

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 Lockhart (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 Rene 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

Oct 2nd 2014	Final proposal due
Oct 16th 2014	Committee selection finalized
Oct 31st 2014	Literature review & theoretical framework draft due
Nov 15th 2014	Methodology draft due
Dec 15th 2014	Analysis draft due
Jan 5th 2015	Full draft due

Reading List

Cultural Studies and semiotics

- Berger, Arthur Asa. "Semiotic analysis". *Media analysis techniques* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004. Print.
- Fiske, John. The semiotics of television. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2.2 (1985): 176-183. Web.
- Fiske, John. Television: Polysemy and popularity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3.4 (1986): 391-408. Web.
- Fiske, John. British cultural studies and television. *Channels of discourse, reassembled: Television and contemporary criticism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Print.
- Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. Florence KY: Routledge, 1987. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding". *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*. Florence KY: Routledge, 1980. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular." *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. 72-80. Print.
- Seiter, Ellen. Semiotics, structuralism, and television. *Channels of discourse, reassembled: Television and contemporary criticism*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. Print.

Feminist theory

- Brundson, Charlotte, and Lynn Spigel, eds. *Feminist Television Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York NY: Open University Press, 2008. Print.
- hooks, bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York NY: Routledge, 1994. Kindle edition.
- Irigaray, Luce. *This sex which is not one*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985. Print.
- Johnson, Merri Lisa. "Ladies love your box: The rhetoric of pleasure and danger in feminist television studies." *Third wave feminism: Jane puts it in a box*. Ed. Merri Lisa Johnson. London: I.B.Tauris & Co., 2007. 1-28. Print.
- Modleski, Tara. *Feminism without women : culture and criticism in a "postfeminist" age*. New York NY: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Press, Andrea. *Women watching television : gender, class, and generation in the American television experience*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991. Print.

Existing analysis

Burkehead, Cynthia. *Grace Under Pressure: Grey's Anatomy Uncovered*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2008. Print.

Cranz, Alex. *The Good Wife* recaps. FemPop Media, 5 Mar 2013. 1 Oct 2014.

Edgerton, Gary R. *Mad Men: Dream Comes True TV*. London GBR: I.B. Tauris, 2010. Web.

Engstrom, Erika. *Mad Men and Working Women: Feminist Perspectives on Historical Power, Resistance and Otherness*. New York: Peter Lang, 2014. Print.

Feasey, Rebecca. "Hospital Drama: Reassurance, Anxiety and the Doctor-Hero." *Masculinity and Popular Television*. Edinburgh GBR: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. 68-79. Web.

Harris, Scarlett. "Cristina Yang as Feminist". *The Scarlett Woman*. 11 Jul 2011. Web. 30 Sep 2014.

Inness, Sherrie A. "Raising the Bar: Brilliant Women Lawyers from Ann Kelsey to Miranda Hobbes." *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.

Mad Men category. *Bitch Flicks*. Bitch Flicks, 2008-2014. Web. 1 Oct 2014.

Mlawski, Shana. "Why strong female characters are bad for women." *Overthinking It*, 18 Aug 2008. Web. 30 Sep 2014.

O'Neill, Erin K. "Women, professional ambition, and 'Grey's Anatomy'." *Bitch Flicks*. Bitch Flicks, 27 Feb 2014. Web. 1 Oct 2014.

Context

Dow, Bonnie. *Prime-time feminism: Television, media culture, and the women's movement since 1970*. Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. Print.

Lotz, Amanda D. *Redesigning women: Television after the network era*. Chicago IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Print.

Press, Andrea and Terry Stratham. "Work, family, and social class in television images of women: prime-time television and the construction of postfeminism." *Women and Language* 16.2 (Fall 1993): 7. Web.

Triangles

Girard, Rene. *Deceit, desire, and the novel*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Gender Asymmetry and Erotic Triangles." *Feminisms REDUX: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndl. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.