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THE POWER OF TELEVISION SPECTACLE: FEMINISM AND POPULAR TELEVISION

Abstract

Popular television is perhaps the most important tool for the production and promotion of popular culture content. It is a strong place of resistance and a space for various cultural struggles, including the feminist struggle that we observe through a number of genres and characters that resist established definitions of femininity and typical female characters. Products of popular culture, such as television soap operas, and lately a number of other genres, especially those that put female characters in the role of heroines, have enabled the development of a diverse spectre of female characters and given their audience a place where they can find authentic representations of their identities and life experiences. Through the analysis of such series, this paper will show how popular television, empowered by the ideals of feminism, and above all, popular feminism, introduced many female characters to a wider audience, and has undeniably become one of the primary places for female consumption of popular culture.

Key words: popular culture, television, resistance, feminism, female character

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Introduction

The field of popular culture and its theories are still a significant part of the dynamics of contemporary cultural, philological, sociological and other social and humanistic research. Popular culture has been associated with mass culture since its beginnings, or it has been defined as a part of mass culture, and the terms mass and popular are often used as synonyms. This paper primarily uses the concept of popular culture based on the theoretical reflections of the contemporary British sociologist and culture theorist Stuart Hall, especially his thesis from the text *Notes on deconstructing 'the popular'*. He states how the study of popular culture should begin with a dual movement in mind, the movement and both adherence and resistance, which is always and inevitably found within it. (Hall, www.freewebs.com/dcelcer/StuartHall2.doc) It should be noted right away that, in his research, Hall links the study of popular culture to the study of the history of labour and the institutions of the working class. However, this must be viewed in the context of the wider historical picture. The author makes conclusions about certain periodization problems in the study of popular culture, including an opinion on the strong qualitative changes in the field of popular culture that occurred in the post-war period.[20] Namely, it is not only about "changes in cultural relations between classes, but also about changed connections between people and the concentration and expansion of the new cultural apparatus", based on a strong technological revolution, especially since the 1960s. In addition to the technological revolution in this period, the socio-cultural changes that swept the world started a sort of dynamics of liberating processes on many social and cultural levels. The freedom of choice to consume popular culture products, the possibility of changing the meaning of pop culture products and their symbolic redefinition in the field of culture, but also the struggle for freedom and greater rights of marginalized groups in society, such as African Americans in the USA or women in society, widened the channels through which popular culture increasingly cut deeper and stronger into the petrified body of western societies. Moreover, this was a period of profound structural changes in the society: "there are not only changes in the relations of power, but also the establishment of the area of political

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20   After the Second World War.

struggle itself". (Hall, www.freewebs.com/dcelcer/StuartHall2.doc) This paper will be guided by some of Stuart Hall's thoughts on popular culture, that is, one of the theories about popular culture, based on the thoughts of European cultural theorists such as M. de Certau, P. Bourdie, R. Barth, S. Hall and M. Bakhtin, and mostly John Fiske with his thoughts on the theory of popular culture. The course that Fiske pursues in the study of the theory of popular culture is one that sees popular culture as a space of struggle and resistance against the forces of domination and the establishment of popular tactics that avoid, suppress or loosen the pressure of power. This approach seeks to understand the forms and mechanisms of everyday resistance and avoidance of the pressures of ideology, with faith in the energy and vitality of people as the motivation for initiating social changes.[21] As a rule, popular culture itself is a part of power relations. Moreover, it contains fragments of the constant struggle between dominance and subordination, power and resistance, or avoidance of power, between strategy and tactics. Popular culture, according to Fiske, is culture rather than consumption. It is distinctive for transforming the act of consumption into an act of cultural production because, in this context, consumption is always the production of meaning (Fiske, 2001: 28, 31). Models of popular culture, therefore, show not only the presence of money, but also values, meanings and pleasures. Popular culture, therefore, is not produced by the culture industry, but by people. That is why it is brought into direct connection with the everyday life and active attitude and experience of its devotees. Everything that is a part of everyday life is a part of the context in which consumers of popular culture also appear as its makers.[22]

The relationship between popular culture and everyday life is multifaceted and reciprocal, and can be viewed from at least two direction. If we look

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21   According to Fiske, until recently, the study of popular culture took place in two basic directions. The less productive one glorified popular culture without placing it in any model of power, that is, a kind of democratic version of elite humanism that moves the cultural life of a nation from the high field to the field of popular culture. The other direction places popular culture firmly within the power model, highlighting the strength of the forces of domination, in which it is then almost impossible to develop popular culture. Its place in this direction is taken by mass culture, imposed on a passive audience deprived of critical power by the culture industry. The third direction is the one mentioned above, which the paper will discuss in more detail. More in: Fiske, 2001: 29-30.

