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The straight guy who sleeps solely with men– A deep semiotic analysis of hegemonic parameters in the American television serial *Empire*

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Title: THE STRAIGHT MAN WHO SLEEPS SOLELY WITH MEN

- A deep semiotic analysis of hegemonic parameters in the American television serial *Empire*

The study that follows is a deep semiotic analysis meant to shed a light on which ideologies the serial represents and communicates to its audience. In my analysis I have used the terms homonormativity and homosubversivity to divide the different discursive codes and thus see if it was the former or the latter that the production of *Empire* preferred. These terms have been used in relation to hegemony, ideology and discourse to fully grip the connection between production and reception.

The study consists of an analysis of the overall narrative of the serial in its entity with focus on the gay character Jamal, in relation to John Fiske's concept of *reality, representation and ideology*, and then a deeper semiotic analysis of three strategically chosen scenes. This division was done simply so that I could perceive the show both in terms of representation and semiotic signs, but also the interrelations between production and audience which gives the show its meaning and ideological power.

My analyses showed that *Empire* is an epithet of hegemony as a moving equilibrium. While the representation of the character Jamal as a gay man may resist homonormative rules in some ways, it reinforces it in others. The serial mostly incorporates homosexuality in the vicinity of heteronormative ideology, but prefers a discourse of homosexual superiority where masculine hegemony even in gay men, is the only way to achieve fair inclusion. The preference of masculinity is done on the expense of femininity.

Key words: homosubversivity, representation, hegemony, ideology, homonormativity, heteronormativity, semiotics, discourse

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A lot has happened in the Western media since homosexuality was deemed a criminal offence. The wave of equality for LGBT people is said to have begun at Stonewall, 1969¹, and has since spread like rings on the water to the parts of the world we call the west. Although the Stonewall riotsⁱ cannot be described as anything more than a group of people who decided that enough is enough; the following 46 years of increasing acceptance (and setbacks), of homosexuality is credited by many accounts to the media.

A rise of visibility in television is one factor for raised tolerance, an increase, which is a sign of the reconstruction of dominant hegemony, in British Cultural Studies, this rise of equality for a subordinate minority is the result of a struggle between ruling hegemony and counter hegemony². Television is where the struggle between different discourses in contemporary culture occurs. This is where hegemony is defied or consented to.

During the 80s rule of Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK, television produced a lot of media text that is said to have reproduced dominant ideologies, depicting the “white heterosexual man” as the ruling sex while women, homosexual men, and other groups defying set gender roles were represented as something negative and submissive.

Today there is not much controversy in representing a gay character on television, but there is a stigma to the attributes of that character. Instead of diminishing LGBT worth with open homophobia contemporary television incorporates and limits homosexual behaviour within the heteronormative ideology. This consent to ruling hegemony is dubbed homonormativity, and is “centred on the construction of an acceptable homosexuality based on its adherence to heteronormativity...”³. The dominant ideologies pumped out by television are, at the very core, still heteronormative. The view of

¹ Fritscher & Hemry, 2008

² Kellner, 1995:31

³ De Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira: 2013:1477

homosexuals as deviants, effeminate weaklings, and sexual predators as Connell describes in his piece on masculinities⁴ may have altered but not with acceptance towards subcultural lifestyles, but a form of homosexuality that is similar to heterosexuality.

Empire, which is an American television serial from 2015, has been met with hail from LGBT advocates and resounding negative remarks from conservatives: a clear sign of a show with controversial attributes.

One of the main characters who is a central parameter in my empirical investigation around television and hegemony in relation to LGBT persons is the musical protégé, Jamal Lyon, who is not simply gay but also from an Afro-American family. Jamal is also a main character, in a relationship, and the intimacy of the couple is on-screen.

The features of Jamal's character mentioned above could be perceived as more controversial since the company who own the rights is the conservative channel FOX. The show had 9.9 million viewers its first episode, a number, which grew steadily and reached an unbelievable 17.5 million; plus a few million online streamers on the final episode. Crowning it one of the most watched first seasons on any channel since *Greys Anatomy*⁵.

I am doing an analysis of how *Empire* projects Jamal and his attributes and if that representation negotiates, struggles or conforms to general heteronormative rules of how a gay person behaves or acts.

As Dhaenens writes in his essay on the TV-show *Glee*; “non-normative gender and sexual identities, which may unsettle the privileged position of the heterosexual masculine man and the heterosexual feminine woman, are dismissed or subdued by institutions, practices, norms, and values that reify Heteronormativity”⁶.

There is a dominant ideological discourse on how the privileged heterosexual majority accepts, believes or wants homosexuals to act. It is easier to relate to a gay person if this person's wants, needs, and position in life resembles that of ones own; but a show that projects a gay man chained

⁴ Connells, 1995

⁵ <http://deadline.com/2015/03/empire-finale-ratings-high-fox-danny-strong-1201395097/>

⁶ Dhaenens, 2012:306

in heteronormative norms and behaviour, is a show, that reproduces current heterosexist ideology.

The reason for me to perform this study is simply put because there is too much focus on the visibility of LGBT characters in media studies and not enough critical analysis of the codes which together produce certain kinds of ideology, codes that are made to favour heterosexist discourses.

The semiotic signs in *Empire*, transgress into other television series as well. If the hidden, naturalized codes in one series can be read as hostile to effeminate men; then these codes will most likely be spotted in other television shows as well. Thus a study of a narrow empirical data from one series also exploits the ideology television favours as an entity: as a communicator of cultural meaning. As Kellner argues, television “articulate specific ideological positions and help reproduce dominant forms of social power, serving the interests of societal domination, or of resistance to the dominant forms of culture and society...⁷”

1.1 Previous Research And Background

1.1.1 Television as Ideology

Many have done studies on how television operates as a tool for the reproduction of hegemony. Television, according to media and cultural researchers such as Douglas Kellner, Stuart Hall and John Fiske, is both constituted by and constitutive of larger social and political dynamics⁸, thus its effects on ideology should not be disregarded. For example, if characters on television and the makers of them consent to heteronormative rules, then that will further enhance them. A show is part of culture, and as such, a reproductional tool in which heterosexist ideology is reinforced.

But we also need to look further: at the relationship between owners, producers, writers and the audience.

⁷ Kellner, 1995:4

⁸ Kellner, 1995:5

Douglas Kellner's concept of Media Cultural Studies puts several artefacts of culture and ideologies next to each other and examines the negotiation between them. Kellner argues, that as we analyse representations of people on television we need to do so in relation to audience, political climate, socio-economics, ruling hegemony and so on. In his study of Rambo he sheds light on how Hollywood reinvented the ruling ideology of *Reaganism*⁹ to reproduce dominant line of thought: "popular cultural texts naturalize these positions and thus help mobilize consent to hegemonic political positions"⁹.

1.1.2 Femininity and Masculinity:

Feminist media studies is a very broad field, but the parts of it that are interesting for this study are the studies that show that representation in television often display women as less than men. A discourse based on the assumption that the female sex is weaker than the male sex, and also, that the different sexes are fundamentally divided. These differences are not biologically natural¹⁰, but part of a social and cultural construction in which the heterosexist ideology maintains female subordination.

Van Zoonen makes an example out of Julia D'accis study of the televised serial *Cagney & Lacey*. It was supposed to transfer the concept of the male working buddies onto a pair of female independent cops, a phenomenon that, in the 80s was unheard of. The screen writers, two dedicated feminists wanted to portray these women as *strong* and *capable*, but the broadcasting company told them that the characters did not appear "soft" or "feminine" enough¹¹. To air the series they had to negotiate with the company who did not think, presumably, about equal portrayal of women but a representation that would bring a lot of viewers. In other terms: the gender-defying narrative of the show had to be reigned in to suit dominant heterosexist ideology.

⁹ Kellner, 1995:59

¹⁰ Connell, 1996: 71-3

¹¹ Van Zoonen 1994:45

The inequality in the representation of women in relation to men transcends into the unequal representation of gay men. Women are represented as subordinate to men with emphasis on the feminine being of less worth than the masculine, which is similar to the favour given to heterosexual acting homosexuals rather than those characters that are gender-fluid. The effeminate characteristics of a man are constructed as something abnormal, defying the very core of heterosexist hegemony.

I drew a parallel above regarding female representation and gay representation and now I would like to draw another parallel. To study television as culture, means studying it with the mind-set that it is one of the keys with which ideological heteronormativity is maintained – that said; masculinity is a vital part of the struggle for dominance since male heterosexuals often constitute the dominant, while women and gay men constitute the subordinate who must either consent to the “natural” social order or be labelled abnormal or deviant.

1.1.3 Gay Media Studies

In a study by Jay Poole about queer representation in media, he describes in relation to queer representation within television that: “the so-called gay community is being called to action in the struggle for equality, with equality representing a replication of so-called straightness¹²”. This portrayal comes from the heteronormative rules society is structured around: where LGBT characters are simplified and pushed into a box that consists of heterosexual wants and needs.

