FEMININITY AND LESBIAN VISIBILITY IN *THE L WORD*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis questions media representations of the “lesbian as image” as part of a discourse produced by shifting and varying texts. I analyse visually and discursively the U.S. television series *The L Word* and explore through the concept of the “lesbian chick” its arrangement of the lesbian as necessarily feminine and sexual.

I interrogate the concept of the male gaze and its revision in the notion of lesbian gaze(s) which takes my analysis beyond the textual approach. Through the concept of genre I relate *TLW* to the genre chains with which it resonates, such as LGTB- focused genre and female-centred genre. Based on female centred genre conventions I establish the representation of female characters as revolving around romantic love. I analyse the story lines and narratives *TLW* invests on to claim that it represents the lesbian as anchored in her femininity and romantic love in a fundamental way.

The centrality of romantic love in its overlap with post-feminist discourse dismisses feminist politics for constraining women’s choices and operates in the interest of a reconfiguration of the home as the site of family, love and security for women. My analysis situates *TLW* as opening discursive space to include the lesbian as legitimate subject within this logic in light of the centrality of romantic love to the arrangement of her life narrative.

SPANISH VERSION:

Este trabajo busca interrogar las representaciones mediáticas de la lesbiana *como imagen* en tanto que producción discursiva de un régimen visual compuesto por diversos y cambiantes textos. Mediante el análisis visual y discursivo de la serie de televisión estadounidense *The L Word* exploro la organización de la lesbiana como cuerpo necesariamente femenino y sexualizado a través del concepto de "lesbian chick" o lesbiana chic. El cuestionamiento de las teorías tradicionales de la mirada masculina como organizadora de las representaciones visuales de la mujer / lesbiana *como imagen* me lleva a revisar sus actualizaciones en conceptos como la mirada(s) lesbiana(s) que me permiten superar los planteamientos teóricos que se mantienen dentro de los confines de lo puramente textual para expandirse hacia lo contextual o discursivo mediante la noción de género (genre).

El concepto de género televisivo me permite relacionar *TLW* con otras cadenas de significado con las que resuena como las series centradas en lo LGTB y las centradas en "mujeres". Basándome en un análisis de las convenciones del género centrado en "mujeres" explico cómo se centran en la representación de personajes femeninos cuyas vidas gravitan en torno al amor romántico. Mi análisis de TLW se centra en las historias y narrativas sobre amor para establecer cómo la serie construye a la lesbiana como anclada en su feminidad y sentimiento amoroso de forma fundamental. Esta centralidad junto con un discurso posfeminista que relega las políticas feministas a código moral que constriñe la libertad de las mujeres, opera en favor de una reconfiguración conservadora del hogar como espacio familiar, de amor y seguridad al que las mujeres acceden gracias a su recuperada libertad para amar y formar una familia. Mi análisis sitúa *TLW* como serie que abre este tipo de discursos para incluir a la lesbiana femenina como sujeto legitimado por sus narrativas de centralidad del amor romántico en su historia.

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“what i want is for you to write “fuck me” on your chest. write it. do it! and then I want you to walk out that door and i want you to walk down the street, and anybody that wants to fuck you, say, sure! sure! no problem! and when they do, you have to say, “thank you very, very much”. and make sure that you have a smile on your face. and then, you stupid fucking coward, you’re gonna know what it feels like to be a woman.”

Jenny Schecter

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My thesis project departs from an original concern about lesbian visibility in mainstream media as conforming to western beauty standards of femininity only. This concern is framed by uneasiness with the self-presentation of certain series as series about lesbians. I resist taking at face value that television dramas do actually *reflect* lesbian lives and wish to explore the politics of such representation.

My other relating concern is about feminist approaches to popular culture that are based on the identification of stereotypes in a descriptive fashion. Similarly, I regard research focused on a "male gaze" that takes advantage of the display of femininity as object as insufficient to account for lesbian visibility in media. Furthermore, it feels as if these approaches were non-problematically assuming an underlying gender binary that I wish to expose and question.

I decided to focus in the particular piece of television programming *The L Word* because it puts forward a plot in which lesbian characters abound and which also resonates strongly with other series centring female characters. The intertextual dialogue of these different series is another of my initial interests since I assume that both invest in relating femininity and love in a specific way.

In this thesis, I attempt to research from a "queer" perspective (understood as challenge to the gender binary) that does not take at face value the categories of gender, sex, sexuality or desire but that is implicated in disentangling their discursive complexities. Finally I want to underline that I intend to produce a text which does not invest in an evaluation of the series (or certain elements of the series) as progressive/regressive representations of the lesbian but to explore the politics involved in media representation.

In the second chapter I review feminist approaches to the study of popular culture in

order to frame my own perspective as drawing on the "woman as image" approach vis a vis the "images of women" approach. In addition, I situate the theoretical framework on the study of sexuality that will provide the basis of my understanding of (hetero/homo) sexuality and my critical perspective on the production of sexuality and desire.

In chapter three I engage with the analysis of the series' texture i.e. the way it is put together as visual product. My main interest is to interrogate characters as image in so far as their embodiments seem to respond to traditional orderings of heteronormative representations of femininity in popular culture. I shall utilize a critical account of theories of the "gaze" to explore the ways they can contribute to my analysis. My analysis is expanded by relating the particular piece of *TLW* to the genre conventions of television serials after which it is patterned.

In chapter four I analyse the series' "external" elements (title, title sequence, side-products) and its internal elements (story lines and narrative progression) to elaborate on my initial idea that *TLW* is thematised around the topic of love. I centre on the stories and narratives at work in the construction of love in *TLW* and analyse their discursive implications. Subsequently I focus on the narratives that shape the love story between the main characters of the series to disentangle the various logics that underlie their discursive production of love as at the central project in the character's lives.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Popular culture from a feminist perspective

In the study of representation a seemingly pervasive difference has been implied or reinforced by a recurring differentiation between “high” culture or “high” art and “popular” or “mass” culture that is termed as “low” form of culture,. This separation which implies a division founded on the issue of quality, is problematic as it elevates and legitimises certain forms of cultural expression over others apparently as a consequence of “high art” being a sort of effect of beauty that casts pieces of 'art' as more aesthetically valuable. This issue has been debated and critiqued from a feminist perspective that dismantles the logic behind such categories for being informed by the modernist tradition that locates a privileged male subject as the origin of this aesthetic access to beauty. The counterpart of high art is the set of products which appear as foundationally linked to the market and defined by their aspiration to reach a 'mass' audience. As if their reproducibility was marked by a sort of inauthenticity also as if high art was independent from constraints of the market. Various authors have stressed how this duality is implicated in a logic that assigns feminized attributes to “mass” culture and privileges “high” art for relating to traits that are socially understood as masculine (see Storey 2003; Huyssen 1986; Kuhn 1990). I will use the concept of popular culture throughout my work as a self-conscious gesture that aims at withdrawing from the binary of high art/ mass culture.

Having established this overarching concern to the study of popular culture, I shall expand on more specific debates. On mapping feminist research of popular culture, Sue Thornham (2007) addresses previous feminist interrogations of representations in (western)

media and introduces two different perspectives to do image analysis from a feminist perspective. First, she exposes the limitations of traditional feminist approaches which aim at identifying "*sex role stereotyping*" (2007, 23) and consist of quantitative research through an analysis of content and effects of mediated images. She argues that this body of work became mainstream within feminist research while also discursively promoted through UN's Conferences on Women, in particular Beijing's 1995 Conference (24). Thornham refers to this approach as "images of women" approach.

Thornham's main concern is the epistemology implicated in this account in relation to the politics of representation. She argues that the "images of women" approach is limited in its scope by an epistemological standpoint that only allows for methodologies which can account for a bias in media representations. The problem of representation within this approach is that women are reductively represented, i.e. only a short proportion of the (assumed) larger number of women are represented in the media. As part of the solution to the issue, research from this perspective generally advocates for the inclusion of women in directive or decisive positions within media companies (2007, 24). This way the "images of women" provided in the media are assumed to expand in an inclusive way i.e. to come to cover the whole diversity of 'real' women.

Thornham is critical of this sort of research for various reasons. It implies a conception of media representations in which images appear to be a reflection of "meanings that originate elsewhere" (2007, 27). At the same time, it does not provide an analytical framework to critically engage with the work of meaning production and the ways it is socially organised. In fact, the work that images do to arrange discourses goes unacknowledged, taking this approach to a "theoretical stagnation" (24). Instead, she argues for understanding images as a constitutive part of the process of meaning production and suggests to rather problematizing the representation as a matter of "woman as image" (28).

“Woman as image” conceptualises images as embedded in discourse. Thornham sees womanhood/femininity organised in discourse as according to a certain sort of visibility and discusses relations of power and subject positions at work in woman as image as practice.

Thornham's concern is best framed by introducing the reflective and constructivist approaches to the work of representation as explained by Stuart Hall (Hall 1997, 10). Hall provides an introduction to the debates around the shift from the study of language to the study of culture. Hall questions the reflective understanding of representations because within its approach “language functions like a mirror” and the analytical framework offered takes at face value that language stands for “reality” as existing outside of the realm of language (16-20). The “images of women” approach entails a reflective approach since images in the media are understood to represent (stand for) particular women (only) as reality out there.

On the other hand, a constructionist perspective questions how meaning is constructed through “representational systems” formed by “concepts and signs” (1997, 11). In the constructionist approach “representation is a practice” consisting of “the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate” and which is not conflated with “the *material* world, where things and people exist” (11). Hall introduces in his text a third approach, the intentional approach in which meaning is attributed to objects represented and the voice of the author or speaker, “who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language” (10). The “woman as image” approach is understood in my project as a constructivist approach to the work of representation.

To continue I will introduce the concept of representation that I will be using and that is taken from the work of Stuart Hall as well. Hall identifies two systems of representation mediating the “production of meaning through language” (1997, 2). One of them is the system that organises the “mental concepts” or the conceptual map through which we make sense of the world around us in our minds, through which we “interpret the world” and “refer to things

both inside and outside our heads". For Hall what enables us to produce the meanings of the "concepts in our minds" are representations (3). Then we make use of another system of representation that allows us to "exchange meanings and concepts", to share the ideas and images in our conceptual map, so that we can express them. This system makes use of signs, which "carry meaning" and stand for the concepts in the maps in our minds. Signs establish a correlation among one another to "organise themselves into languages" (4). This second system of representation is the language system.

Discourse defines the extent to which "things" can be talked about, representations are produced within systems which first produce the set of concepts that we get to carry in our minds to subsequently put them into language, or particular signs, that come to signify those concepts. To say that there is "work" involved in representation is to state that my account considers a productive process of representation which is not fixed or determined but that appears as a process in the making particular to each case. This complexity of the work of representation is important in order to produce a theoretical framework that allows for a more nuanced analysis than that which would take at face value the ontological existence of "things" outside of language and discourse. Beyond the already contested reflective perspective sees "things" as merely reflected by language so they appear as readily available to us within knowledge while texts seem to encapsulate meaning.

Hall assesses two models within the constructionist approach, the semiotic and discursive models. Hall accounts for the emergence of semiotics and points to its limited explanatory scope as constrained by the limits of the text (see Hall 1997) and underlines the importance of Michel Foucault's work on the discursive approach which he discusses in detail. Foucault as explained by Hall was rather interested in how knowledge was produced through concrete systems of representation (discourse) and how relations of power are to govern "the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about" (1997, 29).

"Physical things and actions" exist only when they come to signify, they become objects of discourse within discourse (30). Through the relation of power as productive of the emergence of certain forms of knowledge (power/knowledge) the extent to which "things" - or "representations" - can be talked or thought about is delimited (33). Foucault claimed that the question would not be about establishing which statements are inherently true in a universalistic fashion within concrete systems of knowledge but he invested in relating power to knowledge (power/knowledge) in order to conceptualise what comes to count as true within discursive formations, what he called "regimes of truth" (34). However, my work will follow a different line of argumentation in so far as my analysis argues for the possibility of ideological meaning within discourse. I will expand on the concept of ideological meaning in chapter two.

The discursive model provides a framework that will allow my analysis of representation go beyond the boundaries of the text. My work is informed by previous concerns about analytical perspectives that focus on the textual level only for taking at face value the reflective approach. At the same time, analyses focusing on the textual level only come often implicated in the production of universalistic theorisations of the practices of reading or interpreting representations (see Kuhn 1984; Fairclough 2003). My analysis questions "texts" as organised by social and institutionalised practices.

This concern over the "dualism of universalism and specificity" is one of the main debates that Annette Kuhn (1984) identifies for theorising representation. She assesses a "gulf between textual analysis and contextual inquiry". In the level of textual analysis theories would account for matters of structure within the limits of the text itself, as if it encapsulated meaning in a universalistic fashion. On the other hand, Kuhn claims that accounts enhancing the importance of the context of meaning production, often end up implicating a text/context divide as if separable entities. Kuhn underlines the relevance of television theory in that it

brings to the debate of popular culture a more complex account of meaning production, in an attempt to see the relation of texts and contexts through the use of categories such as genre or by understanding television as a social institution that connects the text to its socially produced pattern (Kuhn 1984, 148).

This thesis invests in thinking “texts” beyond the textual approach by questioning discourse as in the intersection of text and context, thought of as a continuum of “text-in-context”, rather than a binary opposition of “text/context”. If “texts” are understood to be the effect of work through a particular way of texturing -the way they are put together- , they already appear as imbued in a practice that is socially patterned.