22   This is also one of the fundamental differences between popular and mass culture – one that implies imposed values and mechanisms of manipulation, reducing cultural differences between social classes, but often lowering the level of cultural value and enabling stereotyping.

at popular culture from the direction of everyday life, it usually carries *the moment of cause*. In other words, a certain situation in everyday life causes resistance, a kind of countermeasure and the production of (new) meaning in popular culture. If we look at everyday life from the direction of popular culture, we see that new values, meanings and pleasures are incorporated into the everyday life of the wider population. In this direction, too, there is a kind of resistance and opposition, mostly by individuals, but also by some social groups, to the influences of popular culture that permeate everyday life. However, they are often unstoppable, like for example, the penetration of rock music in the late 1950s and 1960s.[23] It is also necessary to emphasize that often, like in the above relationship, it is not easy to demarcate causes and consequences, or to recognize the directions from which and/or towards which certain influences come. Also, in many cases, it is not even necessary to draw boundaries or insist on the right of priority. The forms of cultural struggles from which popular culture emerges are, therefore, closely related to the activity, de Certeau's "arts of doing", of the broadest social masses and their everyday life, regardless of the direction and influences involved.

Since the 1960s, television has been a medium that has become one of the most important factors of popular culture. Popular television is a place of struggle and the production of meaning, including feminist struggles that influenced the portrayal of female characters on television, which is what we will primarily deal with in this paper. Throughout the long history of popular television, female characters have gone through a series of representations in order to fight for roles equal to their male "rivals". In line with the above popular culture theories, this paper will present a short history of feminism on television, from soap operas through sitcoms and female warriors to Netflix, the global hit of today. It will also how the efforts of feminist critics influenced the change in the portrayal of female characters, but also how the television spectacle inversely affected feminism, because with the increasing success of feminism and the growing audience, it is no longer only about what feminism has said about popular culture, but also about what the audience has had to say about feminism.

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23   In this case, we can talk about a kind of moment of consequence. There are numerous examples in the cultural history of the second half of the 20th century in which phenomena arising from popular culture resulted in strong and lasting cultural and even broader social changes. (Ileš, 2016: 133)

Television as a means of production and promotion of popular culture

Television as a mass medium[24] is one of the most important means in creating and maintaining the spectacle[25] of popular culture. It is the promoter of the consumer spectacle and enters the domain of economic, political, social and everyday life in new and significant ways (Kellner, 2008). In his book *Television Culture,* British popular culture theorist John Fiske interprets television as a "cultural agent, provocateur and circulator of meaning" (Fiske, 1987, 1). Television as a medium dominates free time, while its images and stories influence social norms and the formation of political attitudes, offering models for the formation of personal and social identity. By introducing new social and cultural elements into its texts that reflect popular trends in social reality, television influences social change and breaks down taboos (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014). Characters on television are not only representations of individual persons, but are also codes of ideology and the embodiment of ideological values (Fiske, 1987). In the observed content, the viewer recognizes points of contact with his own life experience and with the values and opinions he holds, and the power and reach of the popular culture text are based on the emotionality produced by the show, i.e., the power of the audience's potential for emotional connection with the cultural messages the product emits, and the consumer consumes (Labaš and Mihovilović, 2011).

As Fiske suggests in *Television Culture*, television programs need to be viewed as potentials of meaning, not just as a product/commodity. Television series are clearly defined in terms of format and duration, and will be the same wherever they are broadcast, but the television text itself is

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24   In his book *Television – the toy of our century,* Croatian television journalist and editor Damir Matković states "Television is an invention that undoubtedly marked our century. Thanks to its amazing ability to instantly jump across time and geography, television technology has turned the world into a global village."

