptation's more graphic audio-visual format. However, the issue with *Game of Thrones* is not the involvement of nudity per se, but rather the power structures of male activeness and female passivity, and subsequent objectification, implied in the depictions that have frequently resulted in the show's producers Benioff and Weiss being accused of having transformed the show into misogyny (Henderson n.p.).

Gender roles *are* power relations. Gender is not only a cause but also a consequence, instrument and embodiment of power-over relations. It is a key mechanism through which power not only constrains but *constitutes* individuals and is perhaps the most persistent form of 'invisible power' in our world (Koester 3)

The power over the representations of gender in *Game of Thrones* is held by men: men present the ruling elite in the framework of popular culture and men, too, dominate the production process of *Game of Thrones*. Consequently, the male hegemony, the active controllers of the patriarchal structure, convey their 'male gaze' to the predominantly male audience targeted by the fantasy genre (Frankel 18).

The term 'male gaze', which was coined by the feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1975) refers to the socially established gender-bias, which is reflected in the cinematic gaze. As the fantasy world depicted on screen is subject to the law which produces it, it is the dominant patriarchal order that structures the spectator's look and their pleasure in looking (Mulvey, *Visual*, 58-61). Consequently, it holds the representative power over film fantasy and constitutes the "bearer of the look of the spectator" (Mulvey, *Visual*, 63). Controlled by an unconscious patriarchal

framework, representations on screen have thus, been focusing on and perpetuating a male, heterosexual, perspective, representing women as passive objects of male pleasure (Mulvey, *Visual*, 57).

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (Mulvey, *Visual*, 62)

Traditionally, the depiction of woman on screen has fulfilled two roles: woman functions as the erotic object of desire of one of the characters within the intradiegetic level of narration and as an erotic object for the spectator as well. This display of women as sexual objects and leitmotif of the erotic spectacle stems from the underlying patriarchal scopophilia (Mulvey, *Visual*, 62), the voyeuristic pleasure of “[...] using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (Mulvey, *Visual*, 61). Conventionally, scopophilia is achieved through the cinematic techniques of close-ups or lingering pans over the female body (Mulvey, *Visual*, 62), thereby, creating the woman as icon who is “[...] displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men” who present “the active controllers of the look” (Mulvey, *Visual*, 64). Furthermore, the audience is absorbed into the voyeurist or fetishist situation within the on-screen diegesis and becomes complicit with the identification with the male spectator position (Mulvey, *Visual*, 66). Consequently, all three differing looks that Mulvey associates with a filmic production – that of the camera, the audience and that cast by the characters at each other – are led by a patriarchal ideology of representation (Mulvey, *Visual*, 68).

In regard to *Game of Thrones*, as well as most contemporary popular culture, all three looks are characterised by significant sexism and strongly execute the ‘male gaze’. As it has been established, the fantasy show employs an overwhelming majority of men in executive and creative positions in its production process. Hence, the camera, which revolves around and is subordinated to the ideology of representation favoured by the ruling elite (Mulvey, *Visual*, 68), satisfies the male hegemonic pleasure by extensively capturing female nudity and voyeuristic sex scenes. Especially, the camera techniques of close-up, lingering pans over the female body, reflecting the spectator’s staring eyes, and ‘fragmentation’, the focus on isolated body parts, are frequently employed within the series’ individual episodes (Frankel 19). Even in instances of reverted power, in which women do possess agency and men are in a passive, subordinate position, such as in the scene where the sorceress Melisandre seduces the former king’s bastard Gendry and ties him to the bed in order to obtain his blood (3.08), the camera angle is inherently

subordinated to the male gaze. While solely Gendry's naked upper body is depicted on screen, Melisandre is displayed in complete undress (see Image 1.1) and during the sex scene the camera alternately focuses on his face (see Image 1.2) and, in a lingering over-the-shoulder-shot, on her naked upper body (see Image 1.3).



Image 1.1: Melisandre seduces Gendry. 3.08. 28:56.



Image 1.2: Close-up Gendry. 3.03. 29:54.



Image 1.3: Fragmented shot of Melisandre. 3.08. 30:00.

By focusing on the woman's revealed breasts in fragmented shots, she is sexualised and turned into an erotic object for the enjoyment of the male character as well as the spectators. This eroticization demonstrates that the camera reproduces the dichotomy of men as active controllers of the gaze and women as objects of said gaze. Melisandre, although she technically holds a position of power, is nevertheless degraded to her sexual magnetism and fully embodies the classic stereotype of a femme fatale. She presents a lust interest, her nudity merely functioning as a means of titillation to satisfy the intended heterosexual male spectator's scopophilic fantasy and reflecting the male hegemony's inability to bear the burden of sexually objectifying a male figure (Mulvey, *Visual*, 63).

#### 4.1.3. Consumption, Complex television, and ‘sexposition’

The overt sexualisation of women in *Game of Thrones*, however, is not exclusively the culpability of the male gaze, but, as representations are informed by numerous discourses (Hall, *Discourse* 202), the objectifying depictions of women do also stem from the series’ production parameters. *Game of Thrones* presents a prime example of complex television, which, as a format produced by subscription-based networks, is purely led by a capitalist agenda. As viewers must subscribe to the premium channels in order to access their complex productions, the various pay-tv networks engage in a “quality war” (Davidson, n.p.), offering more complex, provocative and compelling content, to lure paying audiences (Reichert and Lambiasi 103). Frequently, this war for the domination of the market intersects with the premium channels’ freedom from strict FCC regulations. Complex productions’ independence from stately censoring has resulted in their notoriously exploitative and extensive display of violent and sexist images (Nesselhauf and Schleich 10). Especially, HBO has, from *The Sopranos* onwards, created its niche in the televisual landscape based on the marketing strategy of excessive depictions of sex, nudity and graphic violence. The premium cable network draws on images of “gritty, uncompromising authenticity” (Hassler-Forest 192) not only as narrative and aesthetic function, but additionally to mark themselves off from other pay-tv channels and target a self-perceived sophisticated audience (Spiegel 370). The subscription-based networks’ hallmark features have elicited considerable critique, such as by the critic Lara Stemple who accuses HBO for “[...] mistaking vulgarity for being grown up, for sophistication” (168). While HBO’s critiqued formula for success heavily draws on the capitalist rationale ‘sex sells’, thus, abiding by the general contemporary societal trend towards expanding into a “pornosphere”, resulting in “a less regulated, more commercialized, and more pluralistic sexual culture” (McNair, *Striptease* 11), the fantasy production *Game of Thrones* has carried the extent of gratuitous nudity and sexualised violence to an unprecedented extreme.

The trend of varied and numerous scenes in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* featuring unnecessary female nudity even led to media critic Myles McNutt coining the term “sexposition” (*You Win*, n.p.). The portmanteau of ‘sex’ and the film technique of ‘exposition’, refers to “the use of nudity or sexual acts in conjunction with the communication of information related to character, plot, or mythology” (McNutt, *Night Lands*, n.p.). So, in its purest definition, sexposition describes the revelation of character information, via long monologues or dialogues, set against a backdrop of ample, predominantly female, nakedness on screen. The most well known instance of sexposition within *Game of Thrones*, the scene which actually inspired McNutt to

coin the term, shows Lord Petyr Baelish instructing two prostitutes on how to convincingly fake sexual ecstasy when with customers. While the two naked women are engaging in simulating sexual activity, Baelish simultaneously offers an extensive insight into his past, character development, as well as present motives (1.07; 10:40-14:17). Hence, woman in this filmic technique merely functions as erotic spectacle, as requisite, whose sensationalised depiction functions to freeze the look of the targeted male heterosexual spectator in such “moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey, *Visual*, 62) and fixate the consumers to the image on screen during a prolonged input of information (Mulvey, *Visual*, 68).

Although, the filmic technique has been used in productions previous to *Game of Thrones*, such as in HBO’s *The Sopranos*, in which exposition scenes are frequently set in a strip club, the series extremely relies on minor female characters’, predominantly prostitutes’, nudity and sexuality in its mise-en-scène. Therefore, it is important not to confuse the neologism sexposition with the overall gratuitous depiction of nakedness in non-expository scenes that do not aid the advancement of the plotline, but present an overused, cheap special effect, included in order to titillate the audience. Indeed, in numerous instances the superfluity of female nudity becomes obvious and clearly only follows the purpose of pleasing the spectator’s scopophilic fantasy. In fact, the gratuitousness of the deployment of female nakedness within *Game of Thrones* was further emphasised by director Neil Marshall’s (“Blackwater”, 2.09) interview with the Empire Film Podcast (2012). After being asked about the much-critiqued nudity on screen, he reveals the network’s agenda to include nakedness, even in scenes where it has not been scripted, recounting how an executive producer told him, “You can go full frontal, you know! This is television, you can do whatever you want. And do it. I urge you to do it”. He further claims that this particular executive even stated, “I represent the pervert side of the audience [...] and I’m saying I want full frontal nudity in this scene” (Empire, 6:50-7:43). The executive’s statement makes it clear that the countless female extras who are depicted in full frontal nudity are not included into the drama’s storyline to portray historical accuracy, a frequently named argument for the excessive on-screen nakedness and sexual violence (see Martin in Itzkoff n.p.), but to appeal to an extensive audience who “delight in the spectacle of violence and sex” (Genz 243). Consequently, the interview reveals the link between the gender politics and promotion of female inferiority in Westeros with the premium cable channel HBO’s capitalist endeavour and politics of objectification, exploiting their independence from FCC regulations to lure paying consumers.

#### 4.1.4. Constructing gender identity

Although, the fantasy epic features a notable number of fully fledged female protagonists as well, women predominantly compose minor characters serving as erotic spectacles and even the majority of main female characters have been displayed in varying stages of undress in the show's course. While the extensive nudity and sexualised violence might please the targeted male audience's scopophilic pleasure and thus, succeeds at increasing subscription numbers, the sexist on-screen depictions of women do simultaneously negatively affect the female spectators. The "[...] 'masculinization' of the spectator position" (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts*, 69) imposes the 'masculine' point of view on the female viewership, which in terms of *Game of Thrones*, accounted for almost half of the show's audience in 2013 (Watercutter, n.p.). Consequently, the women in the audience are forced to either transition into the other sex (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts*, 72) and identify with the active male protagonist, and thus, the patriarchal ideology structuring filmic productions (Bennett, Hickman and Wall, 253-254), or to engage in female masochism, identifying with the passive female as spectacle (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts*, 69). In both cases, the female spectators have to accept women's constructed status as objects of male desire and hence, also internalise the implicated myth of female inferiority perpetuated. Furthermore, such sexist depictions also potentially impact the male spectators' understanding of femininity and masculinity, regarding that both are socially constructed in contradistinction to each other, these images reinforce the gender binary as well as the misogynist belief of male supremacy and female degradation (Steiner 366). Besides impacting the spectators' gender identity and reinforcing the belief of female subordination, the images conveyed by *Game of Thrones*, an instance of mass media, which present one of the principal agents in the process of socialisation, are equally transmitting norms, values and ideas that are affecting the media users' attitudes on body standards and sexuality (López-Guimerà et al. 388-389).