This perspective is presented by Norman Fairclough in whose work “texts are seen as part of social events” (Fairclough 2003, 21). He understands “texts” or the textual dimension as producing outcomes in social practices and organisations, but he also underscores texts themselves as outcomes of “social structures” and “practices” on the one hand, and of “social agents” interacting in the frame of “social events” on the other. A social event would be the encounter of the social agents with the text, or the text-in-context encounter Fairclough situates discourse as a social structure related to social events or styles through the mediation of social practices or orders of discourse and patterned or arranged socially in genres, formed by chains of genres (24). This concept of discourse is different from the Foucauldian concept in that it accounts for discourse as social structure while the Foucauldian concept would situate it at the level of social practice and not account for any structural level of analysis. A final resolution of this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis. I take ideas by Fairclough to account for texts as particular overlaps of genre chains and as in relation to discourse.

In particular, I will take Fairclough's concept of genre as “sustaining the institutional structure of contemporary society” and subsequently invested in “regulating and managing (…) social practice(s)”, what he conceptualises as “genres of governance”. This concept that I

will broadly term genre seems useful for questioning the "relationship between different scales of social life and social organization" in the context of globalization.

My work tackles the issue of scale only indirectly but i wish to consider here the complex resonations that have been raised productively from some queer perspectives on geopolitics (Binnie 2004; Halberstam 2005) as it has influenced the way representation and meaning have overlapped with the study of sexuality. If hegemonic perspectives within geopolitical inquiry had traditionally privileged the national scale, these authors focus on how scales have been produced within geopolitics and to the interest of what questions. Jack Halberstam is critical of post-modern geography (Edward Soja 1989; David Harvey 1990) for departing from a foundational exclusion that assigns the body to "the local" while economical or political issues on/of globalization are the centre of debates on the transnational (Halberstam 2005:5). The concept of scale in my work is taken from this (queer/ feminist) critical perspective to conceptualise the theoretical endeavour to think the relation of the so-called "global" to the "local" not as in an opposition or binary but as already a complicated production (Binnie 2004; Halberstam 2005; Cabezas 2012).[1] Cabezas points out how connections among the "global" and "local" processes are not abstract but embodied and situated in a concrete space (Cabezas 2012). Jon Binnie brings attention to how the local scale can become difficult to grasp as well as conflated with the national scale while it resonates as a site of authenticity "devoid of agency" vis a vis the global scale as a globalizing or homogenizing force of global capital (Binnie 2004, 35).

This theoretical navigation among different scales is approached in my work mainly by the use of the concept of genre and genre chain as practice mediating the various

[1] Binnie reviews this debate and its contemporary outcomes that have authors as Aihwa Ong to, rather than the "global", conceptualise the "transnational" as a "cutting across or traversing of national borders which actively transforms the relationships between states and capitalism" (Binnie 2004: 34).

dimensions of events and structures. Debates on spatial scale and the implications of the global vis a vis the local are relevant for my work also because I will research representations that seek to produce sexuality as distinctive feature of their arrangement. As sexuality is often situated in the local scale and as a phenomena constrained within the body in an essential way it has been key for my thinking to revise the implications of this sort of logic, especially as the global scale is often pictured as “the” impacting force of global capital over the local.

2.2 Sexuality and desire

In this project I analyse a particular piece of popular culture, *The L Word*. As specifically wishes to produce an understanding of its representations as *standing for* the lives of a group of lesbians and therefore promotes the idea that this particular group of lesbians *reflect* what it *is* to *be* a lesbian in their context, I need to consider also the problems and politics of representation of sexuality in popular culture. I shall question the representation of sexuality as monolithic dimension that as an effect produces LGTB subjects as intelligible subjects within discourse. In order to do so, I will introduce some considerations on the how sexuality has been thought of previously and a review of its historical production.

Firstly I shall underscore the importance of Michel Foucault's work on sexuality in “The history of Sexuality, Vol.1”. In this work he aims at unravelling the historical production of the realm of sexuality as a sort of stabilized category that can be intelligible in the social order. He provides a set of theoretical tools to think it as a production of power relations

(Foucault 1990, 103), in contrast to what he coined the "repressive hypothesis" (10)[2]. He claims sexuality to be "a great surface network" whose formation is in relation to various "strategies of knowledge and power" (106).

His thought dismisses the idea that sexuality shall be conceptualized as having its origin in the realm of the natural (see also Halperin 1989) or as a given that individuals display throughout their social practices, but argues that sexuality is produced, that it is "a historical construct" (Foucault 1990, 105). Its fundamental period of formation would have been the eighteenth century when "Western societies created and deployed a new apparatus" of regulation and control over bodies, the "deployment of sexuality" (105).[3] Homosexuality in its modern sense would emerge within this discursive shift and appears as a foundational trait of subjects, who seem necessarily defined by their (homo)sexuality, through the erasure of previous understandings of sodomy as a "temporary aberration", "the homosexual was now a species" (Foucault 1978: 43).

Nevertheless, these genealogies of homosexuality have been critically approached for focusing on the emergence of gay male sexuality only. Some authors invested in reclaiming different cultures of female sexualities have worked on a genealogy specific to female homosexuality or "deviant" female practices (see Jagose 1996; Halberstam 1996).

[2] Foucault uses the concept **juridical- discursive model of power** (1990: 83) to frame a historically produced understanding of power that has been central to western modern thought, though it is presented as insufficient. Within the model, power is reduced to a negative force; it relates to subjects by exclusively prohibiting and restricting. It establishes itself through language and discourse by introducing a binary system. This means that positions in relation to the rule are either licit or illicit, legal or illegal, in a characteristic move of modern thought which seeks intelligibility through oppositions. The consequence for not adjusting to the rule is reduced to punishment. One implication here is that subjects, who become subjects so long as they are subjected to the founding law, are not able to act outside the realm of the rule, they only act within what is allowed. This model corresponds to the modern, enlightened, universal- aspiring knowledge ideal, where legibility and comprehensiveness through a rational exercise of understanding is the ultimate objective.
The 'repressive hypothesis' applies this model of power to thinking sexuality. Sexuality here appears as constrained by restrictions that can be overcome by employing the language of liberation as transgression of the law. He claims that what should be under study is "the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'" (1990: 11)

[3] He identifies "four strategic unities" (Foucault 1990: 104) that would have started forming in the beginning of the eighteenth century, despite they would not have come to "fully develop" in that historical phase. They are "the hysterization of women's bodies", "a pedagogization of children's sex", "a socialization of procreative behaviour" and "a "psychiatrization of perverse pleasure.

Jagose invests in reworking a genealogy of lesbianism or lesbian identity (1996: 14), while Halberstam argues against the use of the term lesbianism as "transhistorical concept" (Halberstam 2008, 73). Halberstam explores a tentative genealogy of the set of practices at the intersections of femaleness, gender and "peripheral sexualities". In contrast to a historiographic account of "lesbianism", he casts the use of the term "lesbianism" as term across time and space as if universal as a reductive account of the variety of practices in which diverse bodies, practices and roles have intersected historically. Following Foucault's understanding of peripheral sexualities[4], Halberstam recuperates partially the history of masculine women who desired other women and were referred to as hermaphrodites, tribads or female husbands (73), and locates the emergence of the concept of lesbianism in the mid-twentieth century.

The notion of sexuality as a historical product, as a disposition produced differently in specific historical contexts, has inspired a set of academic debates interrogating the emergence of homosexuality in the West (Jagose 1996). While in Foucault's work its emergence is related to the disciplinary power of bio-medical discourses of the XIX, other authors relate it to the shift to an industrial productive system and the widespread access to wage labour a century before (Jagose 1996; Weeks 1998; D' Emilio 1983).

This debate is beyond the scope of my work, but it seems important to acknowledge how various perspectives engage in genealogical efforts that focus on the production of the binary heterosexuality/ homosexuality as foundational to the emergence of the modern notion of sexuality. Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's idea that explanatory accounts of its exact emergence can be set aside for a moment in the interest of a theorisation that looks at the

[4] Foucault points to how from the end of the eighteenth century until our time, (Foucault 1978: 40) a set of deviant practices would have been specifically defined in relation to medicine's capacity to to "create an entire organic, functional, or mental pathology arising out of "incomplete sexual practice" (ibid, 41). Homosexuality in its modern sense would be one of this peripheral sexualities

implications and outcomes of the binary heterosexuality/homosexuality (Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990, 9). Various authors (Jagose 1996, Kosofsky Sedgwick 1990; Halperin 1989) have underlined that homosexuality would have been produced as deviant category even before the establishment of a concept of heterosexuality and its subsequent stabilization as norm. Sexuality would have become thought of as a binary logic, characteristic of western thinking, which defines one normative category in opposition to what it is not. To the extent that meaning is relational i.e. produced in relation to other meanings, heterosexuality has been discursively thought of as already containing its opposite, what it is not. Heterosexuality therefore "secures its self-identity and shores up its ontological boundaries by protecting itself from what it sees as the continual predatory encroachments of its contamined other, homosexuality" (Fuss 1991, 2). Paradoxically, what might appear discursively as a solid boundary can questioned for producing the centred practice/identity of heterosexuality and "operates as an indispensable interior exclusion" (Fuss, 1991, 3).

Nevertheless, genealogical ways of accounting for the emergence and shifts of discourses on sexuality have allowed for the identification of different stages of its domain. In order to present a chronology of Anglo American understandings of sexuality, I will begin by presenting the account of Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick's study of language and sexuality (2003). From the beginning of the XX century until the 1940s, homosexuality would have been explained as a pathology, which in the 1950s and 1960s would have become contested by the influence of gay rights movements, advocating for a positive understanding of homosexuality from a defence as a matter of identity (Cameron and Kulick. 2003, 77). Cameron and Kulick underline how this process of normalization of homosexuality was pursued by its reinforced presentation as a sort of new identity in an attempt to distance itself through difference from its prior formation. As an outcome, new gays and lesbians would have come to define themselves in opposition to "misguided homosexuals" who have been

pictured as excessive and resonating with the previous pathologised understandings of homosexuality (77). In the 1970s and 1980s, and following the tendency started by gay and lesbians on the liberation rhetoric, homosexuality would have been increasingly framed as an identity, adapting the frame provided by other minority identities that were struggling against their collective discrimination (77). Michael Warner makes an important critique by pointing out that the anchoring ideal of this production is an idea of “community” as “generated in the tactics of Anglo- American identity politics and its liberal-national environment” (Warner 1993: xxv). Therefore LGTB politics would be articulated around a project of belonging in a reiteration of the language of minorities and civil rights which is anchored in the ideals of community as family and shared culture and language that in Warner's argument are necessarily heteronormative. As well, it “falsely suggests an ideological and nostalgic contrast with the atomization of modern capitalist society” (xxv).

As an end to his chronology, Cameron and Kulick locate the 1990s as a final phase in which a queer and post-identitarian emphasis in activism and academia would have shifted debates towards the question of identity effect of “social relations of power” (1990, 78). His conclusion to the text is arguing for the dismissal of sexual identity as category for the study of language and sexuality since it entails too a reductive perspective. (Kulick, 2000: 105). In a similar fashion, Michael Warner advocates for a queer politics as resistance to the logics of formation of minorities and their agenda of toleration (Warner 1993, xxvi).

Beyond these accounts on queer politics and agenda, I shall expand on the overlap of identity and sexuality. Firstly, I will relate this overlap to the emergence of a pink economy and gay lifestyles (Lewis 1997) to then review the emergence of the idea of sexual citizenship in the West (Binnie and Bell 2000). The shift from a fordist to a post-fordist society is identified as the process in which Euro-American societies' productive systems turned increasingly into a “consumer culture” which would have carried along a “struggle over

meaning" and "signification" in a process of stylization. This form of consumption would be structured around the accumulation of goods and services for having an expressive or aesthetic value i.e. they are valuable in relation to their capacity to become an expression of the consumers' ability to make choices in the market in order to display individuality by a self-commodification of oneself. In post-fordist societies consumerism and economy more generally revolve increasingly around matters of "the distribution of aesthetic knowledge" as defining site of social positioning (Lury 1996, 79). This sort of consumption produces subject positions as lifestyles that signify the consumer's social position (Lury 1996, 80; see also Grewal 2005). This correlation of identity with consumer choices available in the market expands the realm of economic activities so that they become the centre of the life project of the individual.

Even though the production of sexuality as related to consumer culture has been theoretically underlined, an understanding of gay and lesbian identities in relation to capitalism has been present in some authors' theorisations regardless of the historical period (D' Emilio 1983). Other authors have focused on the relation of the capitalist consumer market to sexual identities, as a particularly relevant issue from the 1980s with the emergence of the pink economy (Reina Lewis 1997; Preciado 2008).[5]

Ann Pelligrini challenges the emphasis made on the commodification of identity only as a matter of lifestyle in the late twentieth century. She argues that power relations under neoliberal capitalism do shape the emergence of new ways of producing sexualities as lifestyles available in the market, but that they might have been exaggerated in the interest of an inaccurate idealization of the formation of sexual identities as minority as more authentic

[5] 5 Reina Lewis (1997) situates the establishment of the pink economy in the late eighties and relates it to the production of LGTB subjectivities not only as political or adhering the minority logic, but also in relation to consumption so that consumer practices increasingly became an access to participate in "a gay life" within cosmopolitan urban space. This consumer culture would have focused more on gay males than on lesbians.

than the commodified, perverted and superficial gay consumer subject . More importantly, she suggests that this understanding makes the assumption of rendering the "new" identities as necessarily a site of negation of politics, unable to access the political realm of contestation. In that sense, this model would misunderstand politics and agency by failing to acknowledge how commodity capitalism is constitutive of these identities, as capitalism in its productive phase can be also thought of as constitutive of (sexual) identities in other historical moments of their formation (Pellegrini 2002, 141).

