

Power of the intro

- Satirical representation of female gender norms and oppression throughout history in the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*

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Abstract

Desperate Housewives is one of the most popular television series of our time. In the masculine entertainment industry, a show focusing on women has without doubt raised discussion. Past research has focused only on analyzing gender norms in the characters and the plot of the series, even accusing Desperate Housewives of supporting these old-fashioned models. This study obtains a new angle and aims to prove that through portraying norms Desperate Housewives, in fact, aims to break them and reveal society's harmful gendered power structures. Furthermore, this study will focus on the show's opening sequence. 21st century's opening sequences rely on heavy symbolism and hidden meanings to convey the whole message of the show in a few seconds. Thus, the socio-critical agenda of the show can be identified through examining its symbolic opening. Discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis were used to identify rhetorical devices, symbols, metaphors and hidden meanings in the opening. Results show that Desperate Housewives portrays many female gender norms and gender inequality, for example motherhood, housewifery and housekeeping. The results also prove that Desperate Housewives is in fact a highly socio-critical satire that aims to make a mockery out of the old-fashioned gender norms that it seeks to change.

Tiivistelmä

Täydelliset naiset on yksi aikamme suosituimmista televisio-ohjelmista. Miesvaltaisessa viihdeteollisuudessa täysin naisiin keskittyvä ohjelma herättää kiistämättä keskustelua. Aiempi tutkimus on poikkeuksetta keskittynyt analysoimaan sarjan jaksoja ja hahmoja tunnistuen niissä esiintyviä sukupuolinormeja ja -stereotyyppioita, sekä jopa väittänyt, että Täydelliset naiset tukee näitä vanhentuneita arvoja. Tämä tutkielma ottaa uuden näkökulman ja pyrkii todistamaan, kuinka normeja kuvaamalla Täydelliset naiset todellisuudessa rikkoo niitä ja paljastaa yhteiskunnassamme piileviä haitallisia sukupuolittuneita valtarakenteita. 2000-luvun television alkutekstit sisältävät paljon symbolismia, vertauskuvia ja piiloviestejä, sillä koko ohjelman viesti täytyy tiivistää muutamaan sekuntiin. Täten ohjelman yhteiskuntakriittinen ulottuvuus voidaankin tunnistaa sen alkuteksteistä. Diskurssianalyysin ja kriittisen diskurssianalyysin avulla retoriset keinot, symbolit, vertauskuvat tunnistettiin alkuteksteistä. Tulokset osoittavat, että Täydellisten naisten alkutekstit kuvastavat useita vanhanaikaisia sukupuolirakenteita, naisten sukupuolinormeja ja sukupuolten epätasa-arvoa, kuten normeja äitiydestä, kotirouvuudesta ja kodinhoidosta. Analyysi todistaa myös, että Täydelliset naiset on todellisuudessa yhteiskuntakriittinen satiiri, joka pyrkii stereotypian kautta saattamaan vanhanaikaiset sukupuolinormit epäsuotuisaan valoon.

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1. Introduction

Desperate Housewives is considered one of the most popular television series of all times. Groundbreakingly, it is also one of the longest-running television shows with all-female lead cast. In the masculine entertainment industry, a television series focusing on women's lives and struggles has without doubt raised discussion and interest in viewers. Surely, the immensely popular television series has been researched from a feminist point of view in the past. However, previous studies have rather focused on analyzing the episodes and the characters of the series and how they portray female gender norms and traditional gender roles. Researchers have gone as far as to claim that Desperate Housewives supports these traditional gender roles and patriarchal power relationships. This is where the present study takes a different approach. I argue, as paradoxical as it may sound, that it is exactly through portraying gender in a stereotypical manner that Desperate Housewives fights these oppressive structures. Indeed, Desperate Housewives includes multiple characters that embody female gender norms and gender inequality: Bree Van De Kamp is the conservative housewife who polishes silverware and organizes bake-sales, while Edie Britt is the blonde, sexually active bimbo who nobody takes seriously (Cherry et al., 2004-2012). The events of the show also reflect old-fashioned structures: men work and spend their free-time golfing and drinking beer while women stay in the house taking care of children, gardening or gossiping over new shoes.

The present study argues that this is exactly where the power of Desperate Housewives and its feminist and socio-critical purposes lie. Indeed, previous research has been successful in examining and describing how the show represents gender stereotypes and inequality. But the accusations about the show reinforcing and supporting these norms is where I disagree with existing studies. They have not examined the series as an entity rather than as separate pieces, and thus have failed to identify the key substance of the show, satire. One must understand that Desperate Housewives works like a fine cartoonist illustrating a caricature. In hopes of changing society, it takes its worst features and turns them into something even more drastic, like 19th century caricatures portraying wealthy bankers as hungry pigs and politicians as ticking timebombs. Through playing with toxic norms it makes a mockery of the parts of society that it seeks to change. Unlike serious soap operas or light-hearted comedies, a satire does not make a character act certain way simply for the convenience of the plot, but for the sake of a larger socio-critical aim. To understand this higher meaning of Desperate Housewives, one must also be familiar with the motives and background of the series. Therefore, I have also spent time studying the series creator Marc Cherry and will explain how Cherry's background affects the way Desperate Housewives deserves to be analyzed. I claim that Cherry's Desperate Housewives may perhaps be the biggest caricature ever created, masking its sociocultural

criticism in the shape of stereotypical women in stereotypical situations in the most stereotypical settings.

Furthermore, this study will adopt a new angle and focus on the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*. I have always found great interest in television opening sequences, though wide research on the subject has not yet been conducted in the field of linguistics and discourse studies. The idea of having to capture the essence, the most important message, of the whole show in only a matter of a few seconds is beyond fascinating for language and discourse enthusiasts. Due to limited time to make a statement, opening sequences heavily rely on symbolism and visual rhetoric. They must effectively communicate with the viewer through fast images and texts. This is where opening sequences and satire also meet. They both include hidden messages, metaphors, symbolism and argumentation through visuals. Furthermore, the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*, likewise satirical images, is rich in intertextuality. References to famous paintings such as *Adam and Eve* and *American Gothic*, combined with computer-made alterations, all contain subliminal messages that are part of a larger socio-critical message that *Desperate Housewives* tries to convey. The unique combination of the three is why the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* offers linguists a huge, enthralling playfield to explore.

