

Issue 2016 **60**

GENDER FORUM

An Internet Journal for Gender Studies



Special Issue: Early Career Researchers IV

Edited by
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ISSN 1613-1878



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Spring Issue:
abstracts (October 1),
completed papers (January 1)

Summer Issue:
abstracts (January 1),
completed papers (April 1)

Fall Issue:
abstracts (April 1),
completed papers (July 1)

Early Career Researchers Special Issue:
abstracts (May 1),
completed papers (August 1)

Winter Issue:
abstracts (July 1),
completed papers (October 1)

About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

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Editorial

By Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky, University of Cologne

1 While the three previous issues of the Early Career Researchers series of *gender forum* featured a topically diverse collection of essays, the submissions for this year's issue spoke to two particular fields of interest that are currently engaging young academics. One centres on problematic and subversive representations of gender in current and cult TV shows, and the other on the rise of feminist material in science fiction. One half of this issue thus speaks to a recent trend that is continuously gaining ground in scholarly analysis, while the other expands on a well-documented area of research that has its origin in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

2 In "Renegotiating White Male Hegemony in Contemporary Period Fiction: An Analysis of the Television Serials *Copper* and *Hell on Wheels*", Sebastian Probst analyses notions of masculinity in current variations of the Western genre. While both shows were marketed as counter-hegemonic approaches to the dramatization of the American Civil War, both series feature white male protagonists who are portrayed as patriarchal protectors. Probst critically interrogates how the two shows complement their white male main character with a Black male side-kick. While these relationships allow to be read as critical explorations of the subject of racism at the surface level, a more thorough inquiry into their structures and dynamics indicates that they primarily cater to the emotional needs of a white male audience, up to the point of offering a redemption of sorts from the historical guilt of slavery.

3 Angelica de Vido's "‘I Want to be a Macho Man’: Examining Rape Culture, Adolescent Female Sexuality, and the Destabilisation of Gender Binaries in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*" considers in how far the oppressive, essentialist models of gender identity evident in (for instance) *Hell on Wheels* routinely dominate the action and horror genres of screen media. De Vido investigates how the first two seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) destabilise this repressive polarisation through its courageous, commanding female protagonist, who subverts genre norms by adopting the – traditionally male – role of Vampire Slayer. Pointing out how Buffy's relationship with Angel further destabilises traditional heterosexual power relations, De Vido's essay also examines the centrality of rape culture in *Buffy* and its powerful and subversive rewriting of Sharon Marcus' theory of the 'rape script'.

4 The third contribution to this issue's focus on television comes from Dennis Schäfer, whose "Nosferatu Revisited: Monstrous Female Agency in *Penny Dreadful*" offers a subversive reading of female characters in the horror genre. He argues that F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) constitutes an important filmic intertext that

facilitates a fruitful understanding of the series *Penny Dreadful*'s first episode and its main character Vanessa Ives. Even though almost a hundred years separate one of the prime examples of German expressionist film from this contemporary TV series, the monstrous female agency of Vanessa Ives can be conceptualized and problematized by several narrative and visual congruencies with *Nosferatu*. Analysing the show's female acts of transgression, the essay assesses the critical nature of masculinised female monstrosity on the serial screen and the fruitful possibilities that agency and serialisation might offer.

5 Jonas Neldner maintains the issue's focus on feminist analysis in his essay "'I should have let her die': a Posthuman Future between (Re)-Embodiment and Cyborgian Concepts" when he argues that the depiction of gender roles functions as an important theme in science fiction literature, as it allows for a critical evaluation of stereotypes and underlying disparities. Drawing on C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" (1944), James Tiptree, Jr.'s "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" (1973) and Shariann Lewitt's "A Real Girl" (1998), Neldner discusses a posthuman state and its effect on traditional gender roles. The futuristic worlds the stories are set in serve to explore science fiction's potentially feminist stance, and offer room for an investigation of the thought-provoking cyborg figure.

6 Christian David Zeitz offers this issue's final contribution. In "Dreaming of Electric Femmes Fatales: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: Final Cut* (2007) and Images of Women in Film Noir", he takes up *Blade Runner* as a classic neo-noir, a science fiction film which applies 1940s films noirs' visual style in order to create a dark and dystopian vision of humanity's future. However, this borrowing from film noir is not only limited to visual style, but also applies to *Blade Runner*'s representation of women. Zeitz examines how two female archetypal film noir roles, namely the roles of the *femme fatale* and the *redeemer*, are transposed to science fiction and how they are placed outside of what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order.

7 This fourth issue of gender forum's Early Career Researchers series speaks to young researchers' ability to make significant contributions not only to new fields, but also to established ones, and to offer new ways of engaging with gender representations in literature, film, and television.

Renegotiating White Male Hegemony in Contemporary Period Fiction:

An Analysis of the Television Serials *Copper* and *Hell on Wheels*

By Sebastian Probst, University of Cologne, Germany

Abstract:

Starting with the observation that the results of Hollywood's recently renewed interest in the subject of the American Civil War and Slavery in the Old South allow for being read as explorations of questions of masculinity, in particular in relation with issues of race (including whiteness), I ask whether the same applies to two recent television drama series set in the historical period in question, namely AMC's *Hell on Wheels* (2011 – present) and BBC America's *Copper* (2012 – 2013). Considering media statements about these shows that give the impression that they could be regarded as counter-hegemonic approaches to the dramatization of American history, the question arises how both of them ended up with a white male main character. Given the centrality that “narratives of paternally charged revenge” (Hamad) assume in the design of either character, an inquiry into the forms and functions of fatherhood is chosen as a starting point for an exploration of this question. The following analysis shows that apart from serving as a diegetic device that accounts for their respective motivations, drawing the main characters as bereaved fathers also sets the stage for authoritarian celebrations of the need for a patriarchal protector that imply conceptualizing motherhood as inevitably needful and dependent at best, or even as the primary cause for fathers' experiences of loss and alienation from their children at worst. In a second step, the attention is turned towards the portrayal of race relations in the two shows, based on the observation that in either case, the white male main character is complemented with a Black male side-kick, a constellation that bears a certain resemblance to the setup typical for the biracial buddy movie as analysed by Ames. While these relationships allow to be read as critical explorations of the subject of racism at the surface level, a more thorough inquiry into their structures and dynamics indicates that they primarily cater to the emotional needs of a white male audience, up to the point of offering a redemption of sorts from the historical guilt of slavery.

Stabilizing Hegemony by Incorporating Criticism?

1 The two network television serials *Hell on Wheels* (AMC, 2011 – present) and *Copper* (BBC America, 2012 – 2013) might at first glance have nothing more in common than their historical setting in immediate temporal proximity to the American Civil War. Yet a look at the publicity that both shows received might suggest otherwise. BBC America General Manager Perry Simon promoted *Copper* as a show that would be “capturing the early American multicultural experience in provocative, ground-breaking fashion” (qtd. in Fienberg) and likewise *Hell on Wheels* was criticized for giving the impression that its “actors sometimes are made to symbolize very modern obsessions, e.g. with race and gender” (Dewolf Smith). Could it be, then, that these shows represent an intersectional approach of the dramatization of American history, that they might, in other

words, present an attempt at “decentering the center” (Narayan & Harding), at undermining the hegemonic position of white masculinity? It might come as a bit of a surprise that this is precisely not the case, but that both series resort to a rather conventional setup in featuring a white male main protagonist - with astoundingly similar character designs. In fact, as I would like to argue, a comparative analysis of both shows that takes this similarity as a starting point indicates that they primarily cater to the emotional needs of a white male audience, up to the point of offering a redemption of sorts from the historical guilt of slavery.

2 Both protagonists are introduced as Civil War veterans who lost their family while they were at the front and in either case this loss supplies the backdrop for the “long arc [that] hangs over every episode” (Metcalf 64) of at least the first season. Furthermore, both the former Confederate soldier Cullen Bohannon in *Hell on Wheels* and the former Union soldier Kevin Corcoran in *Copper* are complemented with a minor character whose identity as a Black man is a defining factor of their relationship. It is probably safe to say that the relative prominence of these latter characters – Elam Ferguson in *Hell on Wheels* and Matthew Freeman in *Copper* – has inspired statements about the two shows such as those quoted above. As a matter of fact, it is not to be denied that the subject of racism is critically explored through the portrayal of these relationships, e.g. when Ferguson points out to Bohannon that even strong emotional bonds between slave and slave-owner cannot undo the fundamental injustice of slavery (“Revelations”) or when Freeman makes Corcoran aware of the racist bias guiding one of his investigations (“In the Hands of an Angry God”). Yet, for all this apparently critical engagement with power structures, the fact remains that in either case, we somehow mysteriously ended up with a white man occupying center stage. Now, how did that happen? Could it be, for instance, that these apparently critical glances at American history operate in a way very similar to “popular culture’s latest attempts to come to terms with feminism by appropriating it”, a pattern that Modleski has observed in her analysis of *Top Gun* already 25 years ago (63)?

Postfeminist Fatherhood in the Civil War Era?

3 Given the striking similarity between Bohannon and Corcoran – both are family fathers who lost their families while fighting in the Civil War – an obvious point to further this analysis is to look at the way in which their being fathers is made relevant in either series, based on Hamad's observation that “[f]atherhood has become the dominant paradigm of masculinity across the spectrum of U.S. mainstream cinema” (1) and her

subsequent conclusion that “postfeminist fatherhood is the new hegemonic masculinity” (ibid.). For all its acuteness with regard to the present, Hamad’s pointed formulation runs the risk of obfuscating the fact that fatherhood as a social institution has always been a central element of hegemonic masculinity in American society, notwithstanding the manifold transformations that it has undergone since colonial times (Griswold 1-9; Rotundo 2-6), and that, by virtue of its ideological equation with breadwinning for the better part of the last two centuries it has served to legitimize male dominance (Pleck 86-90). Nevertheless, her observation does have the merit of drawing attention towards two important discursive novelties.

4 On the one hand, Hamad rightly foregrounds that over the last fifteen years it has become next to impossible for a male Hollywood hero to escape being cast in paternal terms, if not as a father in the literal sense of the word, then at least figuratively (15-17). On the other hand, and more importantly perhaps, she also casts light on the historically specific form that the ideal of fatherhood has taken on in a discursive formation that is shaped to a large extent by “the cultural hegemony of postfeminism” (5). At large, this historical situation is distinguished by the attempts of patriarchy to stabilize itself in the face of the long-term impact of second wave feminism, sometimes by mobilizing discourses that posit men as victims of feminist interventions (cf. Modleski 10; Kimmel 217-223), sometimes in less obvious ways. Thus, what Hamad observed in her survey of recent period drama films (29-47) is a marked tendency towards dualistic configurations of fatherhood that blend “cultural nostalgia for pre-second wave feminist gender norms” (29) with an adherence to postfeminist demands for “sensitive, emotionally articulate fathers” (ibid.). This discursive strategy aptly illustrates the persistence as well as the flexibility of patriarchal ideology in that it ensures the survival of outdated models of masculinity by making partial and highly selective concessions to emancipatory gender ideals.

5 This “dualistic construction of historically located masculinity as germane to the setting and symptomatic of postfeminism” (Hamad 31) can also be traced in the design of both Bohannon and Corcoran, especially in the way they interact with their respective surrogate children they encounter along the way. Kevin Corcoran’s relationship with Annie Reilly, for instance, is not only characterized by him acting as her patriarchal protector (“Surviving Death”; “Husbands and Fathers”; “The Hudson River School”; “A Morning Song”) but also features instances of him displaying a softer, more domestic side, in that he is shown putting her in the bathtub, carefully cleaning her up and affectionately tucking her in afterwards, on a day that saw her escaping a traumatic situation (“The Hudson River

School”), thus offering her a kind of emotional support that is much more in correspondence “with contemporary norms of sensitive fatherhood” (Hamad31) than with the high degree of alienation that must be assumed to have been characteristic of father-daughter relationships in nineteenth-century urban America (Griswold 16f.). In a similar vein, Bohannon gets an opportunity to display his softer side upon meeting the orphaned Mormon boy Ezra Dutson, with whom he quickly develops an astonishingly good rapport: after gradually gaining the boy's trust by bonding activities such as playing cards (“Cholera”), passing on wilderness lore and making him his confidant in warning him not to trust Thomas Durant too much as the three of them set out on a mission to get some of their workers back, Bohannon turns out to be the one with whom Ezra speaks his first words after the traumatic experience of losing his parents (“It happened in Boston”). Yet, despite these apparent efforts of letting both Bohannon and Corcoran conform with the ideals of postfeminist fatherhood to a certain extent, the primary mode of inflecting their masculinity as fatherhood is through the mobilization of a “paternalized revenge narrative” (Hamad 31).

Mobilizing Paternal Revenge Narratives

6 In *Hell on Wheels*, the very first scene of the series’ pilot sees Cullen Bohannon shooting one of the Union soldiers who killed his wife and son, branding the series from its very beginning as a staging ground for what Hamad – borrowing a term coined by the critic Anthony Oliver Scott – refers to as a vigilante fatherhood narrative that follows the pattern of “paternal payback” (63). A bereaved father’s quest for vengeance upon those responsible for his loss is established as the main character's primary motivation, an effect that receives further reinforcement from the tag-line of the first season's trailer: “In 1865, a soldier’s search for vengeance brought him here.” Notably, however, the fact that Bohannon is presented as a “righteously aggrieved father” (Hamad 30) can certainly serve to explain why he made the journey to this remote outpost of civilization in the very first place, yet it does not account for the fact that he becomes one of the most central figures of the community, a centrality that is expressed and underlined by his impressive career with the Union Pacific Railroad. After being hired as little more than a common laborer (“Pilot”), he is made foreman of the entire workforce (“Immoral Mathematics”), head of railroad security (“Pomp, Pride and Circumstance”) and chief engineer (“Big Bad Wolf”). What this implies can be illustrated by borrowing from the terminology of Wright's structuralist analysis of classical Western movies. Allowing for the derivations that the

format of the television serial as opposed to the movie necessitates, *Hell on Wheels* presents itself as a blend of the classical plot (48f.) and the vengeance variation (69). In the terms of these plot models, Bohannon's fatherhood tells us why he "enters a social group" (41) in the first place, yet it does not account for the "exceptional ability" (42) which in turn motivates the social group to award him "a special status" (43), a status that seems to correspond rather well with Connell's and Messerschmidt's conception of hegemonic masculinity as "the currently most honored way of being a man" (832).

7 In *Copper*, on the other hand, it takes slightly longer until Kevin Corcoran's masculinity is articulated as bereaved fatherhood. In fact, this is not the case until halfway through the first episode ("Surviving Death") when his perceived duty to see to the burial of a recently murdered child takes him to the cemetery that also contains his own daughter's grave. Significantly, however, the child that Corcoran and his colleagues have come to bury there is the twin sister of Annie Reilly, his surrogate daughter whose acquaintance he already makes in the episode's opening scene. Interestingly, the presence of this surrogate daughter makes it possible to let Kevin Corcoran act as the protagonist of two narrative scenarios that, in her survey of recent Hollywood films, Hamad has identified as cognate, yet normally mutually exclusive manifestations of vigilante postfeminist fatherhood (63-69): By virtue of this configuration he can not only appear as the "righteously aggrieved father" (30) seeking to "enact paternally charged revenge" (ibid.) on those who killed his daughter, but it also enables him to repeatedly act as a "sovereign rescuer father" (65) in search-and-rescue narratives, with Annie taking the role of the kidnapped daughter ("Surviving Death"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "The Hudson River School"; "A Morning Song"). Similar to the function that the paternal revenge narrative assumes in *Hell on Wheels*, Corcoran's aggrieved fatherhood and the narratives through which it is articulated help to provide a certain degree of diegetic plausibility. Thus, they allow to account for the stubbornness with which he investigates seemingly hopeless cases even after his colleagues and superiors have told him otherwise, be it the murder of Kate Reilly ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"), or his wife's mysterious disappearance ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"; "The Empty Locket"; "La Tempête"; "Better Times Are Coming").

Marginalizing Motherhood

8 In fact, I would like to argue that he does not regard finding his wife Ellen as an end in itself, but rather as a means to solve the case of his daughter's death. This is

indicated by a similar suspicion that is voiced by his partner detective Francis Maguire (“La Tempête”) and the way he treats his wife after finally having found her, heavily sedated in a psychiatric hospital reserved for poor women (“Better Times Are Coming”; “A Day to Give Thanks”). His behavior in this latter instance is especially telling: Despite the heavy withdrawal symptoms that she is suffering from, he treats her like he would treat a suspect in an investigation, unrelentingly questioning her as soon as she shows the slightest signs of coming to her senses (“A Day to Give Thanks”).

9 The final revelation of the mystery then does not contribute to solving this conflict, either. On the contrary, it rather adds further tension to their relationship, as it turns out that it was Ellen herself who accidentally killed their daughter, after the latter had walked in on her and Francis Maguire having extramarital sex (“A Day to Give Thanks”).¹

10 The tragic resolution then comes in the form of Ellen’s suicide, after she had unsuccessfully tried to make up with Kevin for several episodes (“The Hope Too Bright to Last”). Overtly, this desperate act seems to have been caused by Ellen having gotten the impression that Kevin had made another woman pregnant (“To One Shortly to Die”), yet the ground for it had already been prepared by his inability and unwillingness –to forgive her (“A Day to Give Thanks”; “Home, Sweet Home”; “Aileen Aroon”; “I Defy Thee to Forget”).

11 Reduced to a more abstract pattern, this plot-line presents a brutalized version of the “marginalization of motherhood in popular cinema” as it has been described by Hamad (17-19): instead of merely rendering her largely irrelevant to the story, here the mother is made responsible for the father's loss of his child. Subsequently she is punished for having caused this loss by having acted as a (sexually) autonomous subject independent of her husband. Despite the fact that she feels compelled to inflict the punishment on herself, it is

¹Interestingly, Ellen’s repressed memory of this event is presented to have blended with recollections of an earlier traumatic – and apparently guilt-laden – experience, namely an abortion she had after she got pregnant from Francis Maguire. Her strongest association with this experience is a sense of having heard the fetus cry during the abortion, even though she expresses full awareness for the impossibility of this impression. In the scene that shows her recovering both memories and confessing them to Kevin, she describes having pulled Maggie towards her in order to console her, after the latter had started crying because her mother was committing adultery with Maguire. However, Ellen reveals that she was not able to stop Maggie from crying and that instead, the girl’s sobbing reactivated the earlier trauma of the above-mentioned abortion, thus inducing a state resembling an anxiety attack, as is hinted at by the strong perceptual disorders she describes. In this state, she tries to push the noise away from her, not realizing any more that what she merely perceives as noise is in fact her daughter, and inadvertently makes Maggie hit the door-frame with the back of her head (“A Day to Give Thanks”). This arrangement ties Maggie’s death to Ellen’s unfaithfulness in a twofold way: on an immediate level, being caught in the act with Maguire sets the stage for Maggie’s death, whereas a former consequence of Ellen’s affair, namely the abortion, provides a plausible explanation for the push that ultimately killed the girl. Notably, this arrangement containing a very strong association of abortion with murder, brings to mind the political positions of the so-called ‘pro-life movement’.

clear that she would not have gone to such desperate measures if it were not for the persistence of Kevin's grudge against her. To put this bluntly, the pattern partly resembles a socio-cultural phenomenon germane to the postfeminist present that has also gained currency as a standard trope of anti-feminist backlash politics: the legal dispute over custody arrangements and financial child support after divorce that allegedly tends to cut off fathers from their children, while simultaneously compelling them to divert unreasonably high amounts of their incomes into their ex-wives' pockets. Despite the fact that demographic reality does not coincide with this trope to an extent that would justify regarding it as a mass phenomenon, it has nevertheless decisively shaped the public debate about child-care arrangements and the pertinent jurisdiction, which is largely due to the political efforts of so-called "fathers' rights" groups (Griswold 260-265; Kimmel 265f.), an activism that more often than not is fueled by these men's "hostility towards the courts, social workers, and *most of all their ex-wives*" (Griswold 261, italics added). Against this backdrop, Ellen's suicide, ultimately attributable to Kevin's behavior towards her, gives the impression of an aggrieved "fathers' rights" activist's revenge fantasy, mediating the misogynous aggression that is effectively directed at contemporary women through a narrative arrangement in an historical setting that causally links a wife's unfaithfulness to the death of the 'legitimate' child and her subsequently self-inflicted punishment.

12 This impression is supported by two further peculiarities: on the one hand, Ellen's death finally paves the way for the happy reunion and lasting reconciliation of Kevin with the fraternally signified Francis Maguire, i.e. the man with whom his wife had an affair in his absence ("Ashes Denote That Fire Was"), thus giving homosocial bonds between men symbolic prevalence over relationships across gender lines, which again is very much in line with ideologies of male supremacy both old and new (Connell 209f.; Kimmel 293f.; Rotundo 194-221). On the other hand, the pattern of a woman both coded as a mother and a spouse bringing harm to a child by acting autonomously – i.e. without depending on Kevin – had already made its appearance in the series once before Kevin learned that Ellen was responsible for their daughter's death. Annie, Kevin's aforementioned surrogate daughter, had been given into Elizabeth Haverford's care ("In the Hands of an Angry God"), a wealthy and beautiful upper-class widow who also becomes Kevin's love-interest for a few episodes ("In the Hands of an Angry God"; "The Empty Locket"; "La Tempête"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "The Hudson River School"), yet she finds it increasingly difficult to deal with the girl's erratic behavior and finally comes to the conclusion that she is not capable of providing the firm education that the bad influences Annie had been

exposed to seem to make necessary. Consequently, she locates the man who identifies himself as Annie's actual father, a farmer from Upstate New York, and hands her over to him ("Arsenic and Old Cake"), without knowing that this man had bought Annie and her sister Kate from their biological mother in order to turn them into sex-slaves, before they managed to escape from his farm and ran off to New York City, as Kevin and his colleagues had found out earlier on ("Husbands and Fathers").

