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1. Introduction: Versions of Femininity and Masculinity on the Road

To begin with, this thesis shall shed light on the delicately interrelated phenomena of identity construction and gender representation in the genre of the road movie as exemplified by two recent American movies. Issuing the claim that the road can be seen as a site whereon identity is constantly challenged and negotiated, this thesis shall investigate representations of masculinity and femininity along with the focus on how identity is constructed within narratives on the road. The inspiration for this investigation dates back to the 1990s, when a road movie featuring two female protagonists questioned heteronormative Hollywood narratives along with the validity of hierarchically organized binary oppositions. When Ridley Scott's film *Thelma and Louise* was released in 1991, it was hailed as being subversive as for the first time on the big screen, female characters were featured as active protagonists on the road. This provocative disruption of the originally male-dominated genre (Eraso 63) led to much controversy as to whether *Thelma and Louise* could be read as an empowerment of women on the one hand or an attack on feminist ideals on the other (Cooper 278-279).

More than 20 years later, it seems apt to investigate more recent road movies in order to analyze their feminist or masculinist elements respectively. Therefore, I will scrutinize constructions of femininity and masculinity as well as the depiction of gendered performances in two Hollywood road movies of the 21st century: *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), directed by George Miller, and *Transamerica* (2005), directed by Duncan Trucker. These two very different films have been chosen to portray both ends of the spectrum, with *Mad Max* depicting a patriarchal world and *Transamerica* calling into question gendered hierarchies.

In the first part of this thesis, I will pursue the feminist enterprise of “[...] exposing [...] the mechanisms of patriarchy [...]” (Barry 117) in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, which has arguably been praised for its strong presentation of the dissident female character Furiosa. Thus, I want to shed light on how “[...] several key tenets of traditional masculinity” are attacked (Gallagher 52) in the movie. However, it can simultaneously be argued that “[t]here is still a long way to walk [...]” on the path to gender equality (Bampatzimopoulos 217) as several scenes prove that gender dichotomies are still re-enacted rather than transgressed. Additionally, I will illustrate how the two main characters Furiosa and Max can be said to impersonate the contrasting, yet interrelated

concepts of “visionary ambition” and “restless sensuality” (Laderman 59-60) and explain how these two notions serve to affirm or undermine constructions of femininity and masculinity in the film. Said notions shall be examined by means of analyzing the main characters as well as the latent use of binary oppositions in *Mad Max*. Basically, it is my aim to give examples of traditional ideas of gender being questioned in some scenes, while also showing how they are affirmed in other scenes in said movie.

The second part of my thesis is dedicated to *Transamerica*, which superficially conforms to the conventions of the subgenre of the “buddy movie,” with the difference being that gender conventions are questioned and partly deconstructed since the protagonist Bree/Stanley is transsexual. The fact that actress Felicity Huffman, best known from *Desperate Housewives*, had been cast to portray a trans woman, arguably “[...] contributes to [the] trans/romance dilemma [...]” of the movie as the audience is fully aware that Bree has never been male (Abbott 38). Furthermore, the analysis of this movie will focus on the performative aspect of clothes as a way of constructing distinct gendered identities: while on the road, a leitmotif turns out to be the swapping, laying off, collecting and putting on of gendered accessories (like a cowboy hat, a cap etc.). Therefore, I will analyze the movie’s iconography “[...] including settings, costumes, actors/characters [and] characteristic props [...]” (Jensen 3) in order to lay bare the movie’s stance on gendered performances and gendered hierarchies.

However, before the primary texts shall be subjected to closer scrutiny, I will further elaborate on methodologies employed as epistemological lenses. Mainly, gender studies and psychoanalytic theory constitute the theoretical background. As for psychoanalytic theory, Lacan’s model of the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order shall be introduced to explain how gender differences (Man is associated with the Symbolic Order, while Woman is conventionally tied to the Imaginary) are portrayed. Furthermore, Freudian symbolism will be explored to show in what ways repeated motifs and patterns are employed to conjure up traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. A discussion of the terms “sex” and “gender” will make it obvious how “[femininity] and masculinity are terms that are added to the biologically determined sex class of the individual” (Denzin 200). Especially in *Transamerica*, I will focus more closely on Butler’s concept of performativity as a means of constructing and deconstructing one’s identity. Therefore, I will necessarily also touch upon transgender studies, which “[...] defines itself against identity, offering a challenge to the perceived stability of the two-gender system” (Love 172). These theories will provide fertile soil for an analysis of *Transamerica* by dint of

their “[...] critical interrogation of and resistance to gender and sexual norms” (Love 172).

In order to grasp the texts’ often contradictory potential, it will be necessary to apply a certain degree of eclecticism, meaning that ideas forwarded not only in feminist or psychoanalytical theory, but also distinct concepts developed in (post)structuralism (such as binary oppositions) or postmodernism (e.g. pastiche) will be adapted to the purposes of my research.

In sum, this thesis sets out to examine distinct portrayals of femininity and masculinity as well as deviant sexualities in a predominantly white, heteronormative society. Focusing on the two road movies *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Transamerica*, I want to illustrate ways in which issues like “identity” or “performance” are constantly questioned and renegotiated on a both spatial and metaphorical journey. While the former movie fosters conventional associations (Women should be safely contained within the interior, while Men dominate the road) on the one hand and simultaneously questions those via the portrayals of the ambiguous characters Max and Furiosa on the other hand, the latter explores the subversive potential of performativity as the transsexual protagonist consciously relies on clichés to “[...] deliberately perform her female gender [...]” (Jensen 3). Referring mainly to psychoanalytic theory and gender studies, I want to analyze gender roles and gendered performance in both movies with a view to how patriarchy can possibly be challenged.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Psychoanalytic Theory

The first part of this thesis introduces methodologies to be used as epistemological lenses. These shall serve as tools to help analyze key scenes in the films under scrutiny, which will be examined in chapters four and five of this thesis. Psychoanalytic theory is pivotal for this thesis as it is understood as “[...] a theory and practice of interpretation directed to making sense of otherwise unconscious sexual desire, sexual pleasure, and the gender identities of human beings” (Elliot 165). This understanding is crucial to my enterprise since large parts of the readings of *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Transamerica* focus on gendered identities and how they are displayed differently in the films under consideration. Though I will not primarily focus on the sexual aspect, psychoanalytic theory helps uncover hidden meanings in several scenes in the movies under consideration. Viewing “[...] human subjects as psychic entities inscribed in language, discourse, and social relationships [...]” (165) will certainly shed new light on dialogues and social interactions presented in both *Mad Max* and *Transamerica*. While psychoanalytic theory arguably offers constructs of femininity and masculinity that are essential for analyzing role relationships in *Mad Max*, it is also claimed to have a “[...] history of coercive hetero-normatization and pathologization of non-normative sexualities and genders” (Gherovici 3) which will provide fertile soil for criticism when elaborating on gender performance in *Transamerica*¹.

Freudian symbolism and the psychical apparatus in this paper mainly show how prevalent – and essentialist – notions of femininity and masculinity are forwarded via “[...] attributing sexual connotations to objects [...]” (Barry 94). A critique of Freud “[...] as a prime source of the patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight” (Barry 125) as well as alternative concepts to “masculinity” and “femininity” will be appended. Subsequently, I devote part of the theoretical introduction to psychoanalytic theory as expounded by Jacques Lacan, focusing on his concepts of the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage, the Symbolic Order and the Real, which shall strengthen possible interpretations

¹ “*Heteronormativity* refers to a system in which sexual conduct and kinship relations are organized in such a way that a specific form of heterosexuality becomes the culturally accepted “natural” order. Thus biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and expression and normative gender roles are aligned in such a way that a dominant view on sexual and gender relations, identities, and expressions is produced” (Wieringa 210; emphasis in the original). It is specifically this alleged “natural” order that is attacked as a key tenet of psychoanalytic theory.

forwarded in the practical part of my thesis. Thirdly, Judith Butler's critique of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity shall be introduced. Referring to Simone de Beauvoir, Butler claims that one does not only "become woman," but also that "[...] one becomes one's gender". Rejecting traditional notions of dyadic pairs like man/woman, male/female, Butler also seeks to overcome that traditional sex/gender binary by viewing gender as a performative practice embedded in a particular place and time (O'Shea 4).

2.1.1 Sigmund Freud

Above all, psychoanalytic theory as conceived by Sigmund Freud shall only be outlined so far as it can be deemed relevant to the purpose of the movies' analyses. Thus, I want to adumbrate the ways in which repeated patterns and motifs are used to construct traditional ideas about femininity and masculinity.

Basically, Freud was of the opinion that every symbol encountered in "[...] dreams, myths, fairy tales, folklore [...]" (Petocz 28) could be traced back to a *repressed* phallic or female symbol respectively². While phallic symbols would be "[...] towers and ladders, for instance [...]" (Barry 94), that is, long and erect objects with the power to penetrate, female symbols could be detected in hollow objects that might be penetrated or filled by something else (Landry 95). Notably, not only man-made objects like the ones already enlisted were invested with meaning, also natural or topographic features like mountains or valleys could serve that purpose (Landry 95-96). Furthermore, it is crucial to point out that said symbols occurring in dreams or narratives denote *repressed content* since "[...] dreams symbolically picture waking-life wishes such as sexual or aggressive urges [...]" that "[...] are unacceptable, and so the waking, conscious mind represses them" (Malinowski 118). Such seemingly inadequate desires or wishes are commonly "[...] forced out of conscious awareness and into the realm of the unconscious" (Barry 92-93).

In sum, one could argue that according to Freud, dream symbols or elements found in narratives replace other repressed elements, that could be translated back to give meaning to an otherwise unintelligible message (Petocz 57). Distinguishing between the latent and the manifest dream content (Freud, *Unbehagen* 31), one could come to a conclusion by decoding manifest symbols and thus discovering the actual latent meaning (Schallmayer

² For the purposes of this thesis I am extending the scope of myths and fairy tales and use the films I have selected as cultural narratives to analyze constructions of femininity and masculinity in today's society.

14). Hence dreams can be viewed as an “[...] untapped resource, able to provide greater insight into one’s waking life [...]” (Malinowski 121). However, those who find themselves unable to uncover the meaning of such repressed contents are forced to live through a certain experience again and again until they come to terms with either past traumatic events or desires considered inappropriate. This is what Freud called “repetition compulsion” (Freud, *Lustprinzip* 228).

In respect to repressed content it may be useful to introduce Freud’s conception of the psychic apparatus as well. Firstly, Freud created a model of the psyche consisting of two parts; the ego and the id³. The id is the first part that a human knows and the “[...] source of our bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses; particularly our sexual and aggressive drives” (Siegfried 1)⁴. It is governed by primordial drives and the pleasure principle (Freud, *Unbehagen* 7). Freud speaks of two basic impulses, Eros and Thanatos, the life instinct and the death drive, that may complement or contradict each other (Barry 93). Every human decision or deed could be traced back to a synthesis or antagonism of Eros and Thanatos (Freud, *Unbehagen* 11). In the process of socialization, the ego develops as a kind of mediator between basic impulses and requirements imposed on us by society (7) to make sure that the “[...] impulses of the Id are expressed in a way that is acceptable to the real world” (Siegfried 1). Contrary to the id, the ego is ruled by the reality principle (Freud, *Ego* 25) and thus pivotal to making sense of our surroundings (Siegfried 2)⁵.

One ought not, however, think of ego and id as two completely separate parts. Freud maintains that “[the] ego is not sharply separated from the id; its lower portion merges into it” and describes this dialectical relationship further by saying that “[...] the repressed merges into the id as well, and is merely a part of it. The repressed is only cut off sharply

³ The following quotation contains a very apt description of the nature and the functions of ego and id respectively: “It is easy to see that the ego is that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world [...] Moreover, the ego seeks to bring the influence of the external world to bear upon the id and its tendencies, and endeavours [sic] to substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle which reigns unrestrictedly in the id. The ego represents what may be called reason and common sense, in contrast to the id, which contains the passions”. (Freud, *Ego* 25). Furthermore, Freud likens the ego to a rider on horseback – the id – “[...] who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse [...]” (25).

⁴ Being ruled by the pleasure principle, the Id demands “[...] immediate gratification of all needs, wants, and desires”. As these demands cannot always be met, psychological tension arises. Freud suggested masturbation as a means to relieve this tension (Siegfried 1).

⁵ “Fundamentally, the Ego has a set of psychic functions able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. It organizes thoughts and makes sense of the world. The Ego represents reason and common sense” (Siegfried 2).

from the ego by the resistances of repression [...]” (Freud, *Ego* 24). Thus, all that is not accepted by society is repressed and re-emerges in different shapes and guises in the id.

Coinciding with the phenomenon of the Oedipus complex, “[...] whereby [...] the male infant conceives the desire to eliminate the father and become the sexual partner of the mother” (Barry 93), the voice of the third instance of the psychic apparatus, the super-ego, gains importance⁶. Thus, the child realizes that it is inappropriate, if not deviant, to sexually desire one’s own mother or father (Freud, *Ego* 34). The super-ego can be considered a moral instance representing “[...] an energetic reaction-formation against [the] choices [...]” of the id (34)⁷. It can be claimed that id and super-ego act as antagonists as the latter “[...] criticizes and prohibits ones [sic] drives, fantasies, feelings, and actions,” forever striving for perfection (Siegfried 2). The ego constantly works to mediate between id and super-ego (2). Choices made by the ego are appropriate if they meet the needs of id, super-ego and reality (Freud, *Unbehagen* 8)⁸. In sum, humans constantly have to keep a healthy balance between pleasure and reality, internal wishes and external obligations, impulses and expectations, so as not to lose their psychic integrities.

2.1.2 “Castrated, Penisless Men” – Understanding Freud’s Framework

Sigmund Freud’s statements regarding the differences between men and women have been met with heavy criticism, especially by French feminists whose concern it was to deconstruct central concepts like “woman” or “femininity”, thereby referring to post-structuralist and psychoanalytic theory (Barry 120). Feminists viewed concepts like “femininity” as artificial categories produced within a patriarchal discourse so as to underline and secure male prowess. Stripped of such a socio-historically informed discourse, said concepts would have no inherent meaning at all (Griffin Crowder 118). Essentially, their main concern was to make it clear that “[...] people should not suffer disadvantage by dint of belonging to a particular gender [...]” (Gheaus 167) and to achieve equality on all levels, whether it be equal payment, equal representation in

⁶ It has to be mentioned at this point that not only boys, but also girls experience the Oedipus complex: “[...] the outcome of the Oedipus attitude in a little girl may be an intensification of her identification with her mother [...] a result which will fix the child’s feminine character” (Freud, *Ego* 32).

⁷ Freud even goes so far as to claim that the super-ego (or ‘ego ideal’) “[...] answers to everything that is expected of the higher nature of man” and “[...] contains the germ from which all *religions* have evolved” (*Ego* 37; emphasis mine).

⁸ “Eine Handlung des Ichs ist dann korrekt, wenn sie gleichzeitig den Anforderungen des Es, des Über-Ichs und der Realität genügt, also deren Ansprüche zu versöhnen weiß“ (Freud, *Unbehagen* 8) in the original.

professional life or equality in the domestic sphere conventionally associated with women (176).

The primary concern within the feminist agenda was to make evident how “[...] we do not always think about [...] women and men, in the most helpful way” (Dimen 303), thereby exposing the mechanisms producing gender stereotypes within psychoanalytic theory. Freud forwarded an intricate image of womanhood that only reinforced prevailing clichés about the inferiority of women. For him, basically, “[w]omen were castrated, penisless men who suffered from penis envy and morally inferior weak superegos” (Dimen 304). Finding their one and only reward in motherhood, whereby the baby would symbolically compensate the missing penis, “woman” was allotted the rigidly framed role of an “[...] inferior being [...]” (304). Feminists like Karen Horney or Clara Thompson declared this misogynist mind-set to be the very source from which discrimination may spring (305) and particularly found fault with the perpetuation of women’s oppression that Freud’s writings would bolster (Williams 131). Indeed, women could only be labelled “inferior” in so far as they were less politically and economically powerful than men, and not because of mere anatomical differences (Dimen 305)⁹. However, it has to be stated that Freud himself claimed that “femininity” and “masculinity” had to be “[...] achieved [...]” (Dimen 304), from which one can deduce that those concepts are not inherent to women and men respectively.

However, not all feminists discarded Freud’s framework as they felt it could be useful in shedding “[...] light on the origins of gender inequality” (Williams 131)¹⁰. Notably, sociologist and psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell defended Freud by making clear that he didn’t “[...] present the feminine as something simply ‘given and natural’ [...],” but as something “[...] produced and constructed [...]” (Barry 125). Thus, it became ever more obvious that the supposedly natural differences between men and women proved to be

⁹ That this is unfortunately valid today is demonstrated in Anca Gheaus’ article on gender from 2015 wherein she elaborates on the manifold ways in which women are still discriminated: “We live in societies that are structured by gender in various ways: most obviously, we inherit a tradition of differential treatment of women and men, which bestowed numerous political, economic and social privileges on the latter”; “Yet, they [women] tend to be *underrepresented in politics* – particularly at the top levels [...]”; “They [Women] also tend to be more affected by poverty than men are and *receive less pay*; they are the victims of most rapes and domestic violence and do most of the housework and childrearing [...]”; “[...] their bodies are *objectified* through pornography and commodified through prostitution to a much larger extent than men’s” (167); “To bring men into care as full partners has been on the feminist agenda at least since the late 1960s, and in spite of some degree of change it still sounds *utopian*” (170); emphasis mine.

¹⁰ “Freud may have been a sexist, but the theory he began can provide feminist sociologists with valuable tools for understanding the links between gender identity and male domination” (Williams 131).

nothing but historical constructs, established with the sole purpose of securing male hegemony (Cameron 23). It follows then that there is no such thing as “femininity” or “masculinity”: “[the] sexually gendered human being [...] is a social, economic, and historic construction, built up out of the patriarchal cultural myths that have been articulated in [...] popular culture for the last two hundred years” (Denzin 201). The enterprise of deconstructing male dominance culminated in the proposition of the concept of “gender” meant to challenge the notion of “sex”. While sex is conventionally used to refer to biological differences between men and women (Weeks 101), gender should free male or female bodies from adjectives like “masculine” or “feminine” respectively. In other words, the “[...] distinction between sex and gender has rested on the *ascribed* status of the former and the *achieved* status of the latter” (West and Fenstermaker 153; emphasis mine). Thus, gender can be understood as a role to be learned during socialization and put on for various purposes (154). Indeed, by calling into question concepts like “femininity,” “identity” and “sex,” French feminism strongly advocates the idea of a space of female opposition to the prevalent male order¹¹.

2.1.3 Jacques Lacan

The controversial French psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan partly returned to Freudian psychoanalysis (Barry 104), taking up notions expounded by Freud and appropriating or criticizing them respectively. Calling himself a “[...] Freudian [...],” Lacan revised “[...] Freud’s work on [...] infant sexuality [...]” by introducing linguistic terminology (Ghosh 85).

Most importantly, Lacan drew attention to the constructedness of notions like “femininity” and “masculinity”, thus unhinging sexuality from anatomy:

While Freud took reproductive genitality as the ideal model of sexuality, Lacan (1998) rejected this norm in claiming that there is no sexual relation as such but that sexuality comes to attach itself to relations of love and gender identity that are socially constructed. Asserting a complex relationship between body and psyche, Lacanian theorists emphasize the instability and uncertainty of sexual identity, arguing that the normalizing constructions of gender imposed by the social must be understood as something other than sexual difference. (Elliot 166)¹²

Lacan most prominently contributed to psychoanalytic theory by creating the models of the Mirror Stage and the Three Orders; the Imaginary, the Real, and the Symbolic Order.

¹¹ The discussion of the instability of identity as well as the increasingly fuzzy boundaries of the concepts sex and gender will be taken up in chapter 2.2 revolving around Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity”.

¹² see chapter 2.2

Said concepts, as well as the leitmotifs of desire and loss constitute the most essential points in the theory part and will be explained in greater detail. Lacanian psychoanalysis proves to be pivotal to this paper as both primary texts, *Mad Max* and *Transamerica*, seem to be informed by motifs like (symbolic) castration, and shaped by feelings like alienation, desire and loss (Bendle 73). Space and place in said movies can be viewed to bear traces of the Imaginary, the Symbolic Order and irrational dreams of the Real. Being able to draw on psychoanalytic theory may shed new light on the films' prevalent structures as well as on character development and gendered hierarchies.

2.1.3.1 The Three Orders

The importance of Jacques Lacan's work lies in both his ability to "[...] draw together distinct strands of thought" (Schallmayer 16) and his profound influence on post-structuralism, film theory or literary theory (Barry 104) which is undoubtedly central to this paper. Similar to Sigmund Freud, Lacan focused on the unconscious; however, he likened it to language, whereas Freudian psychiatry could be understood much rather as a "[...] verbal science" (Barry 106). Where Freud saw "polymorphous perversity" governing childhood, Lacan suggested "order" to be one thing structuring the infant's world even before birth (Althusser 27-28). Lacan initially proposed a two-part model consisting of Imaginary and Symbolic Order respectively, both of which are deeply informed by structures of language. The Mirror Stage initiates the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order, allowing for "[...] the subject's further development [to take] its course" (Olivier 3). This shift goes hand in hand with socialization and the acquisition of language (Millard 156). Although it may seem that these orders delineate chronological stages, they should rather be seen as a "[...] Borromean knot [...] of strength in unity" (Bailly ch.6), meaning that these three realms cannot function independently of one another¹³.

Prior to developing a sense of self and consciousness, the child exists in what Lacan labels the Imaginary, a "[...] sphere of images [...]" (Olivier 3); a space wherein the infant does not distinguish "[...] between self and Other [...]" (Barry 109) and perceives of itself as yet "one" with the world (Millard 156). The Imaginary can thus be understood as "[...]"

¹³ It is simply not possible to think of the Imaginary, the Mirror Stage and the Symbolic Order as chronological, successive stages as especially in psychoanalytic theory, "[t]he trouble with chronology is [...] that the enunciation driven out through the door returns through the window [...]" (Soler 4). This is exactly why the comparison with the Borromean knot has been established, to reiterate that "[...] the three rings of string, representing the [...] Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real, are knotted as three in such a way that if any one of them is cut the knot is undone" (8).

the realm of the senses in that it houses the conceptions that issue directly from sensorial perception [...]” (Bailly ch.6), the most important of which being sight. By means of seeing, the baby recognizes its mother, who serves as the ideal and only identification figure (Barry 109) or the “first signifier” (Bailly ch.6)¹⁴. As much as the child cannot yet experience itself as a unified being, it cannot perceive the mother as a separate entity (Widmer 30). Thus, the infant lives in a kind of symbiosis with the mother, ruled by the belief that each party perfectly complements the other (Pluth 73). The mother epitomizes the object of love and desire and is only characterized by her presence or absence for the child (Althusser 26).

