

Ph.D Theses

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THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN:  
FEMALE ROLE TYPES IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN TELEVISION SERIES

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## **I. INITIAL SUPPOSITIONS**

The starting point of the dissertation is that nowadays television series are undergoing a significant transformation, while the number and significance of the main female character in these are spectacularly increasing at the same time. My goal was to examine contemporary American fiction television series in terms of what role models they offer to female viewers, and how they view contemporary women. According to my thesis, the seemingly feminist goals—which come from second-wave feminism—do not prevail because they are continually undermined by an almost undetected postfeminist logic. Postfeminism sets the goals of feminism as fulfilled, exceeded, and it presents qualities as desirable for women that have been criticized by classical feminism. In exploring the scope of the problem, I proceed along two significant theoretical frameworks, these are the history of television series and the critique of postfeminism, which together determine the corpus.

## **II. THESES AND CHAPTERS**

For the study, I examine the female lead role models presented in different themes and genres of series, thereby what concepts of femininity they represent. Each chapter is concerned with television series' different genres - situation comedy and women's series (II.), procedural crime dramas (III.), series which present witches (IV.), superhero series (V.) and queer series (VI.) – embedded in the history of series required for the corpus of a given chapter. The chapters show that the issue of femininity and family — especially in a postfeminist logic — is so intertwined that the two are almost inconceivable without each other.

Chapter I presents the two theoretical frameworks of the dissertation in a detailed way to provide a comprehensive picture of the transformations affecting the television series and of the postfeminist cultural logic. From the dissertation's objectives, the presentation of the constantly changing media space is not negligible, in which the changes related to streaming services and new media have key role. The peculiarities of the production, distribution and consumption of television series have been in a constant state of change since the 1980s and 1990s, and we can see even more rapid changes today. The proliferation of the use of smart devices, the multiplication of the screen, strongly transforms the viewing habits of series, and the viewer becomes a consumer who shapes his or her own schedule. While previously the schedule significantly defined the channel's image and the viewing habits (Sarah Kozloff), in the age of streaming this has been transformed to this: the highlighted content offered to the viewer is determined by the viewer's preferences and by the data collected about the user. In

the field of distribution, you can still find episodes casted weekly, especially for streaming platforms that have a television channel, while the typical strategy of streaming providers is seasonal publishing, which encourages users to binge-watch, that is, to consume the season in a relatively short period. This has also transformed the production, as episodes must be finished at the same time for the whole season's distribution, whereas for television series distributed weekly, production is drawn out until almost the end of the season. This recentness of production and distribution deprives the characteristic of seriality, that the creators can shape the content with regard to the reactions of the recipient. The narrative structure has been changing since the 1980s due to the competitive situation brought about by the emerging cable channels, which led to a qualitative shift in the visual and narrative characteristics of television series. Jason Mittell linked this to the emergence of narrative complexity, resulting in a blurred boundary between serial and episodic series, a more committed and active viewer, and the appearance of hidden references and threads spanning through seasons.

By critique of postfeminism, I examine the postfeminist logic in which a feminist and a postfeminist rhetoric simultaneously operate. Postfeminism, while proclaiming on the surface the female power and equality important in second-wave feminism, maintains the patriarchal order by making traditional female roles, feminine beauty and sexuality that is ideal for the male gaze, desirable and achievable for women. In postfeminism, all this goes unnoticed by the fact that the patriarchal male gaze no longer acts as an external force but has become internalized. The examined contemporary series show that the archetypes and women's images of feminist film theory are less relevant, the problems have transformed. At the same time, embedded in a post-feminist rhetoric, some feminist concepts and slogans return. Postfeminism sets femininity as a bodily feature, instead of objectifying it, it moves towards subjectification, emphasizes self-surveillance, self-monitoring, and self-discipline, focuses on individualism, choice and empowerment, revives the ideas of natural sexual difference, and shows culture as peculiarly sexualized (Rosalind Gill).

Chapter II presents the evolution of situation comedy series' history through the lens of family representation from nuclear to dysfunctional families and series featuring groups of friends as families. The family surroundings - especially in this genre - has been dominant in the series' narratives from the very beginning. I present its development on the basis of Jennifer Fogel, Richard Butsch, Jason Mittell and Gábor Krigler, highlighting the ideals and types that determine each era. Television is one of the important media of the twentieth century, which conveys various ideologies and cultural ideas to viewers not only through information and news