In relation to gay representation there have been a lot of studies concerning the term homonormativity. A term which stands for the ability to pass off as straight with the help of conformity to dominant gender roles and a focus on monogamy and family¹³. These studies acknowledges the progress media culture has made in the visibility of LGBT characters but remain critical to how the heteronormative ideologies have shaped the idea of homosexual men as exclusively “straight” acting, conforming to dominant gender roles, and

¹² Poole, 2013:283

¹³ Stryker, 2008; Rosenfeld, 2009; Duggan, 2003

displaying a want for monogamy and marriage. Previous research of this sort also incorporates the important aspects of sex, gender, masculinity, ethnicity and class. Masculine behaviour is always preferred in a man above feminine behaviour.

Poole says in his analysis of the character Brian in *Queer as Folk*ⁱⁱⁱ, that “same-sex practices, remains rooted in hierarchical power structures that privilege the dominance ascribed to males despite the costs to those with presumably less power”¹⁴. Dominant heterosexist ideology, recreate the idea that effeminate behaviour correlates with subordination just as it favours the white male from the upper or middle class.

The studies focusing on the representation in television of gay men assimilating the attributes which does not fit within heterosexist discourse, uses similar theoretic framework as Kellner and Van Zoonen, but zooms in on the specific ways television character need to turn of the gas on their persona to fit an audience raised in a heterosexist ideology. To alter a characters voice, dressing him/her down, making the dialogue *straight* or avoid public displays of affection is the visible signs of homonormativity. As is the masculine body combined with a type of behavioural measures that adheres to heterosexual discourse.

To make a short summary of gay media studies; it is the critical analysis of gay representation on television as one portraying a cultural fiction of homosexuality and reproducing it as natural, the *truth*, while the people outside that fiction becomes even more marginalized.

1.1.4 The gap

Gay media studies, or queer studies, focus on the visible and thus, what the visible communicates. In a television series we might see a gay man in a relationship and the intimacy within that relationship. But what is harder to see is the underlying structure, which produce hegemony. This deep semiotic analysis has been done to an extent within general cultural studies and feminist studies but remains, not entirely, but mostly absent in studies concerned solely with the representation of gay men.

¹⁴ Poole, 2014:282

The studies on gay representation is also to focused on finding gay characters on television who resists homophobia but not enough criticism on who suffers from this resistance. The importance of doing a study that is critical not only to how gay men are represented but also put the representations into categories so that one might dissect what part of ruling ideology is resisted to and what part is consented to.

1.2 Purpose and research Questions:

I will assume, as Kellner did, that: Media Culture is (also) the site where battles are fought for the control of society¹⁵. The determination of my analysis is to analyse the layer beneath the controversy. At first glance we might assume a show to be a cultural defiant which represents the reality of homosexuality; the truth. But in order to fully understand how hegemony is maintained, we need to understand that there is no truth but the one we create. Just as power and dominance are not static, natural ways of society but given its natural essence by our consent. I want to show that even in the most contemporary television programs the representation of homosexuality still serve the dominant hegemony. Homonormative ideology may not be favoured at every turn and homosubversivity may sometimes be communicated. The question is what ideological rules will have to be reinforced to break homonormative representation? Homonormativity is the assimilation gay people undergo to fit into society or media, which is dominated by heterosexist discourses. Homosubversivity stands for the people or representations of people who does not. My purpose is to reveal the struggle between the normal and the abnormal in television put them in the context of culture and see if the abnormal, the homosubversive, is diminished to confine homosexuality within the frames of heteronormativity. And also see if when it is not conforming, the homosubversive character may have to resist on the expense of enforcing other dominant discourses.

¹⁵ Kellner, 1995:35

1. What kind of serial is *Empire* and how can its context of production and reception be described?
2. How is “gayness” constructed in the television serial *Empire*, in central segments focusing on the main character Jamal?
3. How does the struggle between homonormative and homosubversive representation in the series reflect contemporary ideological struggles around the representation of gay men?
4. Based on question 1 and 2; what aspects and representations in *Empire*, can be said to confirm, contradict, or create ambivalences around dominating ideas of normativity of relations and (hetero/homo)sexuality?

1.3 Boundaries

My empirical material is chosen by me strategically to get as much valid material to analyse as I can. The same can be said for my theories. I will use some of the methodological tools in Selby & Cowdery’s book *How to study television*, but not all of them. I exclude technical codes partly because of the lack of space and further because they do not bear too much relevance in this particular study.

The study I am doing is mostly about men, and how homosexual men are represented in television which means that there will not be that much analysis about women. Finally it should be noted that I am doing the semiotic analysis and that my results may differ from those of another researcher. Even though I will try to be objective and dissect the semiotic codes in relation to my theoretical framework, the presuppositions I have might show in the text. I am aware that I am studying an American television serial and that the ideology it reproduces might only be valid in that country. However, I would defend the generalizations of my analyses to transcend onto other western societies as well, since the homonormative core that stands for the assimilations of non-conforming attributes in gay men resembles that of say Sweden’s. Consequently the defiance of homonormativity in one country could be said to resemble the defiance in another.

1.4 Disposition

Chapter two will begin with a review of the theories and concepts that I have used in the analysis and final discussion and clarify the meaning of some important terms. In chapter three I will explain what methods I am applying, and how I am approaching my empirical material. Chapter four will answer my first research question, with an analysis of *Empire*'s ideological context, reception and production. Chapter five consists of the actual analysis and chapter six, the answers to my research inquiries and the final discussion.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

2.1 Ideology, Hegemony and Television:

Television is in modern society one of the places where the struggle for dominance takes place. Not by promoting an ideology created by the producers of programs, but to reproduce those that already exist. "Television does not cause identifiable effects in individuals; it does however work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others"¹⁶. Television, does not recreate reality but the dominant *sense* of reality. This *sense* of reality is constructed through the naturalization of some things over others. Such as heterosexuality over homosexuality.

I will dissect *Empire* to see how the character Jamal is represented to either reproduce or struggle against dominant hegemony.

We can argue that a television serial is trying to naturalize whatever "reality" it is representing. It could represent a woman and a man in different social boxes such as the male working externally from home and the woman cooking inside it. Through this the television series is reproducing a discourse in which the woman is confined to the domestic and the man to

¹⁶ Fiske, 2010:20

the public. Further representation could be that of a woman asking about her husband's day as she cooks, while he answers. This puts the husband in focus and his wife works as an enhancer to his knowledge. She asks, he answers. Ideologically this could refer to the man as a keeper of knowledge and the woman lacking it, strengthening the ideological code of patriarchy¹⁷.

The representation on television naturalizes social order but is never natural. The theories that are used to critically study media as culture agree that representation and content is created by someone and the natural occurrences is the product of what ideological codes the creator wants to present. Thus, television is ideology in the sense that it mirrors and produces the hegemonic structure, which exists outside of the screen.

John Fiske's theory divides the production of ideology into three levels, the first explaining reality: environment, speech, dress and so on; Representation: Editing, Lighting, music etcetera. These two types of codes, come together to predetermine a preferred meaning that supports a certain ideology¹⁸ - Ideology being the final level, which is constructed by the former two. The former two naturalize the characters and events that occur in a serial such as *Empire*, which in turn communicates ideological positions.

The term hegemony refers to a situation in which a provisional alliance of certain social groups can exert 'total social authority' over other subordinate groups, not simply by coercion or by the direct imposition of ruling ideas but by 'winning and shaping consent so that the power of the dominant classes appear both legitimate and natural¹⁹. Every human being exists within hegemony but may consent to or struggle against it. Just as television might do the same: or the opposite.

The climate of hegemony is not static but a moving equilibrium – a relation of forces approving or disapproving of one tendency or the other²⁰. Douglas Kellner argues that since the hegemonic struggle today is different from yesterday, theories of culture is "best developed through specific studies of

¹⁷ Mulvey: 2001, 2006

¹⁸ O'donnel: 142-160

¹⁹ Hebdige, 2001, 2006: 150

²⁰ Kellner & Durham, 2006: 151

concrete phenomena contextualized within the vicissitudes of contemporary society and history”²¹. His perspective on Cultural Media Studies, dubbed Media Culture, revolves around the idea that current television series are involved in present political and cultural struggles²².

The term ideology means “science of ideas”, and if used within an analysis on television and culture it is the “investigation of the origin of ideas²³”. Television can, as could society, be said to contain a system of ideas, which makes it the superstructure of hegemony. Ideology is the ideas that organise people, such as a political ideology where people believe in the same government, laws etcetera. Television is both a mirror to these ideas, and a reproducer and creator.

Douglas Kellner sees a relation between hegemonic discourses, ideology, political economy, media, and audiences²⁴. He considers not only the content in television, but also who made the show, who it was made for, and the relationship between them. We will not be able to tell what a certain symbolic or indexical sign says to the audience if we are not aware of “who” the audience are. Neither will we be able to find out the meaning of a red cross on a white background^{iv} if we have no pre-existing knowledge of Western NGOs.