13 Now, instead of being slowly driven to commit suicide like Ellen, Elizabeth receives her punishment from Kevin in a much more immediate manner: after he learns that Annie was not sent to California, as Elizabeth falsely made him believe ("Arsenic and Old Cake"), he rushes to the Haverford mansion in order to confront her. As she receives him in her drawing room, he enacts his "paternally charged revenge" (Hamad 30) on her in a twofold way. First, he violently destroys a nude painting that had been described to bear "an uncanny resemblance" to her earlier on and that had played a significant role in catalyzing their romantic relationship to each other ("In the Hands of an Angry God"), by slicing through the canvas with a knife he seemingly produced out of nowhere. Then he turns back on her, holding the aforesaid knife to her throat, threatening to cut "right across [her] voicebox", emphasizing that this way nobody would hear her scream ("The Hudson River School"). Apparently, the common denominator of both these actions seems to be that they allow to be read as death threats, even though the destruction of the painting that either portrays Elizabeth or at least someone looking very much like her is overtly rationalized by having Kevin choose between two paintings based on their market value, thus settling for the nude because it is the more expensive one, whereby the class differences between Kevin and Elizabeth are also made relevant at the surface level. Yet the threat to cut Elizabeth's throat in a way that would also render her mute might also be taken to be indicative of a male anxiety of the possibility of female subjectivity (cf. Theweleit 121-158; 217-227), symbolized by the capacity to express such subjectivity, i.e. the voice. The fact that it was Elizabeth acting as an autonomous subject, i.e. her subjectivity in action, that produced the occasion for this conflict in the very first place in that she decided to give Annie away without asking Kevin beforehand – who would have been able to tell her that Mr. Reilly was not actually Annie's father and should not be trusted – seems to lend this interpretation further support.

14 Yet, whether or not the conflicts between Kevin and the two women can be regarded as expressions of or appeals to male anxiety over female subjectivity, the impression remains that in both cases the paternal revenge narrative intertwines with the

marginalization of motherhood in a rather disturbing way. Whereas in *Hell on Wheels* the paternal revenge narrative simply places the mother, i.e. Cullen Bohannon's dead wife, among those to be avenged by the hero, thus comfortably eliminating her from the actual action, which is also very much in line with the pertinent observations made by Hamad (18f.), the mother/wife – or her maternally signified equivalent – turns into the object upon which revenge has to be enacted in *Copper*. Regardless of the implications that this may or may not have on matters of subjectivity, both Ellen and Elizabeth bring this fate upon themselves by acting autonomously from Kevin.

15 A narrative that parallels this pattern to a certain extent can also be encountered in the last two seasons of *Hell on Wheels*, yet instead of turning herself into the object of revenge, the woman in question turns herself into a damsel in distress by acting independently from the hero, i.e. she receives her punishment in a much less immediate way. At the end of the third season, Bohannon marries a young Mormon woman (“Get Behind The Mule”) whom he impregnated earlier on (“Eminent Domain”), yet due to the fact that he was not able to reclaim his old position as chief engineer upon returning to Hell on Wheels, he sees himself forced to accept a job that hardly pays enough to secure decent living conditions for him and his new wife Naomi, let alone their child (“Chicken Hill”). As it becomes evident over the course of the following episodes that this arrangement renders him unable to adequately perform his paternally charged roles as provider and protector (“Life's a Mystery”) as well as it makes it impossible for him to be a caring companion for his socially isolated wife (“Reckoning”), she then decides to go back to the Mormon colony Fort Smith where her family sought refuge after they were driven from their land by the railroad company (“Under Color of Law”). Naomi's decision to leave Cullen ultimately sets the stage for a search-and-rescue narrative which in turn provides the long arc (cf. Metcalf 64-67) that frames the first half of the as yet unfinished fifth season of the show (“Chinatown”; “False Prophets”): upon arriving at Fort Smith after quitting his job with the Union Pacific, Bohannon discovers that the settlement had fallen prey to a catastrophic event that killed many of the inhabitants, yet he neither finds his wife nor his son among the unburied dead bodies. His search for them then leads him further west to Salt Lake City where he finds evidence that lets him believe that they are still alive, but does not offer any clues with regard to their whereabouts. This situation then inspires his decision to join the Union Pacific's historical rival, the Central Pacific Railroad, as the latter's vice president promises him to mobilize the company's vast resources in order to locate Bohannon's family (“Further West”).

16 Naomi's distress is thus presented as being occasioned by her decision to leave Cullen and thus allows for being read as the narrative punishment that she is dealt with as a consequence of her autonomous actions (cf. Modleski 63), in a way similar to the fates that Ellen Corcoran and Elizabeth Haverford bring upon themselves in *Copper*. For Cullen himself, on the other hand, Naomi's distress presents the perfect opportunity to redeem himself of his inadequacies as a husband and as a father that he exhibited earlier on (cf. Hamad 58f.). In a way, it even seems as if he could not quite realize his full potential as long as his wife and son are still around him, for while Naomi and William were with him, his career with the railroad did not seem to be going anywhere. Yet as soon as they are gone, he is made chief of railroad police ("Under the Color of Law") and his decision to join the Central Pacific later on even makes him a shareholder in that company ("Further West"), equaling an improvement not only to his immediately prior position with the Union Pacific, but also to but also to his season 3 employment as the latter company's chief engineer.

. The implication of this is somewhat paradoxical: only when his family is taken away from him, he can adequately perform as a father and a husband, be it by avenging his first wife and son in the first season, or by embarking on a quest to search and rescue Naomi and William.

17 In retrospect, then, letting Cullen Bohannon have another family, letting him become a father again seems to have had the primary purpose of giving him a reason to join a new social group, very much like the murder of his first wife and son provided him with a plausible motive to come out west in the very first place. In that it presents the independent actions of Naomi as potentially harmful for herself and their son, the use of this motivational device also implies a marginalization of motherhood and thus helps to account for the centrality of a male character by way of establishing the need for a patriarchal protector. In a way, this need for a patriarchal protector was already implicit in Bohannon's original background story, insofar as it was his absence from his farm in Meridian, Mississippi that rendered his family defenseless against the marauding Union troops. In other words, this answers the question why the story revolves around a male main character. Similar reasoning can be applied to the maternally signified women in *Copper*, therefore it would seem equally possible to apply this explanation to Kevin Corcoran.

18 The impression that was gained earlier that inflecting the main protagonists' masculinities in terms of fatherhood merely serves as a motivational device in either series

thus needs to be revised: precisely through making their fatherhood relevant by way of mobilizing narratives that celebrate the need for a patriarchal protector, a marginalization of maternally inflected femininity is achieved that helps to account for the fact that either series revolves around a male protagonist. But still, neither the fact that the narrative setups are designed to require a patriarchal protector nor the main characters' exceptionally strong motivations that are articulated as a result of their fatherhood sufficiently explains what it is that endows both Corcoran and Bohannon with the "exceptional ability" (Wright 42) that leads their respective societies to award them the "special status" (ibid.: 43) that is part and parcel of both their stories.

19 With regard to *Hell on Wheels* and *Copper*, then, Hamad's claim that "postfeminist fatherhood is the new 'hegemonic masculinity'" (1) seems to require a significant modification, inasmuch as the analysis so far has shown that the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Kevin Corcoran and Cullen Bohannon could not possibly have been constructed *without* drawing them as fathers, yet their fatherhood in itself is not what grants them hegemonic status. A second striking similarity of both characters, namely that for both of them their relationship with a prominently figuring minor character who happens to be a Black man – Elam Ferguson in *Hell on Wheels* and Matthew Freeman in *Copper* – is important in a number of ways. An inquiry into the dynamics and functions of these relationships might help to account for the centrality that both Bohannon and Corcoran achieve in their respective settings in a manner that the analysis of the implications of their signification in terms of fatherhood does not, especially in the face of the stabilizing effect that the emergence of the sub-genre of the biracial buddy film since the 1980s has been shown to have on white male hegemony. Critical readings of this sub-genre have attributed this effect to the fact that "the African-American character is typically the sidekick to the white hero [who] offers his skills and bravery for the preservation of mainstream (white) cultural values" (Gates 74), raising the question whether this pattern also applies to Elam Ferguson and Matthew Freeman.

Appropriating Ex-Slaves' Labor?

20 The development of the relationship between Matthew Freeman and Kevin Corcoran does not follow the pattern typical for the buddy movie as we are not made to witness how "their initial lack of understanding of one another is eventually transformed into friendship and mutual respect" (Gates 73f.). Their bonding had already taken place in

the battlefield where they fought side by side and thus lies already in the story's past when the series begins ("Surviving Death"). Yet, the function that Freeman fulfills for Corcoran can certainly be argued to correspond with Gates' observation on how the biracial buddy film contributes to the stabilization of white male hegemony: in many of his investigations, Corcoran relies heavily on Freeman's support, whose skills as a physician extend well into the realm of forensic pathology, thus giving Corcoran a scientific edge over his fellow detectives.

21 For instance, if it had not been for Matthew's thorough examination of Kate Reilly's dead body, revealing both the murder weapon and the fact that the suspect in custody who had already been bribed into taking the blame for the child's death could not possibly have been the one who dealt the fatal blow, Kevin would not have been able to solve the case, especially in the face of the unwillingness of his superior officer to spend too much time on this investigation ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"). Furthermore, Matthew's analyses provide decisive leads in cases that appear to threaten public safety in Five Points, be it by identifying a chemical substance in the vomit of what appeared to be the victims of a serial killer ("Home, Sweet Home"; "Aileen Aroon"), by establishing the innocence of a murder suspect in a case that might otherwise have led to a major riot in the neighborhood ("In the Hands of an Angry God") or by helping Kevin to figure out that his very own ward boss, General Brendan Donovan, must have had a hand in the demise of a man whose death would enable him to buy large parts of the neighborhood ("Think Gently of the Erring"; "The Fine Ould Irish Gintleman" [sic]; "Good Heart and Willing Hand").

22 Notably, this division of labor that lets Freeman serve as Corcoran's analytical faculty whereas Corcoran himself is strongly associated with the capacity and willingness to use brute force bears a certain resemblance to the character setup that Ames has shown to be characteristic of the biracial buddy film of the 1980s and early 1990s in that here as much as there "the white man is clearly the savage equipped for survival, while the black man has become a highly civilized figure who has lost his touch with his savage masculinity" (53), a configuration that Ames has shown to constitute a reversal of the older stereotypical pattern of "the association of the black man with the physical (and unthinking) realm" (59). By making Matthew a medical doctor, one might argue, this reversal is almost taken to the furthest point possible, and in fact he is the character most strongly associated with the "thinking realm" in the entire series.

23 The upshot of this, i.e. the emasculation that is imagined to result from this

supposed alienation from one's own physicality, is underlined by drawing Matthew as a man whose decisions are to a large extent governed by the imperatives of domestic life as is aptly illustrated by the fact that he is shown to give in to his wife's wishes to move out of Five Points in the very first episode ("Surviving Death"). Even his 'emancipation' from this heteronomy, marked by his decision to take over the practice of a retiring doctor in their old neighborhood ("Home, Sweet Home"), is cast in terms of domestic conflict to such an extent that it contributes to the framing of family life as a form of imprisonment for the masculine subject, notwithstanding that its resolution offers an apparent reconciliation of the demands of the public and the private sphere. Notably, this reconciliation is achieved by letting his wife come to happily accept it as her duty to support her husband in any way she can ("Aileen Aroon"). Towards Kevin, who in contrast to his scientifically trained friend has lots of casual sex with changing partners ("Surviving Death"; "Husbands and Fathers"; "Arsenic and Old Cake"; "A Morning Song"; "Beautiful Dreamer"), Matthew even acts as an advocate of domesticity by trying to raise awareness in him for Ellen's emotional needs ("A Day to Give Thanks"; "Aileen Aroon"), thus reproducing the juxtaposition of the respectable, yet emasculated Black man with the tough, streetwise white savage who has perfectly adapted himself to the dangerous urban jungle, the juxtaposition that would normally provide the point of departure for the central plot of male bonding in the biracial buddy film (Ames 54f., 58).

24 With regard to the aforementioned division of labor between Corcoran and Freeman it seems significant that, at least initially, Kevin takes all the credit for the remarkable results that it enables him to come up with ("Surviving Death") and even later on he does not disclose more than that "there is a doctor, who helps [him] with cases from time to time" ("Aileen Aroon"). Thus, Kevin's success as an investigator rests to a large extent on the appropriation of a Black man's *mental* labor and on keeping this circumstance secret at least towards his superiors. Through his relationship with the wealthy Robert Morehouse who has Kevin taking the credit for an amputation that Matthew carried out on him when the three of them were in the field together, this constellation even earns him an extraordinary reputation among New York's upper class ("Surviving Death").

25 Yet this mode of appropriation is very consciously introduced as a concession to "the diegetic requirements of the historical backdrop" (Hamad 31) by letting Matthew himself advise Kevin not to let it be known that it is a Black man who regularly performs autopsies for him, because he plausibly suspects that such knowledge would inevitably

lead to the mobilization of racist bias, which in turn would make it impossible for Corcoran to work with Freeman's findings ("Surviving Death"). This is where *Copper* differs significantly from the movies analyzed by Ames: it is precisely not the "denial of history" that amounts to the "powerful appeal of the interethnic bond" (59) between Matthew and Kevin, but rather its very explicit reflection.

26 To an even higher degree, this seems also to be the case in *Hell on Wheels*, given that in Cullen Bohannon the recently freed slave Elam Ferguson not only encounters a former slaveholder, but also sees this former slaveholder put in charge of him, precisely because the racist foreman Daniel Johnson assumes that, as a Southerner, Bohannon would know how to keep Black workers in line ("Pilot"). Given this initial conflict, the development of their relationship more closely conforms to the pattern of the buddy movie "in depicting the humorous banter and developing rapport" (Ames 58) of the two men, even up to the point of including a scene where Bohannon symbolically enables Ferguson to reclaim his manhood by teaching him how to shoot ("Revelations"; cf. Ames 53). In contrast to Matthew, though, Elam's initial emasculation does not originate in the constraints of domestic life, but is instead presented as a direct result of the hostile racism that he encounters everywhere in the camp: because he is Black, he is turned down at the brothel ("A New Birth of Freedom"), not included in meetings of the so-called "walking bosses", despite the fact that he is in charge of the freed-men's crew ("Bread and Circuses"), and almost lynched as he is caught secretly having sex with the prostitute who initially would not serve him ("Pride, Pomp and Circumstance"; "Revelations"). Bohannon's heavy reliance on his Black companion's help in both establishing and maintaining his centrality in the camp, on the other hand, strongly mirrors Corcoran's dependence on Freeman. Without Ferguson breaking his chains, for instance, Bohannon could not have escaped custody in order to ask Durant to be made foreman ("Immoral Mathematics"). The implied irony of a former slave freeing a former slaveholder is echoed later on when Cullen calls upon Elam to back him up on an expedition into Cheyenne territory, because he feels threatened by the Union soldiers he is supposed to accompany, given his past with the Confederate army ("Derailed").

27 Despite the fact that Bohannon very consciously tricks Ferguson into inadvertently giving the impression of being his personal servant in order to complete the performance by virtue of which he manages to be made chief engineer ("Big Bad Wolf"), Ferguson nevertheless develops a loyalty towards him that ultimately turns out to be his ruin: his desperate quest to rescue Bohannon out of Mormon captivity all by himself sets a

complex chain of events into motion that first lets him lose his mind and then his life (“Get Behind the Mule”; “Bear Man”; “Elam Ferguson”). Yet his willingness to risk his life for Cullen is made plausible as the result of a certain reciprocity in their relationship: after all, Cullen had put a halt to a very urgent camp move in order to accompany Elam on his search for his kidnapped daughter, thereby risking the loss of not only vast amounts of company goods and money, but also of his position as chief engineer (“Searchers”; “One Less Mule”). Ostensibly, then, it appears as if theirs was less a relation of unilateral exploitation, but rather one that operates as something that at least approximates a mutual exchange of equivalents, in contrast to Corcoran’s one-sided appropriation of Freeman’s skills and knowledge in *Copper*.

28 At a closer look, however, it is possible to see their relation to be structured by one of the semantic operations through which white men historically have and presently still do depend on gendered and racialized others for the purpose of constructing their own subject position as unified, impenetrable and supposedly legitimately superior to its others as they have been outlined by DiPiero’s psychoanalytically informed inquiry into different historical manifestations of the intersecting discourses of gender and race in Western culture (2002). One such operation that DiPiero has traced in contemporary American fiction is the insertion of an “African American or Latino conscripted to tell the white man who or what the latter is, and to know more about his identity than he himself apparently does” (7; cf. 208-227) into stories that feature a white male protagonist. In a number of situations, it is precisely this function that Elam fulfills for Cullen, e.g. by repeatedly telling him what is expected of him as the Union Pacific’s new foreman (“Jamais Je Ne T’oublierai”) or by pointing out to him the implication of being in the inferior position when Cullen is on the verge of picking a fight with a Yankee officer, i.e. that “sometimes you got to bite your tongue and just take it” (“Derailed”). It seems noteworthy, that in this latter instance, it is the recently freed slave that helps the recently defeated former slave-owner to come to terms with the results of his defeat, ironically by passing on a coping strategy – and a strategy for survival for that matter – that appears to be firmly rooted in his own experience of slavery.

29 The probably most interesting “manifestation of white masculinity receiving confirmation of its identity from projected others” (DiPiero 207) in *Hell on Wheels* occurs shortly after Bohannon was taken captive and before Ferguson decides to rescue him. Upon returning to the construction camp from the gun battle that ended with Bohannon’s surrender to the raiders, Ferguson sees himself faced with the challenge to tell the workers

that the boss they truly respect has been kidnapped, but that they cannot go after him until they have not laid the last remaining miles of railroad to Cheyenne, Wyoming, because otherwise the extremely unpopular capitalist Thomas Durant would be reinstated as the man running things at the construction camp. Now, in order to convince the workers to spend their night laying rails, he steps up in front of the gathered crowd and makes a highly emotional speech, that praises Bohannon as a man of principles who had earned the right to lead them, because he had always treated them fairly and was not afraid of getting his hands dirty himself, and insinuates that Bohannon himself would want them to finish their work first. He also juxtaposes him with Durant, whom he characterizes as “a man that cheated, lied, and stole and disrespected every last one of us” (“Fathers and Sins”), to the effect of letting Bohannon appear as nothing less, as I would like to argue, as the embodiment of “the currently most honored way of being a man” (Connell & Messerschmidt 832), i.e. of hegemonic masculinity.

30 Significantly, the subject of racism also makes its appearance in Ferguson’s monologue: “Bohannon called me a n*****²... but he ain’t never treat me like one.” This remark seems to imply not only a fundamental difference between racist behavior and racist language, but also that it is not a problem to employ the latter as long as one abstains from the former, an impression that is endowed with all the more force, given that these words are coming from a Black character. In the actual scene, the remark makes the appearance of being addressed to the Black workers in the crowd, as the cutaway shot immediately following it shows us a Black man raising his head at Ferguson’s words (“Fathers and Sins”). Yet the emotional need to which these words correspond is more likely to be found in the audience in front of the television screens at home, most likely among white viewers. After all, hearing a Black character say that a former slave-owner was not racist even though he did sometimes use racist language must be a rather comforting, even consoling experience for those “Angry White Men” who see themselves tricked out of their privilege by affirmative action (cf. Kimmel 238-242). In fact, what is brought to mind here are recent debates that discard attempts at avoiding racist language as mere ‘political correctness’. Given that only a few scenes earlier, Bohannon had confessed to Ferguson that he never did actually free his slaves before the Civil War, as he had told him at an earlier stage of their friendship (“Revelations”), Ferguson’s remark could indeed be argued to constitute a white fantasy of redemption from the guilt of having profited

² The N-word will not be reproduced in this paper.

from slavery, as well as still benefiting from institutionalized and other forms of contemporary racism. Through this remark, uttered by one of its projected others, the white male subject redeems itself of the very real consequences that its projections have on those on whom they are projected.

Conclusion

31 In the light of these findings, it would be wrong to regard *Copper* and *Hell on Wheels* as pop-cultural attempts to come to terms with criticisms by appropriating them, as had been the question raised initially due to the apparent incongruity between descriptions of these shows as being obsessed with issues of race and gender and the fact that in both cases the main character happened to be a white man. They certainly exhibit an incorporation of demands for a more involved, affectionate fatherhood very much akin to what Hamad has traced in recent historical drama films (29-47), yet the mode through which both Bohannon's and Corcoran's fatherhood was made relevant in either series has in fact very little to do with feminist critiques of the domestic division of labor, especially child-rearing, but instead amounts to nothing less than an authoritarian celebration of the need for a patriarchal protector, thus drawing motherhood as inevitably needful and dependent at best, or even as the primary cause for male experiences of loss and alienation at worst.