Finally, I shall introduce the emergence of sexuality as a dimension to be included in the realm of "rights". In the end of the XX century, the LGTB movement started to organise around demands for equality that gravitated around issues of visibility and recognition of civil rights such as that of "domestic partnership" which later derived in the demand of marriage. Accordingly, sexuality emerged as a relevant formation to the theorisations of citizenship. In the 1990s the concept of intimate or sexual citizenship emerged to refer to the various social changes which put sexuality in the political agenda of institutions (Plummer 1997; Weeks 1998). As argued by Weeks, sexual citizenship is fostered by "powerful cultural and social changes" that started in the 1960s and are related to the formation of an idea of "sexual minorities". This concept of citizenship would seek to expand the domain of citizenship as legal status as well as political concept, making it "about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by new responsibilities" (Weeks 1998, 39). The work on sexual citizenship adheres to the discursive framework of western liberal democracy by claiming notions of freedom, rights and equity typical of these formations. As Grewal argues one of the most significant complications of the notion of sexual citizenship is that it reclaims rights beyond the nation-state to turn them into an issue of "human rights", of a universality that surpasses the nation and enters the arena of a sort of international rights- based subject (Grewal 2005, 11).

The question of whether it is theoretically appropriate to think of “a global gay” has been widely discussed and celebrated by some (Weeks 1998) as well as criticised for having become a new measurement of democratic progressiveness within a modern liberal paradigm (Binnie 2004, Puar 2013; Grewal 2005). This critique is best exemplified through the concept of homonationalism as put forward by Jasbir Puar (2013). She is critical of how its proposed subject becomes the site where the democratic project is expanded. She interrogates its universality and additive understanding of subordinated positions, as they appear to be increasingly included in a sanitized way i.e. without conflict, in the project of collective transcendence of democracy. With the intention of assessing the discursive investments of liberal democracy, she uses the concept of homonationalism useful for a nuanced analysis of the processes through which LGBT subjects emerge as the site of rights within the legal apparatus of the state, a process that is complicit in actualizing new measurements for the progressiveness of nation-states. She wishes to capture the shift by which the nation- state has increasingly come to be problematised, instead of as a strong site for the articulation of heteronormativity as compulsory sexuality, as the site of inclusion of LGTB subjects via legal recognition. The liberal discourses which have reshaped western democratic projects to include LGTB subjects are also invested in foregrounding the conditions of its universality. The identitarian project that shapes this process is called out by Puar in that it is producing a necessary racialization on the figure of the Other, constitutive of the centred rational (white) subject, the citizen who is recognized in his/her sexuality.

The genealogy above has aimed to situate the historical overview considered by my research as relevant and constitutive of what it is to theoretically think sexuality as historical and situated concept. The production of sexuality as a matter of lifestyle and as emerging dimension of national citizenship as well as the international concern over “human rights” are the most relevant social formations that will provide a theoretical background for my analysis

of lesbian subjectivities as also produced in the media discourses. Nevertheless, I want to further problematise the production of sexuality by questioning its naturalization of desire. The foundational site of the production of identities relies in the understanding of desire as an inner drive that is situated in the realm of the "natural" as opposed to that which is constructed socially.

In the light of the work done on language and sexuality by Penelope Eckert (2002), this thesis is aware of the limitations of both the conception of sexuality as identity and as desire only. I will follow Eckert's investment in debunking previous conceptions of sexuality, where she argues that sexuality as identity allows for a partial understanding only of the social practices that it organises. As identity (and lifestyle) only, sexuality would be reduced to taking at face value the personal narratives or self-identifications that seek to encapsulate it as a matter of the unfolding of an inner self. If Kulick had suggested that identity as category should be dismissed for this reason, she argues that it should be retained as a tool to take the social into account, though it should be critically interrogated (Eckert 2001, 100). At the same time, she also highlights how the conception of sexuality as desire runs similar reductive risks. There is a danger of naturalization in both that in the case of the latter comes from the potential of the term desire to be thought of as originating in an inner drive which displays in social practices, but that is not shaped by social practices and power relations. Eckert argues that it is not an either - or question between the two focuses, but the issue shall be to explore the limits of both. She advocates for recuperating the notion of identity as an analytical tool useful to problematise what the idea of membership does for participating socially as well as she is invested in a notion of desire as an activity which is socially mediated. In her conclusion she claims that the study of desire is embedded in the larger problematic of de-naturalizing the discourse that makes sexual activity appear as an activity in which people engage "*only out of the desire for a particular physiological object"* when she would include

that it shall be explored as *also* organising activities "*for a social object*". This move brings to the forefront that "*society structures sexual desire*"; the implications of sexual activity have societal outcomes which structure desire, therefore "*sexuality is not just about sex*" (Eckert 2002, 109).

Her argumentation for this thesis is fundamental since she wishes to acknowledge the "potential for naturalization in the study of sexuality", a naturalization that she expands as well to the study of desire and emotion, that she relates to "the location (of desire) in the body". She claims that "the centrepiece of sexual ideology is that sexual desire is natural, unfolding unmediated from a physiological and individual need". In her argument, this "social allocation of libido" in the body has the outcome that the social practices which organise desire and also emotion and affect are not accounted for, taking at face value the dominant naturalising discourse, that has ultimately the effect of rendering sexuality, desire and emotion as outside the realm of politics (Eckert 2001, 103). Her work argues for a theorisation of "how desires and emotions do not form our social lives, but are formed by our social lives as well" (104).

In wanting to disentangle the difference among notions of sexuality and desire, she opens up the scope of research, not only by rendering social objectives as mobilised in the social organisation of sexuality, but also by raising relevant political points for a feminist research. The importance of not collapsing sexuality into desire allows us to bring other social practices into the realm of sexuality, such as violence, as she accurately points to how sexuality "is also about undesire" i.e. sexuality is also about unwanted attention or lack of desire, even when "they are framed" by the "desire imperative". Therefore, she underlines that there is an "overlap" in the study of desire and sexuality, but they shall not be conflated (2001, 104).

I seek to take these important issues into account and expand them through a de-

naturalisation of emotions -through an analysis of the construction of romantic love as ideological- and their re-location as socially constructed also through media representations and discourses. The aim of this work is to question how the social organisation of desire, emotion and sexuality participate in the formation of identitarian fictions that this thesis resists to take at face value. However, the theoretical importance of identity as social category is not set aside in an absolute manner. In a similar fashion as Eckert, I intend to take up the project that aims at questioning identities to see how they come to be formed. This sense of the importance of the study of identity is shared by Rosemary Hennesy, who underlines that identities matter in so far as they are also thought of as *real* when "meaning is taken to be anchored in referents or signifieds; "lesbian" and "gay" are often read as referring to authentic identities, either benign or malevolent perversions of a naturalized norm" (2000, 118). In my work I wish to analyse how sexuality and identity are represented in the TV series genre as *real* or as a *reflection* of a reality out there. I also explore alternative ways of thinking sexuality and representations that allow my analysis to capture the politics of this socially organised work.

Chapter 3: Analysis of texture

This chapter presents the television series The L Word as first series to introduce a full cast of female self-identified lesbian characters and analyses their arrangement as visual text. First I explore the array of lesbian visibility produced within Euro- Anglo-American popular culture through representations of the lesbian that follow the arrangement of the 'lesbian chick'. I analyse the concept of the 'lesbian chick' by focusing on its production as a particular intersection of the representation of gender and sexuality. Subsequently I introduce the concepts of the gaze and spectatorship in a critical way in order to situate them as historically produced within film theory. Even though these concepts allow my analysis to identify meta-narrative and self-reflexive elements that formally compose the text of *TLW*, in more general level my argumentation exposes the theoretical limitations of both concepts as they confine meaning to the limits of the text. Drawing on theoretical contributions by Annette Kuhn on the concept of audience, I argue that an analytical perspective that focuses in the text-in-context overlap is productive for my analysis.

The concept of genre emerges as fundamental since it allows my perspective to include other texts that resonate with the particular series of my analysis and therefore expands my perspective beyond the textual approach.

Previous academic and non academic interest in *TLW* engage in claims which draw on binary understandings of the series as either positive or negative, progressive or conservative, for being an advance in cultural visibility as opposed to pointing out the exclusions these representations were drawing on, and which all ends up with the authors' conclusion (Pratt 2008: 40). I wish to rather shift the perspective of critical reflection to considering the ways this particular product can be seen as constitutive of particular available

discourses on lesbianism. Consequently, my aim is not to explore how progressive it is or not to have lesbian characters in media representations in general or in this particular case. My research interest is more invested in the work these representations do in relation to the meaning of "lesbian" as meaning in the making and to see if they make a difference in any ways to the public discourses circulated by the media. Drawing on the theoretical framework put forward by Sue Thornham I wish to confront the perspective of "the images of women" with an analysis of the work that "woman as image" does.

I shall take up the perspective of "woman as image" interrogate the "lesbian as image" in order to question media images as constitutive of ordering social practices of reading gendered representations and organizing femininity, in relation to different orders of heteronormative discourse. The "lesbian as image" perspective allows my analysis to interrogate the organisation of images as a hierarchical practice, as much as it provides a framework to reintroduce the work of meaning production as a process in the making, in which the "content" (woman or lesbian) does not appear as detachable from its "form" (as image). This approach opens up the analysis for images to be regarded as constitutive of particular ways of ordering social practices and therefore already embedded in discourse.

"Lesbian as image" allows for a denaturalisation of the work of representation as much as it takes my analysis to deconstruct the notion of "lesbian" (and by extension "woman") which would not appear to exist in an essential way or as a "reality" taken at face-value. I also argue that it is not possible to understand "lesbians" or "women" as an infinite sequence of particular lesbians or women who are self-sufficient on their own in a conceptualisation that expands the limits of the concept but maintains its essentializing

terms.[6] 'Woman' would rather emerge as an articulation produced through several social practices and discourses.

3.1 Generic history of TLW

The L Word (*TLW*) is a US/ Canadian TV series aired throughout 2004 – 2009 by the US cable channel Showtime. It has become relevant worldwide for being the first TV drama in the US and elsewhere to present a story with a full cast of lesbian or bisexual- identified female characters. This US/ Canadian production was filmed on set and aims at representing the lives of a group of almost exclusively lesbian- identified female friends living in Los Angeles where LGTB political issues such as same sex marriage and parenting, coming out, discrimination, trans/homophobic violence and identity politics. The series episodes in addition to earning this historic reputation, has been aired in 25 countries, and distributed and marketed through alternative channels, mainly the internet (Pratt 2008: 138). Its production runs parallel to the success of *Queer as Folk* (*QAF*), another Showtime TV series that started airing previously (2000-2003) and which presented for the first time in national- U.S television the lives of a group of self-identified gay characters, in this case males (*The L Word* 2009: Special).

As Ilene Chaiken, creator and screenwriter, puts it, her project of *TLW*, which, in fact, she had introduced to Showtime before the production of *QAF*, was only taken up for production after the first season's success of *QAF* (*The L Word* 2009: Special). Chaiken has a long career in the alternative film industry where she has created and written stories related to the representation of gender and sexuality in film. She could then develop *TLW* with a team of all women and/or lesbian writers, directors and various professionals in the alternative LGTB

[6] This is an ongoing debate within feminist theory and activism. See more on works as that of Chandra Mohanty (1984) Audre Lorde (1995) or Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) which aim at dismantling the idea of "women" as unitarian universal and Western category. White feminists have also argued and theorised the artificiality of the production of "women", Monique Wittig (1981) or "lesbians", Butler (1990).

scene all with an existing experience in filmic representations of women and lesbians in popular culture, including one of the most influential directors, Rose Troche (*Go Fish!* 1994) (The L Word 2009: *Special*).

3.2 Gendering images of the lesbian

On the basis of my analysis I shall argue that a distinctive characteristic of *TLW* is that its characters are produced according to traditional reiterations of "woman as image" that revolve around a particular way of representing, and collapsing, femaleness and femininity. By addressing the conceptual difference of femaleness and femininity my work aims at taking into account the variety of gender presentations, expressions and roles that subjectivities can come to occupy beyond the socially hegemonic binary.[7]

My research is informed by the concept of femininity as discourse as presented by Dorothy Smith (1995) who explores femininity as "the actual social relations of a discourse mediated by texts" (Smith 1995: 161). Femininity is then a production, constituted and constitutive of a textual discourse on the media which emerged in relation to the "market" and the "production of commodities" (1995: 172). My perspective regards femininity and femaleness as artificially conflated by a production of a correspondence of femininity with 'the' female body as a necessity.

The tendency to represent the lesbian as image organised through the mobilisation of

[7] I take the relation of femaleness and femininity as a production of cisnormativity. Cisnormativity is the socially produced and compulsory correlation of the sex assigned at birth to a gender identification, both as artificial social impositions. This idea of femaleness corresponds to the physical traits that are socially perceived to naturally correspond to a person who is assigned female at birth. It is important to highlight that I wish not to imply that it is a natural or biological condition, but rather a socially engineered disposition (Fausto Sterling, 2000; Preciado, 2008). Femininity would then be its correlation, produced to emerge as if a natural consequence of femaleness. At the same time, masculinity would appear as in the natural domain of maleness therefore deterring from the possibility of existence of a female masculinity

hyper-femininity via femaleness has been widely interrogated in academic literature through the overlapping concepts of the “lipstick lesbian” (Lewis 1997: 94), that of (‘apolitical’) “lipstick lesbian chick” (Hemmings 1999: 457) and “lesbian chic” (Dove-Viebahn 2007: 75). In my work I will take the concept of the lesbian chic to look at the way the characters in *TLW* are gendered. Regarding the emergence and changes of “lesbian chick”, I draw on Erin J. Rand's genealogy that contends what in my work is called lesbian as image in mainstream media (Rand 2013:124). The 'lesbian chick' emerges in a moment of re-appropriation of subcultural identities into the market and liberal politics (Rand 2013:124). The period of nineties in the US is pointed out to be a moment of articulation of identity politics through a foundational visibility as the standpoint from where to pursue political demands. The decade is also said to become a decisive moment in LGTB visibility to overcome the AIDS crisis that is a crisis of representation as well, where LGTB characters had been stigmatized as the “container” for all negative significations of the crisis. Even though lesbianism was more of a satellite to those representations, argues Rand, its representation still played a role in the process of reinventing lesbianism to mean a threat, though a less threatening, “safe version of homosexuality” (2013: 126).