Political Economy stands for the relation between economics, law and politics, an important aspect from which to read media texts. Not because it creates a clear image about content in a series based on its audience but because of the contradictions sexism, homophobia and heteronormativity might have. The common sense for any television program would be to secure income from advertisers through a description of who will watch it – but that has not always been the case; an example is the 60s daytime advertisement in the US to white men with an audience consisting mostly of women²⁵. This is a sign for times when sexist discourses won over

²¹ Kellner, 1995:3

²² Kellner, 1995:4

²³ Kellner & Durham, 2006:15

²⁴ Kellner, 1995:37

²⁵ Meehan, 2001, 2006:313

economical ones. Hall, Kellner and Fiske all acknowledge that television has a role to play in the struggle for dominance and that it does so in relation to its audience.

2.2 “The codes of television”

There are three levels of codes according to John Fiske. The first is *reality*; expression, dress, environment, behaviour, speech etcetera that are encoded by technical codes, which can be found in the next level called *representation*; Camera, lighting, music, sound and so on which transmits conventional representational codes which shape the representations of, for example, narrative, conflict, character dialogue along with others. This last level is called *ideology*, a term referring to the organization of these codes into coherence and acceptability by ideological codes such as sexuality, class, race along with other ideological messages²⁶.

I will use this concept to analyse the aspects of *Empire*, which are not covered by the semiotic analyses. Audience, perception, type and overall narrative will be dissected within the frames of this method.

2.3 Masculinities:

I will use the concept of *Subordination, complicity and marginalization* from Connell’s book *Masculinities*. Subordination regards the homosexual man as less than the heterosexual due to effeminate attributes, such as being penetrated by another man, talking feminine and a supposed weakness. Complicity points to the fact that all men cannot live up to the hegemonic masculinity, but despite that acquires an automatic privilege from it. Marginalization refers to the fact that the hegemonic masculinity is typically white, middle class, and heterosexual; but that there are some, for example, Afro-Americans in sports that can be represented as the ideal picture of masculinity. This does not however mean that the rest of the black men are privy to that²⁷. Further, he brings affront Freud’s theory on the Oedipus complex, which is when a child desire the opposite sex and despise the other

²⁶Fiske, 2010

²⁷ Connell, 1996:101-104

parent²⁸.

2.4 Homonormativity/homosubversivity

The neoliberal conception of Homonormativity implies a normative formation “that does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them”²⁹.

Homonormativity is thus the expulsion of homosexual attributes that does not agree with what is mutually agreed upon to be acceptable. Effeminate behaviour, gender fluidity and sexual practises outside of a monogamous relationship are but a few examples of what is deemed abnormal and removed from homonormative representation.

Homosubversivity is what I here call the opposite. It is a term including all those characteristics and patterns that do not agree or consent to cultural rules. It struggles against the heterosexual ideology with its defiance to heterosexist discourses on family, reproduction, work situations and gender roles.

Homonormativity then, is basically the way in which LGBT-people assimilate to underlying schemes about the “normal life” either because of the comfort and privilege they experience within that or due to fear of discrimination, confrontation or shame³⁰. It is the core of every ideological reproduction where the defying discourses of a ruling ideology use the very same tools to surrender, that the dominant discourse uses to oppress them. This might mean avoiding intimacy in public, in fear of being found and having to cope with the consequences in the social world, due to how same-sex public affections are represented on television. Heteronormativity is the tool of the privileged, *guaranteeing “the mundane production of heterosexuality as the normal, natural, taken-for-granted sexuality”³¹*

I will apply it on the empirical data to see what codes I identify as homonormative or homosubversive.

²⁸ Connell, 1996: 21-31

²⁹ Duggan, 2003:50

³⁰ De Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira, 2013

³¹ De Oliveira, Costa & Nogueira, 2013:1476

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

I will take use of the semiotic analysis provided by Selby & Cowdery, to analyse different codes from the scenes I have chosen in order to get a hold of what they mean. The scenes or the moving picture is a text³² and I intend to read that text and hopefully be able to see what lay between the lines, above them, and how they come together to shape meaningful discourses.

3.1 Selby & Cowdery's Model for Studying Television

I will use the method above to study the serial, because it is a multifaceted tool to read a television show as text. It gives me a concrete way to identify different codes and how to reveal their meaning. The model³³ incorporates five concepts; *Construction* (which is specified below). *Audience* refers to the idea that we cannot analyse a text without regard to the audience. *Narrative* takes into account that unfolding events are not a natural occurrence even though they are made to look that way, but a strategic manipulation of the effect through editing, actions, discussion etcetera. *Category* is the type of program, such as musical drama or a comedy.

Agency points to the production of a series. What broadcasting company owns it, who produced it, what political bias might that agency have? Audience, category and agency will not be used in the analysis itself because they are already discussed and analysed within the frames of chapter four.

3.2 Semiotics

Semiotic analysis, according to Keith Selby and Ron Cowdery, "is the study of the ways in which signs communicate meaning and of the rules that govern their use³⁴". It is a very thorough tool for analysing media texts, and exemplary to really dig beneath what we see at a first or even a second glance.

There are three levels³⁵ in the model of semiotics I have chosen – first we

³² Selby & Cowdery, 1995:41

³³ Selby & Cowdery, 1995:9

³⁴ Selby & Cowdery, 1995:41

³⁵ Selby & Cowdery, 1995:47

have the *sign* (signifier), which can carry a meaning (signified) for certain people. The second level is called the *code* and refers to a system of signs, such as a language. The third level is the combination of signs that create a *message*. This is also the level where ideology is created or maintained but as we can see: it is of crucial importance to look at level one and two in order to comprehend how different systems create different discourses.

3.2.1 Signifier & Signified

The signifier is the “thing”, while the signified is that “things” meaning³⁶. The meaning is bound to the cultural context of the text. A man, kissing another man meant another thing fifty years ago, than it does today. Different things have different meanings not only historically but demographical. The kiss mentioned above might be non-controversial in the west but controversial and even illegal in Uganda.

In my context, the meaning is extra important, since my presupposition is that meaning is created both by the audience and television.

3.2.2 Syntagmatic & Paradigmatic

Syntagmatic refers to the things that have been chosen to go in the scene and paradigmatic is the combination of those things. The former reflects on the choices that have been made while the latter on how they could have been made. In my first scene for example, we can pick and chose from different things that the creator of the show has chosen to go in the scene. The combination of the same-sex couple and the sofa they sit in whilst talking in the scene does not convey the same meaning, as if they had been on the bed. The meaning of a sign is created in relation to what signs could have been there instead³⁷.

A bed in itself may connote sleep or night. A bed with rose pedals may hold the signified of love, wedding, or sex. What is in the scene has a meaning and only by examining what something else might have meant, can we understand the reason why the production put what they did in the scene

³⁶ Selby & Cowdery, 1995:42

³⁷ Gripsrud, 2002:158

instead.

3.2.3 Construction

There are two aspects of construction *mise-en-scène*^v and technical codes. The technical codes that involve shot size, camera angle, focus etcetera have proven non-relevant for my essay, since they do not adhere to my research questions. I have thus chosen to only use *mise-en-scène* codes, which I will clarify below.

- Setting: what do we see?
- Props: what has been put in the scene?
- Non-verbal communication: Facial expression, body language
- Dress Codes: what are they wearing?

3.2.4 Narrative

Narrative is the way things unfold, and in a semiotic analysis it means that the unfolding events do not happen naturally or by chance. That someone walks into a room at the same time as the people in the room are talking about that person is carefully staged to affect the audience in a certain way.

I use Narrative to analyse unfolding events, which include; conversation, movements and atmosphere. By atmosphere I mean if in one moment there might be signs in the plot before an argument, a kiss, a goodbye and so on.

3.3 Approach

I am approaching the scenes after picking a few of Selby & Cowdery's methods to analyse codes, to see different signs that in turn form a message. My intention is to present the codes one can see, signifiers, and their signified and then turn them over to present what is harder to depict.

It should be noted here that I incorporate for example, different codes of clothing with environment and props and narrative to reach the meaning of the signs that I present. A white dress has different connotations on a wedding than it has on a funeral. This approach also aligns with Kellner's

belief that we need a multilateral method to study television³⁸. Just as we cannot fully realize the effect a television series has on current ideology without putting it in a cultural perspective, we also cannot disregard the context in which a grey shirt is worn.

3.4 Selection

The series is a musical drama revolving around an Afro-American family situated in New York City. The main plot is about Lucious Lyon, a father and owner of a big musical corporation who finds out that he is dying.