In this study I will analyze the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* from the point of view of representation of female oppression and gender norms. All this, while keeping in mind the larger satirical context and thus the hidden feminist aim of the series. I will examine the characters, the original paintings and the computer-animated modifications, such as actions and texts, utilizing discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis. I will determine if the actions in the opening portray gender inequality and traditional female gender norms and furthermore how they portray them. This is all then linked to larger sociocultural and historical context. I aim to investigate the symbolism and uncover the hidden agendas related to female oppression embedded in the opening. Thus, this study will uncover the numerous ways in which text and language work in *Desperate Housewives*' opening sequence to make a larger feminist statement. Section 2 introduces reader the research materials in this study, followed by section 3 and research methods. Section 4 discusses the analytic framework of this study and presents previous research on representation of gender in *Desperate Housewives*, and section 5 contains the analysis of the opening credits. Finally, the results are discussed and concluded in section 6.

2. Research material

This section will introduce the reader to the research materials that were used in this study: most importantly the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* and the original artwork used in it. The reader is also briefly introduced to the television series itself and its creator, Marc Cherry.

2.1 Series creator Marc Cherry

As stated in the introduction, to understand the satire and to be able to critically analyze the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* one must know the series as an entity. Marc Cherry, born in 1962, is an American television producer and writer particularly known for working in series concerning women (Wikipedia, “Marc Cherry”, 2020). When Cherry was a child, his father travelled due to work, so Cherry would instead grow closer with his mother, who was a housewife. The idea for *Desperate Housewives* roots from a conversation Cherry had with his own mother. In an interview by Weinraub (2004) Cherry recalls a conversation of the two watching news about a woman convicted of killing her children. Cherry could not understand how a mother could do such thing, but to his surprise, his mother could (Weinraub, 2004 para. 9). Cherry’s mother had in fact once been as desperate herself. Weinraub (2004) writes that Cherry had always seen his mother as “the perfect wife and mother, a woman who aspired to being a homemaker” (para. 9). It was a shock to Cherry to find out that his mother had in fact experienced great desperation when she was at home with three children: “she was starting to lose it. [– –] And I realized if my mother had moments like this, every woman who is in the suburban jungle has. And that's where I got the idea to write about four housewives” (Weinraub, 2004, para. 9).

2.2 *Desperate Housewives*

Desperate Housewives is an American television series combining drama, satire, comedy, mystery and soap opera (Wikipedia, “*Desperate Housewives*”, 2020). Perhaps it is exactly the peculiar combination of genres that has made the show so successful: *Entertainment Weekly* ranks the show as a new television classic (“The New Classics: TV,” 2007). The popular show aired on ABC for eight years from 2004 till 2012 with a total of eight seasons and 180 episodes (Wikipedia, “*Desperate Housewives*”, 2020).

Desperate Housewives features four protagonist women, all housewives and friends, who live in the seemingly perfect suburb of Wisteria Lane in the imaginary town of Fairview Eve (Cherry et al.,

2004–2012). However, the idyllic white picket fences, perfectly cut green lawns and beautiful rose gardens hide a secret. Each woman in Wisteria Lane battles a problem of their own. The series begins with the protagonists' friend, a seemingly perfect and happy housewife as well, committing suicide. The protagonists feature Bree Van De Kamp, a conservative, strictly Christian and patriotic housewife who loves guns and cooking for her husband; Susan Mayer, a clumsy and goofy single mother who is always disappointed by the men in her life; Gabrielle, the Latina trophy wife who loves new shoes but hates housework; and Lynette, the tired stay-at-home mother of four, known for nagging. The four begin solving the secret behind their friend's suicide and simultaneously discover the dark stories of their not-so-perfect neighborhood.

Along the series the viewer is introduced to the dark side of each protagonist. Bree for example battles with alcoholism, whereas Gabrielle resorts to cheating after feeling emotionally neglected by her husband. Susan becomes severely depressed after being left by her husband for a younger woman and Lynette is on the verge of mental breakdown, dreaming of drowning her children, after having to quit her successful career. The series also features themes such as domestic violence, infidelity, postpartum depression, divorce, maternal burnout and infertility.

2.3 Opening sequence

The main research material in this study is the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*. Cherry, the originator of the opening, states in an interview by Smith (2004) that he wanted to “do something different than the standard ‘turn and look’ introduction and make a larger statement about all women throughout history” (para. 6). Television show openings at the time favored an old style that focused on presenting the show's cast with titles appearing in the screen (Smith, 2004, para. 4). Cherry's opening, ahead of its time, utilizes digital technology and 3D imagery. Rather than presenting characters, the revolutionary opening relies on symbolism, metaphors and intertextuality. The opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* contains nine paintings from different eras. Eight of the paintings contain a female or male character and one inanimate objects. All paintings are first presented untouched but are then modified digitally to establish unequal relationships between genders (Cherry et al., 2004–2012). The sequence progresses from the oldest to the newest painting, thus chronologically presenting the suffering of women from the beginning of time to modern day. The original works and the events in the opening are briefly introduced next, as further details are discussed in the analysis section.

The opening scene contains two paintings, *Adam and Eve*, by Cranach (approx. 1510–1520), and features the biblical characters Adam and Eve standing under an apple tree. The digital modification comes to action as a serpent appears out of the tree, offering a delicious apple to Eve (Cherry et al., 2004–2012). Eve accepts the gift and as soon as she takes the apple, a huge apple falls from the tree and crushes Adam. The credits zoom to Eve’s face, which does not even flinch as she holds her delicious apple.

The second scene cuts to Ancient Egypt, featuring the historical tomb painting of queen Nefertari (“*Tomb painting of Nefertari*”, approx. 1250 BC.). Nefertari stands in her palace with a happy expression on her face when suddenly a child appears next to her. After one child, another one appears. Five children pop up and surround Nefertari, who ultimately sinks in the crowd of children, waving her hands for help as if she was drowning.

Third scene takes the viewer to the Age of Discovery. *The Arnolfini Portrait* (Van Eyck, 1434) features Italian merchant Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife. The couple stands side by side holding hands in their home and the woman faces downwards, towards her husband. The man looks firmly forward with a stiff expression and a raised hand. *Desperate Housewives* opening explores their story by separating the two and asserting the man in front of the scene, eating a banana. He finishes the banana and proceeds to throw the peels behind him, onto the floor. The woman appears behind the man with a broom to clean up the mess. The man steps aside and the viewer is exhibited to a huge pile of banana peels in the corner.

The scene cuts to the famous painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood (1930). The painting contains an older American man and a woman standing in front of their gothic style house. They are likely farmers; the man holds a pitchfork and wears denim overalls. With melancholic expressions, the man looks at the viewer while the woman, slightly behind him, looks to the horizon. The digital twist brings in a young pin up girl. The heavily made up, scantily clad girl with a big smile grabs the man under his chin to bring him closer to her. The man throws his pitchfork away and his dull expression turns into a big grin. The old woman has receded to the back, looking at the two flirting. An open food can appears around the woman. The woman’s expression turn sad as the can’s lid rolls to succumb her inside and present the text in the lid cover *Aged sardines* with a depressing cover image of the old woman.

