SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN AMERICAN TV SHOWS

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Abstract

This thesis looks at two forms of self-reflexivity through examples from recent American television shows with the aim of exploring the queerness of the phenomena connected to it. The two forms to be discussed in detail are the doppelgänger or the double with examples from *Dexter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on the one hand, and the device of the *mise en abyme* with examples from *Glee* and *Queer as Folk* on the other. Through looking at the main theoretical concerns connected to self-reflexivity I show how closely related the concerns of queer theory and those of theories of self-reflexivity are. In analyzing the examples mentioned above, I will draw attention to how a queer theory perspective can provide for exciting ways of interpreting instances of self-reflexivity.

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Introduction

There was an impression followed by a set of questions that motivated me to choose the topic of self-reflexivity for this thesis.

As I was reading accounts of what self-reflexivity is, about the moment when the text or the piece of art draws attention to its own constructedness, to its own status, to its—if I dare say—real nature, I had the impression that there is something queer in these scholarly narratives.

Is it that I read in these accounts a fantasy of the piece of art looking straight back into the gazing eyes, exclaiming, *"This is who I am, this is what you are looking at and I know you are looking!"* Is it the assumption at the core of framing self-reflexivity that this is not how the film should behave, that the film gets naughty and causes discomfort to the viewer by making her or him feel caught in the act of gazing? Or is it the gesture that the television show *comes out* as a television show? Or, if I take a step back, I wonder, is it the uncanny moment when the text—in an unanticipated gesture of anthropomorphism—comes to self-consciousness unexpectedly?

Whereas self-reflexivity has been extensively theorized by scholars since the 1970s, the queerness of this group of phenomena has not really been picked up on in the last two decades. In order to explore the potentials of such a pairing, I begin the thesis (in the first chapter) by exploring some of the main concerns with regards to self-reflexivity that appeared in the disciplinary fields that could be connected to the analysis of current American television programming. I am not arguing that these are the only concerns or that these are the only disciplinary frameworks that have dealt with the phenomena of

self-reflexivity. My goal with this chapter is to provide a relatively narrow scope that could provide indicators of those questions that I see as connected to some of the concerns at the very core of queer theory.

Then, in the second chapter, I explore Sigmund Freud's term, the *uncanny*, which I—among others in recent years—see as extremely apt to connect to queer theory despite what might be considered significant limitations of Freud's text. As my examples, I first look at how identity is structured in *Dexter* through notions of faking and through mirroring configurations. In the case of my other example, *Buffy*, I show how the doppelgängers engage in circles of imitations with the "original" characters up until their elimination, after which the direction of the mirroring seems to turn "inward," and the characters incorporate the doubles into their hybrid personalities.

Finally, in the third chapter, I discuss examples of the *mise en abyme* in *Glee* and *Queer as Folk*, to show once again patterns of mirroring where there is a possibility to go beyond a perhaps oversimplifying interpretative gesture of assuming there to be two frames, hierarchically positioned in relation to each other, and one providing commentary on the other in a unilateral direction. Instead, I propose to read there chains of interpretations that confuse this linearity and overwrite and transform each other.

Chapter 1.

Theoretical Frameworks of Self-Reflexivity

The use of self-reflexive elements has become increasingly widespread in American popular television shows in the past few decades (Allrath and Gymnich 4); therefore, how we make sense of this phenomenon is extremely important for our understanding of current American popular culture. In this chapter, I want to show those theoretical frameworks that have treated this subject as a highly important and theoretically exciting one. On the one hand, this chapter aims at giving a general overview of the theoretical context(s) surrounding this phenomenon. On the other, I want to bring attention to the commonalities in the different frameworks, because these elements of the rhetoric of the debates will be connected to the topic of the next chapter. In the next chapter, I will look at the phenomenon of doppelgangers, which is often times not considered to be the most representative form of self-reflexivity; yet, I will argue that throughout the debates in these slightly different but overlapping theoretical frameworks, exactly those key terms, concepts, and binary oppositions keep recurring as what are omnipresent in the discussions of the doppelganger. Altogether, I want to make the point with this parallel that the arguments that appear in these frameworks can be read as connected to very similar cultural anxieties as what are often discussed as being connected to the phenomenon of the doppelganger. The three slightly different, yet—of course—interconnected theoretical frameworks will be those of literary theory from the eighties, film theory in the seventies, and finally, television studies in recent years. This

means that I will not be following a chronological order, but the logic of discussing theories in an order that gets closer and closer to the medium of television.

1.1 LITERARY THEORY FRAMEWORK

Within the literary theory framework, the two main notions connected to self-reflexivity as a narrative device that have been central in scholarly literature and that I will build upon later are the (re-)examination of the relationship between fiction and reality on the one hand, and a certain kind of a double gesture of distancing and involving, of pushing the reader away in some way, but at the same time pulling her/him in on the other.

As Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis point out, self-reflexivity and metafictionality gained special prominence as a topic in literary (and film) theory in the 1970s and 1980s (*New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* 205). Patricia Waugh, in her highly influential 1984 book, *Metafiction*, defines metafiction—of which self-reflexivity is the main device—as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). The self-reflexive moment is the moment of the piece drawing attention to its own status or "nature" as constructed. Besides her emphasis on the relationship between fiction and reality, it is also important to point to the "self-consciousness" of the piece of art, which Waugh foregrounds in the above quotation.

While Waugh—or any other theorist of the time—certainly did not consider the occurrence of self-reflexive elements in literature to be a new phenomenon, she did argue

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in her book that metafiction became more commonly used by authors of postmodern fiction (as a tool to reflect on the relationship between fiction and reality), and that is due to a general change in the understanding of the relation of literature—and more generally, narratives—and reality. As she points it out,

> contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of external verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures. (7)

Therefore, for Waugh, the emphasis is on how seeing the constructedness of literary pieces can open the door to seeing other kinds of texts as constructed as well. Waugh sees the importance of metafictional writing, then, in that "in showing us how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'" (18). Thus, to slightly refocus the importance of the fiction-reality relationship, in Waugh's understanding, the overwhelming potential of metafiction is that our sense of fictionality or the imaginary and of reality change in a way that these two seemingly oppositional or mutually exclusively defined categories are in fact revealed as akin or inseparable.

Another aspect that appears in (other) literary scholars' works is the significance of the intrinsically ambiguous or paradoxical nature and mode of narration that metafiction entails. Linda Hutcheon, while still focusing on the reader, defines as the main feature of metafiction what she calls the "metafictional paradox," the notion that this kind of narrative demands "of the reader both *detachment and involvement*" (*A*

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Poetics of Postmodernism X, emphasis added). Hutcheon explains this oppositely

oriented gesture and extends it to the piece of art as well, by arguing,

> […] in all fiction, language is representational, but of a fictional 'other' world, a
>
> complete and coherent 'heterocosm' created by the fictive referents of the signs.
>
> In metafiction, however, this fact is made explicit and, while he reads, the reader
>
> lives in a world which he is forced to acknowledge as fictional. However,
>
> paradoxically the text also demands that he participate, that he engage himself
>
> intellectually, imaginatively, and affectively in its co-creation. This two-way pull
>
> is the paradox of the reader. The text's own paradox is that it is both
>
> narcissistically self-reflexive and yet focused outward, oriented toward the reader.
>
> (*Narcissistic Narrative* 7)

Therefore, Hutcheon sees the position of the reader of a metafictional piece of

writing as that of a more self-aware and critical, active one. This idea is undoubtedly in

line with Brecht's political considerations of the epic theatre, which is the most central

reference within the film theory framework of the 1970s as discussed below. It is also

worth noting that Hutcheon emphasizes that the fictional world is a complete and

coherent one.

Mark Currie, in his introduction to the collection of essays he edited with the title

Metafiction (published a decade after Waugh's book), shifts the focus from the reader to

the producer of the text. Currie argues that metafiction should be understood as "a

borderline discourse, a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction

and *criticism*, which takes the border as its subject" (2, emphasis added). Once again,

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although with a slightly different focus, metafiction is defined as a crossing between two seemingly mutually exclusive modes (fiction and criticism).

To bring these points together, in a number of theoretical writings that analyze comprehensively the phenomenon and functioning of metafiction, the main conclusions regard how metafiction problematizes the relationship of fiction and reality, and that this problematizing includes that the reader's position is changed from—in simplistic terms— passive to active due to perceiving these specific self-reflexive elements in the narrative. Importantly, metafictional writing is theorized as self-conscious writing that calls for or produces a self-conscious reader, or to put it in other words, through seemingly oppositional gestures, in the web of apparently mutually exclusive forces, the position of the artwork and of the reader are changed in the same way as their "rising" to consciousness is mirrored.