25   The spectacle, in addition to providing satisfaction, progressiveness and social change, contradiction, emotionality and a break with traditional norms and values, is perhaps the most pronounced feature of popular culture (Labaš, Mihovilović, 2011: 101-106). Also, the characteristics and dominant expressions of popular culture are subject to constant changes. Popular culture is progressive and contradictory, constantly creating new social and cultural meanings. Expressions of popular culture are usually transmitted through mass media such as television, and are impossible to analyse separately. Therefore, we are dealing with the analysis of the television text as a popular culture text, and the ways of encoding and decoding that text.

a product of the reader's overall viewing experience. Television content thus becomes a cultural text only when the audience attributes a certain meaning to it (Fiske, 1987). It is relevant to mention here Louis Althusser's thesis on "interpellation", the process by which the media, as a part of governing institutions, form an ideological paradigm within which the viewer observes the world (Althusser, 1971). An additional influence is the perspective of the critical community, which defines quality itself under the influence of some kind of ideology, be it aesthetic, political or both. In other words, certain TV series can transmit a text with different meanings, depending on the audience watching it. Contemporary high-quality television series in this sense require a complex narrative structure, which implies that the work deals with complex topics and builds characters with complex personalities, which are narrated in an innovative way in stories of hybrid genres (Fiske, 1987).

Popular television, soap operas and feminism

French culturologist Jean-Pierre Esquenazi believes that the audience expects television series to paraphrase the real world more than any other genre: television series "would thus follow changes in the reality in which the audience lives, including those concerning the position of women in society and the development of the feminine consciousness and feminism" (Esquenazi, 2009, as cited in Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014, 138). Fiske mentions the example of female soap opera fans as extremely capable readers of popular culture texts. Such reading requires an understanding of the conventions according to which the TV program is constructed, as well as the use of one's own textual and social experience in the process of reading and understanding the television text. The satisfaction in studying the text comes from the fact that the (socially) subjugated find satisfaction in confirming their own identity as a resistance to the dominant structure, i.e., in confirming the legitimacy of women's meanings and identities in a patriarchal world (Fiske, 1987).

Anikó Imre, an American theoretician of cultural studies, explains in her work *Gender and quality television* that television, as an object of research, has been influenced by gender differences since its inception. In post-war America, television spread as a medium primarily intended for women

who were in the domestic sphere and open to consuming its contents, (Imre, 2009), especially those intended for a female audience. The development of feminist theory of popular culture is thus inseparable from the study of soap operas, which played a key role in its development (Grdešić, 2020). According to British popular television theorist Elke Weissman, the analysis of soap operas should be understood as a political and feminist project that was radical and subversive precisely because it understood soap operas seriously as a place of female pleasure (Weissman, 2016). In the words of Charlotte Brunsdon, initial feminist interests in television were "an appeal from a deep conviction that the oppression of women is linked to mass media representation" (Brunsdon, D'Acci, & Spigel, 1997, as cited in McCabe & Akass, 2006, 1). The strong relationship between feminism and television grew from the wider engagement of British cultural studies in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, and efforts to understand popular culture as a battleground of meaning (McCabe and Akass, 2006). Ann Kaplan, an American feminist theorist, believes that this early critical view of television laid the foundations of an agenda whose goal was to understand the social context within which television is viewed, which is why the "receiver" has become a logical focus for research into the relationship between viewers and television texts (Kaplan, 1994, according to McCabe and Akass, 2006). Television owes its prestige precisely to feminist theorists, who "turned this area of low cultural significance and generally disparaged pleasures into a provocative ground for serious criticism" (Imre, 2009, 392), and later analyses such as those by Judith Butler, who questioned the binary of male and female, and viewed gender itself as nothing more than a performative construct, strongly influenced future representations of gender on television (Butler, 1990, as cited in McCabe and Akass, 2006, 1).

Today's critical approaches in many ways reject the gendered category of television and the feminist foundations of television studies, and perhaps one of the most influential efforts to change television is the turn to "quality television." The term "quality television" came into use in the 1980s in the United States. It was used by the HBO[26] network to present their programs as works of original creative vision, aimed primarily at an "elite"

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26   HBO (Home Box Office) is an American television network with a subscription model.

audience, relying on an ensemble of actors, complex and overlapping narratives, and social and cultural commentary (Imre, 2009). The popular HBO drama from the late 1990s, *Sex and the City*, found itself at the centre of discussions about quality television and (post)feminism, along with other award-winning dramas such as *Ally McBeal*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Desperate Housewives*. As Imre states, the stories of those series focused on female characters, automatically placing them in the so-called space of "chick" programs, the equivalent of superficial women's chatter and the glitz of women's magazines, unworthy of serious consideration. Regardless of their popularity, complex characters and stories exploring taboo topics and social issues, what primarily distinguished them from many other popular series at the time was the fact that they focused on female characters (Imre, 2009). Apart from women in leading roles, these series do not actually have much in common, but the market puts them in a separate category that Maša Grdešić conditionally refers to as "women's series", i.e., series that deal with "female" topics such as love, sex, friendships, family, and are therefore considered less valuable preoccupations than the public sphere and political topics that belong in the "masculine" domain (Grdešić, 2020).