The fifth scene builds around *Of course I can!* (Williams, 1946). The propaganda poster from World War II features an overwhelmed looking woman carrying a pile of food jars. The poster features text: *Of course I can! I’m as patriotic as can be– and ration points won’t worry me!* In *Desperate*

Housewives, the soup cans in the woman's arms are falling on the floor as she tries to carry them. One of the soup cans, originally from *Campbell's Soup Cans* (Warhol, 1962), falls to the floor.

The sixth scene features modern pop art. *Romantic couple* (Dale, approx. 1960) depicts a happy modern couple with the woman laying her hand on the man's chest. *Couple arguing* (Dale, approx. 1960) features the same man explaining something to the woman, who looks at him unhappy over her shoulder. In *Desperate Housewives*, the couple face each other, looking happy at first. Suddenly the man's expression turns unhappy. A tear falls on the woman's cheek and she proceeds to punch the man in the face, making him collapse.

The last scene returns to the setting of the opening scene, with the punched man collapsing against the biblical tree. The tree shakes and sheds its apples. The four protagonist women of the series appear under the tree to catch an apple each. The serpent slithers in a branch behind the women while red juicy apples in their hands the women look at the viewer, smiling.

3. Research methods

In this section, the research methods, in this case discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, used in this study are presented.

3.1 Discourse analysis

Discourses are present everywhere. Even when alone, one is surrounded by different discourses. The word originates from the French word *discours*, which translates to ‘speech’ or ‘discussion’. When speaking of discourses people often tend to refer to written texts. Indeed, written texts are an important part of discourses. However, discourses also cover spoken language and images. All of these are referred to as ‘texts’ in discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a research method that focuses on analyzing texts from contextual perspective. Discourse analysis combines both language analysis and social theory. Fairclough (2003, p. 21) argues that all texts are a part of social events. Fairclough explains that discourse analysis does not “share the traditional limitation of linguistic analysis to sentences or smaller grammatical units” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). Fairclough states that they “focus upon higher-level organizational properties of dialogue” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 3). For example, in spoken text, this can mean analyzing turn-taking in a conversation between colleagues or in a written text, focusing on the structure of a magazine cover and its headlines and images. “Discourses do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or ‘constitute’ them”, argues Fairclough (1992, p. 3). When analyzing a discourse, for example a magazine cover, researcher focuses on matters such as placing of images, choice of images, word choices and repetitive patterns in it.

3.2 Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis, CDA, likewise depicts structural patterns in texts. However, critical discourse analysis not only describes, but also examines how a discourse reflects sociopolitical structures and power relationships in society (Fairclough, 1992, p. 12). Fairclough (1992) argues that discourse is “shaped by relation of power and ideologies” (p. 12). CDA also reverses the roles and examines how the discourse constructs social identities and relations as well as beliefs and ideologies (Fairclough, 1992, p. 12). For example, when analyzing the magazine cover mentioned earlier, critical discourse analysis focuses also in combining the structural elements, such as highlighting of a certain word in a headline,

to a broader societal context. If the magazine for example exercises political propaganda, its rhetoric is driven by a sociopolitical ideology. Critical discourse analysis aims to uncover these hidden motives and ideologies and raise discussion (Fairclough, 1992, p. 36). For example formality of words, grammatical features, pronouns and modality are examined (Fairclough, 1989, p. 111). It could be said that in critical discourse analysis everything has a meaning and nothing exists without a purpose. Therefore, discourse analysts can motivate a change for the better in society.

CDA is an essential research method for this study, as this study examines social dynamics and dominating structures in the spectrum of gender. Fairclough (2003) writes that media is an important part of social research (p. 22). The importance of media in today's globalized world is even more significant, as television shows can spread a message everywhere in the world in a matter of seconds. Television series are accessible to all with internet and streaming services. Television opening sequences contain large amounts of symbolism and information compressed into a very short intro. They sum up the motives and key themes of the show but are rarely examined more thoroughly. Critical discourse analysis is ideal for analyzing the sociocultural messages of opening sequences and their visual rhetoric.

4. On the analysis of gender

This section exhibits the background theories and research utilized in this study and explains the key themes that support the analysis. A synopsis of previous research on representation of female gender norms in *Desperate Housewives* is also introduced.

4.1 Gender and gender norms

Today people recognize the difference between sex and gender. When talking about sex, we refer to physical and anatomical differences between two binary opposites, a male and a female (Wiesner-Hanks, 2011, pp. 2–3). It is important to note that gender is a concept that goes beyond one's biological attributes. Wiesner-Hanks (2011) claims that gender is ever-changing, culturally constructed and unstable system relying on differences (p. 2). “Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Butler, 2004 p. 42). Most often gender is still analyzed based on the two binaries, masculine and feminine. Butler calls gender a “mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized” (2004, p. 42). This is where gender norms come to action. A norm means the normalization of an act. Thus, gender norms are normalizations of behavior for a certain gender. Gender is an important part of behaving based on differences between the sexes. Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power (Wiesner-Hanks 2011, p. 2). Butler (2004) is concerned about the black and white thinking of gender and thus, gender norms: “A restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field performs a *regulatory* operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption” (p. 43). Ideas of how certain features are masculine and others are feminine create a cycle in which these ideas affect how people think and perceive and how they themselves choose or are forced to operate in the world (Wiesner-Hanks 2011, p. 2).

4.2 Traditional female gender norms and women's role

Recognizing that gender constructs from the expectations and stereotypes linked to femininity and masculinity, we can examine the norms associated with females and women. Williams (2012) defines traditional femininity to base in white, middle-class female image, particularly prominent in the 20th

century (p. 4). Traits related to this kind of femininity are for example kindness, willingness to nurture and socialness (Williams 2012, p. 4). An ideal woman is expected also to be humble and family-oriented (Williams 2012, p. 4). Wiesner-Hanks (2011) demonstrates gender norms with dominant and strong individuals being described in masculine terms and dependent ones in feminine (p. 2). This sort of dependence is prominent in many descriptions of women. Williams (2012) describes women as submissive and passive (p. 4). This means that a woman is a passive object whereas a man is an active subject. Women who assert dominance or power are frowned upon and considered masculine (Williams 2012, p. 5). Traits associated with men are often power, strength, assertiveness and rationality (Williams, 2012, p. 4). Men are expected to lead and take high positions in society. Their “natural born rationality” is what has been used to justify keeping the “overemotional” women from for example voting and taking part in societal decisions. One could argue that women have been treated in history like children: as incompetent and fragile, something to patronize. Klages (2006) argues that Western society values ‘male’ over ‘female’ (p. 92). Poststructuralist feminist theory aims to take down the division to these two binaries and the favoritism of the male (Klages 2006, p. 96).