1.2 FILM THEORY FRAMEWORK

Cinematic self-reflexivity came to forefront in the theoretical writings of the 1970s. This was arguably in a large part due to an emerging general, massive revival in popularity of the writings and political aesthetics of Bertolt Brecht that dominated both in film theory and in filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s (*Film Theory* 145). One of the most well known writings—of the time and since—on self-reflexivity is Dana Polan's 1974 article, "Brecht and the Politics of Self-Reflexive Cinema," which connected self-reflexivity (in films) as a device to the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Polan's article is representative of this more general trend which included other influential essays like Peter Wollen's "Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d'est*" (1972), which prescribed a

revolutionary, anti-mainstream cinema along the lines of Brechtian aesthetics, or Colin MacCabe's "Realism and the Cinema: Notes on Some Brechtian Theses" (1974). As apparent in these essays, it was Brecht's aim to "demystify capitalist society" through "an art which would free socially conditioned phenomena from the 'stamp of familiarity,' and reveal them as striking, as calling for explanation, as other than natural" (*New Vocabularies in Film Semiotics* 204, 203) that attracted the theoreticians, critics, and artists of the era. This explicitly political goal is what the essays call for, and self-reflexivity is postulated as the primary device towards this goal.

The most important element of the ideal cinema in this view was the production of a critical viewer. As Robert Stam points out, the Brechtian framework included first and foremost the goal of "the nurturing of the active spectator (as opposed to the dreamily passive 'zombies' engendered by bourgeois theater or the goose-step automatons generated by Nazi spectacle)" (*Film Theory* 146). Clearly, this effect on the viewer is what is echoed later in texts of literary theory on metafiction as described above, although within film theory (and practice) of the time, this was an outspoken political strategy and not just a presumption.

Polan's arguments in particular resonate with writings on metafiction and literary self-reflexivity. He argues, "*a distance* in which the work turns in on itself and speaks about its own artistic conventions and presuppositions" is "an attitude of self-reflexivity, of the text *making strange* its own formal devices" (emphases added). It is important to note here that Polan sees the self-reflexive gesture to be one of *distancing* and about *making strange*. Polan also makes it explicit that this gesture is "a movement out of the self-enclosed world of the artwork toward a real world which the mediations of art

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usually leave behind," thereby again describing a move from the fictive world towards the "real one." Therefore, it is clear that although the theoretical context of this framework is slightly different from that of the literary theory framework, very similar considerations are at the center of these arguments.

Yet, the most interesting conclusion that Polan comes to is his hierarchy of "forms of pleasure in a work of art." Within this hierarchy, he puts the "pleasure of familiarity […], the pleasure of uncritical, reified realism" at the bottom. At the second place, there is "the pleasure which comes from art's dehumanization of from forced self-reflexivity." His argument throughout the essay is against this type of self-reflexivity, which is enjoyed "just" for its technical playfulness, of which he sees no import. Ultimately, at the top of the hierarchy,

> there is the pleasure elaborated by Brecht, the pleasure of an art which realizes the dream of the Roman poet Horace in his *Ars Poetica* […]: to please and instruct. To please through instruction. To instruct through pleasure. An art whose content is a combination of the world and a better version of the world.

As obvious from this form's marked difference from the *dehumanized* second form, the ideal self-reflexivity (which he calls for throughout the essay) is a *humanized* one, and one that can only be a *combination* of worlds.

1.3 TELEVISION STUDIES FRAMEWORK

Within television studies, two aspects appear as central and different from what has already been pointed out in this chapter before: the role of technologization and the role of a new type of (interactive) fan culture. The boom in self-relfexive narrative

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elements in the television shows of the last few decades often gets connected to changes in the medium of television. The growing presence of these techniques is not just seen as "bear[ing] the imprint of the aesthetics of postmodernism" (Allrath and Gymnich 4), but also—just as importantly if not more so—as rooted in the dynamism of technological developments. As Allrath and Gymnics point out, "many of the narrative forms which have come to be used in contemporary television series have been made possible by technological innovations," including "computerized editing and manipulation of the visual and auditory tracks," and these are essential to the above mentioned postmodern aesthetics that self-reflexivity is an essential part of (4).

Perhaps even more interestingly, a closer examination of the role of industrial practices that aim at facilitating a viewer with "insider" knowledge (Caldwell) can reveal how self-reflexivity can also serve as a tool in the process of producing an "active viewer" catering to corporate interest. John T. Caldwell lists a great number of examples of how current fan culture is supported by producers not only through enabling infrastructures (e.g. providing and developing internet sources to support interaction), but also through the constant production of behind-the-scenes and self-reflexive footage, which are primary forms of showing television in the process, in the making. As he argues, "a close examination of industrial textual practice[…]shows how the industry theorizes its presence in moving image form, even as it teaches the audience at home by publicly circulating insider knowledge about the televisual apparatus" (103). This teaching of the audience is an essential part of how today's fan culture is (re)produced. In other words, it is in the best interest of the industry to be self-reflexive as part of selling the self-image of "active partaker" to the audience.

In short, television studies has to reflect on the increasing use of self-reflexive elements that is apparent in recent television production, and it seems that technologization and fan culture, which are both discussed extensively for various purposes within scholarly literature, can easily be seen also as connected to this phenomenon. These two aspects, on the other hand, can quite simply be seen as just rephrasing or associating new types of information with what has been discussed before in the other frameworks: a focus on the viewer (or perceiver) as active and on the process as "disillusioned," so to say.

1.4 CONCLUSION

What literary theory, film theory, and television studies have in common in the understanding of self-reflexivity is a focus on a change happening in the reader's/viewer's position from passive onlooker to active partaker, and a troubled relation to a surrounding world, where it becomes troublesome to differentiate real from fiction, imaginary, and desired.

Consciousness appears to be of essential importance here. Let me take a moment to sum up again the dynamics of how the perception of self-reflexive elements supposedly happens. Distancing happens in the moment when the reader or viewer becomes conscious. More precisely, the self-reflexivity, that is, the self-consciousness of the artwork produces the self-consciousness in the reader or viewer. When the work of art calls attention to its own constructedness, in that moment the reader/viewer gets thrown out of the illusionary relationship that s/he had with the fictional world. In that moment, somehow the revealing of the "real" nature of the art piece and that of the reader/viewer

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bring these two entities closer together, as if just through the very fact of being revealed as what they "really" are. Altogether, this may sound like a slightly romanticized scenario. What I wanted to show is that the way these frameworks present self-reflexivity seems to follow narrative of two entities relating to each other wherein true and fake identities play a central role. In the next chapter, through looking at the phenomenon of doppelgangers (and the theories thereof), it is exactly this relation and question of identity that will be at the center of analysis.

Chapter 2.

The Doppelgänger

In this chapter, I will analyze doppelgängers and split characters through connecting the term *uncanny* as used by Sigmund Freud to the affect *shame* as described Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, drawing attention to the similar concerns that the authors raise in connection to these terms. While I intend to show that these common concerns are also similar to those explored in the theoretical frameworks discussed in the first chapter, I also want to emphasize in my analysis of instances of doubles in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dexter* the mirroring configurations in the structures of the shows, in order to show the potential sources of connections with the chapter following this one, on the *mise en abyme*.

First, I will review what Freud's use of the term *uncanny*, as he described it extensively in his essay, "The 'Uncanny,'" while I will also draw attention to specifically those points where Sedgwick's *shame* can be seen as functioning in a similar way. In my examples, I will first show how *Dexter* can be interpreted as a series centered around an actor character who negotiates his—always theatrically performed—identity and relationships in such a way are always configured in mirroring structured. Then, through the example of the doubles in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, I will show how there is a constant play with chains of copies and hybrid characters throughout the show.

2.1 THE QUEERNESS OF THE UNCANNY

The *uncanny* as defined by Freud in his essay of the same title (1919) has been vividly used in the analysis of Gothic texts and in theorizing about the genre (or mode of

writing) itself. With the recent renewed popularity of the Gothic in American popular culture—whether in literature, films or television shows—debates making use of Freud's term are as lively as ever in contemporary scholarly literature. While the queer potentials of Freud's text were arguably pointed out before the emergence of queer theory per se by Hélène Cixous in her 1976 essay, "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The 'Uncanny')," the connection of queerness and the uncanny has come to the fore in recent decades. On a more general level, there has been immense interest in the queerness of the Gothic (often defined as the genre of the uncanny) in the last decades[1], while a couple of writings in recent years (e.g. Royle 2003 and Jenzen 2007) have focused emphatically on the relation between Freud's text and queer theory as well.