It is well known that the mass media promote unhealthy messages about beauty norms and body size, which consequently have resulted in the internalisation of these ideals by the, especially, female adolescent and young adult, spectators (López-Guimerà et al. 388). Although *Game of Thrones* is set in a fictional fantasy universe, this series, too, presents no exception to the promotion of narrow and unattainable beauty standards by the mass media. Completely independent from their social stratification, from noble women to prostitutes, the vast majority of women who are depicted in various stages of undress on screen, are reflecting the contemporary Western paradigm of beauty. Women's skin is "soft, supple, hairless, and

smooth”, not demonstrating any “sign of wear, experience, age, or deep thought” (Bartky 136). The fact that the representations of female characters fully conform to the aesthetic norms valued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a silhouette that is “taut, small-breasted, narrow-hipped, and of slimness bordering on emaciation” (Bartky 132), rather than reflecting the ideals of the Middle Ages, stems from the discourses, which inform the series’ production being “historically and culturally specific” (Hall, *Representation*, 3). Most of present-day mass media adhere to the capitalist creed that ‘sex sells’ and, as *Game of Thrones* is a product of the consumerist period it is being produced in, the show mirrors the *Zeitgeist* of pornification. However, while the undermining of women for the sake of profit is a common patriarchal strategy in Western culture, the concentration of the display of sexualised women conforming to modern aesthetic ideals seems to have reached a culmination within the fantasy epos.

Visual media present a powerful force of social communication in contemporary society and, although the images conveyed are hyper-ritualistic and do not reflect reality accurately, offer the spectators crucial information about gender and sex (Jhally 313; 317). The issue with the misconceptions about gender identity established is that meaning is always deciphered based on representations and the significance ascribed to them. Once this relation has been established, meaning has an effect on behaviours and actions, directly correlating with the construction of the audiences’ identity (Hall, *Representation*, 3). The representations of femininity conveyed by *Game of Thrones* exclusively depict idealised female bodies as erotic spectacle, while presenting non-conforming characters’ nudity as non-sensual, such as in the bulky knight Brienne of Tarth’s unveiling bathtub scene with Jaime Lannister (3.05), or their non-conformity as comic relief, as in Brienne being ridiculed by being forced to fight in a dress (3.07), underlining her perceived unwomanliness. As “the mannish woman is taken as a sign of lesbian identity” (Tasker and Steenberg 183), Brienne, although her amorous interest in men is revealed, for instance, quite ironically, in Renly Baratheon, who indeed is gay, she is coded ‘queer’, due to her inability to conform to dominant beauty ideals of femininity. Brienne’s appearance and performance of her gender identity render her the exotic Other and, thus, force her into a status of ‘queerness’. Thereby, both, the non-conforming character’s right to desire is ridiculed and her desirability as a woman is rejected.

Consequently, the show, which ostensibly promotes progressive gender identities by featuring numerous three-dimensional female protagonists, like most complex television, fails to present female bodies that are challenging narrow beauty ideals (Hass 106). Instead, the series' emphasis on traditional female physicality and attractiveness, reflects the Western beauty myth that the female body is "a body designated to please or excite" (Bartky 142) and in order to be considered desirable and worthy of the male gaze must adhere to culturally specific beauty and body size standards. The show's representations of women are not solely problematic, because they do little to enhance their social status, as attention and admiration do not reflect any social agency (Bartky 141), but also due to the fact that media images play a significant role in the transformation of audiences' self-concept of body image. People's body image, "the picture we have in our minds of the size, shape, and form of our bodies; and to our feelings concerning these characteristics and our constituent body parts" (Slade 20), is constantly shifting and subjected to ideals perpetuated by the media. Women in the developmental periods of adolescence and early adulthood are particularly vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and heightened body image instability, which are triggered by unattainable body ideals promoted by mass media productions, such as *Game of Thrones* (Mills, Roosen and Vella-Zarb 60-64).<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, the beauty myth perpetuated and imposed on women, through *Game of Thrones* and other visual representations, constitutes the body as a new oppressive force and thus, enables the continuation of female oppression. Unlike the patriarchal framework with its obvious constraints on women's agency, contemporary's "tyranny of slenderness" (Bartky 141) is a socially constructed beauty myth, strongly informed by misogynistic and sexist discourses of male hegemony, that has been naturalised over time. As Roland Barthes explains, "what the world supplies to myth is an [sic] historical reality, defined, even if it goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a natural image of this reality" (142). Consequently, myths "[...] cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things" (Barthes 108) but are carefully constructed by the ruling elites to convey and naturalise their ideologies. As the pop cultural phenomenon *Game of Thrones* reaches an unprecedented audience, it is crucial to understand how the male hegemony behind the production processes creates and enforces myths. Therefore, I conduct a Barthian analysis of a

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<sup>5</sup> The show does not exclusively portray problematic images of femininity, but it, too, conveys idealised and unrealistic depictions of male bodies and masculinity, which might also negatively affect men's body image and self-esteem. However, as the thesis's focus lies on the patriarchal structures governing *Game of Thrones*' levels of narration and their effects on women, as well as (successful) attempts of breaking paternalistic structures, the incorporation of the patriarchy's impact on men would consequently exceed the thesis's scope.

still from a scene of *Game of Thrones*, to reveal the underlying process in the capitalist creation of a myth, as well as to uncover the meaning the myth, which “[...] is a message” (Barthes 107), conveys on a wider cultural level. Drawing on Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1915) linguistic model of the *signifier* and the *signified*, Barthes defined his concept of “mythology” (1957) by linking the emerging *sign* with a broader cultural level, the second level of signification, whereby, as he states, the myth is constituted.



Image 2: Littlefinger’s brothel. 4.01. 10:06.

At the first level, the elements of the still image (see Figure 2), the *signifiers*, denote three lined-up women in differing stages of undress, either entirely naked or scantily clad, who are being gazed at by the woman in the foreground and two men in the background. Combined with the *signifieds*, the concepts of romance and eroticism, that the nudity displayed and the image’s low-key lighting as well as the warm, red colour scheme convey, the emanating *sign* purports a simple connotated meaning: ‘prostitutes working in a brothel are examined by potential customers’. By linking the sign to the broader cultural level, the ideological theme of *Game of Thrones* as an instance of complex television, which is notorious for its excessive depiction of nudity, it is revealed that the women do not fulfil the function of pleasing the actors. Rather, their movements and striptease are choreographed and designed to appeal to the targeted male heterosexual audience’s scopophilia. Barthes’s claim that the “woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked” (84), promoting the appeal of ‘the hidden’, demonstrates that his insights, published in post war France at the dawn of mass culture, differ from contemporary pop cultural perceptions: nowadays, a nude woman no longer presents the exotic Other, but shows compliance with the new cultural norm of pornification. This, however, emphasises Barthes’s own argument that images are always “[...] adapted to a certain type of consumption” (107-108). *Game of Thrones* is driven by HBO’s capitalist creed to lure viewers and to do ensure rising subscriber numbers complies with pornification and dominant cultural beauty norms.

By exclusively depicting women embodying 21<sup>st</sup> century body ideals, however, the series simultaneously amplifies the myth that conformity with beauty standards is required in order to be perceived desirable or sexually attractive by both, men and women. Thus, the myth is created from a previously existing semiological chain and, while it notifies the audience of the social construction of body standards, it also imposes these norms on them (Barthes 113-115). Consequently, the sexist portrayal of idealised women is ideologically charged, and the transmitted imperative to fulfil these beauty standards and body size norms serves the patriarchal interest of domination (Bartky 143). As the male supremacy in societal key positions is continuously challenged and women attempt to attain equal rights and power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, beauty, as Naomi Wolf states, in the modern era in the West “is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (12). Although the body standards stem from an underlying patriarchal ideology, they have evolved into an oppressive force in their own right, creating docile bodies, which unreflectingly adhere to the socially constructed beauty norms and values. Moreover, this “modernization of patriarchal domination” (Bartky 132) is, regardless of their class affiliation, self-imposed by the subjects, who largely remain oblivious of their self-induced disempowerment. The invisible disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body can be explained drawing on Jeremy Bentham’s model of the Panopticon, the prison designed “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). Through the ubiquitous confrontation with normative images of idealised femininity in *Game of Thrones* and other visual media that are principled by patriarchal culture, women internalise the look of the anonymous patriarchal Other. Thereby, they strive to obtain a patriarchal ideal while simultaneously engaging in self-surveillance, taking on the role of the panoptical male connoisseur (Bartky 140).

#### 4.1.5. Regulating the patriarchal gaze

While conforming to and promoting of unattainable body standards has not yet been an issue raised with *Game of Thrones*, the abundance of scenes featuring gratuitous, sensationalised nudity, sexuality, and violence have triggered severe criticism, since the show has started to air<sup>6</sup>. The misogyny displayed has also resulted in the alienation of many female viewers, as “[...] it is always possible that the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its ‘masculinization’, that the spell of fascination is broken” (Mulvey, *Afterthoughts* 69-70). This reveals that viewers are not passive receivers of the male hegemonic ideology, but rather, present an active force of counter-hegemony, who can resist and challenge the images conveyed and normalised by the patriarchy through ‘negotiated’ or oppositional readings of media images (Brunsdon and Morley 1978). Throughout the history of television, programmes’ contents and their display of gender images have often changed according to the desires of protesting groups (Davis, *Portrayals* 326). The very same development can be witnessed in regard to the depiction of nudity and sexualised violence on *Game of Thrones* over the course of the series’ seven seasons to date: in its initial season the series is packed with scenes including nudity and statistically, features the most instances of sexualised violence; the show’s subsequent six seasons’ depiction of nudity and sexuality has since, however, contrasting the rocketing popularity of the fantasy epic, constantly decreased. In the first season, thirty-three people are depicted in undress, 88% of which are women, whereas in the penultimate seventh season the number has shrunk to a limited six people and an equal gender ratio of nudity. The statistics of attempted rape and rape scenes in *Game of Thrones*, too, mirror this development of decline with the first season depicting the highest number of attempted rape and rape scenes, while no such instances are included in the storylines of, both, Season 6 and Season 7 (David n.p.).