Another important aspect related to femininity is beauty (Williams, 2012, p. 4). Williams (2012) mentions makeup, high heels, fashion magazines and Barbie dolls (p. 4). All these are related to looks or how to enhance them. The profitable business of cosmetics relies on women feeling unattractive and insecure. A normal feature in humans, such as pimples and wrinkles, are deemed in women, but normal for men. Women are expected to curl their lashes, pierce their body parts and paint their nails even though none of these features are natural for humans. Women who do not enhance their looks are a minority. It is rather peculiar why even in children’s cartoons, where the characters are animals or obscure shapes, female characters have long lashes, as if wearing mascara, to indicate that they are a woman. Male characters do not necessarily have any special indication to being a man; a male dog is just a dog. It could be argued that society sees womanhood as a trait itself. Thus, female characters need long lashes or skirts to prove their femininity whereas masculinity is seen as the standard, the normal. Williams (2012) explains that society and media affect women by connecting beauty and youth with good girls and old age and ugliness with being bad (p. 17). The aspiration to be beautiful comes from wanting to please others.

Perhaps the biggest concept related to womanhood is woman’s relation to family. Throughout history women have been the main characters of homes. Women have been and still are for example denied work, paid less and encouraged to stay home (Wiesner-Hanks, 2011, p. 45). In the past, women were told to “make their homes a haven in the heartless world” (Wiesner-Hanks, 2011, p. 45).

Hoare (1967, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009) writes that the whole historical development of women has been within the family: “Any discussion of the position of women which does not start from the family as a mode of her relation with society becomes abstract” (p. 90). Thus, motherhood is highly connected to womanhood.

Studies show that mothering reinforces women’s gender identity (McMahon, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 90). Since woman’s place has always been at home and her most important task has been bearing children, mothering has defined her as a person. Medina and Magnuson (2009) write about mothers’ mental health issues, and mention a 1998 study by Rogers and White, examining parents’ identities (p. 90). The study states mothers to identify themselves primarily as mothers and wives whereas fathers describe themselves with traits for example related to their occupation (Rogers & White, 1998, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 90). This proves the “selflessness” and living-for-others-mentality that a mother is assumed to possess. A mother works for the family and puts others’ needs before her own. A woman defines herself by how much others can benefit from her rather than by what she does herself. She is the epitome of goodness and self-sacrifice, a saint.

The concept of housewifery means woman taking care of household and not being employed. This used to be the norm and continues to have a strong place in many cultures, even in West, where gender equality improves rapidly. Stone and Lovejoy (2004, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009) interviewed a group of professional women who left their jobs to become housewives (p. 93). In 86% of the cases workplace inflexibility or so-called “maternal wall” was mentioned as a factor for choosing to quit work (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 93). Maternal wall means employers’ subconscious expectations about motherhood being an obstacle for working. Over half of the women also reported that their husbands affected their decision to become housewives (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004, as cited in Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 93). Medina and Magnuson (2009) claim that the results show that women are pressured to quit their careers due to society’s belief system that a mother should stay home nurturing her family (p. 93). Women make decisions under pressure of societal standards and in the context of political and social constraints and norms (Medina and Magnuson, 2009, p. 93).

4.3 On representation of gender in *Desperate Housewives*

As noted in the introduction, opening sequences are a fairly new and unexamined territory in the field of linguistics and discourse studies. Furthermore, the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* has

not yet been researched. However, as stated, it reflects the whole message of the show. Thus, it is valuable to examine previous research on female gender norms in *Desperate Housewives* as a whole.

Matty (2012) focuses on analyzing female sexuality and sexual norms in *Desperate Housewives*, stating that the series highlights old sexual dynamic of men dominating and women being objects (p. 48). Matty (2012) refers to a scene where Lynette and her husband are about to get intimate, but her husband interprets her being active and dominating as her trying to control him: “When the man is not in power, he feels threatened” (p. 48). This reinforces the norm of men being sexually dominant and active and women becoming sexual objects (Matty, 2012, p. 49). The study claims the men in *Desperate Housewives* to face threat when women act in a nontypical way for their gender, thus dominating to assure their masculinity (Matty, 2012, p. 49). This point is also proven in Bree wanting to feel closer to her husband but being told that men only feel close during sex (Matty, 2012, p. 55). Matty (2012) claims that it is “evident that the woman’s purpose is to serve” (p. 55). Even when Bree does not want to have sex, but to be close to her husband in other intimate ways, she feels compelled to satisfy him in a pornographic way, because that is what men want (Matty, 2012, p. 55). The scene highlights the stereotype of men as emotionless sex addicts and women as romantic pleasers.

Matty (2012) also gives credit to *Desperate Housewives* for discussing sexual assault (p. 54). The show discusses men’s sexual crimes and the impact they have on women: Gabrielle for example battles with dark past of incest by her stepfather and even as an adult is afraid of him (Matty, 2012, p. 54). This emphasizes the norm that even an old, weak man is a sexual threat to an independent adult woman.

Salomaa (2010) examines whether the lead characters of the show correlate to the traditional image of housewife defined by Friedan in *Feminine Mystique*. Five episodes from season 4 were examined, looking into the characters, their acts and the plot of the show (Salomaa, 2010).

The study examines the many ways in which the show represents women in a traditional way. The visual appearance of the characters in *Desperate Housewives* is claimed to support many female gender norms; for example, the lack of tomboys, muscular women and women with short hair are discussed (Salomaa, 2010, p. 22). The study also finds a strong wife discourse present in *Desperate Housewives*. The women are defined by their relation to their husbands (Salomaa, 2010, p. 12). Women are referred to with their husbands’ surnames and even after divorce they carry the stigma of being an ex-wife (Salomaa, 2010, p. 12). Salomaa (2010) claims that women in *Desperate Housewives* thus consider themselves primarily as mother and wives, not individuals (p. 12). This further demonstrates the old belief of women’s identity being related to wifery.

The lead housewives' resentment towards the character Edie Britt is also explained to reflect domesticated, old women's envy towards young, sexually active and working women (Salomaa, 2010, p. 12). According to Salomaa (2010), Edie "represents a threat and an inappropriate woman for the housewives and therefore the underlying ideology is ideology is also revealed" (p. 12). The study argues that *Desperate Housewives* implies that traditional housewives are the ideal women in society (Salomaa, 2010, p. 12). The research concludes that the overall themes and characters in *Desperate Housewives* are very similar to traditional gender norms and the main characters correlate to the traditional stereotype of housewives and women (Salomaa, 2010, p. 24).