Mental processes come into play when the baby finally recognizes its body, and its image, in the mirror (Hivernel 509). At the age between six and eighteen months (Barry 109), the child recognizes its reflection and “[...] starts to build up its ego [...]” (Bailly ch.6) so that it ultimately understands itself as a being that is separate from the rest of the world. This sudden and joyful “[...] discovery of the self [...]” (Hivernel 510) is often accompanied by “[j]ubilatory gestures and facial expressions [...]” constituting an “Aha-Erlebnis” (Lacan, *Schriften I* 63) and is likely to take part with an adult around (Hivernel 510). This adult is usually the mother as the insecure child wishes for a confirmation of what it is currently experiencing (Widmer 28), which is conventionally granted by the mother’s returning of the gaze (Millard 156). The Imaginary is eventually dismantled as an illusion and replaced by the illusion of wholeness that the mirror suggests as the baby only projects “[...] *ideas* upon the object in the mirror” (Bailly ch.6; emphasis mine). Picturing itself as complete and perfect (Widmer 28) allows for a compensation of the baby’s defects (Butler, *Bodies* 74-75). The relationship with the object in the mirror is primarily informed by narcissism and based upon dualities (as much as the baby now recognizes the *duality of self and other*) such as “[...] like and dislike, love and hate, admiration and disdain, attraction and disgust [...]” (Bailly ch.6)¹⁵. It is hence via the Mirror Stage that the infant is familiarized with the primal concepts of socialization¹⁶.

¹⁴ This analysis made by Bailly is questionable in so far as it focuses on the development of sight to recognize the mother; while it has been already proven that hearing and smelling are developed prior to seeing. Thus, the baby would recognize its mother by her sound or smell before it can actually see her.

¹⁵ “Lacan points out the fundamental place of narcissism in the formation of the I – the seeing oneself as an image, and the falling in love with that image” (Hivernel 510).

¹⁶ Notably, Olivier points out that not only the image in the mirror, but also reaffirming gazes or statements uttered by the parents advance the development of the subject: “It should be remembered that this need not literally be a *mirror-image* – a reflection of one’s face and figure on the surface of a lake or in window fulfills the same purpose, as does a parent’s gaze or remark reflecting something about one’s body, for

The Mirror Stage forwards delusional pictures about selfhood (Widmer 28), illusions of unity and wholeness once experienced in the Imaginary. It is thus that the recognition of the image in the mirror is unveiled to be a “[...] *misrecognition* [...]” (Olivier 3; emphasis in the original) as the promise of coherence proves to be a fallacy and hence leads to alienation (Olivier 3). With this shattering realization comes the faint hope to attain completion, a compensation for the lost union with the mother, in language (Hopf 32). As notions of alienation and lack fester (Barry 109), the child slowly understands that “[...] not only the mother, but also the father can impersonate an instance granting security and wholeness” (Schallmayer 19). Thus, the child detaches itself from the maternal body (Widmer 35) and gradually moves into a new realm associated with language, logic and the figure of the father, the Symbolic¹⁷.

The function of the father in socialization and coming of age is where Freud and Lacan differ. At the age of about eighteen months, when the Mirror Stage is coming to an end, the child finds itself entangled in a triangular relationship with the mother and the father as outlined by Sigmund Freud (Grigg 40). According to Freud, the young child experiences the Oedipal conflict that is characterized by an irrational desire for the parent of the opposite sex accompanied by an unconscious longing to “kill” the parent of the same sex (Schallmayer 15-16). Thus, Freud defines sexual difference as a crucial factor to coming of age, while Lacan on the other hand views said sexual difference as a merely symbolic division that cannot be reasonably explained (Pluth 70). Hence it is the function of the father that sets Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories apart. While Freud strongly connects the father to processes of identification, Lacan takes this one step further and poses the question as to what “[...] a father [...]” actually is, thereby drawing attention to gaps in Freudian theory (Grigg 44). In sum, Freud adumbrates the father’s function as one to “[...] pacify, regulate, and sublimate the omnipotence of the figure of the mother [...],” thus regulating her and the child’s desire (45). Lacan, however, established the *symbolic father*, equated with the Name-of-the-Father, the father as a

instance: ‘Look at Jack’s (or Jill’s) strong little body!’, or: ‘With those legs you will run like the wind!’” (4; emphasis in the original).

¹⁷ It has to be said at this point that Lacan does not view the figure of the mother in an entirely positive light. Unconsciously, the mother wishes to transform her child into the phallus that she covets in order to compensate for her lack (Barzilai 2), thereby denying the child a subject position. By destroying the detrimental union of mother and child, the father saves the infant from the mother’s desire (Schallmayer 19) as imaginary pleasures need to be suppressed to develop an upright subject position (Butler, *Gender* 45). By severing the child from the maternal body, the father acts as a savior, ushering in the phase of language and socialization (Schallmayer 20).

signifier without a correlative representation (45; emphasis mine). It is the Name-of-the-Father that is central to the Symbolic Order.

Contrary to the Imaginary, the Symbolic Order is a term more closely connected to its common meaning. Derived from social anthropology, Lacan used the term “symbolic” to define structures “[...] [regulating] kinship, exchanges of goods, and marriages” prevalent in what he calls “primitive” societies (Bailly ch.6). The Symbolic can thus be understood as “man-made” as it surfaces in language, law, and society (ch.6). In other words, the Symbolic can be seen as the “[...] *unconscious organisation* of human society” (ch.6; emphasis in the original).

The child’s life is now entirely rewritten as it is confronted with a “[...] world of patriarchal order and logic” (Barry 109), replete with prohibitions, restraints and regulations. The infant needs to give up on Imaginary structures and adhere instead to the Law of the Father (Schallmayer 20). Where once was wholeness, the child experiences now “[...] lack and separation [...]” (Barry 109) as one of the many functions of language is to name and express that which is not there and replace it with linguistic signs. Moreover, language can be said to constitute one of the foundations of human existence (Berressem 27) and allows for the “[...] revision and renewal of the subject [...]” (Olivier 9)¹⁸. Equipped with the “gift” of language that the father has brought, the child is now able to voice desires, enter social exchanges (Millard 156) and also familiarize itself with sexual division (Apollon 118) as one more function of languages lies in allotting the ego a sexed – albeit arbitrarily sexed – position (Butler, *Bodies* 138).

Having already mentioned that the child strives for completeness in language, it has to be said that this will also prove to be a delusion. Other than providing answers and solutions, language merely serves to “[...] protect narcissism [...]” and “[...] negotiate desire” (Ragland-Sullivan 69). Linguistic units now replace the fluid sensations of the Imaginary. These notions can no longer be voiced within in the Symbolic Order and are therefore repressed (Schallmayer 21). Lacan sums up this bitter realization by saying that words inescapably operate as substitution for things (Miller 30)¹⁹. Scholars like Elaine Millard have likened the Imaginary to the female and the Symbolic Order to the male domain

¹⁸ “Lacan’s view was that the characteristic that sets human beings apart from other animals is language: we are speaking beings [...] If language is what makes us human, then the fundamentals of the human psyche should be found in language” (Bailly ch.6). Thus, he came to the conclusion that “the unconscious is structured like a language” (ch.6).

¹⁹ “Le mot est la meurtre de la chose” in the French original (Miller 30).

(156-157), which fosters an association of woman with feelings and elusive structures on the one and a correlation between man, language and authority on the other hand. This very delicate establishment of a dyadic pair will surface most prominently in key scenes of *Mad Max* which will be analyzed in a later part of the paper.

Having established that finding wholeness in the Symbolic Order turns out to be a fallacy as it is also inextricably linked to notions of lack is now crucial for understanding the Real. Subsequent to elaborating on the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order, Lacan established the concept of the Real as he always had the feeling that something was missing (Bailly ch.6). The Real can best be described as a place where inside and outside, imagination and reality, self and Other collapse (Pagel 59) as there are no borders and distinctions in the Real (Bailly ch.6). Describing the Real as “indescribable”, scholars have come up with highly poetic phrases about it being “[...] the featureless clay from which reality is fashioned by the Symbolic; it is the chaos from which the world came into being, by means of the Word” (ch.6). The Real is an impossible space without cracks or flaws, possibly only experienced before birth or in death as a return to the primordial state prior to the vague structures of the Imaginary (Berressem 23). Death may thus even become the “[...] ultimate object of desire [...]” (Moi, *Politics* 110) in order to elude separation and loss and find peace in a condition before the distinction between subject and object, self and other, presence and absence, surfaced. This further entails that *language* as a by-product of the Symbolic Order does not exist in this sphere as the Real withdraws itself from the constraints of order and logic. Strikingly though, that which cannot be put into words or is repressed in the Imaginary or the Symbolic, emerges erratically and irrationally in different guises in the Real (Grigg 22).

It has now become evident that the Imaginary and the Symbolic are inextricably bound together in a kind of “[...] continuous mutual interaction [...]” (Schallmayer 27). Although Imaginary structures precede the Symbolic ones, linguistic signs are already foreshadowed by the Imaginary as Imaginary structures are necessary to generate meaning at all (Schmitz 75). Admittedly, Imaginary structures are elusive; nevertheless, they are deemed “[...] indispensable for the foundation of language [...]” (Schallmayer 27). It thus follows that Imaginary and Symbolic complement and depend upon each other in a dialectical relation (Schmitz 75). Barry proposes a comparison of Imaginary and Symbolic to conscious and unconscious, describing the Symbolic as the “[...] orderly surface realm of strict distinctions and laid-down structures [...]” complemented by an omnipresent “[...] linguistic ‘unconscious’, a realm of floating signifiers, random

connections, improvisations, approximations, accidents, and ‘slippage’ [...]” (123-124). The Real comes into play in so far as it edges on both Imaginary and Symbolic, continuously disrupting them.

2.1.3.2 Semiotic and Symbolic

It has already been established that language assumes a pivotal role in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Philosopher and feminist Julia Kristeva appropriated the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order as expounded by Lacan and established the concept of the semiotic and the symbolic; the former being a space of provisional structures withdrawing definition, and the latter being a realm of authority and order (Barry 123). Furthermore, Kristeva established an analogy with the qualities of poetry and prose respectively, defining them as two connected aspects of language (Barry 123). While the symbolic (or the Symbolic Order) can be linked to phallogocentric language commonly used in prose, the semiotic (or Imaginary) bears characteristics of poetic language like gaps and broken language that surface when the Imaginary bleeds into the Symbolic. This is important in so far as it helps to understand and analyze (although no verbal texts are considered in this paper) how language and tokens of speech respectively are used in both *Mad Max* and *Transamerica* to characterize the films’ protagonists and their relationships with one another.

2.2 Performativity: Parody and Pastiche

Both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan have been subjected to heavy criticism by feminists for forwarding essentialist notions of the concepts of femininity and masculinity. One of the primary concerns within the feminist agenda was to grant women the possibility of occupying spaces of opposition outside the Symbolic Order (Müller 23) which offers only an extremely narrow range of roles available for women, and to raise awareness of how perceived differences between men and women were falsely said to root in ‘natural’ or given characteristics (West and Zimmerman 128). The aforementioned distinction between sex and gender (chapter 2.1.2) constituted one of the primary achievements for the liberation of women. However, even the border separating gender from sex cannot be considered a clear-cut one. The concept of sex itself, previously thought of as biologically given, was subjected to feminist scrutiny (Schallmayer 13) and theories assuming connections between women’s roles and her physique done away with (Butler, *Acts* 520). It has been pointed out that in everyday life, sex is usually merely deduced from gendered appearance and cannot be known for sure, since we actually do

not see a person's genitalia (West and Zimmerman 132)²⁰. West and Zimmerman suggest a further distinction between "sex," "sex category" and "gender," with "sex" being the "[...] socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males" at birth (127). "Sex category," on the other hand, is something that is acquired, more a "[p]lacement [...] achieved through application of the sex criteria [...]" presuming a person's sex in everyday life by "[...] [standing] proxy for it [...]" (127). As concerns the notion of "gender," it proves necessary at this point to refer to the work of the American philosopher Judith Butler. Best known for challenging straightforward notions of gender, Butler draws attention to gender as socio-culturally inscribed performance that is acquired, internalized and reproduced in our everyday lives. She asserts that by linking gender to notions of the feminine or the masculine respectively actually undermines its progressive nature:

Gender is not exactly what one "is" nor is it precisely what one "has". Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performative that gender assumes (Butler, *Undoing* 42).

For her, it is important to realize that gender exceeds traditional notions (43) and is not merely an alternative targeted at replacing the more steady and rigid concept of sex. But what is gender exactly? Butler defies all notions of gender being (a more or less stable) category, insisting that gender is always temporally produced in discourse. Likewise, she rejects the notion of "identity" in favor of a "[...] thoroughly historicized notion of the human subject," meaning that what makes one a "subject" always "[...] depends upon time and place" (Digeser 656). In the same way that "[...] the subject and gender [are] effects of social and political practices and discourses [...]," also the body is "[...] historically constituted" (656). This renders a categorization of bodies into two distinct sexes obsolete. Thus, there is also no innate quality that informs our identities; instead, the "[...] key to our identity is [...] found in the *performances* that are demanded of us and in the *deeds* that are done" (656, emphasis mine). Identity is thus constituted via the acquisition and repetition of acts targeted at creating "[...] the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler, *Acts* 519). It thus follows that gender is *performed*, and a performance might be changed according to situation and time (520). However, it needs

²⁰ West and Zimmerman refer to an incident narrated by Diane Margolis, describing her confusion as she was unable to deduce the biological sex of a salesperson she encountered. West and Zimmerman explain that such an ambiguity can be experienced as 'disturbing' since we are preconditioned to "[...] want to know the sex category of those around us (to see it at a glance, perhaps) [...]" and that furthermore, we already "[...] presume that others are displaying it for us, in as decisive a fashion as they can" (134).

to be addressed that we are not always free to choose our gendered performances the way we like to. “Gender recruitment,” as West and Zimmerman call it, already starts at a very early age when boys and girls are taught to be “[...] competently female or male, that is, learning to produce behavioral displays of one’s “essential” female or male identity” (142).

Also, Judith Butler draws attention to this darker angle of the sex/gender discussion and takes Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that we are not born woman, but become woman as a starting point (Chambers 51). While Beauvoir insists that sex serves as a natural distinction and gender is a socio-political construct, Butler goes one step further by ushering the claim that “[...] perhaps even sex cannot be ‘taken’ as natural”, thereby questioning everything once assumed to be “[...] ordinary, natural, unquestionable [...]” (51f)²¹. She goes on to say that also gender and by extension gendered performance is something we acquire in the process of socialization. The question that still remains unanswered is, “[...] *how* do we become our gender?” (Chambers 52, emphasis in the original). Butler explains that

[...] to become our gender is not simply to choose it, since gender itself remains controlled and constrained by norms, taboos and expectations, all of which originate outside of our selves – in society and in the political domain. (Chambers 52).

In sum, we are not always free to revise our (gendered) performances due to society’s expectations to “[...] stick to the well-rehearsed interpretations of our gender scripts” (Digeser 657). Justifiably, this assertion raises the question whether essentialist gender dichotomies can ever be overcome. It almost seems as if internalized norms would bar us from performing the way we want to; or, to be more precise, as if we did not know what we originally wanted as norms and expectations always preceded our actions²². Hence, we would be caught in an endless “[...] process of repetition that is structured by a complicated interplay of obligation and desire [...]” (Butler, *Performativity* xi).

However, there might be a solution to break out of this vicious cycle. If gendered roles rely on their continuous perpetuation, then one way of challenging their supposed

²¹ In this respect, Butler is indebted to Michel Foucault who has already pointed out “[...] that ‘sex itself’ does not exist, and that ‘sex’ always remains a product of particular discursive practices” (Chambers 61).

²² “The theory of gender performativity presupposes that norms are acting on us before we have a chance to act at all, and that when we do act, we recapitulate the norms that act upon us, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but still in relation to norms that precede us and exceed us. In other words, norms act on us, work upon us, and this kind of ‘being worked on’ makes its way into our own action” (Butler, *Performativity* xi).

legitimacy might be the refusal to endlessly reenact them. In her early work, Butler suggests “drag” to be exactly the kind of performance needed to “[...] put into question the normative assumption within the heterosexual hegemony that prescribes the performance or ‘being’ of femininity to a ‘real’ female body who must desire a male body inscribed with masculinity and vice versa” (Pettitt 2). Via drag performances, women and men can call attention to “[...] the arbitrary relation between sex and gender [...]” by refusing to display “feminine” or “masculine” attires respectively and thereby deconstruct sex as “[...] that raw material upon which gender is later inscribed” (Pettitt 2). However, Butler revises said idea in her later work and, reflecting about the ambivalence of drag performances, asks whether drag is truly subversive, or simply a “[...] vehicle by which the norms of hegemonic discourses are actually reconsolidated” (Pettitt 3). This is a justifiable question insofar as even drag performances rely on commonly known stereotypes of femininity and masculinity and thus might ultimately prove to be a mere reversal of roles within the same heteronormative system. Hence, drag performances ultimately limit themselves to be imitations, copies of an original, repetitions with variations (Pettitt 5).

While Peter Digeser argues that the truly subversive potential of drag lies in *parody*, Annie Pettitt opts for *pastiche*. Digeser points out that via parody, it might be possible to “[...] break apart the naturalized or reified conceptions of gender and sex” and endow our performances with subversive capital (Digeser 659)²³. Pettitt, however, counters that in order to be truly progressive, it is impossible as well as unreasonable to resort to mere parody, since parody “[...] is always dependent on a prior given [...]” and thus already assumes “[...] a certain notion of normalcy”, probably “[...] an already constituted notion of gender, class, race, or sexuality” (5). Fredric Jameson’s idea of “pastiche,” on the other hand, defies the idea that there actually is an original behind the imitation (that would be parody) and can thus be viewed as “[...] a radicalization of parody [...]” that “[...] reveals the impossibility of true imitation [...]” (Pettitt 6) as an original will forever be out of reach. Jameson attributes this to the fragmentation and alienation of the subject in the Postmodern era. In this respect, Pettitt argues that the notion of pastiche is much more apt to gender insofar as it “[...] challenges the very notion of an original, and therefore forces us to rethink the terms in which our subjectivity and identity are inscribed” (6).

²³ Butler particularly sees drag as a way of mocking and thus subverting traditional notions of gender and sex, doing away with the idea of a gendered identity (Digeser 660).

In sum, gender still can be claimed and used as a “[...] powerful ideological device [...]” (West and Zimmerman 147) insofar as it questions so-called “natural” traits of men and women ascribed to them by virtue of their belonging to a certain biological sex. However, also gender performances tend to fall into the trap of reenacting “[...] an already given notion of what counts as normal and what counts as abnormal” (Pettitt 5), or, as I would argue, of what counts as masculine/male, and what counts as feminine/female. Solely playing with gendered attributes or styles does not necessarily constitute a subversive act. Hence, “pastiche” proves to be better suited when aiming to question gendered performances than “parody”, for the latter still draws upon normative ideas of sexuality, while the former does not rely on an original to be copied or imitated.

The concept of gender performances will be applied as an analytical tool in the analysis of Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica*, which centers on the question of whether subversion of gendered identities can be achieved by performative subjects, or whether ultimately, gender stereotypes still prevail in American narratives. In this context, also Bree’s appearance and her interactions with the characters around her will be scrutinized with a view to determining how gender is produced in social discourses. A close examination of several key scenes shall reveal in how far the powerful paradigms of heteronormative sexuality can be challenged by applying the concepts of “parody” and/or “pastiche”. Prior to forwarding a filmic analysis, genre and conventions of the road movie shall be introduced so as to provide a stable frame for the following three chapters.

2.3 The Promise of the Road: Genre and Conventions of the Road Movie

Giving a full account of the history and development of the genre of the road movie is, undoubtedly, beyond the scope of this enterprise, one of the reasons being that it is hard to impossible to pin down this extremely diverse genre²⁴. Ganser et al. have already refuted attempts to arrive at a clear-cut definition that might only seem “arbitrary” and unable to provide legitimate definitions (4). Secondly, also the term “genre” is not easy to grasp as no one genre can be fixed in time, but constantly changes and evolves, always in dialogue with the very discourse that has brought it forward (Hurault-Paupe 2). This is seconded by Griggers’ claim that especially modern genres must be viewed as hybrid narratives “[...] produced by various cultural determinants and undergoing continuous variation” (129).

²⁴ “Since most genres are awash with road movies, any attempt to define the picaresque tale as a genre would prove too unwieldy” (Gehring 68).

I will therefore narrow my focus down to certain key elements found in road movies. Although it is almost impossible to define the genre of the road movie as such, there are certain tropes, or “chronotropes” defined by Bakhtin, that permeate those films we know as “road movies”²⁵. To pursue my investigation, I will map out some of said features, such as the road itself, the road movies’ protagonists, their motives, and the representation of space.

2.3.1 On the Road

It is often claimed by scholars that the road movie feeds upon literary journeys wrought in classical antiquity, preferably those displaying a quest-structure in which a hero has to prove himself worthy by undertaking various tasks. The hero conquers various obstacles and has transformed triumphantly at the end of his quest (Ireland 521-522). Laderman suggests Homer’s *Odyssey* to be the first road narrative, providing the audience with a tale which “[is] fantastic and often grotesque, [and which] stages a series of episodes and “detours” that lure him [the hero] from his goal [...]”. Notably, it “[...] emphasizes the *journey* over the destination [...]” (6; emphasis mine). Laderman furthers more historical examples such as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* or Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* to have paved the way for the road movies we know today (7). Griggers roots the genre in “[...] Greek Menippean satire and carnival [...]” (129).

All in all, it can be agreed upon that the “[...] journey of [the] protagonists [...]” of such stories forms the basis whereon the narrative is fleshed out (Ganser et al. 5). Although the focus is placed much more on the temporal movement (5), there is almost always a literal or metaphorical road to be travelled before a certain goal is reached or a metamorphosis can be completed. Critics have claimed that the road emerged as a trope central to road movies with the release of *Easy Rider* in 1969, considering “older” road movies merely as forerunners, which is highly problematic in my opinion. *Bonnie and Clyde* would thus be considered more of a “biopic” than a “road movie”, (Hurault-Paupe 2) which is tantamount to bluntly ignoring that the vehicle and the gangster couple’s journey constitute intrinsic elements of the narrative.

