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Orphan Black:
Crazy Media Science

Cosima Niehaus:

Lesbian representation and its influence on the queer community

academic paper

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ORPHAN BLACK:
Analysing the television series by the example of the representation of female homosexuality and feminity from the character "Cosima Niehaus" and the series' significance to the LGBTQIA+ community

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Abstract

This academic paper is with the objective of investigating how representation of female homosexuality and femininity occurs of the character Cosima Niehaus from the television series *Orphan Black*. A character and relationship analysis of the lesbian Cosima will show the presentation of these two topics. The impact on the spectators of the series in this field and the use of stereotyping will be examined. Also it will be demonstrated how the impersonators Tatiana Maslany and Kathryn Alexandre (acting double) experience Cosima, which contributes representation. Up-to-date literature and internet sources, plus a survey and an interview conducted by the author enables this investigation. It will lead to the importance of medial representation of female homosexuality (thus including the topic femininity) and therefore also the importance of LGBTQIA+ topics for our whole society, to communicate an understanding of tolerance, one's own identity, the identity of others and the perception of reality. Consequently *Orphan Black* will be illuminated as pioneer in exemplary LGBTQIA+ representation.

Annotations

This academic paper was written as examination to pass the Bachelor studies program. It was evaluated with the top mark due to its academic validity, topicality and its relevance of content.

This thesis was translated into English by the author herself from the original German version. German quotations are still part of the thesis but are noted with an English translation.

lectured and edited by:

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Thank you for your support, Gabriele.

The fifth and last season of the series *Orphan Black* was not released during the writing of this academic paper for which reason it is not part of the analysis even though it unfolds many more factors of representing (queer) women.

Attempts were made to word the constant and important change of representing and phrasing queer content. Therefore e.g. the initialism "LGBTQ" was broadened to "LGBTQIA+" in 2019.

Although this thesis has been written in 2017 its relevance is still up-to-date as queer representation and representation of women are both still in development and

still have to increase due to the actual numbers of earth's population.

The publication of this thesis has been postponed due to personal reasons, but still had find its way as it is a meaningful work for the LGBTQIA+ community and female representation.

The author likes to add that the lesbian representation of *Orphan Black*'s character *Cosima Niehaus* is one selected example and therefore portrays one option. There is room and need for different representation of different age, skin colours, ethnicities, abilities, body shapes, gender (beyond the constructed binary understanding), romantic and sexual orientation (including the asexual/aromantic spectrum), beliefs, social, financial and professional backgrounds.

Acknowledgement

My personal gratitude is addressed to the two women, who portray Cosima. Thanks to their tolerance, intelligence, creativity and talent *Orphan Black* experiences its profundity, which made this thesis possible.

Heartfelt thanks, Tatiana Maslany and Kathryn Alexandre for your exemplary and inspiring openheartedness and open-mindedness.

And I am deeply grateful for everything *Cophine* brought into my life including embracing myself, daring to stand up for what matters to my heart and people I've met along this journey. I am grateful for the support and help of many people to realise this.

This thesis is published to set an example for the importance of queer female representation in media and shall inspire others – queer or not; media producers or not – to be aware of their own representation and the responsibility that comes with it to this world beyond media as well.

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List of abbreviations

cf. = compare

e.g. = for example

OB = Orphan Black

TC = Timecode

Term definition

Ally (to the LGBTQIA+ community) = The term "Ally" is used to describe a person, who stands up supportively to people who belong to the LGBTQIA+ community. Ally is used for non-LGBTQIA+ people and those who support each other in the LGBTQIA+ community, e.g. a lesbian supports the bisexual community. Being supportive as an ally means being honest with queer people, showing and sharing one's acceptance and support of one's fellow human beings, standing up against discrimination and prejudices when it comes to queer people, encouraging queers in their sexual orientation or gender identity and letting one's daily decisions be influenced by active support for queer people.[1]

Cis(-gender) = „Cis" means that a person lives and identifies with the sex that they were assigned at birth. Being cis-gender is considered as "norm" contrary to trans*gender and other gender identities (e.g. non-binary).[2]