In this section, I will look at two main aspects of the uncanny that connect it to the frameworks of self-reflexivity described in the first chapter on the hand and to queer theory on the other. First, the uncanny is most importantly a term of ambiguity, the meeting point of what are assumed to be mutually exclusive perceptions. Second, the *uncanny* is just as importantly about repetition and recurrence. Finally, I will look at how these two aspects of the uncanny are tied together and culminate in the figure of the doppelgänger.

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[1] A long list could be provided here, but just to point to some of the works, see for example the special issue of *Gothic Studies* entitled *Queering Gothic Films*, (vol. 7. nr. 2) from 2005, George E. Haggerty's *Queer Gothic* (2006), *Queering the Gothic* (2009, edited by William Hughes and Andrew Smith) or Paulina Palmer's *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (2012) most recently. Also, it may be worth nothing here that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick had from the start of her academic career a particular interest in the Gothic—her first published work (a revised version of her doctoral dissertation) was titled *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (first published in 1980), and certain chapters of *Between Men* (1985) were also dedicated to the genre.

2.1.1 FAMILIAR YET STRANGE

In his essay, "The 'Uncanny,'" published in 1919, Freud defines what is *uncanny* as a specific case of *frightening*, concluding that "the uncanny is that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). Freud argues that this "leading back" to the old known and familiar happens in a way that turns the old and familiar into strange and unexpected, thereby resulting in the sensation of the *uncanny*. In short, the cause of the emotional reaction that the uncanny is associated with is a confrontation of different or supposedly irreconcilable perceptions.

In order to further explore the conceptual ambiguity of the term (and to support his argument), Freud embeds into his text etymological and encyclopedic dictionary entries. Through these, he first shows how the German word "unheimlich" is in contrast with not just *homely* (*heimlich*), but also with *native* (*heimisch*) (220). As he points it out, "the German word '*unheimlich*' is obviously the opposite of '*heimlich*' ['homely'], '*heimisch*' ['native']—the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (Freud 220). The emphasis here refers to that this is not just about something that is not known and familiar, but that it *should* be, yet it is not. Furthermore, as he analyzes the entries, Freud comes to the conclusion that "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (226). Therefore, what he finds really exciting about the *uncanny* is that it is most characteristically defined by what it is not meant to be, that in the uncanny, those categories which seem irreconcilable collapse into each other.

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In her essay, "It Walks: The Ambulatory Uncanny" (published in 2003), Susan Bernstein also points very clearly to the importance of the uncanny being a clash of differences:

> [t]he differences between presence and absence, and sameness and difference, self and other, are […] particularly at stake here. All of these pairs are troubled by the destabilization of binary opposition that Freud formulates as one of the fundamental features of the uncanny, that is, between the "heimlich" and the "unheimlich," the "homey" and the "foreign," the familiar and the strange. While the uncanny is often discussed in terms of these pairs, most importantly, the opposition itself is untenable. (1113)

Just as importantly, the oppositions that are troubled throughout Freud's account are clearly gendered terms. In the first part of his essay, Freud quotes from a number of sources that define *Heimlich*, the opposite of *unheimlich*, as "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly," as "belonging to the house of the family, or regarded as so belonging," and as "arousing a sense of agreeable restfulness and security as in one within the four walls of his house" (222). Therefore, it seems like the opposite of *uncanny*—which, in Freud's argument, is of course inseparable from the uncanny—is also something that is profoundly connected to the domestic: the family, the house/home.

As also suggested by the reference to the "foreign" in the quotation by Bernstein above, and as clear from Freud's lines, the domestic is also evoked in these descriptions in the sense of the *homeland* ("Heimat" in German). Therefore, the uncanny is associated with a strong spatial sense, and this space is apparently one where the domestic is expected. At another point, Freud calls the "female genital organs […an] *unheimlich*

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place," and this is soon followed by his explanation that "whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: 'this place is familiar to me. I've been here before,' we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her" (245).

Just as Freud makes it fundamental to the *uncanny* that it is a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar or strange, so does Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick put these very same notions at the center of how the affect of *shame* works in her analysis of Henry James's prefaces in "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James's *The Art of the Novel*" (2003). Sedgwick starts her analysis by considering her own experience of feeling shame when expecting to see the World Trade Center in its original spot after the September 11 attacks. When describing what she felt, she writes the following.

> "I think this was, in effect, one of those situations in which, as Silvan Tomkins puts it, 'one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or… one whishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one was smiling at a stranger'" (35)

To make explicit the importance of the connection between shame and the uncanny, Sedgwick proposes in her essay that shame is intrinsically connected to queerness. As she points out, "some of the infants, children, and adults in whom shame remains the most available mediator of identity […] Queer, I'd suggest, might usefully be thought of as referring in the first place to this group" (63).

Besides the clear connection of what brings about the dynamic of shame and the uncanny as pointed out above, it is also worth noting that Sedgwick, who theorizes shame

as an explicitly relational term, first connects it to an experience of her own where this affect is evoked by a sight of a certain location (and not a person), and in so doing, deliberately opens the possibility of what can cause shame beyond the scope of another person.

That the estrangement of the known and familiar as described in Freud's essay suggests a connection between the uncanny and the queer is also pointed out by Olu Jenzen her essay (published in 2007) as she explains, "the uncanny effect of making strange and uncomfortable the world as we know it is an element identifiable both in queer theory and what we may want to call a queer aesthetic, drawing on both repetition and the carnivalesque" (3).

To bring these points together, I would argue that one thing that is very similar—if not the same— in the uncanny, self-reflexivity, and queerness is that destabilizing and collapsing together of the familiar and the strange at the very core of all three. All three have been conceptualized (through *shame* in the case of queerness) as connected to a moment of perception in which this collapsing is sensed and which in turn produces a change in the position or identity of the perceiver her/himself.

2.1.2 REPETITION

Freud distinguishes between two main types of what the *uncanny*—or more precisely, the fear that is connected to the perception of something that is uncanny—can be rooted in. The first type can be traced back to repressions, "when the uncanny proceeds from repressed infantile complexes" (Freud 248), such as in the case of the fear of being buried alive, which Freud connects to the "phantasy […] of intra-uterine

existence" (244). The second type, which is perhaps more interesting for the topic of this thesis, is when such a thing happens that takes us back to what "we no longer believe in […]", because

> we have *surmounted* these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation. As soon as something actually happens in our lives which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny (Freud 247-248).

As Freud sums this case up, "the whole thing is purely an affair of 'reality-testing,' a questions of the material reality of the phenomena" (Freud 248). Therefore, a part of how something becomes uncanny is a trembling sense of what is real and what is not. This by itself could be argued to be very much in line with the recurring discussion of the question of reality versus fiction or reality versus imaginary within the frameworks of self-reflexivity, but there is more to this connection.

What is in common between the two types of uncanny is the return, the recurrence, the repetition of something. The problem with repetition, Freud argues, is that it leaves us feeling out of control—or, more specifically, we feel a loss of control as we have the impression that we are under the control of an outside force. Reflecting on his own experience of ending up in the same place again and again, Freud writes that the "*unintended* recurrence of the same situation" (Freud 237, emphasis added) results in "the feeling of helplessness and uncanniness" (Freud 237). Therefore, the real problem is not just repetition as such, but the moment of recognizing unintended repetition. As Bernstein points out, "the uncanny does not repeat a certain X; rather, it emerges in the

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recognition of repetition, through the connection of disparate and distant moments stretched over the temporal and spatial expanse of the text" (1125).

Importantly, what happens through the recognition of repetition is that a certain (coherent) narrative is assumed out of what were seen before as isolated and unrelated moments or events. Therefore, this point can be seen as bringing Freud's text a step even closer to the frameworks of self-reflexivity, by showing that the uncertainty in uncanny is that of "reality" versus a specifically constructed narrative.