The plummeting of the show’s incipient hallmark features correlates with the continuous feminist fandom’s critique of the series’ over-reliance on nudity and rape as narrative instruments. Feminist critics have frequently claimed that gratuitous nakedness is employed in order to lure subscribers and that sexualised violence is employed as facilitator for, predominantly male, character development, while any thoughtful engagement with the dreadful effects and trauma concomitant with the experience of sexual violence are completely

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<sup>6</sup> The objectification, sexualisation and violence endured by female characters within *Game of Thrones*’ intradiegetic level of narration has been repeatedly addressed by numerous online newspaper articles (see [telegraph.co.uk](http://telegraph.co.uk), [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), [time.com](http://time.com), [independent.co.uk](http://independent.co.uk)), online magazines ([vulture.com](http://vulture.com), [slate.com](http://slate.com)), as well as political ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com)) and especially fan web blogs ([denofgeek.com](http://denofgeek.com), [feministcurrent.com](http://feministcurrent.com)).

omitted. Especially the brutal sexual violation and humiliation of female protagonist Sansa Stark in Season 5 (5.06), following an arranged marriage to the sadist Ramsey Bolton, triggered an enormous public backlash on the show's producers Benioff and Weiss in the media, on social media platforms and was even discussed in the US Senate (Bennion n.p.). The scene, which presents a deviation from the source material, is extremely problematic, because it unnecessarily presents visual imagery to a scene that could have easily been imagined by the audiences who have become well-aware of Ramsay's depravity. Moreover, the rape scene emphasises the issue of the male perspective and gaze on the experience of female trauma, as the camera's eventual close-up in the scene is on Reek's face, revealing that the scene indeed serves the purpose of the male character's redemption, by being forced to bear witness to the assault.

The public outcry following the airing of the episode has influenced *Game of Thrones'* producers and consequently, also resulted in the show's future adaptation of changes as the director of the episode "Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken", David Podeswa, states (Podeswa, cited in Bennion n.p.). Probably, it was even the fans' backlash that convinced the producers to include a scene in which Sansa forces Lord Petyr Baelish, who had previously traded her into the abusive marriage, to vocalise the horrors she endured (6.05), as well as a powerful revenge scene for Sansa on her abuser in Season 6 (6.09). By not concealing another traumatic experience of sexual violence, but openly discussing it for the first time, thus deconstructing the common stigmatisation attached to rape, the producers most certainly attempt to pacify the audiences. However, as the series has been subjected to feminist critique since it originated, hardly causing any transformations in the fantasy epic's policy on nudity and sexualised violence, the spectators' counter-hegemony probably do not account as the sole factor leading up to the decline of such sensationalised depictions. Indeed, *Game of Thrones'* reduction of the inclusion of titillating imagery might also stem from their no longer required reliance on this capitalist strategy in order to lure subscribers, as audiences worldwide are already fully invested in the enthralling narrative. Furthermore, a potential factor for the series' expurgation in the numbers of nudity and sexualised violence could simply be the evolution of the storyline: drawing on a close, it is prerequisite for the show to tie together the individual strands of narration, rather than concentrating on engaging in unnecessary pornification. Moreover, the remission of nudity is corresponding with the increasingly empowered depictions of the female protagonists, as by Season 7 almost all rulers in the fantasy universe Westeros are female and in the process of transforming the patriarchy into a matriarchy.

## 4.2. Intradiegetic level of narration

The fantasy genre itself opens up the possibility of transcending reality and proposing, potentially superior, alternative worlds (Jackson 2). Hence, fantasy provides an opportunity for depicting emancipated gender roles, subverting and bringing them in tension with traditional gender identities, as well as for uncovering and dismantling underlying formative oppressive forces (Ferreday 23). As the analysis of *Game of Thrones*' extradiegetic level of narration has revealed, the fantasy series' mode of production does not engage in a subversion of existing patriarchal structures. On the contrary, the show's production parameters are strongly governed by female underrepresentation and a rigid following of a patriarchal ideology and capitalistic endeavour, serving the furthering of the male privilege. The subsequent analysis of the fantasy epic's intradiegetic level of narration examines whether *Game of Thrones*' storyworld mirrors the production's inability to subvert the patriarchal framework by which it is characterised. Furthermore, it unveils whether the series' narrative showcases female characters' awareness of and attempts to address and break patriarchal oppression by analysing selected scenes from the initial to the penultimate seventh season based on four criteria: ignorance of the patriarchal framework; women's awareness of the hegemony, but lack of agency; and women's conscience of the patriarchal structure and consequent attempt to fight it, resulting either in defeat or success.

In its inquiry into *Game of Thrones*' intradiegetic level of narration, the thesis primarily draws on Michel de Certeau's conception of "strategies and tactics" (34), which I interconnect with the Gramscian theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony, to examine the means used by women as the Other to express their resentment of the patriarchy. Moreover, the examination of the storyworld takes Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, stating that gender is not an essentialist category but a socially constructed performance as point of reference. Thereby, the thesis aims at examining its hypotheses that: women who remain unaware of the patriarchal oppression, or unable of acquiring agency to fight it, embody normative ideals of femininity and are subjected to exceeding objectification; while women who are cognizant of the patriarchal hegemony and engage in counter-hegemonic behaviour simultaneously reject male stereotypes of beauty and sexuality and thus, bend the stereotypical gender identity of femininity.

#### 4.2.1. Mise-en-scène

For the intradiegetic analysis of the fantasy epic *Game of Thrones*' scenes not solely the narrative level and the spoken word are of importance. Especially the scene's staging is significant, as the thoughtful composition of a scene's aesthetics conveys crucial information, which can facilitate the audience's reading of the scene. Thus, the subsequent analysis of the fantasy series' scenes first consists of brief information on the characters and provides narrative context. Afterwards, the thesis focuses on the individual elements of the on-screen depictions that compose the scenes' mise-en-scène for a detailed interpretation.

The French loanword mise-en-scène, which originated in theatre and literally translates to 'put on stage', presents a crucial term in the field of film studies and the discussion of visual style. In regard to film, mise-en-scène can be defined as referring to the contents and their organisation within a frame, both of which are equally significant and encompass and establish meaning in relation to each other (Gibbs 5). According to John Gibbs the contents of a frame include ten potential elements that are available for directors to draw from and provide them with a range of creative filmic possibilities, based on their intention on what to foreground or background. These elements are: lighting, costumes, colour, props, décor, action and performance, space, camera focus, frame of the screen and lastly, the interaction of all these components, which constitutes mise-en-scène.

Lighting, the first component of mise-en-scène, has an enormous impact on the viewership, as "the organization of light, actors and camera makes possible a series of suggestive readings" (Gibbs 6). Light enables directors to control the viewers focus, and the absence of light, darkness, is a useful means to create suspense, a mystic atmosphere or to conceal information from the audiences. The second element, costumes, which also include hair and make-up, convey vital information about a story's setting as well as a character's social status and attitude. In regard to *Game of Thrones* and the numerous settings used in the series, costumes are significantly helpful factors in signifying characters' belonging, especially in combination with the element of colour. Colour, as Gibbs states, "is an expressive element [...] and is often mobilized by means of costume [...] It might equally, however, be a feature of the lighting, the set, decoration, or particular props" (8). The lighting in the North of the fictional country Westeros, for instance, is low-key and dominated by cool colours, which are resumed in the costumes of the Stark family, who wear dark long fur coats, emphasising the darkness of winter as well as the cold of the geographic region, necessitating a warming attire (see Image 3.1). Meaning might also be established through the feature of props, which "collect meanings

through repeated usage, and develop associations throughout the narrative” (Klevan 146). Furthermore, a frame’s arrangement of décor can influence the audience’s perception, as it can emphasise a character’s personality, or stress contrasts between a character and their surroundings. This strongly applies to Daenerys Targaryen’s wedding scene: the lighting in this sequence is high-key, the setting is evenly lit, and underlined by warm tones of red and orange, clearly locating this scene in a more Southern setting. Furthermore, the colourful body painting and warrior costume of the Khal signifies that this chain of events occurs in a non-Western setting and Daenerys’ delicate dress and her pale complexion additionally emphasise her outsider status (see Image 3.2).



Image 3.1 The Starks of Winterfell. 1.01. 25:39.



Image 3.2 Daenerys is wed to Khal Drogo. 1.01. 50:30.

While static elements, such as lighting, colour, props and décor, convey important information, the sixth element, action and performance, presents one of the most significant components of mise-en-scène and a key element in the interpretation of scenes. Skilful performance and the direction of action, the manner in which a line is delivered, particular movements, or the direction in which an actor is gazing can add perspective and hence, generate meaning (Gibbs 12). Space, the seventh element, presents another major dynamic directorial feature as it might highlight and dramatize relationships, mood and conflicts through the positioning of actors (Gibbs 17). Moreover, the position of the camera, the angle or shot used, the focus and movement, too, govern the audience’s understanding of a scene. While close-ups might draw the viewers in, long-shots can create a distance between the audience and the action and limit their view (Gibbs 19). The ninth element, the frame of the screen, also is about providing a selective view, revealing or withholding information from the audience and thereby, framing their perspective on an action. Lastly, the combination and interplay of all individual nine components, which are at the director’s disposal, create the meaningful context of the frame, the mise-en-scène (Gibbs 26).

#### 4.2.2. Ignorance of the patriarchal framework

In HBO's *Game of Thrones*' initial episode "Winter is Coming" (1.01), the audience is introduced to the noble family of House Stark, one of the most powerful in the Seven Kingdoms, who function as wardens of the North in the fictional universe of Westeros. The noble line's nuclear family consists of patriarch Lord Eddard Stark, his wife Catelyn Tully and their five trueborn children Robb, Sansa, Arya, Bran and Rickon, as well as Eddard's presumed illegitimate son Jon Snow. Sansa Stark, the second child and eldest daughter of the Starks, presents the focus in the subsequent analysis of scenes. The first time Sansa is depicted on screen in the first episode, the audience encounters the Stark's thirteen-year-old daughter sitting with other ladies as well as her younger sister Arya, monitored by Septa Mordane, a priestess who serves as their tutor, while practicing embroidery stitches. Initially it becomes clear to the viewers that Sansa is talented at the traditionally feminine art of embroidery, as her Septa's comments of praise, she states "fine work as always, well done [...] I love the detail that you managed to get in these corners" (10:02-10:11), reveal. Besides the dialogue, Sansa's beaming facial expression at Septa Mordane's remarks further highlight her pride in her ability to succeed in the feminine art of embroidering. However, analysing the scene's mise-en-scène, a fundamental component in filmic dramaturgy, even provides a more detailed understanding for the interpretation of the character and her motivations.