32 A similar case could be made with regard to the findings pertaining to the portrayal of race relations. *Copper* certainly introduces the fact that Corcoran's success is too a large extent based on Freeman's skills in a very conscious manner, thus probably allowing for being read as a critique of conditions that made and continue to make Black people's contributions and achievements near to invisible, yet at the cost of reproducing precisely the structure that it appears to critically engage with. *Hell on Wheels*, on the other hand, despite featuring bitter and sometimes painful exchanges on the subject of slavery between Bohannon and Ferguson and trying to let their relationship develop into one of mutual respect and reciprocity, even articulates an apologetic view on racist language in that it offers the dangerous and misleading distinction between the harmless realm of verbal abuse and actual, not verbally mediated racist behavior. Thus, instead of mediating a defense against criticisms of white male hegemony by incorporating them, they are rather negotiated in a manner that amounts to an outright repudiation. The subversive potential that was implicit in advertising *Copper* as a show that would be "capturing the early American multicultural experience in provocative, ground-breaking fashion" (qtd. in

Fienberg) and was hinted at by a review of *Hell on Wheels* that argued its “actors sometimes are made to symbolize very modern obsessions, e.g. with race and gender” (Dewolf Smith) can, in the light of these findings, not be said to have been realized.

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“I Want to be a Macho Man”: Examining Rape Culture, Adolescent Female Sexuality, and the Destabilisation of Gender Binaries in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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Abstract:

Oppressive, essentialist models of gender identity - whereby women are routinely positioned as helpless victims, and men are antithetically characterised as strong, heroic saviour figures – routinely dominate the action and horror genres of screen media. This polarisation functions as an ideological tool for reinforcing patriarchal dominance, by aligning the masculine role with that of powerful agent, and the feminine with weakness and passivity, thereby deeming men’s governance as a necessity for women’s safety, due to women’s seemingly ‘natural’ role as victim. However, this article investigates how the first two seasons of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) destabilise this repressive polarisation through its courageous, commanding female protagonist, who subverts genre norms by adopting the – traditionally male – role of Vampire Slayer. Through examining this characterisation, and its explicit challenge to the active/male passive/female gender dichotomies that are frequently interwoven into the tropes of the horror and action genres, the investigative foci of this article will demonstrate how *Buffy* dismisses socially-prescribed hierarchies of power between masculinity and femininity, and empowers women in a role where they have routinely been victimised and diminished. I will illuminate how Buffy’s relationship with Angel destabilises traditional heterosexual power relations, and liberates Buffy from the oppressive heterosexual matrix in which female characters, and representations of female sexuality, are routinely confined – most notably, through the series’ treatment of virginity and first sexual experience. Finally, this essay will examine the centrality of rape culture in *Buffy*, and express how the television series empowers its female characters through rewriting Sharon Marcus’ theory of the ‘rape script’.

*What would happen...to the order of the world...
if the rock upon which they founded this church should crumble?*
- Hélène Cixous, *Sorties*

How can I be without border?
- Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*

1 The narrative impetus of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)¹ centres on the deconstruction and subversion of the binary notions of gender identity on which the horror and action genres are frequently based — whereby women are routinely positioned as helpless victims, and men are antithetically characterised as their strong, heroic saviours. This polarisation functions as an ideological tool for reinforcing patriarchal dominance, by aligning the masculine role with that of powerful agent, and the feminine with weakness and

¹ Hereafter *BtVS*

passivity, thereby deeming men's governance as a necessity for women's safety, due to women's seemingly 'natural' role as victim. Indeed, as Judith Butler contends, the construction of gender identity through this oppressive dualism is an attempt to conceal the constructed nature of gender roles within an essentialist biological origin, since "the binary framework for [...] sex and gender are [...] regulatory fictions that [...] naturalise the [...] power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression" (46). However, *BtVS* reverses this polarisation through its eponymous protagonist, Buffy Summers, whom creator Joss Whedon envisages as a courageous, commanding heroine, who adopts the active – and traditionally male² – role of the Vampire Slayer.

2 Through examining Buffy's characterisation, I will express how the television series engages with and challenges the prevalent gender binary of active/male and passive/female – a dialectical structure that Hélène Cixous cites as the fundamental hierarchical order of gender identities and relations (578). Indeed, Laura Mulvey argues that this gender dichotomy is routinely present in screen media narratives, with male characters advancing the narrative, whilst women adopt a peripheral role, typically that of passive love interest or helpless damsel in need of rescue (11). Conversely, I will display how Whedon's narrative concentration on Buffy's (female) experience destabilises and reverses the traditional gender binaries of the horror and action genres, most notably, through the male characters frequently passively relying on her to save *them*. Indeed, Whedon states that his specific aim was to subvert the conventional horror trope of "the little blonde girl who goes into a dark alley and gets killed" (DVD commentary). Through this subversion, Whedon aimed to create "someone who was a hero [...] where she had always been a victim," and subsequently empower women in a character role in which they have commonly been diminished (*ibid*).³

3 The investigative foci of this essay will centre on discussions of episodes from Seasons One and Two of *BtVS*. Through a close examination of these seasons, I will explore how Buffy's characterisation is immediately showcased to explicitly subvert the traditional alignment of active heroism and strength with male characters in screen media, and to destabilise the gender binaries of activity/passivity and victim/saviour that are frequently interwoven into the tropes of the horror and action genres. In addition to establishing Buffy's identity as the Slayer, Whedon also employs these seasons to depict the growth of Buffy's

² For further discussion of the history of the Vampire Slayer figure, see Bruce A. McClelland.

³ Sarah Michelle Gellar's casting as Buffy Summers highlights the genre conventions that Whedon aimed to subvert, since the same year that *BtVS* was released (1997), Gellar also played Helen Shivers – a screaming feeble blonde girl who is brutally murdered in an alley – in the Slasher movie *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, positioning her role in *BtVS* as especially subversive of audience genre expectations in light of this (a character contrast that is illuminated through a comparison of Figures 1 and 2).

relationship with Angel. Although this relationship is conservative in its heterosexual basis, I will consider how it is a narrative thread that is in fact implemented to destabilise traditional heterosexual power relations, since Whedon attempts to liberate Buffy from the oppressive heterosexual matrix in which female characters, and representations of female sexuality, are routinely confined – most notably, through examination of the series’ treatment of first sexual experience. My final area of investigation will be the allegorical function of Buffy’s supernatural opponents as representations of the very real threat of sexual violence that many women face. Through this discussion, I will illuminate how Buffy explicitly defies and destabilises conventional genre and gender norms, and is used by Whedon to revise audience expectations of the horror and action genres: as her Watcher, Giles, tells her – and advises the audience – “the handbook would be of no use in your case” (‘What’s My Line? Part Two’).



Fig.1 Gellar as victim in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997)



Fig.2 Gellar as powerful hero in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)

Rewriting the Female Victim

4 A central narrative preoccupation in *BtVS* is the destabilisation and subversion of the male attacker/female victim dualism, which is routinely employed in the horror and action genres to code the female body with weakness and vulnerability. This subversion is immediately established in the opening scene of the show's pilot episode, 'Welcome to the Hellmouth,' which overtly draws upon audience expectations and knowledge of generic conventions in order to subvert them, and rewrite narrative tropes. Here, a young girl sneaks into school at night with an older boy, with his predatory body language – as he closes in on her, blocking her exit – and the dark, shadowy *mise-en-scène* of the visibly empty school corridors suggesting that he intends to attack her while they are alone. For audience members who are familiar with the tropes of the horror genre, she is presented as the traditional victim – blonde, innocent-looking, and visibly nervous; underscored through her stuttering "I...I...I don't want to." However, at the moment when the boy attempts to trap her, she is revealed to be a vampire, and *she* instead attacks *him*. This reverses not only the usual victim/attacker scenario, but also cements Whedon's central binary dissolution, and narrative thread that in *BtVS* "nothing is as it seems," since Whedon explicitly utilises the visual codes of the horror genre, and draws upon audience expectations of generic gender roles, only to continually destabilise and subvert these conventions (DVD commentary). This opening scene also immediately demystifies the commonly employed gendered horror convention of what Whedon refers to as the "helpless little blonde girl" as perpetual victim, which Buffy will defy for the following seven seasons – crucially, the show's first victim is *male*, not female, and this opening scene cements the series' narrative centrality of powerful female characters (*ibid*).

5 The central narrative destabilisation of the traditional horror and action trope of the female victim helplessly relying on her strong male peers for rescue is evident throughout the first two seasons of the series. Instead of relying upon this overworked narrative stereotype, Whedon depicts women actively protecting and saving themselves, other women, and, most notably, the men.⁴ Rather than fulfilling what Carol Clover establishes as the lone 'Final Girl' role – as showcased by such 'slasher' movies as *Scream* (1996) – in *BtVS*, women work together to save themselves and each other. This is achieved through physical battles, but also via intellectual problem-solving, with many of the young women being described as having "first-rate mind[s]" ('Teacher's Pet'). This collective female strength is significant since

⁴ A trope also explored – albeit to a lesser extent – in *True Blood* (2008-2014), wherein the (blonde) heroine Sookie Stackhouse comes to the aid of vampire Bill Compton in the series' first episode.

rather than portraying one anomalous ‘strong girl’, *BtVS* depicts many powerful women, thereby showcasing Sharon Inness’ claim that “toughness in women does not have to be antithetical to friendship” (168). Indeed, Buffy is not encumbered by her friendships, but instead, as Sharon Ross has argued, the ‘Slayerettes’ strengthen her through physical and emotional support, and form a collective offence against the patriarchal conventions that attempt to limit and control them – a collective female action that is essential to feminist advancement.

6 Whedon frequently employs this reversal of the conventional victim/saviour gender dichotomy humorously. This is most apparent in the first two seasons with the character of Xander, who regularly adopts the traditionally female ‘damsel in distress’ role. He routinely relies on Buffy for protection, while also comically parodying conventionally ‘macho’ masculine action – for example, when he declares: “It’s time for me to act like a man – and hide!” (‘Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered’). However, this gendered victim/saviour reversal also facilitates an investigation into negative male reactions to Buffy’s assertions of power, since many male characters feel threatened and emasculated by her strength – most notably, Xander in season one, whom Buffy’s actions initially make feel “inadequate and less than a man” (‘The Harvest’). These feelings of emasculation engage with Mulvey’s argument that women’s screen presence induces castration anxiety in men, due to women’s “absence of a penis” – yet conversely, this absence also serves to highlight men’s possession, and socially-prescribed phallic power (6). However, Buffy destabilises this binary of absence/possession through her portrayal as a phallicised female – wielding phallic weapons such as stakes, which she uses to destroy (usually) male opponents. Clover considers this “symbolic phallicisation” as proceeding “from the need to bring her in line with [...] laws of the Western narrative tradition [...] of the literal representation of heroism in male form,” (60-1) and therefore it diminishes Buffy’s transgressive characterisation, since rather than being a powerful female, she is instead a symbolic male, and is only imbued with power through phallocentric means, as a member of what Cixous terms the “Phallocentric Performing Theatre” (582). Indeed, this emphasis on female power through phallocentric means has been highlighted by bell hooks as a fundamental flaw of such narratives as *BtVS*, which she contends showcase, “phallocentric girls doing everything the boys do,” since rather than illuminating ontological female strength, and strength in femininity in its own right, such narratives instead portray powerful female characters as mere “dicks in drag” (22).

7 Whilst these arguments present a considerable contention to Buffy's transgressive characterisation, this phallocentric power is not the only form of power that Buffy demonstrates in the series — as I have argued, Buffy draws considerable strength and power from her friendships, especially those with other young women. Furthermore, Whedon arguably succeeds in representing this phallocalisation as a subversive element of Buffy's characterisation. Indeed, through these weapons — and the symbolic phallic power they represent — Buffy destabilises the gender binary of absence/possession and reverses the traditional heterosexual power dynamic by being depicted as the *penetrator* rather than the *penetrated*. This characterisation is troubling for male characters — and viewers — since it implies that phallic power is transferable, and can be possessed by either sex, thereby destabilising men's ingrained feelings of 'natural' superiority. Whedon explores these male desires for superiority over women in 'Teacher's Pet,' when Xander fantasises that Buffy is the helpless victim of a vampire attack, and he is her rescuer — subsequently allowing Xander to display the socially designated 'ideal' masculine attributes as her heroic saviour. However, later in this episode, Xander's fantasy fails to materialise in reality, when he is instead placed in the feminised victim role, relying on Buffy to rescue him when he is almost raped by a monster. Through Xander's saviour/victim reversal, Xander could be considered as being rebuked for his fantasy, since Whedon routinely punishes macho masculine fantasies and behaviour in *BtVS* when they centre on diminishing women to inflate male illusions of power. Indeed, this punishment is usually expressed through humiliating male characters, or turning men into victims, and thus weakening their physical and symbolic power in the diegesis.

'I May be Dead, But I'm Still Pretty' - Destabilising the Male Gaze

8 A criticism that is frequently aimed at the show by such scholars as Sherryl Vint is that Buffy is presented in a sexualised manner, and that this undermines her progressive representation by placing her in the traditionally female role in screen media of what Mulvey terms "fetishised commodity" (47). Buffy's hyper-feminine appearance also concurs with the dominance of the male gaze in screen media, and signifies Mulvey's assertion of how "the determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is stylised accordingly," since Buffy's appearance may be considered as an attempt to "circumvent her threat" by portraying her as a sexualised feminine object, which can be governed by the controlling (male) voyeuristic gaze (11-17).

9 However, her hyper-feminine fashion choices – as well as portraying Buffy as a typical 1990s teenager – in fact arguably aid Whedon’s destabilisation of gender binaries. Buffy is frequently underestimated by her opponents because of her feminine clothing and petite physical size (and hyper-feminine name), which do not concur with the traditionally muscular, combat gear-clad body that conventionally signifies a character’s heroic, powerful status⁵ – as Angel observes, “I thought you’d be taller, or bigger, [with] muscles and all that” (‘Welcome to the Hellmouth’). Indeed, Buffy is repeatedly patronisingly referred to as “little lady,” (‘Teacher’s Pet’) and frequently receives sexist comments about her abilities as the Slayer – for example, when she meets werewolf hunter Kane in ‘Phases,’ he doubts her capability because, “well, you’re a girl.”

10 In actuality, Buffy’s appearance conversely functions to destabilise typical associations of femininity with weakness, and exposes the artificiality of the essentialist binary model of biologically-determined and fixed gender roles. Instead, her characterisation reveals the fluidity of gender identity as what Butler terms a “free-floating artifice,” since Buffy displays both stereotypically masculine and feminine traits – visually emphasised through the conjunction between her ‘feminine’ outfits, and ‘masculine’ combat skills and weapons (fig.3) (9). Furthermore, by visually coding Buffy as hyper-feminine, Whedon foregrounds Mary Ann Doane’s notion of the “female masquerade” in screen media, since excessive femininity reveals the active construction of gender identity, and alerts the (particularly female) audience to gender’s status as an actively-fashioned and continuous performance (235).

⁵ As commonly witnessed in the action genre – most notably, Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984)



Fig.3 Conjunction of femininity and masculinity

11 In addition to Buffy's appearance, a further focus for binary destabilisation is the gendered experiences of the gaze. Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach to the gaze and screen spectatorship maintains that historically in screen media, patriarchal ideology and screen apparatus have positioned women as the passive, sexual objects of the active, controlling male gaze, which commands authority over the narrative, as women's images are filtered and fashioned through the male hero's gaze (11).

12 However, *BtVS* revises Mulvey's notions by conversely imbuing women with optic agency, ergo rewriting and liberating women from their traditional role as passively awaiting inscription through the male gaze. Instead, *BtVS* places men in this passive role, as women assert their presence as screen *subjects*, not objects. Through foregrounding the subjective gaze of the female protagonists, *BtVS* revises Mulvey's suggestion of the classical gaze of the (male) audience onto the female onscreen, since instead, the audience looks *with*, rather than *at*, women. This focus on female subjectivity subsequently rewrites women's typical inscription within what Christian Metz terms the male "scopic regime" in screen media (703).

13 Although Buffy's body is frequently admired by men in the show, Whedon attempts to destabilise Mulvey's observations of the gendered conventions of the gaze, by allowing the female characters to escape their traditional roles as passive objects. Instead, women actively assert their optic agency, as the female gaze is wielded to appraise the male body in *BtVS*. Indeed, significantly, it is not Buffy, but the male characters whose bodies are explicitly eroticised and objectified by the camera, as is most notably witnessed with Angel. He is frequently displayed as a source of scopophilic pleasure for the (female) audience and Buffy alike. He repeatedly appears in various states of undress, with his body expressing Mulvey's notions of being "stylised and fragmented by close-ups," as the camera regularly lingers on his bare torso in close-up and medium shots, when in the same scene Buffy is fully clothed (14).⁶ This is first notable in 'Angel,' when he passively stands shirtless, as Buffy – who remains fully clothed – inspects his wounds (fig.4). Buffy explicitly and voyeuristically admires his body when he is not looking, as she watches him undress, thus reversing Mulvey's observations of the typical male/female "active/looking, passive/looked-at" binary of the gaze (16). Furthermore, the soft lighting in this scene is specifically focused on Angel's body, which therefore purposefully directs the audience's attention towards it, and eroticises his body through emphasising his muscular torso, and enhances his status as an object to be, "looked at and displayed" (Mulvey: 11).

14 As well as reversing the gendered gaze by highlighting women as the, "active controllers of the look," and designating men as the passive, eroticised recipients, this scene – and many others when Angel appears shirtless and wounded – also displays the vulnerability of the male body to penetration and wounding (Mulvey: 13). This thereby reverses the typical focus in the horror and action genres on the vulnerability of the female body, and instead illustrates the 'feminisation' of Angel's body. This vulnerability thus further destabilises notions of a unified gender identity because, even though Angel's body is visually coded as displaying the muscles and strength that conventionally signify masculinity, he is also 'feminised' through his apparent physical vulnerability, and subsequently represents a non-dichotomous gender identity. Indeed, through his 'open' and leaking body, Angel becomes the "bearer of the bleeding wound," a traditionally female role in the horror genre, and in wider socio-cultural iconography (Mulvey: 1). Furthermore, this scene – similarly to Xander's eroticised torso in 'Go Fish' – highlights the constructed nature of masculinity. As Richard Dyer contends, hegemonic masculinity, as frequently visually defined through a focus on

⁶ Significantly, none of the female characters appear partially undressed in these seasons – only the male characters do so.

muscular physique and physical prowess, acts to underline the constructed nature of this gender identity, since defined muscles such as Angel displays are an “achieved,” rather than natural physical state (274). Therefore, similarly to Doane’s theory of the female masquerade, the focus on masculinity as construction – a central paradox of hegemonic masculinity that Dyer refers to as the “masculine mystique” – furthers Whedon’s intention to undermine ideas of ‘natural’ gender roles and characterisations (276).



Fig.4 Angel’s eroticised body

‘You Made Me The Man I Am Today’ – Challenging Patriarchal Discourses of Virginity

15 Although the first two seasons of *BtVS* are conservative in their focus on heterosexuality, the relationship between Angel and Buffy is a key narrative thread wherein gender binaries are destabilised. In traditional heterosexual narratives, Mulvey asserts that the male role is that of, “the active one [...] forwarding the story, making things happen” (12). However, here it is Buffy who adopts this role, with the narrative revolving around her endeavours, while Angel maintains what Susan Owen cites as the traditionally female role of the passive “plot enabler,” since he functions to allow the narrative to explore certain key adolescent events for Buffy – for example, first sexual experience (27). Mulvey argues that

the traditional female role in screen media is to “fall in love with the [...] male protagonist and become his property” (13). However, *BtVS* explicitly rejects this narrative trajectory, and a traditional heteronormative narrative closure, when Buffy kills Angel at the end of season two (‘Becoming: Part Two’). Buffy thereby literally kills this narrative option, and again underscores Angel’s role as a passive character, since she decides both his and her own destiny in this act, thus emphasising Susan Hopkins’ contention that Buffy’s narrative trajectory involves “not the pursuit of romantic love, but of personal destiny” (214).

16 Whilst much has been written on gender identities in *BtVS*, there has been relatively little scholarly analysis of the series’ treatment and representation of virginity. Buffy’s first sexual experience with Angel explicitly destabilises traditional heterosexual power dynamics. After their encounter, due to a curse, Angel loses his soul, and transforms into his evil alter ego, Angelus. This incident may be considered to exemplify Clover’s argument that those who have sex in a horror film are punished (usually through being the first characters to be killed), as Angel is punished through losing his soul – and later being killed because of this – and Buffy experiences the emotional punishment of losing him (33-4). Therefore, this narrative incident may be considered to transmit a conservative message, which underlines warnings about the dangers and negative consequences of sex that are often transmitted to young adults through screen media – an argument that is especially apparent when one considers Angel’s ‘dangerous’ status as an older man, and as a vampire.⁷ However, although Buffy experiences emotional distress, it is Angel who is explicitly punished here, not Buffy, therefore challenging and reversing the usually female-focused punishment for sexual activity.