This point perhaps becomes even clearer from Bernstein's detailing of the influence that the recognition of repetition has, according to Freud's text. She explains,

> When we notice repetition, the uncanny will have occurred; it can have no
> beginning, for we can never see the first element of a repetitive structure until it
> has already been repeated. In dealing with the uncanny, we will always remain
> subject to the passive and ignorant position of the first instance which we can
> never grasp directly. In the recognition of an uncanny effect, at best, we can
> become aware of the way *we have been manipulated by the text*, how it leaves its
> mark on us before we can notice it; and perhaps *our reading, too, is programmed
> and controlled in ways we cannot master*. (1125, emphasis added)

Bernstein moves on to conclude that the fear that the uncanny induces is that the perceiver "does not want to be a sleep-walking reader controlled by the alien powers of another, the text and author before us" (1126). Being "manipulated by the text," the wish to master our reading, not to be "sleep-walking readers"—these are all anxieties connected to the reader's or viewer's position that have been shown to be at work in the discussions of self-reflexivity, whether in the form of the goal of avoiding to become

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"zombies" in the Brechtian framework, or in the form of conceptualizing metafiction as what "demands" the reader to participate (e.g. in Hutcheon). Just as importantly, the "passive viewer/reader" and her/his process is often figured in non-human terms— whether as machinic (e.g. as automatons or as programmed) or bestial (e.g. as zombies, or as "daemonic" in Freud [238]).

Ultimately, the recognition of repetition results in the self-shattering nature of the uncanny, bringing to the fore the fear of not being original, of being revealed as "just a copy" (Bernstein 1126). This also means that the anxiety over the uncertainties and ambiguities of what is perceived as uncanny results in the uncertainties and ambiguities perceived in the self—which is a similarly mirrored gesture between perceived and perceiver as what was discussed in the case of the coming to consciousness of the "text" and the reader/viewer.

2.1.3 THE DOPPELGÄNGER

The two previously discussed aspects of the uncanny, the mixture of the familiar and the strange on the one hand and (involuntary) repetition on the other, come together in the figure of the doppelgänger or the double. Through analyzing the "The Sandman" by the "master" of the *uncanny*, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Freud draws the conclusion that in the short story, the uncanny scenes are "all concerned with the phenomenon of the 'double,' which appears in every shape and in every degree of development," more specifically, whenever "there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self" (233).

The reason why the double is uncanny is that it is a form of "ego-disturbance" (236) and a "regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from

the external world and from other people" (236). In short, Freud sees the double's uncanniness in that it *disturbs* the ego and that in the moment of this disturbance, there is a return to a developmental stage when the subject was not yet capable of individuating her/himself.

Interestingly, there are two important points in the development of the ego that are necessary for the double to become *perceived* as uncanny. First, the person has to become self-reflexive, the formation of what he would later call the *ego-ideal* or the *super-ego* (as pointed out in a footnote on page 235) has to happen. Second, there has to be a change in what is associated with the double—and perhaps not so surprisingly if we consider the logic of the phenomena covered in this thesis, this change is from something to its opposite: from an "assurance of immortality" to the "uncanny harbinger of death" (Freud 235).

Shame is described by Sedgwick in a manner that can be connected to what has been discussed here. When Sedgwick describes the protoform of shame, she points out

> That is the moment when the circuit of mirroring expressions between the child's face and the caregiver's recognized face [...] is broken: the moment when the adult face fails or refuses to play its part in the continuation of mutual gaze; when, for any one of many reasons, it fails to be recognizable to, or recognizing of, the infant who has been, so to speak, 'giving face' based on a faith in the continuity of this circuit. […] Shame floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting identificatory communication. (36)

Therefore, both the uncanny and shame causes disturbance in identificatory processes (whether put as "ego-disturbance" or "disruptive moment in identity-

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constituting identificatory communication"). This is not to say that the moment that

Sedgwick and Freud refer to are exactly the same, but that *shame* and the *uncanny* are

conceptualized by the two authors in overwhelmingly similar patterns and as working in

basically the same way. Most importantly, the two concepts can be seen as raising some

of the most important questions discussed with regards to self-reflexivity and connected

to anxieties over (mis)recognition and identity.

2.2 *DEXTER* AND *BUFFY*: DOUBLES AND IDENTITIES

It is important to first point out that Freud analyzes the case of the double with a

focus on what happens when somebody sees the double of somebody *else* and what

effects this experience has on that person. He seems less concerned with the effect of

someone seeing her/his *own* double, limiting the discussion of such a possibility to only a

footnote (though the second longest one of his essay, 248).

In the examples of this chapter, I will analyze such cases, in which what is really

exciting is not just what effect the doubles have on characters who know the "original"

ones, but perhaps more interestingly how the "original" character negotiates her/his own

identity through relating to her/his double. In the case of *Dexter*'s title character, I will

show how the role of theatricality and bonding are connected to Dexter's identity as an

actor, arguing that the show's most important focus throughout the seasons is the

countless ways in which Dexter negotiates his identity that is fundamentally based on

performing scripts in a world full of mirrored structures of identification. In the case of

Buffy, the original character and her/his character are first introduced as perhaps

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appearing to be the same, but marked by the "original" as radically different. What is exciting in this case is how (on what grounds) the "originals" cast off the doubles as radically different from themselves, but then seem to copy and eventually incorporate them.

2.2.1 THEATRICALITY IN *DEXTER*

Dexter (2006-) is a show currently in between its seventh and eighth (and final) season about a serial killed called Dexter Morgan, who works as a forensic blood spatter analyst. These two aspects (serial killing, investigating) of the character are combined in his ritual of hunting down and executing his victims with a code that prescribes that he only kill serial killers who "fall through the cracks" of law enforcement. The show includes voiceover narration by Dexter, which primarily enables the viewers to be informed about how Dexter's relation and communication with people are "just a show," a carefully and continually developed act. The viewer is *in* on the secret, knows the truth, and the main source of suspense in the show is created by the conflict between the truths of the two worlds: Dexter's private and public realities. Just the fact that Dexter has a secret life and that he needs to "pass" as a non-criminal person would appear to locate theatricality in the public life of Dexter. However, I argue that what is really exciting in Dexter is how all spheres of his life are constructed as theatrical spaces.

Dexter makes it clear in his voiceover monologs that his life is about wearing a mask. In an episode about Halloween, he says,

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> I love Halloween. The one time of year when everyone wears a mask... not just
>
> me. People think it's fun to pretend you're a monster. Me, I spend my life
>
> pretending I'm not. Brother, friend, boyfriend - All part of my costume collection.
>
> Some people might call me a fraud. Let's see if it will fit. I prefer to think of
>
> myself as a master of disguise. ("Let's give the Boy a Hand," season one, episode
>
> four)

But "wearing a mask" and "pretending not to be a monster" makes it seem like he

Dexter has one true identity (which he surely does reiterate on numerous occasions)

which he hides by acting. Yet, performing is in fact not limited to his roles as "brother,

friend, boyfriend." Besides his private interactions, theatricality is located as a main

feature of Dexter's work. Right in the very first episode of the show, Dexter points out in

a voiceover monolog that he sees all homicide scenes (which he works on as a blood

spatter analyst) as theatrical scenes,

> There is something strange and disarming about looking at a homicide scene in
>
> the daylight of Miami. It makes the most grotesque killings look staged, like
>
> you're in a new and daring section of Disneyworld: Dahmerland. ("Dexter")

During this voiceover, Dexter is seen approaching a crime scene at a motel, where

upon his arrival, he first encounters news cameras set up right next to a police car.

Arguably, this quotation is not only identifying the space of the *homicide scene* as staged,

but it can also be read as a self-reflexive note on the popularity of the investigative and

crime show, such as *Dexter* itself. To add to this aspect of the quotation, it is also worth

pointing out that Dexter looks eerily like Jeffrey Dahmer, a serial killer whose acts and

life was highly publicized. By asserting a reading of crime scenes as staged, Dexter also

positions himself as a critic on the one hand (through his job as an analyzer) and a director-actor when performing his own killings.

Furthermore, Dexter's own killings are shown as highly regulated, precisely choreographed rituals. Dexter wraps up his victims and the whole room in which the killing takes place in plastic. All the walls and floors are covered, while the victim lies on a table at the center of the room, tied down to the table by plastic. Indeed, the killings, the scenes of which often include close-ups of blood spreading beneath the plastic, appear as spectacles. But Dexter's ritual does not begin or end in that room, the script prescribes everything from selecting and stalking his victim, to dropping the wrapped up body parts from his boat, "Slice of Life" into the ocean. Dexter's instinct to kill, which he calls his "Dark Passenger," might easily be perceived as more "real," truer to who he is (as opposed to the fakery of his interactions within his social environment), but in fact, this urge is also constantly channeled into very strictly scripted, scenic performances. In conclusion, I argue that instead of seeing Dexter's private and public personae as having distinctively different natures, they can be read as Dexter split into different roles, with each part of his character working in the very same way. *Dexter* is not just a show about a character who has a fake life on the one hand and a secret real one on the other; he is ultimately an actor, who survives by learning and performing his scripts in all fields of his life.