However, Salomaa (2010) also notes that many scenes in the show reverse the traditional gender roles, thus showing the women as modern, capable and independent (p. 13). Salomaa (2010) refers to for example a scene where Susan protects her family and confronts Orson, the man she thinks tried to kill her husband: "This adds an interesting aspect to the representation of the housewives. Though the traditional values of family and home are emphasized, here a wife acts like a man would stereotypically act" (p. 13). Salomaa (2010) concludes that the show thus depicts but also in its own way fights stereotypes (p. 23). This beautiful playing with juxtaposition and exaggerating by generalizing is what satires and *Desperate Housewives* are at the very core and what my study also focuses on.

5. Analysis

In this section a detailed analysis on the opening sequence is conducted. This section has been chronologically divided into seven subsections, each focusing on an individual scene. The original paintings and their modifications are analyzed with the goal of identifying female gender norms, stereotypes and oppression portrayed in them.

5.1 Adam and Eve – the rational man and the incompetent woman

The opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* starts biblically from the beginning of time. The first scene features a pair of paintings named *Adam* (Cranach, approx. 1510-1520) and *Eve* (Cranach, approx. 1510-1520), the first man and woman on Earth. The two stand naked under an apple tree, known in the Bible as the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam looks at Eve with his hand on his chest. Eve holds an apple while a serpent hanging from the tree looks at her. In the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*, the couple, as in the original paintings, stand under an apple tree. A serpent dangling in the tree offers Eve an apple (figure 1). Eve accepts the apple but the second she grabs it a giant red apple falls from the tree, crushing Adam (figure 2). The apple has text *Desperate Housewives* in it. Eve looks at the giant apple with a content expression and a delicious apple in her hand (figure 3).



Figure 1. Adam and Eve (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** Death of Adam. **Figure 3.** Eve.

This scene portrays the poststructuralist view of binary opposites and the favoritism of the male binary. Klages (2006) argues that the black and white division of attributes between the ‘male’ and the ‘female’ also include for example light and dark, good and evil, positive and negative (p. 96). Things on the right side, the feminine side, of the spectrum, are deemed in the Western society as bad (Klages, 2006, p. 96). They have been positioned in a way that represents them as destructive to the attributes on the ‘masculine’, the left side (Klages, 2006, p. 96). According to Klages (2006) this

causes the society to look down upon the ‘feminine’ attributes, trying to control and suppress them (p. 96).

Exoticism and mystifying of the feminine is present in the original artwork and in the Bible as well. In the Bible, God creates Adam first and then creates Eve from Adam’s rib. Thus, a woman does not represent her independent entity but a part of something more whole and perfect, a man. God lets the two live in the perfect gardens of Eden, where there is plenty to eat and no violence. Only one thing is forbidden: eating from the tree of knowledge. Vicious serpent persuades Eve to eat from the tree and as a punishment God banishes humans from paradise. Therefore, mankind will always suffer. In the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives*, the same misogynistic story is depicted. Eve is the one that breaks the rule of God, falls for the temptations of the evil serpent and ultimately becomes the death of Adam, symbolizing the destruction of paradise meant for all humankind.

The division to binaries signifies women representing something foreign and exotic; the other. As mentioned previously, attributes related to the masculine are rationality, wisdom and logic. While Adam is strong enough to not listen to the serpent, Eve falls for it, making women naïve, selfish and irrational. It is ultimately women’s fault that humankind cannot live in paradise, but a world full of violence and death. Adam, symbolizing men, is the victim of the incompetent actions of Eve, the woman. Eve’s content expression and passiveness (figure 3) when her husband dies may indicate lack of remorse: a woman is evil and only seeks her own advantage. It may also indicate not understanding the consequences of her actions: a woman is not intelligent and is only happy to eat the apple. Either way, negative attributes related to the feminine in the binary spectrum are portrayed in the scene.

To make satire and criticize the oppression of women, what a better way to start than criticize the first man and woman on Earth. With this oppressive scene *Desperate Housewives* shows that since the beginning of time women have been imperfect in the eyes of men. They have always been in the way of the wise men and have thus “ruined it for everyone”.

5.2 Queen Nefertari – the drowning mother

The second scene locates to Ancient Egypt as its main material is a historical painting of Egyptian queen Nefertari, found by archeologists from her tomb (*“Tomb painting of Nefertari”*, approx. 1250 BC.). The painting features queen Nefertari stand facing left against a white background wall covered

in hieroglyphs (“*Tomb painting of Nefertari*”, approx. 1250 BC.). Perhaps these hieroglyphs represent the educated queen’s rare skill of reading and writing. She is dressed in a lavish manner in golden hat, white robe and jewellery (“*Tomb painting of Nefertari*”, approx. 1250 BC.). In the modification of *Desperate Housewives* Nefertari stands alone in a lavish palace, in her queen-like costume (figure 1), when suddenly a small child appears next to her. One by one more children appear out of nowhere, each one faster than the previous. A mass of children surrounds queen Nefertari, who lifts her arms up and starts to sink (figure 2). New children keep appearing while Nefertari is in trouble, ultimately sinking in the crowd of children, waving her hands for help as if she was drowning at sea and reaching for a lifebelt. No help arrives: Nefertari succumbs to the endless sea of children (figure 3).



Figure 1. Nefertari (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** The children. **Figure 3.** The drowning.

I argue that this scene portrays the struggles of motherhood, maternal burnout and the societal burden that mothers carry. *Desperate Housewives* uses the rhetorical device of hyperbole. Hyperbole means exaggeration in order to emphasize the point that one is making. In this case, the mother is under so much stress and burden that she drowns in it or the mother drowns in the demands of her children. In a similar way, the overwhelming number of children is also a rhetorical way of exaggerating to make an impact to the viewer. With a large quantity of children one can emphasize the large amount of stress and pressure, even if it in reality revolves around only one child. *Desperate Housewives* demonstrates that even Nefertari herself, a strong leader and an empowering female character in history, drowns under the burden of her children. The children literally drag Nefertari down with them off the screen, symbolizing death or even as far as to being dragged to hell. This symbolizes that a woman’s own life dies when she starts a family.