Clone Club (as Fandom) = Cosima Niehaus names the group of cloned women and their supporters "Clone Club".[3] The fan base of *Orphan Black* undertook this description to call their fandom (cf. "Fan and Fandom") "Clone Club". This term is also used by creators and actors from the series to address its fandom.[4]

Cophine = The lesbian couple Cosima Niehaus and Delphine Cormier from the series *Orphan Black* is called „Cophine". It is a pop culture trend which combines the first names of a couple.[5]

Fan and Fandom = Fans are an active audience, who spend much money and energy on interpreting and investigating the meaning of their favourite media. Fans are consumers, who express their identity through practice. Sometimes fans create themselves out of inspiration for their favourite medial interest (e.g. videos, self-written texts, paintings and discussions in forums). Fandom is an association of fans with the same interest. Fandoms build communities in which fans interact with each other. Fandom involves a complex, creative and meaningful engagement with the media.[6]

Feminism = Feminism is a form of policy, the purpose of which is to transform the unequal relations of power between men and women [author's note: and other genders/non-genders]. Feminist theories aim to explain why there are inequalities between men and women [author's note: and other genders/non-genders] and feminists use those explanations to fight inequality.[7]

Heteronormativity/heteronormative = "The term heteronormativity is used to explain how society is organized around the assumption that everyone is – and should be – heterosexual."[8] Most of the time heterosexuality is defined as "normal" and homosexuality as "other". Media often represents heterosexuality as the only way to be "normal". While heterosexuality is constructed as norm, non-heterosexuals are constructed as "other". There is a long history in which non-heterosexual identities are represented as abnormal or threat or problem to heterosexuality. There is an increase in acceptance for other sexualities in many countries, but heteronormativity in media makes non-heterosexuals often invisible and not represented.[9] [author's note: Heteronormativity brings stereotyping assumptions about heterosexuality as well.

Heterosexual people and – much more – non-heterosexual people suffer from heteronormativity.]

LGBTQIA+(-community),also often LGBT(-community) = LGBTQIA+ is an acronym and stands for *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, *trans**, *queer, inter, ace (asexual/aromantic)* and *"+"*, which stands for people beyond the mentioned descriptions [author's note: mostly not heterosexual and/or cis-gendered]. This shortcut is used to denominate the community of those who's sexual and gender identities have similar political and social concerns. This term does not describe all non-heteronormative identities and is sometimes used with less letters, e.g. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans*)[10]

Queer/Queerness = people who experience fluidity in their sexuality or gender call themselves queer. Therefore they do not strictly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans*.[11] Queer is also used as synonym for LGBTQIA+. Consequently it is an umbrella term for non-heterosexual and/or not-cisgender identities. All humans who do not correlate with the norm of society in gender and sexuality (cf. "heteronormativity) are described as queer.[12] [author's note: in thus meanings *queer* will be used in this thesis.]

Representation/to represent = Media offers representation to the world. These representations form how humans understand and experience the world. Representation constructs reality. People can only know and make sense out of the world they live in if there are various forms of representation. Representation does not simply reflect and misinterpret reality but constructs what we understand as reality.[13] Medial representation influences the meaning and shaping of one's own identity and also how we think about those of other people. Meaning is implied through representation; for example what it means to be a

man or a woman. Medial representations of identity are very powerful because they can obstruct and limit how people think about themselves and others.[14]

Stereotype/stereotyping = stereotyping is reducing people to a few, easy and essential characteristics, which are represented. This excludes all that does not belong. Stereotyped identities seem to be unchangeable and fixed. Stereotyping limits the way we perceive groups of people because they are only represented in limited ways.[15]

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[1] Cf. URL: http://www.hrc.org/blog/how-to-be-an-lgbt-ally [Date: 11.04.2017]

[2] Cf. URL: http://queer-at-school.de/?page_id=88 [Date: 20.04.2017]

[3] Cf. Orphan Black: Season 1, "Natural Selection", 2013, TC: 00:01:03 – 00:04:45

[4] Cf. Orphan Black: Season 2, Extras, "A Look Inside", TC: 00:11:01 - 00:11:27

[5] Cf. URL: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=cophine [Date: 11.04.2017]