The category of women's popular culture, or "women's genres", is a term introduced in 1984 by Annette Kuhn in the programmatic article *Women's Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera, and Theory*, which defined it as "the study of audio-visual texts, i.e., popular television and film forms intended for female audience, such as soap operas and melodrama" (Kuhn, 1984, as cited in Grdešić, 2013, 34). Charlotte Brunsdon also added to this category popular publications, such as girls' and women's magazines and romance novels, and in 2000 offered a more contemporary definition of women's genres that also included popular culture texts: melodramas and soap operas, romantic comedies and "women's" series, romance novels and chick lit, women's and teenage magazines, etc. It also includes popular culture practices such as fashion, make-up, knitting, sewing, gossip, etc (Brunsdon, 2000, as cited in Grdešić, 2013, 35). Based on the above, women's genres can be defined as "media, skills and practices of conventional femininity, i.e., fiction of femininity in mass culture" (Grdešić, 2013, 35). Kuhn singles out television soap operas and film melodramas as the popular narrative forms intended for female audiences that attract critical and theoretical attention. She defines them as "gynocentric genres"

because they are primarily aimed at female audiences and generally consumed by women (Grdešić, 2013).

One of the fundamental inputs of the early feminist critical and theoretical work on soap operas was the desire to study the genres that were popular and particularly popular with female audiences. Soap operas attract a large audience, mostly made up of women. The problem, however, becomes more complex when the questions of the content of such a television text and the relationship between the viewer and the meaning of the text are discussed (Kuhn, 1984). The question here is what actually makes these genres "feminine": do the texts really have some kind of "feminine" form, or is it simply a matter of more women consuming them statistically? In her work, Kuhn references Tania Modleski, who argued in her texts about soap operas that this genre prioritizes the private sphere, insisting on traditionally understood "female" skills in solving personal and family crises (Modleski, 2008, as cited in Grdešić, 2013, 36). Kuhn believes that there is nothing inherently "feminine" in female genres, but that femininity itself is a discursive construct, a product of different ideas of what it means to be a "woman". In western culture, this is usually associated with the categories of personal, private, home, family, motherhood, emotionality: the idea of a woman as a wife and mother (Kuhn, 1984, as cited in Grdešić, 2013, 38). Soap operas, like other "female genres", put the private sphere in the foreground, focusing on family and home, love and marriage, friendship and community, and making such programs a rare place where skills and competences that are traditionally considered feminine receive preferential treatment. They rely on a certain cultural competence of viewers who are pre-constructed as "feminine", and who will recognize the codes of their personal and own lives, but "at the same time offer their own representations of femininity that the recipient may or may not adopt" (Grdešić, 2020, 107).

From the perspective of "high" culture, soap operas are rejected as aesthetically worthless, poorly written, psychologically unconvincing and intended for a poorly educated mass audience, as well as a way of manipulating female viewers, primarily housewives, to whom their subordinate position is presented through the plot of the soap opera as a desirable form of idealized notions of traditional femininity, related to family and marriage (Grdešić, 2020). On the other hand, Kuhn states that soap operas offer the viewer a "position of power" (Kuhn, 1984, 27), a story that centres

on "female desire", embodied in the main female character, which represents a gender shift away from the neutral, but actually masculine viewer, whom most products of "high" culture and popular culture supposedly address. In this sense, the argument that "in a society that is represented as masculine, these genres offer the possibility of female desire and a female point of view", is used in defence of women's genres (Grdešić, 2013, 36). Modleski, in turn, explored the relationship between soap operas and the daily life of women, believing that soap operas, in addition to offering the possibility of a female point of view, also fulfil the socio-cultural needs of women who felt isolated at home, playing up the intimacies of family life by offering a fantasy of a collective community (McCabe and Akass, 2006).

At the beginnings of television feminism – humour

At the beginning of popular television, housewives were the main "target" of American television companies. In the 1970s, American feminist critic Julie D'Acci analysed how white middle-class women, especially business women, became the new sought-after television audience. The socio-political environment of the time inspired American television companies to focus on sitcoms with a feminist undertone, such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), *Maude* (1972-1978) and *Rhoda* (1974-1978) (McCabe and Akass, 2006, 3), transitioning away from the stereotypical presentation of female characters and the division of gender roles in which the woman appears as a happy and passive housewife and mother (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014).