2.2.2 BONDING AND IDENTITY IN *DEXTER*

Throughout the seven seasons, while Dexter keeps hunting down serial killers and negotiates his private life, there is always one (or a group of two) main recurring

character that Dexter tries to bond with. This is usually framed as the one person who finds out about Dexter's secret and who eventually either leaves (as in the case of Lumen Pierce in season five and Hannah McKay in season seven) or gets killed by Dexter at the end of the season (Brian Moser in season one, Lila West in season two, Miguel Prado in season three, the Trinity Killer in season four, and Travis Marshall in season six). What all of these characters have in common[2] is that Dexter sees ways of identifying with them and in the end, the decision to get rid of them is a decision based on the painful realization that they are not like Dexter. They are all killers, but they do not kill according to Dexter's code. Remarkably, the final talk (part of Dexter's ritual) between Dexter and these killers is always about them claiming that Dexter is not different from them, and Dexter arguing for the opposite. For Dexter, the moment of deciding to kill is the moment when the bond and the mirroring are revealed as impossible. For example, in the case of Miguel Prado, the final conversation goes like this:

> Miguel: I tried to crack that damn armor of yours… […]
>
> Dexter: So this was my fault for being shut down?
>
> Miguel: I just want you to let me in!
>
> Dexter: Why the fuck would I do that now?
>
> Miguel: Because I know you… Dex, I know you better than anyone else.

---

[2] Lumen is an exception to this rule, she is not a killer by instinct. It should be added, though, that Dexter remarks, "with Lumen, I'm someone different. *In her eyes*, I'm not a monster at all" ("In the Beginning," emphasis added). Therefore, with Lumen, this script is also similar in that Lumen understands him to be similar to *her*, a non-monster, so to say.

Dexter: No, there've been quite a few who've seen the real me as they laid on that table. *You're all just unchecked versions of myself*—what I would have become without my father's code.

Miguel: They deserved it! I'm not like them…

Dexter: You are, admit it!

Miguel: I'm like you.

Dexter: No, no … I know I'm a monster. ("I Had a Dream," season three, episode eleven)

The bonding that Dexter keeps failing at, as Lisa Arellano rightly points out, is bonding through violence. Violence makes Dexter an outsider of society first, and his special code of violence makes him an outsider within his "community" of serial killers as well. Arellano argues that "Dexter's self-confessed 'monstrosity' can be understood as an unexpected type of social failure—specifically a failure to take up the forms of violence represented by the other men in his world" (3). Although Arellano is right in that it is a failure of Dexter in performing violence in the expected way, as I pointed out earlier, although it is predominantly men with whom Dexter fails to bond in this manner, the list most definitely includes women (most importantly, Lila West and Hannah McKay).[3] More importantly, it is through these scenes of "final talks" that it becomes most evident that Dexter not only sees the killers he bonds with as potential copies (or as potential "original" in the case of the Trinity Killer), but his decision to get rid of them is connected to the realization that they are failed copies, "unchecked versions" of himself. In Dexter's world, then, as has been argued in the earlier section as well, it is not only his

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[3] In fairness, it should be pointed out that season seven with Hannah McKay, the second serial killer woman on the list, had not yet aired when Arellano wrote her essay.

relationships with people in his domestic life and working environment that are "faked,"

but even his seemingly most "honest" efforts at bonding are ultimately shown to be a

question of how good a copy of himself another person can be.

   Finally, it is noteworthy that *Dexter* has attracted much attention from gender

studies scholars with regards to the connection between violence and masculinity in the

show, especially connected to the supposedly central moral question of when violence

and brutality can or cannot be considered acceptable, and on the normalizing role of the

"code" (Santaularia; Arellano). As Santaularia points out very importantly, though Dexter

kills serial killers, he is not the vigilante type that is driven "purely" by some kind of a

sense of (in)justice. Dexter kills because he wants to *kill* in the first place, he just

channels his urges into a certain type of ethical code (Santaularia 60).

   However, interestingly, the vigilante figure and whether Dexter can be read as a

"hero" is addressed in *Dexter* in another self-reflexive episode. In "The Dark Defender,"

after the bodies of Dexter's victims have been found without evidence connecting them

to Dexter, law enforcement labels him the "Bay Harbor Butcher." In the episode, Dexter

enters a comic store and finds a comic strip inspired by the Bay Harbor Butcher story (the

story of a serial killer who kills other serial killers), calling him the "Dark Defender."

This is not the only time that the comic hero figure is evoked in the show and as Victoria

L. Smith points out, especially in the killing scenes, "[…]setting, lighting, slow-motion

cinematography, super-saturated colors, and low and wide angle shots […] achieve a

disturbing and hyper-realist impact," a visual structure that is most in line with the style

of graphic novels (396). So, it seems that in the show, it is the killing scenes where this

styling typical of the comics are most evidently evoked. Importantly, the killing are the

sphere of Dexter's "Dark Passenger" (his urge). This is how the "Dark Defender" of the comic strip can be read as the double of the "Dark Passenger."

2.2.3 DEXTER AND BUFFY

It is fairly obvious that there are a number of ways in which *Dexter*'s main issues and concerns are similar to those of *Buffy*. Both shows focus on cases when violence is or is not legitimized, through the main focus being on the execution of serial killers (whether human, vampire, or else). Both shows have as their main characters—what appear to be—vigilante-type social outcasts, who kill those beings that "regular" forces cannot. Both shows focus on characters who have super- or non-human features of themselves (Buffy's being chosen as a Slayer and Dexter's "monstrous" urge to kill), which they constantly try to negotiate in newer and newer ways throughout the seasons of the shows.

2.2.4 BUFFY AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) is a vampire series that aired on the WB network during its first five seasons and on UPN in its last two. Since its transfer from the big onto the small screen one and a half decades ago, *Buffy* has turned out to be a highly popular academic subject for authors from a wide range of disciplines and has turned out to be of enormous interest for those in women's and gender studies.

Cinematic self-reflexivity is extremely common in *Buffy* and there are myriad forms in which it appears throughout the seven seasons of the show. There are episodes that are thematized around certain technical aspects of the medium, such as the silent episode (the tenth episode of season four, "Hush"), while in another one, a character (Jonathan) alters the fictional reality of the show in such an "overwhelming" way that that happens to include that even the opening credits of the episode are modified to include him (in the seventeenth episode of season four, "Superstar"); and one of the most well-known episodes is a musical episode ("Once More, With Feeling," season six, episode ten). Cinematic reflexivity with all of its playfulness is one of the most characteristic features of the show and part of the reason why it seems defiant of clear-cut genre categorization as well.

Buffy is also a goldmine of character-level doublings, whether in the form of doppelgängers, split characters, shapeshifting or body swaps. In some cases, there are two bodies that appear to be the same, such as the Buffybot in season five and season six, Vamp Willow in the ninth and sixteenth episodes of season three ("The Wish" and "Doppelgängland"), Xander's personality splitting into two (with a separate body for each, in season five, episode three, "The Replacement") or the Angel-Angelus body-sharing dyad. These phenomena are part of the more general complexity and dynamism of the personalities of the characters, which is also one of the main focuses of the show. An increasing dynamism of the changes in the characters comes more and more to the fore in the later seasons. As Erma Petrova points it out, "while the first seasons of *Buffy* are structured around an external threat seeking to corrupt the order of the world, later the

source of the threat becomes increasingly internal, and the characters must embrace a side of themselves which is evil, irrational, or dangerous."

2.2.5 DOUBLES IN THE BUFFYVERSE

The doubles that appear in *Buffy* are significantly different from their "originals." By "originals" I mean the character who is a regular main character of the show. Whereas in some cases the use of this category would appear to be less problematic to use (e.g. in the case of the Buffybot, who is modeled after Buffy), in others (e.g. in the case of Angel and Angelus) this is much more complicated, as I will explain later. The nature of the difference between the original and the double is foremost characterized by an intersection of sexual otherness and non-humanness. In the case of Vamp Willow or Angelus, non-normative sexuality is intertwined with being a vampire, while in the case of the machinic double, the Buffybot, as Bronwen Calvert points out, "artificial embodiment in the form of cyborg, robot or other 'monstrous' incarnation marks tension between the 'real' and the 'artificial,' between truth and desire" (para 12).