This re-articulation of lesbianism as less threatening is carried out through a sort of compulsory correlation with femininity that I wish to analyse. The previous feminine lesbian figure had been the figure of the femme as related to her partner the butch lesbian. “Lesbian chick” distances from this previous femme/butch pair. There is an erasure of the butch lesbian from representation which I locate as the condition that allows heteronormative discourse to produce a lessened sense of anxiety towards lesbianism.

In her text on femme subjectivities, Clare Hemmings explores Havelock Ellis' discourse on female inverts as exemplary of the social contemporary depiction of lesbian desire and exposes the twofold effect of femme desire. While femme desire for an inauthentic

masculinity (butch) is rendered as a failure of her femininity, the very position of femininity itself is cast vulnerable to seduction by the masculine invert and not necessarily as naturally oriented to “authentic” masculinity only (Hemmings 1999: 452). At the same time the femininity of the femme is also the site of her likeliness to “get cured” in redirecting her desire towards the rightful kind of masculinity, as opposed to the irrecoverable butch lesbian as permanent inverted, femme would become “the inauthentic pervert” (ibid, 453). Femme navigates the blurry boundaries of invisibility/visibility because of her gender presentation/expression and not *everyone* would straight-forwardly read her as an “invert”. Hemmings' analysis allows to actually establishing the position behind this impersonal *everyone:* the male as “authentic” masculinity. Because femme can eventually pass as heterosexual femininity, the (male) 'gaze'[8] of authentic masculinity is filled with the anxiety of not being able to make a difference amongst “real” and “perverted” femininity. Hemmings situates the origin of this anxiety in the relation of the (heterosexual) male gaze to knowledge. As the core of male masculine subjectivity relies on its access to knowledge as form of power, its *looking* at femme and failing to *see* is filled with the anxiety of *not knowing* and consequently to become degraded from a position of power (ibid, 454).

In my argument of “lesbian chick” as a less threatening' formulation of lesbianism for the heterosexual 'male gaze' I wish to recall the figure of the butch lesbian as a triangulation of “authentic” male masculinity's relation to femininity. As representations of “lesbian chick” involve the loss of the figure of the butch, I argue that this loss allows to devoid the authentic/ inauthentic binary in which the presence of the butch imbues male masculinity. Through the erasure of female masculinity, masculinity is rendered as if only in the domain of the “male” as “authentic” version and this way its very authenticity of male

8 Here 'gaze' is used as 'desiring look' in contrast to its more nuanced use in the coming section

masculinity as natural is allowed to go unquestioned.

Jack Halberstam exposes how from the decade of the eighties, lesbian visibility produced in “self-conscious” lesbian independent movies was carried out either by erasing the figure of the butch or at least by feminizing her representations through what he terms the “soft butch” (Halberstam 2008: 243). In line with Halberstam's observation and other previous works on *TLW* (Pratt 2008; Moore and Schilt 2006), I argue that even though the characters in *TLW* represent a variety of gender presentations which can not be seen as reduced to the lesbian chick figure, the series represents “gender conforming lesbians” as its centred characters (Pratt 2008: 160). What is more it continues the logic of veiling female masculinities through the “softened” masculinities of the soft butch as the most masculine female represented in *TLW*, following Moore and Schilt's (2006: 162). These soft masculinities are embodied in the series in the characters of Tasha, Shane, Max or Ivan. It is remarkable how all of them respond to a working class social position as which might be read as indicator of the lower social position of female masculinities within the series. While Max and Ivan endure through lesbian transphobia for their gender presentation, Shane and Tasha present watered down masculinities by fashionable looks and hairdos.

The re-articulation of representations of the lesbian as feminine is carried out by the erasure of the butch alongside a process of anchoring the image of the lesbian as feminine only through its signification through fashion in mainstream media. Fashion advertising and media would become the sites of the creation of this new lesbian (Dove-Viebahn 2007; Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006). By producing lesbian visibility as related to fashionable looks and a sense of style as central for her discursive arrangement, lesbianism becomes increasingly portrayed as a lifestyle and in that sense replaced as position within the consumerist market. Reina Lewis sees this particular form of lesbian visibility as a direct effect of media market strategy that seeks to present a more consumable, palatable lesbian image to the mainstream

audience while pursuing a new LGTB consumer market (Lewis, 1997: 93). On another dimension of the analysis, which would account for a productive sort of power, LGTB subjectivities would have come to get produced through the power relations that appeared to shift the issue of political subjectivity into consumer positioning within lifestyle markets, LGTB or otherwise.

In all, this framework of lesbianism produced 'lesbian chick' that brought about the figure of a consumable, politically non threatening lesbian, in contrast to the previous and now "old", feminist political lesbian who is now made to look pathetic for being dressed in flannel (Rand, 2013: 125). In the celebration of the "new" self-made lesbian, she presents herself to be actively seeking for a public visibility that would paradoxically render her invisible (Dove-Viebahn 2007: 75). In what some authors have named a post-lesbianism move, nothing but her inherent desire would differentiate her from other female- femininities and from her counterpart, the heterosexual feminine female (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2006:48).

In my interpretation, *TLW* can be regarded as an exemplary product along a similar logic. It arranges the lesbian as image through a female hyper-femininity that appears both as self-evident and self- sufficient while depoliticized, as if outside the power relations that produce lesbian forms of embodiment as gendered and sexualized, according to the commodity logic of lesbian chick. Even when the visual image of characters in the series is visibly different, such as the looks of Jenny (feminine) and Shane (soft butch) for instance, I claim that when looking at the particular ways they become gendered, a whole set of visual and narrative dispositions related to gender, race and class unfold as constitutive part of the way they are put together as characters in the series and which defines their homogeneity.

TLW as a particular reiteration of the phenomenon of the lesbian chick is produced through the representation of the characters as attractive, upper-middle class white professionals living in and taking advantages of a metropolitan space. Yet their relation to

normative late modern western standards of beauty, class and race should not be solely problematised as a matter of listing randomly the exclusions they might produce. As Rand drawing on Ferguson argues the analytical approach should not assume that “race, gender, class and sexuality exist as connected but discrete formations that can be added or subtracted at will” (Rand, 2013:129). The prominence of beauty in the production of the meaning of 'lesbian chick' should be rather questioned from an intersectional perspective by acknowledging how “heteronormativity has been articulated historically through the language of race” and class. In Rand's work, the debate then shifts from the non-productive discussion of heteronormativity vis a vis marginalised identities, to how the “circulation of heterosexual desire actually producing the public and becoming the 'marketplace' as “the dominant economy that shapes and governs the kinds of discourses of desire which are allowed to circulate publicly and which are involved in the actual constitution of the 'public' itself” (2013: 130).

The arrangement that Rand conceptualizes as the “heterosexual economy of desire” becomes useful for my understanding 'lesbian chick' as a particular form of production embedded in a discourse that produces bodies as shifting dispositions at the crossroads of what can be visible and invisible while allowing for the consumption of marginalised positions of the lesbian in the given economy. It is particularly useful in that it allows me to expose how this economy of desire- leaves the very articulation of desire as inherently heteronormative unchallenged- securing the possibility for Showtime to air a show with a full cast of lesbians.

3.3 Sexualizing images of the lesbian

For feminist theories of representation in film theory, Laura Mulvey's (1975) work on visual pleasure of a male gaze has become “the” influential work having psychoanalytic film theory as foundational to feminist research on film (See more on Burston and Richardson 1995, Halberstam 1996). According to Mulvey's paradigm, through a specific organisation of the gaze as determining a subject position of power, woman is arranged as spectacle for the pleasure of the man. This gaze structurally arranges viewing as an act of power to render male subjectivities as ‘the’ active while femininity would signify as 'passive object'. Male pleasure in looking would emerge from a scopophilic act or voyeuristic gaze while the female presence would become captured in the male gaze activating an identificatory process with femaleness in the female spectator accordingly.

However, in so far as Mulvey's aim was to analyse particular pieces of Hollywood classical cinema (1975) it should be immediately noted how her perspective was subsequently extrapolated beyond that particular practice by other feminist accounts of images and visual texts as if the concept itself did not pertain to a particular social, cultural moment in the history of the 'gaze' itself. At the same time, I would like to argue that it is perfectly possible to read the subsequent criticisms of Mulvey's work as attempts that -albeit unknowingly- problematize this lack of locatedness. For instance, Diana Fuss' work from 1992 on the homospectatorial look naturalized in fashion images interrogates female engagement with woman as image to expose how it reinforces the process of identification while obliterates the mobilisation of a lesbian desire in looking. Her work disrupts perspectives that go back and forth between thinking of images as organised to satisfy a desiring male gaze and to create a female identification. She explores how this process works to secure heterosexuality as institution through the connotation of homosexuality in the act of looking (Fuss, 1992: 732). Fuss brings about an analysis that questions how lesbian desire is veiled within discourse.

Reina Lewis (1997) would then expand the analysis looking at the nineties' lesbian

magazines in the UK and the US as subcultural texts where lesbianism is constructed as visible for the audience's pleasure, what in her thesis would "produce less visual pleasure" (1997: 96) for downplaying subcultural competencies in advantage of a more explicit lesbian meaning. This shift in the location of the (analytical) perspective to the actual moment of viewing complicates the meaning of the 'gaze' from strictly a disposition coded in the text to conceptualise it as a dynamic process emerging in the practice of reading. In this sense, the shift entails an account of the concept of the 'gaze' open to diverse readings that would argue for meaning as a process in the making. In line with the acknowledgement of the diversity of contexts and subjectivities that can potentially encounter the text (1997: 95), Lewis also highlights how the homogenous concept of lesbian gaze seen as self-sufficiently contained by and within the text can not contain in any case the variety of lesbian readings or ways of looking at the text, precluding seeing the position of the lesbian as one that comes always already intertwined with other social positions that organize the gaze according to multiple logics. Therefore she conceptualizes the concept as lesbian gaz*es* (1997: 95). In her argument social positioning comes as crucially relevant to situate the process of reading of the viewing subjectivity.

It can be argued that *TLW* attempts to remain conscious of this multiplicity of gazes through which the series can potentially be looked at. As Kosofsky Sedgwick argues (2006), this concern of a plurality of lesbian gazes resonates with the variety of characters that *TLW* aims at representing especially by including characters that present traits that distance them from the "lesbian chic" as introduced before and nevertheless are presented as desiring, desired and desirable. The characters of Tasha, a masculine black military professional or Max, a transgender boy who comes originally from the working class and whose transition is put into a story line, can be read as characters which are wishing to offer alternatives to the monolithic 'lesbian chic' by addressing the plurality of lesbian identities as well as lesbian

viewers of the series. Nevertheless, in my argument the presence of these characters does preclude that TLW should be analysed as a celebration of the “lesbian chic” since the tone of the characters is set by this ideal, as much as the other peripheral characters' development in the series leads them to approaching this ideal. For instance, Max becomes a successful professional to fit in the lesbian upper-middle class or Tasha becomes increasingly framed as fitting the lifestyle of her girlfriend Alice by quitting the military and joining her consumption patterns.

The multiplicity of the gaze in TLW is to be found also in its distancing critically from ways of filming lesbian scenes inspired by a traditional reproductions of the 'male gaze' and voyeuristic pleasure. In the textual level, TLW organises its filmic strategies in interesting ways which draw on a sort of self-reflexivity as TV series invested in representing the lesbian figure. For instance, in certain takes, the heterosexual invasion of privacy for the satisfaction of a voyeuristic gaze is represented on shots which allow for a critical reading through a particular management of the filmic resources of the mise en scène and narrative progression. They offer a distance from what is being represented, as is the paradigmatic case of the opening scene of Jenny, the outsider straight character hiding behind a fence to watch Shane have sex with another woman only to utilize her discovery to recreate the scene for her boyfriend’s arousal (Wolfe and Roripaugh, 2006:50). This particular scene allows for the viewer to critically engage with heterosexual gazing as well as with its representation in media so that practice and representation do not come conflated but are addressed in their artificial relation.

This self-reflexivity is a distinctive feature that *TLW* appears as imbued in by engaging in narrative mechanisms where the issue of representation is questioned as political issue. This is transversely incorporated in the series by a range of strategies that vary from the technical choices for the takes to the scenes where discussions on the limits and politics of

representation in art and popular culture are included. One of the most obvious moments of pursuing this meta-narrative effect is the story line from season four where Jenny and Tina undertake the project of shooting a Hollywood movie which is based on their lives (Wolfe/ Roripaugh, 2006:49). Through this story line, scenes of the series become repeated again but this time by the actresses of the movie in takes that highlight the artificiality and nuanced arrangement involved in an industrial set.

The self- reflexive approach to representation and filmic strategies especially in relation to sexuality in *TLW* provides representations that seek to pose questions on traditional ways of filming gender and sexuality. By exposing an invasive heterosexual or voyeuristic gaze, *TLW* aims at pushing the debate beyond the more traditional subject/object duality of 'gaze' theories in line with psychoanalytic frameworks. It exposes the limitations of the concept of the 'gaze' and takes analysis in the direction of questioning the universality implied on static theories of the gaze as anchored in the concern of gender and its implicated erasure of how this regime of looking implies dispositions of class and race. At the same time self-reflexivity presents a nuanced and multi-layered text which allows for a whole variety of readings more related to the subjectivity viewing the series than to the text itself as the site of out of which meaning is produced. The cultural competences of the viewer come in this framework as the centred site of meaning production taking the analysis beyond the textual limitations.