In her analysis of the leading heroines in early American television sitcoms, such as Lucile Ball from *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and Gracie Allen from *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950-1958), American film critic Patricia Mellencamp argued that the heroines in question used humour as a tool to rebel against the "prison" of home life that many soap operas portrayed, and that the viewers of these sitcoms understood very well what the humour was hiding (McCabe and Akass, 2006). American communication scientist Bonnie Dow believed that "sitcoms were a breakthrough in the presentation of feminism on television, portraying their heroines as more mature and independent, and coinciding with

increasing emancipation of women in the society" (Dow, 1996, as cited in Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014, 139). At the same time, series such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, with an unmarried business woman in the lead role; *One Day at a Time* and *Kate* and *Allie*, starring single mothers; and *Julia*, the first series with a black American woman in a leading, non-stereotypical role, which aired 1968-1971, reproduced and institutionalized the gender roles of the time, following the broader social changes and new female experiences (McCabe and Akass, 2006).

According to these examples, we are ready to understand the field of popular culture, including the medium of popular television, as a space of pop-cultural resistance. In societies where power is unevenly distributed, popular culture is shown to be a contradictory value, and the contradiction is expressed in power relations, in dominance and subordination, in power and resistance. The adaptive tactics of everyday resistance and the mechanisms of the popular culture act as *guerilla* attacks into the territories of power. Fiske's thinking about the relationship between the meaning and pleasures of popular culture and political activity is particularly significant in this regard. He shows how the politicization of popular culture, which appears as a variety of micro-realizations and as a tactic of daily opposition and resistance of subordinates, usually occurs at the micro-political level. Thus, the politics of popular culture acts as a micro-politics in the tactics of everyday life, in which there is a redistribution of power between the forces of domination and subordination. Structural changes at the level of the system itself, regardless of whether it is politics, economy, legislation or family relations, can only be achieved if the system is undermined and weakened by the tactics of everyday life (Fiske, 2001: 27-28). Therefore, television content often put in motion micro social changes, or at least served as the space that opened up taboo topics to a wider audience and in some way sensitized the society to certain socio-political issues.

A new set of shows in the 1970s placed female characters in the realm of crime, action and fantasy worlds, once again hinting at broader social changes. These series included *Police Woman* (1974-1978), *Wonder Woman* (1975-1978), *Bionic Woman* (1976-1978) and *Charlie's Angels*. (1976-1981). Despite the new liberation of these heroines, "the focus on their physical attractiveness has not changed. Thus, the heroines of *Charlie's Angels* often achieve their goal by charming their opponents, but they also use physical strength to fight against them, which is a new element" (Sever Globan and

Pavić, 2014, 139). While female characters continued to appear in sitcoms most frequently, female protagonists in drama series were described as "youthful, and their true value was hidden precisely in their youth and beauty, while male characters were wiser and more powerful the older they got, and occupied a higher business position than their female partners" (Davis, 1990, as cited in Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014, 140).

Popular feminism, consumerism and warrior women

Moving towards the end of the 20th century, the growth of popular feminism and post-feminism resulted in an increase in the number of television shows with a post-feminist woman in the lead role, such as *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), and *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) (Imre, 2009, 394). With the transition to the popular-feminist and post-feminist period of television, the roles assigned to female characters in television shows underwent some changes, and the traditional dichotomy of male versus female, i.e., *reason, strength, independence, intelligence, reservedness, career, dominance* versus *sensitivity, fragility, intuition, lack of independence, sexiness, motherhood, subordination*, became less present in favour of a more complex and equal portrayal of female characters. (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2013, 138)

In the 1990s, popular culture began to include more and more feminist ideas in its products, but that should not be understood without additional thought, because, as Nina Power puts it in *One-Dimensional Woman*, it is often just a matter of commodifying feminism and turning it into a commodity for the capitalist market. The author calls this contemporary feminism consumerist, underlining the similarity between "liberating" feminism and "liberating" capitalism, i.e., the way how the desire for emancipation begins to look like something replaceable by the desire to buy as many material things as possible (Power, 2009 according to Grdešić, 2013, 255). Gamman and Marshment questioned the way in which popular, consumer culture co-opts feminist ideas, such as "freedom" and "choice", in order to address women as consumers. Power warns that today "feminism takes over the capitalist advertising discourse in order to better market itself" (Grdešić, 2013, 255). "Girlie" is a cultural phenomenon related to the third wave of feminism, and is defined as feminism for a generation

that grew up on popular culture, which is why the colour pink, knitting, nail polish, fun, pop and rock music, pornography, pleasure and sex are important places of identification for these girls. This type of insistence on the importance of popular culture in general, but also on its significance for feminism, which managed to enter the mainstream precisely thanks to popular culture, could be connected to a new trend within feminist cultural studies – popular feminism (Grdešić, 2013, 51).