Initially, before the audience is introduced to Sansa Stark, the sequence begins with an extreme wide shot depicting the family's residency, castle Winterfell in its entire glory, immediately revealing the Stark's status to the viewership (see Image 4.1). Then the camera transitions from a wide establishing shot from outside the castle, further establishing the medieval setting and cold northern geographic location due to the cool lighting, to a medium shot depicting the inside of the castle walls where the youngest Stark son, Bran, is training his archery skills, instructed by his brothers Robb and Jon (see Image 4.2). Up on the balcony, which emphasises their elevated status, the family patriarch Eddard Stark and his wife Catelyn are supervising the practice, smiling benevolently at their son, who is repeatedly missing the target, revealing their loving and supportive relationship to their children. Moreover, this short expository sequence and the following cut and medium close-up on Sansa and her Septa engaging in needle work illuminate the strictly enforced gender binary in the Stark household to the audience: while Stark men are expected to become warriors, women are supposed to acquire traditionally feminine skills. Additionally, the change to a low-key lighting, a lower exposure towards a darker grey scale, which is creating shadows and consequently, making the ladies in the

background indiscernible, exposes that the scene takes place inside the confines of the castle walls, rather than outside. This again underlines the notion that a woman's place in this medieval Northern society is in the domestic sphere.



Image 4.1 Winterfell. 1.01. 9:40.



Image 4.2 Inside Winterfell Castle. 1.01. 9:47.



Image 4.3 Sansa and Septa Mordane. 1.01. 10:03.



Image 4.4 Arya glances at Sansa. 1.01. 10:12.

Sansa and her Septa are depicted in a medium close-up shot and the only well-lit characters, which immediately directs the audience's gaze at them and foregrounds their importance in this scene (see Image 4.3). The fact that Septa Mordane takes on a lower, kneeling position at Sansa's side, while she is inspecting her work furthermore, demonstrates that Sansa holds a higher position in the social hierarchy. Additionally, the Septa's praise and Sansa's pride in her exceeding at the skill of embroidery suggests that the eldest Stark daughter succeeds at and finds delight in the gender role society has ascribed to her. The camera subsequently slowly pans towards Sansa's sister Arya, who is sitting behind Sansa and has previously been invisible to viewers due to the space between the sisters and the low-key lighting, hiding her in the background of the scene (see Image 4.4). The focus on Arya reveals that she is glancing at her sister in childish envy of her appraisal and the camera's capture of her embroidery hoop additionally, discloses her own struggling attempts at needle work to the audience. Moreover, Arya's physical positioning in the background of the scene, as well as her sitting in a hunched position, whereas her sister holds a straight posture, indicates Sansa's advance in mastering the feminine skills. Hence, Arya, with her inability to fulfil the ideal of femininity that is expected

of women in the medieval North, serves as a foil to Sansa who excels at the feminine arts, functioning to further emphasise her talent and ladylikeness.

The sequence merely reveals Sansa's aptitude for the feminine arts, but it does not provide the audience with an insight into the eldest Stark daughter's understanding of her gender role and her opinion on the expectations of a woman in medieval society. Therefore, an additional scene from the series' first episode, set shortly after the previously analysed sequence, is examined. King Robert Baratheon, who ascended the throne after a successful rebellion supported by Lord Eddard Stark, arrives at Winterfell with his wife, Queen Cersei, their eldest son and heir to the throne, Joffrey Baratheon, and their entourage. In honour of the royal visit, the Starks hold a feast, for which Sansa is getting ready for, with the help of her mother, Lady Catelyn Stark. As a deep friendship connects the King and Lord Stark, the former suggests that they might unite their Houses by marrying Sansa to the Prince, which is the principal topic of conversation between Sansa and her mother during dressing up. Sansa, who is thrilled by her prospective future, pesters her mother with questions about the potential future alliance.

The scene between Sansa and her mother is set in a private bed-chamber, as the end of the bed, which is visible at the bottom of the frame, reveals, establishing an intimate relationship between the two women (see Image 4.5). Additionally, the low-key lighting, which simulates that the room is solely illuminated by the numerous candles and the fireplace, further emphasise the medieval setting as well as conveying the notion of the intimacy of the moment captured to the audience. Moreover, the close and loving relationship between mother and daughter becomes obvious when Sansa asks her mother, "Do you think that Joffrey will like me? What if he thinks I'm ugly?" (39:36-39:39), to which Catelyn returns that he would be "[...] the stupidest Prince that ever lived" (39:41-39:45). Sansa's comments, however, as well as her holding and constantly checking her appearance in a hand mirror, also indicate the enormous significance beauty ideals and conforming to them play in her life. Sansa's self-worth obviously is linked to other people's appraisal of her appearance and, consequently, she objectifies herself. After her doubts about her physique have been erased, Sansa continues to press her mother about the specifics of the wedding ceremony, resulting in Catelyn pointing out that Lord Stark has not yet given his consent. Sansa's response, "Why would he say no, he'd be the second most powerful man in the Kingdoms" (39:57-40:01), in turn, demonstrates her awareness of the fact that marriages present the male hegemony's strategy to secure and acquire power (Rubin 176). Nevertheless, she does not resent the patriarchal order, but attempts to convince her mother, pleading, "Please, make father say 'yes'. Please! Please! It's the only thing I ever

wanted!” (40:16-40:22). This is stressed by the camera’s close-up on Sansa’s face, rendering visible the tears welling up in her eyes (see Image 4.6), which are stereotypically coded a feminine emotionalism (Clover 240). Moreover, the shot is filmed from a high camera angle, simulating Catelyn’s point of view, and serves to further emphasise Sansa’s vulnerability, powerlessness and dependency on others.



Image 4.5 Catelyn doing Sansa’s hair. 1.01. 39:46.



Image 4.6 Sansa begs her mother. 1.01. 40:22.

The conversation between mother and daughter is enlightening, as it exposes that Sansa truly has internalised the patriarchal ideology of a woman’s role as wife and producer of heirs in medieval society that has been instilled into her mind through her traditional upbringing. Sansa embodies the ideal of femininity, she is beautiful, obedient, talented in the feminine art of embroidery and content with finding bliss in the domestic sphere. Thus, she epitomises the archetype of “the innocent maid dreaming of marriage” (Frankel 72), whose life goals mirror the patriarchy’s norms of femininity and whose identity and personal fulfillment are strongly intertwined with the prospect of marrying a highborn and producing heirs. Clearly, Sansa’s idealised mental image of marriage stems from her sheltered upbringing, resulting in an unrealistic understanding of the situation in the world outside of Winterfell, and her socialisation with fairy tales of chivalry and romance. Moreover, her childish naivety is exposed by her indifference of the underlying patriarchal order, which has become naturalised and is governing the life choices of women, but her dutiful acceptance and fulfilment of her assigned place within society. Sansa thus, following Foucauldian theory, presents a ‘docile body’ (*Discipline*, 138) who does not resent or attempt to resist to the patriarchal discipline.

#### 4.2.3. Awareness of the patriarchal framework, but absence of agency

The scene under investigation takes place in King's Landing, the capital of the Seven Kingdoms, located in the South of the realm, and features Cersei Lannister as well as Sansa Stark. Cersei, a highly complex character and the series' main antagonist of the Starks, becomes Queen Regent, and thus, theoretically the most powerful woman in Westeros, after her husband King Robert Baratheon's death, which she induced. During the analysed consecutive sequences from the second season's episode "Blackwater" (2.09), the city is under attack by the troops of Stannis Baratheon, the King's brother and rightful heir to the throne, as Cersei's son, King Joffrey, was conceived through an incestuous relationship with her twin brother Jaime Lannister. While the men are fighting Baratheon's army outside of the city walls, Cersei, Sansa and the court's noble ladies are gathered inside the confines of the protective castle walls, biding the outcome of the battle.

The sequence begins with Cersei's entering the room in which all the other noble ladies have previously assembled. The scene's low-key lighting in warm, but dark colours illustrates, both, the advanced hour, as well as the graveness of the situation they find themselves in. The fact that Cersei arrives last and the other women move towards the sides of the room to let her pass through undisturbed and courtesy upon seeing her, establishes that she holds the highest status among them, as Queen regent (see Image 5.1). Furthermore, her positioning inside the room, on an elevated, private platform, separated from, but enabling her to overlook the entire crowd of women, corresponds with her societal standing (see Image 5.2), which is additionally emphasised by the stark contrast to the otherwise crowded space and the women's accommodation in simple bunk beds (see Image 5.3). Moreover, Cersei's constant positioning in the centre of the frames, as well as the repeated medium close-ups and the generally low-key lightings' focus on illuminating her character (see Image 5.4), illustrates her superiority in the scene.



Image 5.1 Cersei enters the room. 2.09. 20:43.



Image 5.2 Cersei situated on her pedestal. 2.09. 21:03.



Image 5.3 The gathering noble ladies. 2.09. 21:06.



Image 5.4 Medium close-up on Cersei. 2.09. 27:33.

Additionally, as colour presents a vital expressive element in film, which is frequently mobilised by use of costumes, and allows the direct association with a particular character (Gibbs 8), Cersei's attire is deliberately chosen and conveys meaning. Her red and golden costume mirrors the colours of the Lannister's family sigil, thus, immediately associating Cersei's origin as House Lannister, as well as revealing her obvious pride of her heritage by her ostentatiously displaying her House's colours. Cersei's attire, however, does not merely establish her family background, but also her hierarchical standing. Her pompous robe, richly ornamented with gold embroidery and a golden corset, emulating an armour's breastplate, sets her apart from the other ladies, who are dressed in simpler gowns (see Image 5.3), further emphasising her superior social standing. Consequently, it can be resumed that the scene's entire mise-en-scène is purposefully designed to illustrate Cersei's status as Queen and hence, most powerful person in the room.

Quite interestingly, the information provided by the dialogue that arises between Cersei and Sansa in the consecutive sequences examined, does not reflect the Queen's assumed agency, which is suggested by the scenes' mise-en-scène, but unveils its non-existence outside the confines of the room. While the women are waiting inside and praying for a victorious outcome of the raging battle outside the city walls, Cersei repeatedly orders Sansa to leave her place with the ladies and keep her company. Each time Sansa follows her demand and the physical space between the two diminishes, their personal spheres mingle, either by Cersei intruding Sansa's privacy by requesting whether her "red flower is still blooming" (21:14-21:15), or by disclosing personal details. A prop that is of significance in regard to the expository sequence of Cersei providing an insight into her character, is the wine chalice that she constantly clutches and is having refilled (see Image 5.4). Cersei's high alcohol consumption, a trait stereotypically associated with men, and quite ironically a characteristic she detested about her deceased husband the King, might be the trigger to the Queen regent's sharing of intimate opinions, such as her resentment of the patriarchy and feelings about her own gender. Furthermore, her

alcoholism might generally symbolise her attempt of escaping the confinements of the patriarchal world she lives in, and in this particular scene can be read as her escapism of the severity of the situation, as well as her actual insecurity about the battle's outcome.