He decides that he needs to groom one of his three sons to take over when he is gone. Two of his sons are musically gifted and represented as the leading contestants for the throne. One, Jamal, is homosexual and the other one, Hakim is heterosexual, a fact which makes the father more inclined to favour the heterosexual one because of his homophobia. It should be noted for the final discussion that the character Lyon (the father) and Cookie (the mother) were poor when they were young, and as Cookie was sent into prison for selling drugs Lucious started Empire, which since then has grown into a multi-million corporation. This is only shown through flash-backs, and in the displayed timeframe of the family they have moved from poverty to wealth.

I have decided to use three scenes, which in addition to the overall narrative and information in chapter four will be the most demonstrative of Jamal Lyon's representation in the face of different people. I wanted to analyse Jamal in relation to his mother, his father and his boyfriend to see if there were any contradictions or affirmations to the stereotypes of such relations. If he has the bond with his mother that is stereotypical for a gay man, or the bad relationship with his father which gay men is sometimes believed to have.

The first scene takes place in the very first episode and is the first look we get into Jamal's personal life. In the scene we see him in relation to his boyfriend Michael and his mother, Cookie, which are two important

³⁸ Kellner, 1995

connections in order to analyse the portrayal of him as a gay man, stereotypes about same sex relationships and also a homosexual man's relationship to his mother. The second scene is in episode three and in it we also see his father, Lucius. They argue about Jamal's sexuality; another vital sequence to see how *Empire* addresses homophobia and a father's relation to his gay child. The third scene is in the very last episode and contains Jamal, Cookie, and Lucious. In this sequence, Lucious tries to prove that Cookie tried to murder him. It takes place in Jamal's father's grand office and makes an interesting scene, since Jamal here distances himself from his mother and connects with his father, and will be a good conclusion to the semiotic analysis. I chose tha

CHAPTER 4: EMPIRES CONTENT IN RELATION TO JOHN FISKE'S REALITY, REPRESENTATION AND IDEOLOGY

4.1 The Story

This serial's focal point is Jamal, the gay protégé who aims to take his father's company despite being represented as the underdog because of his father's continued references to him as effeminate and weak. Jamal's mother is his closest ally in the show, up until the final episodes when he and his father reunite and work out their differences. During the show we can see some of the main characteristics around the representation of Jamal; He used to dress up in his mothers clothing as a kid, lives with long-time boyfriend Michael and writes music for a living.

His mother Cookie, has been in prison for seventeen years and is released in the first episode. She has a special bond with Jamal and does everything to secure his place at the top of the family business.

Lucious is the patriarch of the family, head of the company, and a staunch opposition to Jamal's success. He is homophobic, racist and will do anything for his corporation.

4.2 Production and reception

The broadcasting company marketed the show mostly towards the black community, something that paid off with 61% of the viewers being Afro-American³⁹. Fox Broadcasting Company deliberately put the majority of its budget to target the black community but also emphasised that it would be a musical drama or a soap opera and thus strategically advertised it towards the LGBT community and the fashion world. They additionally focused on 18-49 year olds and through radio, online, cable, broadcast and partners like Fox Sports and FX⁴⁰, reached the rest of the demographic. Since FOX is a channel that reaches a very diverse audience due to its low cost they wanted to market it everywhere. This is a different strategy from that of say, HBO^{vi}, which is very expensive and consequently have a specific audience. This also means that the content of the show has to please everyone watching or mean different things to different people.

Many believe FOX Broadcasting Company to be a conservative corporation, which is partly true: they do have investors and political connections to the Republican Party. But it is a multidimensional company, which in recent years have begun to advance a republican agenda on their news channel but jumped to the forefront in LGBT inclusion on their sub-channels where they broadcast series and made-for-tv movies. It should however be mentioned that it has received critique from a number of people and magazines.

In an article in The Washington Post they wrote that it has been called “a house organ of the republican party”⁴¹. *Fox News* is the focal point of the controversy since it is perceived to be a news-channel, which instead of acting objective favours the Republican Party and the conservative agenda, a controversy they have answered by saying that “we actually do hard news here from 9 in the morning until 5 in the afternoon”⁴².

This statement, interesting to know, was met with even more outrage since

³⁹ <http://www.adweek.com/news/television/how-foxs-marketing-fanned-flames-empire-one-biggest-new-shows-years-162612>

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/03/27/fox-news-all-day-hard-and-conservative/>

⁴² Ibid

they acknowledged that they followed an agenda: just not during work-hours.

Yet another thing worth mentioning as an additional contradiction to FOX in the context of production is that the producer, Lee Daniels, is a gay man. He has been very articulate in saying that *Empire*, is meant to visualize and deal with hard matters such as homophobia in the black community. He chose to air it through FOX because it would show representations of gay people were it usually is not shown. “We are behind closed doors in a family situation and trying to tell it as honestly ass possible”⁴³.

The production of this show has made it into a bearer of meaning, not just by the comment made by the creator but also by the fact that all realistic codes are just that, made in such a way so that we can draw meaning from them in relation to our own social environment.

Fiske writes; “what passes for reality in any culture is the product of that culture’s codes, so television is always already television culture”⁴⁴.

The makers of *Empire* constructed the show so that it would show homosexuality in places where it is not usually shown, and the only way to do that is to incorporate ideology from social culture and putting it together in such a way that it is made to appear natural. This is partly done in the specific case of Jamal by the influence of one specific popular discourse in America.

Jamal starts out as the underdog with a father who continuously undermines his musical genius and manhood: he overcomes this by creating music appealing to a mass audience, proving to his father that he is a man and in the end of the season he receive stardom, power and respect. All of these aspects of his character are not random or natural but constructed to appeal to the audience with a popular plot where anyone can do anything. Fiske argues on the topic of television; “that it is made to appear the result of natural rather than cultural processes, it is taken away from the realm of

⁴³ <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/20/lee-daniels-empire-homophobia-black- n 6507274.html>

⁴⁴ Fiske, 2010:4

history and culture and moved towards that of universal truth”⁴⁵.

That anyone can do anything is not to say that these people can do it in whatever way s/he wants. No, the codes of production follow certain hegemonic rules where the character makes alterations to succeed. We have all seen how the unpopular girl achieves social favour and a boy’s affection by altering her looks as a plot in television, just as we have seen unpopular and skinny boys join a sport to become tougher, achieve better body mass, and finally be the reason why the team (in the pastime of their choice) wins. These boys also get the girl in the end.

This alteration is represented as a transition into a true self from which they then, and only then, can achieve anything. Similar alterations are made by Jamal. He does not dress in women’s garbs when he reaches manhood, starts standing up to his father and defying Lucious place as the masculine heterosexual by becoming an even more masculine homosexual. He releases an album with hits, ends his relationship with his long-time partner Michael, and stop identifying with his mother in order to identify with his father instead.

The reception of the show can be put into three words; *Identification* in the way Jamal’s sexuality is displayed, *ground breaking* in the way a gay man is not made into a stereotype and *non-revolutionary*⁴⁶. No, I do not mean to say that the receptive news-outlets does not think that the character Jamal is revolutionary, but *non-revolutionary* in the way that his homosexuality is not represented as a sensation or a “show stopper”.

What is so important about reception is that the audience of *Empire* are the ones who give power to the codes it naturalizes. Fiske say that “power relations can only be stabilized or destabilized by the meanings that people make of them”⁴⁷.

The content in *Empire* is constructed to appear to be reflecting reality and it only succeeds if the perception, the audience, believes that it does. We can with the ratings I offered earlier see that the production succeeded in

⁴⁵ Fiske, 2010:21

⁴⁶ <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-st-fox-empire-hip-hop-lgbt-essay-20150106-story.html>

⁴⁷ Fiske, 2010:20

manufacturing a gay character that resides partly within dominant cultural ideology. But the essence of that ideology can only be answered after the deep semiotic analysis in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS

5.1 Scene 1 “ The Reunion”

5.1.1 Summary

This scene is from the very first episode and revolves partly around a talk between long time partners Jamal and Michael: partly around the return of his mother from her 17 yearlong sentence in prison. It takes place in Jamal’s apartment. In the conversation between Jamal and Michael they discuss the succession of Lucious.

In the middle of the scene, we get a glimpse of Jamal and Lucious visiting Cookie in prison. During the flashback Jamal is about ten years old and has a conversation first with his father before he enters the holding-room where he has a conversation with Cookie through by protective glass.

When the scene flashes forward, we get to witness the first meeting between Cookie and Michael.

5.1.2 Environment & props

The scene takes place in a large loft in an up-scale neighbourhood. The interior colouring consists of shades of brown and details in turquoise with black cracks making it look like the mineral, such as kitchen cabinets, chinaware, pans and additional interior design. This colour scheme reads “safe”, “bohemia” and “home”. These signifieds, has additional meanings, which can be summed up by “family and “stability”. The living room, kitchen, and bedroom have no walls and the bed is just inside the front door. As you enter you arrive at Michael and Jamal’s personal sphere, their private domesticated safe space.

