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Gendered (Re)Visions

Constructions of Gender in Audiovisual Media

In cooperation with Stefanie Hoth

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Gender in Audiovisual Media: Introduction

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media have often been accused of perpetuating gender stereotypes and of confronting viewers time and again with outdated role models and rigid, binary concepts of masculinity and femininity.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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

10 PRESS. *Women Watching Television*. 6.

11 GRIFFITHS. "Gender and Stereotyping." 97.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

14 HUMM. *Feminism and Film*. 3.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

25 WILLIS. *High Contrast*. 120.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

29 JONES. "Gender and Queerness." 109.

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

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

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Part I: Gaze – Body – Voice

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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