Cersei's awareness that the patriarchal framework defines and limits the role of females in the society of Westeros and her repulsion by it, become obvious when she recounts her childhood and sentiments about becoming Queen to Sansa:

When we were young, Jaime and I, we looked so much alike, even our father couldn't tell us apart. I could never understand why they treated us differently. Jaime was taught to fight with sword and lance and mace, and I was taught to smile and sing and please. He was heir to Casterly Rock and I was sold to some stranger, like a horse to be ridden whenever he desired. (34:22-34:47)

This statement stresses the mere performativity of gender roles, as Cersei and her twin brother physically bear a strong resemblance, however, only Jaime has been bestowed with the phallus and consequently, agency and inheritance claims, due to his male gender. Furthermore, her account reveals Cersei's resentment of the patriarchal order and disillusioned understanding of marriage as men's means of forging alliances in order to acquire power and women's sole purpose as objects of the bartering, serving to fulfil the male pleasure. Thus, Cersei is well aware of the agency accompanying the male gender and she also states, "I should have been born a man. I'd rather face a thousand swords than be shut up inside with this flock of frightened hens" (29:09-29:16). However, her comment reveals more about Cersei than the fact that she is aware of women's deprivation of agency: it reveals that she has fully internalised the patriarchal ideology of essentialist, stereotypical gender ideals. She associates agency with the traditional masculine characteristics of strength and braveness, which she believes to embody as a 'lioness', while she dismisses women and connected feminine attributes, pejoratively referring to the ladies as "frightened hens". Hence, although Cersei perceives and is constrained by the patriarchal oppression, the male hegemonic ideology strongly governs her mindset, resulting in her resentment of her own gender, as she is unable to see the social construction that underlies it.

As much as Cersei would love to escape the rigid gender boundaries of Westerosi society, she is trapped in the feminine gender identity patriarchy ascribes to her. This is also reflected by the golden corset, shaped like a breastplate, incorporated in her gown, which fulfils a figurative meaning: while it imitates men's armour, symbolizing strength and agency, it actually does not possess any protective function, but restricts the female body. Although, Cersei is Queen regent and allegedly holds power, she is confined by the societal expectations of female duties, as she discloses to Sansa that the only reason she invited the ladies under her protection was, because,

“It was expected of me!” (29:21-29:22). As power has numerous manifestations and people exercise power in different ways (Kedar 5), this does not indicate that Cersei is powerless, merely that the Queen regent holds a different kind of power, namely an exclusively representative one. Hence, demonstrating her fulfilment of the trope of the manipulative “widow with little real power” (Frankel 72). Cersei, however, does not perceive her own role as that limited and she enlightens Sansa about her tactic of acquiring agency in the patriarchal framework, telling her, “Tears aren’t a woman’s only weapon, the best one’s between your legs. Learn how to use it” (30:10-30:19). Consequently, Cersei draws on her sexuality as, what Stéphanie Genz aptly describes as a “carnal tactic” (244), in order to exercise power.

The choice of the term ‘tactic’ in this instance is of importance, as it stands in direct contrast to ‘strategy’. Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between the two terms and defines strategy as “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated” (35-36). Tactic, on the other hand, he identifies as the weak Others’ option for counter hegemony, stating, “a tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The space of tactic is the space of the other” (36-37). Strategy, thus, is reserved for and imposed by the male hegemony that dictates societal norms and rules, as well as the gender divide in Westeros. By contrast, women, who are discriminated against by the patriarchy and lack the agency to make autonomous decisions, are ascribed the position of the Other in Westerosi culture. This is fairly conventional, as it mirrors the past and contemporary Western world, in which women are continuously forced into the status of the Other by the male hegemony’s strategy, which is based on the preliminary belief of female inferiority and ultimately serves to uphold the patriarchal system. Hence, tactic presents women’s manoeuvre “within the enemy’s field of vision” (von Bülow, cited in Certeau 37), in both the West and Westeros, which Cersei attempts by exploiting her own sexuality. Cersei’s tactic is highly problematic as she, who despises women that conform to traditional femininity, utilises her ascribed feminine role as object of male pleasure, in order to seduce and manipulate men and secure their devotion to her cause. So, while “it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position”, it is incomprehensible “[...] why a woman might flaunt her femininity, produce herself as an excess of femininity” (Doane 6). Basically, Cersei’s tactic mirrors the patriarchal ideology and norms of being a woman: she merely operates within the patriarchy’s framework, rather than permeating it, revealing how much she has internalised the male hegemonic beliefs of female inferiority. This causes her to reproduce the discriminatory role ascribed to her by

reducing herself to a sexual object of desire, thereby, however, not gaining any real agency or respect in the process. So, although Cersei is depicted as powerful, in relation to the other women in the room, by the scene's *mise-en-scène*, she does not hold real power. Further, her tactic contradicts her resentment of the patriarchal oppression and stereotypical femininity, presenting her inability to escape the societal conforms and expectations of the duties of a woman and Queen regent.

#### **4.2.4. Attempt to fight the patriarchal boundaries, resulting in defeat**

The subsequent analysis focuses on Arya Stark of Winterfell, the youngest daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark. In contrast to her older sister Sansa, Arya is unwilling and unable to conform to the ideals of femininity that are required of her as a female of noble birth. Her incapability of fulfilling her gender role is emphasised by her disinterest and lack of talent in the feminine arts, such as embroidery skills. Arya is rebellious and tomboyish, a fact that is underlined by her interest in the traditionally deemed masculine fields of archery and sword fighting. Her brother Jon Snow, himself a bastard and consequently, familiar with the inability to conform, bestows on her the present of a sword, thus supporting her deviation from stereotypical gender expectations. Quite ironically, Arya names her sword 'Needle', a tool typically used in the feminine line of work that she has no talent for, thus using a common symbol of femininity and subverting its associations, thereby, further emphasising her aversion for stereotypical femininity. After her father's execution for treason, Arya, unlike her sister Sansa, who is held hostage by the Lannisters, is able, using her non-conformity and frequently mistaken identity as a boy, to flee King's Landing in male disguise.

Shortly after aligning herself with Night's Watch recruits in order to safely reach the Wall and be reunited with her brother Jon, the men and Arya, however, are taken captives by the Gold Cloaks, the Lannisters' men, and brought to castle Harrenhal. During imprisonment, the Gold Cloaks, who systematically interrogate and torture the prisoners, remain unaware of, both, her real sex as well as her true identity. When Tywin Lannister, patriarch of the Lannister family and commander of the Gold Cloaks, arrives in Harrenhal (2.04) he immediately sees through her disguise and saves Arya's life, who is threatened by one of his men for refusing to kneel, reprimanding the soldier that "this one's a girl, you idiot, dressed as a boy" (2.04; 39:28-39:33). The fact that the Gold Cloak mistakes Arya for a commoner's boy, because she is cross-dressing, dirty and has cut her hair short (see Image 6.1), reveals the existing gender binary in Westeros and its construction and reinforcement by the male hegemony. When Tywin requests to know why Arya is dressed in drag, she responds that it is "saver to travel, my lord" (2.04; 39:35-36). Thus, Arya's response and her posing as a male commoner, throwing off her gender and class, signify her understanding of the existing power structures. Arya is aware of the agency associated with the male sex and the dangers of rape or death faced by women, especially those of noble birth, who might be used as political pawns. Consequently, her disguise enables her to remake herself and claim agency in the patriarchal world of Westeros that she would have been denied as a girl (Spector 177). Tywin's ability to immediately see

through Arya's disguise demonstrates his awareness that gender is performed and can deviate from the essentialist gender binary. Partly, the patriarch's understanding of gender performativity probably stems from the fact that his daughter Cersei as well struggles with the traditional gender divide.



Image 6.1 Arya in drag. 2.04. 38:51.



Image 6.2. Close-up Arya 2.07. 11:21.



Image 6.3 Tywin's neck. 2.07. 11:28



Image 6.4. Sansa and Arya reunited. 7.07. 1:13:46.

Following the revelation of her true sex, Tywin, exactly because of Arya's femaleness, makes her his new cupbearer, thus allowing her to enter his personal sphere. In every instance in which Arya serves Tywin, it enables her to either overhear his plans regarding the battle against her brother Robb Stark or provides her with the opportunity to cross his name off her list of people she intends to murder. Arya is driven by vengeance for her father's death, foreshadowing her later development into a mere instrument of killing, so when Lord Tywin invites her to eat with him, she immediately grabs the knife and contemplates her option of murdering him (2.07). Her line of thought is emphasised by the close-up of her claspings the weapon and her grim facial expression (see Image 6.2) when staring at Tywin, as well as through the lingering extreme close-up on Tywin's neck, underlined by the eerie, non-diegetic background music, indicating that this is where she intends to stab him (see Image 6.3). This sequence serves to further illustrate that Arya is performing masculinity, as brutality and resorting to violence are stereotypically deemed masculine behaviour traits. Moreover, Arya is taking "a piece of

traditionally male power for herself” (Spector 173), as it is the knife, another symbolism associated with masculinity, that provides her with agency against the patriarch Tywin Lannister.

Arya, however, does not act on her impulse and as soon as Tywin turns around she resumes eating, as she is aware that any turbulences would alarm the guards and could, as a consequence, cost her life. The situation takes a turn when Tywin, who regarding the upcoming battle against Arya’s brother is concerned about his own legacy, begins to lecture Arya on castle Harrenhal, where she and the others are held captives. He notes that the fortress, which was considered indestructible, was destroyed by Aegon Targaryen by using dragon fire, who thereby, escaped oblivion and whose name is still known “300 years after his death” (12:52-12:54). Arya immediately corrects Tywin that “Aegon *and* [emphasis in original] his sisters” (12:55-12:57), Rhaenys and Visenya, conquered Harrenhal. She further elaborates that “Visenya Targaryen was a great warrior. She had a Valyrian steel sword that she called ‘Dark Sister’” (13:18-13:25). This emphasises not only her knowledge of history, but also her fascination and idealisation of women bending traditional gender norms and exerting power by performing masculinity and becoming warriors. Tywin thereupon queries, “Aren’t most girls more interested in the pretty maidens from the songs?” (13:31-13:34), to which Arya boldly replies that “most girls are idiots” (13:36-13:38). Hence, the conversation reveals that Arya, sharing her position with Cersei Lannister, strongly resents attributes associated with traditional femininity, such as passivity and romanticism. Arya, however, does not reject her sex per se, but values women embodying traits traditionally deemed masculine, as her admiration of female warriors, the warrior’s role itself being heavily gendered, proves.