3.4 Gaze, spectatorship and audience

Feminist film theory of the late seventies informed by Mulvey's concerns on the 'gaze' established an attempt to distance themselves from theorisations that rendered femininity as necessarily objectified and an effect of the masculine ‘male gaze’. The use of

the category of (female) spectatorship was developed in order to conceptualise pleasure in looking obtained by female viewers of texts (Kuhn 1990: 25). The concept of the spectator refers to the subject positions that films produce for viewers to engage with through its visual and narrative structure. These formal characteristics would provide particular pleasures and identifications to females as spectators (1990: 25).

In the eighties' theorisations on media focusing on television and more related to Cultural Studies engaged with the category of the spectator in a critical way (1990:25). The shift in the debate is productively interrogated by approaching critical concerns on both the gaze and spectatorship, first developed by Annette Kuhn (1984). The core of Kuhn's argument in her work on the genre of soap operas (1984) is that spectatorship is useful to not reduce meaning to an effect of the text and relevant to offer a less deterministic approach which does not obliterate subversive readings, and situates subcultural competencies as relevant in the text-in-context encounter. However, Kuhn is immediately critical of the limitations of a gendered conception of spectatorship in which the spectator becomes an obvious effect of the text. She challenges the concept for producing a homogenous female spectator and in that sense engages in universal claims of what it is to be a spectator as a female.

Kuhn introduced the productive distinction between textually produced spectator and social audience (1984: 147). The social audience is the potential set of people who can become interpellated by the text in the course of particular practices of negotiation and is formed in relation to the larger institutions which frame the social practices of consuming a TV product. This mobilisation of audience as concept entails a more flexible analysis of the relation of text, spectator and context. This way the spectator is understood as a subject position proposed by the text but not a position necessarily taken by viewing individuals (Kuhn 1990: 26). This approach is also concerned about the various and intersectional social identities that constitute audiences and which are potentially informed by different social

knowledges which produce their different readings (1990: 26). As an outcome of the shift of theoretical interest towards the concept of audience, analytical concerns are invested in situating audiences in relation to the genres associated to them and so certain genres were related to women and interest abounded on the social and historical contexts that made this overlap possible. (1990:26).

These theoretical concerns inform my own work which reflects on the importance of not conflating the concepts of spectator and audience since they would refer to relatively different relations with and amongst texts and institutions. Consequently, I continue my research by analysing *TLW* through the concept of the genre as thought of by Norman Fairclough (2003).

3.5 Analysing genre-in-institution

In so far as a text can be seen as the interface of a particular order of texturing it can therefore be thought of as an emerging product that is already embedded in actual orders of discourse, argues Norman Fairclough (2003: 24). In this sense, texts become articulated through social practice. Particular texts appear as related to particular discourses, or as organized according to particular logics of patterning. Texts are organised according to the patterning of particular genres while signifying practices are a process (signifying-in-action). Genres shall be regarded as part of a larger chain of institutionalized practices, genre-in-institution, which resemble one another and unfold without clear-cut boundaries. If texts can be assumed to become articulated by multiple genres, then these chains of genres or similarly shaped and textured texts, become part of a chain of resemblance within a fluid movement of boundaries and texts.

In light of Fairclough's critical framework of discourse and its analysis I see *TLW* as

a patterned text within the conventions of the TV series genre and I then relate it to the possible chains of genres through which it might be articulated. To begin I might aim at disentangling the various dispositions through which *TLW* is articulated in relation to the notions of text, genre and discourse, not as separable entities but as intermingling dimensions that are at times focused on in order to organise the argumentation logically.

The series as a narrative genre is bound to the characteristic forms of different and parallel plots which appear interwoven producing an “infinite process of narrativity” (Kuhn, 1984: 153). This particular sort of narrating is logically linked with the format, in which the end is never to straight-forwardly arrive in favour of a final resolution as in a film narrative, but brings about one which plays with the effect of “forever anticipating an endlessly held-off resolution” (1984: 153).

However, TV series' as text can not be reduced to the apparent surface of the filmed text. Following Kuhn, TV soap operas appear as articulated through “distraction and diversion” (1984: 151) while inserting themselves into the habits and routines of spectators in fundamental different ways. Series allow for a continued consumption that presumably enters the realm of the private and the home through particular scheduling whereas it mobilises lifestyles and consumer patterns in an intrinsically different way. In this sense, Kuhn cites Brundson's study of the series Crossroads in her argumentation that cultural competence and spectators' cultural capital would appear as key to the readings of soap operas, suggesting that this sort of spectatorship would be shaped more through culturally institutionalised processes than by representations imagined to be confined 'in' the series themselves. Even when this framework seems to again reproduce a binary which in this case prioritises context over text in spectatorship formation, (1984: 152) it suggests useful issues to take into account when thinking about TV series as a genre and its implications. It is important to situate the genre not only in relation to the sort of narrativity it allows for and pursues, but also in relation to its

capacity to produce patterns in consumption and other side-products which become relevant in the contextual expansion of the text beyond its surface as serial filmed product.

In this regard it is important to note that *TLW* had derived products such as a reality follow-up show named *The Real L Word* where contestants were to share their lives as lesbians with the audience according to the TV reality show genre conventions or a project for a movie that never got to be produced. This reliance on fandom and technology have as its outcome that the TLW text goes beyond its own texture so that new patterns for consumption are created, and in that sense re-produce the genre as a disposition in the making, blurring the boundary between 'the' series' and its perception over the period of six seasons. New products pursue engagement through the website, forums and in that sense form a spectator-consumer outside of the text itself who can potentially grow interest in new and intertwining products. The increasing virtualization has as well expanded the capacity to distribute and access content from increasingly different contexts. If contemporary TV series is thought of as a set of conventions which operate outside the series' filmed text also and expand to a set of products, then it shall also be questioned for overcoming certain original features of the genre, such as scheduling at times associated to being at home. Technology and the internet expand series consumption as social practice and potentially increase the audience and the contexts which it is bound to reach as a way to, according to Fairclough, “contribute to the possibility of actions which transcend differences in space and time, linking together social events in different social practices” (Fairclough 2003:31). This capacity to move throughout contexts is in his argumentation a distinctive feature of governance and power exercise in the context of globalization. The scope of what a text-in-genre constitutes becomes expanded and blurred into shifting boundaries of texts, genres and discourses.

In the work of analysing the chains of genres that might further constitute the resonations of *TLW* as a text-in-context event, I shall begin with what may come as the most

intuitive resonation, is with LGTB focused texts though they do not abound in the TV series format. TLW strongly resonates with the series where LGTB characters are dominant and conform to “an ecology” (Kosofsky- Sedgwick 2006: xxi) rather than isolated subjectivities in the single story lines. Series with story lines and few LGTB characters in otherwise “mainstream” content can also be thought of as part of this chain, in particular lesbian characters in U.S. TV can be traced from Friends, Buddy the Vampire Slayer, Ellen to L.A Laws' first televised lesbian kiss (Pratt 2008: 137).

In this sort of new genre of LGTB representations, Queer As Folk (QAF) is seen as TLW's direct predecessor except centred on male gay representations, starting the pattern of investing in diverse representations of LGTB characters through an ecology of stories and characters whose narrativity focuses on personal and sexual relationships filmed in explicit sex scenes. The pattern has been going on; QAF and TLW have been followed by other series including *TLW's* direct re-production in *Lipstick Service* (BBC 3). Common to the series of the genre is the central group of characters represented by urban, upper-middle class, mostly white standards, through coming out narratives and visibility -centred issues within the framework of liberal identity politics. But what such LGTB centred series might most importantly be thought to have in common is their account of sexuality as a naturalized identity that reinforces itself as a disposition through which the person accommodates a particular lifestyle.

In the chain of genres that *TLW* might respond to another overlap is with female centred texts (Probyn 1997) or women’s culture (Berlant 2008). Texts arranged through these patterns, are also often referred to as female-oriented texts, what is mostly defined by how they would target a female audience (Kuhn 1984:147). Nevertheless, the concept of female audience shall be questioned for assuming an audience as already constituted by the social category of femaleness while texts shall also be thought of as a constitutive dispositions of the

category of femaleness and/or femininity (as argued before through Smith's work). Furthermore, this is complicated by the ambiguity of trying to situate who might be orienting the text towards this femaleness. If the logic of the expression “female oriented” is to be articulated, it would seem as if meaning emerged from an orienting will mostly related to TV producers and media executives. This perspective leaves the unresolved or naturalized problematic issue of not conceptualising what female would mean while it gives an important amount of power to producers in the determination of the *effects* of the text. Kuhn problematizes also the necessity of not collapsing femininity into femaleness since their conflation would reiterate a “culturally pervasive operation of ideology” that would not differentiate femaleness, in her framework a category of social gender, and gender presentation as a subject position, femininity, where “an address in the feminine may be regarded in ideological terms as privileging, if not necessitating, a socially constructed female gender identity”. Through the ideological exhaustion of one into the other, their counterpart masculinity becomes constrained to maleness (1984: 150).

By female centred texts, I will specifically refer to contemporary popular culture that has female characters as the centre of their narrative, and which usually intermingle features of drama and romantic comedy. In television series there are a good amount of texts following the pattern such as Sex in the city, Gilmore Girls, Desperate Housewives. Their counterpart in film would be those under the term “chick flick”, specific sub-genre of romantic comedies that are marketed as “politically innocent” (Negra, 2008: 51) while presenting simple narrative invested in gender and sexual politics. In TV and film, the main character(s) become the archetype of a very feminine female heterosexual woman who struggles to become successful both in her professional and private life. The overlap of *TLW* with female centred series is evident for its full cast of feminine female characters, as well as

it is more nuanced worked on through self-reflexive features that seek for intertextuality[9] through characters' conversations or the filmic characteristics of the shots.[10]

I shall take Probyn's category of post-feminist discourse to conceptualise these texts as within a larger re-articulation of femininity as a matter of choice in the aftermath of feminist critique. Probyn argues that there is a sort of "vulgarization" (Probyn 1988: 127) of feminism in which it appears as a sort of oppressive morality that operates at the expense of women's freedom to make choices (1988: 126). This sense of loss is framed in a social environment of isolation in an increasingly threatening and competitive world. In contrast, the figure of the home emerges as site of comfort and security related as well to family and partnership (1988:130). Probyn conceptualises this discourse as "new traditionalism" (131) which re-articulates traditional feminine settings and roles as a matter of regained choices for women. By presenting dualities such as "the career" vis a vis "the home" or "family" and "job", this discourse "naturalizes the home into a fundamental and unchanging site of love and fulfilment" (1988: 131).

In the post-feminist texts explored by Probyn (see also Diane Negra 2008) this partnership appears as heterosexual. Their analyses invest in locating the re-production of a femininity that is urged to go back to the "home" of heterosexual partnership alongside the acknowledgement that there is an absence of representation or discursive rearrangement of masculinity (1988: 135). As I have exposed, the obliteration of the question of masculinity is shared by the lesbian chic (see previous section on Gendering the Image of the Lesbian)

9 The intertextual dimension is that which discloses the "set of other texts or other voices which are potentially relevant, and potentially incorporated into the text" (Fairclough 2003:47).

10 The characters in TLW make constant reference to popular culture products, from celebrating famous lesbian artists as Tegan and Sara to dismissing television series as Desperate Housewives (ABC and Cherry Productions 2004-12). At the same time, takes are also arranged at times to evoke particular pieces of popular cinema, as Charlie's Angels (Goff and Roberts 1976-81; McGinty Nichol 2000) for instance, or particular genres as far West cinema or film noir.

whose discursive organisation also reinforces the emergence of a femininity fascinated with love that leaves (male) masculinity uncontested and out of focus. Nevertheless, analyses of the discursive overcoming of feminism in popular culture are arranged exclusively through a focus on heterosexual femininity. I wish to expand the analysis to the lesbian chick to question the reorganisation of lesbian sexuality and gender as palatable and acceptable positions to be incorporated to media discourse. In my argument the foundational site of intersection between the post-feminist feminine-female-heterosexual and that of the lesbian chick would be their anchoring in femininity and the endeavour to pursue love. I will analyse the construction of love as affect in TLW through the concepts of post-feminism and new traditionalism.

Chapter 4: Analysis of romantic monogamous love

This chapter elaborates on how the series *The L Word* (*TLW*) can be interpreted as a story thematized around a particular concept of love. This theme of love is analysed with a focus on how it becomes focalized, or presented by a sequence of events arranged from a particular point of view (Fairclough 2003:83). In this process, the seventy episodes in six seasons are made up of stories that give room to emotions and engagement in line with the conventions of human drama narratives. I shall analyse the story lines and narratives that shape the topic of love according to its patterns of discursive coherence and contradiction. Then I shall expand on the main characters' love story, the couple Bette and Tina. Finally, I will elaborate on my understanding of love as ideological meaning within the series and relate it to the lesbian chic's femininity.

4.1 The L word *readable as The 'Love' Word?*

To explore the series' investment in a particular idea of love, on the external level of the narratives I will reflect on the title of the series, that of the chapters and the title sequence, while on the internal level I shall focus on the narratives of the various long-term relationships of the main characters, followed by an analysis of the story of Bette Porter and Tina Kennard, the couple in the centre of the complete series. I will argue that their relationship becomes centralized in *TLW* as representative of the exemplary, enduring partnership articulating ideological romantic and monogamous love. I shall argue that meaning production is an expression of post-feminist representations of femininity and LGTB discourses of normalization.

Regarding the letter "L" in the acronym that functions as the name of the series, its first straight-forward reading, suggests that it should stand for The *Lesbian* Word. However,

this assumption is complicated by the fact that each title of the 70 episodes' consists of words beginning with the letter L, such as “Liberally”, “Looking back” or “Longing”, undermining the transparency of “L” in the series' title. The third relevant external element is the title sequence of the series, a feature common to the genre, added to the series in the second season. It is composed out of a theme song over the images of the characters in an out-of-space setting that at times reflects sites of Los Angeles.