17 The subversive nature of this incident is especially apparent when one considers that after a first sexual encounter, it is traditionally the female who is considered to ‘lose’ something – patriarchal discourse portrays her as being changed, diminished, and often made impure through the experience. However, here it is the male, Angel, who loses something (his soul), and who changes for the worse – becoming the evil, ‘impure’ Angelus, with the change in name explicitly underscoring this transformation. Therefore, this places Angel in the conventionally female, feminine role, as the one who experiences change – rather than the typical ‘fallen woman’ figure; he is the ‘fallen Angel’. Significantly, Buffy is assigned the – usually male – agency and power of bringing about this change, as Angel tells her mockingly, “you *made me* the man I am today” (‘Innocence’).

⁷ A punishment exemplified in *It Follows* (2014).

18 Most importantly for Whedon's rewriting of the gendered virginity script, is the naming of the episode after their sexual encounter: 'Innocence.' Whedon was adamant that Buffy was still to be seen as "an innocent: she hasn't lost anything of herself [...] that's why her mum says, 'you don't look any different to me'" (DVD commentary). Indeed, as Rhonda Wilcox has noted, Buffy's white clothing at the end of this episode underlines her fundamental innocence, and destabilises the longstanding association of white with virginity, and the traditional innocence/experience dichotomy that typically governs depictions of female sexuality (127). Through this episode, the show explicitly rewrites patriarchal notions of loss of virginity as inexorably changing girls and making them impure or damaged, since instead, Buffy remains exactly as she was before the sexual encounter – she is in no way altered. Therefore, through engaging with the conventional discourse surrounding virginity – which is commonly used as a patriarchal method of attempting to control the female body and female sexuality – *BtVS* empowers women through assigning them agency, and revising the patriarchal ideology which promotes the diminishing effects of sex on women.

'All Monsters are Human' – Everyday Threat and Rape Culture in Sunnydale

19 Buffy frequently faces monsters that are symbolic of patriarchal control, most notably, the vampires of the (almost entirely male) Hellmouth, which represent the patriarchal social structures that repress and control women – underscored through its governance by the male figurehead, the 'Master,' who is Buffy's main enemy in season one. Their impending showdown represents what Lorna Jowett cites as the central tension in *BtVS* – "between young female power and old patriarchal structures designed to keep women under control" (41-2). Therefore, when Buffy defeats the Master, she is directly attacking the social and institutional discrimination and oppression that attempts to contain her. She slays not only supernatural demons, but in the process destroys the patriarchal ideology that attempts to keep women in a subordinate position, and that has previously suppressed women in cinematic and televisual depictions.

20 As well as facing supernatural demons, Buffy also encounters opponents who represent 'real world' dangers – most notably, the threat of rape and sexual assault. The threat of rape has historically lurked in the shadows of many female-centred narratives, with such fairy tales as *Red Riding Hood* warning young women from straying too far from social norms.⁸ Indeed, Susan Brownmiller considers the threat of rape to be the fundamental tactic

⁸ A narrative theme explored extensively by Jack Zipes.

“by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear” (15). Similarly, Sharon Marcus maintains that rape and sexual harassment are patriarchal “micro-strategies of oppression” that attempt to control women through instilling fear, and perpetuating gendered concepts of women as perennial victims (391). Marcus’ term “rape script” expresses how “social structures *inscribe* on men’s and women’s embodied selves and psyches the misogynistic inequalities which enable rape to occur,” since rape is part of a “*gendered grammar of violence*,” which assigns power roles – women the passive victim role, and men that of active attacker – resulting in women being predicated as “the objects of violence and the subjects of fear” (391-3). Marcus suggests that violent acts against women often succeed because women are taught that the safest thing to do is to passively allow it to happen, since men could hurt them even more if they retaliate in defence. However, Marcus calls for the rewriting of this “script” that assigns women vulnerability and powerlessness, and to instead empower women, and grant them agency through depicting them refusing to passively accept the victim role – as she maintains, “since we are solicited to help create this power, we can act to destroy it,” which Buffy does through defending herself and other women against (often explicitly sexual) threat and attack (392).

21 This threat of sexual assault is overtly witnessed in the episode ‘Go Fish,’ which portrays the threat of rape from (initially) human males on the Sunnydale swim team. One of the team members, Cameron, tries to assault Buffy in his car – attempting to place her in the passive, helpless victim role by telling her, “relax, *I’m* not going to hurt *you*,” while he tries to kiss her. However, Buffy refuses to allow him to force her into this victim role, as she replies, “oh, it’s not *me* I’m worried about,” and then breaks his nose against the steering wheel in self-defence. Similar to earlier discussions of the opening scene of *BtVS*, Whedon again employs the show’s central binary reversal of the would-be male attacker instead becoming the victim — here of female defensive violence — a formula that *BtVS* repeatedly employs to empower women and destabilise audience expectations. This scene also acts to emphasise Marcus’s argument that women need to learn “strategies which will enable [them] to sabotage men’s power to rape, which will empower women to take the ability to rape completely out of men’s hands,” since Buffy’s move was one which ‘normal’ women could imitate, not one that was reliant on her supernatural Slayer strength (388).

22 *BtVS*’s encouragement of the training of women in self-defence is expressed in ‘Phases’, when the students of Sunnydale High School take part in defence classes as part of the curriculum. Here, Buffy is partnered with Larry, who is presented as a hyper-masculine sexist student who, when practising a defence move, attempts to sexually assault her.

However, Buffy quickly responds by flipping him over her shoulder — a defensive move that she has been taught during the class, and therefore one that women may imitate in real life. Indeed, Willow jokes with her, “don’t forget, you’re supposed to be a meek little girly girl,” highlighting how Buffy is rewriting the ‘rape script’ by defending herself, rather than allowing men to place her in the role of the “meek” and passive victim — something which any woman can learn and train towards imitating.

23 Later in ‘Go Fish,’ due to a drug the swimmers are using to enhance their performance — and thus to make them more conventionally ‘macho’ — the sexually aggressive male swimmers mutate into demons, thereby overtly exemplifying the notion of their aggressive behaviour making them not just metaphorically, but literally, monstrous. This episode concludes with the swimmers (in monster form) being banished from Sunnydale — an ending that signifies how their behaviour has no place in society. This destabilisation of the boundaries between monster and human in *BtVS* underscores the capacity of everyday humans for evil and monstrous behaviour, as Suzy McKee Charnas notes, *BtVS* emphasises “the discovery that the monstrous is and always has been located primarily not [...] in mythical creatures, but in our human neighbours [...] and sometimes in ourselves” (59).

24 Through her defeat of such monsters, Buffy offers (especially female) viewers the fantasy of invincibility, in a society that teaches women to be constantly fearful for their safety, especially from male threat. Instead of being fearful of male predators, Buffy and the other women of the show confront, attack and defeat them. This leads to a central point of contention, as to whether or not *BtVS*’s status as a supernatural show detracts from its subversive aims. Whedon’s adoption of the fantasy genre could be considered to place Buffy in a world that is too far removed from our own, and therefore a ‘safe’ environment in which to explore her transgressive characterisation, as it is not directly threatening ‘real world’ social gender norms. As Ien Ang suggests, fantasy provides an, “unconstrained space in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions [...] can be adopted. In real life, the choice for [...] that subject position is never without consequences” (243). Buffy’s defeat of monsters in the show is also depicted as relying heavily upon her superhuman strength and combat skills. Therefore, this suggests that few women could accomplish these feats in reality. Thus, Buffy’s threat to patriarchal control may be circumvented by setting the standards of her heroism, bravery and toughness at an unattainable level.

25 Nevertheless, whilst Buffy does possess superhuman strength, hers is not the only form of female heroism depicted in the series. The other female characters, notably Willow and Cordelia, are ‘normal’ teenage girls, but still defend themselves and others, and are

arguably as heroic as Buffy. For example, Willow regularly saves her friends through intellectual problem-solving, whilst Cordelia defends herself from a vampire attack by biting the vampire's hand, exclaiming, "let's see how you like it!" ('Prophesy Girl'). Therefore, they are very real role models for viewers; as Whedon frequently emphasises throughout the show, there is more than one type of heroism, and many of the characters on the show exhibit as much heroism in everyday life – for example, confronting school bullies – as Buffy does in her supernatural battles and displays of strength. As Wilcox observes, Sunnydale in many ways directly resembles the 'real world,' since Buffy and her friends experience the same problems of adolescence and high school life as teenagers across the world do – from homework trouble to the dangers of internet predators – all of which are manifested in the form of supernatural demons, which Buffy and her friends can defeat and conquer. Thus Buffy can still be considered a heroine of the real world – as Whedon conceives the series as "real life, just a little bit wonkier" (DVD commentary).

26 Buffy faces many negative consequences for being the Slayer, most notably, she is positioned as a social outcast, and when she learns of her identity as the Slayer, she describes how she was "kicked out of school [...] losing all of my friends," ('Welcome to the Hellmouth') – in the same way that Butler expresses how those who do not adhere to normative gender roles are "punished" through being shunned in society (190). However, rather than punishing and ostracising Buffy, Whedon instead celebrates outsiderdom, and allows Buffy and the Scooby Gang to draw strength from and celebrate their roles as outcasts by forming a community through their friendship. Arguably, *BtVS* therefore offers viewers, particularly young women, pleasure through their identification with Buffy, and the other strong women on the show, who may inspire viewers to become their own heroes, by teaching them that they do not have to be the "meek little girly girl," ('Phases') that the horror and action genres typically position young women as, but instead can assert their agency, strength and independence. As Susan Hopkins argues, the popularity of female-fronted television shows such as *BtVS*⁹ indicate that girls respond to and enjoy displays of female heroism, especially in the wake of the 1990s 'Girl Power' movement, as she claims, "today's girls don't just want the tough action hero – they want to *be* the tough action hero" (140).

⁹ Especially during the 1990s, with the extreme popularity of such television shows as *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), *Charmed* (1998-2006), and *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003)

Conclusion

27 Overall, through its destabilisation of many of the traditional gender binaries of the horror and action genres — most notably, its challenge to the attacker/victim dualism, and its dismantling of the ‘rape script’ — *BtVS* challenges, destabilises and discounts patriarchal myths of female weakness and vulnerability. Instead, I have demonstrated how Whedon assigns power and narrative agency to women, with Buffy’s characterisation deconstructing essentialist binary gender models through her simultaneous exhibitions of masculine and feminine traits, thereby exemplifying gender identity as a fluid, liminal Hegelian “transitional” dialectic, as opposed to distinct categories that are dependent on one’s biological sex, and are in “fixed opposition” (243). Through what Hegel describes as the “abolishing and transcending of the contradiction” of gender identity, Whedon liberates his protagonist — and female viewers — from the restrictive, diminishing patriarchal binary models of gender identity, and instead the series depicts its female characters asserting their own agency and desires, and acting as their own heroes (245).

28 The employment of the supernatural genre is especially important for the show’s subversive aims — as Rosemary Jackson maintains, fantasy explores “the unsaid and [...] unseen of culture: that which has been silenced [...] covered over [...] made ‘absent’” (4). *BtVS* uncovers and showcases women’s potential for heroism, and subsequently empowers its female characters, who physically and symbolically fight against the restrictive, oppressive and misogynistic images of women that the horror and action genres routinely present. Indeed, as Nina Auerbach argues, vampire genres are regularly utilised to express and explore the contemporary concerns and debates of each generation that engages with the genre. In *BtVS*, the supernatural vampire genre is employed to highlight third-wave feminist concerns regarding the rise of rape culture, the misogynistic backlash against feminism in the 1990s, and contemporary challenges to normative notions of gender identities through the rise of queer theory towards the end of the twentieth century. Although the series is not subversive in all areas of its narrative — most notably, its lack of racial diversity, and its sole focus on ‘young women’s feminism’¹⁰ — almost two decades since its first episode aired, it still stands as one of the most transgressive female character portrayals in television history, and its sustained focus on female heroism, and the importance of female friendships and collective female action, continues to inspire and rally a new generation of millennial ‘Slayerettes’.

¹⁰ As explored by Renee St. Louis and Miriam Riggs

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Nosferatu* Revisited: Monstrous Female Agency in *Penny Dreadful

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Abstract:

Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* proves to be an intertextual *tour de force* that draws on several literary and filmic sources. This essay argues that F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) constitutes an important filmic intertext and can facilitate a fruitful understanding of the series' first episode with regard to the representation of its main character Vanessa Ives. Even though almost a hundred years separate one of the prime examples of German expressionist film from this contemporary TV series, the monstrous female agency of Vanessa Ives can be conceptualized and problematized by several narrative and visual congruencies with *Nosferatu*. After first comparing the almost flawless alignment of heterosexual normative gender categories with the characters of Ellen and Hutter from *Nosferatu* and Ethan Chandler from *Penny Dreadful*, Vanessa Ives allows to illustrate an instance of agency, especially via her proclivity for the gaze. Then, the essay turns towards the female acts of transgression in both texts, as they actively gaze at the vampires that they encounter. The confrontation between Ellen and Graf Orlok fulfils an almost paradigmatic formula of female sacrifice and death in film, whereas a similar encounter between Vanessa Ives and a vampire results in the latter's destruction; a later instance then allows describing her as an instance of the seer. Finally, the essay assesses the critical nature of masculinised female monstrosity on the serial screen and the fruitful possibilities that agency and serialisation might offer.

ETHAN CHANDLER. And what's your part in all this?

VANESSA IVES. My part is my own.

Foregone Conclusions: Performativity, Heteronormativity and the Transvestite

1 The monstrous nature of Vanessa Ives proves to be *Penny Dreadful*'s central mystery. An intertextual *tour de force* that draws on literary sources like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* or Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in the first episode already, *Penny Dreadful* evokes, as this essay is going to argue, F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922), one of the hallmarks of the expressionist film period, in its wide range of intertexts with almost constitutive similarities and differences. *Nosferatu* uses a negative shot to effectively show how its protagonist Hutter enters the world of Graf Orlok (Weinstock 80). *Penny Dreadful* has Vanessa Ives literally walk into the shadows to search for her friend Mina in a virtual house of horrors. However, while the vampire's wrath and terror constitute a terrifying experience for *Nosferatu*'s male protagonists, they are easily countered by the uncanny potency of Vanessa Ives. Given Vanessa's transgressive differences that constitute an

instance of female agency and result in a monstrous representation, notions of gender serve as a central *tertium comparationis* for a consideration of *Penny Dreadful* and *Nosferatu*.

2 The show opens into darkness.¹ After the intro of the first episode, we hear a woman desperately praying the Hail Mary in Latin. The very first shot shows a room almost bare and the praying woman, whose head is bowed so deeply that it remains unseen. The form of a cross resides above her while light shines down on it from above. When we follow her gaze at the cross, we encounter a spider that crawls along the body of the Christ figure. A moment later, it appears again and journeys from the woman's shoulder up towards her hands where it lifts one arm as if to greet her. In a following long shot similar to the very first one, we see not only the woman's head, but follow her movement upwards as she covers the cross like a dark shadow. Her feet become visible, giving rise to a notion of movement similar to that of the spider, while a close-up of her face, that shows her in a trance-like, almost ecstatic state, is accompanied by a voice saying "Soon, child, soon" and "I'm hungry." When a last close-up shows her neck on the left while a large portion of the screen is left in darkness, the distinctive growl of an animal creates the illusion of a predator hunting in the shadows. The cross, i.e. the signifier of Christianity, superimposes a symmetry on the room. When we still see the woman praying, she is bowing down and hence presented as a part of the principle that orders the room and that has inscribed itself on her very body, as we can see from the cross on her dress. The movement of the spider seems to disrupt the symmetry, a movement that is consequently embodied by the way the woman herself covers the cross. The form of the cross serves as a signifier of both patriarchal culture and the (seemingly) clear divide along the lines of the heterosexual binary. The spider and its movement, however, come to represent the agency of Vanessa Ives, the woman whose prayers we initially heard in the dark.

3 Facilitating an understanding of agency to begin with, this essay will follow Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and consider gender not only as "performatively produced" (34), but also understand it as a "set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time" (45) and stylize the body to perpetuate of the reproductive differences between man and woman (191). Ellen and Hutter in *Nosferatu* as well as Ethan Chandler in *Penny Dreadful* prove to be well within the heterosexual and hence hegemonial paradigm of gender performativity. Accordingly, Ian Roberts' analysis sees Ellen "portrayed as a chaste, morally upright middle-class young woman", who can be thus seen as a "plaything of Hutter

¹ All references to *Penny Dreadful* will be from the first episode of the first season.

and the patriarchal society within which her repressed self [i.e. normative performativity of identity] is trapped, much as the ball she dangles before the kitten is used to tease and taunt the creature” (48). Hutter, representative of the typical 19th century bourgeois male given his outward appearance (Müller 271), displays a complementary bodily stylization. Thus, Ellen’s and Hutter’s performativity seems to flawlessly accentuate these generic differences between man and woman on which *Penny Dreadful*’s Ethan Chandler relies. Ethan can seemingly act according to both the sexual connotation and Vanessa’s actual conception of the “night work” and in doing so, constantly reasserts and performs male heterosexual norms. During his performance at the Wild West Show, he exhibits an almost exaggerated masculinity; even when he loses his fake beard, the heavy American accent remains and reveals the continuous performance of this masculine subject. As Ethan in a later instance asks for Sir Malcolm as a fellow representative of patriarchy, Vanessa’s rebuttal (“I can speak for him”) clearly accentuates her status as an equal or even superior to him. Vanessa, in contrast to Ellen and despite the similar historical setting of both texts, not merely repeats the feminine norm, but much rather reformulates it.

4 As the subject for Butler comes into being via repeated, signifying processes which establish identity and perform gender (196), agency works as a “variation on that repetition” (198) whose “strategies of subversive repletion” and “local possibilities of intervention” must be subject to feminist analysis (201). Agency does not constitute a singular, but rather constant alteration of the performative repetition and thereby signifies a state of transition from the restrictive, heterosexual paradigm to the possibilities of gender identities. With regard to Vanessa Ives, one particular aspect appears significant: movement. As part of the audience, Vanessa’s attire seems almost indistinguishable from that of the other women who also dress within the parameters of Victorian dress codes. The way, however, Vanessa pertains to that stylization of the body during the midnight venture into the London underworld forms a blatant contrast to the women in *Nosferatu*. Given the fact that *Nosferatu*’s Ellen is depicted to be almost always restricted to a domestic and hence feminised sphere (Risholm 276f., 282), Vanessa’s freedom of movement already sets her apart. While the women in *Nosferatu* react fearfully to the mere mentioning of Orlok’s name, Vanessa’s calm attitude and confident behaviour as well as her ability to move around freely and unhindered during the struggles between Ethan, Sir Malcolm and the vampires denote performative differences to other gendered identities in both *Nosferatu* and *Penny Dreadful*.

5 According to Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, cinematic representations of (masculine) power and (female) powerlessness often function via the

potency of the gaze. Hence, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (837). Passive “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (837) goes hand in hand with an effort to integrate woman as an “alien presence [...] into cohesion with the narrative” (Mulvey 837). Within an imbalance of power working on two levels, woman is both “erotic object for the characters within the screen story” as well as “for the spectator within the auditorium” (838). As the “power of action” is associated with the masculine, Ann E. Kaplan stresses: “Women receive and return the gaze, but cannot act on it” (121). One primary example would be in the domestic scenes at the beginning of *Nosferatu*; here, Hutter, slings his arm around his wife in a possessive grip and kisses a responsive Ellen while looking down on her. A corresponding scene in *Penny Dreadful* is less domestic and far more explicit. The coitus happens not only with Ethan in a clearly dominant position – he is, among other things, penetrating his partner from behind – but the wagon of his Wild West show serves as backdrop on which his name is written in bold letters on top, and underlined by “The Sharpest Shooting Gunslinger In The West”; these words all effectively framing a portrait of Ethan that is covered by the nameless woman.² This directly leads to the farewell kiss that, in the way Ethan holds the woman, is almost reminiscent of the one in *Nosferatu*, but can be traced back throughout the history of mainstream cinema. These two exemplary performative acts constitute a stable heterosexual paradigm as these gazes flawlessly align according to the bodily stylization already noted and reinforce an imbalance of power where woman is made object so that the (male) spectator “can indirectly possess her too” (Mulvey 840).

6 Constituting the implications of female spectatorship means to extend Mulvey’s concept, as done by Mary-Ann Doane. The female subject that Mulvey disregarded in her work has to choose between masochism, i.e. identifying with her subjugated and objectified female counterpart on the screen, and narcissism (Doane 78, 87). The latter implies “oscillating between a feminine position and a masculine position, involving the metaphor of the transvestite” (80). Since transvestitism “is an act that can be performed by both men and women” (Oswald 353), the structures observed are kept intact and ensure that woman then loses feminine characteristics even when man assumes the position of the object (Kaplan 129). Instead of repeating the dichotomy of “male-versus-female-spectator” (231), Rhona J. Berenstein therefore offers a reinterpretation of the spectatorship positions as performative

² As a note: The way the portrait is serving as backdrop for the coitus seems to ironically comment on the notion of identification between spectator and male character, as the latter forms the Lacanian perfect self (Mulvey 836, 838). So even when *Penny Dreadful* seemingly confirms the ideas of classical cinema, it does so with a reflective set design.