The road can be said to be an archetypal feature of not only road movies per se, but of American movies in general; having been invested with immense cultural value ever since

²⁵ “The chronotope operates on two important levels: first, as the means by which a text represents history; and second, as the relation between images of time and space in the text, out of which any representation of history must be constructed” (Ganser et al. 2).

the myth of the “frontier” was born (Cohan and Hark 1), which particularly applies to the American Southwest (Ireland 504)²⁶. Ireland points out that the sheer size of the United States proves to be of utmost importance to road movies, comparing the landscape to a “[...] vast blank slate on which artists can paint their visions” (504). The open spaces re- evoke the dangers of past times, making the stories told all the more interesting (505). Working as a metaphor for the protagonists’ inner journey (Gehring 67), the road not only works as a symbol of American culture, but it also represents “[...] a universal symbol of the course of life, the movement of desire, and the lure of both freedom and destiny” (Laderman 2). It is an as yet unknown promise of freedom and a better future that makes it a utopian trope, often deluding the characters into believing that escape is possible.

As a distinct place, the road marks a space where people – who often would never encounter one another if not on the road – meet and form temporal or permanent social relationships, and where the majority of events takes place (Montgomery 15). The action unfolds on the road, is sometimes halted, and may end there (*Thelma & Louise*) or continue (*Natural Born Killers*), thereby perpetuating the journey for the sake of being on the road. The reasons for hitting the road are as diverse as the genre itself, most of the time, however, the protagonists seek to escape an oppressive society, hoping to find liberation when travelling²⁷. This may go hand in hand with irrationally romanticizing nature, thus yielding to a deep yearning to escape conformist city life in order to find one’s true nature and return to man’s most natural state (Laderman 18). From a psychoanalytic perspective, this often repressed longing is only a manifestation of the more latent Oedipal wish to unite with the primal mother (considering the popular literary and visual motif of associating woman with nature); or, in Lacanian terms, a wish to evade patriarchal orderliness in order to experience unlimited bliss in the Real. Since neither is possible, “[...] taking to the road [becomes] a matter of life and death, freedom or bondage” (Laderman 187), as Thelma and Louise soberly realize at the edge of the Grand Canyon. The bitter discovery that neither escaping hegemony nor returning to their conventional lives is possible often leads to disillusionment or even the protagonists’ tragic deaths (e.g. *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Thelma & Louise*). As a metaphor for finding freedom though, the road works as a uniting or separating force for buddies, outlaws and

²⁶ This proposition is also forwarded in Ireland: “It may, then, be possible to say that the narrative framework of this story – the road trip – is responsible for the presence of themes which are supposed to be inherently American in nature” (533).

²⁷ “Characters hit the highway for a myriad of reasons, including escape, adventure, and assorted quests [...]” (Gehring 67).

lovers on the run alike: what they all seek is nothing but “[...] rebellion against conservative social norms” (Laderman 1). This ties in with the fact that road movies are more often than not to be read as critique against socio-political conventions²⁸.

As the action unfolds, the road may lead through cities (as in *Transamerica*), deserted landscapes (*Thelma & Louise*), or disappear altogether in the forging of fantastic spaces, as is done in the *Mad Max* movies. By showing vast landscapes (often the American mid-west), the classic road movie serves to reinforce the dyadic pair of nature (liberation) and culture (oppression). This rather essentialist distinction has disappeared in most modern road movies challenging clear-cut boundaries (as is done in e.g. *Transamerica*). Furthermore, open spaces recall the genre of the Western that has obviously influenced especially early road movies, thereby perpetuating the myth of the frontier (Laderman 14). On their journey, the protagonists might have to stop for various reasons at “[...] motels, diners, and gas stations” (Laderman 15) in conventional road movies, or other towns (as is the case in *Transamerica*), or simply in the middle of nowhere (Max and Furiosa do so involuntarily in *Mad Max: Fury Road*). The stops may either open up new possibilities (*Transamerica*’s protagonist Bree is able to come to terms with her past and partly reconciles with her family) or pose threats to the travelers (most stops prove detrimental for the protagonists in *Thelma & Louise*); or of course, do neither of these and merely work as an episode within a bigger narrative.

2.3.2 Characters

The protagonists of road movies are in most cases couples “[...] for rather practical reasons of story-telling” as “[t]wo people in the front seat of a vehicle make for easy classical framing and keep the dialogue going” (Cohan and Hark 8). Also, tension might be quite easily built up as the characters contradict or complement each other in various ways²⁹.

The couple might consist of two buddies – conventionally male ones – as in *Easy Rider* or *On the Road*, or be a heterosexual couple like in *It Happened One Night* or *You Only*

²⁸ Cohan and Hark state that the “[...] road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it was produced” (2), and also Laderman mentions Bonnie and Clyde as an allegorical tale of the 1960s “[...] countercultural political activism [...]” (50).

²⁹ Quite conventionally, Hollywood narratives seem to favour two contradictory characters, like the “[...] wild Dean [and] the more cerebral Sal [...]” (Cohan and Hark 7) in *On the Road* or the sensible Louise and the impulsive Thelma in *Thelma and Louise*.

*Live Once*³⁰. As the genre evolved, the heterosexual couple was transformed into criminal “Lovers on the Run,” epitomized by the eponymous couple of *Bonnie and Clyde* or Mickey and Mallory in *Natural Born Killers*. *Thelma & Louise* took this development one step further by featuring two female characters, who seemed somewhat of a mixture between buddies (they are explicitly introduced as friends) and lovers on the run due to their criminal actions such as murder and theft³¹. What most of them have in common, however, is that the protagonists are mostly outlaws despised by society, “[...] outsiders and antiheroes [...]” (Ireland 509), frequently penalized for their non-conformist behaviors and attitudes (*Easy Rider*, *Bonnie and Clyde*). Seen from a psychoanalytic angle, one might argue that such characters are wholly governed by the pleasure principle and fail to conform to the demands of the super-ego, which are tantamount to regulations imposed by society.

Naturally, these are not the only options open to character constellations in road movies. In *Mad Max*, Max and Furiosa are a heterosexual couple, but rather than lovers, although “on the run,” they become something like “buddies” in the course of their adventures. Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that they are never alone in their vehicle, but accompanied by Joe’s wives and Nux, and later on also the mothers. Bree and Toby, in *Transamerica*, are neither a “heterosexual couple,” nor “buddies,” but father – who at the end of the movie self-confidently completes the transition to a mother – and son, not without tragi-comically erotic moments though (Toby tries to seduce Bree, oblivious to the fact that Bree is his father). Other characters encountered on the road or at a stop might be befriended, cause trouble (which is all too often the case) or simply serve to drive the plot forward.

2.3.3 Space & Place

As the respective roles of space and place – and also the relevance of particular characters – will be explored in greater detail in the following chapters, this subchapter only briefly outlines some important notions about space and place in popular road narratives. That being said, the genre’s connection to the genre of the Western shall be recalled. The road becomes the new frontier, offering the individual new perspectives and the possibility to

³⁰ “The dominance of men in this genre is, undoubtedly, a reflection of traditional gender roles, especially outdated views about the nature of reproduction”. Traditionally, road movies “[...] code mobility as masculine and exciting, and immobility as feminine and passive. These foundational attitudes are reflected in society as a whole, and are catered to in much of the road genre” (Ireland 512).

³¹ Louise self-consciously plays with this stereotype as she jokingly says “She’s [Thelma] running away with me” to a colleague from work, perhaps already anticipating their escape from suburban life.

escape an oppressive society (Soyka 24). In order to travel said road, often symbolized by a seemingly endless highway (Soyka 24), a vehicle for transport is inevitable. The car is more than the protagonist's temporary home: it is a manifest belief in technical innovation and at the same time an epitome of freedom and individualization (Soyka 27-29) that grants the characters mobility and escape³².

In the quest for individual freedom, "home" as such along with its values such as comfort, domesticity and family, is often left behind as stability is conventionally replaced with mobility (Soyka 30). Taking to the road thus can be read as a refusal to conform to the idea of strictly gendered spaces, as is done in *Thelma & Louise*. Hence, *Thelma & Louise* can be argued to have marked a turning point in the history of road narratives as it frankly questioned the binary organization of the sexes that had until then informed most road narratives: while men were conventionally associated with rough wilderness and the public space, women were confined to the security of the home and civilization, their frontiers literally being the thresholds of their homes (Soyka 45).

³² "Das Road Movie zelebriert das Auto sowohl als Objekt als auch in den ihm zugewiesenen Funktionen [...] Es steht, in Verbindung mit der scheinbaren Endlosigkeit der Straße, für individuelle Freiheit und Selbstverwirklichung. Dabei spielt nicht nur die Geschwindigkeit – vor allem in Flucht-Road Movies – eine bedeutende Rolle, sondern auch die Automarke; zu den klassischen, [...] immer wieder klischeehaft [auftauchenden Autos] zählen Corvette, Thunderbird (kurz T-Bird) und Cadillac" (Soyka 29).

3. *Thelma & Louise* Revisited

When Ridley Scott's film *Thelma & Louise* was released in 1991, the previously male dominated genre was provocatively disrupted (Eraso 63) due to the featuring of two female protagonists on the road³³. Finally, the active/passive duality when it came to the depiction of gender in classic Hollywood movies was dissolved (63). However, the justified question as to whether *Thelma & Louise* could be read as an empowerment of women on the one hand or an attack on feminist ideals on the other had arisen (Cooper 278-279).

Taking a closer look, *Thelma & Louise* is situated within the subgenre of the "buddy movie" (Soyka 36-37), with the only alteration that here two women represent two oppositional characters complementing one another – already a gesture of assimilation to patriarchal Hollywood narratives that indeed cries for questioning its feminist value³⁴. On a surface level, identity constructions are certainly questioned as the movie features two women taking to the road in order to escape patriarchy and embrace their freedom. Tragically, "[...] Thelma and Louise become outlaws the moment they seize control of their bodies" (Dargis 16). Thus, it is exactly said provocative deed that leads to Thelma's and Louise's punishment and thus deaths as a means of expelling them from the Symbolic Order. The two women are "[...] forced into a series of crimes and victimized by a series of men along the way [...]" (Cooper 276) which clearly deprives them of their potentially subversive powers. Rather than transgressing gender dichotomies, the movie re-enacts them via fashion and the manner in which women and men are portrayed in their respective spheres, rendering *Thelma & Louise* a "[...] product of mainstream Hollywood and its patriarchal environment" (Cooper 284).

3.1 Buddies on the Run

Already the beginning of the movie testifies to the "[...] sexism and marginalization women experience on their everyday lives [...]" (Cooper 278) as Thelma and Louise are shown in their pseudo-stabilized settings of home and workplace respectively. Both women start out wearing uniforms: while Louise is introduced as a conventionally witty coffeeshop waitress (Lichtenstein 487) complete with pastel apron and tidy haircut,

³³ Consider the claim, "The road trip *is always a male trip* and the road movie makes literal the rite of passage that Oedipally-driven narratives demand of their male heroes" (Dargis 16; emphasis mine).

³⁴ Greenberg et al. understand *Thelma & Louise* to be a mixture of genres, incorporating elements of "[...] classic and contemporary Westerns, sundry types of road film (doomed/outlaw/lovers subgenre in particular), and the seventies "buddy" movie" (20).

Thelma's white morning-gown ornamented with delicate flowers as well as her curlers establish her position within the rigid frame of housewifely naivety. The uniformity of these dresses, fitting the subordinate roles they embody within an unsubtly patriarchal society on the verge of caricature, point to the narrow range of available positions for female agency, which to test will prove fatal³⁵. Basically, the crosscut scenes featuring both packing their suitcases for their planned weekend trip straightforwardly serve as characterization of the two women and further prove the film rooted in its (male) genre. As has been mentioned above, the two befriended women are portrayed not only as "buddies," as the eponymous subgenre "buddy movie" suggests, but conform to representations of the road movie's infamously featured "lovers on the run," springing from Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*. Quite like tricky Clyde, who shepherds Bonnie into alleged liberation and life on the road, Louise has bigger plans: While originally this might only be a blunt fishing trip for one weekend, it is her from the start who lures Thelma to leave her domestic cage for a while, encouraging her to find a position in life other than conventionally defining her husband (Bronfen 299). Desperately clinging to a vision of a world beyond male repressive violence, she murders the would-be-rapist Harlan. It is also her who then sets up the plan to go to Mexico. Even though she irrationally wants to avoid Texas on their journey, Louise is the one who finds expressions, conditions and set-ups for this alternative life, and is thus able to give orderly shape to a utopian enterprise in the same way she does to her suitcase. Louise is "[...] tough and knowing [...]" (Dargis 17), and thus rather conforms to masculine ideas of order and logic. Contrastively, Thelma represents all that which is conventionally regarded feminine: she is "[...] simple and sweet, childlike and unworldly" (17)³⁶. Her way of suitcase packing is irrationally restless and sensual as she dumps clothes into her suitcase by emptying drawers at random. Ultimately, these "hyperfeminine" clothes are an utterly impractical choice for a traditionally male outing. What seems inappropriate in this scene (but later turns out to be invaluable) is Thelma's instinctively packing a gun, which she is still afraid to touch and finally puts it, as Louise reluctantly suggests, into a purse. The phallic symbol may be seen to foreshadow Thelma's sexual awaking taking place on the journey. The overemphasis on Thelma's erotic impulses (at JD's sight she pants like a dog) is in line with her sensuality. However, Thelma is not only effeminized,

³⁵ This chapter tries to argue that even though men's portrayals are flatly caricatured versions of masculinity, they still form the backbone of a patriarchal system of power that Thelma and Louise are not able to transgress.

³⁶ Tough Louise and naïve Thelma thus very much "[...] embody classic Western archetypes [...]" (Dargis 17).

she is also *infantilized* as can be proven via fashion, her attire and statements uttered about her³⁷. Abandoning her “white suburban bedroom,” Thelma wears a long white dress with puff sleeves, a plunging neckline and a tight embroidered bodice exposing her shoulders and emphasizing her pelvis³⁸. Thelma’s marriage to Darryl took place long ago, in fact she was only 18 when they married and when she was apparently frozen and conserved in a bluntly childlike state, enduring years of “[...] unfulfilling marriage [...]” (Eraso 68). Thelma’s outfit is undeniably conspicuous in that it features what may be called fossilized attributes of romance (such as a long dress and a tight bodice) present in wedding dresses that have transformed into near-uniforms (Hughes 175). In line with a long tradition of “mad brides” (Hughes 166-169), the white dress might also point towards insanity, a quality which to possess Thelma is ever ready to acknowledge³⁹. Also Harlan wears white, and after Louise shoots him with the phallic gun (thus removing it from the protecting purse, opening up the path to bodily passion), the film features the highly charged topos of blood splattered on white. A possible way of reading the blood is as a signifier of awakening sexuality and lost purity. It is the experience of nearly being raped that catapults Thelma on the road leading to her sexual fulfilment and the subsequent end of innocence by transgressing gendered spheres. This cut is, however, not as clear-cut as such a reading might want to suggest: long after hitting the road, Thelma still behaves in childlike ways and is treated by others as if she was a child: she plays smoking, obeys to commands such as “sit down,” “take off your foot,” “don’t you litter,” her hair is combed and her face is wiped by Louise. So far, not much subversive power has been granted to the two adventurers hitting the road, a transgression that necessarily must be punished in “a men’s world”.

³⁷ It has to be acknowledged, however, that both women are sexualized and thus diminished by men, being referred to as “Kewpie dolls” or “the girls” by males.

³⁸ The noun phrase “white suburban bedroom” refers to *The Ballad of Lucy Jordan* performed by Marianne Faithfull that accompanies the women’s nocturnal journey through the ghostly landscapes of Monument Valley. The ballad encapsulates the fate of a suburban housewife, who, having realised that her dreams of riding through Paris are unattainable, commits suicide and eventually finds fulfilment of her wishes in death (Soyka 66). It is also this song that symbolically connects Thelma and Louise to a number of anonymous women suffering “[...] unsuccessful past experiences [...]” (Eraso 67).

³⁹ “I might be crazy,” “You are disturbed,” - “Yeah, I believe I am,” “You are crazy” - “You got that right,” “I guess I went a little crazy” - “No, you’ve always been crazy” (taken from various dialogues between Thelma and Louise in the course of the movie).

3.2 Trespassing on Male Ground

The first female ‘transgression’ into the ‘men’s world’ occurs during the stopover in the country club which is to alter the women’s lives for good and casts them into the roles of outlaws trespassing on male grounds. Although constituting an interior space that should offer protection and is generally connected to the feminine (Soyka 59), the *Silver Bullet* adheres almost wholly to patriarchal norms. The first glimpse one catches conjures up images of a fancy dress party – all are dressed as cowboys, all keep in line – as the activity of line dancing only too obviously suggests. Harlan takes the initiative and penetrates Thelma’s and Louise’s personal space; Thelma’s naivety and credulity make her an easy prey for male aggressors. By labelling them “Kewpie Dolls,” Harlan immediately ascribes conventionally passive and objectifying attributes to the two women. The hierarchical order of the sexes is thus given from the beginning of the conversation onwards. While Thelma does not dare to challenge or question the authority Harlan conventionally exerts due to his being male (“[...] he physically takes possession of her while dancing, his muscular arm around her neck, clutching a beer, finally spinning her around into a stupor” [Laderman 188]); Louise evidently does not fit into the setting which manifests itself in a sense of ‘not belonging’ during the scene taking place in the bathroom. Louise occupies neither of the traditional roles that are suggested by the conforming mass of women with long, ‘untidy’ hair shoving around in front of the mirror and is therefore watched disapprovingly. She seems displaced, this woman in a ‘men’s world’. Immediately after killing Harlan, they stop by in a diner – another conventional stationary space typically found in road movies – and Louise again goes to the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, she starts to rub her cheeks frantically with tears in her eyes, as if to erase her face after the deed that has doomed her a total outcast.

Louise’s non-conformity is again referred to in the scene that has Thelma robbing the store, while Louise remains apathetically in the car. Louise recognizes that she is being watched by two elderly women on whom the camera zooms in and thinks about putting on lipstick. “Disturbed by an image of her own mortality [...]” – an age that she will never reach – and the “[...] definition of female appearance” (Laderman 187), Louise acknowledges the inappropriateness of putting on make-up: the role requiring a feminine appearance has already been left behind. A return to conventional life is denied to the buddies, “[...] taking to the road [is] a matter of life and death, freedom or bondage” (187). Defying designated female roles, Louise literally throws the lipstick out of the car

and “[...] in the dirt” (Dargis 17); thereby shedding one more item testifying to her femininity.

The amount of ambiguity bestowed upon this action (has Louise resigned to her fate or is she rebelling against conventions?) can as well be transferred to Thelma’s robbery. On the one hand, it can be maintained that she takes the initiative after all their money has been stolen due to her carelessness. She actively asserts her authority by appropriating a phallic symbol – the gun – in order to grant the existence of a secure future based on female dreams. On the other hand, her authority is easily undermined when considering the fact that Thelma bluntly imitates JD’s way of robbing stores. Seen from this angle, the “performance” cannot be read as a means of self-expression, but has to be understood as submissively internalizing male instructions, given JD’s “[...] expert private lesson on the art of hold-ups [...]” (Eraso 67). JD’s act is authentic, Thelma’s merely a copy. What further negates a possible feminist reading of Thelma’s action is the fact that the robbery is not included in the chronological sequence of the narrative, but shown later as being watched on closed-circuit television (a symbol of patriarchal surveillance) by Darryl, Slokum and other FBI agents. The fact that the act is filtered through male eyes, accompanied by outcries such as “Jesus Christ,” “Good Lord” and “Oh my God” (suggesting the morally inappropriate perversity of a woman, let alone a housewife, robbing a store) ultimately eradicates any feminist elements that could have been said to be latent in Thelma’s deed. At this point it is perhaps useful to scrutinize the legitimate agents within this ‘men’s world’ in a more detailed account.

3.3 “Take Me, Break Me, Make Me a Man” – Versions of Masculinity

Reflecting upon the male characters appearing in Ridley Scott’s movie, one cannot dismiss the impression that men are depicted as caricatures (Soyka 60). Generally, all male minor and major characters in some sense wear “uniforms” or, to put it more frankly, “costumes,” thereby impersonating popular clichés assigned to various versions of masculinity.

Darryl’s appearance as an authentic, serious character is undermined from the beginning onwards. He is displayed as an “[...] inconsiderate, annoying, stupid, and philandering carpet salesman [...]” characterized by “[...] double standards, selfishness, and insensitivity [...]” (Lichtenstein 487). He perfectly completes the white suburban couple, yelling for Thelma and giving orders. However, even in the domestic sphere, where he should be the respected head of the family, Darryl is rendered object of exclusive laughter;

his ridiculous appearance coming dangerously close to, not to say merging with, caricature⁴⁰ (Cooper 286).

Louise's boyfriend, the musician Jimmy, most profoundly characterized by absence (Soyka 61), is portrayed in the light of Western stereotypes of masculinity. This is achieved firstly via focusing on his muscular upper body and his exposed well-defined arms, and secondly, by equipping him with clothes like black leather jackets and white vests. Male coded actions like overturning the table when fury suddenly seizes him assume the function of his accessories. Jimmy's subtle antipathy towards JD may represent the fear of losing the position of the alpha male.

A far more conventional role – with respect to male archetypes – is assumed by the hitchhiker JD, who is introduced and repeatedly referred to as “the cowboy,” a label that is in total accordance with his light-blue faded, slightly worn out jeans outfit. Yet his part offers ample room for controversies: JD both caricatures and subordinates himself by using a hairdryer (an obviously feminine accessory) as a gun and jumping on the bed, citing a rhyme suggestive of sexual submission (“Take me, break me, make me a man”)⁴¹. Furthermore, he is subjected to the female gaze as the camera focuses on his bottom while Thelma and Louise are portrayed as actively doing the looking, even commenting their voyeuristic impulses, “Did you see his butt,” “I love to watch him go”. Complementing his bottom, JD's exposure zone is undoubtedly the upper body, which is being shown extensively as he seduces Thelma. This depiction of JD is somewhat unusual as conventionally, spectators watch movies to “[...] achieve mastery over the female object on the screen [...]” (McGowan 31), whereas here, the roles are reversed. According to Lacanian film theory, we experience a different kind of desire prior to the desire for power (Studlar 275), “[...] a much more radical kind of desire – the desire to submit to the Other”⁴² (McGowan 31). Hence the scene of Thelma's seduction can be read as one not to celebrate JD's mastery over Thelma, but quite on the contrary as an embracing of his willful submission to the female.