Whereas the doubles discussed here (the Buffybot, Vamp Willow, and Angelus) have slightly different story lines in the show, there are some recurring elements or twists in their plots. First, all three doubles are misrecognized as the "original" at first. Second, at a later point, this turns around and all three doubles are performed by their "originals" (successfully, even if only momentarily) —in other words, a faking to be fake happens. Finally, when the double is eliminated, the original appears to internalize the double, one way or another.

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The Buffybot is basically a sex toy crafted by two characters: it is ordered by Spike, who is in (unrequited) love with Buffy, from Warren, the creator of another, previous robot (April). In other words, the Buffybot is put together with the goal to create a Buffy who is available to Spike, a robot created by men to serve and please them. After the Buffybot is discovered by the Scoobie gang—as Buffy's group of friends is called—, Buffy rejects even the idea that there is accurate similarity between the robot and her () there is one episode where Buffy plays the Buffybot to get information from Spike ("Intervention," season five, episode eighteen). The Scoobie gang uses it in a fight to mislead an enemy ("The Gift," season five, episode twenty-two). Since Buffy dies in that fight, the group decides to continue fighting vampires and demons with the Buffybot replacing her ("Bargaining," season six, episodes one and two). Still in the same episode, the Buffybot is soon discovered not to be "the real one" and gets pulled apart violently, smashed and torn into pieces in a lynching scene. At the same time, however, the real Buffy is brought back to life. Interestingly, from then on, in the last two seasons of the show, Buffy's main finding will be that already the first Slayer[4] was created by men and with the goal of keeping control over her. In other words, after the Buffybot's death, Buffy's main plot is finding out how much she is like the Buffybot. Being "programmed" by men in order to be controlled by them—this is exactly what she realizes she, the Slayer, is. In other words, after a series of replacing each other and after the Buffybot has been ultimately eliminated, Buffy appears to have incorporated the Buffybot.

Similarly to the Buffybot, Willow also denies her own similarity to her doppelgänger, Vamp Willow. Vamp Willow is sucked into this world from an alternative

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[4] There is always one Slayer at a time. The new Slayer—it is always a girl—becomes the Slayer when the previous one dies.

world, a world in which Buffy never came to Sunnydale and which led to Willow turning into a vampire (Vamp Willow). However, unlike in the case of the Buffybot and Buffy, Willow shows more signs of engaging with the identity of Vamp Willow, most evident perhaps in those moments when she talks about Vamp Willow in the first person singular.

Having faced and observed her doppelgänger (Vamp Willow), Willow notes, "it's horrible! That's me as a vampire? I'm so evil and... skanky. And I think I'm kinda gay" ("Doppelgängland"). Though Buffy is quick to comfort Willow by saying that "a vampire's personality has nothing to do with the person it was," Angel (a vampire himself), immediately responds by saying, "well, actually…," but after getting a look from Buffy, he decides to stop. Therefore, in this case, it is almost immediately revealed that the doppelgänger positioned as radically different may not be so. Vamp Willow is sent back at the end of the episode to her own universe, where she gets killed within a few moments. A few seasons later, Willow starts a romantic relationship with her college schoolmate, Tara, and starts identifying as "kinda gay."

Even more interestingly, the above sentences of Willow also recur in a later episode, "Tabula Rasa," when due to another spell that goes wrong, all of the main characters lose consciousness and when they wake up, they have lost all of their memories. As every character tries to find clues that would help identify herself or himself, most characters draw the wrong conclusions at first. Willow and (fellow Scoobie) Xander assume they are a couple, because they wake up next to each other and Willow has Xander's jacket on. Soon, Willow and—at that point, already girlfriend—Tara find their student IDs and realize that they attend the same college, so they assume that they might be "study buddies" at college. When the shop gets attacked by vampires

and the characters have hide in the sewer, Tara and Willow have to get very close to each other. Willow looks a bit confused and after this scene, says to another character, "I'm all sweaty and trapped, no memory, hiding in a pipe from a vampire... And I think I'm kinda gay." As in the scene with Vamp Willow, Willow uses the phrase "kinda gay," and here, too, as the last expression in a list of attributes. Therefore, in this episode, once again, Willow appears to be a copy of the doppelgänger, while in the storyline of the whole show, she has incorporated exactly those features of her doppelgänger that have marked her as radically *other*.

In the case of Angel and Angelus, there is a further step of copying, because vampires are already a sort of a copy, a soulless copy of the human (that they used to be)—an immortalized, non-aging, practically standstill version of the. Therefore, Angelus, the "original vampire" is a copy already. Angelus is known in the Buffyverse to have been one of the most brutal vampires of all times. However, he was at one point cursed to have his soul back, turning him into an entirely different character – fake vampire. Angel, therefore, who is the character that *Buffy* has as a recurring one in the first two seasons, can be read as a copy of a copy already. However, part of the curse was also that Angel would lose his soul (and turn back into Angelus) as soon as he experiences true happiness, which he does after sleeping with Buffy. Furthermore, a few episodes later, Angel pretends to be Angelus ("Enemies").

That doubles turn into each other and hybrids are formed is no surprise in the Buffyverse, where the main characters are constantly changing and dynamically moving in between poles of binaries, most commonly disseminating categories like human and non-human, good and evil, dead and alive, or enemy and ally. From Buffy, a human with superhuman

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powers, to Angel or Spike, who are vampires (usually defined as beings without soul) with souls, and to Anya's revelation that in fact, "all the demons that walk the Earth, are tainted, are human hybrids, like vampires" ("Graduation Day: Part One"), most characters of the Buffyverse are mixtures.

Furthermore, it is not only the characters of the series, but also the show itself that can be characterized foremost as a hybrid of sorts. First and foremost, the genre of the show could be categorized with practically any of the available labels from horror, fantasy, comedy, drama, or dramedy; not to mention a number of times when there are genre crossings in the show. Structurally, Allrath, Gymnich, and Surkamp point out that the show's narrative strcture is best expressed as a hybrid (5-6) of the "classically" distinct series and serial structure, as storylines of enemies are oftentimes limited to one episode (typical for series), but each season also has one main arch nemesis (typical for serial), or Big Bad, as the group calls it.

Chapter 3.

The Mise en Abyme

The kind of narrative structure that plays within plays, stories within stories and the like represent is commonly discussed in terms of the *mise en abyme*. In this chapter, I will look at how such a structure is sometimes understood in critical texts in such a way which I take as a simplification of the interpretative potentials of the *mise en abyme*, resulting in the assuming of a unilateral "revelatory" gesture between the inner frame and "the whole." For an example, I will show how the relation between imbedded songs and the show's plot is understood in an analysis of *Glee* and the shortcomings thereof, and then I will offer an analysis of my own of an episode of *Queer as Folk* to demonstrate what I think could reflect a more complex understanding of the workings of the concept.

3.1 THE MISE EN ABYME

The *mise en abyme*, a concept originating in heraldy, was first defined as applied to works of art by André Gide in 1893 (Dällenbach 7) and discussed in depth later by Lucien Dällenbach in his 1977 book, *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (*The Mirror in the Text* in English translation, 1989). It is commonly understood as a form of reflexivity wherein an imbedded narrative unit and the whole mirror each other, thus providing space for interpretative gestures in both directions between and beyond the two units.

Within film theory and television studies, similarly, the *mise en abyme* is generally understood as what "refers to the infinite regress of mirror reflections to denote the […] filmic process by which […] a section or sequence plays out in miniature the processes of the text as a whole" (Stam 205). However, when it comes to interpretations of shows within shows, in a lot of cases, the *mise en abyme* gets reduced to mean just that there is a smaller frame within a film or television show that can be understood as revealing of or explaining the whole film or show. For example, Gabi Allrath, and Marion Gymnich write in *Narrative Strategies in Television Series,*

> A fictitious series within a series can function as mise en abyme, such as in *Twin Peaks*, in which the events in the fictitious soap opera *Invitation to Love provide a commentary on the events of the primary series*. 36, emphasis added.

The problem with such an understanding is that the mise en abyme is no longer understood as a mirroring between (and beyond) two narrative levels or units, but just as one unit adding to our understanding of the other. Therein, the inner unit might easily get assumed to have a fixed, unproblematic, and obvious understanding, as something that is "bodily" not independent of the narrative it is imbedded in, yet somehow is not as actively formed by the bigger unit as the other way around. In short, what is associated with these scenes or narrative structures that its value lies in its being a unilateral (from inner to outer frame) explanatory gesture. To illustrate where I see this problematic critical strategy at work, I will now turn to analysis of the show *Glee*.