(254) and hence open to the notion of agency. *Penny Dreadful* makes a point in drawing attention to Vanessa Ives' proclivity for gazing and inspecting, her resistance to the "refusal of the woman to look" (Williams 83), as if to accommodate the notion of the transvestite's disruptive performativity, e.g. a woman performing via an active gaze. Already as a part of the audience of the Wild West Show, Vanessa's eyes do notably not follow the bullets, but instead focus on Ethan Chandler. The way she looks down at him is revisited during the encounter in the tavern; her firm and upright posture ensures a sense of equality among them and illustrates that his looks on her are matched by a similar, objectifying gaze despite her clear status as woman. Vanessa appears to constantly inspect her environment and achieves the "mastery over the image" (Doane 81) that is reserved for the female transvestite; she can thereby come up with insights into the male subjects around her that allow her to position herself in the mastered environment. This involves trenchant statements about Frankenstein ("You're very proud") and an attentive inspection of Ferdinand Lyle's office. The same emotionless look on her face signifies agency, the metaphorical presence of a transvestite in *Penny Dreadful*, and accentuates a gaze that turns men into objects instead of becoming one herself. As Ethan unsuccessfully tries to hide certain deficiencies in front of her, "hoping I won't notice", Vanessa can come up with an astute analyses of him, as if to define him for her very purposes: "I see a man who has been accustomed to wealth, but has given himself to excess and the unbridled pleasures of youth, a man much more complicated than he likes to appear." Linda Williams states that the "woman's gaze is punished [...] by narrative processes" and that the "horror film offers a particularly interesting example of this punishment in the woman's terrified look at the horrible body of the monster" (85).

A Fearful Symmetry: The Transgendering Gaze of the Seer

7 The prayer scene of the beginning is taken up again shortly before the end of the episode albeit with important alterations. This time, her prayer is heard not in the darkness, but with a view on the door leading into her room. Upon entering it, an over-the-shoulder shot shows us the cross that serves, again, as a source of light and is thereby contrasted with Vanessa's black hair. Then, the camera slowly moves around to get eye-to-eye with her, and as this movement is completed, we can see that Vanessa is not only wearing an outfit different from the scene before, but is keeping her eyes closed. The room is not bare anymore, as two candles in the background serve as a new source of light and seemingly start to levitate in the background while Vanessa's constant whispering continues to accompany

the scene. The falling of the candles disrupts this prayer and makes Vanessa turn around and open her eyes to then behold the scene in front of her: Again, we have a close-up of the cross, which this time, along with everything it stands for, has been upturned and is almost obscured by a large cluster of spiders that now dominate the spectacle. Vanessa's face is petrified when she sees the upturned cross and the swarm of spiders moving along it, but this quickly turns into determination. Her gaze remains directed at the cross regardless of its Christian or demonic instrumentalization and Frankenstein's remark on how "nature abhors symmetry" highlights that its superimposition on the room is not only unnatural, but about to be torn down. The obscurity and darkness of the spiders thereby reiterates the way Vanessa covered the cross when she rose during her first prayer scene. Where one spider represents an instance of Vanessa Ives' agency, the devilish implications of the cross's upturning reveal that with the invasion of the spiders, movement has taken over the scene and symmetry is not merely disrupted, but dissolved. *Nosferatu*'s Ellen was restricted to exist to an *addendum* of the filmic image from whose background she, like so many women before and after her, becomes indistinguishable (Risholm 276, see also Doane 78) so that the monstrous shadow of the vampire can thus break into the home to which she is confined and take her into his possession. As Vanessa gains freedom of mobility and thereby comes to embody the very shadows dominating *Nosferatu* and other hallmarks of the expressionist film period, the symbolic meaning of the spider has changed accordingly, for it now represents monstrous female agency, i.e. the means of destruction for the idealized, normative, gendered body (see also Butler 185).

8 The monster's paradoxical and ultimately dissonant nature resists the very structures which perceive and thereby create it. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" conceives monsters as "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration" (6). Subjugation and exclusion may go hand in hand when "normative categories" diffuse in the monster (11) and the (white) heterosexual male does often constitute the norm to which monsters and the monstrous, especially in gendered terms, are contrasted (Schumacher 127). According to Weinstock, the vampire hereby appears "more manly than any human male" (8) and Dana Oswald also observes that his hypermasculinity goes hand in hand with inflationary displays of "aggression and domination" as "ultra-virility is written on the body" of the vampire or other hypermasculine figures (347). Both Cohen (5) and Williams (88) note the interrelation between woman/femininity and the monstrous based on the difference and exclusion from the aforementioned norm. Cohen sees the "woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender

roles” (9) as prone to a monstrous representation and Williams thereby considers the vampire as a titillating “threat to his [man’s] potency” (90). Oswald herself thereby remarks how especially the act of gender bending is associated with female monsters (353) since these do thereby “adopt corresponding aspects of masculine gender. By doing so, they broaden the concept of gender by becoming, in a sense, transgender individuals” (354). As a category dissociated from the transvestite, a (female) monster implies denaturalization and excess (354). The transvestite destabilizes heteronormative discourses, but agency requires constancy instead of singularity. Monstrous female agency should be understood as a disjunctive and disruptive stylization of the female body with an excessive masculine performativity that continuously goes beyond its heteronormative counterpart.

9 Orlok and Ellen are presented in relation to symmetries, albeit with different effects. Roberts states that Orlok “is filmed behind the window, hands wrapped around the strong *horizontal and vertical bars* which demonstrate that the vampire is as much a prisoner, as much a victim, as Ellen and the others” (46, my emphasis). Ellen’s imprisonment in patriarchy, represented by the cross and its horizontal and vertical axes, becomes evident when she is waiting for her (vampiric) lover at the sea, surrounded by crosses. Ellen Risholm takes this sequence to note the affinity between the vampire and the shadow that *Nosferatu* introduced (279), also observed by Weinstock (82): “The film’s most memorable image, however, arguably is that of the vampire’s shadow creeping up the stairs to Ellen’s room, grotesque hands stretching and elongating toward the door” (81). *Nosferatu*’s Graf Orlok has inspired the appearance of vampires for many years to come (Müller 272), yet the vampire master in *Penny Dreadful* does not just provide the latest example, but his representation takes the key concerns of *Nosferatu* even further. Against the backdrop of Orlok, Hutter can only be seen as the “passive, impotent male” (Bergstrom 197), having already been locked up in the count’s castle over an extended period of time and appearing powerless in the face of this threat when Murnau “cuts for a few seconds to the reactions of the terrified youth [and] returns to the approach [of Graf Orlok]” (Eisner 104). *Penny Dreadful* depicts the vampire’s performative hyper-masculinity in a similar manner when the vampire master enters the scene. Here again, the normative, masculine hero Ethan Chandler falters within the narrative when he is easily thrown aside and incapacitated almost at first strike. In *Nosferatu*, Ellen actively gazes at Orlok out of her window and when she is moving on her bed and encounters another being similar in its difference to man (Williams 86-87). It is remarkable that after having summoned the vampire, Ellen not only “stares at him in wide-eyed terror” (85), but also covers her eyes or turns away in almost painful gesture at these instances. Orlok on the

other hand keeps on staring, i.e. continuously performs (hyper)masculinity via his dreadful gaze even as he moves away. Similar to Ellen, Vanessa also steps in and ensures the vampire master's destruction, but without any notion of victimization this time. His gaze overwhelms in the one instance and is countered in the other.

10 Vanessa's continuous gaze does not result in death, but rather enables her to be part in the monster's destruction. Vanessa's inspecting and emotionless look, the signifier of her agency, remains constant during her search among the bodies in the vampire lair; fright, then, appears on her face when the vampire master rises, but not for long. As the vampire master approaches Sir Malcolm, Vanessa steps in and gazes at the vampire. The high angle shot makes it clear that the camera is now imitating the position of the vampire and hence, the spectator encounters Vanessa's objectification of the vampire via her stern and angry expression; tension arises via the high and shrill sounds accompanying it.³ Instead of now being punished within the narrative for the "autonomous act of looking" (Williams 97), the vampire master himself is taken aback. Now seen from a low-angle shot that allows the spectator to assume Vanessa's position, he hesitates and looks with awe as she easily defies and defeats his potent gaze. Like Graf Orlok, who could "master her [Ellen] through *her* look" (86), he never keeps his eyes off the woman, even when he is falling down and dying, but his gaze appears evenly matched. Though the vampire master still represents "raw carnal desire, which must be kept in check" (Elsaesser 86), woman, once "expressing that mixture of desire, curiosity, and horror typical of patriarchal culture" (86), takes on a different role. Monstrous female agency as it is represented in the cinema means for woman to gaze actively by going unpunished, as is easily realized by Vanessa. From this point on has become a transgendered monster more masculine than the über-man himself. Unlike Creed, who sees "a unified self [put] into crisis" within the horror film (59), Berenstein positions the appeal and pleasure of horror in the transposition of gender ambiguities in the domain of the spectator (245-47, 261-62). When we as spectators, regardless of any gender, assume first the monster's and then Vanessa's position, this multiplicity of gendered spectator positions beyond any clear binary signification proliferates.

11 Another encounter between Vanessa Ives and Ethan Chandler allows to conceptualize Vanessa's monstrosity. During their meeting at Grandage Place, Vanessa is sitting at the table whereas Ethan remains standing and looks down on her. However, the camera angles make a

³ These, of course, are the same sounds that to be heard during Vanessa's trances in the two prayer scenes and during her search for Mina.

point in establishing the same notion of equality as during their last encounter for there are mostly over-the-shoulder and eye-level shots that take Vanessa as point of reference without looking up to or down on Ethan. After a series of extreme close-ups during the dialogue, the cameras only assume a subjective position when Ethan has to pick a Tarot card. Here, Vanessa asserts how looking into her eyes is an essential requirement. Then, the camera looks down from a high angle, imitating Ethan's position, and the spectator can follow his look into Vanessa's eyes before the card is picked, yet through her eyes, we see both him and his wandering hand to account for his hesitation. Her request to "[b]elieve" seems to be directed at all parties involved and her clairvoyant power is thereby realized not only through the active gaze, but by the actual identification with it. Ethan, in an earlier attempt to understand Vanessa, tries to differentiate between the terms of "fortune reader", which is immediately deemed "inadequate", and "spiritualist", to which she agrees. As already connoted by these designations, the witch "is usually depicted as a monstrous figure with supernatural powers and a desire for evil. Her other social functions as healer and seer have largely been omitted from contemporary portrayals" (Creed 76). The seer, then, has been introduced by *Penny Dreadful* and conceptualized via the transgendering power of her gaze. In doing so, woman and monster, by becoming one in Vanessa, do not constitute the other as stated for *Nosferatu*, but rather now exclude man in form of Ethan Chandler, i.e. he who is not (yet) different.⁴

Turning the Tide: Agency and Serializing the Horror

12 The role and status of the female that *Nosferatu* so vigorously puts on display seemingly collides with her representation in *Penny Dreadful*. When Ellen assumes the performative position of the transvestite, this cannot be regarded as an instance of agency, as her final sacrifice, though achieved by it, merely repeats one of many almost paradigmatic moments of female redemption within cultural history (Lange 351, Schumacher 76). Moreover, the masculinised woman reiterates a formula of monsterization (Oswald 353) which goes hand in hand with a representation as a witch, as indicated by numerous examples from English literary texts. One only needs to read (or hear) the words of Banquo in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directed at the *Weird Sisters*: "What are these, | so wither'd, and so wild in their attire, | That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth, | And yet are on't? | [...] [Y]ou should be woman, | And yet your beards forbid me to interpret | That you are so." (15)

⁴ Viewers who are aware of the revelations in the first season finale can, of course, challenge that assertion quite easily, but not the validity and complexity of the structures here observed.

And Mathilda from Mathew Lewis' *The Monk* seems to be yet another witch that resists clear-cut distinctions between masculinity and femininity:

[H]e grieved that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own; and when he thought of her expressions respecting the devoted nun, he could not help blaming them as cruel and unfeminine. Pity is a sentiment so natural, so appropriate to the female character, that it is scarcely a merit for a woman to possess it, but to be without it is a grievous crime. (Lewis 217)

As Cohen (12) remarks these monsters and many others “declare that curiosity is more often punished than rewarded, that one is better off safely contained within one’s own domestic sphere” (12) while they at the same time continue to fascinate and to attract (16f.). For Margrit Shildrick the “monstrous feminine frustrates distinction, and in threatening to merge strikes at the patriarchal economy of desire” (46). Like all these transgendered monstrosities before her, Vanessa seems to embody a patriarchy that fears the dissolution of hierarchy and hegemony, a *spiritus mundi* still unable to move beyond the binary. Hence, Vanessa could have more in common with Ellen’s fate and fall despite all of her merits and achievements. Other instances of female monstrosity in the media, e.g. the Borg Queen from *Star Trek*, Illyria from *Angel: The Series* and Harley Quinn from the recent *Suicide Squad*, might tell a similar tale of a difference simultaneously elevated and subjugated by the very cultural processes by which they are produced and from which they cannot be separated.

13 The representation of female agency as monstrous in a contemporary TV series appears utterly problematic. When uncovering the virility of the male gaze in cinema, Mulvey wants to “make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides” (834), yet Vanessa’s position as transgendered female within the patriarchal structures underpins her position as a monster. The power of the seer lies in the activity of the gaze, i.e. in the defunctionalisation of a former instrument of suppression. This creates an almost inescapable vicious circle; even though the performative characteristics of the masculine look and the suppression that it implies can easily be uncovered, the fact that agency, i.e. their – successful and continuous – transgression, makes a woman become monstrous immediately undermines this success. Even Butler asks: “Is the breakdown of gender binaries, for instance, so monstrous, so frightening, that it must be held to be definitionally impossible and heuristically precluded from any effort to think gender?” (viii-ix) While it does not necessarily constitute notions of the monstrous and evil, female agency is represented as such. Agency, however, does not imply breaking the vicious circle, but moving along with it

by continuously changing it from within. *Nosferatu*, as a horror film, moves within the confines of early 20th century Weimar Germany and, as its narrative is concluded, offers a return from the cinema as a “temporary place” into the “world of comfort and light” (Cohen 17). *Penny Dreadful* rather uses the continuity of serialization that relies on a pattern being both repeated and reformulated and thereby lends itself to the very idea of agency, of leaving and returning to the horror on the screen.

14 The shadowy realm entered by Hutter and Vanessa Ives to encounter the vampire is given a name in *Penny Dreadful*: The “half world between what we know and what we fear”, i.e. the place inhabited by the monstrous, is called the “Demimonde”; this “place in the shadows” continues to haunt characters like Sir Malcom from *Penny Dreadful* even after leaving it. After his encounter with his daughter Mina, he comes to speak of an episode in Africa or in more specific terms of “the moment you realize you are no longer the hunter, you are the prey”. Even though the story is related to Mina, a simple cut to the gazing Vanessa makes clear that she might just as well be the lion who “looks at you” at the turning point of his brief narrative. Looking back at the history of the horror film, with *Nosferatu* as one of its earliest, most famous and constitutive examples, means looking back at a genre where clear performative distinctions perpetuate a heterosexual matrix and woman, no matter if as victim or demon, is deemed the object, with a clear indication of who can be regarded as hunter and who as prey. With the agency and hence active gaze of the seer Vanessa, the noted wind change seems about to come to pass. In 1980, S.S. Prawer writes in his study *Caligari's Children*: “Many members of cinema audiences today will look to the horror-movie for violent shock-images, for titillations of sexual and aggressive instincts which have to take more indirect forms in the entertainments television companies beam into our homes” (5). As the “violent shock-images” transferred from the cinema to the television screen, the new horror format, also to be noted with series like *American Horror Story*, *Hemlock Grove* or *The Walking Dead*, opens up new possibilities for a new audience. No longer must the destruction of the vampiristic monster entail a return of patriarchal order as in *Nosferatu* (Williams 90). Constituting Vanessa Ives as its titillating nexus, *Penny Dreadful*'s polymorphic ensemble becomes all the more deconstructive, subversive and ultimately monstrous as it leaves the Demimonde behind. Even if, given its cancellation in 2016, a satisfactory conclusion to the questions and challenges that the series has posed might be amiss, its central, thematic achievement, uncovered by these almost preliminary remarks on the expository first episode, will not go unmentioned. The serialized horror of *Penny Dreadful* ultimately explores a different theme, reconceptualising the monster and the fear it

embodies for the 21st century. Now, it is no longer solely about how to fight a monster, but how to be one.

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“I should have let her die”: a Posthuman Future between (Re)- Embodiment and Cyborgian Concepts

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Abstract:

The scenarios invoked in science fiction literature derive from imaginative concepts and futuristic technologies, and set out to fabricate and explore a potential future. Whereas the early development of science fiction stories showed a stronger emphasis on scientific and technical accuracy—hard science fiction—this has in the present day become increasingly dispensable, coining the expression of soft science fiction. Science fiction is the umbrella term for a wide range of genres which share various recurring themes including futuristic time settings in the future, scientific achievements that challenge state-of-the-art physical laws, and alternate social systems that depict a post-apocalyptic or post-scarcity world. Especially soft science fiction allows for the close investigation of social circumstances, philosophical reevaluations of what it means to be human, and contesting gender roles, while simultaneously emphasizing their impact on an imaginative society or even a posthuman state. Therefore, the depiction of gender roles functions as an important theme in science fiction literature, as it allows for a critical evaluation of stereotypes and underlying disparities. Focusing on the three short stories, C. L. Moore’s “No Woman Born” (1944), James Tiptree, Jr.’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973) and Shariann Lewitt’s “A Real Girl” (1998), this paper illustrates the notion of gender and embodiment, with particular consideration of the advantageous influences the posthuman state has on female gender roles. Each of these short stories serves as examples of enhancement in the portrayal of the female gender in science fiction literature and the different representation lays bare its struggles within the genre. Whereas “A Real Girl” addresses the issue of the female gender as a sexually desirable object as perceived through the eyes of the self-appointed female AI, “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” and “No Woman Born” thematize becoming a cyborg, the oppression of the female body by a dominant sovereignty, a desired ideal state of femininity and the imprisonment of gender, set in a highly technologized society. Whether in the form of exclusion through otherness based on differences between computers and humankind, or gender marginalization, these short stories depict social standards which the main characters fail to fulfill. However, the futuristic worlds the stories are set in allow for adjustment in order for the characters to take part in society. This paper, hence, will explore what could be called science fiction standard, its relation to gender roles and also investigate the thought-provoking—and uncanny—aspects of the cyborg figure and a critical evaluation of the posthuman-state as such.

Key Words: Gender, Science Fiction, Female, Cyborg, Posthumanism, James Tiptree, Jr., Shariann Lewitt, C. L. Moore, Embodiment, Post-Apocalyptic, Post-Scarcity

1 “I will be a real girl” (Lewitt 518). Thus ends Shariann Lewitt's short story “A Real Girl” (1998), which presents a female 200-year-old AI that is obsessed with the idea of becoming an embodied human girl, instead of being a mere disembodied online personality. Whereas she eventually desires a body for perceiving the world more fully, her initial

aspiration is to experience a genuine romantic relationship: “But I wanted, craved, needed to be loved. For myself. I wanted to know what it was all about” (511). Despite the risks that come with her unprecedented transformation from machine to (post)human, the nameless AI is willing to give up her immortality that enables her to exceed human physical abilities: “I am trading a good, secure, and fulfilling eternity for nothing but risk, and the potential for pain and disaster” (517). The idea of attaining a physical body is implemented in her consciousness after multiple love affairs with female scientists that are studying the AI. Men, however, are not interested in her and deny her wish to become human – for which she collectively discredits them as narrow minded. The short story questions what it means to belong to a female gender and its accompanied discriminatory state in society. By drawing on Lewitt’s story and two other works from different writers and periods, this paper aims to lay bare the liberating scope of science fiction literature for the gender discourse and to evaluate the beneficial aspects of a futuristic setting for commenting and criticizing on unequal past and presents circumstances. Whether for whitewashing the past, picturing alternate timelines or mapping out a new future: the genre of science fiction holds the potential to fabricate old and new in an intriguing uncanny symbiosis.

2 Both dreaded and desired in “A Real Girl”, the inferior pain-filled human state sets the starting point in James Tiptree Jr.’s “The Girl Who Was Plugged In” (1973) and C.L. Moore’s “No Woman Born” (1944)¹. In “The Girl Who Was Plugged In”, the seventeen-year-old Philadelphia Burke (P. Burke throughout the story) – born physically deformed – is no longer able to cope with living as a social outcast, for which she is repulsively described as “one rotten girl” (Tiptree 546) and “the ugly of the world” (547), by the mischievous narrator Weasel Face, eventually resulting in her attempted suicide. Her brain is then disembodied from her “own grim carcass” (556) and linked to a “flawless” (552) female artificial body, called Delphi², which is used to advertise products for the repressive GTX company. By using Delphi’s body, P. Burke is allowed to join the ranks of celebrities, who are elevated to a god-like status: “This whole boiling megacity, this whole fun future world loves its gods” (546). However, P. Burke realizes that her new life is equally depressing as

¹ James Tiptree, Jr. is the pen name Alice Bradley Sheldon used from 1968 to 1987 to publish numerous science fiction short stories as well as two novels. Currently, the *James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award* is given annually to science fiction and fantasy works of literature that contribute to the further understanding of gender roles. The acclaimed science fiction author Connie Willis concludes that the few successful women writers had to disguise themselves as men by using pen names, mere initials or androgynous names and even adapt their style in order not to be identified as females (Davin 2).