⁴⁰ He possesses a red Corvette car, a status symbol in road movies, but is utterly unable to climb into it due to gardeners and workers surrounding the car; at a later point, he finds himself standing in a pizza and is even laughed at by fellow men (Cooper 286).

⁴¹ Particularly the part “make me a man” seems to faintly suggest that JD acknowledges the construction of gendered roles.

⁴² Scholar Gaylyn Studlar deplores the fact that “[c]urrent theory ignores the pleasure in submission that is phylogenetically older than the pleasure of mastery – for both sexes” (275).

Detective Hal Slokum also takes on a slightly ambiguous role. On the one hand, he is part of the male apparatus, the police team seeking to arrest Thelma and Louise; on the other hand, it is noteworthy that he does not wear the police uniform, but always enters the stage in plain-clothes. His distinct “uniform,” or rather lack of it, detaches him from the rest and connects him closer to the women, but it does so in a patronizing, benevolent manner. Eventually, Slokum’s suggested “otherness” surfaces as he, too, ends up alone, running in vain after the Thunderbird disappearing in a cloud of dust.

The movie’s only other policeman worth mentioning is impersonated by the highway patrolman, who, when seen approaching in uniform and the accompanying patriarchal attitude, is labelled a “Nazi” (Cooper 287) by the two women. The highway patrolman, however, fails to exert his authority as Thelma threatens him with a gun and forces him to climb into the trunk. Even more so, he is emasculated by depicting him crying and begging, insisting that he has “wife and children”.

The last minor character that shall be subjected to scrutiny is the Afro-American biker, who discovers the aforementioned highway patrolman locked in the trunk but refuses to provide help. Conservative clichés about blacks can be said to dominate the scene: the biker – having of course no speaking part – is portrayed in a uniform of his own; that is, fluorescent sportswear, joint and Reggae music. However, the comic relief immediately depoliticizes the scene. Being an outlaw, too, simply by way of his ethnicity, the biker acts as an ally to the women outlaws and therefore opposed to authority as represented by the policeman. Additionally, his rebelliousness is faintly implied through the “costume” he is wearing (Laderman 194).

Even though there are hints of ambiguity and inconsistency – so-called cracks in the picture – in the portrayal of masculinities, the overall representation of male characters is rather characterized by stereotypical flatness leaving no space for alternative narratives.

3.4 From “Kewpie Dolls” to “Bitches from Hell” – Transformations and Dead Ends

Part of the alleged feminism in *Thelma & Louise* might stem from the notion of women leaving the narrow feminine paths laid out within patriarchal systems. Acknowledging the performative aspect of clothes as a way of constructing distinct gendered identities, it is easy to see Louise and Thelma going astray from conventional paths. The women’s outlaw career is characterized by a continuous de-feminization of their dress and attire,

as the “[...] masks of cosmetics, sunglasses, and scarves are rejected and discarded” (Lichtenstein 489).

On the road and away from home, there seems to be going on a constant trade of items, a significant exchange of gendered capital – with Thelma and Louise gaining the “capital of a subculturette”⁴³. Thornton’s “subcultural capital,” an adaptation of Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” denoting cultural artefacts and modes of behavior that confer status in the eyes of subcultural members (Thornton 11-12), shall serve as a model for this paper’s purpose and in a second step be adapted as “subculturette’s capital,” a notion which shall acknowledge aspects of gender entangled in these processes. It shall be argued that the abandonment of accessories coded as feminine and the interrelated adoption of male coded items as performed by Thelma and Louise leads to their ultimate destruction proving the inappropriateness of their gender transgressions.

In the night of Thelma’s sexual awakening, seducer JD takes off her wedding ring, which Thelma willingly lets happen. The next morning, they find that JD, whom naïvely overjoyed and blinded Thelma has left alone in her room, has taken all their money – an incident that leads to Thelma robbing the store and starting a series of crime. In the same night Louise receives a proposal ring from Jimmy which she later swaps together with the rest of her jewelry for an old man’s cowboy hat (Dargis 17). At their next stop, Louise wears the hat for the first time and has a telephone conversation with Slokum that is long enough to track their location. On their trail of crime, they are stopped by a police officer due to Louise’s speeding. In order to prevent trouble, they lock him into his car’s trunk – but only after Louise has swapped sunglasses with him, taken his gun, his belt with ammunition and finally his pack of beer, a stereotypical symbol of masculinity. Metaphorically blinded by the sunglasses and probably tipsy from the beer, Thelma and Louise rush to their final criminal deed wherein Louise uses the officer’s gun. Teaching the sexist trucker a lesson, they open fire on his phallic truck causing its explosion⁴⁴. Circling the desperate trucker with the car, Thelma finally picks up his cap lying on the ground. A few seconds later, a police helicopter makes out the burning truck, which

⁴³ The term “subculturette” is used by Helen Reddington in relation to female participation in the subculture of punk.

⁴⁴ Interestingly, Thelma and Louise echo the police officer’s command “Would you take off your eyewear” in their speech to the trucker when telling him to “Take off [his] shades,” and thus, adopt not only male accessories but also male, authoritarian speech.

consequently lets the police trace the fugitives. The last scene features the women in their full manly attire rushing to their inevitable deaths.

As has been proven, Thelma and Louise's attempt to transgress the space originally confined to women is punished with death. This notion can be seen to materialize itself as a continuous accumulation of items adding up to what we call the "capital of a subculturette". Their visual transformation by means of clothes and accessories may indeed be called a symbolic resistance to conventionally hetero-normative gender constructions, and thus, a ritualistic challenge of the predominant, restrictive discourse by means of style – processes that were ascribed to youth subcultures by Birmingham researchers in the 70s. As the swapping of items described above shows, every artefact the women appropriate is "[...] inserted into a sort of chain of continuous references to other units [...]" (Eco 66).

The problematic crack in the picture occurs when considering that neither Thelma's nor Louise's accumulation of items produces a sufficiently "stable" identity to hold out in this men's world. The film has been criticized for portraying the women's development into "mock-men" (Fournier 332) – an argument which an analysis of dress can only but confirm. Starting out as a flowery bride, Thelma in the course of the film transgresses to the other extreme (Eraso 70f) and finally wears a black sleeveless top with a skull printed on it, the trucker's cap and has her gun tucked into her jeans⁴⁵. At the climax of the "fashion show" both women have acquired a repertoire of manly attire but have utterly failed to adopt the longed-for power that goes with such accessories. Driving over the precipice, both options of gender identities are revealed to be out of reach for them as the driving wind blows both the Polaroid showing their feminine suburban faces framed with lipstick and head scarf as well as their cowboy hat and trucker cap away. In the last seconds of their life, it becomes apparent that their fancy dresses have worn out: their clothes are dusty, utterly wrong and, ultimately, deathly. The subsequent deliberate jumble of scenes on the road taken out of chronology seems to soberly confirm the dead end of their masquerade, proving that they have not been able to draw subversive power from their subculturette's attire. Merely copying and pasting from male role models, whether it be clothes, behavior or the use of language (Woolf 77) is punished in a world where patriarchy is thoroughly intact. Sticking with Butler's line of argument, it can be

⁴⁵ This clothing item also exemplifies the exposure zone that in the course of the film is shifting to the women's upper arms – the same body parts which are stressed in both JD's and Jimmy's case.

concluded that Thelma and Louise only engage in parody, relying on that which is already available and considered “normal,” instead of adopting the concept of pastiche, dismissing the possibility of male “originals” to be copied altogether (Pettitt 5-6).

Strikingly, their last goodbye does not involve speaking, only a “[...] final soul kiss at the abyss” (Greenberg et al. 20), preparing them for their ultimate jump into the Real. It is telling that they share a desperate kiss and do not take their leave with words, hoping to find absolution in the Real that exists prior to and outside of language. Although some critics were eager to read a “[...] lesbian subtext [...]” (Greenberg et al. 20) into this, it shall be argued that this is a final gesture of goodbye to the patriarchal Symbolic Order, proof of a bond strong enough to continue beyond their expulsion from the Symbolic Order. Griggers goes so far as to argue that any faintly erotic traces are erased immediately after the character’s death sentence as the polaroid and moments shown earlier in the movie appear, safely shifting the focus back to friendship so as to obliterate any uprising doubts (133). Refusing to acknowledge their death sentence, then, Thelma and Louise in kissing defy “[...] containment strategies of straight femininity’s narrative [...]” (Griggers 134), thus actively choosing fulfillment in death instead of submitting “[...] to a hetero-phallic law [...]” (Griggers 133).

As the story draws to a close, the unattainability of their new, imagined home becomes evident: the promise of a new start in Mexico turns into an illusion; the process of liberation was only a temporal one (Cohan and Hark 10). Hence, the last shot epitomizes the hopelessness of their situation. Poised in the sky between a home they can never return to and a home they will never reach, they have recognized that an independently chosen, progressive and in gender-wise revolutionarily marked space is only possible in their imagination.

It has to be remarked at this point that the original movie provides an alternate ending (“Thelma & Louise Deleted Scene”), which roots the movie rather in the realm of magic realism. While the commonly known ending freezes the Thunderbird and thus the action in space and time, in the alternate ending, the camera follows the fall of the car. Slokum, desperately running after Thelma and Louise, stops at the ledge, apparently admitting his failure to himself. The police helicopter dives down the canyon, the numerous policemen lower their guns and move towards the abyss, as if to convince themselves of what has just happened in front of their eyes. The camera zooms in on guilty Slokum, showing a close-up of his face for several seconds. Finally, Slokum turns around and walks towards

the policemen, head bent down in defeat. Utterly surprisingly, what is shown next is the Thunderbird continuing its journey on the ground, driving towards a vast green space, hills in the distance. These deleted scenes are suggestive of an alternative way of perpetuating Thelma and Louise's journey towards freedom. Although it is impossible to survive such a crash, the movie nonetheless shows an escape from the rationally organized Symbolic Order into an indefinite Real where anything is possible.

The following two chapters, constituting the thesis' main part, critically interrogate (gender) roles of men and women in two contemporary road movies. The outspoken aim is to outline and analyze what exactly has changed in terms of gender representation since Thelma and Louise have made their "[...] leap into the void" (Lichtenstein 491) in 1991.

4. *Mad Max: Fury Road*

4.1 “Fire and Blood” – George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*

Set against the backbone of a “poisoned” Earth, the adventure of self-proclaimed road warrior Max Rockatansky (Tom Hardy) takes him into a seemingly endless desert and into the heart of the Symbolic Order, the Citadel, where patriarch Immortan Joe (Hugh Keays-Byrne) has established a totalitarian system hoarding scarce resources like water and gasoline and controlling reproduction by means of enslaving women. Keith Clavin perfectly sums up the status quo depicted at the beginning of the movie with the following words,

[the action] takes place on a future Earth that has been scorched into a lifeless desert and the remaining humans live amongst motorized tribes scattered across the desolate landscape. The planet is often described as ‘dead’ or ‘poisoned’ and in need of fresh resources. Fluids (and their scarcity) define the state of affairs [...] (56).

Trusted warrior Imperator Furiosa (Charlize Theron) is sent on a mission to replenish the Citadel’s supplies. However, she secretly embarks on a dangerous mission to free the five young wives of patriarch Joe with the aim of returning to “The Green Place of Many Mothers” she originally came from. Soon, the women are chased by Joe’s war boys, and find unexpected help in Max. As the plot unfolds, Max and Furiosa become allies that need and rely on one another so that at the end of the movie, a potentially better future seems within reach.

So, the ending does leave hope for a more equal living-together of women and men, which leads us to the topic of how exactly gendered hierarchies are depicted. Essentialist gender stereotypes are certainly highly questioned in Miller’s movie as “[...] several key tenets of traditional masculinity” are attacked and reconsidered (Gallagher 52). Female characters are not mere filmic devices or sex objects, but take actions into their own hands, whereas the male hero is allocated “[...] the role of an ally” – an ally to the film’s alleged “[...] real protagonist”, Imperator Furiosa (de Coning 175). In this chapter, it shall be made evident in how far traditional notions of gender are either questioned or conformed. Before doing so, I will turn to an analysis of the road movie features in *Mad Max* as secondary literature treats gender roles extensively, but hardly mentions what exactly makes *Mad Max* a road movie. I will further investigate in how far Max and Furiosa impersonate the concepts of “restless sensuality” and “visionary ambition” often found in road movies. The main part of this chapter more closely examines notions of

masculinity and femininity predominant in the movie by means of analyzing the main characters and their portrayals as well as the use of binary oppositions.

4.2 On the Road with Max and Furiosa

4.2.1 Existing in the Wasteland – Space & Place in *Mad Max*

The extremely descriptive title *Mad Max: Fury Road* already contains the movie's defining features: the road as setting⁴⁶, and fury as the character's dominant motif for their actions, and the "Fury Road" as the very place the War Boys hope to die gloriously on⁴⁷. "Fury Road" can further be read as an allusion to "Anarchie Road" in *Mad Max* from 1979, where Max (Mel Gibson) takes it upon himself – being an *anarchist* – to seek revenge for the deaths of his wife and his child (Falconer 249; 256). Similarly, the title of the fourth movie links the name of the road to the protagonists' motif – that is, *fury*.

Space in *Mad Max: Fury Road* is shown as a salty endless desert, a devastated Wasteland, after man has "killed the world", reminiscent of the almost lunar landscapes of the American West used as setting for traditional road movies like *Easy Rider* or *Thelma and Louise*⁴⁸. Again, a connection to the older films is formed, wherein a "disappearance of the road" can be traced. Max's adventures lead him over conventional "asphalt roads" in the first movie to "dirt tracks" in *Mad Max 2* (1982) and culminate in an elimination of the road as such in *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, where "[...] even these dirt roads have disappeared into a trackless landscape of desert dunes, fertile gorges, and post-nuclear dust" (Falconer 249). Though only faintly linked to the original trilogy, *Mad Max: Fury Road* resumes the motif of the Wasteland, disconnecting it from the concrete place Australia where the movie has been made and transferring it to a scattered dystopian landscape that is unfamiliar and thus all the more uncanny in the Freudian sense of the word.

Steeped in the genre of the road movie, the focus is both on the spatial journey across the Wasteland and on the inner journey of the protagonists Max and Furiosa. Apart from several "[...] short interruptions [...]," the protagonists find themselves in a "[...] continuous movement [...]" that is halted at the end of the movie (Ganser et al. 6). The

⁴⁶ It is perhaps not really accurate to speak of a "road" as setting, since the characters' journey takes them mostly through the desert, where no particular road is discernible; for lack of a more apt term, however, I will stick with "road" when speaking of the spatial journey.

⁴⁷ "If I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die historic on the Fury Road!" (Nux)

⁴⁸ The question "Who killed the world?" pops up several times in the movie, either written on the wall or voiced by the characters. At one time, Angharad shouts "Who killed the world?" at Nux, and his reluctance to provide an answer makes it all too obvious that the answer is "men" (Gallagher 52).

most striking feature of the journey, however, is that “[...] action and imagery form a cyclical aesthetic” (Clavin 56), ultimately taking them back to the starting point, the Citadel. Furthermore, the road bears the “[...] function of a meeting place for characters who would otherwise perhaps never meet” (Ganser et al. 6), allowing for Max and Furiosa to form a synergy that helps them overthrow a common enemy. Yet the movie does not merely tell of a journey that the characters undertake, it is informed by the “chronotype of escape” as the road allows them to escape the totalitarian system of the Citadel (7). The Citadel here serves as an emblem of the Symbolic Order, a “[...] world of patriarchal order and logic” (Barry 109) governed by the principle of language and strict rules established by the Immortan Joe.

Interestingly, the movement, once complete, does not lead to an end of the road, but back to the very beginning. The ending marks a point of change as “[...] paternal fascism [...]” has come to an end; the possible change, though, is never shown so as not to perpetuate the circular narrative into eternity (Clavin 61). In line with the “[...] cyclical journey [...]” is the “[...] circular imagery [...]” employed in the movie, repeatedly confronting the audience with “[s]teering wheels, tires, dashboard gauges, gears, eyes [...]” (Clavin 58) that symbolically reinforce the movie’s ideology.

As the plot unfolds, the movement is repeatedly halted as the protagonists encounter obstacles of various kinds, as suggested in the article by Ganser et al. A sandstorm, wherein Furiosa crashes Nux’s car, allows for the two protagonists to meet and consequently form a mutual alliance as well as for the introduction of new characters (Joe’s wives) and development of already introduced characters (Max, Furiosa and Nux).

The most significant halt occurs near the end of the movie, when Furiosa and the group unveil the dreams of a better future in the “Green Place of Many Mothers” to remain an unattainable fantasy. This bitter realization “[...] marks the midpoint of the narrative” (Clavin 57) as the characters become aware that “[...] home cannot possibly be found in the nightmarish places they encounter [...]” (Ganser et al. 9). Thus, they venture to return to a place even more nightmarish than anything they have seen so far, the oppressive system they have desperately sought to flee from. Their only hope now is to eliminate patriarch Joe and transform the master signifier, the Citadel, into a place that allows for both women and men to prosper. Although the characters do not stop in a town, the “Green Place” can be read as such as it bears a similar function; the halt forces the protagonists to “[...] get involved with the townspeople [...]” (9), represented by the

Many Mothers in this case, and experience a kind of crisis, namely the discovery that the future they have envisioned is forever out of reach. The “Green Place of Many Mothers” embodies the trope of the “promised land,” a mythic place wherein the characters will find a better future and “[...] infinite freedom [...]” (10). In this respect, the journey is represented as one back to and not away from home (Laderman 144) as Furiosa was originally one of the Vuvalini inhabiting this fairy place before she was stolen and brought to the Citadel.

It can be argued that the allegedly glorious “Green Place of Many Mothers” serves as a symbolic manifestation of the Real, suggesting a dream of blissful wholeness and subversive potential to the (female) characters (Schallmayer 18). Thus, Furiosa’s wish to return to this “green” place (again, we witness an association between woman and nature proposed by the adjective “green,” which is often used to denote lush vegetation) is really a latent primal urge to re-enter into an immediate, pre-oedipal relationship with the mother as yet free from the troubles of socialization and enculturation. That this bubble must necessarily burst grounds on the fact that Furiosa as well as the other women have already entered the Symbolic Order and hence can never go back into that blissfully oblivious state but in death (18). As the dream of returning to the “Green Place” proves to be a necessary delusion, an alternative must be sought, which is neither found in arriving in the promised land nor ending up in “Dead End City” (Ganser et al. 13), but in an inevitable return “home” to the Symbolic Order, with the difference being that hopefully, the law of the father will be rewritten.

4.2.2 Visionary Ambition and Restless Sensuality

By treating two crucial notions stemming from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and epitomized by the infamous gangster couple *Bonnie and Clyde* (Laderman 59), the movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* forms a connection to previous road movies, thereby acknowledging its adherence to the genre⁴⁹. The protagonists of said movies can be claimed to impersonate the inextricably linked concepts of “visionary ambition” and “restless sensuality”, which have acquired the status of leitmotifs within the genre (59). It can be reasoned that Max and Furiosa also embody these concepts; however, not in the way one would think. Traditionally, “visionary ambition” has been reserved for the male domain: in *Bonnie and Clyde*, it is Clyde who embodies this notion, which he shows

⁴⁹ *Natural Born Killers*’ main characters Mickey and Mallory show a surprisingly similar pattern: it is Mickey that Mallory needs to escape the “horrors” of her domestic life (including abuse by her parents) and Mallory that is portrayed as exceedingly sexually active.

through carefully planning their future (59). In *Thelma & Louise*, it is reasonable and grown-up Louise, arguably the more “manly” character, who orderly plans their weekend getaway. “Restless sensuality,” on the other hand, is associated with Bonnie, who is characterized by “[...] overt erotic impulses” and an “[...] excessive sexual desire” (59), which remains mostly unfulfilled. Also Thelma represents this sensuality as she is portrayed in a much more irrational, emotional and feminine manner than her counterpart Louise. It is Thelma, not Louise, who finds sexual fulfilment during their journey.

This chapter tries to argue that contrary to the aforementioned movies, *Mad Max* partly reverses gender notions by linking Furiosa with “visionary ambition” and Max with “restless sensuality” (not in a sexual manner though). In Miller’s movie, Furiosa embodies “visionary ambition” which manifests itself as a “[...] longing to be elsewhere, a frustration with the present (stabilized) situation, a dream of a better destiny” (59). This “better destiny” that Furiosa has in mind corresponds to a dream of a life beyond the patriarchal order, which most of the other characters are too blind, or simply too afraid, to see. While originally sent out to raid supplies for Joe, Furiosa does have a vision: she is dead set on freeing Joe’s wives from (sex) slavery and start a new life in the “Green Place of Many Mothers”. It is her from the start who initiates the action and thus is responsible for the development of the plot. As the action unfolds, Furiosa in the same way moves towards fulfilling her goals. Arguably, as her plans are shattered, Max takes this quality from her as he becomes the visionary, leaving only the emotional role for Furiosa. It is him who suggests going back to the Citadel to start a better future there. As Furiosa – albeit reluctantly at first – agrees to his plans, she is rewarded with being the visionary again, rising above Max in the end who disappears from the scene to herald a new era.

Contrastively, Max represents “restless sensuality,” a “[...] primal urge to keep moving, located in and expressed through the body (rather than the mind) [as a] compulsion to drive” (Laderman 59). While Max’s embodiment of “restless sensuality” does not smack of the sexual appetite a Bonnie or Thelma seem to possess, he is definitely restless in his eternal wandering through the Wasteland. Max is a nomad, not belonging to any place, but keeps moving with only one purpose in mind, survival. This becomes all the more obvious in the end as he refuses to settle down with Furiosa and the denizens of the Citadel, possibly driven by his instincts to keep going. Laderman’s suggestion that this restlessness is connected to the body more than the mind holds true in so far as Max hardly speaks or shares plans or thoughts for most of the movie. His performance more often

than not focuses on his body as we watch him furiously struggling to escape imprisonment by the War Boys or fighting Furiosa with Nux and the door of the car chained to one hand. Planning on stealing the War Rig to escape into the desert, Max follows the archaic compulsion to go, to drive, and is only stopped by Furiosa's cleverness. Being a true visionary, she probably has anticipated theft of her War Rig and thus installed a mechanism that allows only for her to drive the Rig. In the course of the movie, Max develops visionary insight as he insists that the best chance for the group to stay alive is to return to the Citadel and overthrow the prevalent order of things. He does not, however, claim the position as ambitious visionary for himself as he in the end leaves it to Furiosa to build a better future, perhaps under her lead.