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Glee, a show produced by The Fox Network, started airing in 2009 and is currently in its fourth season. The show has at its center the students and associated teachers of the glee club of the fictional William McKinley High School. In addition, some subplots include the relatives—mostly parents—of the students, and the most recent season also follows—regularly or occasionally, depending on the character—some of the by-now-graduated former main characters. The members of the glee club (called New Directions) prepare a performance each week, thus resulting in performance-within-a-show being the most characteristic structure of the series. In other words, *Glee* is a musical ("dramedy") series about the making of musical theater. As far as the recurring story of the show goes, the students choose songs for themselves after being given a topic for the week and their song choice engages with their current personal issues and interpersonal relations.

Barrie Gelles, in "*Glee* and the 'Ghosting' of the Musical Theatre Canon," gives a detailed analysis of the working of the *mise en abyme* in the show by exploring the musical theatre numbers in it, that is, when students choose songs from this genre for their weekly assignments. Gelles illustrates her points through analyzing a number of scenes from the show and presents each example by first describing the episode of *Glee* that the scene is from, then explaining what the original context of the song was, i.e. the musical's story, and finally how the episode's story diverts from the song's original context, plots or consequences and how a character or the plot of *Glee* is "enriched"

through knowing "the" original.[5] As she puts it, "the use of the musical theatre canon in *Glee* can sometimes offer a more complex reading of a given plot point and/or character development" (90). At another point, Gelles is even clearer on that she takes the performances within the show to offer a unilateral interpretative gesture: "Frequently these songs [chosen for the weekly assignments] have a double meaning, reflecting back thematically on the events of the episode, and it is to be understood (or we are simply told) that the song choice is revealing something about the storyline or character(s)" (Gelles 94).

3.2.1 MUSICALS AS "CONTEXTS"

At the very core of Gelles's argument, the basic presmise is that songs from musicals are radically different from other non-classical songs – whether pop or rock hits or jazz standards (a great number of which, as Gelles also admits at one point, actually come from musicals). Gelles argues that including Broadway musical numbers on *Glee* is different from presenting hit songs on it, because "when showtunes such as 'Defying Gravity,' 'And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going,' and 'Rose's Turn' are used within the storylines of Glee, they bring with them their original context" (90). There are a number of problematic assumptions at work in this argument.

First of all, Gelles here works with the premise that the biggest difference between musical theatre numbers and hit songs is that the first are not written to "stand alone." As she puts it, "songs in musical theatre are a piece of a larger story; they are not created to be complete in themselves, but are indeed part of a larger whole" (92). While it

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[5]As a side note, it is interesting that Gelles also avoids engaging with examples where not only certain songs are taken from musicals, but *whole* musicals are "put together" within the show, such as *The Rock Horror Picture Show* in the second season, *The West Side Story* in the third and *Grease* in the fourth.

is true that they are written as art of a particular musical, Gelles herself at another point quotes—and approves of—commentary suggesting that the specificity of musical theatre is that musicals include narrative units, the songs, that are relatively independent of the plot and do not primarily serve to enhance the plot, but—in what Gelles misses to see as a very precise rephrasing of her understanding of the *mise en abyme*—to provide commentary on it (94). And again, it is no surprise that a great number of musical songs have become almost entirely independent of their original context - industrial/theatrical practices regarding how these songs are performed do in fact make use of them as songs that are "complete in themselves."

Second, through her differentiation between Broadway and hit songs, Gelles also suggests that hit songs are "complete in themselves," that is, that they do not come to us as a part of a package, which once again seems to be naïve at best if industrial practices are taken into consideration. Furthermore, this notion could not be any further from how hit songs themselves are presented by the characters of *Glee*: always within a web of popular/celebrity/gossip cultural references. For example, in a more recent episode, "Guilty Pleasures," the members of the glee club are outraged by the choice of another one of them to sing a song by Chris Brown, who has become notorious in the media with his history of physically abusing his girlfriend. Perhaps even more interestingly, Gelles does not deny the importance of other kinds of contexts at work behind songs when she argues that in one of her examples, the character's choice of song is at least partly motivated by the fact that that song ("Rose's Turn") has been previously performed by a number of gay icons and is often part of queer and drag performances. Altogether, instead of making the distinction that musical theater numbers come from certain contexts as

opposed to hit songs, which do not; I would propose to make sense of all of these songs as resonating with a number of different intertextual and intermedial references and contexts.

3.2.2 DIEGETIC VS. NON-DIEGETIC SONGS

Another one of Gelles's theoretical considerations is the distinction between diegetic and non-diegetic songs. The way Gelles uses these terms is important for the topic of this thesis as this distinction seems to be associated with the stylistic opposition between realistic and theatrical or highly-stylized and through this association the terms also resonate with reflexive versus non-reflexive modes of narration.

In film studies, diegetic sound refers to

sound whose source belongs to the imaginative world of the film, sound that is understood to issue from that world rather than ours. Examples of non-diegetic sound include voice-over commentary […], music that accompanies the image from without rather than from a source within the world of the film (music, that is, which we presume the characters do not hear), or noises on the soundtrack […].Villarejo 50.

However, as Gelles points out, the term *diegetic* and *non-diegetic* have come to be used slightly differently in musical theater studies. As McMillin sums it up in a quotation in Gelles's article,

the term diagetic […] is coming to be used for numbers that are called for by the book. It is meant to cover the backstage musicals plus any other occasions on which characters deliberately perform numbers for other characters… The

diegetic number is not a case of someone 'bursting into song.' Rather, someone

has a song to sing, according to the book, and goes ahead and sings it. Qtd. in

Gelles 95.

It is worth noting here that precisely speaking, *Glee* is closest to the genre of the

backstage musicals. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Gelles argues that "unlike

musical theatre, the majority of the music used in *Glee* is diegetic. The songs are

typically featured as part of a rehearsal, performance, of presentation of a song as part of

the weekly assignment from their teacher […] " (94). Then, diegetic and non-diegetic get

paired up with stylistic differences when Gelles argues that non-diegetic songs (that is,

scenes of "bursting into song") are typically "presented in a non-realistic manner" (95),

whereas diegetic, therefore most of the songs on *Glee*, are presented in a realistic manner.

Yet, Gelles seems to ignore that the songs on *Glee* in fact remain highly stylized and the

scenes are not at all constructed to feel "natural." From the lack of ever seeing the

characters practive or perform any song more than once, to singers announcing what they

will perform to the others' surprise, followed by the others join in (both singing and

dancing) half a minute later and to staged performances of songs with instrumental

background without a band being seen as playing, Glee hardly seems to aim at "realistic"

representation. On the contrary, performances are often stylized as pop music videos and

occasionally making references to props, dresses or the style of particular music videos,

such as "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go" in the season four episode "Guilty

Pleasures," "I wanna dance with Somebody" in the season three episode "Dance with

Somebody" or the Britney Spears songs of season two episode "Britney/Brittany."

Ultimately, what Gelles does not explore further, although it clearly is at the heart of the phenomena that she describes and would be arguably more beneficial than the diegetic-non-diegetic distinction is that in these scenes, there is a constant play of the border or overlap between theatrical and quotidian, of texts coded as highly stylized and texts coded as what "feels natural" or "realistic" in her words. *Glee* is exciting exactly for that reason: because it is a show that is constantly playing with what we perceive as theatrical and what we perceive as "believable" or realistic.

Finally, instead of focusing on the Broadway numbers on *Glee*, perhaps it could be more productive to focus on another phenomenon: mash-ups. These songs, which are born out of combining two songs, bring together songs from different eras, different styles or genres, showing them to be somehow connectable, engaging them in a communication of sorts. Rock and pop songs (e.g. "Crazy" by Aerosmith and "You drive me Crazy" by Britney Spears in "Britney 2.0" in the fourth season), musical and popular songs (e.g. "Umbrella" by Rihanna and "Singing in the Rain" from *Singing in the Rain* in the episode "The Substitute") or pop songs from different decades (e.g. "Halo" by Beyonce and "Walking on Sunshine" by Katrina and the Waves in the episode "Vitamin D") are brought literally into harmony. What these examples allow for is making it obvious that in each case—mash-up or not—in the performances of the show, songs, styles, genres, artists come together in unexpected ways, all "participants" transforming the others while finding some kind of musical common ground that leaves elements recognizable as themselves and yet never the same as what they might be primarily recognized as.