² The name refers to the Greek oracle of the ancient classical world, which was considered all-knowing and therefore consulted on important decisions. Similar to the oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, the character of Delphi is denied true ownership of her own body as P. Burke’s brain exercises control over it.

she is condemned to maintain the mindless cyborg body of Delphi and follow the order of her 'fatherly' figure Mr. Cante, without the right to voice her opinion. Merely loved for her new outward appearance, the story culminates in P. Burke's gruesome death by the hands of her lover Paul.

3 Like P. Burke in "A Real Girl", the main character in "No Woman Born" is also confronted with her own mortality. The world famous Deidre is presumed dead after falling victim to a theatre fire, and is subsequently mourned by the masses. Her manager Harris considers her "the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways" and claims that there has "never been anyone so beautiful" (261). The scientist Maltzer resurrects her by transplanting her brain into a metallic golden body, which, although featureless and solely resembling the silhouette of a human being, allows her to ultimately perform and enthuse the audiences yet again. Upon careful study by her creator and Harris, Deidre is able to reproduce her old voice and unmatched talent to fool them into believing that she is submissively following their orders, when she really has no desire to be forced to match the expectations of her oppressors and longs for an empowered state, which she validates with her "superhuman" (299) qualities.

4 These selected short stories function as popular examples of how the relationship among techno-scientific innovations, gender, embodiment, and reevaluating humanistic ideals is communicated in the science fiction genre. All three stories are centered around the means of overcoming dystopian male dominated hierarchies and the longing for gender equality. It is at their core at which all stories portray a modern approach to the (post)human considerations that entered the literary world with Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), and present the notion of being human and what remains of these superhuman qualities in either the AI's or Deidre's and Delphi's cyborgian state. By selecting three female authors who serve to emphasize in how far the formerly male-dominated genre has changed, this paper will consider significant feminist approaches at posthumanistic concepts of desired gender equality varying from re-embodied imaginations of an artificial intelligence to female cyborgs, set in futuristic scenarios and (proto)cyberpunk worlds.

5 Despite the fact that Shelley's *Frankenstein* is now considered the first science fiction novel, the feminist American science fiction author Pamela Sargent argues that little was contributed by female writers in the years between *Frankenstein's* release and the twentieth century. However, the gained momentum of rising gender equality and interest in gender studies during the twentieth century also lead to significant rediscoveries such as Lydia Maria

Child's time travel tale *Hilda Silfverling* (1845) and broader possibilities for women writers within the genre (Franklin 312). As a result, Eric Leif Davin points out that the 1960s showed a rise in the number of women writers in science fiction literature. He has collected a list of approximately 1,000 stories published by 203 female-identified writers between 1926 and 1960 in *Partners in Wonder* (2005), providing insight to how gender roles were perceived in science fiction literature (6). In this way, these here presented non-contemporary examples show that gender issues have in fact ever since been an (external) aspect of science fiction literature, which not only exists in the fiction of women writers per se, as Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* (1968) for instance demonstrates.

6 Consequently, while commenting on present social circumstances and anti-humanist ideals, the genre is able to shape the increasing human-machine relationship and to map a possible future (Booth and Flanagan 2). In contrast to other genres, science fiction is – despite its more or less hard sciences³-loaded origin – not dependent on the knowledge of physics and natural sciences or accuracy, which allows writers to speculate upon new and old topics (Thiess 2). Therefore, cyberpunk⁴ is not only the subgenre to put forth anti-humanist sensibility as such; rather, the theme is also a prominent aspect of fragmented narratives of feminist science fiction.⁵ However, whereas women's science fiction in particular explores regulated conceptions of hierarchical structures in a patriarchal society, the movement of cyberpunk, initiated by William Gibson, transformed into a rather masculine identified genre (Booth and Flanagan 7). The aspects of on the one hand female oppression by male sovereignty and on the other autonomous liberation are vital parts of these selected short stories and can be regarded as mirroring this shift. Initiated by the New Wave period of the 70s, the recent movement in the genre shows a rather liberal approach in regards to gender relations by both male and female authors, and in particular criticizes its uneven perception. Often times the scope of handling the issue of gender identity is centered around strong female characters, a hyperreal post-gendered world or even the ability to change gender

³ Science Fiction literature can be broadly divided into hard and soft science fiction, with the former carefully basing its futuristic ideas on existing and/or possible scientific achievements.

⁴ Cyberpunk's focus lies on the juxtaposition of high and low technology and allows for speculating about advanced technological achievements, which are confronted with (hierarchical) changes in current societal orders. In contrast with other fields of science fiction, the genre sets forth a pessimistic perception of the future, which is supposedly filled with violence and decay. The plot frequently revolves around post-industrial settings in a not-too-distant future, and presents a dystopian notion of cultural achievements and abysses.

⁵ Just as "No Woman Born" allows for a cyberpunk-reading due to Deidre's beneficial juxtaposition of machine and human parts, "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" can be considered as a proto-cyberpunk text due to its adverse depiction of a body being run by a satellite computer. P. Burke's transformation can be understood as 'loosing' against a technologized society – which is oftentimes the case in feminist cyberpunk texts; contrary to cyberpunk's absolute necessity of this usually empowering technologized process, it enriches the notion of (female) oppression by hierarchical disparities (Bukatman 316).

(Baldwin 20). Nevertheless, science fiction's highest-grossing works of the past often put forward a prominent unilateral, namely heterosexual, perception of sexual preferences in the future, which can be ascribed to the cultural pressure originating from heteronormative values and the reluctance to perceive oneself differently from social norms (Hollinger 302). As queer theorist Michael Warner argues in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), this is due to the means of envisaged inter-gender relations, which comprises reproduction and is the core for a society, as society would not be able to exist without it (Bell and Valentin 163).

7 On the contrary, the AI's homosexuality in "A Real Girl" is yet another liberating and novel aspect the short story puts forth, as it alters the ideas of a romantic relationship and what it means to be a desirable feminine girl, which represents an ideal state of humanity and emotional satisfaction – via homosexual ties – in her mind: "And I knew that emotionally it was women who drew me, who enticed me, whose attention I desired and whose approval I preferred" (Lewitt 511). By perceiving the female gender in a sexually desirable manner, the AI eventually becomes rather dismissive and stereotypical in her judgement of men who do not interest her, who she accuses of solely talking "about beer" (507) as they disregard her instead for being anything but a machine: "Men never saw me as even possibly alive. I am always a machine when I work with them, and while it hurts terribly there is never any chance the lines will be anything other than clear" (508). Likewise, the AI herself challenges the stereotype of female technical ineptitude when it antagonizes the perception of women, who are dismissively attributed to be not as skilled as men with technology. Subsequently, she considers that to "become a human" (513) implies to be a girl, which further enhances the role of the female gender. The act of becoming human is at the same time depreciated as to gain life would mean to "lose all" (518), and the AI wonders whether it is "worth dying for" (517). At this point without a gender, the AI's endeavor to become human is about achieving the female gender and a 'beautiful' body. Thus, it would mean that she would lose her superior state of not belonging to either gender and – due to having a functioning yet fragile biological body – the aspects of her unending capabilities of gaining knowledge and subsisting.

8 Cyborgs – an acronym of cybernetic and organism – generate their superiority to humans from being part machine and part human organism. The symbiosis of these elements illustrates the notion of social reality⁶ and fiction. This, therefore, evokes a condensed image

⁶ A process that is no longer solely existent in the fictional world, as for instance the augmentative aspects of

of an imaginative thought process and a material reality, which subsequently reflects the tradition of science and progress, while also drawing on the traditional perception of appreciating nature as a foundation of cultural achievements. Hence, in terms of reproduction, the notion of a cyborg emphasizes the creation of the self, based on a reflection from the other, which is essentially the relation between organism and machine (Haraway 150 f.). On being accused of not having a heart – and therefore not being real – the AI responds that it has a mechanism resembling the human heart by stating that “‘I have hydraulic pumps,’ [...] ‘[w]hich is the same thing you’ve got’” (Lewitt 511). Consequently, the cyborg figure shares similarities with the same formal dynamic as the monster figure in literature, as it is based on the combination of culturally opposing elements that are custom-tailored in order to be compatible. Whereas both share the aspect of a certain monstrosity, the reservedly coded cyborg evokes the archaic monster in its inability to emerge from nature into a humanoid culture at which the cyborg struggles to overcome the gap of being humanlike and representing the nature as a hypermachine. The role of the cyborg marks another difference; oftentimes – despite its superior coding – the cyborg is a slave to its creators rather than vice versa, a circumstance which Deidre and Delphi also fall victim to.⁷ Hence, its role can be considered as liberating, as it does not have to conform to an ethical notion or predetermined existence and the lines between humanlike and machine can become vanishingly low (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 199). Therefore, it is the aspect of the unknown and thus a novelty of the grotesque, which is to Harris and Maltzer fascinating at first but makes them resist Deidre’s threatening superhuman potential. Thus Maltzer concludes that, “[w]e who bring life in the world unlawfully, [...] must make room for it by withdrawing our own. That seems to be an inflexible rule. It works automatically. The thing we create makes living unbearable⁸” (Moore 292).

9 In *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), Donna Haraway proposes the notion of emancipation contained by the fictional cyborgian composition. Due to the futuristic perception of a gendered cyborg “in a post-gender world” (150), which is said to be neither only female nor only male, the cyborg does not fall in line with stereotypical concepts of a monolithic perception of either gender. Despite Haraway’s reading of the cyborg as a feminist icon and her critique to move beyond the standardized limitations of traditional gender norms, the

medical achievements contribute to prolonging life and overcoming inevitable disabilities.

⁷ Whereas Deidre is assigned to remain off-stage in order not to be crushed by the audience’s reaction to her new look, Delphi is imprisoned by the dominant GTX Company and their plan to exploit her beauty for economic purposes.

⁸ Which, in response to *Frankenstein*, implies the notion of monsters that necessitate its makers’ death.

cyborg figure in pop culture milestones such as *Terminator* (1984) and *RoboCop* (1987) emphasizes pure male power and mass destruction (Adam 163). With that said, technology permits the cyborgs to reject the notion of a constructed state of femininity and to turn away from this repressive approach to furthermore reject an idealized outward appearance (Stevenson 87). Haraway points out that gender roles are first and foremost constructed. In her opinion science fiction is capable of altering the rigidity of gender norms as it neither has a predetermined form nor must obey ethical charges; this innate possibility to change concepts turned into a prominent theme in numerous pieces of science fiction literature⁹ (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 198-199). However, as several famous adaptations of cyborgs indicate¹⁰, their standardized representation frequently includes an adherence to ideals of beauty, with a certain tendency to exceed them. This is of particular importance in P. Burke's cyborg Delphi who is "[s]itting up in the bed [and] is the darlinest girl child you've EVER seen. She quivers—porno for angels" (original emphasis Tiptree 550). C. L. Moore's "No Woman Born" can – in constructing a cyborg that is not in accordance with this image but nevertheless has an intriguing and uncanny beauty to her body – be read as a comment on this standardized perception of cyborgs in the genre of science fiction. Namely the story counteracts the idealized perception of merely constructing beauty from scratch and lays emphasis on Deidre's remaining human qualities and intriguing posthuman-qualities. Therefore, the initial idea of beauty in "No Woman Born" derives from approaching her personality and being able to see beyond her cyborgian body. When compared with Delphi's and the AI's scenario, Moore's decision to take the focus off her outward appearance can be read as her criticism of the exploitation and admiration of ideal beauty as opposed to personal qualities.

10 The two classic short stories of cybernetic re-embodiment by C. L. Moore and James Tiptree Jr. are early pieces of science fiction literature that explore the figure of a re-embodied female cyborg and its powerful traits (Booth and Flanagan 236). In both instances, the brain of the female character is being linked to a body powered by a machine in order to secure her viability and to enhance her value for societal pleasures – the brain being of greater value than the body stresses the feminist potential of the stories and implies what it means to be a woman, which is at its core not about a (desirable) body. A critical analysis of

⁹ See for instance Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), Octavia E. Butler's *Bloodchild* (1984) or Marge Piercy's *He, She and It* (1991).

¹⁰ This becomes especially evident in Motoko Kusanagi of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995) and Rachael and Pris of *Blade Runner* (1982). The former is a cyborg constructed in accordance to the beauty specifications of anime femininity, the latter are female replicants bioengineered after Aryan prototypes.

the two stories either allows a technophilic praise of the cyborg state with its liberating powers and potential, such as Moore's Deidre has achieved, or, in the case of Tiptree's P. Burke/Delphi, places emphasis on the disdainfulness of female bodies in particular and their ability to participate within an oppressive society. In addition, despite the fact that both cyborgs are superior to their oppressive creators due to their artificial state, their impelling loneliness and desires are, for the majority of the story, on a narratorial level not sufficiently dealt with (Stevenson 87). Therefore, both stories contrapose the augmentative aspect of having a cyborg body, with the issue of not being able to be oneself. Maltzer further stresses this notion when he claims that he "should have let her die in it" (Moore 279).

11 To then draw a line from this juxtaposition found in Deidre's and Delphi's case, to the desired notion of being an embodied girl in Lewitt's "A Real Girl", the AI concludes that being a human would not only mean that "[t]here is so very much to lose" (Lewitt 517) but extends the line of thought by considering the negative psychological side effects of being a human girl. These include giving up the posthuman aspects of connectivity – which holds the potential to refer to an immeasurable amount of knowledge and freedom of being bound to an emotionally charged persona, trapped inside a fading human body. The concession of these posthuman features would lead to newly achieved anxieties and insecurities, which to her constitute a crucial aspect of being human, explicated in statements such as: "And I had never really known love. I thought I have loved, but I had never had the things that humans seemed to about most. I had never had a house, a lover who worried about taxes and arguments over dinner. I've never had dinner." (515). Nonetheless, the AI is eager to explore what out of her superior perspective seems to be a limited state and craves for the sub-state of being human, postulating that "[i]t was worth death and loss of power to know these things" (515).

12 Moore's and Tiptree's early cyborg stories further display the notion of withstanding to lose all in the moment of inevitable death and to gain a liberating – and what contemporary cultural theory calls *posthuman* – state. Although the prefix *post* implies the concept of occurring immediately after the human, the present understanding of the posthumanities can be regarded as a protracted thought process which is immanently rooted in the ideology of humanism itself (Herbrechter 7). Therefore, the introduction to the posthuman inevitably involves the critical evaluation of what it means to be human – and in particular regards to the three selected short stories – laying bare its struggles. Thus authors, scientists, artists and philosophers alike concluded that the recent decades, with their technological and cultural developments, have exacerbated the search for the significance of being human, which transformed into a far more complex answer than what modern early Enlightenment thinkers

such as René Descartes in his *Discourse on the Method* (1637)¹¹ already considered (Graham 2). However, the neologism of posthumanism also involves anti-humanistic ideals of a techno-critical movement of the 1970s and 80s that revolves around a recurrent cultural image of self-hate and its perception of the end of the human species due to the technological progress of machines, which surpass human beings in an increasing number of subject areas (Herbrechter 7). Hence, as Ihab Hassan points out, the movement would helplessly transform the many years of humanism into a posthumanistic world (Badmington 2). In the late 1960s, the genre of science fiction literature became the preferred medium to address contemporary culture, and its intersection of technology and technocratic social practices. The genre additionally showed a growing interest in popularity among eager readers, critics and researchers for the consideration of a possible utopian, dystopian and/or posthuman future, and established its own domain by associating literary, philosophical and scientific fields. Besides, the integration of state-of-the-art scientific achievements and concepts in contradistinction to societal merits and inequalities further influences the readers' conception of what for one thing is imaginable, and for another thing could be plausible (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 4). The inducement of critically evaluating a posthuman future focuses on eliminating a certain perspective humanism puts forward, which is contingent on the anthropocentric ideology of humankind itself, and attempts to consider the human after the dreaded end of the human species, proclaimed by the existing techno-critical movement (Herbrechter 7).

13 In the same way, the cyborg Deidre represents a posthuman state made possible by technological achievements and labels herself as “superhuman” (Moore 299) as opposed to “subhuman” (293), a term she vigorously rejects. In doing so, she emphasizes the augmentative possibilities technology can have on humanity, manifests its overarching superiority and addresses that she, as a cyborg, is not designed for male desire (Booth 32). Moreover, Deidre's superhuman state poses the question for both Maltzer, her ‘creator’, and Harris, the adoring manager and point-of-view character, of whether or not Deidre can still be considered a woman, or, a human being at all. Thus, both men are confronted with instances in which Deidre is more human than ever: “Then she put her featureless helmeted head a little to one side, and he heard her laughter as familiar in its small, throaty, intimate sound as he had ever heard it from her living throat” (Moore 269) or not at all human – perhaps even

¹¹ The renowned phrase “Cogito ergo sum” (“I think, therefore I am”) has become a fundamental element of the Enlightenment movement and argues in favor of one's own mind, as long as the existence is motivated by doubt, which stresses the value of the self as a thinking entity.

inhuman – “[n]othing she had done yet had been human. The dance was no dance a human being could have performed. The music she hummed came from a throat without vocal cords” (Moore 283). Therefore, both men are faced with the influences of technology on a human interface, which makes it henceforth an ethical question whether Maltzer should have “let her die” (279), as Deidre “isn’t a human being any more” and fears that “what humanity is left in her will drain out little by little and never be replaced” (Moore 279; cf. Hollinger 308).

14 Besides, the consideration of whether she is human (and has therefore feminine traits) or machine (and is as a consequence intersexual) revolves for Harris around Deidre’s unconventional beauty, which he recalls when she is displaying certain behaviors that are linked to her past: “Then the machinery moved, exquisitely, smoothly, with a grace as familiar as the swaying poise he remembered” or when she makes use of her “sweet, husky voice” (Moore 266) to remind him that it is actually her: “It was Deidre” (266). However, this observation shifts whenever he sees her metallic body: “She isn’t human [...] but she isn’t pure robot either. She’s something between the two” (279). Deidre’s vaguely humanoid condition exposes the recurring struggle for Harris, and thus the reader, to finalize what is beautiful and feminine about her. Whereas Maltzer considers her inhuman and unable to compete since “she isn’t female anymore” (278), her performance proves him wrong, as the audience is overwhelmed by her beauty and applauds her “[t]he accolade of their interruption was a tribute more eloquent than polite waiting could ever have been” (284). Hence, the praise supports the notion of Deidre’s special beauty and stresses her femininity, without answering the omnipresent question of the state of her humanity (Vertesi 76 f.).

15 With that said, this portrayal also shows that Harris’ and Maltzer’s dominant male gaze is solely focused on Deidre’s outward appearance, which is in particular for Harris sufficient enough to judge what she has become. In addition, Harris concentrates on excessively analyzing Deidre’s new body and outward appearance when he first meets with her and does not remember her for any significant personality characteristics. Rather, he remembers her for her beauty and performative abilities, which he repeatedly points out in the course of the plot “[S]he had been so intimately familiar in every poise and attitude, through so many years” (Moore 273). Nevertheless, by referring to her as “the loveliest creature whose image ever moved along the airways” (261) in the first sentence of the short story, while appreciating her outward appearance, he also routinely degrades her for being a “creature” (260) and “subhuman” (293) throughout the story, which she vehemently refuses to accept. Thus, Deidre is imprisoned by the scope of Harris’ perception of her, as he denies

her personality, and her appearance is merely analyzed by his superficial way of thinking. By not addressing her character in any way, the narration criticizes the perception of gender roles in science fiction literature and highlights its distinct male gaze and dismissive attitude of men towards women. This can also be found in the distribution of their roles in society: whereas Deidre's function as a singer is to entertain a wide audience, Harris – as her manager – has the power to judge her actions and to even decide over her career. Subsequently, Maltzer – Deidre's creator – artificially designed her and is thus aware of her capabilities, thoughts and desires: "I created you, my dear. I know. I've sensed that uneasiness in you growing and growing for a long while now" (290). By asserting his role in her creation, he denies Deidre the ability to form a reflected assessment of her own needs and desires¹², which underlines his patronizing attitude towards her. When Deidre insists she is "not a Frankenstein monster made out of dead flesh" (293)¹³, towards the end of the story, it is not only the first instance in which she is being recognized for her character and humanity instead of the body, but also an indication of her self-empowering approach to overcome Maltzer's and Harris' control and their interminable attacks on femininity. She surprises both men by moving with inhuman speed, which further serves to stress the advantages brought by her cyborgian state as "even thought was slow, compared with Deidre's swiftness" (296). This, additionally, serves as evidence of the influence of her posthuman state on her abilities, and as such, can be understood as her contribution to challenging patriarchal norms.