programs, but also in a more indirect way, namely through fictional television series. While these fictional series may seem to work along an escapist logic, that they may just be an easy pastime for those sitting in front of the TV, but the situation is not so simple, as television series also convey ideologies about the ideal family, what a woman and a man should be like, these images become part of our cultural imagination. Of course, the ideologies conveyed by fictional television series have changed over time, but as outlined in the dissertation, they serve to maintain and pass on the institution of the family since their first appearance. One of the main thoughts in the first chapter is related to this, with the inclusion of Butsch and Charo Lacalle, who examine the relationship between the families seen in the fictional series and the real ones. The other arc of the chapter examines the emergence of family constructs in the *Big Little Lies* from the critique of postfeminism, where images of femininity and the ideals they represent are examined through female characters, and by examining them together, we find the incarnation of Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's concept of the post-familial family in the series. As the analysis of the series exemplifies, the roles of femininity and motherhood are strongly intertwined, the two are unthinkable without each other, a condition for the characters to thrive is to find the right balance between their maternal and female roles. The problems of second-wave feminism, like a woman could not leave the private sphere in public, and that sexual attractiveness is threatening at the same time, are no longer valid. These problems have transformed, and instead, in line with the logic of postfeminism, it has become important to maintain a state of balance between the femininity and motherhood.

Chapter III examines the popular pair of the female detective-male consultant seen in procedural crime series. The world of crime-themed series is still dominated by patriarchal narratives and male investigators. The pairing that proliferated in the 2000s shows an active, action-ready female investigator and a male counselor who comes from outside of the system, and this implies a twist in sexuality. It can be observed already in the *X-files*, that in relation to the characteristics of the main characters sex and gender intersect, namely the feminine and masculine traits are interchanged between the sexes. The woman is rigid, rational, intelligent, determined and she stands for the law, the man is spontaneous, characterized by freedom, creativity, intuition and he is an outlaw. The dynamics of the team led by the successful female detective will be upset when the man arrives, and the counselor becomes the main crimesolver. In the study series like *The Mentalist* and *Castle* are highlighted. Analyzing from classical feminism, it is definitely a positive change that female characters are in role of the detective, she represents the law, leads her team and has an active gaze – while previously the ideal woman

was passive and gazed, or appeared who gazes, but in that case, she had to be punished for that in the story. In terms of the power's hierarchy the woman is above the man by law, which is also a change to be celebrated. At the same time, the character of the female detective in these series is not without problems, and in examining her transformation we come across with the mode postfeminist logic operates. The possibilities for the detective's feminist reading are undermined by incarnations of postfeminism such as making the female body more attractive over the seasons, placing the woman in a dependency relationship with the man, often putting the man's interests above the law, and returning the woman to the family where she will be a caring woman and mother. The patriarchal nature of the power balance is further illustrated by the difference of the two protagonists' mindset. Female protagonists become successful in their profession by instilling in to the fundamentally masculine role of the detective, which means, she becomes a rule-following women who masters the expected linear mindset (which as Sandra M. Gilbert showed was male writers' and women were excluded from this). At the same time, however, we can observe George P. Landow's idea of hypertext in the studied male heroes, because they already think "outside the box", their different way of thinking and associative logic highlights them, which suggests that in the network culture a network-like thinking is the most useful way.

Chapter IV examines series featuring witches. This chapter illustrates most vividly that how postfeminism builds on the feminist characteristics and slogans, in a postfeminist discourse these work to rewrite the woman into a patriarchal order. The figure of the witch plays an important role in certain discourses of second-wave feminism. On the one hand, the witch is a figure of resistance to the oppression of women, in this notion women who lived differently from social rules, such as in women's communities, were considered witches. On the other hand, their connection to nature is emphasized, in which the figure is a marker of female reproductiveness and female knowledge about nature. In this chapter, I examine television series in which the witch's character is associated with charm and magic, the protagonists correspond to the female ideals of their age, and have a power that they must keep in line. These series are characterized by feminist slogans such as emancipation, solidarity, sisterhood, matriarchy, female power, punishment of hegemonic masculinity, while the presence of postfeminism is shown by glamor, ideal feminine appearance, female beauty, choice, domestication, the presentation of female sexuality and enrollment in traditional femininity and patriarchy. In the series since the 1990s, such as *Sabrina*, *The Teenage Witch* and *Charmed*, feminist and postfeminist rhetoric work together to undermine the former.

Chapter V examines female characters in a mainly patriarchal genre, the superhero series, where women heroes' appearance is long overdue. The forerunner of the superpowered female protagonists was the *Wonder Woman* series, that cannot be considered unproblematically as a feminist series, because of the common images depicting a weak, passive woman in which the woman's appearance connote Laura Mulvey's to-be-looked-at-ness. A significant shift in the genre occur in 2010s, when both the number of superhero series and of the female characters multiply and comes the era of superhero universes. In the universe era, however, female heroes are either seen as a female counterpart of the male hero, which means she is in dependence with the man, or their sexuality is the subject of the male gaze, or as a figure of the unruly woman who has to be restrained by the male hero. From the examined superhero series *Jessica Jones* made for the streaming platform, carries real feminist potential with a number of characters representing different femininity, and with the protagonist's figure, who has a female gaze thanks to her job as private investigator, has spectacular physical strength and who is independent. The series demonizes hegemonic masculinity and rejects both the possibility of a postfeminist idyll and the classic female role.