We could assume that the absence of walls are random - a commodity of a loft, but we need to take account of the fact that living room, kitchen, and

bedroom stands for family life. It is three objects fundamental to the domestic. In the kitchen the family eats, in the living room they live, and in the bedroom they love. Separate they are not as meaningful as when we see them all together at the same time. When they interrelate we see the entire space where a family resides. This is something identifiable that we can relate to.

The colours added with personal photographs on the fridge and a helmet behind the sofa emphasizes the connotations to family and domestic safety. By the bed they have a home-gym with a barbell and weights signified with the maintenance of the male body, but also health and concern for one's looks.

In the part of the scene where they display the prison where Cookie is confined, the setting is that of a normal waiting room and the rowed seats for visitors is separated by glass from where the prisoners sit in the same fashion on the other side.

5.1.3 Codes for non-verbal communication

Jamal lies relaxed on the sofa, looking up at the ceiling while Michael, always looking at Jamal, cooks and serves the meal.

As he takes his place on the sofa he shapes his posture as to fit Jamal's. That is, he lays his leg on Jamal's and puts his hand on his shoulders. Almost linking them together: with Jamal unmoving and Michael the fabric, which has to reshape to fit another body. This can be read as Jamal being the man of the relationship and Michael the woman. He cooks, alters his posture to fit his boyfriend's, and never sways his gaze away from him. He is the one to cook and serve, and as they kiss Michael leans in while Jamal remains unmoving.

Another striking thing is that Michael does not make himself a meal. In fact, it is only as Jamal answers the phone and walks over to the window that Michael takes over the bowl and eats. The many symbols I detect during the scene are signified with a passive Michael who pleases Jamal and receives pleasure from doing so. As Cookie is about to enter the scene, Jamal picks up some clothes from the floor and hands them over to Michael who in

turn proceeds by tidying up.

When Jamal sits opposite to his mother inside prison during the flashback, she wears an expression of pride and leans towards him in such a way that despite the glass separating them has a protective posture. They lay their hands on top of each other's with the glass between, which makes one think of a bond that on one hand has been destroyed by the glass but also one that cannot be broken by the inability to touch.

As the scene shifts back to the present, her facial expression as she looks at Jamal is that of sincerity and pride, whilst it in relation to Michael shifts to an expression that analyses his appearance from top to bottom. At one instance in the moment when she touch her gaze up and down she pinch his cheeks. Michael also makes the same studying top-to-bottom look.

From that we can draw connotations between that of a girlfriend and mother "measuring" one another. The mother concerned with who cares for her son's needs and the girlfriend concerned with who did it before.

5.1.4 Dress codes

The couple wear comfortable clothes: Jamal a dark T-shirt and blue sweats while Michael wears grey sweats and a white tank top. None of them wear any shoes. Here we can draw three distinct connotations from their appearance.

Firstly, Jamal dresses dark in hard and masculine colours while Michael has soft, stereotypically feminine colours. The couple's dressed down attire makes me think that they are encoded to look comfortable in their domestic sphere: in the confinement of family. The third observation is that Michael's tank top offers the audience and Jamal more naked skin. It could mean his sexual appeal is more on display as the object of Jamal's affection.

Cookie wears a white fur, a short leopard dress, high heels, and a lot of make up and jewels. In the flashback, Jamal wear an old, too big, worn out sweater and too big jeans. That they do not fit has the signified meaning that they were inherited from someone, perhaps his older brother. His dad, Lucious, has a white t-shirt, unbuttoned black and white shirt, regular jeans and a black headband on his head. The headband along with the loose shirt

and jeans makes one think of a criminal or a man who is a member of a motorcycle gang.

Cookie wears orange; as is the standard outfit for prisoners in America and her hair is messy, tangled. It gives her a tired look, a woman who has given up. Her garbs also remove any sexual artefacts from her persona, which is the opposite from her appearance in the present with the short dress and heels.

5.1.5 Narrative

As we move into narrative, we have to divide the scene into two parts and one break. In the first part, the events that follow are that of Jamal and Michael's conversation about Jamal's reach for the company. He is pessimistic about the possibility, while Michael tries to on one part support him whatever he does but also push him to reconsider.

The sole focus of the conversation revolves around Jamal's world outside the domestic; his wants and needs and doubts. Michael functions as a commodity to his boyfriend's life and consequently he is perceived as the passive party without any wants, needs or doubts of his own. Certainly, one could assume that they might have several conversations that are not on screen where Michael's needs are in focus – but this is a television series and everything on display is constructed and carefully chosen.

When Jamal answers the phone, which turns out to be his mother, we find out that she is coming up. The tension is visible on Jamal and they stir into a stressed state of cleaning up and get ready for her entrance. This signifier, cleaning, is in the context a signified of trying to alter their home. We see that he cares even after seventeen years of absence what she thinks. We can also make a contradictory note, that the safe domestic is about to receive a visit from someone who is not a part of the safety. Thus they need to alter it in fear of judgement.

In the "break", we are thrown back into the past. Jamal and Lucious are visiting Cookie in prison. The first thing that happens in the conversation between Lucious and Jamal, is that Lucious tells his son; "go in there and tell your mama I love her, and don't come back here crying". Here we see

how the father makes it clear that tears are wrong, which we can take one step further and connote to him believing that emotion is wrong. As Jamal talks to his mother he also mentions that the other kids are picking on him, but that he is afraid to tell his father, who as it turns out: will make him fight. This is moreover a sign of forcing masculinity onto a child. Cookie does not tell him not to but instead tells him that he is different, and that life will be hard at times. She continues by saying: “I got you”.

Part two: Cookie and Jamal embrace and there is a moment where you really observe two people reunited from a long separation. But the scene quickly removes focus from her return and all the questions around her confinement or release and turn to the present. Jamal takes her hand and drags her in the direction of the kitchen and as she sees Michael on the way there, she says; “she’s adorable” and then whispers to Jamal that his boyfriend should clean up after he cooks.

The scene ends with us finding out that she came straight there from prison and as Jamal asks of her plan, she says that she is going to take back what is hers.

5.1.6 Discussion

This first scene shows a home, with emphasis on certain artefacts that in turn, emphasise monogamy and family. The choice of colour may be one of the most significant artefacts since turquoise is known for its symbolic meaning of stability and protection. The colour turquoise comes from the mineral with the same name, and has been a symbolic gem for protection, good fortune, and stability.

If we look at the other colours dominating the apartment, we see brown; a colour representing earthliness, structure, home and embodies a belonging to family. It is also a signified of nature; in its cultural form: natural. This colour contradicts and operates as a counterforce to the, to some, controversial relationship between two men.

Continuing on the line of colour, we can see that Michael wears white and grey. The signifieds of purity, innocence and femininity while the dark shades on Jamal stands for authority, hardness, and masculinity. That they

have neither shoes nor socks is a sign of humility and relaxation. It also takes away any focus that might be drawn to footwear and onto the colour and type of the rest of their clothing; the fact also removes the effect a pair of shoes would have to their attire. One example of this is Cookie's white fur, which in relation to her too short leopard dress, excessive heels and shiny jewellery connotes in anything but innocence and purity. The fur on a woman with a short dress is more linear with promiscuity and sex.

The non-verbal communication between the lovers is peculiar in the way that Michael always look at Jamal, while Jamal mostly looks forward. Michael thus carries both the male antagonist perspective that allow the audience to look at Jamal through his eyes, but also the role of the female antagonist, which works to enhance the male lead. He asks questions and listens to the answers, and the entire narrative is bound to Jamal. Without Jamal there would be no scene; whilst we could switch Michael out for a mirror and have a monologue with similar if not the exact same effect. Michael's relevance is only achieved through Jamal, which relates to Mulvey's conviction that "in herself the woman has not the slightest importance"⁴⁸. Michael embodies a woman's character in the logic that he has no sole importance to the plot, but his enhancement of Jamal's sexuality, in both senses of the word.

This makes Jamal contradictory in himself since he is displayed in a sexual manner through the scene. Merited by the kiss, which Michael instigates in the middle of their conversation by laying his hands under Jamal's chin, but also in the way he draws Michaels undivided look. He is the male lead, as well as the object for the audience's affection.

⁴⁸ Mulvey:1992:29

5.2 Scene 2 “The Fallout”

5.2.1 Summary

This scene begins, as the first one, with Michael and Jamal on the sofa. They are discussing the events of the evening when Lucious calls and says that he is coming up. As he enters it is clear that an argument is coming. Lucious and Jamal argue about his sexual orientation and how it is hard for Lucious to accept it. As the argument moves to its climax, Jamal lets his father know that he does not need his money or the apartment that he pays for.

5.2.2 Environment & props

Jamal and Michael are stationed on the sofa, and in front of them they have a bottle of water and some half read magazines, and an ashtray.