Becoming a mother can be a great crisis in a woman’s life. She loses her individuality and her independent life and what she was prior to having children. Life outside home, a promising career and her own dreams and goals turn into supporting her family and her children’s goals, when a woman gains the primary identity of being a mother and a wife. Even if a woman has a high position in society, in this case the intertextuality to Nefertari being an educated queen, her duties wait for her at

home after work. Research shows that even though women become more and more educated and take part in working, housework still heavily relies on women (Drobnič, 2010, p. 241). “Regardless of how household labor is defined, how it is measured, or in which country it is studied, research has consistently shown that women contribute a larger share of the household labor than men” (Drobnič, 2010, p. 241). A stereotype of men coming home from work and having the rest of the day as their free time lives on. This norm lives for example in old sitcoms where the husband comes home and yells “Honey, I’m home!” and sits to a made-up table. A father’s job is done after work. A mother’s job, however, never ends. Even if a mother is equal enough to have her own career, her responsibilities still lie at home after work.

The scene highlights heavily what Medina and Magnuson (2009) write about mental health of mothers and motherhood’s pressures: “Often mothers are stretched to fulfill functions, yet they feel guilt and failure for not meeting the intensive mothering ideal” (p. 93). The idea of mothers being self-sacrificing saints is harmful. It raises higher expectations for women and mothers and can make society deem them as lazy and not enough if they do not master every aspect of their lives. Medina and Magnuson (2009) argue that mothers experience expectations and pressure, while not getting enough appreciation (p. 93). Mothers cook, clean, help with homework, take care of the children and the husband and the home and sometimes even go to work at the same time (Medina and Magnuson, 2009, p. 92). It seems that is a taboo for mothers to talk about the bad sides of parenting. Mothering can be “boring, dirty, and exhausting” (Medina & Magnuson, 2009, p. 93).

5.3 The Arnolfini portrait – the servant of the husband

The third scene features the Late Middle Ages and the oil painting on oak panel *The Arnolfini Portrait* (Van Eyk, 1434). The painting depicts Italian merchant Giovanni di Nicolao Arnolfini and his wife. It is argued that the painting symbolizes marriage (Bedaux, 1986). The couple stands in a luxurious decorated apartment, holding hands. Bedaux (1986) claims the room to possibly be a place where newly-weds spend their first night together (p. 21). There is a small dog on the floor which is argued to symbolize fidelity and faith in marriage (Bedaux, 1986, p. 15). Evidently, the couple have a high social status and are wealthy. The man looks stoic while the woman faces obediently down with her hand is positioned on her stomach (Van Eyk, 1434). This gesture in the Renaissance was part of the female etiquette: “Young Renaissance women were encouraged to keep their hands demurely clasped around their girdles when in public, as this was seen as polite and unobtrusive” (Eagles, 2018, para. 2).

The opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* has the couple separated in the luxurious apartment. Arnolfini is portrayed in the front eating a banana (figure 1). He finishes eating and proceeds to throw the peel negligently behind him on to the floor. His wife arrives fast with a broom to obediently sweep the floor. It is revealed to the viewer that in the corner of the room there is a pile of old banana peels (figure 2).



Figure 1. Arnolfini (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** The servant.

It could be argued that the Arnolfini scene portrays wives as servants of husbands. Butler (2004) writes about gender stereotypes and norms, explaining that “a norm operates within social practices as the implicit standard of normalization” (p. 41). This means that gender stereotypes refer to customs and practices that are normative for genders. The whole theory relies on a poststructuralist view of the binary opposites of femininity and masculinity (Klages, 2006, p. 92). In this scene the exact stereotypes of male and female behavior are played with. The man is the initiator of the chain of events; he activates. The woman follows the man’s actions. In this case, the man initiates by creating a mess and the woman follows by cleaning the mess. Furthermore, the stereotype about men being unhygienic, rough and poor cleaners is a binary opposite to women being clean and neat. Men are not expected to clean whereas women have the role of being housemakers. This oppressive norm of women as servants is largely discussed in *Desperate Housewives*. Susan’s mother-in-law for example advises her by saying that a woman should be “a chef in the kitchen, a maid in the living room and a whore in the bedroom” (Salomaa, 2010, p. 12).

The layout of the scene also symbolizes gender roles in society. Critical discourse analysis examines texts’ large-scale structures and their relation to those of a small-scale (Fairclough, 1989, p. 111). Distinctly, a significant and important piece of news will get the biggest font and image on cover of a magazine. Likewise, in the opening sequence the man is big and in front; he has a significant role in society. The woman is small and in the back; she is merely a quiet, supportive observer in the playbook of great men in history.

As the wife cleans the floor it is revealed that in the corner there is a pile of old banana peels. This adds shock-value as the viewer realizes that the man's behavior is constant. It is not a simple mistake, but a reoccurring habit in their relationship. Arnolfini does not grant a single look at his wife when disposing his garbage on to the floor for her to clean but keeps on looking towards the viewer with a stoic expression. The binary opposites present men as ruthless and tough, whereas women are soft and loving. It could be interpreted that Arnolfini does not feel any sort of remorse for his actions: it is expected from a woman to serve her husband. *Desperate Housewives* makes a loud statement with this scene: even the greatest men in history, who we admire and idolize, likely had unadmirable and oppressing tendencies. The hardworking women behind them are forgotten.

5.4 American Gothic – woman's beauty and sexuality

The fourth scene takes the viewer to the early 20th century and revolves around the famous *American Gothic*, where an old American man and a woman stand in front of their gothic styled house, facing the viewer (Wood, 1930). With melancholic expression, the man holds a pitchfork while the modestly dressed woman behind his shoulder looks towards him (Wood, 1930). The digital twist of *Desperate Housewives* starts with the original painting's setting (figure 1). Suddenly a young woman resembling a pin-up girl, a sex icon of the mid-20th century, appears. The girl is heavily dolled up with lipstick, lavish hair and wearing nothing but a revealing corset. The scantily clad girl smilingly grabs the old man from his chin to bring him closer. The man throws his pitchfork away and his dull expression turns into a smile (figure 2). The old woman recedes to the back, looking at the two flirting, as an open food can appears around her. The woman looks distraught as the can's lid rolls over her face to succumb her inside and present the text *Canned sardines - aged* with a depressing cover image of her (figure 3).



Figure 1. American Gothic (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** The pin-up girl. **Figure 3.** Aged sardines.

Evidently, the scene discusses female beauty and sexuality and the idea of woman's value being in her youth and her looks. For the symbolic interpretation to be done right, one can assume that in the eyes of *Desperate Housewives* the old woman and man are a couple. This is often the case when interpreting *American Gothic*, even though the artist's family have declared the woman to be the man's daughter (Fineman, 2005, para. 5). Given that the whole theme of *Desperate Housewives*' is wifery, one can analyze the painting as portraying a couple.