Joanne Hollows in *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture* (2002) and Rachel Moseley in *Feminism in Popular Culture* (2006) advocate the thesis that popular feminism is a more contemporary and desirable direction of research development, considering that it is impossible to talk about real and authentic feminism which would be outside of popular culture due to the fact that most women born after the 1960s first encountered feminism precisely through popular culture:

> "Academic and activist feminisms – however unpopular they may be – are not outside of these popular manifestations of feminism, but are part of the same social and cultural struggles over the meaning of feminism. In this sense, the emphasis is no longer solely on what feminism has to say about popular culture, but also on what popular culture has to say about feminism" (Hollows and Moseley, 2006. according to Grdešić, 2013, 52).

In Stuart Hall's view, popular culture is an important battleground for feminism, which gave rise to disagreements regarding the meaning of femininity and the issue who creates it and in relation to what (Hollows, 2000). Charlotte Brunsdon, a British television and film theorist, analysed films such as *Pretty Woman* and *Working Girl*, trying to justify some pop-cultural products that she herself enjoys. Moreover, articles about *Buffy*, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were often created, and the most common conclusion is that the very characteristics that made the studied product "fail the feminist test make them more resonant, interesting, compassionate and realistic to women today" (Grdešić, 2013, 52).

While mainstream television was still primarily occupied with male protagonists and heroes, less-known television channels featured female warriors in leading roles, in shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Xena the Warrior Princess*, and *La Femme Nikita*. All three series have female warriors/fighters in lead roles who stand out with their independence, strength,

intelligence and style while questioning the ambiguities and complexities of everyday life along the way. In *Frustrating Female Heroism: Mixed Messages in Xena, Nikita, and Buffy*, Mary Magoulick, an American theorist of popular culture, argues that these shows were created in response to the female audience's dissatisfaction with the lack of female heroines on television. They did not like the fact that the new heroines they offered were no less sexualized than before, or that they did not create any new ideas about what it means to be a hero as a woman: they simply transferred the traditional roles of male action heroes to women. These series, it should be said, were created by men, placing the heroines in a space where they fulfil male fantasies more than they challenge the *status quo*. Within the series, these female warriors are not only threatened by a hostile environment embodied by various villains, but also by their private life within the domestic sphere, and romantic and emotional conflicts with partners, friends and family (Magoulick, 2006). Girl power, as presented in *Buffy*, is often portrayed in the media as true feminism, although it is actually a way of circumventing the complexities of feminism. Buffy is strong and sarcastic, her outfits are always impeccable, and she is the ultimate *femme*. Thus, she is not challenging the sensitive definitions of physical femininity. Female empowerment has been commodified through products that serve as advertisements for the show, or instructions on how to be fit like Buffy Summers (Fudge, 1999).

Nevertheless, Mary Magoulick believes that these shows fulfilled the hopes of many female viewers who celebrated them as strong, liberated and less emotional heroines than those of the previous generations, and offered new role models for female heroes, citing various American publications that celebrated Xena as "the vanguard of lesbian and feminist youth culture" and as a "self-confident, active woman in the lead role" who "victoriously proves her differences" (Magoulick, 2006, 731-732). Furthermore, "whatever weapons they use – humour, magic or combat – each of these heroines defined what it means to be a woman for a whole new generation" (Moy, 2002, as cited in Magoulick, 2006, 732). But regardless of the public (feminist) praise these shows have received, such feminism is still a source of frustration for many. The shows of the time emancipated the female characters from traditional roles by presenting them as supernaturally "strong", but at the same time, equating their strength with "masculinity". Many of these female characters can be seen

as male characters of the other sex, still rooted in the patriarchal system because male characteristics are understood as the norm. Such "strong female characters" were created pretending to be part of progress, but in reality, they are archetypes of male characters, without even realizing it. A strong female character in a typical progressive series possesses three elements: she is physically strong, emotionally closed, and presented to the audience as traditionally attractive, which only reinforces patriarchal ideals and keeps the heroine in the field of the "male gaze" (Moy, 2016, 2). Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey explains it as projecting a male fantasy onto a female figure where the woman is still treated as a passive, visual object (Mulvey, 1975). British author Sophia McDougall believes that "strong" male characters are treated differently than "strong" female characters. Male characters like Batman, Sherlock Holmes or Iron Man are not put in the box of "strong" characters. Rather, they are able to possess other characteristics, while the characterization of female characters is often narrowed down to "strong female characters", ignoring their other characteristics (McDougall, 2013, according to Moy, 2016, 2). New heroines are therefore also commercial goods, as Sever Globan and Pavić (2016) have argued, which is also confirmed by the thesis presented by Mary Magoulick (2006), who states that the emergence of such television series coincides with the increase in the number of female viewers with a greater spending power.