Throughout the seasons, however, Arya’s initial performativity of gender transforms into her throwing off her gender identity. She first sheds “[...] away all traces of femininity to compete with men and thrive in a man’s world” (Frankel 48) and then continuous to part with class affiliation and any gender identity, in result truly becoming no one but an instrument of killing without empathy, pity or moral. This is underlined by Arya’s conversation with her older sister Sansa upon being reunited with her at their home Winterfell, after years of separation (7.07). The two sisters stand on the castle’s battlements and overlook their homelands while talking about the execution of Lord Petyr Baelish for betraying House Stark. The scene is illuminated by low-key lighting with cool undertones, which, together with the snow-covered scenery that is visible in the background, immediately locates the shot in the North (see Image 6.4). While their attire is similar, as both wear a heavy black coat, further emphasising the Northern setting,

the space between the two women signals that their relationship has never been close and the dialogue, too, stresses their abiding character differences. When Arya attempts to reassure her sister that she made the right decision by ordering Baelish's death, Sansa stresses that it was Arya who had carried out that order, to which she merely replies, "I'm just the executioner, you pass the sentence. You're the Lady of Winterfell" (1:12:40-1:12:49). This statement indicates that Arya has parted with her noble heritage and claim to her House and transcended into a cold-blooded killer. She then continues to elaborate, "I was never going to be as good a Lady as you, so I had to be something else" (1:12:53-1:12:59), revealing that the patriarchal framework and its gender norms that are governing Westeros forced her into the role of an assassin, due to her inability to conform to stereotypical beauty norms and attributes associated with traditional femininity.

Arya's tactic of attempting to overcome patriarchal boundaries regarding her sex is intertwined with Butler's concept of 'gender performativity', referring to gender being a construct that becomes naturalised by reiterated practice (xv). Thus, "gender is an 'act'" (Butler, *Gender* 187), and Arya, contrasting her anatomical female sex, performs masculinity by demonstrating masculine attributes, such as assertiveness and violence. Her performativity of gender becomes especially clear by her taking on a male appearance as "the performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler, *Gender* 175). Additionally, Arya's possession of the accoutrements of the traditionally male warrior, her cross-dressing and performance of masculinity (Tasker and Steenberg 181-182), facilitate her to successfully evade the objectification and sexualisation through the male gaze that all women performing femininity in *Game of Thrones* are subjected to. Hence, her outsider status as a tomboyish girl "[...] provides a perfect place from which to explore, to skirt boundaries, to embrace difference" (Creed 98) within the rigid gender boundary of Westerosi society. Furthermore, Arya as an adolescent girl "[...] who styles herself in masculine terms operates culturally as a site of uncertainty, while the mannish woman is taken as a sign of lesbian identity" (Tasker and Steenberg 183). So, while the adult warrior woman who performs traditional masculinity, such as Brienne of Tarth, clearly is coded queer, Arya occupies an intermediate and independent state.

Arya, however, is not entirely free of the confines of the paternalistic gender ideology. This is revealed by both, her resentment of women conforming to traditional femininity, as well as by her own claim that she, due to her non-conformity, was forced to “be something else”. Moreover, she is not an independent woman in Beauvoir’s terms as although, she “[...] refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself” (739), she evidently repudiates her femininity. As “renouncing her femininity means renouncing part of her humanity” (739), Arya transcends into a genderless assassin status and “[...] increasingly seems sociopathic in her appetite for violent revenge” (Tasker and Steenberg 185). Arya exercises tactic, and becomes autonomous and thus, more equal to men, by exerting agency through the traditionally masculine means of sword fighting and killing. However, she had to completely shed her gender identity, family and class-affiliation and become no one in order to survive and strive in the patriarchal framework of Westeros. Therefore, it is the male hegemony’s strategy, their promotion of the gender binary and their consequent condemnation of non-conformity to this dichotomy that has forced Arya onto her path of becoming “*something* [emphasis added] else” (1:12:57-1.12-59). Hence, Arya is still operating within the patriarchal framework, rather than splitting it open. Furthermore, although, she has gained more independence from parting with her identity, it happened at a great cost to her humanity, making Arya a problematic feminist icon (Frankel 54).

#### **4.2.5. Attempt to fight the patriarchal boundaries, resulting in success**

The scenes under analysis focus on Daenerys Targaryen, daughter of King Aerys, who was publicly known as the ‘mad King’ and was killed during the rebellion of Robert Baratheon. After the usurper installed himself as the new King, Daenerys and her brother Viserys had to flee Westeros and grow up in exile in the Free Cities of Essos, across the Narrow Sea. Daenerys’s character development is quite remarkable, as she has to endure constant abuse at the hands of her older brother, who also sells her to Khal Drogo, a chief of Dothraki, a nomadic warrior people, in return for promised troops to invade Westeros. The Khal further victimises Daenerys as he repeatedly subjects her to sexual assaults. This relationship, quite problematically in the televisual adaptation, transforms into a loving marriage, which could be interpreted as reflecting Daenerys’s suffering from the Stockholm syndrome. After her husband’s early death, Daenerys follows him onto the funeral pyre, together with one of her wedding presents, three fossilised dragon eggs, symbolising the Targaryen’s sigil of a three-headed dragon. However, Daenerys remains unharmed by the fire, emerging the pyre with three hatched dragons on which she bases her agency. This causes the Dothraki to proclaim her their Khaleesi, Queen, resulting in Daenerys’ decision to use her newly gained power and claim the Iron Throne.

In the subsequent scenes, from the episodes “Walk of Punishment” (3.03) and “And Now His Watch is Ended” (3.04), Daenerys and her Dothraki khalasar, her tribe, have arrived at the city of Astapor in Slaver’s Bay. There the Unsullied, an elite of enslaved eunuch-soldiers, are trained, whom Daenerys, although she abhors slavery, intends to acquire, to strengthen her claim to the Iron Throne. Her personal aversion of slavery is further emphasised when she walks to the meeting pit, where the negotiation between herself and the Good Masters, the ruling elite of Astapor, is taking place and she is terrified to notice that the path there is lined with crucified slaves (see Image 7.1). Coming from Westeros where slavery is abolished, Daenerys’s attitude towards the slave trade stands in complete contrast to the Eastern cities, which base their entire economy on it. The culture clash and shock about the inhumane treatment of people is shown, when she even stops and, against the advice of her counsellors, offers water to one slave who was sentenced to death, revealing her concerned facial expression in a close-up (see Image 7.2). Thereby, Daenerys’s good nature and nurturing manner, an attribute traditionally associated with femininity (Smith and Cook 14), as well as the princess’s innocence and unawareness of the gruesomeness of the world are demonstrated.



Image 7.1 Daenerys on her way to the negotiation. 3.03. 28:35.



Image 7.2 Daenerys nurturing a slave. 3.03. 28:53.



Image 7.3 Kraznys disregards Daenerys. 3.03. 31:15.



Image 7.4 Daenerys and the masters negotiate. 3.03. 30:56.

Daenerys's traditional Targaryen appearance, her long silver hair and pale complexion, further underline her differing geographical and cultural background, as coming from the Western country of Westeros, and thus, her non-belonging to the Eastern cities. Furthermore, her outsider status becomes obvious in the negotiation process, during which Daenerys, as pretends to be unable to understand Astapor's language Valyrian and, relies on the Good Master Kraznys mo Nakloz's translator Missandei. Her apparent inability to speak Valyrian and directly converse with the masters presents Daenerys's tactic, as it stresses her inferior status and disadvantage in bargaining with them and hence, makes it easier for the masters to underestimate her. Daenerys's tactic is successful in that Kraznys remains unaware of her scheme and openly regards her dismissively (see Image 7.3) and repeatedly verbally assaults her, humiliating Daenerys by pejoratively labelling her "beggar queen" (3.03; 32:30). Further he subjects her to his male gaze and objectifies and sexualises her by stating "[...] I like the curve of her ass" (3.03; 31:58-32:01), in a side remark to the master sitting beside him. These comments are not translated but reformulated in a more diplomatic manner by his slave Missandei. Hence, Daenerys is supposed to be left in the position of a naïve Western princess attempting to bargain, while holding an unequal status in the exchange. The deal is closed when Daenerys eventually offers to trade her biggest dragon, Drogon, that represents her main source

of agency and is essential for winning the Iron Throne, in return for the army of slave soldiers, further expressing her naivety.

Additionally, Daenerys's allegedly inferior status in the trade is stressed by the scene's mise-en-scène. The long shot, which is used to establish the meeting to the audience, is captured from an overhead position from the masters' perspective (see Image 7.4). Immediately, the unequal power relations between the respective parties can be observed, merely by the characters' positioning within the frame. While the masters are sitting in armchairs, Daenerys and her entourage, mirroring the inferior status of the slave Missandei, are forced to remain standing during entire negotiation. Furthermore, the masters are positioned on an elevated platform, thus, forcing Daenerys to look up to them, which is indicating their higher standing in the social hierarchy of Astapor as well as their authority regarding the trade, as the Western princess is dependent on their army of soldiers. Also, due to the long shot and the vast space between her and the masters, Daenerys's physique, although she is wearing trousers to assert masculine dominance while she is bargaining for the warriors, is small. This makes her appear fragile, which underlines the masters' male hegemonic belief of female inferiority, and results in them not considering her an equal partner in the negotiation process.

The following day, Daenerys and Kraznys meet in front of Astapor's city gates to execute the trade, a scene shot in medium close-up with the camera at eye-level (see Image 7.5). However, this does not indicate that the two characters now represent equal forces in the exchange, as master Kraznys still considers himself in the superior position. This is indicated by his gaze, which openly reflects his disregard of Daenerys: Kraznys refuses to look at her, solely focusing on the dragon, the ultimate source of power, he believes to receive in the trade, when handing her the whip, which signifies the control over the Unsullied. He still assumes to be emerging this trade triumphantly and proceeds to insult her, stating "the bitch has her army" (3.04; 47:29-47:32). The whip in this exchange underlines the importance of props, as Daenerys being in possession of it, instantaneously bestows her with the commanding power over the army of 8.000 elite warriors and provides her with further agency to claim the Iron Throne. When the master faces troubles controlling Drogon, he again turns to Missandei and orders her to "Tell the bitch her beast won't come" (3.04; 48:14-18:17), to which Daenerys directly replies in Valyrian tongue that "A dragon is not a slave" (48:19-48:21). Her statement for the first time reveals to, both the master and the audience, that she speaks the language of Astapor and consequently, has understood the master's demeaning comments all along and was aware of him mistreating her. Thereby, the power dynamic is reversed, placing Daenerys in the superior

position and leaving the master enraged and frightened, as a consequent medium close-up of Kraznys shows (see Image 7.6). Now that the power hierarchy is newly established, Daenerys utilises her agency and orders her dragon to burn Kraznys and the army of Unsullied to murder the remaining masters and free all of the slaves. Thus, it is revealed that Daenerys by no means is an inferior or powerless woman, but that she utilised a gendered tactic to break the patriarchal framework of Astapor and liberate its people. While Daenerys operates within the patriarchy's system, she successfully manages to split it open: Daenerys purposefully draws on the masters' misconception of female inferiority, and consequent underestimation of women, for her own advantage, while actually never during the trade doing anything to reinforce the masters' sexism.