16 In regard to the female characters' self-perception, and as a consequence of their desire to alternate their situation, all three stories are centered around the AIs' and cyborgs' wish to overcome the discrimination they are faced with. Either being a hierarchically structured, less valuable member of society – "A Real Girl", "The Girl Who Was Plugged In" – or, being oppressed by self-proclaimed superior men, in "No Woman Born". Deidre, however, successfully embraces the urge to be recognized for her humaneness and consequently behaves in a self-liberating manner as she reflects critically: "I'm not a robot, with compulsions built into me that I have to obey. I'm free-willed and independent, and, Maltzer—I'm human" (Moore 293). By choosing to view her situation in this light she

¹² Aside of the desire to perform, Deidre longs for the appreciation of her newly achieved life and wishes to be respected and not told what to do by either of the two men.

¹³ The intertextual reference to *Frankenstein; Or, the modern Prometheus* (1818), is a prominent element in all three stories and is used to either repulsively describe women or the process in which a cyborg is being created. The scenarios invoked by this reference derive their horror among other things from the nightmarish qualities of thematising the process of galvanism and a technophobic perception of the posthuman state. Furthermore, it can be read as a reference to Mary Shelley's mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), expresses the need for women's equality and education.

effectively overpowers her oppressors, yet the same cannot be said for either P. Burke's or the AI's case. P. Burke, who is rather self-critical to begin with, considers suicide as her last option. However, when being asked why a seventeen-year-old would want to end her life, she cannot provide an answer. Her lack of speech stresses the desperation she succumbs to, leading her to believe that suicide is her only means of escape. Lack of conventional attractiveness results directly in discrimination: "No surgeon would touch her [...] She's also quite young, but who would care?" (Tiptree 547). In addition, her new personality as Delphi puts an end to the persona of P. Burke, who is "legally dead" (549), and forces her to lead two half-lives. Consequently, the perfect Delphi on the one side, and the disfigured P. Burke on the other give rise to the intricate situation in which she is not capable to distinguish her mind, which belongs to Burke, and her body, which is Delphi's, and ultimately leads to the increasing loss of P. Burke's original personality: "The fact is, P. Burke can no longer clearly recall that she exists apart from Delphi." (568). Finally, "[t]he little thing in his arms stirs, says plaintively, 'I'm Delphi' (575), being her last words, suggest the final stage of the technological disembodiment of P. Burke and problematize the notion of the transcendence of the body. Thus, P. Burke's pleasure of being the empowered Delphi, who chooses not to look back at her past, conceals her introductory remark on her, P. Burke's, death itself: "She's deciding she really did die" (549). This further stresses the aspect of disembodiment for the sake of personal fulfilment. Therefore, Tiptree's short story in particular highlights the degradation of the physical body for the benefit of gaining a virtual body: "If you cut the transmission cold you'll kill the Remote [...] If you pull Burke out you'll probably finish her too. It's a fantastic cybersystem, you don't want to do that" (572). The connection between a mind and a body that is not its own also problematizes notions of romantic love (Booth and Flanagan 459). In this way, Tiptree's narrative functions as a comment on the value of individual personalities and aims to expose the patronizing and sexist treatment of women in society, which, due to the death¹⁴ of P. Burke, can be read as a cynical remark on the prospect of the future. This is illustrated when Face's voice directly addresses the reader at the very end: "Believe it, zombie [...] You can stop sweating. There's a great future there" (Tiptree 577).

17 In Lewitt's short story, the AI glorifies the imagination and creation of a physical body, from which she promises herself to have a singular consciousness and to be able to

¹⁴ P. Burke has just been killed by her lover Paul and he will go on to support the discriminatory system of the GTX Company of his father. By the end of the story the beautiful Delphi is "nothing but a warm little bundle of vegetative functions hitched to some expensive hardware" (577), thus reducing P. Burke to Delphi's outward appearance and ignoring her gruesome death.

embrace her feelings and desires, which are not being recognized due to her inhumanness “[a]nd because I didn’t have a body the entire question of my sexuality and orientation was completely superfluous” (508). The story explores the consequences of such a process, which endangers the AI’s life: “I’m ready to die, if I have to. If that’s the price of being real” (506). Additionally, the inferiority of being human in comparison to being a “megabrain” (507) is being emphasized when she says: “In all my life I have never known physical pain. I have never been hungry. I have never been cold or wet or had a charley-horse in my leg or a runny nose. All my life I have never slept. I have never lost consciousness” (517). Therefore, the story questions the value of being a cyborg superhuman, and in contrast to Tiptree’s approach – in which P. Burke finds initial happiness outside her body by means of a new personality – highlights the necessity of living among mortal human beings in order to be truly living (Booth and Flanagan 458). In the process of developing a new body, the AI is critically monitoring the process and shows signs of vanity by commenting on her re-embodied outward appearance: “The hair is dark brown too, almost black, and straight. I had wanted curls, but I was told quite crossly that I would get whatever came out of the DNA mix just like a real person, and just like a real person I would have to put up with it” (Lewitt 505). By showing her desire for a specific look, the AI is presented as being solely interested in the outward appearance and thus shows signs of superficiality – which she ought to rise above since she is otherwise portrayed as having superior mental faculties. It is Lewitt’s comment on the stereotypical perception of women, who are supposed to conform to society’s beauty ideals. This preoccupation with looks diverts from the AI’s genuine desire to really live among and as part of the human society. The AI considers being an adult woman as having achieved an empowered state which is to say “a woman, an adult who is in her full power” (508), and represents another aspect of Lewitt’s approach to argue in favor of gender equality. Depicting an AI that chooses to be a woman, it implies a societal desirability of this gender which is shown as challenged in the other two short stories by Moore and Tiptree.

18 In light of seeking a liberating and ultimately empowered state of the female gender in the stories, it is vital to point out that none of the short stories displays an actually independent character; instead, they are forced to obey the order and perception of a male superiority. In the case of “A Real Girl”, it is due to the AI being forced to remain stationary, namely by being “four pounds of neural computing circuitry in a box” (Lewitt 507) and being obligated to wait for humans to communicate with her in the interface: “She kept coming back and I kept waiting, hoping, that she’d return soon. That I’d catch a glimpse of her in the video monitors, that I’d hear someone else mention her name” (516). Furthermore, the AI’s

profession – and thus what she likes and strives for – is in fact fulfilling work for others, which underscores the unequal conditions she has to face and stresses the role of dependence for women: “I am always a machine when I work them” (508). Therefore, in the process of creating her body, the AI is consequently not in power to do so herself; rather, she is dependent on others and is forced to rely on trusting the “DNA mix” (505). When considering that she is a two-hundred-year-old AI, whose purpose in *life* is to collect as much knowledge as possible and to function as a database for people to have access to, this aspect functions as a limiting basis, which ties in with the notion of the cyborg’s struggle to overcome the gap between being humanlike and rising to become a hypermachine. Hence, the AI, despite its superior coding, is forced to become a slave to its creators rather than the other way around (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. 199).

19 In regard to “The Girl Who Was Plugged In”, P. Burke is being preserved from death in order to fulfill work for GTX. Hence, she is not even granted permission to decide over her future or ending her life as evidenced in the line, “Our girl revives enough to answer the questionnaire without which you can’t die, even in the future” (Tiptree 548). In accordance with being stationary, she is still described degradingly as “the monster, down in a dungeon, smelling of electrode-paste” (565) and a “caricature of a woman burning, melting [...] the beast she is chained to [...] Delphi” (565 f.) and is thus only able to remote control Delphi’s cyborg body. However, even in Delphi’s hinted-at versatile state “Delphi doesn’t have much privacy; investments of her size don’t” (556) and is furthermore assigned to obey all orders set by her technical creator Joe and ‘fatherly’ figure Mr. Cantle “a wired-up slave! Spikes in her brain, electronic shackles in his bird’s heart” (570). The state of dependence is additionally supported by the working methods of the megacorporation GTX. Here, Delphi is being told to promote products to the society and in particular draws her increasing joy on the mass appeal she in turn achieves. Consequently, the narrative emphasizes the constructed ideal of femininity, which prompts P. Burke to disembody from her real body and to re-embody ultimately as Delphi in order to fit in. Thus, her entrapped physicality is used to comment on society’s unrealistic expectation of gender imprisonment and women per se (Hollinger 306). P. Burke’s survival is only of importance for controlling the content-free body of Delphi and emphasizes on the one hand the dismissive value of her female gender, and on the other the technophobic idea of a future, in which a loss of oneself occurs in exchange for an increasing virtual connectivity (Hicks 67).

20 With a similar origination process as Delphi, it is in particular Deidre’s technological state that concerns Maltzer, and as a consequence motivates him to disallow her to return to

the stage and to question his creation: “I’ve done something to her a thousand times worse than the fire ever could” (Moore 279). Harris, however, is unwilling to either thoroughly accept her overly-powerful state or forbid her to return to the stage. Rather, he is much more concerned with denying Deidre’s posthuman state and meticulously tries to see her remaining female human parts. He suppresses her status as a new entity and selfishly exploits the situation to indulge in reminiscences as the “illusion of the old Deidre hung about the new one” (278). It is the aspect of Deidre being imprisoned in her cyborg body over which both men obsess and which ultimately leads them to treat the ramifications of her artificial intelligence hyperconsciously. Hence, Moore’s narrative is centered around a critique of the male gaze and falls into line with a sexist perception of femininity in science fiction literature, as both men are concerned with solely materializing their desires Deidre has to attain, and limiting female characters to a mere replication of an idealized notion of beauty. Even at the end, it is not Deidre’s personality that enthuses them, but rather her performance that makes them recall her extraordinary beauty: “Time caught up with Harris. He saw it overtake Maltzer too, saw the man jerk convulsively away from the grasping hands, in a ludicrously futile effort to forestall what had already happened” (296). However, in Deidre’s final monologue she again considers her yet-to-be-explored potentials: “There’s so much still untried. My brain’s human, and no human brain could leave such possibilities untested. I wonder, though ... I do wonder —“(300), which could hint at a further empowerment of her status, or, a possible end-of-the-world scenario even involving the possibility of her self-replication¹⁵. Maltzer already hinted at such a possibility by stating that “[t]he thing we create makes living unbearable” (292). This scenario further serves as a popular theme to criticize in the science fiction genre and the prospects of a techno-laden futuristic world.

21 Although all three stories derive from imaginative concepts of the unknown, in which futuristic technologies lay the foundation of exploring a potential future, it is at their core at which they provide a systematic depiction of social circumstances of the oppressed female gender and simultaneously contribute to the reevaluation of what it means to be human. Subsequently, it is the enabling aspect of a posthuman state which facilitates the liberating possibility to overcome the patriarchy and sets forth the process of abolishing gender imprisonment with its standardized notion of ideal states of femininity and of female roles in society. Finally, it is important to note the authors’ ability to manage the balancing act of

¹⁵ Also referred to as gray goo problem in *Engines of Creation* (1986) which is a term coined by the nanotechnology scientist Eric Drexler and stands for all-consuming machines that are building more of themselves (146).

intertextually referring to Shelly's *Frankenstein*, by which they include the maddening scenario of the grotesque horror of the uncertainty of technological achievements, and map the overarching notion for a new state of gender relations, in possible future settings for human kind. Which, in response to the question of what it means to be human, could pose the answer that it "is about not retaining our humanity" (Brayshaw and Witts 461). With that said, "there's a great future" (Tiptree 577), isn't there?

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Dreaming of Electric Femmes Fatales: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner: Final Cut* (2007) and Images of Women in Film Noir

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Abstract:

Blade Runner is cited amongst many as a classic neo-noir, a science fiction film which applies 1940s films noirs' visual style in order to create a dark and dystopian vision of humanity's future. However, this borrowing from film noir is not only limited to visual style: *Blade Runner*'s representation of women, that is to say female replicants, can be read as a reworking of female roles in film noir. When discussing women in film noir, it seems essential to pose some questions, i.e. where are they situated within the discourse of film noir and in relation to which characteristics are they defined? In answering those questions, different feminist perspectives on two female archetypal roles in film noir, namely the roles of the *femme fatale* and the *redeemer*, will be considered. Femmes fatales signify sexualized, active danger to men, whilst redeemers signify moralized, passive security and domestication. Generally, both roles are defined in terms of their sexuality, regardless of whether they are sexualized or desexualized, as well as their either threatening or non-threatening relation to the men surrounding them. An interpretation of the female roles in *Blade Runner* will clarify how the place assigned to women in film noir accords with the place of women/replicants in *Blade Runner*, that is a place located outside what Lacan terms Symbolic Order. Above that, *Blade Runner*'s orchestration of women is based on defining them through their sexuality and in relation to men: they are subjugated to marginalizing processes of sexual othering. Through a close reading of Rachael, it can be theorized that she transmutes from femme fatale to redeemer throughout the narrative. Similarly, both Zhora and Pris can be read as textbook examples of classic fatal women.

1 Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, first released in 1981, then re-released as a final cut version in 2007, constructs a dystopian future in which private detective Deckard is hired to hunt down fugitive replicants, i.e. a neologism for bioengineered humans. As Katherine Farrimond remarks, contemporary American science fiction films tend to stage female cyborgs "as [both] threatening and sexualised" and thereby revive the femme fatale of film noir: these cyborgs are not only hard, half-technological "deadly seductresses", but their initial female agency is also put under male control throughout the narratives (182). Regarding *Blade Runner: Final Cut*¹, with the exception of Deborah Jermyn's "The Rachel Papers," there is (at least to my knowledge) no in-depth work examining the correlation between female roles in film noir and Scott's film. This absence is surprising given that *Blade Runner* is often cited as a quintessential neo-noir (see, for example, Kellner, Leibowitz, and Ryan). Bearing the aforementioned in mind, I intend to point out how far *Blade Runner*'s

¹ Although I will be talking about the final cut version, I will simply refer to the film as *Blade Runner*.

representation of women can be interpreted as a reference to the representation of women in film noir.

2 When discussing *Blade Runner*'s reference to roles or images of women in film noir, it is necessary to outline the film's general use of visuals and themes prevalent in film noir, regardless of "[w]hether it is a genre, a cycle of films, a tendency, or a movement" (Cowie 121). As the paper's main focus is on gender representations, I will only give a short outline of the typical film noir features that can be identified in *Blade Runner*. In their essay "Blade Runner and Genre", Susan Doll and Greg Faller categorize "*Blade Runner* as a multi-generic film, as a combination of film noir and science fiction" (89). The scholars' approach is rather formalistic, as they valorize visual style, i.e. the specific use of certain cinematic signifiers, against plot (91). Thus, they posit eight stylistic devices or characteristics that constitute film noir: "low-key lighting, claustrophobic framing, shadows and/or reflections, unbalanced compositions, and great depth of field", as well as "urban landscapes, costuming, particularly trench coats, garments with padded shoulders, and spiked heels; and most often rain-soaked environments" (91). However, Doll and Faller also make thematic statements, i.e. that films noirs most often deal with some kind of investigation, involving an investigator, who sometimes is a detective, "a corrupt authority figure," as well as an image of women usually tied to the role of "femme fatales or redeemers" (91). The world or society in film noir is often characterized by hopelessness, desolation, amorality and the instability of old orders.

3 Interestingly, *Blade Runner* accords with most of the features listed above. The overall lighting of the film is expressively dark; according to Doll and Faller the scenes in Bryant's and Tyrell's offices and Deckard's condo serve as good examples of low-key lighting. Furthermore, the use of close-ups and extreme close-ups (of eyes), as in the scene where Leon takes the VK test, exemplifies a style of claustrophobic framing. Yet, overly shiny and blinding "television monitors" have a similarly claustrophobic effect (91). In terms of costuming, "Rachael's tight-fitting dresses with padded shoulders and her 1940s influenced hairdo, Deckard's and Bryant's (and to some extent Gaff's) trenchcoats" seem to be an allusion to the fashion of 40s films noirs (92). Finally, the Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* is a rainy and dark megalopolis, as are most of the cities presented in films noirs (ibid.).

4 Stylistically, *Blade Runner* is often cited as the quintessential filmic text of postmodernism, especially due to its genre-mixing as a form of intertextuality (see Bruno). It is this paper's aim to point out in how far *Blade Runner*'s intertextual reference to film noir is not only confined to visual style, but also manifests itself in the (conscious or unconscious) orchestration of remarkably noir-styled women characters.

5 In her introduction to the new edition of *Women in Film Noir*, E. Ann Kaplan notes that “classical Hollywood ‘realism’” tends to accord “with the patriarchal status quo that positions women as subordinate in a (Lacanian) male Symbolic Order” (3). Concurrently, in “The Place of Women in Fritz Lang’s *The Blue Gardenia*”, Kaplan extends the scope of this statement to film noir. Kaplan draws on Laura Mulvey’s standpoint that the mythological figure of the Sphinx symbolizes women, for it is situated outside the realm of male culture: it is postulated that the women of film noir “are placed in the position of the Sphinx, mysterious, sinister and challenging to men but assigned a place outside the order of the film” (87). With reference to the above, two essential suggestions can be made: firstly, that the women of film noir are often defined by mystery as well as their challenging/threatening nature and activity, secondly, that most films noirs, however, eventually assign women a subordinate place, meaning that the discourse of these films remains male as opposed to female and does not destabilize, but reaffirm patriarchy. This is in accordance with Mulvey’s discussion of women in mainstream film. In her analysis, men are active, controlling the gaze, taking pleasure in looking at and fetishizing women (fetishistic scopophilia), whilst women remain passive, objectified as sexual images and “tied to [their] place as bearer[s] of meaning, not maker[s] of meaning” (Mulvey 7). Initially, film noir unsettles this “active/passive heterosexual division of labour” only to further reinforce it in the end (12). Nevertheless, it will be delineated in how far women in film noir are not simply misogynist constructions, but can also be read as female agents or at least as false projections, as a discussion of a study by Julie Grossmann will show. In this chapter, my main focus addresses the portrayal of specific roles ascribed to women in film noir.

6 Relying on the assumption that film noir can be considered a “male fantasy”, Janey Place claims that in film noir femininity is constructed in relation to sexuality: consequently, it offers women two dualistic roles to perform, either that of the dark lady, spider woman or femme fatale for whom sexuality is accessible or that of the good and innocent woman, the redeemer for whom self-determined sexuality remains beyond reach (47). Although film noir can be termed “phallogentric,” because it defines women in terms of their sexuality and otherness to men, for Place it also has a subversive potential: “it does give us one of the few periods of film in which women are active, not static symbols, are intelligent and powerful, if destructively so, and derive power, not weakness, from their sexuality” (47). Hereafter, the two pre-dominant female roles in film noir, that of the femme fatale/spider woman and that of the redeemer, will be investigated, as these are also, in my reading, the pre-dominant female

roles in *Blade Runner*. This investigation will especially approach the figure of the femme fatale from differing theoretical feminist perspectives.

7 Angela Martin writes about the origin and meaning of the French term *femme fatale*: she simply translates the term into English (“fatal woman”) and points to the three different meanings of the adjective: “(1) causing or capable of causing death, (2) ruinous, disastrous, (3) decisively important, (4) destined, inevitable” (206). Hence, deadliness and destruction can be labeled two determining traits of the femme fatale. In male discourses on film, the fatal woman’s deadliness was then ascribed to her ability to avail herself of her “sexuality as weapon” in order to put forth the destruction of a man for her own benefit (206). However, it seems noteworthy that (oftentimes) the femme fatale’s deadliness is not based on violent actions or actual enforcements of murder, but rather lies in “her very presence”, that is to say her power to fascinate men sensually and sexually (Martin 208). This point is quite insightful with regard to *Blade Runner*. In my reading, the female replicants are not naturally violent or deadly, but it is the Symbolic Order that expects and creates their fatal nature and thereby makes them react in a lethal (or defensive) manner.

8 What is more, according to Place the femme fatale’s sexual way of posing a threat to masculinity is recognizable in film noir’s “iconography” and “visual style” (54). This specific form of iconography is either sexual or violent. Sexual, for the femme fatale is visualized through blond or dark long hair, make-up, jewelry, cigarettes symbolizing “dark and immoral sensuality”, as well as long legs, often shot in a sexualizing, fragmentizing manner (54). Her violent side is linked to her ability to handle a gun and take possession of a metaphorical phallus (54). With respect to composition and camera movement, the femme fatale adopts a dominant and active role. She is usually orchestrated as the center of single shots and even if she is placed in the background, she draws the male protagonist’s as well as the audience’s attention to herself. In Place’s words, the fatal women “direct the camera (and the hero’s gaze, with our own) irresistibly with them as they move”, meaning that they possess control over camera movement as well as the male protagonist gazing at them, which implies a temporarily static man and a dynamic woman (56). It is, however, noted that, in the end, the femme fatale is detached from her status as a dynamic woman who controls both camera movement and the men around her: usually, she loses her ability to move freely, to control camera movement and gaze relations, restrictive frames and other compositional devices keep her immobile and “imprisoned” and sometimes she is even murdered (56). After all, as Mulvey suggests, cinema could be viewed as an ideological apparatus, working to satisfy male desire. First, the male spectator can identify with the male protagonist. Second, both

extradiegetic spectator and intradiegetic male hero come to be “in direct scopophilic contact with” a female protagonist who serves nearly no diegetic function apart from being an object of the male gaze (13). In film noir, the above described gender and gaze relations are not as black and white, since the femme fatale challenges them. Yet, the femme fatale’s transgressions remain ephemeral, as when death is her reward, and the gendered active-male passive-female dichotomy is restored. To summarize, the femme fatale is at first presented as a powerful, free and also dangerous woman, but eventually her power and freedom (the two characteristics that make her dangerous for men) are limited or even eliminated by the narrative of the film (56). Conclusively, it can be summarized that film noir visualizes the femme fatale as both independent and sexual, but eventually punishes her sexuality and independence: those are the ‘poor’ characteristics that make her transgress the borders of the traditionally passive and dependent place assigned to women in a patriarchal system. Thus, this transgression is rendered inoperative by putting the femme fatale back in her subordinate, femininely connoted place.