The scene has two portrayals of women: the old, unwanted hag and the young, lusted beauty. The scene symbolizes how an aged woman loses her value next to a younger woman. Idealization of youth as the only good and beautiful stage of life controls women's lives and self-image (APA Task Force on Sexualization of Girls, 2010). Media exposure has been found to constrain young women's conceptions of femininity by putting appearance and physical attractiveness at the center of women's value (APA Task Force on Sexualization of Girls, 2010).

The couple have lived a long life together: they have built a house and worked together on a farm. However, they are not happy, but look rather melancholic. The minute the young pin up girl shows up, the husband's facial expression turns into a smile. The young woman does not bring anything with her except for her looks. This indicates that the woman herself, a young, beautiful pin-up girl is all he needs to be happy. No matter if the old couple have had a long life and children together, the man is willing to change her in the snap of a finger for the sake of getting a beautiful girl next to him. The old woman looking distraught and receding to the back indicates that she is invisible in the eyes of the world. She is compared to a can of aged sardines, meaning that she is rotten and disposable, as if a woman has a best before date before which she must be used. *Desperate Housewives* argues with this scene that society does not acknowledge aging women as important as young women. The scene portrays women as two juxtapositions: one can either be the good wife or the sexy lover.

The beauty ideals of women and beauty as a norm for women lies in objectification. Objectification theory suggests that sexualization of women has dehumanizing effects for how people perceive them (Bernard et al., 2020, p. 2). Bernard et al (2020) state that one of the primary contributors to objectification of women is the sexualization of them in the media (p. 3). The female body has been sexualized since the beginning of time in artwork, music, commercials, fashion, video games and television. Sexualization changes the social perception of the person in society (Bernard et al., 2020, p. 3). Sexualized people are believed to acquire negative attributes, thus they become dehumanized.

Bernard et al. (2020) state that using heavy makeup reduces humanness related attributes linked to the person in the eyes of the viewer (p. 2). Bernard et al. (2020) found out that women with heavy makeup are seen as less experienced, less competent and less moral. This is demonstrated in the opening sequence as the pin-up girl seducing the married man. She is sexualized to the core with her heavy makeup, done hair and corset, and is seen as almost “stealing” the husband.

This juxtaposition in society creates an image of women either being modest, saint-like mother figures or sexual, immoral objects who cannot be taken seriously. In the opening sequence this is highlighted with the wife dressed modestly, in a high collar and her hair on a tight bun. This juxtaposition leaves no grey area where women can have multiple traits from both spectrums, being both warm and cold, funny and serious and so on. Problems occur, however, when women are fantasized over in pornography and media. A girl is then told that she is a good girl if she does not use heavy makeup, pose seductively in social media and does well in school, but she also constantly receives hints that her worth lies in her physical attractiveness and satisfying men. This creates a dilemma where women do not know which category they should be in, thus never feeling good enough because they are constantly told they should act like the other model type.

5.5 Of course I can! and Campbell’s soup cans – woman as a homemaker

The fifth scene utilizes propaganda poster *Of course I can!* (Williams, 1944) and *Campbell’s Soup Cans* (Warhol, 1962). In Williams’ work (1944) a ruffle-aproned housewife holds a pile of food jars in her hands with a text *Of course I can! I’m patriotic as can be – And ration points won’t worry me!* Warhol’s work (1962) contains pop art styled printed red soup cans. The fifth scene starts with the previous sardine can lying in a kitchen where the woman from the propaganda poster carries groceries (figure 1). Food jars and cans jiggle as the troubled woman tries to hold on to them. The jars fall on the floor one by one, lastly, a Campbell’s soup can (figure 2).



Figure 1. The housewife (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** The soup can.

Evidently, this scene discusses women as homemakers. The original poster is a propaganda poster from World War II. During the war, women were trusted to take care of the home country (Stoller-Conrad, 2012, para. 3). US wanted the people to ration their food consumption, so posters were created to encourage women to can food and thus show their patriotism (Stoller-Conrad, 2012, para. 3). The woman in the poster is the typical ideal of an American housewife: she wears a ruffled apron, lipstick and blush and has her hair done (Williams, 1944). The original poster's message (*Of course I can! I'm patriotic as can be – And ration points won't worry me!*) refers to a good housewife being a patriot who thinks about the community and well-being of her country. In the *Desperate Housewives* opening the gender norm of women as nurturers, kind-hearted and loving characters is presented. To make everyone happy, she will work harder at home, canning food and taking care of her family. The discourse of women and kitchen is reinforced with Campbell's soup can (see figure 2).

The jars falling from the housewife's hands refer to the stress and the amount of work women have at home. *Desperate Housewives* indicates that housewifery is not an easy job. Even if the housewife looks perfect in her idyllic kitchen, with her makeup and ruffled apron, she is flawed and makes a mess.

5.6 Romantic couple and Couple arguing – women in relationships

The sixth scene takes the viewer to modern time in form of pop art. *Romantic couple* (Dale, approx. 1960) depicts a happy modern couple with the woman laying her hand on the man's chest. *Couple arguing* (Dale, approx. 1960) portrays the same man, dressed in white collar shirt and a tie, trying to explain something to the woman and the woman looking at him unhappily over her shoulder.

In the opening sequence the Campbell's soup can falls, taking the viewer to the next scene, where it lands in the hands of the man in *Romantic couple*. The young couple face each other happily, like in the painting. Suddenly the man's expression turns serious, resulting to the woman becoming sad and a tear drop falling on her cheek. Suddenly, she punches the man in the face. The man receives a black eye and falls.



Figure 1. Romantic couple (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped). **Figure 2.** The punch.

It can be argued that the sixth scene demonstrates modern women in relationships and furthermore modern love troubles. The smiling couple seems happy at first, but then the man proceeds to do or say something negative with his frowned expression. This initiative results in the woman starting to cry. It is not clear to the viewer what the couple argue about, but it can be interpreted that the man is seen as the fault in this scene. Arguably *Desperate Housewives* implies in this scene that he is the one who makes the woman cry, thus being the villain of the story. Here the series plays again with the stereotype of women being emotional, dramatic and instable, whereas men being cruel and non-committed.

More interestingly, it could be identified that this scene also implies the unequal power relationship between the genders. Historically, women have always been subjected to violence by men. As time has passed, laws have been set to protect women from domestic violence. Mindset towards corporal punishment has changed in West. Today disciplining wives by hitting is seen as a terrible, punishable crime. However, society does not yet deem violence towards men with such force. Women hitting men is often perceived funny or not as severe. This is due to the old harmful norm of women being weak and men being strong. Men are not allowed to be vulnerable or feel pain, making it more acceptable for modern women to get away with violence towards men. In this scene the man is vilified for initiating a problem and making the woman cry. Therefore, unfortunately, in the eyes of many, he “deserves” the punch.