Daenerys's determination is further demonstrated by a close-up of her face after her dragon set fire to the city (see Image 7.7), shot from a low-angle, depicting her stoically staring into the distance, while everything behind her is ablaze. This shot, with the fire illuminating her, resembling the stereotypical imagery of the action film genre, which is heavily gendered, emphasises her heroism as well as her masculine exertion of power. After the attack on the city is completed, the lighting, which previously in the scene was high-key, reflecting the warm oriental weather conditions, changes to low-key lighting. This might be employed to demonstrate, both, the advanced time since the start of the attack, as well as the gravity of the happening. Daenerys, who is standing in a central position in the frame, which is shot from a low-angle, signifying her centrality in the event, is illuminated by backlighting, solely revealing her silhouette to the audience (see Image 7.8). Through the technique of backlighting, filming Daenerys against the backdrop of the setting sun, she is enveloped in light, which produces a romanticised and idealised effect, making Daenerys appear almost like a religious saviour figure.



Image 7.5 Kraznys hands Daenerys the whip. 3.04. 47:11.



Image 7.6 Kraznys realises Daenerys's superiority. 3.04. 48:36.



Image 7.7 Daenerys exerts ultimate power. 3.04. 49:26.



Image 7.8 Daenerys is portrayed as holy figure. 3.04. 49:52.

Daenerys's tactic to acquire agency within the patriarchal framework clearly diverges from Cersei's carnal approach that is also master Kraznys's expectation of her attempt to negotiate. This is proven by his statement, "the slut thinks she can flash her tits and make us give her whatever she wants" (3.03; 31:03-31:10). Daenerys, however, throughout the entire meeting does not fulfil the master's estimation, as she never proceeds to objectify herself and use her body and her female sensuality in order to gain agency. Rather, she obtains her power through the master's sense of male entitlement and his consequent, negligent underestimation of her. Thereby, Daenerys demonstrates that the "ways of operating" to evade the strategies of the patriarchy are innumerable and that the female Other has various options of reappropriating "the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (Certeau xiv). While the master's misconception of her female inferiority enables her to trick him into conducting a trade that she will most certainly emerge from as victor, Daenerys's tactic to conquer Astapor is heavily gendered as well: she asserts traditional masculine power, namely violence, as commander of an army, to capture the city and liberate the slaves. Daenerys also is portrayed as possessing the stereotypical masculine characteristics of self-control, assertiveness, resilience and courageousness (Donald 125), however, at the same time, she does not, like Arya, reject her feminine character traits, as the scene of her nurturing a slave demonstrates. Consequently, Daenerys's, who does not consider anything inherently wrong with being a woman, but exclusively with the paternalistic framework oppressing females, balance of masculine and feminine characteristics, as well as tactics typically associated with the respective genders, reveals the mere performativity and fluidity of gender.

Although, Daenerys disempowers the patriarchal, slave-owning, hegemony of Astapor, her success simultaneously raises issues, due to the Orientalism enforced by the scenes' mise-en-scène and her portrayal as white saviour, reinforcing the myth of imperialism. Edward Said, who in his 1978 published book *Orientalism* coined the eponymous term, defines the Orient as an "almost [...] European invention" (1) that, through the biased lens of Western scholars, has

been the subject of misleading and stereotypical representations of the East in the Western discourse. As “power produces knowledge” (Foucault, Power 27), and the East was unable to represent itself, it has patronisingly become portrayed as “a place of romance, exotic beings” and “[...] remarkable experiences” (Said 1). This construction of the exotic Other also often correlates with the stereotype of the “carnal female temptation” (Said 187), the hyper-sexualised oriental woman. However, the Orient is not solely romanticised as exotic and enigmatic by Western accounts, but is also portrayed as barbaric, backward, antidemocratic and under-humanised (Said 150), which has frequently served as justification for the colonisation of Eastern countries. The imagery of the Orient in the analysed scenes’ *mise-en-scène* mirror, both, *Game of Thrones*’ othering of the East, as well as its glorification of the West and thus, is highly problematic from a racial perspective.

The setting of Astapor immediately is evocative of the Middle East, due to the casting of ethnic actors, the audience’s awareness of the geographical setting of the city on the Eastern continent Essos, but also through the city’s architectural design. On top of the building in which the meeting between Daenerys and the masters takes place, a statue, covered in gold, of a mythical hybridisation of a woman and a bird, presumably a goddess in the culture of Essos, presides (see Image 7.9). The goddess clearly evinces a resemblance to the harpy, a creature frequently described in Greek and Roman mythology (see Image 7.10), possessing the torso of a woman and the wings and clutches of a vulture. Furthermore, the importance of the figure of the harpy in Astapori culture is signified by, both, the prop of the whip, the handle of which is shaped like a harpy (see Image 7.5), as well as the Astapori flag, which, too, depicts the mystical creature (see Image 7.4). The reliance on an ancient Eastern mythological figure stresses the mysteriousness of Astapor and further, serves to locate it in the Eastern cultural sphere and thereby, contrast it with the West. Moreover, the Otherness of the Astaporians is emphasised through their incomprehensible Valyrian language, as well as by the characters being racially coded as non-white<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, their exotic and colourful costumes serve to facilitate the audience to easily distinguish between the Easterners and Westerners, demonstrating the helpfulness of costumes in signifying characters’ belonging. Regarding Missandei’s attire, her costume also reveals the stereotypical assumption of the hyper-sexualised oriental woman, as

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<sup>7</sup> It needs to be noted that on the extradiegetic level of narration the casting choice of master Kraznys might be considered problematic, as the actor portraying him is Dan Hildebrand, who indeed is white and British. This raises the question why a Caucasian actor was cast to depict an Easterner, instead of casting an actor with actual ethnic background in the role, again, revealing the underrepresentation of minority actors in film.

her extremely low-cut dress clearly objectifies her and thus, projects, both, the Western, as well as the male gaze (see Image 7.3).



Image 7.9 City of Astapor. 3.03. 30:50.



Image 7.10 Harpy in Mythology

Especially troubling, however, is that the Astaporian culture and people who are coded non-white are solely perceived through Daenerys's Western lens and are unable to represent themselves. As soon as Daenerys arrives in Astapor the East is visually coded barbaric by the 'walk of punishment', the path lined with slaves sentenced to die (see Image 7.1). Daenerys, who is unfamiliar with Eastern cultures, immediately is aghast by the inhumane display and the fact that slavery, in contrast to Westeros, is not yet banned in Astapor. This distinction serves to signify the backwardness of the East and the superiority of the West, a presumption that has frequently presented the justification for imperialism. Indeed, Daenerys also utilises the argument of under-humanisation, emphasised by the existence of slave-trade, to set out to conquer the city of Astapor and liberate its people, who are depicted as unable to free themselves from their subaltern position. This, again, indicates their inferiority to Westerners as they are incapable of perceiving the injustices done to them and are dependent on a white messiah to introduce superior Western human rights and civilisation to them. Quite ironically, however, Daenerys draws on the very enslavement of the Unsullied in her conquest of the city and breaking of the patriarchy. Thereby, she herself becomes a coloniser as her power solely stems from the oppressive force of the whip and she only frees the soldiers after her orders have been successfully executed and Astapor is 'liberated'. Moreover, the fact that the Eastern storyline merely functions to further Daenerys's character development and establish her as a moral and just ruler, fit to conquer the Iron Throne and rule the civilised country of Westeros, equally amplifies the strong colonial undertones.

## 5. Conclusion

The thesis aimed at ascertaining the construction of the female gender identity in the complex television series *Game of Thrones* by illuminating both, the underlying processes and practices in the production of the show that inform on-screen representations, as well as the performance of femininity, and the potential bending of gender norms, within the storyworld. The analyses of the extra- and intradiegetic levels of narration have demonstrated that the depictions of femininity in *Game of Thrones* are as ambiguous as the reactions towards the series, which range from praise for the show's portrayal of 'feminist icons'<sup>8</sup> to severe criticism for its excessive display of female nudity.

The examination of *Game of Thrones*' extradiegetic and intradiegetic levels of narration has revealed that numerous aspects influence the portrayal of female characters in the series, resulting in ambiguous depictions of femininity. A crucial external factor is contemporary culture and the *Zeitgeist* during which the show is being produced: the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterised by a male hegemony dominating popular culture, as well a general pornification of culture. This further driven by complex television's capitalist endeavour, is leading to televisual representations which reflect and please the 'male gaze'. While *Game of Thrones* features several fully-fledged female characters, the analysis of the extradiegetic level of narration has demonstrated that in the production process, however, women are severely underrepresented. Consequently, the show's extradiegetic level mirrors women's general underrepresentation in behind-the-scenes positions in popular culture and the existing gender disparity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the representations of female gender identity are exclusively constructed by the male hegemony that is governing the series' production, it is consequently their ideology, aimed at upholding the gender dichotomy and thus, the patriarchal framework that is promoted and mirrored by the show's gender portrayals. This underlying patriarchal framework proves to be problematic, as it strongly affects the depictions of femininity on the intradiegetic level, causing ambiguous imageries.

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<sup>8</sup> *Game of Thrones*' female protagonists' circulation and reinforcement of feminist ideals has been often addressed by online newspapers (see [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)), online magazines ([glamourmagazine.co.uk](http://glamourmagazine.co.uk)), as well as political ([huffingtonpost.com](http://huffingtonpost.com)) and fan web blogs ([villainesse.com](http://villainesse.com)).

*Game of Thrones* is strongly shaped by the patriarchal gaze, which is revealed by the majority of, predominantly minor, female characters' frequent subjection to extreme objectification and sexualisation on screen. This has not only evoked considerable criticism but has even ensued in the coinage of the term 'sexposition', underlining the fantasy epic's explicit 'Othering' of women as objects of erotic spectacle. As the examination of the extradiegetic level of narration has illustrated, *Game of Thrones*' perpetuation of images of women conveying exhibitionist "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, *Visual* 62), which in turn are based on myths of female inferiority, might severely effect women's gender identities. Furthermore, the females depicted, who are coded erotic, present, "docile bodies" following Foucault's doctrine (1979): they, in unison, conform to present-day beauty and body norms, thus, disclosing the series' promotion of 21<sup>st</sup> century beauty myths that serve to maintain the male supremacy.