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3.2 QUEER AS FOLK

Queer as Folk (2000-2005), based on the British show of the same title, ran on Showtime for five seasons and focuses on the lives of five gay men. There is one episode, the third episode of the second season, that tackles the issue of televisual representation of gay/queer sexuality. Most probably inspired by moralizing criticism of the show claiming that it presents an oversexualized and thereby distorted image of gay men, the episode entitled "Hypocrisy: Don't Do It" starts right with a fictional show-within-the-show about gays (entitled *Gay as Blazes*) playing in the background and the characters (of *Queer as Folk*) engaging in a debate about what a television program about gay men should be like. In short, the question is whether a show with gay "role models" or one that presents taboo- and norm-breaking sexuality is more appropriate?

I argue that the episode eventually shows these two not as mutually exclusive exclusive options, but as two co-existing and potentially overlapping fictions. I believe that by combining Judith Butler's (1988) analysis of why sitting next to a transvestite on a bus can cause unease and Josette Féral's (2002) remarks on the theatrical, the episode's camera-sucking scene can be read as the ultimate transgression of the boundaries of multi-level theatrical and quotidian spaces.

3.2.1 DISTURBING THEATRICALITY

When Judith Butler argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" (1988) that seeing a transvestite on a bus evokes fundamentally different emotional reactions than seeing a transvestite on the stage (527), she is pointing to two different—though inseparable—sources of confusion. She

claims that the difference in our response can be traced back to the difference in the "conventions which mediate proximity and identification" (527) in the two situations.

In other words, when a transvestite is sitting next to us on a bus, two sets of our expectations are disrupted. On the one hand, it confuses us that we cannot separate the spheres of theatricality and reality (or as Féral calls it, the quotidian) as easily as we could in the theater. On the other hand, we are confused because what we see when we look at the transvestite does not match our norms of gender; it is "a modality of gender that cannot readily be assimilated into the pre-existing categories that regulate gender reality" (527). Similarly to this example, the scene from *Queer as Folk* that I am analyzing in this chapter causes discomfort for the viewer because it breaks with two types of conventions.

3.2.2 BREAKING THE CODE OF COMMUNICATION

The scene appears in the plot of one of the main characters of the show, Emmett. Emmett is a naïve character in awe of the (intentionally ridiculous) show-within-the-show, *Gay as Blazes*. According to the storyline, soon after watching an episode of the latter, Emmett starts to work for a gay couple that at first appears to be like a "real-life" (that is, on the level of fictional reality/quotidian of *Queer as Folks*) version of the main couple of *Gay as Blazes*. However, the self-confessed monogamous heroes that Emmett starts working for soon try (and manage) to sexually take advantage of their newest employee.

The scene that I call the camera-sucking scene happens when one of the guys of the couple, Blaine, seduces Emmett. Blaine appears with a towel around his waist, which he then drops and asks Emmett to pick up. Emmett goes down on his knees, all the while

keeping his eyes steadily on Blaine's naked genital area. As Blaine says softly to Emmett,

"I'm really grateful," the camera switches to a close-up of Emmett now looking directly

into the camera, stammering "I… I see that." Then we see Emmett reaching for the

camera, taking it in his hands, opening his mouth, and finally putting the camera into his

mouth.

As I have suggested earlier, there are two types of conventions that are broken in

this scene. Similarly to the example of the transvestite, it could be said that one concerns

form (quotidian vs. theatrical space), whereas the other concerns content (gender norms

in Butler's text, [televised] sexuality in *Queer as Folk*). If we were to apply Féral's terms,

these conventions could also be thought of as parts of television's "code of

communication" (2002: 104). This code, or the rules of an unspoken agreement between

the viewer and the producers of the TV show, is, as Butler pointed out in her own

example, "conventions which mediate proximity and identification" (Butler 527). When

in this scene we are positioned as the erect penis via the camera's angle, we feel at

unease, because the boundary between the space of televised fiction and the space of

our—the viewer's—reality/quotidian is transgressed. We are denied our comfortable

(viewer's) distance and we are offered instead a very unusual position of identification.

As Féral explains, theatricality is called to life by the gaze. As she points out,

theatricality is the result of a perceptual dynamics linking the onlooker with

someone or something that is looked at. […] By watching, the spectator creates an

'other' space, no longer subject to the laws of the quotidian, and in this space he

inscribes what he observes, perceiving it as belonging to a space where *he has no place except as external observer*. 105, emphasis added.

In order to understand the discomfort caused by the camera-sucking scene, it is important to emphasize that not only do we need a boundary in between the spaces that our gaze creates and disconnects and not only do we need entities belonging the *other* space to remain *there* for our comfort, but also that we need *us* to remain in *our* own space.

In the theater, when the code of communication is broken, as Féral explains, "[the spectator] is no longer in the alterity of theatrical space, but has crossed back into reality" (104). Thus, the emotional result of the breaking of the magic, so to say, is a feeling of being painfully excluded, tossed back into the sphere we left behind once we decided to become viewers of theater. On the contrary, the camera-sucking scene figuratively sucks us in, pulls us out of the comfortable position of the passive and invisible viewer. In other words, if Féral's example shows how the gaze loses its productive power, *Queer as Folk* in this scene starts to exercise power over the viewer by turning the gaze back at her/him.

Furthermore, our position as viewer of this scene is not only oppositional to the conventional viewer's position. It is in and of itself full of oppositional positions. We are radically involved in an extremely contradictory and sexualized manner: as spectator and watched (Emmett is looking directly at us), as the desiring (as the aroused penis) and the desired (by Emmett), as inside the show's fictional reality and outside it. Instead of breaking the theatrical-quotidian binary through bringing the actor into the realm of the

real, as in the case of the transvestite on the bus; this scene pulls the viewer into the fictional space of the show. This is why we feel at unease.

Finally, this understanding of the scene as an example of erotically charged transgression can be easily complicated further if we take into consideration that in this very scene, the same transgression happens on the two fictional levels within the show—that of *Gay as Blazes* versus *Queer as Folk*—as on the level of us as viewers versus *Queer as Folk* as viewed. Within the fictional quotidian of *Queer as Folk*, this is the scene where the image (that of the moral heroes that Emmett is working for) that first appeared as a fiction-come-true through Emmett's eyes (first transgression) is revealed as a sexually charged fantasy (second transgression).

First, the couple is seen as a copy of the couple in the fictional show *Gay as Blazes* and when this couple's personalities and attitudes turn out to be closer to a sexual fantasy than to what they first seemed to be, *Gay as Blazes* is also revealed as readable as sexual fantasy. This reading is encouraged by the final scenes of the episode, when Emmett is again watching *Gay as Blazes*, where we see the "original" couple taking in a guy from the streets in a scene that appears to be a copy of Emmett's arrival to the "copy" couple. As a result, "original" and "copy," just as the spaces the two occupy become inseparable.

In the beginning of the *Queer as Folk* episode, Brian voices his disdain about *Gay as Blazes* being hailed as the "most honest look at gay life ever portrayed on television" ("Hypocrisy"). He responds by asking, "well, then where's the fucking and the sucking?" His question undeniably calls for a more complex presentation of sexuality. I would argue—in response to the question—that all of these are there in the camera-sucking

scene. As an analogy to the concept of genderfuck, meaning the strategy of intentional mis-performing of gender in order to cause confusion, this scene could be called an example of theatricalityfuck, the intentional breaking of conventions of theatricality to cause unease. This scene brings together sucking, both in its literal and its figurative sense of sucking in the viewer and the different spaces, and fucking in the form of theatricalityfuck.

Conclusion

Self-reflexivity, I have tried to show, is an immensely complicated but also immensely exciting topic. Furthermore, as it is a device that seems to be everywhere in recent (American) television series, I have argued that studying it, conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing the particular forms and structures in which it appears, is of utmost interest for our understanding of current American popular culture, and television programming in particular.

Generally speaking, all of the examples that I discussed in this thesis are cases of mirroring, where different frames (characters, fictional worlds, diegetic levels) are called into interpretative interactions with each other. The examples of both chapters are analyzed with a focus on the numerous forms and ways of mirroring that take place in these particular scenes and shows, and the way these can be seen as structuring the whole show.

It is the frames of conflicting binaries within the shows that I wanted to draw attention to. These frames are arguably hybrids of sorts and are therefore also significant with regards to the whole of the shows, as hybridity is a significant characteristic of all the shows that I brought examples from—whether it is the eclectic mixture of genres in *Buffy*, the black humor tone mixed with graphic novel style in *Dexter*, or the self-parodistic tone of the campy "dramedies," *Glee* and *Queer as Folk*.

I also believe that the scope of this project could be further extended to explore more of the similarities and connections between queer theory and theories of self-reflexivity on the hand, and between the frames and mirrors at work on these very different levels (character-level and diegetic levels).

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