Netflix and *the new generation of female characters*

With the entry of television into the 21st century, there has been a greater diversity in the depictions of female characters, female identities and experiences, but they still largely conform to the ideology of the dominant group in the society. However, it should be said that the shift could already be seen in one important, non-stereotypical example from the era of *Buffy* and *Xena*. The sci-fi series *The X-Files* (1993-2002) stars Dana Scully, an agent guided by reason and science; while her partner, agent Fox Mulder, is guided by faith, irrationality, and the supernatural, thus inverting the conventional gender roles (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014). It is particularly significant to note that, although Dana is portrayed as "physically attractive and resourceful", the *X-Files* camera "rarely foregrounds parts of her body and instead portrays her as capable and professional person"

(Kellner, 2009, as cited in Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014, 141). Therefore, this is an example of the shift from the aforementioned "male gaze" that we can see in the examples of *Buffy* and *Xena*, where "the heroines of television shows are still part of the long Western patriarchal media tradition, according to which women are the object of desire and gaze, i.e., a spectacle to watch, subject to the gaze of the (male) audience" (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014, 146).

It should also be noted that the 1990s television shows are today seen as more problematic from a feminist perspective than they were back then, but they undeniably paved the way for many other shows with women in leading roles that came in the future (Paige, 2020). Before the 1990s, most television shows with leading female roles were comedies, and after *Buffy*, *Xena* and *The X-Files*, there was also a number of drama series with "warrior women" in the lead roles, such as *Veronica Mars*, *Homeland*, *Orphan Black*, *Jessica Jones*, *Supergirl*, *Batwoman*, etc (Martin, 2017). Many of these heroines have been hailed as a long-awaited refreshment in popular culture, redefining what it means to be a woman within television and popular culture, but they also raise a question:

> "Does the fact that women use physical force equally as men and are more emotionally insensitive necessarily mean gender equality? Can they be equal to their male counterparts without taking on all their characteristics, such as aggressiveness, use of weapons, vindictiveness and power struggle? Will women necessarily emancipate themselves by copying stereotypical male patterns of behaviour, suppressing their feminine side?! (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2016, 148).

The shift that was started by *The X-Files* can be seen in the new generation of female characters that appeared on television, or more precisely, on the streaming platform Netflix (where television content can be watched online) (Mitova, 2022). If we briefly return to the archetype of the female warrior, the Netflix superheroine Jessica Jones from the eponymous show *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) is praised for her serious approach to topics such as sexuality, rape and PTSD (Williams, 2018). Jessica is considered a "strong female character" (Gallaway, 2018), and returning to the definition of a "strong female character" in "progressive" shows when such a character must be everything that the stereotypical woman is not: physically strong,

emotionally closed and presented to the audience as traditionally attractive (Moy, 2016), differences can be found between Jessica and her predecessors. Jessica is not a girlie like Buffy, nor is she "dressed in short skirts and skimpy costumes" (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2014) like Xena. She is rude, wears a black leather jacket and drinks too much. She is physically strong, but *Jessica Jones* does not possess the dimension that sexualizes the main female characters either inside or outside the show. The costume designer of the show, Elizabeth Vastola, states that "the women in the show dress for themselves. They do not dress for members of the opposite sex. They do not dress either for men or for anyone's gaze. They dress for who they are and to feel good in their own skin". *Jessica Jones* much more openly touches on the topics of interest for the third wave of feminism, so perhaps that is how she more easily acquires the title of a "feminist show", especially because the show is created by a woman, Melissa Rosenberg. Moreover, in the second season the directors of all episodes were women. Because of that, *Jessica Jones* not only deals with topics that concern women, but also gives a voice to women in production and how these stories could be told (Gallaway, 2018).