The characters are introduced one by one over the song whose lyrics is to evoke the kind of women that the audience are about to *see* in the series, “*girls in tight dresses who drag with moustaches, chicks driving fast*”. The characters are introduced relating to one another through sexual gestures, this presentation reinforces the possible resolution of the letter “L” as ‘love’: the lesbianess of the female characters is implicated to be defined by their sexuality and romanticism as key dimensions of their lives, “*women who long love lust women who give*” (Chaiken 2005, 2:1). Then the characters' names start connecting to each other through the visual arrangement of *the chart*, representing a sort of net. The lesbian community of women related to one another through erotic love and sex.

In the analysis of the elements internal to the plot I wish to focus on the “chart”. I take it as a key element since during the series it gradually becomes the visual illustration of the sexual and romantic connections in the lesbian community. The chart is said to be a novel invention by Alice, on of the main characters, in the first season. She develops it as an idea for her radio program (Chaiken 2004, 1:3), and eventually recycles it for her professional purposes in the following seasons in order to map relationships among the community. The presence of the chart within the plot is consistent and places sexual and romantic relations in the centre of the series narratives. The chart in the opening then becomes a three dimensional image of connections, while the song depicts the variety of activities that these women do in life, “*Talking, laughing, loving, breathing, fighting fucking, crying, drinking, writing, winning,*

losing, cheating, kissing, thinking, dreaming".

The title sequence comes to an end through the final variation of the chorus of the lyrics: *"This is the way that we live, and love"* generalizing the lives of this actual group of lesbians as representative of lesbians in Los Angeles more generally, *"This* is *the way that we live"*, in addition to the implication that erotic love is the activity in the centre of that living in *TLW's* world. Although `love´ is left unsaid until the very end of the title song, this placement in the closure of the opening of each episode may retrospectively invite us to equate 'L'as 'lesbian' with 'love', as 'the' point of relevance of living itself.

These external elements of the series frame the stories to follow as reflecting the lives of a diverse, interconnected, urban group of lesbians living in L.A. At the same time, the list of verbs as activities in these lesbian lives resonates with the multiplicity implied by the variety of L-words with which the 70 chapters begin. This might appear as an implication of the series' aspiration to amplify and give multi-dimensional readings to lesbianism. But there is a contradiction between the multi-vocal narration of lesbian lives illustrated by the large image of names in the chart, which suggests multiplicity and diversity in the series' representations of ways of living, and the anchoring of lesbian living in L.A to one activity only, loving.

Now I continue my exploration of the construction of love in *TLW* and turn to the internal elements. First I look at the continuum of narratives of sexual versus romantic relationships amongst the characters and will argue that the plot of these narratives revolves around two conflicting or rather mutually exclusive forms of bonding. They are mutually exclusive insofar as having sex outside the relationship is implied to break the relationship: couples who have a long-term relationship must be monogamous. This is not to say that there are not other narratives of promiscuous relationships represented in the series. What is at stake here is how the series gets productively analysed by contrasting the way it organises its

narrative efforts to present the romantic monogamous point of view as more legitimate, valuable and elevated, while the rest of the representations are functional to the elevation of monogamy.

Sexual availability and promiscuity are embodied in the series by the character of Shane, a young white hairdresser, former sex worker, who states that she does *not do relationships* on the grounds of sexually relating to others for *fun* only. She placed in the centre of the chart, linked with all other characters in the various episodes, further implying that sex is the central activity of this character throughout the series. She is known to have the highest numbers of connections of them all while her sexual promiscuity and success within the lesbian community is mostly celebrated by her friends. However, this sort of sexuality is celebrated as long as it is framed as that of the young bewildered subjectivity in a sort of experimental period of her life -before settling down. Otherwise when it comes to expressing her views on her friends' love life, she celebrates the stability and commitment of her friends and tries to pursue it for herself. In a few story lines she is about to commit herself to longstanding relationships but eventually always reconsiders, saying monogamy is not her *nature*. By defining this character as promiscuous by *nature*, the series invests in a narrative that frames erotic desire as a disclosure of an inner drive which is uncontrollable and ultimately not changeable. The fact that Shane's desire seems unruly in an essential way, has the logical implication that monogamy, the organisation of desire to pursue a relationship with one person only, is also to be seen as a matter of *fact*, as in the nature of individuals. This shift constitutes an act of naturalization; the presentation of events comes to be neutral, as if not imbued in social practices. Desire either monogamous or promiscuous is equally given, outside of the social organisation of desire and relationships.

The other element of the binary, the long- term, or long-term oriented, monogamous relationships with the aim of forming a stable project in which moving together or starting a

family appear as foundational is represented in the series by a variety of couples, not all necessarily lesbian: Tina/Bette, Jenny/Tim, Tonya/Dana, Dana/Alice, Carmen/Shane, Kit/Angus, Dana/Lara, Dylan/Helena, Tina/Henry, Phyllis/Joyce, Shane/Paige, Alice/Tasha, Jenny/Nikki, Shane/Molly, Bette/Joyce and Jenny/Shane (the latter will be analysed shortly). In order to analyse the work done by these stories in relation to the problematic of love as thematization, I use the analytic category of focalization to argue that the series' thematization of love is arranged so that a particular point of view is presented though rendered invisible. This point of view is imbued in the conventions of a romantic and monogamous love.

I explore the narratives to see how much they are reiterated in a consistent way how much they are shaped by difference. I will show that the way events are plotted into a love story shows a consistent pattern, made up of three elements: the “falling in love” plot, the “I love you” moment with the consequential search for stability and the conflict, often through a romantic triangle.

The “falling in love” plot is crucial moment of confession is present in all romantic relationships in *TLW*. It is common to all couples in the series and culminates in the moment when one of them enunciates “I love you” functioning almost as a sort of ritual that makes the relationship evolve into a new “status”. As an “inevitable” outcome of this confession, the couples start looking for a place to move in together, like in the case of Dana/Alice, Dana/Lara, Alice/Tasha, Shane/Paige, Tina/Henry or plan to marry like in the case of the Shane/Carmen, Dana/Tonya, Kit/Angus, Tim/Jenny stories.

Ironically, none of them is actually represented to act in accordance with their intentions. At some point these couples are confronted with a conflict which is often presented through a romantic triangle. The introduction of the attraction to an 'outsider' is to complicate the arrangement, such as the Dana/Alice/Lara, Bette/Tina/Candance, Bette/Tina/Jody, Jenny/Carmen/Shane, Carmen/Shane/Cheri, Alice/Tasha/Jamie, Jenny/Nikki/Shane

configurations.

There is a variation in the pattern of this complication, depending on whether "*love*" is found within or outside a former lover. When the "*love*" of the person feeling attracted to someone else is meant to be someone in the previous relationship, the story is arranged as an "affair" story surrounded by negative feelings such as deception, loss, betrayal, and the couple enter a crisis moment that sometimes leads to their splitting up. This is the case with Bette/ Tina, when Bette starts to feel attracted to Candance, Carmen/Shane, Jenny/Tim, Kit/Angus, Nikki/Jenny. The conflict enables a contradictory fixation of love as foundational to a good life through loss, regret and frustration on the side of the person *cheating*. The situation puts them into a chaotic and vulnerable position in which the security and warmth of *love* seems ever more valuable but lost. The repetitive portrayal of *love* is contradictory: the representations of love threatened by anxiety of monogamy against the permanent risk posed by the possibility of *cheating*. This cheating narrative exposes further the ideological move in representing love as natural when actually produced through a logic that acknowledges its need of becoming secured by representations of betrayal.

Yet, there are stories where the person *cheating* finds true love in the external relationship, what is put into a narrative that, though portraying a challenging situation, is associated with positive feelings of cooperation, security and legitimacy, that is derived from the *fact* that as the new couple is *in love*, the betrayal was meant to happen. This is the logic that applies to the case of the splitting up of Dana/Tonya, Jenny/Carmen, Bette/Jody or Jenny/Nikki where the *cheating* narrative is erased by the legitimising force of a positive narrative of a new `true´ love story.

There are, nevertheless, other narratives which are not entirely in line with the investment in a romantic and (eventually) monogamous story. These stories, even when presenting a variety of relationships and negotiations that challenge the romantic norm, are

plotted only to eventually reify the romantic and monogamous version. Shane, Jody, Bette, Jenny and Max might engage in relationships through narratives which are resistant to, even critical of, romantic monogamy, but they prevail in particular circumstances, for a period in the sequential development of a storyline.

. I question the apparent diversity of voices and stories in *TLW*: they come to prioritize one particular narrative or point of view within the series. By its reiteration through the different characters' voices, romantic monogamy becomes the building block of the stories of *TLW*. I claim that these romantic and monogamous narratives are arranged to read as more desirable as opposed to the loss of the sense of a righteous life through the implications of cheating by suffering and betrayal. The celebration of monogamy comes ultimately from the sense of stability and belonging (to a nuclear family project) that is in a constant ambivalent conversation and opposition with the larger family that *TLW* portrays as the lesbian community.

4.2 The relationship of the characters Bette and Tina

The characters of Tina Kennard and Bette Porter are present throughout the complete six seasons of *TLW* and their relationship is the central story of the whole series. It is the only story that opens in the first season and closes its plot in the last season. This section analyses the narratives through which Bette and Tina's story is presented as a ‘whole’ and the few events that become central to the way their story is put together over the stretch of the six seasons. In this section I introduce these characters and the main events in their story line which is focused on their love story. I will describe the narrative progression and will attach and comment on the lines of the script and their spoken speeches of the characters to provide relevant material to reflect on my analysis.

Tina and Bette are a long-term upper- middle class couple, seven years together when the series begins. Their story is that of a lesbian couple who seek to start a family together. In one of the first scenes of the pilot chapter, Dana Fairbanks, a friend of theirs, defines them as follows: "*You guys have the best relationships ever of anybody I know, gay or straight*". The pilot episode, the first episode in the first season establishes the ultimate frame for the rest of the relationship: it introduces the two women in the intimate setting of their home over the lyrics of Marianne Faithfull's *So much love*, where Tina is looking at a predictor to see whether she is ovulating and agreeing with Bette that they will "*make a baby*". Yet, at the beginning of the series, Bette and Tina are also presented as a loving couple attending a therapy by "*Hollywood's self-improvement guru*" to work out their growing indifference for sex (Chaiken 2004, 1:1).

The characters are presented during the therapy session. Tina defends Bette for "*always running late, she had a board meeting, she had a meeting with an artist, Bette is the director of the California Arts Centre, she is probably going to be really stressed about time*". When Bette arrives, still talking on the phone and giving instructions to her secretary, they discuss their not fulfilling sexual life through Bette's confrontational attitudes to the male therapist. Eventually, Tina gets the opportunity to introduce her current situation and commitment to their relationship: *"I quit my job I was a pretty successful development executive and now I'm gonna relax and prepare my body for pregnancy. That's what I'm doing, I' am trying to start a family. We both are trying to start a family"* (Chaiken 2004, 1:1).

This scene defines the terms of Tina and Bette's relationship in the first season as that of a committed couple engaged in a division of labour according to pregnancy and household requirements. Bette gets defined for her role as a provider, a controlling, aggressive, smart business woman with Ivy League education with a high sensitivity for aesthetics. Tina, on the other hand, defends her choice of becoming the caring and nurturing figure of their family

project bound to the home.

The pregnancy ends in a miscarriage that puts Tina in a vulnerable position while their relationship grows apart as an outcome. The increasing distance between them is further reinforced by Tina's determinacy to work again outside the house. While Tina increasingly leaves her previous role of care giver in the home, Bette is beginning to feel attracted to Candance, her co-worker in the museum. This attraction unfolds at work, but they are put off by Bette's relationship and Bette is eventually left crying in her office (Chaiken 2004, 1:12). In the subsequent episodes Bette's attraction to Candance is presented in a negative way, one that is threatening her relationship with Tina and one that it is out of control for Bette. Therefore she tells Candance that "*what happened the other day just can not happen again"* (Chaiken 2004, 1:14), getting close to kissing her before her secretary interrupts. They finally have sex and an affair. Tina suspects and tells Bette that she *knows* when they are at home and they both fight aggressively. Bette pushes Tina on the bed and forces her to have sex with her while she says she loves Tina, who screams and tells Bette to stop. This is the first and only scene where violence amongst lesbians is represented. The scene, and thereby the fist episode, ends with Tina entering the terms of the situation and they have sex aggressively (Chaiken 2004, 1:14).

This storyline is extended into the second season, with an outcast Bette who is having an affair with Candance. In the opening episode she goes into The Planet, the usual bar where the characters as a group of friends tend to hang out. When they comment on Bette's affair, one of them, Alice, explains the situations like this: " *'Cause of the sex thing, and Bette can't help it"* (Chaiken 2005, 2:1). Again, attraction for others appears as an out of control circumstance related to some sort of natural instinct, while it is framed as a threatening situation for the long term relationship and as such not welcome.

In the following scene, Bette walks in the bar, wanting to talk to Tina and interrupts

the conversation of her friends saying "*Don't worry I'm not going to ask to join you, I know you all probably think I'm a monster*". But Tina dares her to share what she has to say with all of their friends, so Bette starts her love confession (Chaiken 2005, 2:1).

Bette: Tina... I didn't try to... see you, or... call you until now because I wanted to make sure... that I could do what you asked of me.

I promise. I am not going to ever see her again, I am not ever going to speak to her again, I am not ever going to think about her again.

I miss you. More than that, I need you. And I don't think that I can... I don't think that I can live without you. It is completely and totally over.

Tina: When did you end it?

Bette: This morning, and I told her that you were the love of my life and that I didn't know what I was doing and that I must've gone temporarily insane.