Previous research also depicts theme of domestic violence against men in *Desperate Housewives*. Salomaa (2010) mentions a scene where Gabrielle argues with her husband and proceeds to ask why she is not allowed to hit her husband in her own house (p. 16). The scene is supposed to be humorous, making Gabrielle’s statement sound ridiculous and absurd to the viewer. With exaggerating and magnifying *Desperate Housewives* questions the old gender norm of men being strong and emotionless and women being weak, thus being allowed to use violence against men.

5.7 Desperate Housewives – the imperfect woman

The last scene returns to the first painting's biblical set. The punched man from the previous scene falls towards the apple tree, making it shake and shed all its apples. The four protagonist women of Desperate Housewives stand under the tree, each catching an apple. The evil serpent dangles in the tree, looking at them. Each woman now stands with a red apple in their hand, smiling (figure 1).

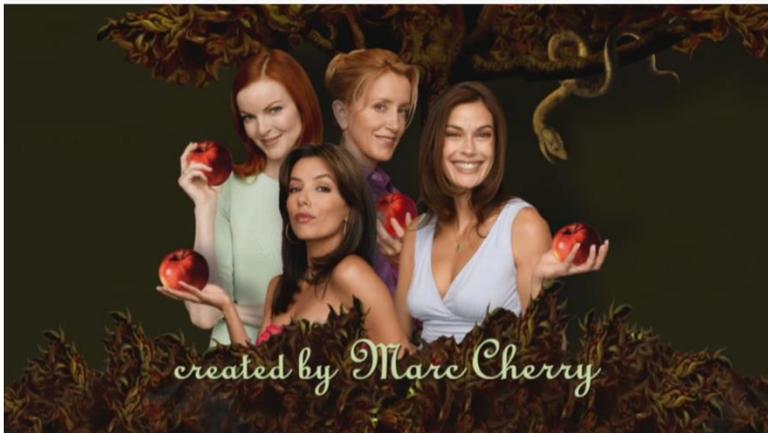


Figure 1. The descendants of Eve (screenshot from the opening sequence; cropped).

The last scene of the opening sequence of Desperate Housewives concludes the message of the whole series and its opening: women are imperfect. The protagonists of the show are housewives of the 21st century, but they are still women and therefore the descendants of the first woman Eve, who cursed all humankind. The same tempting serpent that woke the core gendered instincts, meaning childish curiosity and gullibility, of the first woman still lives in the tree (see figure 1), symbolizing that all the four housewives have fallen for the same temptations of the old serpent and thus embody the same ancient female gender norms. The smiles on the women's faces can be interpreted as either mischievous or nonchalant, supporting either the stereotype of the naïve, silly woman or the theory of mystifying the exotic feminine. Whichever interpretation one chooses to follow, the scene portrays strong unequal gender norms. Red apple is the symbol of forbidden, which all these seemingly perfect housewives, the ideal women in society, fell for. Thus, Desperate Housewives concludes the strong socio-political message of the whole series: a woman will never be perfect, but she does not have to be.

6. Discussion and conclusion

As stated in the introduction of this study, previous research has mainly focused on depicting gender stereotypical behavior and traits in *Desperate Housewives* and its characters, claiming that *Desperate Housewives* portrays and even supports traditional female gender norms and gender roles. The purpose of this study is not to disclaim the previous research on *Desperate Housewives*, as the analyses and observations in existing studies are indeed correct and successful, but rather to debunk the conclusions that *Desperate Housewives* portrays gender stereotypes for the sheer purpose of visibility, popularity and entertainment. Previous research has indeed been right in analyzing how and which female gender norms and sex roles the series depicts. Bree's patriotism and love for cooking for her family truly characterizes the idealization of vintage housewives. Gabrielle's addiction to beauty and new shoes is a clear stereotype of looks-concerned and materialistic women. Susan's husband divorcing her because of his young secretary without doubt portrays the poor status of ageing women and their sexuality in society. Needless to say, Lynette being forced to quit her career and stay at home with her children certainly illustrates women's primary role as mothers.

It is however the conclusion that one will draw from these observations that determines if one fails to see *Desperate Housewives* as socio-critical satire rather than as misogynistic, trivial entertainment. Assumably this is due to research not taking interest in the opening sequence of the series and thus, critically missing the rhetorical devices and symbolism that reveal the series to be a satire. As discussed in section 2, television opening sequences have experienced a radical transformation in the 21st century, turning from classic character presentations to modern symbolical compositions. Opening sequences of the new era do not just merely present the characters of the show but incorporate the key message of the show in them. Therefore, the revolutionary opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* reveals the viewer its socio- and gender-critical agendas. A satire makes fun of a subject with the intention of criticizing and sparking a change in society. It has a strong socio-critical agenda that it expresses through means of humor, sarcasm and irony.

As observed in this study, in the opening sequence of *Desperate Housewives* these satirical features are evident. *Desperate Housewives* utilizes many methods such as intertextuality, exaggeration, hyperbole, symbolism and metaphor in order to present the unequal gendered aspects of our society. Every scene presented in the opening characterizes women and their lives according to traditional woman's role and female gender norms. Female gender norms such as women's emotionality, intelligence, or the lack thereof, motherhood, sexuality and ageing are depicted in the opening sequence scenes. Queen Nefertari drowning in the sea of children for example symbolizes maternal

burnout and motherhood, whereas the scene with the pinup girl and the old woman represents the dilemma of female ageing, sexuality and value of beauty. From Eve being incompetent of making wise decisions to Arnolfini's wife cleaning up after him, *Desperate Housewives* successfully discusses female gender norms in relation to their historical time periods and societal contexts. It criticizes the favoritism of men and the oppression of women through playing with stereotypes and making them seem ridiculous and exaggerated to the viewer, thus leaving a strong impact. The series represents its own unique and successful niche, and this way makes its powerful message heard.

In light of these findings, I encourage even more researchers to take interest in analyzing the opening sequences of television series and films. Media plays an important part in creating and realizing culture and behavior of today's world. It both presents us how the world and people's attitudes work but also vice-versa influences our own attitudes and the world. Socio-political criticism in television continues to grow and offers people a powerful way of influencing others and being influenced. More interestingly, in order to convey the key message fast opening sequences rely on heavy symbolism and include hidden messages. Researchers can and must unfold these messages to increase the transparency of media. Therefore, the study of opening sequences makes a spectacularly interesting research subject for linguists and discourse analysts.

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