The apartment, one would assume, should look exactly the same as it did in the first scene, but that is not the case. Almost every object that was on display previously remains as it were: but this time the black cracks on for example the kitchen cabinets are a dark shade of red, which we read as war, danger and power. I take this signified as enhancements to the coming argument, the power-struggle between dad and son. Heterosexual dominance versus homosexual pride. Even the pot on the stove, which previously had been turquoise, is now red.

In the kitchen there are fresh vegetables, fruit, and a carving board with a knife on it. Despite the increase of red, these artefacts still remain as a reminder of the normalcy of their home. When Lucious enters the line of sight there is a big canvas hanging by the door with a woman on it, she is in black and white and in the process of singing. Below there is a big green plant in a yellow urn. The plant is a sign of care and the green colour of harmony and calm. It enhances their home as a safe stable environment were family resides. This, with the art on the walls conveying that someone has picked them out, and the knives on the carving board says that the apartment is not just a place where someone might live, but a place where life happens. They have chosen the art, they maintain the plant, and they are in the process of making something, a snack perhaps, from the vegetables and

fruit. The plant, alive and thriving is also a connotation for responsibility, care.

There is a paradigmatic aspect to this. If there had been a cake on the carving board for example, I would not have connoted it to health, just as the living plant has an entirely different meaning than a dead one would have. A dead plant would have read unreliable, uncaring, and irresponsible. Another environmental hiccup I keep stumbling over is that the bedroom is left out from the scene. Something I will read more detailed in the narrative and discussion.

5.2.3 Codes for non-verbal communication

The scene starts with Michael lying on the sofa with his feet on Jamal's lap as Jamal massages them. The "look" is still on Jamal and once again, Michael has to position himself to fit the unmoving boyfriend who still gazes straight ahead. When Lucious rings, Jamal push Michael's feet of him almost aggressively and jump up.

When Jamal opens the door to let his father in, he immediately turns his back on him and walks quickly to the kitchen. A place were you often converse with people you do not know very well. Lucious slams the door and gives Michael a look meaning: you do not belong here, resulting in a swift escape from the scene, and as he walks up to Jamal his face twitches with hate, confusion, and aggression. He does not understand his child, he is angry because of it, and at this moment he cannot decide whether it is himself or his son, which is the object of these feelings. The facial expression of Jamal is dismissive and so is the action of pouring a glass of water to himself and not offering anything to Lucious.

The argumental gestures, which I detect, are that of equality. None of the two are backing down. As one moves one step forward the other mirrors and then they both turn their back in retreat only to start anew. Jamal's gestures make the muscles in his arms flex, something that appears to be rehearsed and not by accident. The flexing muscles portray the male body in its peak, with aggressive movements belonging to the male sex. Aggressive and hard.

The fight ends as Jamal throws his keys by his father's feet and herds Michael, who follows his silent directions to a fault, out the door.

That he throws his keys on the floor could mean one of two things. Either that he is the better man who throws the keys to the apartment that his father pays for and leaves before the argument becomes more violent, or that he and his sexuality have been trying to live inside his father's heterosexist world but failed, and thus gives back the key, both materially and emotionally.

5.2.4 Dress codes

Michael aligns himself with soft colours: white t-shirt with long sleeves, a visible necklace and red sweats. Jamal has darker shades: olive green t-shirt and black pants. Neither of them wears any shoes. The connotational artefacts both in props and clothing still bear the meaning of family and home – the domestic. It is almost overwhelming how mundane and natural their life appears.

Luscious wears an expensive looking suit, a long coat in dark grey, and a scarf. His clothes read wealth and sophistication. The dark colours stand for authority and masculinity while the scarf is signified for style and perhaps safety in his sexuality. It may stand for the fact that he can wear a colourful scarf since he is just assumed to be heterosexual.

Jamal however, who is gay, wears very conservative masculine clothing. No bracelets nor earrings or strong colours. The normalcy of his attire is complex and very conflicting with his identity; not as a gay man but a musician.

Usually in musical dramas such as *Glee*^{vii}, the singers wear glossy and dramatic outfits in their performances and off stage. This is something applied for both straight and gay, male and female. An even more obvious example of how this contradicts an artist's clothing is another musical drama, *Nashville*, set in Nashville, Texas. The show is more conservative than this one but still the male heterosexual artists wear that special, over the top stage attire Hollywood is so famous for.

The dress code chosen for the character Jamal connotes either the perfect masculinity or the strategic assimilation of homosubversivity.

5.2.5 Narrative

“Don’t look back there, it’s where we make the gay love” is the first sentence uttered by Jamal whereupon Lucious slams the door with a roaring “that’s enough!” The bedroom is left out of the scene but indicated verbally, something Lucious apparently does not want to hear. The visual signifiers in environment are that there is no bedroom, but verbally there is.

The signifieds of this, in my opinion, is a line between what the audience can approve of. What I mean is that when the heterosexual discourses, personified within his father’s persona enters this domestic sphere, the image of a bed where two men sleeps together at night becomes too defiant. It does however need to be mentioned as a trigger for his father.

To take this one step deeper we can muse that the bedroom can be orally addressed as a struggle against his father’s homophobia, but it cannot be visualized within the ideology this scene represents. That would be too much.

As they begin the argument it is revealed that it concerns an earlier event where Jamal sang a song to his father, which he would have liked to release and his father putting him down for being gay and therefor not allegeable to release an album on his father’s label.

Jamal “I sang a song for you, I arranged that song for you because I love you, and you spit in my face.”

Lucious: “I didn’t spit in your face, I tried to tell you since you were a baby that it’s not about black eyes or bloody noses in this world, it’s life or death and if you don’t toughen up, these streets will eat your ass alive.”

Jamal: “Since I was a baby, you beat me, you told me that was to toughen me up. That was a lie. You beat me because you hate me, and you always will because I’m always gonna be who I am.”

Lucious “I don’t hate you, I don’t know you. I didn’t bring any women into this world, and to see my son become somebodies bitch? I don’t understand you!”

Jamal: “You don’t have to understand me. You don’t have to understand me, or have anything to do with me. I’m a man! A man. So you can keep that stupid song, and your money and whatever else Lucious Lyon thinks that he owns. My obedience is no longer for sale.”

This argument continues with Jamal throwing his keys at his father’s feet, calling out to Michael, who apparently hovered close by, and leaving the scene. Lucious is left alone.

I wanted to display this argument in its entirety, because it is quite interesting when you dig deeper, which I will do in the next part.

5.2.6 Discussion

Similar to the former scene there are strong domestic, homonormative codes in this scene. We have the colours, the clothing, and the normal act of sitting in a sofa. Despite the shades of red I aligned with connotations of war, or in contemporary homes: a coming argument, there are no signs of anything that would defy a heterosexist discourse. Because, even if Michael is displayed as the “weaker” more effeminate of the two, he still fits within the frames of the male body. He does not wear make-up or anything that would endanger him of being anything else than a man. It is only in relation to Jamal that he becomes less than a man and only because Jamal need to be more of a man.

This is a typical form of homonormative conformity. The *one woman one man* relationship is so incorporated in western culture, so institutionalized, that even in same-sex relations we have to give more power to one party and less to another.

This is then enhanced as Lucious enters and with a look dismissed Jamal’s partner from the line of sight. When the argument starts we have very visual conversational codes, which repeats the need for a boy to be loved by his father. A father who beat him in through his childhood to toughen him up, which could also mean to straighten him out or bullying the homosexuality out of Jamal.

But we see that Jamal is overly keen on displaying his masculinity with flexing muscles and the repetitive comment “I’m a man! A man.” And this

contradicts his own argumentative statement about his father's wish to toughen him up and aligns with his father sentiment of not understanding his child, dismissing his homosexual acts as female, weak. Jamal tries to avert his father's argument about him being weak: by proving that he is in fact a man. This female behaviour his father insists that he sees, thus makes him an unworthy artist since he will not be able to handle it if he does not toughen up: in other words suppress his sexuality and thus enter the heterosexist discourse of domination. All the while, Jamal repeats that he is in fact a man and should be allowed entry to his father's, the incarnation of heterosexist ideology, world.

On the surface, I see a gay kid, standing up to his old man: hidden underneath, I see a kid who refuses to be diminished as a woman or in this case the derogatory: bitch.

5.3 Scene 3: "The Choice"

5.3.1 Summary

In this scene we do not get to see Michael since he broke up with Jamal earlier in the series, but are once again invited to the representation of father and son, but this time in relation to Jamal's mother. The scene is from the final episode of the first season.

At the beginning of the scene, we find out that Jamal has been chosen as the successor of Empire, something Cookie always wanted. When they enter a big office in the top of the building Lucious informs them that Cookie will no longer be a part of the company since she tried to murder him. She denies it, but there is a video. Jamal is confused but as Lucious calls on security he does nothing to stop his mother from being dragged away.