[6] Cf. Hollows, Joanne: Media Studiep. A Complete Introduction, Teach Yourself Books, London, 2016, p. 264 (Method of citation: Media Studies)

[7] Cf. Media Studies, p. 197

[8] Media Studies, p. 181

[9] Cf. Media Studies, p. 181f

[10] Cf. URL: http://www.liberateyourself.co.uk/lgbtq/what-is-lgbtq/ [Date: 11.04.2017]

[11] Cf. URL: http://www.liberateyourself.co.uk/lgbtq/what-is-lgbtq/ [Date: 11.04.2017]

[12] Cf. URL: http://queer-lexikon.net/doku.php?id=queer:queer&do= [Date: 11.04.2017]

[13] Cf. Media Studies, p. 124f

[14] Cf. Media Studies, p. 178

[15] Cf. Media Studies, p. 183f

Register of Illustrations

Illustration 15 (from the left to the right) Helena, Sarah, Felix, Alison (in the back) und Cosima dance together

Illustration 16 Tatiana takes a stand for the LGBTQIA+ community: "I'm Tatiana Maslany and I got your back."

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1 Introduction

"Aktuell leben homosexuelle Frauen [...] in einer Gesellschaft, die immer noch von Spuren aus der Vergangenheit gezeichnet ist, in welcher weibliche Homosexualität ignoriert oder abgelehnt wurde. Es gibt allerdings eine Tendenz zur zunehmenden Gleichberechtigung, sowohl auf rechtlicher, als auch auf lebensqualitativer Ebene. Der signifikante Mangel an Quellen über das Thema Homosexualität lässt sich einerseits mit Desinteresse in der Gesellschaft erklären und andererseits mit öffentlicher Ablehnung, die zur Folge hat, dass homosexuelle Frauen sich bevorzugt im Verborgenen aufhalten."[16]

(Translation: "Currently homosexual women live in a society, which is still marked by the past, in which female homosexuality was ignored and refused. However, there is a tendency of increasing equality in law and quality of life. The significant lack of sources about homosexuality is caused by disinterest in society on the one hand and by public rejection on the other hand, which results in homosexual women preferring to live in secrecy.")

1.1 Approaching the subject

Female homosexuality is still ignored and refused in society - even if there are increasing changes - as illustrated in the previous quote. The subject "homosexual women" also includes the subject "femininity". In order to explain the problematic representation in film of female homosexuality

it is important to clarify that cinematic portrayal of female characters is extremely low.[17] Therefore it also reduces the possibility to represent homosexuality and femininity in combination.

Open-mindedness about own sexual and gender identity grew increasingly in the last few years.[18] This provides a much greater audience for cinematic queerness. Medial representation provides an opportunity to educate queer as well as non-queer people and expand their awareness and understanding of reality. (cf. term definition "Representation"). The LGBTQIA+ community suffers from lacking portrayal or rather less divers and qualitatively negative cinematic representation of LGBTQIA+ characters including whitewashing (rare to none portrayal of BIPoC). "Leaving LGBT[QIA+] people out of the picture — or including them only as a punchline — keeps old prejudices alive and creates an unsafe environment, not only [...] in America, but around the world where most audiences see these depictions."[19] Therefore influence on the LGBTQIA+ community and their reputation is intensively dependent on medial representation and affected by influence and significance. This significance for the LGBTQIA+ community with prior analysis of female homosexuality and femininity in the television series *Orphan Black* with special attention to the lesbian character Cosima Niehaus, should lead to knowledge and expansion of consciousness for queer representation.

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16 Tröstl, Stefanie: Femmes fatales und Kesse Väter. Über weibliche Homosexualität im Spielfilm, Diplomica Verlag GmbH, Hamburg, 2012, p.30f (Method of citation: Femmes fatales)

17 Cf. URL: http://www.indiewire.com/2015/02/sorry-ladies-study-on-women-in-film-and-television-confirms-the-worst-65220/ [Date: 20.04.2017]

18 Cf. URL: https://broadly.vice.com/en_us/article/teens-these-days-are-queer-af-new-study-says [Date: 20.04.2017]

19   URL: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/glaad-studio-responsibility-index_us_572772dce4b0b49df6abc868 [Date: 20.04.2017]