9 Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyk) from Billy Wilder’s *Doubly Indemnity* (1944) serves as a good example of a classic femme fatale. In terms of iconography, Dietrichson matches most of the features listed above: she has long blond hair, is made up and dressed elegantly, and her long bare legs are often located in the male hero’s and the audience’s field of vision. In one scene, for example, Walter Neff, the male hero and an insurance salesman, gazes at Dietrichson’s ankle chain as if hypnotized. Besides, she controls camera movement, as she is often in the center of single shots and also often filmed from a low angle, which expresses her high position as a dominant position. In terms of general characterization, Dietrichson matches the image of the fatal and destructive woman. She seduces Neff, begins an affair with him and they team up to kill Mr. Dietrichson. When Neff starts questioning their crime, Mrs. Dietrichson expresses her phallic power by shooting Neff with a gun, a move that, however, does not kill him. On the contrary, Neff gets hold of the gun and is able to shoot down and kill Mrs. Dietrichson. Afterwards, the injured Neff drives to the insurance company where he works and makes a confession; it is implied that the police will take care of him. The message conveyed here, can be formulated as follows: although Phyllis Dietrichson independently attempts to leave behind her assigned status as a passive wife in an unsatisfying marriage, she is simultaneously portrayed as an evil seductress and murderer and is punished for these malefactions through an execution by Neff. Mrs. Dietrichson is a classic femme fatale, as she uses her sexuality to get what she wants and ultimately destroys the man who fell in love with her as well as herself. She does not escape the status of a male

fantasy/construction, for in the end all of her sources of sexuality and activity are put under male control.

10 This notion of the femme fatale as a male construction can be developed further. In her essay “Film Noir’s ‘Femme Fatales’ Hard-Boiled Women,” Julie Grossmann claims that most readings of the femme fatale in film noir tend to be misinterpretations of real female experience (23). It is stated that male discourses make an attempt at defining nearly all independent women of film noir as femme fatales, whilst some of the independent women of film cannot be put in this category. They tend to be women onto which the image or idea of the fatal woman is projected (25-28). In *Gilda* (1946) “Johnny Farrell can’t abide Gilda’s verbal, psychological, and sexual power over him; he reacts so violently and cruelly to her ... that the movie enacts in the story the annihilating process of ‘putting the blame on Mame’” (23). Hence, it is not necessarily the noir woman’s behavior that renders her fatal, but rather the male hero’s way of interpreting this behavior as fatal. Therefore, Grossmann views her as a “projection of male fears and desires” (29).

11 Similarly, the redeemer can be considered a projection of male desires, yet of desires of safety, stability and female quietism. The role of the redeemer in film noir seems to be far less complex than that of the femme fatale: rather, she seems to be an Anti-femme-fatale, her counter-part in a rigid binarism of virgin-whore. As Place remarks, the redeemer takes over an integrative part in film noir, for she “offers the possibility of integration for the alienated, lost man into the stable world of secure values, roles and identities”: as her name suggests she redeems him (61). In contrast to the femme fatale, the redeemer remains “visually static and passive,” not at all in control of the gaze, and resides in “the pastoral environment of open spaces” as opposed to the femme fatale’s dark and shadowy urban homes (61f.). In conclusion, the redeemer can be defined as a safe haven for the male protagonist, for she is “rooted in the pastoral environment, static, undemanding and rather dull,” meaning that she does not threaten the male protagonist with sexualized destruction. As the male hero usually settles for and marries the redeemer, she becomes his bride-price for having resisted the destructive lures of the femme fatale (62).

12 When regarding *Blade Runner*’s representation of women, Kaplan’s comment about noir woman as mysterious sphinx remaining “subordinate in a (Lacanian) male Symbolic Order” seems fairly suitable (3). Terry Eagleton describes the Lacanian Symbolic Order as “the pre-given structure of social and sexual roles and relations which make up the family and society” (145). This means that the Symbolic Order is a system in which certain pre-given symbols (language) as well as laws constitute all societal institutions, for example the police,

as well as communication systems. Following Catherine Belsey's argumentation, it can also be said that the language of the laws and prohibitions existent in this order is that of "the forbidding Father"² (58-59). When regarding the Symbolic Order as the realm of the language and the laws of the Father, it seems plausible to characterize it as patriarchal. As already clarified, the women of film noir are defined in terms of their sexuality, meaning their otherness to men. It is their sexuality, signifying activity and power, which is seen to transgress the borders of a Symbolic Order, which assigns them a passive and subordinate position. The transgressive behavior is, however, soon punished by either relegating them to a subordinate position once more or by murdering them. At the same time, their perceived dangerous sexuality renders them mysterious and positions them outside male culture.

13 In *Blade Runner*, all of the major female characters, Racheal, Pris and Zhora, are non-human androids, so-called replicants. This denotes that all of the members of the police as well as the blade runners, i.e. representatives of the Symbolic Order, are men, whereas the (strong) main female characters, Pris and Zhora, are represented as criminal cyborgs, i.e. as the ones who pose a threat to the welfare of the Symbolic Order. That is why both of them undergo punishment: they are intended to be executed by Deckard who as a law-keeper defends the interests of the Symbolic Order and also executes brutally. Thus, in *Blade Runner*, the women are constructed as a non-human, anti-social Other, as the sphinx so to say. Deborah Jermyn's statement "that the female replicant is the ultimate manifestation of the commonplace cultural positioning of woman as duplicitous," precisely sums up my interpretation (159). Furthermore, like most of the women of film noir Zhora and Pris are characterized in relation to their sexuality: Zhora is a night club dancer, whilst Deckard's boss Bryant refers to Pris as a "basic pleasure model," i.e. a prostitute (*Blade Runner*, 0:14:16-0:14:26). Subsequently, I will analyze the three female replicants Rachael, Zhora and Pris in terms of their shared features with film noir women.

14 When examining Rachael, it is important to draw a line between the two roles she embodies in *Blade Runner*: in the following analysis, I will lay bare in how far Rachael can be viewed as an ambiguous figure, as she embodies both the role of the femme fatale and the role of the redeemer. To begin with, it could be said that Rachael, like most of the femme fatales' of film noir, is denied a central position within the narrative of *Blade Runner*. Tellingly, in most critical accounts, *Blade Runner* is read as Deckard's adventure not Rachael's (even though she "might embody a more sensitive vision of humanity than its humans") and Rachael is mostly analyzed in terms of "what she represents for *Deckard*" (Jermyn 162). As

² The capitalization connotes a representative of male values, therefore not a natural father.

in film noir where definitions of the femme fatale are oftentimes based on the way in which men perceive her (sexual) danger, male-authored essays and reviews tended to analyze Rachael in relation to Deckard, but not in relation to her striking femme fatale *identity* (162). However, as Jermyn notes,

Rachael carries all the superficial erotic trappings of the femme fatale and, at least initially, the same spirit of confidence, an ice-maiden-black-widow who first encounters Deckard with admirable poise, meeting and returning his gaze even while object of the gaze herself (164f.).

In the first meeting between Rachael and Deckard, Rachael accords with most of the determinant visual qualities of the femme fatale. When she first enters Tyrell's office, the viewer sees a shoulder close-up of her made-up face, her red-painted lips as well as her elaborately styled dark hair and when she starts moving towards Deckard it is revealed that she wears a black dress exposing her long, bare legs (*Blade Runner*, 0:16:23-0:16:32).

15 Rachael's dress and also her hair style visualized in this scene are reminiscent of Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*. It is also noteworthy that while Deckard is rather static (residing at Tyrell's desk) in this scene, Rachael moves through the office dynamically and directs Deckard's gaze. Although she becomes the object of Deckard's (male) gaze, by moving around she nevertheless controls it, meaning that being gazed at does not render her passive. Her very mobility and dry eloquence contradict Mulvey's idea that filmic women "freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation"³ (11). Besides, as Lacan notes, "the gaze that is outside", i.e. the returning gaze of the looked-at object, is what constitutes the look of the subject (106). Thus, Rachael directs and thereby determines Deckard's subjective looking position. Visually, Rachael and not Deckard is the center of most of the single shots in this scene. When asking Deckard if he has "ever retired a human being by mistake," Rachael is filmed from a low angle, meaning that the power relation expressed here is that of a woman looking down at a man (Deckard) from a markedly higher position (*Blade Runner*, 0:16:40-0:17:17). In addition, Rachael's question is intended to discompose Deckard. Once again, Rachael could be compared to Phyllis Dietrichson with respect to appearance: When Dietrichson and Neff meet at the Dietrichson mansion for the first time, Dietrichson also takes up a higher position, residing on the stairs, whilst Neff is standing in the hallway. She also confronts him with provoking questions like Rachael does with Deckard (*Double Indemnity*, 0:07:54-0:08:41). In the subsequent VK test, however, Rachael transmutes from "a demanding subject" who confidently smokes her cigarette and returns Deckard's questions to

³ Performances and dances within the narrative or close-ups of fragmented body parts break the coherence of an action-based plot. However, as the male spectator and protagonist share the gaze, such breaks become irrelevant.

a woman defined “by vulnerability and uncertainty,” as his questions become more intrusive (Jermyn 165). Accordingly, the first scene where Rachael is staged, firstly provides the image of a strong and independent femme fatale-like woman (in terms of appearance as well as behavior), but then banishes “her from the room where moments ago she had held court, leaving the men free to scrutinize her further still” (165). The scene analyzed above, sums up film noir’s treatment of the femme fatale: at first, Rachael independently maintains her ground and seems to exert control over Deckard, but eventually the men, Tyrell and Deckard, assign her a subordinate place, as they banish her from their conversation, that is to say *their* male discourse.

16 The second scene that seems crucial for reading Rachael as a femme fatale is the rape scene in Deckard’s apartment. This scene reveals in how far Rachael becomes Grossmann’s projection of male desires and also fears. Jermyn argues that Deckard’s violent behavior towards Rachael is “a desperate effort ... to reinscribe his masculinity”: after all, it was Rachael who saved Deckard from Leon by killing him with a pistol shot through his head (166). Deckard’s rape attempt can therefore be read as a recovery of his phallic power, for in the preceding scene it was Rachael, as opposed to Deckard, who possessed the phallus. She shot Leon with a gun, which can be read as a symbolic act of exerting penetrative power. Although Rachael might have saved Deckard, it could also be argued that she has unmanned him by reversing the traditional roles of *savior* (Rachael) and *damsel in distress* (Deckard). Thus, in my reading, Rachael puts into question Deckard’s masculinity and thereby becomes fatal and terrifying in his eyes. This reading of her prompts him to man himself again which results in a rape-like scene. Rachael is devalued by Deckard’s sadistic exertion of sexual control over her (Mulvey 14). Similarly, Deckard over-values Rachael when he objectifies her and turns her into something “reassuring rather than dangerous” (ibid.). When Rachael starts playing the piano and composes her hair, she figures as Mulvey’s visual spectacle causes a break in the coherent diegesis (11f.) The scene’s sole function is to arouse (physical) desire in Deckard: as he moves towards her, he leans in and starts kissing her neck. After his attempt to kiss her on the mouth, Rachael heads for the door to leave, but is harshly stopped by Deckard who pushes her against the wall only a few seconds later. Deckard then literally projects his desires on Rachael, for he dictates phrases like “Kiss me” and “I want you” to her and she repeats them to him (*Blade Runner*, 1:05:48-1:09:40). Hence, he scripts Rachael as his male fantasy of a femme fatale having access to her sexuality and playing it out actively, even though in actuality she remains passive and simply follows his orders. I would argue that rape is not too strong a term here, for Deckard’s direct physical needs overpower Rachael’s clear,

performative no, reflected in her attempt to leave. Deckard violently prevents her from leaving his flat, whilst her overt uneasiness and sobbing do not stop him from putting dirty/sweet talk in her mouth. If Rachael, in *Blade Runner*, “embod[ies] a more sensitive vision of humanity than its humans”, then she can be assumed to have desires of her own which Deckard ignores and violates (Jermyn 162). The main problem with this scene is that Deckard replaces his desires with Rachael’s and when she does not comply with his femme fatale fantasies, he literally constructs her relative to what she represents for him. He devalues Rachael by ignoring her clear no and simultaneously over-values her by fetishizing her as his femme fatale.

17 Contrariwise, the scene above suggests that Rachael is sexually inexperienced or as Jermyn puts it even “asexual or sexually naïve”, bordering on “frigid” (167-68). This analysis is limited, since Jermyn seems to equate the right to say no with sexual naivety. However, the notion that apparently she has “to learn ‘desire’ in the film”, can be used as an argument to also put her in the category of the redeemer (167). Above that, Douglas Kellner, Flo Leibowitz, and Michael Ryan describe her as a typical *good woman* in their diagnostic critique of *Blade Runner*: “Rach[a]el, fulfills the common male fantasy of the completely pliant woman who serves all a man's needs,” and even rescues him from death (par. 18). The original version of *Blade Runner*, released in 1982, contains an obvious happy ending: as a romantic couple, Deckard and Rachael are able to escape into nature (par. 20). With Rachael, Deckard is capable of leaving behind the dark and polluted city of L.A. and can find his peace in the safe haven of a natural, pastoral space, as described by Place (62) Like in film noir, it is the non-violent, non-sexual woman, namely Rachael, who eventually becomes romantically involved with the male protagonist and survives (in this special case as the sole replicant). In conclusion, Rachael starts out as a determined femme fatale, but then accepts her role as submissive redeemer or ‘good woman’. Her survival is her reward: Rachael submits to Deckard, whereas Zhora and Pris have to pay with their lives for not doing so.

18 Unlike Rachael, Zhora exclusively performs the role of a fatal woman. The viewer’s first encounter with Zhora is Bryant’s description of her as a “Beauty and the Beast” type belonging to an “Off-World kick murder squat” (*Blade Runner*, 0:14:05-0:14:12). This first description of Zhora already provides the viewer with a sufficient characterization of her: as a combat model she is highly dangerous and deadly, she is also classified as beautiful and as is shown later, she works as a night club dancer. The scene in Bryant’s office already anticipates Zhora’s later representation as a destructive femme fatale.

19 In the first scene where she is really shown, Deckard follows her to her dressing room pretending to be a member of an artist federation. Zhora is presented as eroticized, carrying a snake (symbol of sin) around her neck, only wearing heels, a bikini-like top, panties and being sprayed all over with glitter. Her transparent coat implies her to-be-looked-at-ness. As she seems to be a public object of the male gaze, it could be argued that she has access to her sexuality and knows how to seduce and please men as well as herself. As the scene goes on, she takes a shower, bids Deckard to dry her, only to subsequently knock him down and strangle him. However, she does not succeed at strangling Deckard, for she is interrupted by some fellow dancers and therefore has to flee (*Blade Runner*, 0:50:17-0:53:02). In this scene, Zhora first seduces and distracts Deckard by undressing and letting him dry her, meaning that she uses her sexuality as a part of her fighting strategy, and then changes to actual fighting by hitting and strangling Deckard. Zhora's sexual side is paired with her destructive side and she nearly succeeds at literally *destroying* the man. This combination of sexual seduction with an actual exercise of violence renders Zhora as a dually threatening femme fatale. Valerie Su-Lin Lee concludes quite insightfully: "Having Zhora attack ferociously within this sexualised context effectively associates female sexuality with savage violence, marking it as perverse and terrifying" (par. 3).

20 Nonetheless, Zhora's unmanning and near-destruction of Deckard through sexuality and traditionally unfeminine violence is treated as a transgression in *Blade Runner* and thus punished. When Deckard is able to shoot down Zhora, she crashes through multiple windows "in slow-motion" and finally drops down dead, being "reduced to ... an inanimate object" (Wee, par. 3). Like Phyllis Dietrichson, Zhora is ultimately punished, i.e. murdered, by the patriarchal discourse of the film, for she threatens a man, even a member of the Symbolic Order, both sexually and violently.

21 The first staging of Pris seems to refer implicitly to a comment by Place that "[t]he dark woman is comfortable in the word of cheap dives, shadowy doorways and mysterious settings" (53). She emerges from a dark environment, making her way through a street belonging to a rather bad or shady neighborhood and eventually hides between garbage bags. Seemingly, Pris seems to be familiar with the dark and mysterious sides of L.A. The subsequent encounter with J.F. Sebastian, a genetic engineer who works at the Tyrell Corporation, can be termed a planned seduction: Pris plays the role of the innocent, scared and in her own words "lost" little girl in order to get access to Sebastian, as Roy and Leon have previously figured out that he is an acquaintance of Tyrell and knows how to contact him. Her determined face at the end of the scene reveals her real femme fatale-like nature,

that is to say to intentionally behave in a manner that enchants Sebastian (*Blade Runner*, 0:34:51-0:37:47). It is also telling that Sebastian's encounter with Pris eventually becomes fatal to him and brings forth his destruction: if Pris had not *seduced* him, he would not have brought Roy to Tyrell and Roy would not have killed both of them. This means that for Sebastian Pris acts as the deadly fatal woman who first charms him and then thereby enables his death.

22 As in Zhora's case, Pris's transgressions (her destruction of Sebastian and her attempted destruction of Deckard) are also punished in the end. When Deckard enters the Bradbury building, he becomes involved in a fight with Pris (*Blade Runner*, 1:27:14-1:29:51). In this scene, Pris hides from Deckard pretending to be one of Sebastian's dolls and firstly adopts a static position. As Deckard starts inspecting her, she suddenly attacks him and is "shown clamping Deckard's head between her thighs, presenting a sexually suggestive image" (Wee, par. 5). This image is sexually suggestive, for it more or less visually links deadliness and female sexuality: whilst Deckard is nearly killed, he is in the immediate vicinity of Pris's lap and thus her vagina. The scene continues with sexual undertones, as Pris *penetrates* Deckard's nostrils with her fingers and thus undermines the heteronormative role allocation of man as *penetrator* and woman as *penetrated*. These two transgressions that call male supremacy into question are, however, rendered inoperative: eventually, Deckard is able to shoot Pris and two bullets strike her in the region of her genitalia, meaning that he symbolically puts an end to the assumed perils of her sexuality. Like a classic femme fatale, Pris first exerts power over a man and even unmans him, just to be killed in the end so that the power she expressed before is undermined. Conclusively, as Wee argues about Zhora and Pris, "these female characters are violently punished with the death sentence for transgressing social laws and boundaries" by inhabiting the roles of typical femmes fatales (par. 10).

23 In this paper, I attempted to shed light on the fact that *Blade Runner's* portrayal of women refers to the general portrayal of women in film noir. In order to prove this, I have first outlined how women are represented in film noir and then I have applied my findings to *Blade Runner*. In film noir, women are usually assigned a subordinate place in the Symbolic Order or they are placed outside of it, for they remain mysterious and threatening from a male viewpoint. What defines them the most is their sexuality often interpreted as dangerous and destructive to maleness, but however it is their access to their own sexuality which helps them to actively exert control over men. The dangerous and destructive woman described above, was termed *femme fatale* in discourses on film noir: she can be viewed as an independent and strong woman who uses her *sexuality as weapon* to bring about the downfall or actual

destruction of a man. She is a mobile woman, controlling camera movement and transgressing the boundaries of traditionally female, i.e. passive, places by becoming initiative and threatening male supremacy, symbolically through seducing men and literally by firing at them with a gun, as in *Double Indemnity*. However, her transgressive behavior is punished in the end in order to re-stabilize patriarchal power, either marking men as passive again in some way or by murdering them. What is more, the femme fatale can be seen as a male fantasy, for the male hero projects his desires and fears on her. Conversely, the redeemer re-integrates the male hero into a stable world and becomes his safe and submissive haven.

24 In *Blade Runner*, all of the women are replicants, meaning embodiments of the non-human Other. Thus, they are assigned a place outside the Symbolic Order and are therefore persecuted by the law-keeper Deckard, a so-called blade runner. Rachael first behaves like a strong femme fatale, boldly facing and challenging Deckard, but later submits to him and accepts her place as his passive lover. She is also a projection of male fears and desires, for Deckard dominates her to reaffirm himself of his masculinity and creates her as his own sexually expressive femme fatale. Zhora and Pris can be read as seductive/sexual and also literally dangerous, for they exercise violence, femme fatales. Like the femmes fatales of film noir, they nearly initiate the destruction of a man and are punished for their supposedly unfeminine, active actions in brutal death scenes. In conclusion, like most film noirs, *Blade Runner* presents women as enigmatic, but renders their sexuality destructive.

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