5.3.2 Environment & props

The scene takes place in a big office in dark shades of brown and sand coloured décor. The desk, which Lucious stands behind, is large and dark and behind it there is a framed picture with him and Michelle Obama, the

current first lady of the United States of America. On the desk there is a sculptured lion, a golden crocodile, and a book by Walter Russel, who is a famous painter, sculpture and the founder of the university of science and philosophy. Russell was also a self-made man, coming from nothing and working his way to the top. Not so much a signified, but a synonym for Lucious Lyon's own life on the series.

The desk is standing on a raised platform almost like a stage. The entire office is a display of items and codes reading power, wealth, and sophistication. The platform on which the desk is staged just emphasize this. Lucious cannot just be on the top floor: he needs to be raised above the entire office. The desk-chair with an unnaturally high back is similar to a throne.

5.3.3 Codes for non-verbal communication

Lucious walks ahead of Jamal and Cookie, and as they close in on the desk he walks around it and Jamal walks up on the platform in front of it while Cookie stays below them: behind them.

When the revelation about the intent to murder is brought to attention Jamal laughs, Cookie moves nervously, and Lucious appears factual: sincere. As he turns the video on he sits down in his chair, his throne, with a sigh of relief and victory. It appears as if he has always wanted his son to separate from his mother but never had the proof to ensure that he did so. Jamal gazes at his mother in disbelief who in turn eyes her former husband with hatred and disgust. Jamal continues to be perplexed and sad as he watches security remove his mother from the office.

5.3.4 Dress codes

Lucious is wearing a dark-grey tuxedo with a golden tie and handkerchief. The grey is related to sophistication, conservatism and masculinity, and the gold means wealth.

Cookie has a black fur coat, a necklace in silver and a patterned long dress in light and dark grey. Black is often associated with death and danger, but in this case I would say it stands for wealth and class. The coat looks very

expensive and with the designer necklace and modest make up that aspect of the colour is enhanced. Black also stands for authority, which fits the woman who owns half of empire.

Jamal is dressed in a dark-red suit, grey shirt and grey tie. The colour is aligned with leadership, vigour and power. The attire is in addition to an amplifier to his new role as heir to the family company, very similar to Lucious.

5.3.5 Narrative

The events that unfold in this scene are that of two parents trying to prove their case to their son. Cookie denies that she attempted to murder Lucious up until the video is turned on and the evidence is too real. She then switches approach from innocent victim of a vicious man to someone who had every right to act the way she did: “He killed Bunkie!” she screams in her defence (Bunkie is Cookies cousin who died in the first episode, by Lucious hand). Jamal does not seem to believe her, which is maybe why he does nothing to stop his father from throwing her out.

The last words before the scene is cut is spoken by Lucious: “you see son, sometimes you have to be willing to sacrifice your queen, in order to win the game.”

This sentence has a lot of signifieds. The first time I hear it I make it out to be an advise about how we sometimes need to sacrifice something important to succeed. Hearing it another time, this time adding the other codes from the scene, I make it out as a statement about Lucious need to be free from his former wife’s sway in order to really succeed in his career. Reading it, word for word in the context of Jamal, the gay son, I now decipher that the message has nothing to do with Lucious but is an advice to his son, in which he makes it clear that for him to succeed, he needs to cut the bound with his mother and become a man. The video was just a tool to make him realize that, to make him turn to his father, the dominant male, instead of his mother.

5.3.6 Discussion

This scene is very interesting indeed, and to begin the discussion, I shall have to incorporate some of the content in Connell's book *Masculinities*. From an early age, the male child desires his mother, and despises his father. In order to fully grow into an ideal man, the boy needs to identify with his father, which is said to happen when the boy believes that his father will punish him with castration. As he begins the process of identifying with the father, he develops something called a "super-ego"⁴⁹. I will not dig deeper into the Oedipus complex here but wanted to simply acknowledge that it is reproduced here in this scene.

Cookie who has maintained a close relationship with her son is now represented as a murderess by his father. He is in the middle and has to either chose to identify with his mother, or with his father. One might be critical to the direction in which I am going: Jamal did just find out that his mother tried to kill his father. It is true, but she does tell him that she did it for a reason. Lucious killed her cousin, an act that could enrage just about anyone. Another fact is that she did in fact not kill Lucious, but stopped herself in time. Let us add the message, which is read from the dress codes.

Jamal's suit is similar to that of Lucious: he wears his tie and handkerchief in the exact same way. Then we add the environment: the office in masculine colours and expensive décor, Lucious throne behind a big desk. Further, we have the fact that both father and son stands on the platform above Cookie. All of the codes, if we put them together, form signs that in turn shape the message the audience digest, is a montage of heterosexist discourses.

The patriarch on the throne surrounded by wealth and family. The matriarch who is authoritative and loud. The son who have to make a choice. It has been done before. And the ideology it constructs, maintains, is that of the dominant one who favours male over female, something we see clearly as Lucious push a button from under his desk, removing her from the office of power. She might be independent but in no way above the men in the scene. They hold the power to either let her remain or be excluded. But, interesting as this notion might be, I am not analysing the male/female

⁴⁹ Connell, 1996: 21-31

in relation to each other, but in relation to Jamal. He is offered a choice in the scene: identify with his father, suppress the devotion for his mother, and thus receive the privilege of remaining in the office (which I perceive as being a connotation of masculine domination, a stand-in for ruling ideology), or exit with Cookie and lose that privilege.

“Sometimes you have to be willing to sacrifice your queen, in order to win the game”. This sentence stands for a sacrifice of the bond between mother and son and the new identification with his father in order to succeed as a man.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

6.1 Conclusion

To see how a gay man is constructed in television is to see how “gayness” is naturalized within the frames of a serial. In this show we see a boy who at the beginning wear his mother’s clothing, but then grows up into a man. This gay character is confined to a monogamous relationship and he has his own masculinity enhanced by his boyfriend; he stands up aggressively to his father and dresses in almost too, if there is such a thing, straight clothes.

If we add this masculine representation of a man, with the overall plot of his character and the fight against being seen as effeminate and him finally identifying with his father and taking reign over the company: we get a clear image of the “gayness” *Empire* produces. It is that of a gay man, acting, wearing, achieving, and loving as a heterosexual man. His “gayness” is constructed as the epithet of homonormative assimilation in order to fit inside a heteronormative discourse.

Empire shows that the struggle between homonormative and homosubversive representation is consistent with contemporary ideological struggles. Kellner wrote: “I argue that media culture is a contested terrain across which key social groups and competing political ideologies struggle for dominance and that individuals live these struggles through the images, discourses, myths and spectacles of media culture⁵⁰”

The struggle between homosubversity and homonormativity in *Empire* reveal that hegemony is in fact, a moving equilibrium and not a fixed structural reality. There is a tendency in the representation of gay characters to favour the ones who fit into the box, the box which history and political economy and media culture are all responsible for creating. But even though marriage and all the connotations that word stirs up remain overrepresented

⁵⁰ Kellner, 1995:2

in television, we notice a shift in the subordinate nature of gay representation.

A gay man can succeed; can achieve equality to heterosexual men, who has been historically dominant. But this dominant side of gay men, and gay men only, does not help transsexuals, androgynies or effeminate gay people. What we read from *Empire*, is further inclusion of straight acting homosexuals who on one hand struggle against subordination by means of enhanced masculine behaviour and remain confined within a naturalisation of gay relationships as the exact same as heterosexual.

There is a fair amount of ambivalences in the representation around the characters in my analyses. Firstly, we see Jamal defying his father's patriarchy over the family by refusing to conform to gender roles as a child. This could be a contradiction to naturalized homosexuality, but when his father tries to beat that part of him away while his mother does the opposite, it falls in line with the idea of fathers as the dominant figure and often the one to oppose sexual "deviancy". Cookie, does the opposite, strengthening the image of women as caring and loving and often more accepting of a homosexual child. Thus, while the representation of Jamal might contradict the current ideological streams of homonormativity the response of his parents does not.

As we turn our attention to the scenes we notice that the relationship between Jamal and Michael is constructed to confirm the dominating discourses on homosexual relationships as being similar to heterosexual: to the extent that there even is a man and a woman within it.

The contradiction against heteronormative ideology in scene one and two is the fact that Jamal have to be the sexual object at the same time as he remains the lead character.

The conclusion regarding the representation of a same sex relationship, is that it is ambivalent in the way it defy the non-sexual tenor that is usually portrayed but conform in most other aspects. Such as their dominant/submissive relationship, the stable and domestic signifieds and monogamous nature. Jamal's relationship to his father follows the same

track. While Jamal contradicts the subordination of homosexuality in the face of heterosexuality, he does so by overemphasize his belonging within the masculine hegemonic sphere⁵¹. A similar point can be drawn from the fact that he beats his brothers claim to the throne by becoming tougher, “a top”, and finally walk the same path as his father did before him. In this play for the company we see him reject his mother in the process, thus breaking that bond mentioned in my discussion of scene three on the *Oedipus Complex*, and develop a *super-ego*⁵².