Tina: Did you tell her in person? Or on the phone?

Bette: Why does that matter?

Tina: Because I drove by the house at 2:00 AM. And your car wasn't there. Did you fuck all night before you told her I was the love of your life this morning?!

In this conversation Bette's previous and pervasive negative feelings of guilt, "*you all probably think I'm a monster"*, and fear, "*I don't think that I can live without you*", about cheating turn into indifference for her lover's cheating, "I *must've gone temporarily insane*", and her oblivion is articulated in essentializing terms "*you are the love of my lif*e". In this narrative Bette and Tina's love narrative falls in the pattern where Bette's love affair is not legitimized by a "*love*" story with Candance, but is actually burdened with the negative narrative of guilt and betrayal to her " true *love*" Tina.

This affair is sanctioned socially by the group of friends as well as personally by Tina, who starts a separation from Bette. Furthermore, Tina is also pregnant from the donor

she found earlier with Bette. Later on in the season, Tina having agreed with Bette that they would be parenting their daughter together starts approaching Bette in the context of her pregnancy. Finally, Tina tells Bette that she wants to "*come back and have the baby on our home*" (Chaiken 2005, 2:13).

In the third season in the context of their daughter Angelica's birth, they are presented as a family again. But the monotony of the family routine is again introduced, to soon become disrupted by sexual attractions outside the family. In this case, it is Tina's turn to start feeling attracted to men and she so becomes suspect for not being a *real* lesbian, since before Bette she only had straight relationships (Chaiken 2006, 3:7). By the end of the season, Bette and Tina's relationship is broken again, and Tina becomes the outcast figure, highly sanctioned for leaving the lesbian community and starting a straight long-term relationship with Henry.

In Season 4, Bette carries on with her successful career and lesbian love life, starting a new long-term relationship with the artist and university professor Jody Lerner. Tina in the episodes of these two seasons is strongly separated from the group on the grounds of now living a straight life that seems to be excluding her from participating in the lesbian community, although she relates to Bette in good terms as they parent Angelica together. Tina gets framed as increasingly bored with her straight life, entering situations that start announcing her interest for getting Bette and her life back. In a conversation at Bette's place, Tina tells her that she misses their life together and mobilises some notions a "good relationship" (Chaiken 2007, 4:8).

Bette: I mean, I know our relationship was real. I know you loved me and it wasn't just some trivial experiment to you.

Tina: I still love you, you know.

Bette: I love you, too.

Tina: It's so hard, Bette. I miss you so much sometimes.
I miss our life. I miss the way we communicated subtly...
I miss the way that we worked together to make everything around us so beautiful.
I miss being surrounded by women and feeling part of something so secret and special.

Bette: Come here.

Tina: Sometimes I think I made a mistake.

Bette: You don't have to think about it that way.

The above conversation while casual for Bette, is charged with meaning for Tina. Bette does not get the love confession and takes it for a warm gesture, while Tina is implied to talk about being *in love* in the truthful way. This conversation is also relevant because it anticipates some issues that will start appearing in their coming definitions of love. Here, Tina relates lesbian love, as the background for her words seems to be the comparison to her current straight relationship, with something intimate, "*the way we communicated subtly"*, which resonates with the more general statement of the lesbian community as *"something so secret and special"*, as if relationships among women were necessarily connoted to fall into the realm of empathy, intimacy and some sort of convenient obliteration. This association is also connected in her speech to a particular way of aesthetically understanding a long-term stable relationship (as lesbians) as related to the way everyday life is arranged, "*the way that we worked together to make everything around us so beautiful"*. This conversation is an anticipation of the final conversation where they get back together in the fifth season after a love confession where they explicitly put in an argumentation their understanding of love.

In the fifth season, Tina is already back to the lesbian group, having quit her relationship with Henry. Soon, Tina and Bette realize and accept that they are in love and want to fully take back their relationship and family on the terms that they have introduced in

the first season of the series. But since Bette and Jody have a relationship that Bette feels guilty about quitting, they start a secret affair that they hide from the rest of their friends as well.

This is the main storyline of the season, the tension between them is indexed several times, until it resolves in the beginning of their affair (Chaiken 2008, 5:4). Finally their story culminates in a new start of their relationship through a dramatic narrative of events, on finding themselves stuck in an elevator together while on their way to meet their therapist (Danny). Their dialogue in the elevator below is an illustration of the implications of the romantic monogamous love represented through their relationship, it resonates clearly with the previously introduced idea of lesbian love as aesthetically different, but expands on it (Chaiken 2008, 5:8).

Bette: Do you think that Danny might know we're in here?

Tina: I'm sure he's doing everything he can. What do you think he would say of us right now? If we were on session with him?

Bette: He would probably ask what each of us wants.

Tina: And we would say: "We don't know".

Bette: And he would ask: What are you afraid of, Tina?

Tina: Fucking it all up.

Bette: What else are you afraid of, Tina?

Tina: I'm afraid of, um... what everyone will think of us, how they'll judge us, how hurt Jodi will be.

Bette: She already knows there's something wrong.

Tina: - Did you tell her about us?

Bette: - God, no. I've been such a fucking coward. And, you know, it's not like we really... I don't know, it was never just... easy like...

Tina: What do you mean "never easy"?

Bette: Well, we don't share the same values Jodi and I.

Tina: Do you think we share the same values?

Bette: Of course I do! I mean, I think that's why we were able to parent together when things were the most acrimonious between us. I mean, it's so fucking rare, Tina. We both care about the quality of life, you know, and I like the choices you make, and the things that you surround yourself with. I mean, this attention to beauty... I think that's important. And I'm comfortable with, you know, the people of your world, and I think you're comfortable with the people of mine.

Tina: We like the same people.

Bette: And we dislike the same people.

Tina: We'd both rather stay in on New Year's Eve.

Bette: Yes, Dan.

Tina: What is it that you're afraid of?

Bette: I'm afraid that I'm... destructive. That if I have something good, I feel compelled to destroy it.

Tina: Look, I'm not so pure and innocent, okay? I was awful when I was with Henry. I was flailing. Look how I treated you. I used Angelica against you. I was despicable.

Bette: I love you. I love you. I have no doubt about that. I'm just afraid that...

Tina: That everything you're feeling right now is because... we're not really together. It's an affair.

Bette: No.

Tina: But it is.

Bette: For me, when I really search myself, it doesn't feel like an affair. For me, it feels like I'm coming home.

{Bette and Tina kiss}

This conversation introduces again the representation of love as inner drive and out of control. Again, the narrative of betrayal (to Jody) is diluted by the idea that *true love* is not

something either of them can shy away from. Bette bears her own feelings of guilt towards Jodi from a narrative which seeks the celebration of her feelings for Tina as beyond anything else. Bette makes a comparison to Jody and explains why their relationship is not good enough for her. *Values* in her explanation come as the core of a romantic relationship, which according to Bette's words, are decisive in love because of the importance of sharing aesthetics, "*I like [...] the things that you surround yourself with*", lifestyle and consumption patterns, "*we both care about the quality of life"*. Again, aesthetic values are brought up as a relevant quality in a couple "*this attention to beauty*".

When Tina says that she is not as naïve or pure, and tries to contradict Bette's argumentation by implying that she is not "the angel of the house", that would oppose the mystification of love, Bette interrupts by referring back to what is out of control. Bette cuts Tina's speech to articulate the words that end the discussion because they mobilize the ideal that is beyond any logic - "*I love you*". When Tina insists that what they have is not a "*real*" relationship but *"an affair"*, Bette concludes by associating their relationship to the home as the place of belonging and safety, "*it feels like I'm coming home*".

At the end of the conversation they kiss and it would seem like we look at two independent women whose most salient value is to love and choose to act on it to construct a home and a family.

The story of their relationship emerges as a paradigmatic example of the happy-ending love story, as they are the only consistent relationship of the series, finally re-inventing it in seasons five and six. In the closing episode of the whole series, the character of Jenny, who will later try to make a pass at Bette, reinforces their function as the central representation of coupledom, by stating "*with you guys leaving* (Tina and Bette), *you guys were the terrific, wonderful, supreme couple and now we are going to take your place"* (Chaiken 2007, 6:8).

Their ideal status is reinforced in the sixth season by their attempt to have another baby to expand their family while their group of friends becomes more and more chaotic. Again suspicion of an outside attraction enters the story, but this time the logic of narration shifts and Bette seems to not give in to it. Despite her efforts, eccentric Jenny is convinced that Bette cheats on Tina, and threatens Bette to expose her to Tina. Consequently, Bette accepts a new job position in New York to move out and secure her family from L.A gossip. Family seems to be the only transcendental value for their characters in this final season.

This orderly life of Tina and Bette contrasts with the other main storyline of the season, that of Jenny's chaotic management of her personal and professional life. The contrast between these two ways of living, between chaos and order, unfolds in Jenny's mysterious death and Bette and Tina's prevailing comfort as nuclear family and as anchor point of the larger family of their close friends' lesbian community.

4.3 The ideology of love

As I have exposed in the previous sections love is the central social practice of affect that the characters invest in *TLW*. Although the series implies in some story lines that they should reflect some diversity, I have argued that the stories and narratives in the series entail a reductive way of understanding love in its romantic monogamous version only and thereby anchoring “lesbian life” in such a love only. I argue that the representation of love in the series is ideological in that it is represented as if unbounded and diverse when its representations are actually arranged so that they respond to one idealized love only, that of romantic monogamy. In my analysis certain diversity in the representations is acknowledged, but I also expose that it is present insofar as useful for the eventual celebration of romantic monogamous love as the only authentic and desirable form.

Before I continue my analysis I shall reflect on the concept of ideology as the central

category of my argumentation at this point. I draw on Denise Thompson's introduction to ideological meaning as a form meaning can take and which is “complicit with” and pursues relations of domination (Thompson 2001: 27). In this sense, ideological meaning is not “a special kind of discourse” having discourse conceptualised as “system of meaning” (2001: 27). Ideological meaning is “a level of meaning” that can operate in any system of meaning (discourse), but not necessarily. I particularly take Thompson's idea that “ideological meanings are whatever makes domination palatable or acceptable, or natural, real and unchallengeable” (2001: 22). Thompson underlines as well that “meanings permeate” every realm of life, that is, they are constitutive of life and not confined to the realm of thoughts or logics, meanings are productive of particular ways of “feeling”, “desire” or “aversion” (2001:22). According to Thompson, one of the most common ways of producing ideological meanings as acceptable and even desirable is by producing desire itself as oriented to relations that entail domination. “Consent” to domination is produced through the “constitution of subjects” who reproduce this sort of relations out of a “pleasure” in so doing (2001: 36).

As Thompson does in her text, I shortly wish to overview the main objections that a Foucaldian perspective would pose to the idea of ideological meaning. Firstly, she argues that there is no necessary correlation between the use of the concept of ideology to any “commitment” to the base/ superstructure model” that informs theories inspired in a Marxist perspective. Having established a distance with that sort of accounts, I will focus on the issue of ideology as producing a “falseness” that the subject would be able to reject by an acquired consciousness that would lead to a “truth”. To my framework, as for Thompson's, the question of ideology is not turning a “false consciousness” into a sense of “the” truth, as “the distinction between what is ideological and what is not, is not always a distinction between falsehood and truth” (2001: 27). The issue that I wish to explore is the production of logics which “obliterate the knowledge” on their own process of production. One of the main ways

that knowledge on the production of meaning is obliterated is the presentation of logics which reinforce the social productions as having an origin in a sort of naturalness (2001:27).

Another objection from a Foucauldian perspective would be that this theorisation "needs something of the order of a subject" which he rejects (2001: 26). Thompson here argues that the idea of the subject mobilised in her account for ideological meanings is not an idea of a subject as ontological essence, but as constituted by and within the system of meaning as opposed to thinking the subject as "existing outside of any system of meaning" (2001:26). By this historically situated understanding of the subject, Thompson seeks to recuperate a way to "refuse complicity" to domination not in an absolute way but "wherever it is possible" (2001: 26).

I draw on the idea that when a naturalising logic is mobilised to sustain a system of meaning, it rests on a construction that aims at sustaining an status quo or social acceptance of a produced meaning as if it was self-evident or incontestably "true". Nevertheless, it is possible to claim it is ideological or vested in the activity of maintaining domination without necessarily suggesting a totalizing sort of "truth" as unveiled through the action of exposure of such logic. I wish to expose some of the naturalising logics behind the construction of "love" as a feeling or affect that is produced by an origin in the body as the locus of affection, out of which it "pours" in a natural i.e. not socially organised process.

Love in an ambivalent relation to sexuality seems to be the centre of the activities of the series and is articulated according to a reductive binary of promiscuity/ monogamy with promiscuity as a marginal practice that is to function only to reinforce the desirability of romantic monogamy. Even though it is celebrated as a sort of achievement, as happens in the case of the Shane character, in the larger picture, promiscuity becomes what does not happen within orderly relationships or to successful individuals. Furthermore, promiscuity is associated with only a few characters: Shane, Bette and Jenny and through them it is

explained to be “natural” or a tendency individuals “can't help”, framing desire as a matter of factuality. Yet in *TLW* precisely because promiscuity is produced as ideological meaning by its fixation as natural inner drive it does not seem to prevail in the social scene. First of all because it is an a priori attribute of people and not a socially constructed position to relate to others that one can get to occupy. But most importantly, it is not a rewarding position but rather a socially sanctioned one that is associated discursively to loneliness and failure to participate coherently logically in society.