The analysis of the show's intradiegetic level of narration, however, has unveiled that gender in *Game of Thrones* is not solely performed according to the binary gender distinction that is informed by the male hegemony's underlying belief in male superiority. While the majority of minor female characters indeed adhere to the patriarchal ideology which governs, both, the extradiegetic production process as well as the intradiegetic storyworld and are subsequently, excessively objectified, not all women in the series correspond to the traditional gender role of femininity that they have been ascribed as women. As the analysis has demonstrated as soon as female characters become aware of the patriarchal oppression they resent it and attempt to engage in counter-hegemonic behaviour. Thus, my initial hypothesis that women who remain unaware of the patriarchy embody normative ideals and are subjected to exceeding objectification is verified.

However, unlike I presumed, my counter-hypothesis is not entirely supported by the results of the analysis of the intradiegetic level of narration. While women cognizant of the hegemony indeed reject the traditional ideal of female passivity and attempt to bend the stereotypical feminine gender identity that is upheld by the patriarchy, only Daenerys succeeds to split the patriarchal framework open. On a superficial level the female protagonists are visually coded powerful, supported through the scene's mise-en-scène or obvious gender bending by cross-dressing and exertion of masculine character traits, such as in the case of Cersei Lannister and Arya Stark. The in-depth examination of the intradiegetic level, however, has revealed that these women in fact do not break open the patriarchal boundaries, but operate within them and even support the perpetuation of the patriarchy's myth of female inferiority through their personal resentment of women embodying stereotypical femininity. Cersei and Arya, although

they fight the patriarchal boundaries, do not entirely dismiss the male hegemony's ideology by either promoting the patriarchy's dictates of female beauty and sexuality, or by depreciating their own sex. Hence, they demonstrate the severe impact of the belief of male supremacy on the development of their gender identity.

Furthermore, the overall tactics employed by the female characters to acquire power are deeply problematic as they only showcase two possible tactics of fighting the boundaries of patriarchy: female sexuality or violence. Women might either become masculine warriors, resenting their own sex and any attributes associated with femininity, or they utilise their feminine role as object of the male gaze to manipulate men. However, this carnal tactic is exposed as ineffectual and women remain victimised (Frankel 183). While the *mise-en-scène* portrays Cersei Lannister as powerful matriarch, the narrative level juxtaposes her visual depiction, unveiling her dependency on men and ultimately, through her devaluing her own sex, her support of the patriarchal framework.

Daenerys, the sole female character successfully overcoming the patriarchal obstacles presents an intermediate state. She does not resent her sex *per se*, but uses a heavily gendered tactic, as she exploits the inferiority associated with her gender to her advantage. In order to gain power, she performs masculine agency and draws on her dragons and consequently, extreme violence, repressing attributes such as empathy, which are stressed in her character development, and thereby, mirrors the patriarchal strategy. Thus, the show displays that in order to acquire real agency in the patriarchal society of Westeros, which might be considered a metareflection of the contemporary Western world, women must shed off any emotionalism and other character traits traditionally deemed feminine. They are required to perform masculinity in regard to their use of tactic, while in their appearance they are still expected to conform to beauty ideals, as non-conformity is coded queer and undesirable, thereby, promoting heteronormativity.

Although Daenerys overcomes the patriarchal framework within the intradiegetic level of narration, her conformity to contemporary beauty and body ideals supports the production process's male hegemony on a wider cultural level: by amplifying and imposing beauty myths on the audience the male supremacy is reinforced. Consequently, Daenerys's conformity to Western beauty norms, which stem from the patriarchal ideology, result in her remaining a 'docile body' nonetheless, ensuring patriarchal domination. Thereby, even in the most 'feminist' aspects of the storyline, it becomes obvious that the show is predominantly produced and written by popular culture's male hegemony and largely amplifies their dominant beliefs. Hence, it is worrisome how the show's producers attempt to camouflage sexual discrimination

and stereotyping behind characters that, on the surface, are seemingly informed by a feminist agenda, while, indeed, all female characters, independent of their acquired agency, present manifestations of the ruling elites' ideology and facilitate the circulation of myths.

Another pressing issue in regard to women's counter-hegemonic behaviour in *Game of Thrones* is class. Only noble women are enabled in their representations to indicate an awareness of the patriarchal framework and attain agency to fight it, while minor female characters, frequently functioning as prostitutes, are othered as unaware of the patriarchy and consequently, remain flat characters within Martin's universe. Furthermore, the female protagonists who are, to differing extents in the course of the series' plotline, acquiring agency are exclusively white and predominantly heteronormative<sup>9</sup>. Women of ethnic background on the contrary are subjected to orientalism, as they are mostly cast portraying prostitutes, thus being sexualised and forced into the role of the exotic Other. Thereby, the show's issues with the representation of ethnic minorities that mirrors ethnic actors' underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal in contemporary popular culture are revealed. Thus, although *Game of Thrones* belongs to the fantasy genre and as such is enabled to subvert common tropes, the series' lack of intersectionality and its stereotyping of ethnicities, is strongly interconnected with contemporary popular culture and the factors – capitalism, patriarchy, sexism and heteronormativity – governing it.

While Martin states that he was immersed in the Middle Ages but claims that he did not purposefully write an allegory of contemporary society (D'Addario n.p.), the analyses of the extradiegetic and intradiegetic level of narration have shown that *Game of Thrones* could be interpreted as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist* of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that it has been written and produced in. The objectification women encounter in the deeply flawed Westerosi society clearly is reminiscent of the systemic sexism characterising the 21<sup>st</sup> century as well as the general pornification of popular culture. Additionally, the sexism and sexual violence female characters in Westeros suffer at the hands of the male hegemony unfortunately are not outdated in the contemporary society, as Trump's "Grab- 'em by the pussy" (Bullock n.p.) remark and the recent Harvey Weinstein abuse scandal shockingly unveil.

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<sup>9</sup> Brienne of Tarth, Yara Greyjoy and Arya Stark, characters who engage in bending the gender norms also in regard to their appearances and are consequently visually coded queer, are most contradistinctive to heteronormative gender roles. By practicing "queering" (Butler, *Queer* 17), the breaking of the traditional gender dichotomy, on a visual level too, these characters consequently, more distinctly than the other female protagonists through their gender performativity, unveil the ideological construction of the gender dualism (Bachner 201).

So, although, *Game of Thrones* might have not been intended an allegory of contemporary society and the series is strongly led by a patriarchal framework and thus, fails to depict women successfully bending gender norms, the show holds a crucial function in the 21<sup>st</sup> century's culture: it is a pop cultural phenomenon, bridging high and popular culture, and reaches a mass audience of unprecedented size. Consequently, its problematic portrayals of sexual violence and excessive nudity have triggered enormous criticism of HBO and the show's producers. These public debates, which are mostly limited to the intradiegetic level of *Game of Thrones*, might, however, induce a dialogue on rape, heteronormativity, the objectification of women, and gender norms on a wider cultural level. Such public discussions might be fruitful in raising a heightened awareness of the construction of rape and beauty myths, existing gender inequalities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the underlying force of the male hegemony that have created and continuously reinforce these myths through medial depictions.

The depiction of women in *Game of Thrones* is therefore not either empowering or problematic, but "[...] without question, it's both" (Frankel 184). The series' portrayal of female characters might feature elements that could be considered empowering, such as gender bending, open criticism of the patriarchal framework and the employment of tactics to fight the patriarchy, however, it is also highly heteronormative and classist. Furthermore, the extreme objectification and sexualisation of the women depicted, stemming from the series' production being dominated almost exclusively by white men, promotes the patriarchal belief of female inferiority and the myth of the female Other and thus, juxtaposes any alleged feminist ideology informing their character development. However, the analyses showcased that *Game of Thrones* has underwent a significant decrease in 'sexposition' and the display of gratuitous nudity and a simultaneous increase in female empowerment from its first to its penultimate seventh season. As one more season will be broadcasted in 2019, allowing more potential for plot- and character development, it is, at the present, difficult to make a general statement about the roles of women in the fantasy epic, as they might be subject to change in the series' final season.

Words: 32. 971

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## Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Medien verbreiten nicht nur dominante Ideen der Populärkultur, sondern stellen auch einen zentralen Agenten des Sozialisationsprozesses dar, durch den die gesellschaftlichen Normen und Werte internalisiert werden. Folglich ist es wenig überraschend, dass sozial-konstruierte Geschlechternormen häufig den Medien entspringen und anschließend durch die selbigen verstärkt werden (Leavy und Trier-Benieck 12-13). Des Weiteren ist das Bestehenbleiben von stereotypischen Geschlechterrollen eng verknüpft mit den Bestrebungen der patriarchalen Hegemonie. Das 21. Jahrhundert ist weit von Geschlechteregalität entfernt, wie die Wahl Donald Trumps zum amerikanischen Präsidenten 2016, trotz seines geleakten misogynen “Grab-’ -em by the pussy“ Statements, sowie der Missbrauchsskandal um Filmmogul Harvey Weinstein, der einen weltweiten Diskurs über männliche Vormachtstellung und Sexismus in der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft entfachte, beweisen. Daher ist es nicht verwunderlich, dass auch in der Produktion von Medien Männer die herrschende Elite darstellen und es deren Ideologien sind, die in Film und Fernsehen repräsentiert werden (Bennett, Hickman, und Wall 253-254). Deshalb müssen kulturelle Repräsentationen, die “[...] pernicious interests of cultural oppression [...]” (Hammer & Kellner xxxi) dienen können, in die öffentliche Debatte miteinbezogen werden.

Die Fantasy-Serie *Game of Thrones*, welche derzeit, mit durchschnittlich 11,28 Millionen ZuseherInnen täglich, die erfolgreichste Fernsehserie darstellt (Neddog n.p.), steht seit des Ausstrahlungsstartes für ihre überflüssige Sexualisierung und Objektivierung von Frauen, sowie dem Ausmaß an, vor allem sexueller, Gewalt an Frauen unter starker feministischer Kritik. Da Geschlechterrepräsentationen in den Medien nicht natürlich entspringen, sondern sorgfältig konstruiert werden um einer spezifischen dominanten Ideologie der herrschenden männlichen Elite gerecht zu werden, analysiert diese Diplomarbeit die Verknüpfung zwischen dem Genre des komplexen Fernsehens und der Verstärkung von Geschlechterungleichheit, der Sexualisierung von Frauen und der Perpetuierung von Sexismus in Bezug auf die HBO Serie *Game of Thrones*. Der Fokus dieser Diplomarbeit richtet sich dabei auf die Examination der sozialen Konstruktion von Weiblichkeit und den beeinflussenden Faktoren auf der extradiegetischen Ebene, sowie der Performativität des weiblichen Geschlechtes in der intradiegetischen, narrativen Ebene von *Game of Thrones*.