Chapter VI examines queer series that relates to women's series in term of the construction of gender and family representations. In the 1990s queer characters appeared in prominent roles, but mainly in situational comedies and their portrayals remained stereotypical. In the 2000s series were made specifically for queer audiences, which brought taboo topics into the narrative, but these were not successful among mainstream audiences. In the streaming era I detect significant changes in *Sense8*, *AJ and the Queen*, *Tales of the City* and *Pose*. The analyzed series draw attention to the twistability and social construction of gender categories. The *Sense8* offers an opportunity to interpret viewer identification as a queer to sensitize the viewer for the topic. *AJ and the Queen* perform the deconstruction of the gender categories with drag performances and cross-dressing. The *Tales of the City* emphasize concept of queer as umbrella by lining up a number of characters with different gender and sexual orientation. On the one hand *Pose* represents the concept of Beck-Gernsheim's postfamilial family by introducing ball culture and transforming the concept of mother and house, on the other hand, it problematizes the status and femininity of transgender women. The chapter also attempts to define the concept of queer series in contemporary streaming era. Nowadays, in order for a cultural product to earn the queer label, it has to address queer themes, feature queer actors, and both content producers and actors must belong to a featured queer group – this makes authenticity a criterion.

### III. RESULTS

The aim of the dissertation is to examine the female role models offered by contemporary American fiction series in a changing media environment from a historical perspective as well as from the critique of postfeminism. The inclusion of postfeminism's critique was justified by the fact that classical feminist theory like the woman is seen as a subject of male gaze in a passive role is no longer valid in the examined corpus. Instead, the female characters are strong, fit and ready to act, transcend from archetypal portrayals of second-wave feminism and provide many positions for female viewers to identify with. The postfeminist logic works almost imperceptibly in these series, oppose to feminist objectives and leads the woman back into patriarchal society by setting it up as the woman's own choice and making the male gaze internalized. In the examination of queer series, the criterion interpreted as authenticity also incorporates a theoretical framework and critical position related to grievance politics and to struggles for recognition. It is a relevant, contemporary phenomenon that can also be observed in the case of female protagonists. According to this an inclusive and an exclusive discourse operate simultaneously in the age of streaming. The former relating to the target audience of the series in the sense that what was made for marginalized audiences nowadays requires a wider audience to sensitize viewers. At the same time, a kind of exclusivity emerges in production which I have characterized as authenticity. Exclusivity approaches the topics and problems of the presented groups that these can only be articulated by the members of the given group, which entails an exclusionary discourse. Like for queer, nowadays the condition for a series to be named as women is to present female themes, female actors and be made with female director, creator, executive producer. And these changes are likely to transform more radically the world of series than before.

### IV. PUBLICATIONS

Kothencz-Török Katalin (2019): Az út *Jessica Jones*-ig. Feminista potenciál és megvalósulás a szuperhőssorozatokban. [The Way to *Jessica Jones*. Feminist potential and fulfilment in superhero series] *Apertúra*, ősz. URL: <https://www.apertura.hu/2019/osz/kothencz-torok-az-ut-jessica-jones-ig-feminista-potencial-es-megvalosulas-a-szuperhossorozatokban/>

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## I. CONFERENCES

December, 2016. ZOOM3: Nemek és Etnikumok Terei a magyar filmben. Debrecen.

„Nemiség és tér kapcsolata a *Kút* és az *Ernelláék Farkaséknál* című filmekben” [Relation of sexuality and space in *Kút* and *Ernelláék Farkaséknál*]

September, 2017. NYIM 13.: Nők és Hatalom. Szeged.

„A posztfamiliáris család megjelenése a sorozatokban” [The Postfamilial family in television series]

September, 2018. NYIM 14: Gender és szolidaritás: a feminista kritika és önszerveződés újragondolása. Szeged.

„Boszorkák a tévében” [Witches in television series]

May, 2019. Screen Cultures workshop. Szeged

„Superheroes and Supernaturally Powerful Women”

October, 2019. NYIM 15: A feminista kritika és a metszetelmélet. Szeged.

„Queer karakterek és a család reprezentációi a sorozatokban” [Queer characters' and family's representation in series]