The tensions between promiscuity and monogamy, no matter how marginal in the series, indicate the intricate ways in which sexuality and love intersect as socially shaped and sectioned activities. The social objectives obtained through the means of sexuality are variously implicated in the series. If promiscuity allows for the series to set its very background through the chart as element of cohesion of the lesbian community and in that sense generates lesbian belonging in the series. However, I have showed how Tina and Bette's relationship in the series is representative of an ideal status of (romantic) love and stability in the previous section. The social objectives achieved through promiscuity in the series are in the margins of the centred ideal of monogamy. In contrast, monogamy is the practice that operates as the way to obtain social legitimacy and is therefore legitimised and emerges as “real” love. It comes to signify activities of affect as the pursuing of a stability that eventually becomes the origin of a family project, which offers a sense of belonging in opposition to the solitude and unrootedness implied by promiscuity. Therefore the production of the causality love- monogamy- family in the series shall be argued to not fully rely on a desire for an object only.

The series presents love as mediating other social objectives, although the logic is not explicitly stated but ideologically connoted. In their final love confession, Bette and Tina mobilize notions of standard of living and “values” framing their relationship as a matter of

lifestyle and taste[11], "this attention to beauty", of sharing the same social positioning and having access to certain goods and services in the market, "we both care about the quality of life" (Chaiken 2008, 5:8). Here love emerges as a social practice that centres a foundational love, imbues it in the commodity logic and organises a lifestyle accordingly. This aesthetic and commodified love becomes the foundation for a set of social practices that are presented as a matter of individual choices.

In a sort of contradictory move from the idea that promiscuity/monogamy are in the nature of individuals and that they emerge neutrally from *desire/being in love*, to an individualized arrangement of compromises to a project that, through commodities and consumer choices, becomes itself a lifestyle to work on. On the one hand the logical complexity is reinforced by the fact that, even though monogamy as natural is present, not a couple in the series manages to accomplish it, issue that exposes the ideological relation of love-monogamy as natural but at the same time evidences why it needs to get secured. On the other hand, the contradiction emerges when love as natural instinct is put vis a vis the veiled work of pursuing its social practices as an ideal of lifestyle.

The commodification of love can be, for instance, illustrated by the function of Dan, the figure of the therapist in Bette and Tina's relationship. He is present all throughout the different stages of their relation and is described by Alice as "Hollywood's self-improvement guru". Love here appears as an endeavour that can be managed through the mediation of the "expert knowledge" available at the market of the self-help service industry. The partners should invest as individuals to learn to self-manage a set of commodities and routines in order

[11] I follow Celia Lury's reading of Bourdieu's concept of taste as "social phenomenon" as opposed to its understanding as "natural" individual orientation to beauty and stylized choices. Taste comes to be embodied by certain individuals according to class differences and comes to signify those very differences by granting more access to cultural representation and therefore to an improvement on one's social position (Lury 1996: 83).

to put together an ordered practice that will gain them access to social institutions of legitimacy as the family (Berlant 2008, Probyn 1997).

Above all, I argue that the representation of love is ideological as it presents love as relating to a natural display of feelings and desire only, while dismissing the dimension of these arrangements as socially produced practices. This production has two overlapping effects that I wish to take into account. First, sexuality can be read productively from a perspective that takes it as organised also by the desire to reach social objectives other than a physical object (Eckert 2002, 109) i.e. it mediates the willingness to access social positions which are not discursively produced as directly relating to sexuality itself. Love as affect emerges as the core of a lesbian subject which it serves to anchor in this discursive arrangement. Second, sexuality as contained in desire as impulse necessarily anchors itself in a subject as it emerges as "unfolding unmediated from a physiological and individual need" (Eckert 2001, 103). This desire which has a subject to its core is then directed towards an embodied object, a gendered individual (or various individuals) that are seen to be of "the same sex" as the desiring subject, suggesting that sexuality as activity is oriented to a physical object of desire only that one is self-evidently "attracted" to. Desire in this logic is constituted by a sort of natural drive or impulse and as not socially shaped. According to the nature of desire (homo/hetero) subjects come essentially constituted in a disposition that produces the LGTB subject as stable and intelligible as within the liberal production of the subject.

4.4 The lesbian, love and post-feminism

Having analysed love as ideological meaning I wish to question this romantic and monogamous love in relation to femininity. I shall mobilise again the notion of genre so that I can establish how the production of love as ideological emerges and is reiterated in popular culture. Previous pieces of feminist research on female centred popular culture (Probyn 1988;

Negra 2008) or women's culture (Berlant 2008) have claimed that the centrepiece of the genre is the endeavour of the female main character to pursue a successful partnership with her male counterparts and establish a stability based on their relationship and their capacity to initiate a project around the space of the “home”, as central for the family. This arrangement of events within the genre is termed in an ideological way as “love” to which the feminine figure is bound in a particular way. As Lauren Berlant argues the core of “feminine worth” within the genre rests on the female individual longing for this sort of arrangement or on a more general disposition to “at least entertain believing in love's capacity both to rescue you from your life and to give you a new one”. Berlant claims that the “institutions of heterosexual love provide normative locations for imagining the feminine good life” (Berlant 2008, 170). At the same time she connects the discursive production of heterosexual success as in the private realm with representations of the LGTB subject as failing to accommodate to this position.

In contrast I argue that there is also a tendency towards an accommodation of the LGTB subject as fitting this “privacy” that I link with the production of such a subject as capable of navigating the lifestyle associated to the sort of commodified love that I exposed before. I argue that these narratives have expanded to include LGTB subjects and that this accommodation is specific in the case of lesbians because they are also gendered according to the lesbian chick hyper- feminine logic. The “plot of love” as “core life story” of the feminine life has expanded to include lesbian love as based on lesbian chick femininity. Through the concept of new traditionalism Probyn locates the home as site of “love and fulfilment (Probyn 1988, 131). This discourse is sustained by an overlap with post-feminism which makes the re-articulation of femininity around the home emerge as a matter of individualised.

Nevertheless, the discursive production of love in the series does not make visible the social dimension of the arrangement, but presents love as a matter of the individual choices of free autonomous subjects only as bounded to a display of individual affect. In their

relationship, Tina's *choice* to get pregnant and quit her job to become a housewife, Bette's *choice* to be the house provider, her *choice* to pursue professional as well as personal success through a long term relationship, their *choice* in the last season to commit to their sexual exclusivity to secure their family, are all arranged as a matter of their individual choices. Probyn conceptualises "the ideology of choiceoise" to claim that these set of arrangements are at work as "reaffirmation" of the already existing discursive positions allowed for women and as Probyn exposes urges "women (…) to buy into the old as new" (1988, 131). Choice is at the core of new traditionalism in which "new" consists not of providing alternative or unknown subject positions but on providing an ideological framework to the turn to conservative positions in accordance with a post-feminist logic.

When love in TLW is apparently interrogated as a socially patterned practice, it still emerges as the origin of a larger set of relations, such as the institutions of marriage, partnership, or family. Since the characters represented are arranged to read as *lesbians*, these reconfigurations become even more complex, as they are actually opening discursive space to include LGTB subjectivities in the realm of traditional heteronormative institutions such as marriage and the family.

This work produces assimilation insofar as LGTB becomes a signifier of lifestyle through consumption and participates in heteronormative institutions which are now open to subjects who are tolerated for their "different" sexuality as a change in the object of desire. Sexuality framed as a matter of lifestyle and identity entails a change on the object of desire only. Since the only significant difference with LGTB subjects would emerge to be the object of desire, the logic of the narrative of *love* is left unchallenged. The "new" and "inclusive" LGTB *love* reproduces the pattern of securing itself into monogamy, which allows for stability and its projection on a re-productive family, linked to the place of the home.

In this sense, the ideology of love in the series becomes productive as it is produced

to naturally emerge as a central activity to life, and therefore becomes also central to the idea of “being human” regardless of a heterosexual or homosexual sexuality. Love becomes the site of the characters' humanity and the larger justification of the inclusion of LGTB subjects to the economic and social structures of marriage and family, to which love, in its monogamous and romantic version, appears as foundational. This ideology of love becomes productive for the discursive emergence of a politics of inclusion through normative temporalities of re-production.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the sort of lesbian visibility produced within the mainstream television series *The L Word* (*TLW).* By an analysis that first has looked at the characters of the series from the lesbian as image approach and second has exposed the logics in which the construction of love as central affect in the series is based on. I have established how within this particular series the lesbian is constructed as an intelligible subject and lesbianism appears as legitimate sexuality.

My interrogation of the way *TLW* is arranged as text departed from an exploration of its representation of the lesbian as in a specific intersection of femininity and (homo) sexuality. By bringing in the concept of "the lesbian chick" I wished to account for the way this recent form of lesbian visibility draws on a sort of hiperfemininity that is imbued in a specific positions of privilege of class, race, ability and within beauty standards. By conceptually differentiating the concepts of femaleness and femininity and maleness and masculinity, I argued that the ideological collapsing of one into the other produces the lesbian chick in her visibility as necessarily within a female femininity that works to secure masculinity as in the domain of maleness only.

Drawing on traditional feminist literature to explore the positions and potential pleasures associated to viewing I assessed the concept of the gaze as originally worked on by Laura Mulvey (1975) to then introduce subsequent revisions of her ideas by authors exploring the viability of a concept such as "lesbian gaze" or "lesbian gazes" (Fuss 1992; Lewis 1997). I related these alternative concepts of lesbian gaze(s) to *TLW* to find that they allow for a complex reading at various levels of meaning production. The plurality of the concept of lesbian gazes led my analysis to read *TLW* in its self-reflexive dimension, where it visually and narratively plays with diverse dispositions to push the viewer towards a critical

engagement with its politics of representation. Nevertheless, I remained critical of the concept of the gaze for it keeps analysis confined within the limits of textual analysis. I introduced work on the category of audience as directing analysis towards the context of reception. This approach underscores the competences of the particular people viewing the text as fundamental to the readings. This shift towards competences surpasses the more universalistic and monolithic framework of the 'gaze' as it allows for a situated analysis that focuses on communities of reception.

The concept of "genre" emerged as crucial for my analysis since it mediates conceptually between the event of the viewer's encounter with the text and television as social institution. By thinking genre as pattern I could relate *TLW* to other products arranged in a similar fashion. I analysed *TLW* in its overlap with LGTB focused series as well as with "female centred" series (Probyn 1988) or women's culture (Berlant 2008). Probyn's work was particularly influential to establish the way "female centred" genre is imbued in a post-feminist discourse that enhances the re-articulation of the home as the site of femininity ("new traditionalism"). This discursive production is sustained by an ideology of choice that frames the feminine re-turn to the home as a matter of women's freedom and individual choice. With the concept of 'female centred' genre, I situated *TLW* in a larger practice of arrangement of texts that have a similar way of producing femininity and sexuality as the overarching disposition that organises desire and to which love becomes the paradigmatic affect.

Subsequently I focused on the construction of love in *TLW* and established the way it operates as ideological meaning by representing its display as natural and apolitical while arranged through very specific conventions of romanticism and monogamy. I analysed certain narratives and story lines in the series to identify three common moments in the production of love; the "falling in love" plot, the "I love you" moment and its resolution in partnership stability or conflict in a "cheating" narrative. My analysis led me to assess a dichotomy

between monogamy and promiscuity that I argued is functional to the elevation and celebration of romantic monogamy as the centred, normative arrangement of legitimate bonding.

In all, my research took me to first question the diversity of representation implied in *TLW* to then argue that the universal love *TLW* claims to represent responds to a particular form of love only, romantic monogamous love. To question the production of such a love in a more nuanced way I took the relationship of the characters Bette and Tina as exemplary of this sort of love. By analysing the discourse implicated in some of their speech in certain lines along the series' six seasons, I questioned romantic and monogamous love as constructed through a specific relation to positions of success, morality, quality of life and lifestyle. I also established the way it is produced as inherently originating from an inner drive that unfolds from within individuals in a natural way. I argued that this production of love is ideological as it produces love to appear as a natural display of feelings linked to an inherent desire while it can be actually questioned for being socially arranged. I underlined two effects of this ideological love, one that love can actually be thought of as organising the access to social objectives beyond individual needs and second that it is discursively produced as inherently linked to a naturalised desire that emerges as if not constructed socially.

The projection of the "lesbian chic" as bounded by love and femininity emerges as caught up in the normalizing project of presenting lesbian subjectivities as adequate for assimilation in the larger economic and social structures in relation to their capacity of inserting their lives narratives into the temporalities suggested by the work of re-production. The ability of turning into a family/marriage allows lesbian subjectivities to insert themselves in the larger national project as productive subjects. Through this love they emerge as legitimate subjects to become included in now hetero-homo-normative institutions and temporalities. The outcome is a naturalizing production of normalcy in which the stories are

strongly anchored in pursuing a normative understanding of experiencing love as the only socially valuable and successful life trajectory, inserting lesbian subjectivities in the heteronormative logic in a sanitized way by dismissing feminist political projects.

I concluded that this love permits the lesbian chick to become an intelligible subject that is anchored by her affects and the foundational love/desire that subjects her. The viability of the "lesbian chic" subject is produced on the one hand at the expense of female masculinity as position that questions the authenticity of male masculinity. On the other hand lesbian chick rests on a formulation of femininity from a post-feminist perspective that renders feminism as an out-dated project of contestation of male supremacy.

Finally, I should underline the fact that this research focused on a particular series only and that even though it might produce a resonation that other series can come to relate to, my analysis of *TLW* can not be extrapolated in any totalizing fashion to other series that represent intersections of femininity and lesbianism. In fact, I decided to focus in female centred genre resonations of TLW, but it should also be considered that further research on its overlap with LGTB focused popular culture might emerge as productive and illuminating. An extended analysis that questions LGTB- focused television programming shall be incorporated in further research, especially in light of the latest fashion in programming that is transgressing previous character profiling and story lines. Among many, products like *Orange is the New Black* or up-coming *Sense8* directed by Lana Wachowski are likely to disrupt television representation for the original ways in which they surpass the boundaries of narrative and story lines conventions.

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