Final Honours Proposal

Research Topic
My research will investigate popular contemporary television examples of a relationship triangle that occurs between three workplace colleagues: a high-level professional male, a low-level professional female, and a mid-to-high level female. The high-level male and low-level female engage in a cross-class romantic relationship, and the mid-to-high level female acts a work spouse to the male, and as a mentor to the female.

I selected this topic based on my personal investment in these characters: I want to understand why I, as a feminist, derive pleasure from and identify with the female characters in these triangles. With that in mind, I will approach this thesis from a theoretical position as a third-wave feminist: “we are under no illusions that [television] in contemporary culture is primarily feminist ... it is necessary to address [pop culture], to develop a reading practice that attends to its contradictions in content, in its role in our lives, and in its attitudes towards feminism” (Johnson, 2007, p.20). I chose to analyze triangulated relationships versus single characters because it allows for examination of how those involved prioritize career, romance, friendship, and mentorship, and how those decisions impact the group dynamic.

Data Set
I will engage in a semiotic analysis of three instances of this triangle: Mad Men (AMC), Grey’s Anatomy (ABC), and The Good Wife (CBS). Each program features this triangle as a significant story arc. From Mad Men, I will examine the triangle between Megan Calvet (Jessica Pare), Don Draper (Jon Hamm), and Peggy Olsen (Elizabeth Moss). From Grey’s Anatomy I will examine the triangle between Cristina Yang (Sandra Oh), Owen Hunt (Kevin McKidd), and Teddy Altman (Kim Raver). From The Good Wife, I will examine the triangle between Alicia Florrick (Julianna Margulies), Will Gardner (Josh Charles), and Diane Lockeart (Christine Baranski).

Research Questions
My research will ask:

1) how is the triangle encoded to result in an oppositional reading by separatist feminist media critics, and a negotiated reading by visual pleasure libertarian media critics? and
2) what do these encodings reflect about the current state of female working professional characters in the post-network television era?
Methodology and Theoretical Framework
My methodology and theoretical framework are closely tied, as I will use a cultural studies approach to semiotics to perform my analysis. Semiotics will provide the means of determining the structural elements that define the triangle, while cultural studies will provide insight into the ideologies that underlie it, and how audiences decode and reproduce those meanings through discourse. This insight will result in conclusions about the dominant-hegemonic codes underlying the texts, and potential negotiable and oppositional audience readings. My cultural studies approach to semiotics is predominantly guided by the work of John Fiske, and Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding.

To understand why this triangle can produce both oppositional and negotiable feminist readings, the theoretical subcultures that produce those readings must be defined and understood. The first theoretical subculture, classified as “separatist feminist media critics” by Merri Lisa Johnson, oppose the triangle because underlying it are ideologies that bind women into the oppressive structures of patriarchy and capitalism. This group aligns closely with hegemony theorists whose work is grounded in the work of Antonio Gramsci. The second theoretical subculture, classified as “visual pleasure libertarian media critics” by Johnson, negotiate with the ideology they read in television programs to interpret the narrative in ways that allow them to derive pleasure from viewing them.

Literature Review
My literature review will first explore the context of the shows as “professional woman dramas” within the post-network era to provide insight on how the triangles fit within the historical scope. Next, I will review existing scholarly and non-scholarly (web-published recaps and analysis) analysis of the television shows and public conversations of the television shows. This will provide examples of existing dominant and negotiable readings of the programs. Lastly, a discussion of relationship triangles as narrative devices (primarily using René Girard’s theory of triangular desire) will examine how triangulated desire is defined and enacted.

Analysis and Discussion
My analysis will begin with a diachronic and synchronic semiotic analysis of the triangles to identify similarities and patterns. Those findings will then be analyzed through the lenses of my two chosen feminist theoretical subcultures. Following my analysis, I will discuss the implications of these findings for future iterations of this triangle, and make recommendations for expanding on my research.

Project Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction
- Research questions
- Overview of dataset
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework
- Semiotics and Cultural Studies
- Separatist Feminist Media Critics
- Visual Pleasure Libertarian Media Critics

Chapter 3: Literature Review
- Shows in Context
- Existing Analysis of Programs (Scholarly and non)
- Triangular Narrative Structure

Chapter 4: Analysis
- Methodology Outline
- Diachronic and Synchronic Findings
- Oppositional Readings: Separatist Feminist Media Critics
- Negotiable Readings: Visual Pleasure Libertarian Media Critics

Chapter 5: Discussion
- Implications of the findings for characters to come
- Future research recommendations

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Project Schedule

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<td>Oct 2nd 2014</td>
<td>Final proposal due</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 16th 2014</td>
<td>Committee selection finalized</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oct 31st 2014</td>
<td>Literature review &amp; theoretical framework draft due</td>
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<td>Nov 15th 2014</td>
<td>Methodology draft due</td>
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<td>Analysis draft due</td>
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<td>Jan 5th 2015</td>
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Reading List

Cultural Studies and semiotics


Feminist theory


**Existing analysis**


**Context**


**Triangles**