Ultimately, although Max and Furiosa complement one another and form an almost harmonious union at the end of the movie, a union or living-together (whether in platonic or romantic terms) is denied to them. A reason can be found when examining conventions of patriarchal Hollywood narratives. Following Hilary Neroni's line of argument, Max and Furiosa are barred from leading a traditional relationship "[...] dependent on the concept of the complementarity of opposites". She refers explicitly to the genre of the action film where the man is the protector, the woman the object to be protected and traces this notion back to the way Western societies have been socialised. Furiosa does not rely on Max to patronise her, as a "violent woman" she is capable of protecting herself. Thus she "[...] eliminates the need for the male protector, thereby disrupting this complementary relationship" (53). Traditional narrative structures do not, as it appears, allow for a union where both halves are equal. The partners must separate, each existing in their own designated domain. Hence, binary oppositions might limit the scope of roles to be occupied by women, but the movie also succeeds in creating alternative spaces for the representation and fostering of female agency.

4.3 Versions of Femininity and Masculinity

4.3.1 Binary Oppositions

Notwithstanding its progressive or even feminist elements, the movie *Mad Max* employs unsubtle binary oppositions when it comes to the depiction of man and woman. The concept of said oppositions can be traced back to the analysis of myths forwarded by Claude Lévi-Strauss who claimed that certain leitmotifs formed the bases whereon narratives were fleshed out (Schallmayer 31). According to the anthropologist, individuals define themselves via a sense of belonging or not belonging to halves of the

same whole⁵⁰ (Lévi-Strauss, *Parenté* 83). Throughout history, these related halves have been associated with man-made values and beliefs for so long that those relations have finally become “[...] a psychological reality [...]” (Armstrong 13). Lévi-Strauss further commented that the term “father,” or in the broader sense, “man,” thus was invested with positive values as concerns sex and age (*Anthropologie* 48), which only allows for “woman” to accept that the positively connotated norm does not apply to her⁵¹ (Spender 20). This view is perpetuated in the use of the English language, where “[...] male designations clearly [...]” bear “[...] the “unmarked” form [...]” (Goffman, *Arrangement* 303). But not only language, also culture relies heavily on the use of arbitrary ascriptions. In traditional narratives, humans more often than not find themselves poised between “[...] the poles of nature and culture [...]” (Armstrong 13). Woman are traditionally linked to nature, while man is associated with culture and civilization.

Binary oppositions as such latently run through the movie like a red thread. The paternal Citadel, emblem of the Symbolic Order where Immortan Joe reigns like a god-like figure stands in a stark contrast to the “Green Place of Many Mothers” Furiosa wants to return to. While the men figure as warriors and destroyers of the world, women serve to ensure its existence. What most male characters epitomize is the so-called “[...] masculine urge to dominate and oppress women,” as expounded by Nancy Chodorow (Williams 135). This depreciation of women is perpetuated and amounts to “[...] sex segregation in the labor force [...],” which is all too obvious in the Citadel, and “[...] a general cultural devaluation of women [...]” (135). *Mad Max* very clearly allocates distinct traditional spheres to men and women, locating women “[...] in regions of the network rich in information about family [...],” whereas men are safely connected to “[...] flows of information about career, [and] money [...]” (Smith-Lovin and McPherson 230), if one replaced *career* and *money* with *war* and scarce *resources*.

As regards versions of femininity, two contrary types are displayed. On the one hand, Joe’s wives epitomize the classical, sleek body, while the “mothers” in the Citadel show genotypic features that are rather associated with the grotesque body (Russo 63). Attributes like “[...] extremely large breasts and plump physiques [...]” (Clavin 58) do not go along with conventional beauty standards promoted in popular mainstream culture.

⁵⁰ “La plus importante est que les individus se définissent, les uns par rapport aux autres, essentiellement, d’après leur appartenance ou leur non-appartenance à la même moitié” (Lévi-Strauss, *Parenté* 83) in the original.

⁵¹ “[d]ans notre système de parenté, [...] le terme *père* a une connotation positive en ce qui concerne le sexe, l’âge relative [...]” (Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie* 48; emphasis in the original).

Women, it seems, “[...] generally fulfil the roles of passive reproducers of children and producers of milk [...]” (Clavin 58). Possibly, this can be read as social criticism directed against reproductive coercion which still plays a big role in (abusive) relationships in the 21st century⁵².

Basically, mothers predominate when it comes to the portrayal of women. Joe’s wives shall be mothers of his children, the “milk mothers” nourish the babies and also the free women who inhabit the once primordially blissful Green Place (of Many *Mothers*) treat Joe’s wives with motherly affection. This can be read as a hint to reproductive patterns and the configuration of women as emotional, a silent nod to the stereotype that “[...] women maintain affective connections to others more easily and possess greater needs for emotional closeness and intimacy than men” (Williams 136). Obviously, the biological function of being a mother has been conflated with the idea of being a woman. Notably, the rigidly framed roles available to women in this narrative have been imposed onto them by men and should be seen as belonging to a dystopian universe, where the “[...] reproduction of gender roles [...]” forces women into a “[...] pathological cycle of oppression, denial, and dependency” (Williams 136). Interestingly, Furiosa belongs to neither of the two types.

There are some moments in the movie where said patterns feature very prominently and a clear division between man/culture/reason and woman/nature/emotion is established. Although the free women are portrayed as peaceful and not subordinated to authority of any kind, their representation is troublesome, as Bampatzimopoulos points out: “[t]hey are portrayed superficially as caricatures, *grannies with guns* [...]” (211; emphasis mine)⁵³. The fact that one of them carries a small bag of seeds with her as an epitome of life and birth consolidates the age-old binary of nature and culture being linked to woman and man respectively. Moreover, they are women without a future as it will be impossible for them to reproduce without males (211). One could even go so far as to claim that neither matriarchy nor patriarchy can prevail; men and women need each other in order to maintain a healthy society. It soon becomes obvious that hitting the road proves to be

⁵² Kate Marsh defines reproductive coercion as any form of “[...] male partner pregnancy-controlling behaviours [...]” that range from throwing away contraception to emotional blackmailing, physical violence and even rape. (<http://www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/male-partner-pregnancycontrolling-behaviour-the-emerging-crisis-point-of-violence-against-women-20141128-11w9a0.html>; 10.08.17)

⁵³ Consider this a highly charged and problematic trope as men are supposed to possess an innate affinity to war, while women are naturally peace-loving; a very un-feminist picture it appears (King).

fatal for them as some of the Mothers are (easily) killed by Joe's warriors during the return to the citadel. Leaving the space they have designed and appropriated for themselves is thus "punished" with their eventual deaths.

When it comes to decision-making, it is not Furiosa that envisions a future for her and the free women, but Max, who rationally points out that protruding farther into the desert will lead to their inevitable deaths. By being sensible, Max saves the group from Furiosa's raw emotion and impulsiveness. He suggests going back to the now unprotected Citadel – an emblem of civilization – in order to start a new life there. While Furiosa's soundness of mind is clouded by feelings, Max stands for "[...] reason, arguments and facts" (Bampatzimopoulos 215) that ultimately guarantee the group's survival. But this is not the only scene in which his intuition proves to be correct: when the group encounters a naked Vuvalini, allegedly captured, Max is the one who correctly denounces this to be trap (Gallagher 54). Admittedly, Furiosa may be portrayed as a strong female for most of the movie; in some crucial scenes, however, "[...] the gender stereotype of an impulsive female who can't make reasonable decisions and of a logical male who can think properly is reconfirmed" (Bampatzimopoulos 215) and binary logic is left intact.

One more key scene worth mentioning is the end of the movie when Max, Furiosa and the rest of the group victoriously return to the citadel to reveal Joe's corpse to the cheering crowd. (If this were a "feminist masterpiece", would not Furiosa rightfully be the one to "[...] reveal the body of her enslaver [...]" (King) and not Max? – A question that is left unanswered). Furiosa has successfully fought male oppression by eliminating the Signifier, Joe, and thus found redemption. What is left for her after her battles are won, however, is a return to a secure *interior* space, the space traditionally allocated to woman (Bampatzimopoulos 212-213), where she will be able to fulfil her biological destiny, as De Lauretis bluntly claims (132). Although it is unclear how her life will continue, it becomes quite obvious that she assumes her place in the private sphere, a typically safe space for women in road movies, whereas Max, the lonesome hero, walks away into the unknown, thus "[...] passing into legend" (Gallagher 55). The domestic, private sphere is not meant for the heroic male, he belongs in the outer world of adventure and exploration.

4.3.2 A Woman with a Cause

The following sections contain closer analyses of the female characters in *Mad Max*, and are aimed at answering the question of whether *Mad Max* is a "feminist playbook", uniting all women "[...] under a leader whose beauty is in no way sexualized" (Penny) or

whether it ultimately resorts to using “[...] lazy, sexist tropes and clichéd plot devices” (King).

The female main character Furiosa (Charlize Theron) neither belongs to the group of wives nor to the milking mothers; she is an “Imperator,” one of Joe’s most trusted soldiers. It is her depiction, having “[...] no one gender, no one body type, no one sexuality” (Wilson) in the movie that renders her an ambiguous person.

For one thing, Furiosa seems to elude definite classification. She is not “[...] a passive spectacle [...]” (Bampatzimopoulos 207) ready to be looked at and consumed by the spectator, yet she is also not the classical action heroine. In most heteronormative cinematic narratives, it is the man that triggers the action and the woman that features as an icon, a device offering pleasure within and outside the narrative. An actively desiring woman endowed with agency would thus pose a severe threat to the patriarchic order that is eventually reaffirmed by stylizing woman as object (207). Binary logic fails, however, when applied to recent action movies. We witness women taking action without explicitly threatening the Symbolic Order, which leaves us to ask, how is this possible? Bampatzimopoulos declares that one way to remove female threat of castration is the eroticization of the female action hero that strips her of her symbolic powers as the focus on her body “[...] undermines the possible impact of [her] actions”⁵⁴ (208). A second way to alleviate male fears is the “[...] masculinization or defeminization of the action heroine” (208) best exemplified by Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien*. Ripley does not display her body, she does not flirt, she does not express “[...] any kind of erotic desire [...]”⁵⁵ (208). Clover even goes so far as to claim that Ripley is not feminine enough to undermine male prowess, the reason being that she is really a “[...] transformed [male]” (262).

What Furiosa shares with Ripley is her shaved head (Ripley is forced to have her head shaved in *Alien*³ where she is the only woman amongst a horde of males) and partly her clothing. However, Furiosa does neither partake in a “female masculinity” exemplified by Ripley or the muscular Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) in *Terminator 2* (Halberstam 28). Furiosa’s body is not overly lean and muscular, thereby rendering her definitely more feminine than Ripley. Her face – in stark contrast to the wives’ faces – is dirty, which ties

⁵⁴ Scarlett Johansson might be said to represent this type of action heroine in several of her movies, almost always wearing tight (cat) suits that accentuate her curves, thereby moving the focus away from her actions.

⁵⁵ In my opinion, the assertion that Ripley does not desire only holds true for the first part of the quadrilogy, as she is shown secretly spending a night with Clemens (Charles Dance) in *Alien*³.

her closer to Max. What ultimately removes the desiring male gaze is her bionic arm – her body is not whole, but symbolically castrated⁵⁶ (Bampatzimopoulos 212). Thereby, her potentially subversive power and thus threat to the male order is kept in check.

One way of masculinizing Imperator Furiosa is to associate her with violence, which disrupts binary logic as violence in classical Hollywood movies has always been closely tied to masculinity (Neroni 19). Though “[v]iolence itself doesn’t entirely make up masculinity, [...] it is not possible to entirely erase violence from masculinity” (33)⁵⁷. Insofar, a woman resorting to violence is often seen as a threat as she forcefully “[...] breaks up this symbolic relationship between violence and masculinity” (33). Furiosa’s violence, however, is justified as she is a woman with a mission: she is dead set on freeing Joe’s wives and eliminating patriarch and phallus Joe which adds a “[...] humane dimension [...]” (Bampatzimopoulos 212) to her otherwise – from a male perspective – questionable actions. It is care and responsibility for others that drive her actions which dissociates her from purely unmotivated masculine violence exerted by Joe and his War Boys. On the other hand, her willingness to protect the younger wives bestows subtle motherly traits on her, especially as she scolds the girls for wasting precious water (to which Capable in the manner of a rebellious teenage girl responds that Furiosa does not understand their situation).

Furiosa’s greatest victory and also her most violent deed is the killing of Immortan Joe. As she rips off his monstrous mask and with it most of his face, she literally destroys the Symbolic Order by “[...] [depriving] the ultimate patriarch of the film from his privileged gaze”⁵⁸ (212). What ultimately removes the trauma of her violent action is the fact that at the end of the movie, Furiosa’s violence “[...] seems to be consumed by the end of the film” (213). Furiosa is content and returns to a safe space, probably not needing to be violent or “furious” anymore. By conventionally placing Furiosa within a stable surrounding, an interior space, man’s existential angst of (symbolic) castration is removed.

⁵⁶ The fact that her body is not whole reminds of Lacan’s “mutilated body” (“le corps morcelé”) that exists prior to the Mirror Stage when the child is rewarded with a coherent image of its body as it successfully crosses the borders from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order (Schallmayer 18f).

⁵⁷ However, Neroni also admits that contemporary filmmakers “[...] rarely choose to just depict the violent woman as completely masculine” (52) which unquestionably holds true for Furiosa, as this subchapter shall show.

⁵⁸ Notably, this scene is censored in the TV version, which is interesting insofar as Furiosa’s greatest deed is left out of the movie (probably because it is thought to be too bloody and violent). Still, it diminishes Furiosa’s power and the scene is more difficult to understand; since it is not quite clear at first glance how and why Joe has been killed.

This is not to say, however, that Furiosa has been defeated or that her depiction follows conventional patterns. Throughout the movie, she toys with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, forever eluding already established categories. She is an action heroine, but not wholly erotized, she is masculine in her violence, but feminine in her motivation, a mother to her protégées without being a biological mother, a warrior with a cause and castrator of the patriarch. Though there “[...] is still a long way to walk [...]” (217) on the path to gender equality in action movies, Furiosa in all her contradictory nature testifies to the fact that “[...] the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results” (Halberstam 29).

4.3.3 Young Brides Hitting the Road

Joe’s young wives merely serve one purpose: “[...] siring non-mutated offspring [...]” for Immortan Joe (Gallagher 51), apart from possibly providing sexual pleasures given their physiques (Clavin 58). As soon as it becomes obvious that Furiosa is not on a mission to replenish gasoline, but follows her own plans, Joe goes to look after his wives who are, as the audience learns, kept in a kind of prison which resembles a huge bird cage. Joe finds it empty, the slogan “Our babies will not be warlords” written on the ground. In another room, the slogan “We are not things” has been written on the wall. Joe only finds their old nanny who has been helping them to escape and forces her to join him on his vendetta. The next scenes further consolidate the view that women are merely things in this dystopian universe. As the War Boys get ready, they break the news that “things” have been stolen from Joe. As Nux asks what things have been stolen, he is told: “The breeders”. In this short but meaningful conversation, men forcefully construct the image of women as objects and link them to reproduction.

Despite their violent assertion that they “are not things,” it is rather obvious for the spectator to identify said women as the object of the male gaze as described by Laura Mulvey:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (242-243; emphasis in the original).

In fact, the five women look very alike; slender, tall and beautiful, much like tokens of the same type conforming to Western standards of what is regarded as beautiful⁵⁹. Unquestionably, they are constructed from a male perspective as “[...] fragile and valuable, to be protected from the harsher things in life [...]” (Goffman, *Arrangement* 308). This holds especially true since the young women must be protected under any circumstances, they are “valuable” indeed in terms of reproduction. In Goffman’s terms, Joe’s wives can be seen to embody a “pantheon” of Western womanhood as they are “[...] idealized, mythologized, in a serious way through such values as motherhood, innocence, gentleness, sexual attractiveness, and so forth [...]” (*Arrangement* 308).

The first scene in which the audience fully sees them has them washing themselves in the midst of the desert with a hose, dressed in very revealing white clothes (Bampatzimopoulos 210). The fact that all of them are dressed in white only might hint to their innocence, their fashioning as Joe’s brides wearing uncanny wedding dresses or that they are doomed to die should they be found out. In a later scene, Toast (Zoë Kravitz) is seen wearing a headscarf reminiscent of a veil, which is “[...] the one thing needful to make an elopement more bridal” (Hughes 169). Thus, she might be seen as the young bride hitting the road which eventually leads to her freedom and fulfilment. Their lives on the road begin when imprisonment comes to an end, an ambiguity that may surface in white’s association with death and birth which is manifest in white clothing being worn both for mourning and baptism.

When discussing the fates of Joe’s wives, it seems apt to touch upon the subject of the “abject body,” a concept expounded by philosopher and feminist Julia Kristeva. Curiously enough, it is only lead wife’s Angharad’s (Rosie Huntington-Whiteley) body – or belly, to be more specific – that is concealed by clothing. It could be argued that Angharad represents the abject body in this movie and thus her clothing is used on purpose in order to hide her pregnant body. Above all, that which disrespects boundaries and cannot be detained can be labelled “abject”. The human body, and even more so the maternal one, constitutes the very source from which fluids seep and cross boundaries separating inside from outside (Müller 114). Kristeva names blood as one of three areas of abjection, which as the product of menstruation is intrinsically connected to the female body⁶⁰. While male fluids bear a positive connotation, standing for what they do – namely

⁵⁹ Notably, the actresses are all professional models (Clavin 58).

⁶⁰ The other two areas are food and sexuality (Müller 115).

create children (Grosz 199) – female fluids are devalued as filth and put on the same level as excrements (206). Furthermore, the female sex organ, the vagina, is regarded as a monstrosity because when bleeding, it pollutes and obliterates the boundaries between the inside and outside of the otherwise clean body (Gear 328).

The fact that Angharad will soon give birth and thus become an “[...] abject spectacle [...]” (Gear 323) proves a potential threat to man as her bodily fluids disrespect and transgress borders, resisting concrete shape and thus defying control and order, rendering her an abject body par excellence (Grosz 193-194). Her pregnant body itself becomes the source of abjection and the epitome of man’s primal fear (Creed 49). Angharad’s potential to cross and challenge borders endows her with distinctly subversive “powers of horror” that might threaten the Symbolic Order⁶¹. A prior close-up shot of blood trickling down her leg after Max has wounded her fosters the supposition that blood as a source of abjection is inextricably linked to the female, or even more so, the maternal body (Müller 126). Her untimely death, however, strips her of those lurking powers and thus expels her from the orderly paternal realm. As it becomes clear that Angharad is going to die, the Organic Mechanic is told to perform a Caesarean section in order to possibly save the baby. However, neither Angharad nor the baby boy – an alpha male – survive. Thus, the abject body has been brought under control, its powers have been detained just in time.

Another striking feature for exerting control over women are the wives’ chastity belts that bluntly mark them as Joe’s properties – his “things”. As we witness the deliberate taking-off of the nasty belts in a close-up scene, it becomes obvious that the tools of patriarchy are dismissed on a mission to find freedom.

Purposive objectification is further highlighted by the fact that we first see the five wives from Max’s perspective and yet undermined by the sudden realization that he takes no sexual interest in them at all. Yet the encountering seems to “[...] freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (Mulvey 243) as their beauty is displayed and figuratively offered to the spectator. The almost ritual act of washing themselves in the desert seems doubly irrational; firstly, they are presenting themselves to the male gaze, and secondly, the question arises as to whether they would waste the most precious

⁶¹ Philosopher and feminist Julia Kristeva forwards the phrase “Powers of horror” in an essay of the same name (“Pouvoirs de l’horreur” in the French original), in which she extensively treats the subject of abjection. According to her, the abject threatens humans’ lives (and hence possess “horrible powers”) as it blurs the borders between Symbolic and Imaginary, between subject and object and thus eventually leads to the breakdown of meaning and the impossibility of drawing clear-cut distinctions.

resource for washing as lack of water inexorably means death in this Wasteland. On a more figurative level, one could detect an envisioning of the link between water and femininity, a highly widespread trope in popular culture⁶². In this respect, water may be seen as a symbol for life and birth which further aligns Joe's wives – immersing themselves in this most feminine element – with their (future) roles as mothers⁶³. Furthermore, water being used in combination with white clothing conjures up associations of baptism which again hints to the fact that they are about to start new lives.

When Joe's wives finally take action, they seem rather uninformed and clumsy at first. Lead wife Angharad appears to take on somewhat of a motherly role, protecting the four others. It is Angharad who hands Max the hose so he can drink water. Immediately afterwards, Max orders The Dag with gestures to take off his chains with the thongs. As she is unable to cut him loose due to lack of physical strength, a fight between Furiosa and Max ensues. This scene exhibits slightly comic potential as all parties present suddenly partake in the fight. Nux, still chained to Max and the door of the car, tries to help Max, while Joe's wives support Furiosa by repeatedly pulling Max's chain to get him away from Furiosa. Still, they seem very reluctant to touch "dirty" Max.

As Furiosa and the wives insist on going back to the War Rig and leaving Max behind, Max takes action and shoots between Angharad's legs, slightly wounding her so that blood trickles down her thigh. Before they continue their journey together, The Dag gives the loathsome chastity belts a last kick as a sign of rebellion against patriarchy that she is eager to leave behind. As the plot unfolds, the wives become more emancipated and also occasionally involved in the action. When Nux wants to attack Furiosa, he is overpowered and bitten by her protegees. The act of biting might be read as a sign that also the young women adapt to the "wilder" environment they now find themselves in and are more and more willing to kick back. Only Angharad shows mercy, which is a bit problematic as her motherly feelings are overaccentuated in this scene. On the other hand, one could claim that she pities him, precisely because she anticipates a similar fate for her unborn child should the baby be male. Seen from this angle, Angharad's mercy renders her a fuller character endowed with "visionary ambition". However, as Nux starts to protest,

⁶² French feminist Hélène Cixous labels water the "[...] feminine element *par excellence* [...]" for it offers the "[...] comforting security of the mother's womb" (Moi 117; emphasis in the original).

⁶³ Consider e.g. the English phrase "my *water* just broke" used to say that you are about to give birth to a child.

Angharad assumes a more rational stance, asking him, “Then who killed the world,” before mercilessly kicking him out of the vehicle.