The overall conclusion is that *Empire* display bits and pieces that contradict ruling heteronormative discourses on these relationships, while at the same time reinforcing discourses on masculinity.

6.2 Discussion

To analyse whether or not television upholds current heteronormative ideology by means of semiotic codes and hidden structures, is a way to see what is represented in order to shine a light on what is not.

In this serial I have already concluded that homonormativity is reinforced, naturalized, and thus made the dominant discourse communicated to its audience. But in these discourses there is also the ever-present construction of homophobia as something defying popular discourse. The representation of homosexuality may be squeezed into a homonormative pattern, but through this it is also made into our “reality”. It may not be real, but it is depicted as such and naturalized into something belonging inside the current heterosexist ideology. This normalization of being homosexual and consequently the abnormalization of homophobic behaviour produce discourses that favour homosexual acceptance. To construct a violent relationship between a father and his cross-dressing son does not strike me as a jest towards such tendencies, but a spotlight on the blatant homophobic reality in which gay men who does not conform to set gender roles have to live. I do not see the beatings as a warning to transsexual

⁵¹ Connell, 1996

⁵² Connell, 1996: 21-31

people, but as a reminder of the harm a reproduction of heteronormative ideology can have on them. The portrayal of Jamal as a “likeable” character and the underdog who alters his characteristics to succeed in doing *anything* also enforces the reminder that it is not an “other” these crimes affect, but regular people: people in monogamous relations, with mothers, brothers and dreams.

As the show evolves and progress we are audience to the grown up Jamal who do not wear dresses and who show no signs of effeminate behaviour. This works as a correctional force against the homosubversive attributes we witnessed earlier on. He did grow up and threw those dresses away. In “The Reunion” there are a span of signifiers, which I deem as bearers of meanings aligned with the upmost normalcy. These are codes representing monogamy, family – the domestic. The absence of pride flags for example or make up, bold colours or something outside the frame of heterosexuality neutralize their relationship and reproduce the image that “...’appropriate’ expression of sexual relations is located in long-term, monogamous relationships modelled on (hetero)normative marriage and family values”⁵³ .

The assimilation of his former attraction to female garbs does not end here, indeed, as the scene introduce Cookie to the audience Michael is referred to as “she” with a following pinching of his cheek. Jamal has transformed from a boy with traits of a transvestite to the “man” of his current relationship. In “The Fallout” the creators of Jamal’s character continue to lock him inside what is acceptable, this time through his relationship with Michael. Michael’s role, yes, in fact his sole purpose is to enhance Jamal’s superiority as a man.

Side by side with his long-time partner Jamal is clearly the husband and Michael his wife. This could in turn be an interesting twist in which Michael embodies a sort of counter hegemony of feminine behaviour to ruck the dominant one, or at least demand inclusion of homosubversive representation in the form of an effeminate party. Yes, this could have been an interesting turn if it was not for the fact that he is only made less masculine by the presence of Jamal and, unfortunately, this does not align

⁵³ Richardson, 2004:406

with the homosubversive's struggle against homonormativity. In fact, it reinforces dominant ideas of relationships consisting of one man and one woman.

However, there are three separate moments in the scene where we do see a tendency to homosubversive representation. Firstly we can draw the conclusion that Jamal is the man and the lead. A role that would historically put Michael as the object of the audience's gaze⁵⁴, which he is not. Instead we see Jamal being displayed as both the male and the object. He is sexual in his nature; it is him we should yearn for. This is also another aspect of the homosubversive, which is when homosexual men's sexuality is not ignored; that men who are in a relation also engage in sexual acts. It does not stop short at a kiss, something we see through Michael's yearning gaze. This leads us to the next moment when Lucious walk in and the first thing Jamal says is "don't look back there, that's where we make the gay love". It is as if a siren has gone of, the unmentionable is articulated and cannot be reversed. The dominant heteronormative ideology in television may display a controlled sense of intimacy but it is rare to so blatantly invite the audience to picture two men in bed together. This is the second homosubversive depiction: the third is found as father and son; heterosexual and homosexual fight. The character Jamal does not acquire free hegemonic power through the dominance of heterosexuality; if we are referring to Connell⁵⁵ he would be subordinate to his father since the character Lucious *do* receive dominance through heterosexual hegemony. The argument between them, as I mentioned in my analysis, is put together as a struggle between equals and is in its way a breach against homonormativity.

Homonormativity does not only work as a concept for the assimilation of too controversial traits in gay people, it also requires homosexuals to submit to heterosexual rules in which homosexuality may be tolerated but never rise above heterosexuality. While the emasculation of Michael by Jamal falls into the confinement of homonormativity, the emasculation of a heterosexual father does not. That a gay man would be more of a man than his father is

⁵⁴ Mulvey: 2001, 2006

⁵⁵ Connell, 1996: 102

not so much a struggle against heteronormative restrictions, but a right hook.

This resistance brings us to a remark made by Kellner in one of his critiques against John Fiske; “there is a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance per se without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance”⁵⁶

The fact that the production, the encoders of this serial chose to make the gay character more of a “man” than is usually displayed must be labelled as a contradiction to popular beliefs about homosexuals, but perhaps not the most positive. This type of homosubversivity reproduce men as the dominant sex on the one hand, but defy that the dominant sex has to be heterosexual on the other. It reproduces ideas of marriage and monogamy to be one between one masculine and one feminine person: while it contradicts that this arrangement needs to consist of a man and a woman.

None of these, not the defiance or the assimilation helps further the visibility of discriminated groups within the LGBT community. I would almost go so far as to say, that we now have a new heterosexual man, one that sleeps solely with men, something that reproduces the idea that effeminate behaviour is something weaker and less desired. Homonormative representation of homosexuality has, I believe, been included in hegemony, on the expense of non-conformers.

This illustration, if we agree with Fiske⁵⁷, that television produce a sense of reality, our reality, puts further pressure on the social order within the LGBT community. A community that once came together to fight oppression has now paid the entrance to the place of hegemonic masculinity, a price paid by those who cannot or will not conform to the rules from which the grounds of their discrimination erupted in the first place.

Maybe “gay” is not enough to describe homosexuality anymore. According to the representation of homosexuality in *Empire* and the overall need to emphasize masculine and feminine, giver and receiver; there might be time to divide these two if we are to really fit inside the heteronormative

⁵⁶ Kellner, 1995: 38

⁵⁷ Fiske, 2010

composition of ideas which, it seems, cannot disregard, but rather enhance the division between effeminate and masculine. It is a focal point, this relationship between dominant and dominated. It appears that even in the most contemporary depictions of homosexuality; hegemony is still of utter importance. There cannot be equality; not even in same sex relations. To succeed as a man the way Jamal did in the serial, one needs to suppress all effeminate parts of oneself. That is the image that is reproduced.

Even though there is a homosubversive discourse with the idea that all homosexual men are not subordinate to heterosexual men and that gay couples have sexual intercourse, this resistance to homonormativity does so by reproducing relations of power, rejecting effeminate tendencies, and communicating to the audience that masculinity is to be desired in a man. It seems like a good time to relate this meaning of the production to the reception of the audience. The easiest way to appreciate and conclude which type of ideological dominance can be found in the cultural and social sphere is to simply look at how the audience perceived the content. *Empire* has an amazing rating and as we add this with the key words of the audience's responses; *Identification*, *ground-breaking* and *non-revolutionary*, we have a dominant ideology that favours the masculine gay character. Thus we have a hegemonic climate where masculinity still perseveres over femininity.

The show represents homosexual struggle for equality - but as a broken record of historic subordination of effeminate tendencies: that struggle can only be won by altering one's characteristics to mirror the already dominant masculine man - and automatically pushing feminine attributes further down the social ladder.

6.3 Suggestions on further research

I would suggest that further research on the representation of gay men in television continue as I have, to focus on homosubversity, but instead do research on both parties of a relationship instead of a single person. I think that studies on gay relationships, gay and lesbian, will further uncover that these power-relations are not confined solely to gay men, but also gay

women. I would also suggest that, as Kellner did, we focus more on what types of resistance are represented and how they affect the moving equilibrium that is hegemony.

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ⁱ The stonewall riots, is the fight that broke out between the police and the visitors inside "stonewall"-

ⁱⁱ *Reaganism* and *Thatcherism* is terms which refers to the conservative political, social and cultural climate during the period when Margaret Thatcher ruled England and Ronald Reagan ruled America.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian is one of the lead characters in *Queer as Folk*, a show about gay men in Pittsburgh

^{iv} The red cross on a white background stands for the NGO "The Red Cross"

^v *Mise-en-scène* analysis means only looking at those aspects, which overlap with the theatre: setting and props, the behaviour of the figures or actors etc.

^{vi} HBO (Home Box Office) is an American television corporation.

^{vii} *Glee* is a musical drama about teenagers, both LGBT and straight in a fictional high school.