The Netflix show *Orange is the New Black* (2013-2019), which deals with life in a women's prison, was simultaneously praised for focusing on women's stories, but also criticized for the stereotypes and violence with which it approached the issue of race and ethnicity (although the last season received praise for the response and purpose it gave to these complex narratives). *Orange is the New Black* dealt with a variety of characters and topics such as mental health, sexuality, gender, religion, trauma, aging, etc. Also, at least one episode was seen by 105 million Netflix subscribers, clearly showing that shows with female leads can attract a wide audience. Arielle Bernstein of *The Guardian* states that while shows like *Sex and the City* and *Buffy* have already shown what it means to be a woman in the world, *Orange is the New Black* stood out because it placed a significant focus on women from marginalized groups, "insisting for seven years on air that women's stories are actually human stories and that women possess just as complex desires as men". The characters from this show may not have all experienced a happy ending, but they were all portrayed as "fully realized people: complex, human, and worthy of a voice" (Bernstein, 2019). The show *Mr. Robot* (2015-2019) starring the hacker Elliot Alderson received similar reviews. The female characters in the show are not merely anxious

anti-heroines: just like the male characters, they can be aggressive, impulsive, short-sighted, idealistic and naive, i.e., complex and humane and capable of making mistakes. *Mr. Robot* also touches on some more specific feminist topics such as sexism in the workplace, sexuality, relationships, etc. However, this show is most noted for its portrayal of different characters with an ease that puts female characters on the same level as male characters and does not treat them differently (Cruz, 2015).

Although the feminism of all the above-mentioned shows continues to be questioned and analysed, it is important to return to Fiske and his claim that meaning is created in the process of reading. The empowerment of main heroines will not automatically make a show feminist. It is necessary to observe the narrative as well as the other characters in the narrative process (Moy, 2016):

> "We believe that the path to gender equality also lies in cultivating diversity and own specificities, and not just copying those who have power and physical strength. This means that it is still necessary to portray women in different roles and with different characteristics in the media, and the ideal television heroine would be one who will not reach the goal using her naked body, be in repressive partnerships and silently suffer the brutal world that surrounds her. On the contrary, she should build and affirm a world without that much violence, just as her male counterparts should do" (Sever Globan and Pavić, 2016, 148).

As Australian theoretician of cultural studies Meghan Morris states, "dissatisfaction with the 'everyday' and overemphasised definitions of the everyday as 'the way things are'" is the "minimal" characteristic of feminism (Morris, 2006. according to Grdešić, 2013, 34).

Conclusion

The power of the (television) spectacle as the most prominent feature of popular culture is evident today as much, if not more, than at the beginning of the expansion of the television media form in the 1960s. The society of the spectacle, as recognized by Guy Debord even then (1967), is perfectly suitable for ruling, as proven by the fact that those who aspire to power want to rule the society exactly as it is, and with the same actions

to keep it almost the same as it was (Debord, 1999: 00). Preferring an unchanging status, advocating minimal progress in society and maintaining the socio-political system as it is, the rulers will try to maintain it by forcing different forms of spectacle (sports, cultural, economic, especially those considering nationality). In Feuerbachian terms, as long as our era prefers the image over the thing, the copy over the original, representation over reality, and appearance over being, it is not difficult to maintain the *status quo* with the mechanisms of the spectacle that suits the authorities[27]. Since its inception, television has been recognized as an extremely potent propaganda medium, and is therefore always under state supervision. On the other hand, television programs and their content are an important platform through which, in addition to mass culture products, pop culture products are offered and presented to a wide audience. These are places of cultural struggles, resistance to the forces of domination, and producers of new meanings. Popular television is one of the most creative and dynamic forms of the above. Television shows, especially after the 1990s, were highlighted as high-quality television content capable of creating and transmitting messages in which viewers will not only recognize sensation, fun and trendy *jouissance*, but very often Barthesian *plaisir* will prevail over the need to consume feelings and experience something ideal, and thus unrealistic realities.

As a rule, television shows are expected to show and represent situations from real life, the real world, everyday life, perhaps more than any other form of popular culture. Following the life of today's audience, television tries to monitor and thematize current social problems and changes that the society is going through, not only the trends in the sphere of entertainment. It also includes topics related to the development of society in different directions, including feminism and the position of women in society, enabling better insight and understanding the entire society, its problems and habits, and sometimes trying to offer answers to questions that are a step ahead of the times.

Popular television can also be viewed as a training ground for the development of feminism since the 1960s, where the trail has lead from soap operas and their most loyal viewers – housewives; through

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27   Public television is criticised on a daily bases today for making news programmes in particular that fulfil the needs of the ruling state structures.

popular-feminist creations of the 1990s such as Buffy and Xena; all the way to today's variety of female characters that include superhero shows like *Jessica Jones*, to shows with complex, diverse characters in all positions of power, like *Mr. Robot* and *Orange is the New Black*, some of which do not claim to be feminist shows at all, but they simply are.

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