In one of the scenes preceding Angharad’s death, another instance of presenting woman as spectacle can be observed. As Joe comes dangerously close to the War Rig, already pointing the phallic gun, Angharad and her fulminant belly are presented to him as a warning after which Joe immediately puts down his gun. This can be read as a last silent nod to the “powers of horror” of Angharad’s abject body that manages to challenge the phallic power of the gun. The small victory lasts only for a moment, however, as the risky undertaking is immediately punished minutes afterwards as Angharad, having literally taken too far a risk, falls out of the rig and is ironically run over by Joe’s vehicle. Joe is framed frantically screaming, holding Angharad’s body, wrapped in her white clothing that has become a shroud and now serves its final purpose. It is evident, however, that he is not mourning the death of his wife, but rather bemoaning the loss of one his breeders and consequently, the potential loss of an alpha male.

After Angharad’s death, the remaining four wives are shocked, but develop further and gain courage. I would argue that it is the redhaired Capable who becomes the strongest of the four, not measured by physical, but emotional strength which ultimately does make a difference. As Capable finds the already very weak Nux, she solaces him as he anxiously speaks about his imminent death. The two become friends and even develop a certain romantic bond afterwards, as Capable frees Nux and he in turn kisses her cheek. It can be said that Capable draws subversive power out of her newly found courage, which is confirmed visually as she now wears aviator goggles, rather manly accessories, together with her unruly red locks and white gown. It is precisely this moment that shows her exhausting the potential of “pastiche,” creating a unique look that “[...] challenges the very notion of an original [...]” (Pettitt 6) for she does not copy any one of the characters involved. The fact that she frees Nux from the chains of patriarchy hints to the fact that she gives symbolic birth to his new self as an ally to the group. It is her who ushers in a new phase in which Nux gives meaning to what remains of his short life. Finally, he summons the bravery to break with Joe and renounce his worship of the War Boys’ cult. In his last moments, Nux whispers “Witness me” and points towards Capable as a gesture of thankfulness, thereby returning the appreciation that no one except Capable has ever shown him. Nux has appropriated the hollow slogan and given it new meaning.

Although an emancipation process definitely takes place among the young women, none of the others develop as much as Capable. Toast the Knowing lives up to her name and is trusted with the weapons as she seems to know how to use them. However, she is grabbed by Joe's warriors during the fight and safely placed in the Symbolic realm of Joe's vehicle so as to blight any probable attempts of hers to use said weapons.

The Dag assumes the role of a protegee of the free women as she is shown and given the seeds granting the perpetuation of life and civilization by one of the mothers. It is certainly no coincidence that she reveals her pregnancy at this moment and is thus doubly linked to the issue of reproduction. She also voices her criticism against killing (people) as she is familiarized with the woman's weapon. The Dag is thus evidently constructed as the "fairer sex" (and not only in terms of her fair hair) that feels emotional and reluctant about violence, and is, according to the age-old binary of man/culture and woman/nature, once more associated with nature – hence the bag of seeds – just by dint of being a woman.

Cheedo the Fragile is the only one of Joe's wives that shows no discernible development throughout the movie. On multiple occasions, she is eager to seek Joe's forgiveness and expresses her wish to return to the Citadel, probably fearing death or worse. One likely explanation is that she has been corrupted so much by the Law-of-the-Father and got used to living within the Symbolic Order (represented by the Citadel) that she does not dare to look beyond the borders of her restrictive world anymore. The promise of the Real might be too elusive for her to grasp that she dismisses the possibility of a life in freedom altogether. She sticks to what she has known all along rather than risking death or punishment. It is the Name-of-the-Father, a signifier without representation, that has her under total control.

4.3.4 What's in a Name? Furious Females and Capable Characters

Moreover, it seems worth considering the wives' names. We do not know – as this bears no relevance for the storyline – whether the names we hear have been chosen by them or given to them by either their parents or Joe. According to Luce Irigaray, names are "[...] slipped on to the body like a coating [...] an extra-corporeal identity card" (40) and replace the real name we have been given via childbirth, the navel. Thus, it follows that given names are never our real names (Schallmayer 17) which makes sense in this context as the women's names are very descriptive as they often contain adjectives hinting towards character traits or refer to their statuses.

Some names remain rather opaque as it does not become evident why “Toast the Knowing” is actually called *Toast*. The appended *Knowing*, on the other hand, does grant her a certain superior position among the wives as she is trusted with the weapons and well informed about ammunition. Another girl with long blond hair is called “The Dag,” extending the texture of her hair in a pars-pro-toto manner so that it has become her “name”. Also, the use of a definite article makes her appear more like a thing as usually articles are not used to refer to people. Only the lead wife can boast an excessively positively connotated name, “The Splendid Angharad,” meaning “Loved One” in Welsh mythology and bearing associations to royalty⁶⁴. Additionally, the adjective “splendid” in her name is used to hint to her extraordinary position, rendering her a semi-mythical creature that seems out of place in this poisonous Wasteland. She is nonetheless clearly Joe’s favorite as she appears heavily pregnant with a “number one alpha prime,”⁶⁵ as the audience is to learn later on⁶⁶. The scene revealing the baby’s sex hints to the performative nature of nurses or doctors (in this movie, the Organic Mechanic assumes the position of the doctor) declaring “It’s a boy” or “It’s a girl,” thereby fixing the ego’s sexed position in discourse. What their proclamation really amounts to is “[...] assigning a sex and a gender to a body that can have no existence outside discourse” (Salih 61). This scene ironically sums up the classification process conventionally taking place after birth. The newborn is placed into one of two readily available “sex classes,” which is “[...] accomplished by the inspection of the infant’s naked person, specifically its genitalia” (Goffman, *Arrangement* 302). The male-female divide informs everything that happens afterwards; introduction to toys, use of language, socialization, enculturation. So to say, it has to be verified that the child has been placed in the “right” category at various times during the child’s development (Goffman, *Arrangement* 302).

Despite Angharad’s position, her disobedience to Joe is figuratively punished with death in a car accident on the road (another hint that travelling the exterior space proves dangerous to defiant women). Although her death is mourned by Joe, it is obvious that it is not Angharad he is grieving for, but the loss of an heir, since healthy children seem to be rare in this sickly dystopian universe⁶⁷. As far as the red-haired “Capable” is

⁶⁴ “**Angharad** ([/əŋˈhɑːrəd/](#); Welsh pronunciation: [\[aˈŋarad\]](#)) is a [feminine given name](#) in the [Welsh language](#), having a long association with [Welsh royalty](#), [history](#) and [myth](#). It translates to English as *much loved one*” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angharad>; acc. 09.08.17; emphasis in the original).

⁶⁵ “[...] Another month, could have been your viable human” (The Organic Mechanic)

⁶⁶ “Was it a male?” (Joe); “Yep. Your number one alpha prime” (The Organic Mechanic)

⁶⁷ “You lost a baby brother. Perfect in every way” (The Organic Mechanic); “I had a brother! I had a little baby brother! And he was perfect! Perfect in every way!” (Rictus)

concerned, it can only be speculated as to whether she has earned this name for being an especially accomplished person. Capable does, however, exhibit very humane traits and evolves into a very likable and empathic character as the storyline develops. The fifth and last one, “Cheedo the Fragile,” appears, as her name suggests, as a rather naïve and fearful character, anxiously asking the group to return to the Citadel and hope for Joe’s forgiveness. She and Capable have apparently been labelled after personality traits rather than phenotypic features. The same holds true for Furiosa, whose name is Spanish for “(the) furious” and all too obviously tells us that she is a woman with a cause. She is furious in her mission to free the five wives and seek redemption and vengeance. She is violent, but just, bearing a name that befits her character and her wild determination to end male oppression.

4.3.5 It’s a Men’s World

When George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* was released in 2015, it was met with heavy criticism by men’s right activists led by the misogynist Aaron Clarey, who on his questionable website *Return of Kings* denounced the movie as a “[...] feminist piece of propaganda posing as a guy flick”. Apparently, the so-called “manosphere” was shaken to its very foundations at the mere thought of a strong female character “[...] [barking] orders to Mad Max”⁶⁸ (Clarey). The strict request by MRA not to go and watch the movie was immediately countered by feminists such as author and teacher Natalie Wilson, whose article was published on “bitch flicks,” a “[...] website devoted to reviewing films and television through a feminist lens,” steeped in the belief that movies and thus representations of masculinity and femininity reflect socio-political values of the age they have been made in (<http://www.btchflicks.com/about-us>; 12 August 2017). Wilson urges to definitely go and see the movie, forwarding a list of reasons, such as a “[...] new and improved Max [...],” director George Miller’s openly declared feminist agenda, or the need to become aware of the fact that not only women, but “[...] EVERYONE is enslaved by patriarchy [...],” women, Joe’s minions and the planet itself (Wilson). Like-minded media coverage leaves us with the question as to how masculinity is really depicted in the movie.

⁶⁸ The term “manosphere” is used by freelance writer Sarah McKenzie to refer to the “[...] online space [...] where aggressive men’s right groups blame women, and more specifically feminism, for everything from high unemployment rates and shorter male lifespans, to false rape allegations and poor family court outcomes” (<https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=38186>; 13.08.17)

4.3.6 We Don't Need Another Hero – Max Rockatansky⁶⁹

“My name is Max. My world is fire and blood. Once, I was a cop. A road warrior searching for a righteous cause. As the world fell, each of us in our own way was broken. It was hard to know who was more crazy – me – or everyone else.”

The movie starts with a black screen and Max's voice, assuming the role of a narrator acquainting the audience with his “[...] bizarre world [...],” “[...] the sole purpose of [which] is survival” (Bampatzimopoulos 209). He is interrupted by a deliberate jumble of voices, taken out of context, yet providing distinct pieces of information about the status quo, “Why are you hurting these people,” “The world is actually running out of water,” “Mankind has gone rogue, terrorizing itself,” “The earth is sour,” “Our bones are poisoned,” “We have become half-life,” thus evoking mental images of a “[...] dystopian future Earth, which has been devastated by climate change and environmental disaster” (Clavin 50).

The introduction ends and the camera zooms in on Max, next to his car in the midst of the desert, killing and eating a two-headed lizard (probably one of the by-products of the poisoned earth). Max is established as an ambiguous character from the beginning on. Not quite the traditional action hero, he is haunted by voices of people he apparently has not been able to save. These recurrent flashes of memories stress the supposition that Max bears indeed traits of the “[...] traumatized male subject [...],” a trope that Brian Baker traces back to Freudian philosophy saying that the human psyche develops a particular mechanism to block traumatic experiences (2) – a skill Max can hardly deny to have acquired.

The voice of a little girl saying, “Hello? Where are you? Where are you, Max,” fades as he resumes his extradiegetic monologue, *“Here they are again, worming their way into the black matter of my brain. I tell myself, they cannot touch me. They are long dead”*. By saying so, Max tries to convince himself that those memories cannot hurt him, fully aware that they do. After he is chased and finally captured by the War Boys, he deliberately positions himself as an in-between character as he tells us, *“I am the one who runs from both the living and the dead. Hunted by scavengers, haunted by those I could*

⁶⁹ The line “We don't need another hero” is taken from Tina Turner's eponymous title song for George Miller's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* from 1985. The line might be considered appropriate in this context since Tom Hardy's *Mad Max* is “not another” conventional Hollywood hero, as shall be argued in this chapter.

not protect. So I exist in this Wasteland, a man reduced to a single instinct: survive". The last part of his monologue is accompanied by violent memories of people that he, as he has already admitted, has not been able to save, juxtaposed with scenes of the War Boys overpowering him and making him their prisoner. Max is a warrior that is not submitted to any authority and does not belong to either group of people, or as he calls them, "the living and the dead". Max is very much an individualistic character, neither "[...] sharing the masculine beliefs of the villains, nor of the men who 'killed the world'" (Gallagher 54). Already in the film's introductory scenes, Max very much represents the archetype of the lonesome hero, sustaining the "[...] belief that isolation and independence are sources of strength" (54). Obviously, above-discussed introduction to the narrative has fallen prey to heavy criticism, deriding the movie's potentially subversive power as the beginning already anticipates the story of a *male*, "[...] haunted by the women and girls he failed to save, redeemed by the women and girls he succeeds in saving" (King). One might counter, though, that it is precisely his *emotions* that keep Max from winning the upper hand in battle on several occasions. As memories of the little girl over and over again mar his mind, he experiences instances of blackouts that allow his enemies or Furiosa to overpower him. Being too much governed by emotive memories or emotions in general, which are usually portrayed as a "female" weakness, ties him closer to female characters and dissociates him from Joe and the war boys that show neither mercy nor feelings. In one of the last battle scenes, Max is able to unconsciously transform said "weakness" into a strength as he – experiencing one of his flashbacks – instinctively touches his forehead with his hand, thereby preventing his head from being pierced by an arrow.

In the Citadel, Max can arguably be seen as being on the same level with women. Having been categorized and branded as an "original donor," he serves as "bloodbag" to Nux and is thus reduced to a function. While older and – as it figures – less attractive women "[...] are treated like cows [...]," young women "[...] are chosen for reproduction" (Bampatzimopoulos 209). In this respect, one could claim that he is objectified in a similar manner as the "milk mothers"; while the mothers supply Joe's offspring with milk from their breasts, Max is forced to donate his blood to the sick War Boys. Curiously, same as the babies cannot survive without breast milk, the War Boys' lives depend on Max's bodily fluids since they come from "[...] mutated genetic stock and require regular blood transfusions to sustain their tumour-strewn bodies" (Gallagher 52). Quite like an animal, Max wears a muzzle and is kept in a net hanging from the ceiling, always

available when his blood is needed. When the hunt for Furiosa and the wives begins, he is chained to the front of Nux's car in what could be perceived a rather comic scene in order for Nux to be able to take part in the chase, which he desperately yearns for⁷⁰. Following the crash in the sandstorm initiated by Furiosa in her War Rig, Max is able to free himself from the car (still being chained to Nux and the door of the car on one hand though) and hence assumes a slightly more active role in the movie. However, the fact that he occasionally serves as a sidekick to Furiosa in various scenes indeed bears witness to the latent feminist agenda of the movie (de Coning 175). Although Max's masculinity is not in crisis, he does not walk in conventional action heroes' footsteps as "[h]e exhibits traditional masculinity insofar as he is strong and determined, but so too does Furiosa – arguably the film's real protagonist" (175). There are several scenes in which Max and Furiosa rely on and complement each other, fostering a strength that neither of them can achieve alone.

Although Max is able to overpower Furiosa in combat, he cannot escape with Furiosa's truck due to a "[...] precautionary kill switch installed by the Emperor" (Gallagher 54) so that she alone is able to drive the truck. As Furiosa outwits warrior Max, it becomes all too obvious that this is going to be a battle of equals. This marks the moment when Furiosa takes charge of the situation and Max has to follow. Max and Furiosa become allies so that ultimately, gender dichotomies are not simply reversed, but portrayed in a much more nuanced manner (de Coning 175). Max is not emasculated, but "[...] [repositioned] into a female character assisting other women [...]" as a viable alternative to the traditional male action hero in contemporary cinema" (175). He does not exhibit the kind of classical heteronormative masculinity that relies "[...] absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities" (Halberstam 2) as he is constantly challenged by Furiosa's "female masculinity" (see chapter 4.3.2). His character and beliefs constantly evolve and are revised as the action unfolds.

In a short but striking scene, Furiosa asks Max for his name, which he refuses to tell. His objection to answering the question is telling of his reluctance to engage in relationships of any kind. At this moment, he is still hesitant to be part of a social group, a belief that is overthrown by him in a later scene.

⁷⁰ "It's a pretty poor result for the legendary Road Warrior, and Miller milks the indignity of his predicament for all it's worth: 'They took my blood, now my car!'" (Gallagher 54).

A stark contrast to Max's sometimes feminine traits is formed in the scene where Max ventures out alone to ransack a hostile vehicle in order to refill the group's supplies. Although we do not see what is happening, it becomes clear that Max does possess a potential for – albeit masculine – violence “[...] that even the film wants to keep hidden [...],” which serves as an explanation of his “[...] taciturn behavior and reluctance to engage with others” (Gallagher 55). Max returns to the women covered in blood. When Toast asks him if he is alright, Furiosa rightly replies that it is not his own blood. This is the only clue we get as to what might have happened during the looting. Indeed, what we witness here is the ubiquitous link of violence and masculinity, manifest as an apparently “[...] naturalized relation between maleness and power [...]” (Halberstam 2), that is once more reaffirmed so as not to strip the protagonist of his agency.

However, Max regains his humanity and part of his social skills as he tells the unconscious Furiosa, “Max...my name is Max. That's my name,” slightly hesitant, as if to reassure himself of his own name and thus identity. In a broader sense, not masculinity, but *identity* itself is in crisis in a dystopian future where the only purpose in life is survival. By doubly reaffirming his name, Max “[...] rediscovers his sense of trust, his willingness to be involved with others, and his own identity” (Gallagher 55). His revealing his name (“Max...my name is Max. That's my name”) is not done in a strict and orderly fashion as would be expected from a male using conventionalized tokens of phallogocentric language. He could have straightforwardly asserted, “My name is Max,” however, he resorts to repetition and broken language, which is rather reminiscent of Kristeva's semiotic.

The journey undertaken in the movie seems to be somewhat circular – Max ends, as he has begun, the lonely hero in search of his next adventure. This position, however, is consciously chosen by himself, after he has aided Furiosa and the five wives in their mission. Also the journey ends where it has begun, namely at the master signifier of the Symbolic Order, the Citadel; only this time, a much brighter future is beckoning for the inhabitants – that is, if they indeed succeed in overthrowing the foundations on which Joe's order has been built.

4.3.7 Who Killed the World?

Clearly the movie's antagonist is “Wasteland despot” and ultimate patriarch Immortan Joe, who mercilessly controls resources as well as the population in the “[...] misogynist

nightmare [...]” (Penny), the Citadel⁷¹. Joe reigns as a God-like figure over the citizens, granting and forbidding them access to water as he pleases. He justifies this by lecturing the sick masses, “Do not, my friends, become addicted to water. It will take hold of you, and you will resent its absence,” which renders him a ridiculous figure in the first place. Moreover, he positions himself as an omnipotent father figure set out to recover his people, “I am your redeemer. It is by my hand you will rise from the ashes of this world”. By using an archaic rhetoric reminiscent of Biblical language (“redeemer,” and the sentence construction starting with “it”) he tries to perpetuate his unquestionable authority over all people. As has been mentioned, he mercilessly controls an army of sick War Boys, the milking mothers as well as his wives, along with the ordinary people inhabiting the Citadel. Apart from the citizens, he is in complete charge of water and gas supplies, the scarcity of which and need to replenish them features as one of the movie’s leitmotifs. Furthermore, he administers “[...] weapons that permit his military to maintain a stranglehold on the agricultural supply” (Clavin 57). But the motif of needing liquids is manifest on a metaphorical level as well as

[h]is sons are kept stocked with mother’s milk from a farm of perpetually pregnant women, and his foot soldiers, apparently bred to serve him through violence, form a large, warrior class called the War Boys, require blood transfusions from standard humans to extend their lives (57).

In this respect, the narrative can be read as one of absence, which Joe seeks to conceal via showing off his physical power by putting on a “[...] medal-strewn body armour, moulded to give the appearance of exaggerated musculature [...]” and a “[...] fearsome skull-grin mask [...]” (Gallagher 54). Joe anxiously compensates his “lack” with a grotesque costume apt to instill fear in his enemies. What this masquerade really does, however, is merely hiding “[...] his diseased, sore-ridden body” (54). Via self-fashioning, Joe manages to assert a symbolic ruthless authority he does not effectively possess. He occupies an omnipotent position by becoming the phallus itself when putting on his armor for fear of being metaphorically castrated himself. The patriarch Joe is thus transformed into a ridiculous figure resorting to the game of “sexual masquerade,” where women and men bend to the rules of society and put on clothing and attire that is considered suitable for the respective sex. The “masculine” in this context is most commonly associated with authority and power (Ragland-Sullivan 76). The horrendous mask Joe is wearing may

⁷¹ In all probability, “Immortan” serves as an adaptation of “Immortal,” another signifier of Joe’s feigned superiority and strength.

help him to breathe (this is only a suggestion, nothing about that is said in the movie) and also allots him the role of the “monster” as a creature that is “[...] in between, [...] mixed, [...] ambivalent as implied in the ancient Greek root of the word *monsters, teras*, which means both horrible and wonderful [...]” (Braidotti 77; emphasis in the original), or between “living and dead,” as Max classifies the inhabitants of the poisoned Earth in his soliloquy. Joe is both *horrible* to look at, *horrible* in his senseless acts of violence, *horrible* in his subjugation of the population and *wonderful* for the War Boys, in particular for Nux, who will do anything to please him. His sense of power solely grounds on the total control he is able to exert over the War Boys and their unconditional worship of him, and on the “[...] ownership of reproduction, of the very essence of parenthood [...]” (Gallagher 54). Joe transcends the boundaries of a tyrannical oppressor by establishing himself as a father of the nation, “[providing] *his* society with *healthy* babies and milk via *his* women [...]” (54; emphasis mine).

Furiosa’s act of tearing off Joe’s face becomes all the more significant as it frankly testifies to the dead end of Joe’s masquerade. Back at the Citadel, mere seconds after Max has tossed Joe’s body to the ground, “[t]he crowd swarms the corpse, ripping it apart” (Clavin 60). Without army and armor, Joe has no power over the people.

4.3.8 “Shiny and Chrome” – Nux and the War Boys

“The militant destroyers of the Earth are gendered through a hyper masculine idealism [...]” writes Keith Clavin (58) and it is not difficult to see why. With their shaved heads, whitened skin and violent attitudes, the War Boys are reminiscent of hooligans; while on the other hand, their bodies are covered with ulcers testifying to their weakness. They unreservedly worship Joe and match themselves in trying to find the most glorious death after screaming “Witness me”. Before doing so, they cover their mouths with a silvery shiny spray to appear all “shiny and chrome,” almost like machines. Their only hopes are reaching the “Highway of Valhalla” which is promised to those dying a spectacular death in service to Immortan Joe. These warriors seem to share strange subcultural ideas consisting of putting together apparently disparate elements (Hebdige 137-138), such as “[...] hooliganism, Viking philosophy and car porn” (Gallagher 52) that can best be explained via the concept of “bricolage”. Bricolage is in subcultural theory understood as the transformation of an object’s meaning as it is adopted and re-contextualised, originally expounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss and adapted by Dick Hebdige (Hebdige 135-136). An example for bricolage would be the motif of Valhalla, the original meaning of which was

the final resting place for brave warriors in Northern mythology. Here, it has been appropriated by Joe to promise glory for young boys mindlessly and “[...] willingly [destroying] themselves at the bidding of an old man who keeps the spoils for himself” (Gallagher 52). Ultimately, Joe’s accumulation of items does not produce a sufficiently “stable” identity for him and the Way Boys to continue beyond the end of the movie.

At the beginning of the movie, we get to know anti-hero Nux (Nicholas Hoult), a “[...] young and especially sickly War Boy [...]” (52) who is equally victimized by Joe as the women around him (Penny). Initially, he is rather a source of comic relief than a character to be taken seriously, given his “[...] hyperactive hero-worship of Joe and incompetent efforts to ‘die historic on the Fury Road’ [...]” (Gallagher 52). As he is in constant need of Max’s blood, the movie’s eponymous protagonist is strapped to the front of Nux’s car so he can supply him with blood during the ride. As his suicidal attempts to attract Joe’s attention by wanting to sacrifice himself “[...] turn through a set of humanist cycles that permit neither a resolution nor an escape [...]” (Clavin 62), he questions his background and purpose in life, thereby undergoing “[...] the greatest psychological transformation” (62) of the characters in *Mad Max*. Rejecting Joe and the War Boys, he gains a new purpose in life by joining and helping Furiosa and the five wives, even forming a bond with Capable which makes him appear all the more humane. Though not physically powerful, he shows a certain mental strength as he speaks about his imminent death. The smiley faces he has drawn on the two tumours on his shoulder testify to his attempts to gloss over death and finding a bittersweet way to come to terms with his mortality. Certain of his death, he sacrifices himself in one of the movie’s key scenes. Blocking the canyon with the War Rig allows for Max, Furiosa and the wives to escape. Additionally, he manages to kill Rictus, one of Joe’s sons and antagonists in the movie, who even surpasses Max in physical strength. His sacrifice is not foolish like the other War Boys’ deaths, but serves a humanist purpose which finally allots Nux a formidable role as “[...] the redeemable feminist ally as hero” (Penny).

In sum, George Miller’s movie *Mad Max: Fury Road* is thoroughly informed by binary oppositions which form the backbone of most of the movie’s plot. Especially when it comes to the portrayal of men and women, the available “[...] social roles [...] are markedly differentiated [...]” (Goffman, *Arrangement* 306). Ostensibly, the scope of roles offered to women is quite small in Joe’s dystopian universe, “[...] giving to women the lesser rank and power, restricting her use of public space, excluding her from warfare and hunting [...]” so that ultimately, “[...] the female finds her life centered around

household duties” (Goffman, *Arrangement* 306) in a broader sense of the term. Not so Furiosa, however, who occupies the rank of an “Imperator,” driving the War Rig, going on dangerous mission to replenish supplies and being a better shooter than most males. With the ambiguous character of Furiosa, who has “[...] indeed some unique qualities [...]” as she is “[...] active and she takes decisions that advance the plot [...] she is brave and courageous, but also sensitive and emotional [...]” (Bampatzimopoulos 216), the movie offers a viable alternative to more restrictive versions of female action heroines in previous action movies. Although the movie may not be seen to constitute “[...] a breakthrough narrative that deconstructs the patriarchal world [...]” (Bampatzmopoulos 217), it does offer interesting characters like Furiosa, Max and Nux that challenge the well-known order by questioning age-old dichotomies blindly aligning men with culture and violence, and women with nature and emotion.

5. *Transamerica*

5.1 Transitions and Boundaries in Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica*

Duncan Tucker's road movie *Transamerica* takes the endeavor of broadening the scope of gender roles one step further as the narrative traces both the spatial and psychological journey of the transsexual female protagonist Stanley/Bree Osbourne (Felicity Huffman). At the beginning of the movie, Bree has already undergone several operations and treatments in her male-to-female transition. After learning that she has fathered a son in her youth, Bree talks to her therapist who makes Bree's journey a non-negotiable precondition for giving her permission for Bree's final surgery (Jensen 2). Being forced to come to terms with her past and to reconcile with her family, Bree takes to the road with her son Toby, who is unaware of Bree's identity⁷².

During the movie, Bree not only embarks on a spatial journey – that is, from New York to Los Angeles – but also on a “[...] physical and emotional journey to self-discovery in the context of the road movie trope” (Jensen 1). In line with a long tradition of American road movies, travelling across America (hence the title ‘*Trans’america*, pun intended) metaphorically illustrates Bree's journey towards self-acceptance. Her journey can be read as “[...] a quest for the “promised land” [...]” (Ganser et al. 10) in a much broader sense as she is convinced to find fulfillment of her dreams after her surgery. As befits the genre, the “promised land” is represented by California, where Toby wants to start his career in the porn industry. “California” in his imagination is a strong signifier, “[...] a mythic cocaine, a land of infinite freedom [...] where the sun is always shining [...]” (10). The film subverts this myth insofar as disillusioned Toby, having reached California alone, sits on the beach on a cloudy day, letting go of his last package of cocaine. California is deconstructed as having been no more than a childish dream: his journey to this semi-mythic place has been “[...] long, winding, and troublesome [...],” having initiated him into “[...] maturity and adulthood” (Ganser et al. 10).

When contextualizing said journey in space and time, the focus shall be placed on items of clothing and attire in the following subchapters. As Bree assumes various roles in the course of the plot, she impersonates distinct ideals of (conventional) femininity, starting with a hyperfeminine attire. The gradual swapping of items of clothes points towards a

⁷² “On first meeting Toby, to bail him out of jail, Bree does not disclose her true identity or the fact that she is a transsexual woman but instead poses as a Christian social worker, thereby learning about the boy's life” (Jensen 2).

latent subversive potential as “Bree is able to use the stereotypes for her gender performance as a woman” and thus demonstrates how common ways of expressing womanhood are culturally acquired behaviors (Jensen 4). The discussion of *Transamerica* will also include close analyses of key scenes that illustrate the dilemma of representing trans women (notably, the lead actress is a heterosexual cis woman, which has been, amongst others, a subject of criticism) and the prevalence of all too narrow-minded and stereotypical roles available to them in popular culture. The aim of this part is to answer the question of whether a progressive and “[...] positive representation of transsexual experience” (Jensen 6) is possible in the context of an American road movie, given its legacy as a genre originally dominated by heterosexual male characters.

5.2 Terminology

Taking a closer look at the movie’s title, the common prefix “trans” in *Transamerica* firstly “[...] refers to [...] the cross-country journey [...]” undertaken by Bree and Toby, and secondly to “[...] the transition from one sex to another” (Jensen 2). The transsexual protagonist Stanley/Bree Osbourne is impatiently awaiting her final surgery that she hopes will free her from the discomfort associated with her own body, especially her penis; which leads us to the term of “transition”. Rather than denoting the event of the “sex change” per se (that assumably takes place before the movie’s final scene in which Bree presents her “female” body in a bathtub), transition refers to a longer phase wherein one’s gender is altered (Carter 225). Bree’s ultimate goal in her transitioning phase is the sexual reassignment surgery, which is granted to her on condition that she reunites with her family and comes to terms with her troublesome past⁷³. It does appear problematic to both the therapist and the audience that Bree is sure to find happiness only after her surgery. Concerned about Bree’s mental health, her therapist informs her about gender dysphoria due to Bree’s outspoken discomfort with her penis. Gender dysphoria proves to be an extremely controversial and unsettling issue as it “[...] implies that being transgender is a *mental illness* rather than a valid identity” (Green and Maurer 54; emphasis mine). However, a medical diagnosis is a prerequisite to “[...] receive or provide treatment in the US [...]” and thus provides medical attention to people who need

⁷³ “Surgery has been an important part of trans agency and medical transitioning since Michael Dhillon began the first of thirteen operations to reconstruct his morphological sex in 1946. Trans surgery is any surgery that alters the body’s primary and secondary sex characteristics [...] The desire for surgery [...] became a definitive characteristic of transsexuality, distinguishing it from other so-called disorders like cross-dressing, transvestism, and homosexuality”. (Cotten 205)

it (54). This very scene proves crucial in once again affirming how society depends upon the existence of binary oppositions as well as on conventional versions of masculinity and femininity, which has been extensively treated in chapter 4.3.1.

As far as Bree herself is concerned, secondary literature refers to her as either “transsexual” or “transgender” which conjures up the impression that these two terms could be used synonymously. The subtle difference is that the older “transsexual” describes a person “[...] who has had hormonal or surgical interventions to change their bodies to be more aligned with their gender identity [...]” rather than the sex allotted at birth (Green and Maurer 56). Said term has increasingly been replaced with the umbrella term “transgender,” qualifying a person “[...] whose gender identity is incongruent with [...] the biological sex they were assigned at birth” (56). Although having been born as a biological man, Bree’s gender identity most obviously is that of a woman⁷⁴. For her, it is instrumental to “pass” as a woman in front of others, hoping that her biological sex is neither questioned nor unveiled in public. The strong manifestation of this wish might be traced back to a fear of gender discrimination or of being harassed, and results in Bree rigidly upholding binary oppositions in that she exhibits exaggerated behaviors conventionally coded as “feminine”. Researcher Saoirse Caitlin O’Shea, identifying as “non-binary”, elaborates on the importance of “passing”:

Trans folk are usually presumed to ‘pass’ in society where ‘passing’ is a means of stigma management, allows them to slip through a cisgender society unnoticed as their preferred rather than birth-assigned gender [...] ‘Passing’ is a means to avoid abuse and physical assault in a world where – as Butler has repeatedly noted – a failure to conform with the norms of society may result in abuse, physical assault and [...] murder” as was the case with Venus Xtravaganza (7-8).

Bree’s obsession with “passing” may well be rooted in a deep-seated fear of assaults or transphobic violence in general. Transphobia in this context is understood as “[...] any negative attitudes (hatred, loathing, rage, or moral indignation) harbored toward transpeople on the basis of [their] enactments of gender” (Bettcher 46) which is generally assumed to be the reason for violence against or harassment of transpeople. Transphobia is an extremely complex issue, intertwined with notions of homophobia, sexism and possibly also racism, that tragically motivate aggressors to shift blame onto the victims that are said to have purposely “deceived” them (47).

⁷⁴ “A person’s deep-seated, internal sense of who they are as a gendered being – specifically, the gender with which they identify themselves”. (Green and Maurer 54).

5.3 Deceiver, Freak, or “Just A Liar”? The Not-So-Many Faces of Transgender Folk in Popular Culture

As research proves, there is only quite a narrow range of roles available to transgender persons, one of them being “deceivers”. Once again, this runs back to the need for stable binary oppositions facilitating classification. Ostensibly, society heavily relies upon the binary of “gender presentation,” which is tantamount to a person’s outward appearance, including choice of make-up, hairstyle and clothing, and the “sexed body,” i.e. the person’s real sex and thus reduces them merely to their genitalia which are considered “[...] the essential determinants of sex” (Bettcher 48-50). People whose gender representation and sexed body do not match are thus perceived as “[...] either deceivers or pretenders” (Bettcher 52) and found guilty of tricking cispeople into believing what seems to be a falsity. Perversely, it is quite common that transpeople suffer “punishment” in the form of sexual harassment, physical assault, rape or in the worst case murder when their birth sex is verified and they are consequently exposed as liars⁷⁵. Revealing their true identity almost always entails exposing the person’s genitalia which is per se an act of sexual assault, which is, however, justified by assailants’ claims of having been maliciously tricked⁷⁶ (Bettcher 47).

Tragically, stereotypes of transpeople are forwarded and perpetuated in popular culture. Popular narratives regularly feature transwomen as prostitutes or as engaged in the porn industry as being “[...] sexual deviants who display an easily accessible – and easily dismissible – eroticism as their central defining characteristic” (Abbott 34). Cavalcante adumbrates the range of roles being available for transpeople, finding three possible options: the so-called “psycho-trans,” the transperson as victim, and the transperson as betrayer (88). The first stereotype can be found in classics like *Psycho* or *The Silence of the Lambs*, where “[...] cross-dressing [...]” features as a symptom of an “[...] underlying psychological pathology [...]” and thus categorizes the monstrous transpeople or rather transvestites they portray as straightforwardly mentally ill (88). Another type to be found is the transperson as victim; “[...] overrepresented as [...] casualties of violence,

⁷⁵ See for example the case of Gwen Araujo who was murdered by four men in California in 2002 after her male genitalia had been exposed in the bathroom in the context of a private party. The killers reported they had been deceived and even raped by Araujo and pleaded guilty only of manslaughter (Bettcher).

⁷⁶ “Genital exposure as sex verification may also be implicated in some forms of transphobic violence. [...] both of the highly publicized murders of Gwen Araujo and Brandon Teena involved forced genital exposure [...] in a bathroom amid accusations of deceptions and betrayal, followed by extreme violence and finally murder. [...] And it seems fair to say the deceiver representation [...] in and of itself constitutes considerable emotional violence against transpeople through its impeachment of moral integrity and denials of authenticity” (Bettcher 47).

discrimination, and murder” (88). Lastly, transpeople are prone to be represented as “[...] experts in deception and as perpetrators of betrayal” (Cavalcante 88), eager to trick heterosexuals into believing what is commonly declared as “wrong”.

On a more lighthearted level, crossdressing has long been used as a comic device in films like *Tootsie*, *Mrs. Doubtfire* or *White Chicks*, the latter of which interweaves transphobic attitudes with sexist and racial issues (34). Such films promote the image of the transwoman as freak, “[...] desexualized through dress, appearance, and mannerism [...]” in order not to threaten or question heteronormative sexuality (34). In said films, the deception is unmasked at the latest towards the end of the movie so that the well-established order of the sexes is restored and the audience relieved. Although not using violence or assaults, possible “[...] romantic or sexual attraction to a transperson is [...]” revealed as “[...] a comic misunderstanding [...]” for the heteronormative audience’s pleasure. Notably, nascent romances are “[...] invalidated or undermined to uphold the traditional dichotomy of sexual orientation and reestablish heterosexual normativity” (Abbott 35). At its worst, however, transpeople are featured as vile deceivers facing rape and murder such as Brandon Teena (Hilary Swank) in *Boys Don’t Cry*. Narratives brimming with violence and tragedy unfortunately tend to marginalize transpeople even more as their connection to suffering and discrimination only “[...] removes them from everyday experience” (Cavalcante 89), which does not, as I will argue in the next subchapter, hold true for Tucker’s *Transamerica*.

Arguably, *Transamerica* neither uses Bree’s transsexuality or crossdressing as a source of comic relief (as would be the case in *Tootsie*, *Some Like It Hot* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*) nor shows her experiencing any form of sexual or physical violence. Bree is never discriminated nor harassed throughout the movie. The only assault she suffers is a verbal one. Still, the scene wherein Toby learns of Bree’s birth sex uses exposure of genitalia (not forced, though, as Bree is unaware of Toby watching) which is indeed problematic insofar as the gender dichotomy is upheld and the “[...] primacy of sex over gender” reasserted (Abbott 35). This discovery leads Toby to call Bree a “freak” which is extremely hurtful to her as it is crucial for her to “pass” as a woman. Several scenes later, despite having called her a “freak” before, he now merely finds fault with and is deeply disappointed because of her being a “liar” as he unmistakably states (Jensen 4). On the one hand, the term “liar” does not possess any semantic qualities connecting it to transpeople (anyone can be a “liar”), on the other hand, being a “liar” is associated with being a “deceiver”. Still, it is not Bree’s lying about her birth sex that upsets Toby. The

movie's climax shows Toby's clumsy attempt to seduce Bree which puts *Transamerica* in a stark contrast to the movies mentioned before. When seeking a sexual encounter, Toby is fully aware that Bree has a penis and is not at the least appalled by her identity as a transwoman. The scene is quickly transformed into a tragic moment as Bree is forced to reveal her parenthood and Toby slaps her in utter dismay. However, precisely this revelation sets the foundation for a *healthier* relationship between parent and child. The fact that Bree somehow personifies Toby's father and mother at once complicates the Oedipal union. Having unconsciously desired his mother, and now finding out that this "mother" is in truth his father gives Toby the chance to leave the dangerously incestuous union. The movie's ending exhibits emancipatory potential as far as traditional role models are concerned. The concept of the conventional "core family" is deconstructed as father and mother are represented by the same person (Klippel and Knieper 201).

It is thus that *Transamerica* might exhibit distinctive subversive potential as the heterosexual core family simply does not exist in this movie, as much as Toby might unconsciously wish for it in the beginning. Also the tragically marginalized roles usually allowed for transpeople within heteronormative society are explored and exploited with a view to their subversive potential. The movie shows Bree's journey across the United States as much as her "journey" from man to woman. In the course of the action, her gendered identity is "[...] instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler, *Acts* 519; emphasis in the original). The next chapter centers on the question of whether *Transamerica* manages to challenge stereotyped views or ultimately confirms the "[...] reliance of gender norms upon an idea of 'truth'" (Pettitt 6).

5.4 Gender Performance on the Road

5.4.1 Multiple Realities

When *Transamerica* was released in 2005 – thus preceding the (social) media hype centering around the real-life transformation of Bruce Jenner into Caitlin Jenner by ten years (Jensen 1) – it was received with mixed feelings. Those embracing the film's openness towards issues of sexuality and gender celebrated the movie as a forerunner, claiming that it "[...] provided insight into this gender-fluid existence before it became the highly popular and contested topic it is today" (Jensen 1). As has been pointed out in chapter 5.3, critics hailed the advent of a movie finally dissociating transpeople from topics like violence, tragedy and murder. *Transamerica* instead boasts a "[...] light-hearted plot portraying the everyday life and relationships of a transgender individual"

(Jensen 2). This is not to imply an end of discrimination and injustice, but there must be more to the lives of transpeople than just tragedy. The move away from violence and towards “[...] the quotidian, providing insight into the transition, concerns and challenges of a gender-fluid individual” (Jensen 2) was highly appreciated.

On the other hand, director Tucker has been criticized precisely for the more light-hearted, even humorous touch he has given to his movie. Some critics feel that the issue of transgenderism is not taken seriously enough and that its complexity has not been exploited by far. Tracy Abbott for instance scolds several directors, amongst them Duncan Tucker, for “[...] conflating sex and gender to delegitimize the trans character’s right to love [...],” concluding that the main characters of the movies she criticizes are “[...] still [...] defined by his or her gender identity” (39). Movie-goers negatively disposed to *Transamerica*’s portrayal of transgenderism apparently feel that said representations “[...] are based on fairly normative conceptions [...]” of transpeople’s identities and hence foster rather stereotypical depictions of transsexual characters (Scherr 2). Another shortcoming of the movie has been identified as the fact that its main character is “[...] engaged in [a] *personal [quest]*” which depoliticizes the highly contested topic of marginalized groups (Scherr 2; emphasis in the original). Arguably, *Transamerica* remains relatively apolitical (at least explicitly); however, several academic articles and online reviews praise the movie exactly *because* of this as a “[...] movie about family, and connection”⁷⁷ (Cavalcante 85). Authors like Jensen plead for the acceptance of diverse realities:

[a]lthough transphobia and gender violence are still a reality, they are not the only reality of transgendered individuals. This film [*Transamerica*] portrays a positive discourse on trans-existence that was not fully explored or appreciated academically at the time of its release (6).

Additionally, the argument that *Transamerica* forwards stereotypical representations of transpeople is countered by Richard Propes from “The Independent Critic” who even goes so far to say that “‘TransAmerica’, in fact, transcends, the stereotypical treatment of transgendered individuals [...]”, allotting this to the formidable performance of lead actress Felicity Huffman (<https://theindependentcritic.com/transamerica>).

⁷⁷ “Transamerica wins you round by declining to grandstand on sexual or political issues, by not banging any drum in Bree’s cause, by not demanding victim status for Bree or making authentication of her new sexual identity a condition of finding her attractive or sympathetic [...] Everything about *Transamerica* is fraught and complicated, yet writer/ director Duncan Tucker somehow creates from these intractable materials a very easy and even happy comedy” (Bradshaw); “[...] at the end of “*Transamerica*,” you realize it was not about sex at all. It was about family values” (Ebert).

While one has to admit that there are several latently problematic implications in the movie under consideration, it does not do the movie justice to call it disrespectful and insensitive (Abbott 39). Quite on the contrary, it can be said that the legitimate desire of a man to become a woman questions the hegemony of the two sexes as a dichotomy. Thus, a shift from the bodily to a socio-political level *does* occur (Klippel and Knieper 189), despite the claim that the movie refuses to tackle political issues. In general, the movie offers new and fresh perspectives on gendered performances (also due to the fact that *Transamerica* is a road movie) and is open to “[...] discourse on gender fluidity, the processes and the experiences of transsexual individuals” (Jensen 6), which shall be elaborated on in the following.

5.4.2 Becoming Bree Osbourne

*"TransAmerica", in fact, transcends, the stereotypical treatment of transgendered individuals largely due to the **empathic and sincere performance** of Felicity Huffman [...] (Propes; emphasis mine)*

*"And he [Duncan Tucker] is helped by Felicity Huffman, giving one of **the funniest, subtlest performances** to be seen this year" (Bradshaw; emphasis mine)*

*"The movie works, and it does work, because Felicity Huffman brings **great empathy and tact** to her performance as Bree [...] What Felicity Huffman brings to Bree is the **newness of a Jane Austen heroine**. She has been waiting a long time to be an **ingenue**, and what an irony that she must begin as a mother [...], and at the end of "Transamerica," you realize it was not about sex at all. It was about family values" (Ebert; emphasis mine)*

The casting of Felicity Huffman, best known from the TV series *Desperate Housewives*, to portray transsexual protagonist Bree Osbourne has aroused enormous controversy. As the quotations above show, Huffman's performance has been praised excessively by those in favor of the movie, claiming that her acting has contributed substantially to its success. Those critical of this choice wonder why Tucker chose a heterosexual actress to portray a MTF transsexual, "Casting Felicity Huffman would also presumably negate the trans/romance dilemma because any romantic and erotic intimacy would also be perceived as normatively heterosexual [...]" (Abbott 38). Thus, Abbott claims that any potential romance between Bree and a male would not be perceived as "queer" by the audience, since they merely conventionally experience an actress and an actor engaging in heterosexual relationships or intercourse respectively. However, the film does not

allow for any romantic incident to take place, possibly because Bree is too uncomfortable in her biologically male body to allow any man close to her. Until the end of the movie she still has a penis she finds “disgusting,” a fact she reveals to her psychiatrist. Thus, it would seem odd if Bree suddenly engaged in romantic or even sexual relationships. Her authenticity, though, is undermined further by her “[...] prosthetic penis named Andy [...]” (Abbott 38) that Huffman reportedly wore throughout the shooting of the movie. Having worn the rubber prosthetic for such a long time made her feel close to Bree, and thus it outraged her enormously when Tucker decided to shoot the scene in which Bree’s penis is shown to the audience and Toby learns of her sexual identity. Huffman confessed she felt “[...] exposed and it felt like a betrayal and it wasn’t something I wanted to have and, nor did I want to show people” (“Huffman upset”). Purportedly, Huffman broke down after she learned that her prosthesis would be visible to the audience (“Huffman upset”). Apparently, she felt that the demonstration of “[...] Bree’s birth genitalia usurps or betrays her female gender identity for the average viewer” and that part of the audience would think that Bree was actually played by a man⁷⁸ (Abbott 38).

It seems curious that the scene showing Bree’s rather large penis is quite long; it almost seems as if her penis is put on display to overaccentuate Bree’s masculinity. Indeed, the scene serves a narrative purpose as Toby learns of Bree’s birth sex, but still, framing the penis as such a spectacle contributes to the inauthenticity of Bree’s masculinity⁷⁹ (Klippel and Knieper 196-197). Ultimately, the “[...] length of the shot and Andy’s [the prosthetic penis’s] size combine as well to prioritize the penis’s significance [...]” (Abbott 38) so that consequently, phallic power is unquestionably asserted.

Basically, Tucker could easily have cast a man for this role and foregone the trouble that “Andy” caused. Tucker deliberately refused to cast a man to impersonate Bree, because he did not want to focus on Bree’s birth sex, but on her wish to become a woman, “By casting a woman, that’s where Bree was going, instead of having it be a man in a dress. That’s what she left behind” (Thompson, qtd. in Abbott 38), which indeed seems a sensible and “laudatory” decision to make (Abbott 38). While Huffman’s (gender) performance has been labelled “[...] earnest and often awkward [...]” (Abbott 38), this

⁷⁸ Interestingly, the words “betrayal” and “betray” are repeatedly used when it comes to discussing the revelation of Bree’s genitalia, which hints to a long cinematic tradition of featuring transpeople as deceivers (see chapter 5.3).

⁷⁹ “[...] die Inszenierung [ist] überraschend grob in ihrem Festhalten an der Sichtbarkeit der Männlichkeit, als ob ihr Vorhandensein unter den rosa Röcken von allen Verdachtsmomenten befreit werden müsse“ (Klippel and Knieper 197).

serves a definite purpose: her performance is “[...] uncomfortable [...] when it is *intended* to be so [...]” (Bradshaw; emphasis mine). Huffman’s acting deliberately stresses Bree’s discomfort with and in her body and especially with her penis, her insecurity of how to interact with other people and her strong desire to “pass” as the woman she has always been and yet has not wholly succeeded to become.

This already becomes visible in the opening scene which firmly positions Bree as a transsexual woman utterly uncomfortable in her own body and her surroundings. We first witness her watching the video tape of a vocal coach, repeating after “This is the voice I want to use,” imitating the coach to sound as feminine as possible. Immediately, it becomes clear that Bree is obsessed with “passing” or as she calls it several times, “going stealth”. Bree puts on white underwear, conventionally coded as feminine, and light pink clothes, complete with light pink nail polish on her fake fingernails. She applies make-up and grabs a pink handbag. All in all, her getting ready in the morning seems like a “[...] parody of feminine performance resonant not with transsexual self-presentation, but more with drag performance” (Scherr 14) as her putting on of “feminine” accessories is utterly overaccentuated.

Interestingly, Bree’s interest in foreign cultures, which strongly positions her not as exotic, but sexual “other” is highlighted as her performance is accompanied by “[...] a traditional Zulu battle song” and she also takes a book about Black Africa with her. The interior of her home further testifies to this passion as she has it “[...] adorned with pictures and objects from ‘other’ cultures” (Scherr 14). Slightly disturbing photographs showing “[...] black women with rows of neck rings [...]” (Scherr 14) probably serve to underscore the issue of bodily transformations, bestowing it with a slightly grotesque touch. Furthermore, the images might anticipate Bree’s own transformation that is to take place in a week’s time. Scherr calls Bree a “[...] warrior going into battle” (14) that she is convinced to win due to her well-prepared performance.

Still, Bree comes across as a hyperfeminine parody, especially when compared to the people in her surroundings. As she heads for the bus stop, she is obviously ridiculed as she clumsily tries to grab her hat that is blown away by the wind. Additionally, it becomes evident that Bree inhabits a Hispanic neighborhood and works as a dishwasher in a Mexican restaurant, where she is portrayed as a rather comic figure trying to imitate the “feminine” hip swing performed by her Mexican colleague. Tragically helpless, Bree tries to blend in, but cannot do so because of her deliberately inelegant moves. A closer

analysis of these first scenes already points to the movie's problematic stance on otherness and transgender subjects,

Bree is constantly juxtaposed to and takes interest in people of color throughout the entire film [...] These representations of "the racial other" within *Transamerica* come to signify something extra-diegetic related to the position of transsexuals in contemporary United States. The constant positioning of Bree up against this backdrop of racial difference operates analogically: the message is that to be transsexual and white is *like* being racially other (Scherr 15; emphasis in the original).

What can indeed be criticized about *Transamerica* is how most of the minor characters impersonate gridlocked ideas of exoticism and otherness. They are marginalized, too, and thus automatically act as allies to Bree as if recognizing and respecting her otherness in order to unitedly stand up against white heterosexual hegemony. One could even go so far as to say that "[...] these "others" don't judge Bree because their judgment holds no social weight" (Scherr 18). Otherness would thus be characterized by Tucker by a certain flatness uniting all those expelled by society; be it by dint of their skin colors or their sexualities.

What Scherr aims at is to question exactly why Bree unites with and is mostly accepted by people of color. Her Mexican co-workers seem to respect and accept her. Bree's only and best female friend is her therapist Margaret, a Latina woman, who affectionately calls Bree "dear" and "honey" several times. Toby's black foster-mother seemingly does not even notice or care about Bree's otherness and treats her in an extremely welcoming and friendly manner. The only male who takes a sincerely romantic interest in Bree is Calvin, a Native American man, characterized by politeness, discretion and chivalric manners that Bree has perhaps never encountered before (Scherr 15; 18). That Bree is attracted to Calvin quite openly is little surprising as she has already stated her interest in Native American cultures before⁸⁰. Additionally, her appreciation of the Native American might be based on reciprocity as according to her, Native Americans have always valued and never judged transsexual persons. Hence, it seems only appropriate that she feels attached to a Native American man, who grants every woman "a little mystery" and does not ask any questions about her identity but woos her like a gentleman in the old-fashioned manner. Admittedly, *Transamerica* falls into the trap of straightforwardly using clichés: firstly, Native Americans are introduced as non-judgmental and very spiritual in Bree's stories, then Bree is shown as openly expressing interest in Native American culture, and

⁸⁰ Having exchanged only a few sentences, Bree already asks whether there is a "Mrs. Manygoats" which Calvin denies.

finally meets precisely the type of man, polite and tolerant, that she is obviously searching for, in the shape of the Native American Calvin Manygoats. However, they are barred from experiencing romance as Calvin lives and works in New Mexico, while Bree is pursuing her own goals, probably also not yet ready to develop a serious relationship. Still, she is extremely flattered as she takes his card, promising to give him a call should she ever be in New Mexico, which both of them know is not likely to happen.

In this respect, *Transamerica* can be said to use binary oppositions when it comes to the portrayal of characters: there are those in power – heterosexual and white – and those who lack socio-political power – people of color and those possessing a non-normative sexuality. Having been ascribed outsider roles already, these characters have little choice but become allies to support Bree in her own “otherness”.

The only white character – nothing is known about his sexuality – who accepts Bree and even views transsexuality as positive is the hitchhiker, who rules himself out as a serious character by declaring that he does not “eat anything that casts a shadow”. Complete with dreadlocks and a pipe to smoke drugs, as befits the cliché, the self-declared “level four vegan” is ridiculed so that ultimately, his opinion does not carry any weight, either⁸¹. After a skinny dip with Toby and conferring about transsexualism with Bree, the young man steals their car with all their possessions, forcing the duo to hitchhike as well. Instead of becoming an ally, the outcast betrays Toby and Bree, which takes his excessively stereotypical lifestyle to the absurd.

Still, *Transamerica* allows for a positive reading of marginalized characters: Bree’s son Toby, however, represents a refreshingly exceptional character as he is a white male excluded from those in power due to his “[...] most indeterminate, queersexuality of all characters in the film”⁸² (Scherr 18). On her coming to the New York State Prison, Bree learns that Toby has been working as a male street prostitute and has been arrested for drug abuse. Interestingly, she is not appalled by the fact that he has been hustling (or that he wants to start a career in the porn industry, as he tells her the first day they meet), but naturally worried that her son might be a drug addict. Throughout the movie, Toby’s sexuality is neither questioned nor discussed, which can be read as a refusal to classify

⁸¹ The hitchhiker in *Transamerica* bears strong resemblances to the Afro-American biker in *Thelma & Louise*, who, unlike the hitchhiker, does not betray the protagonists but helps them. Still, his help is of little use which further underlines the insignificance of characters representing forms of “otherness”.

⁸² “Queer” in this respect is “[...] associated primarily with nonnormative desires and practices [...]” (Love 172).

characters as either heterosexual or homosexual. In the latter case, one would conventionally find a scene wherein it is clearly stating that the character is homosexual, as if to owe the audience an explanation for any doubts they might have, or to give a reason for the character's deviance. Toby neither outs himself as gay nor is he ever asked any questions. At their stopover in Arkansas, Toby kisses a young girl and is immediately admonished by her father, instructing him on not getting his girl into difficulties. When staying with the transsexual Mary Ellen in Dallas, Toby feels much more comfortable being around transpeople than Bree, telling her not to be so "uptight". It seems very much so that Toby does not extensively think about the sexualities of the people they are staying with, but rather considers them "nice" persons as he tells an awkwardly apologetic Bree afterwards. Oddly enough, Toby is instantly "read" as gay by an older male the second they enter the pub in New Mexico where Bree meets Calvin. Toby seduces said man to earn money that they are in dire need of. The most remarkable scene occurs towards the end of the movie, as Toby tries to seduce Bree *because* of her penis, and even suggests marrying her, thereby admitting faint romantic feelings towards her⁸³. He tells her that he "can see her" and likes being around her, which is either a manifestation of the Oedipal complex he has not yet overcome, or a misinterpretation of the familial bond they share. On learning that Bree is his father Stanley, Toby reacts in a conventionally "masculine" manner and hits guilty Bree who insists that they can still be friends. When Toby and Bree reconcile at the end of the movie, Toby has his first role in a gay porn, as he had hoped for in the beginning, and additionally has dyed his hair blond, which he had also announced at some point before.

Although it can be argued that the divisions along gender and racial lines are quite clear-cut in *Transamerica*, it is not true that the movie fails to "[...] challenge the supremacy of white vision that continues to uphold [...] white power and privilege [...]" (Scherr 20). Scherr's concluding statement is proven wrong by the complex and unconventional character Toby, who despite his youth questions the established gender division insofar as he does not care about other character's birth sexes or sexualities. As far as Toby's identity is concerned, it is rather amusing to see how the movie assumes a light-hearted stance on such sensitive matters as race and origin. These serious issues are treated both

⁸³ Interestingly enough, secondary literature forgets to mention that this is not the first seduction attempt on Toby's behalf. On their very first night together in a motel, Toby lies down suggestively on the bed, clad only in his underwear in a cheeky attempt to provoke Bree and get behind the "walls" that she has built with her "costume". It seems ridiculous indeed as she goes to bed in "full armor," wearing a silky night gown, a towel over her shoulders (although her hair is completely dry) and puts on a sleeping mask.

ironically and warm-heartedly as an earnest Toby explains to Bree that he is part Indian because of his father. Rather than offering a reasonable explanation, he states, “It’s an Indian thing”. In a later scene, the joke is taken up self-consciously as the Native American Calvin tells Toby that he must have Cherokee blood in him, to which Toby does not reply, but coyly lowers his eyes, touching his delicate cheekbones with a gesture of faint pride. The unsettled question assumes a tragi-comic angle as Bree is forced to reveal her parenthood, her first concern being that Toby must certainly be disappointed because her being his father means he is not part-Cherokee, but Jewish (which again forges a connection between the marginalized and the queer, given Toby’s origin and sexuality).

What has to be pointed out as well is Toby’s difficult past that has substantially influenced Toby’s sexuality and attitudes towards other people. Tellingly, he never talks about it openly; instead, Bree learns of it through other characters and is thus able to empathize with Toby. Toby’s way of dealing with suicide and abuse is to repress that which traumatizes him, glossing over unpleasant truths with white lies as he tells Bree his mother died from a stroke, and he just does not get along with his step-father. In a very Freudian manner, the repressed truths force their way into consciousness as Bree decides to take matters into her own hands. It is Toby’s foster-mother who tells Bree of Toby’s habit of running away from problems, just as he did after his mother’s suicide (which is, however, never mentioned again afterwards). Likewise, Bree arranges a reunion with Toby’s stepfather, which ends in a brutal fight wherein Toby summons the outstanding courage to openly accuse his stepfather of sexual abuse. The all-too comic relief – Bree and Toby’s foster-mother carry the unconscious assailant back into his chair as if to erase any traces of what has happened – immediately lights up the sinister mood that has been created seconds ago. As Toby is confronted with the true identity of his father, he runs away again. In the last scene, however, he seems to have overcome the implied repetition compulsion as it is he who returns to Bree. Both have rid themselves of the burdens they have been carrying around all along, now showing off their new and happier selves.

Via the character of Toby and his way of seeing the world, *Transamerica* blurs the initially established boundaries between “white and heterosexual” and “non-white and queer,” thus offering a very self-conscious and fresh perspective on an otherwise disturbingly serious topic.

5.4.3 A Christian, a Cowboy, a Warrior – Identity Construction and Imagery on the Road

Notably, Bree's performance heavily relies on accessories and imagery, often taken from foreign contexts which further exoticizes her. Her clothing, however, is deliberately and exaggeratedly feminine, as if to constantly prove her femininity to both herself and the people in her environment (Klippel and Knieper 196). She always wears pastel colors, ranging from a blush pink to a faint lavender or a light mint green, adorning herself with conventionally feminine accessories such as a sleeping mask, a bow around her neck, or a headscarf to protect her hair from getting undone when driving. However, her femininity more often than not seems like a parody or a costume, as she is wearing too much make-up in a color that does not really fit her natural complexion, her mouth too broad, her hair stiff as if she wore a wig. Contrary to Bree's outspoken goal of becoming a woman, Klippel and Knieper claim that this artificial femininity merely de-feminizes her⁸⁴ (197). It is interesting to see, though, how in the course of the movie Bree puts on a slightly different attire, implying that she is now much more at ease with herself. As she sits around the fireplace with Calvin, hair tied back, wearing a printed jacket that must be Calvin's, she seems much more natural and womanly than ever before. There are several crucial moments yet to be discussed when on the road, travelling towards a goal and towards her new self, that deconstruct the idea of gender-stereotyping, revealing what seems to be the movie's ultimate truth: that there is no such thing as *the* transsexual person (Klippel and Knieper 192).

Before reaching that conclusion, Bree and Toby embark on a literal and metaphorical journey, to complete a mission in order to come to terms with their difficult pasts. On the road and leaving home, Bree and Toby participate in what appears to be a trade of gendered items, which they put on and take off again, thereby hinting towards the inappropriateness of gendered accessories. Adorning themselves with those items, they become whoever they wish to be at this moment, deliberately not adhering to acknowledged standards of beauty. Bree and Toby engage in what can be labelled "performative pastiche," a kind of radical parody, that, *unlike* parody, "[...] reveals the

⁸⁴ "Wichtig ist dabei vor allem, dass die Entweiblichung in der – knapp misslungenen – Betonung der Weiblichkeit besteht: im gespielt femininen, statt schwungvoll allerdings eckigen Gang und in der zu dick aufgetragenen Schminke, deren Farbe im Verhältnis zum natürlichen Hautton zu hell wirkt, und dem zu breit geschminkten Mund. Die Haare sind gerade, ohne jeden Schwung zeigen sie einfach nur nach unten, steif, als sei es eine Perücke, und wenn nicht, so sind sie schlecht frisiert, von jemandem, der mit langem Haar nicht umgehen kann" (Klippel and Knieper 197).

impossibility of true imitation, for the copy will always be a failed attempt to approximate a phantasmatic ideal” (Pettitt 6). The viewer is hence forced to reassess notions of femininity and masculinity as well as identity which might have appeared relatively stable up until now.

Travelling through rural Arkansas, Toby and Bree stop at a diner and souvenir shop where they put on distinct accessories endowed with gendered capital. First, Toby tries on sunglasses with an army pattern, which could be classified as a conventionally masculine item. By taking them off again, Toby renounces conventional masculinity associated with war and violence, as the army pattern suggests, in favor of a baseball cap that shows the bust of a stereotypical Indian warrior, which he seems to like much better. Toby probably chooses the hat as a tribute to his alleged Indian heritage; however, truly this is an instance of pastiche, for the Native American father that Toby wants to refer to does not exist. As Toby does not have a Native American father, the possibility of approximating the original retreats into unattainable distance (Pettitt 6).

Meanwhile, Bree is “read”, as she tells Margaret afterwards in tears, by a little Afro-American girl, who asks Bree whether she is male or female. Bree pretends not to care and turns back to the menu, only to frantically flee into the phone booth seconds later. Is it a coincidence that the girl talking to Bree is black (Scherr 17)?² The girl’s mother does not take part in the conversation, but merely advises her daughter not to bother strangers without paying any attention to Bree (Scherr 18). Bree’s desperate conversation with Margaret is unexpectedly interrupted when Bree spots Toby kissing a young girl. At this point, Toby abandons his indeterminate sexuality for an instant and assumes a heteronormative role, not without irony, though, as he is holding an orange plastic gun in his left hand that he had used before to aim at a slot machine. With a twinkle, the foundations of American society are turned upside down by Toby as he momentarily impersonates the heterosexual male, armed, in order to protect his family and home. He embodies an ideal of masculinity that is immediately deconstructed, given that his gun is made of orange plastic and both teenagers are scolded by their parents for inappropriate behavior. Notably, it is the girl, Taylor, who starts the kiss, as she pulls out Toby’s lolly, a candy usually given to children which further underlines Toby’s childlike playfulness and grabs his head. The set-up of this scene, juxtaposing gendered items and toys for children that neither match nor serve any discernible purpose shows that gendered capital cannot be naturally linked to female or male bodies and any connections between

accessories and gendered bodies is ultimately constructed and could thus be altered. (Pettitt 6).

Before resuming their journey, Toby buys a present for Bree, a cap with the slogan “I’m proud to be a Christian” which she reluctantly puts on in reaction to Toby’s insistent pleading. Again, this scene serves to illustrate the notion of “pastiche” (Pettitt 6) as the reference as well as Toby’s intention is ultimately devoid of purpose: the reference to Bree being a Christian misses its aim as Bree is not affiliated with the Christian church at all. Additionally, this is the first time that Bree abandons her hyperfeminine attire and puts on a gender-neutral item, the cap. Although she is at first unwilling to wear it, the cap is invested with emotional power and thus becomes a dear symbol for the journey with Toby. After her surgery, when Bree is no longer on speaking terms with Toby, she takes the cap into her hands again, crying in despair.

At their next stopover with Calvin, Bree is seen actually wearing Calvin’s jacket with a typical Native American pattern. Bree seems much more relaxed and comfortable in this piece of clothing, which may be attributed to her appreciation for anything Indian. The next morning, the traces of the previous evening are erased as Bree wears a pastel-colored dress again. Before Calvin continues his own journey and the three travellers part in Arizona, Calvin gives Toby his black cowboy hat that had been the subject of discussion before as Toby rightfully asked why Indians wore cowboy hats. Calvin wearing the cowboy hat is another example of bricolage, putting together originally disparate items to create his own look that is part of his identity. Putting the cowboy hat on Toby’s head, Calvin jokingly declares, “Now you look like a warrior,” possibly aware of the battles Toby has yet to fight. On the other hand, this might be an ironic hint at Toby’s self-assumed Native American heritage. Toby is as little part-Cherokee, as cowboy hats are linked to Native American cultures or traditions.

As Bree and Toby arrive at Bree’s parents’ home in Phoenix, Bree has to face the fact that not only Toby, but she, too, has lied about the past. Her parents are not dead, as she has everybody believe, but alive and well; they simply do not accept that their son Stanley has become Bree. Especially Bree’s mother Elizabeth cannot deal with the fact that she has symbolically lost a son. Their short stay in the parental residence serves as a perfect example to prove that gendered performance can be viewed as “[...] a compulsory reenactment of an already constituted norm, that reproduces itself with every recitation” (Pettitt 6). Hyperfeminine ideals of beauty are perpetuated as Bree has to choose her

clothes from her mother's wardrobe. However, the scene is one of inclusive laughter, uniting Bree and her sister in ridiculing Elizabeth's clothes that might as well be taken from the wardrobe of a drag queen. At this point Bree makes it clear that she is a transsexual and not a transvestite, drawing attention to the importance of the body.

Elizabeth epitomizes essentialist notions of gendered identity (Jensen 4), wearing pastel-colored jogging suits with perfectly styled hair, make-up and a cute little dog that fulfills the function of a fashion item. Elizabeth's performance is approved and appreciated by society and can therefore be copied safely by Bree (Jensen 4). Not only does Bree take clothes from her mother's wardrobe, she also takes "[...] female hormone replacement pills" (Jensen 4) that she finds in her mother's bathroom cabinet (note that hers have been stolen along with the car). Bree's family can be regarded as a microcosm of a "[...] binary society [...]" that judges and classifies "[...] these varieties of performances [...]" as 'right' or 'wrong' instead of merely existing on a continuum" (Jensen 4). Thus, Bree's family tells her that they love her, but do not respect her for the decision she has made. Elizabeth even grabs Bree's penis to verify whether it is still there, which constitutes an act of transgression on her behalf. Bree's answer consists in grabbing her mother's hand and putting it on her breast to demonstrate that she is neither male nor female, but definitely going in the direction of becoming a woman.

On learning that Toby is Bree's son, Elizabeth and Murray immediately decide to take him in and exert total control over him. In Toby, Elizabeth seems to regain the son she has lost in Bree and enters into a strangely intimate Oedipal union with him (given that she sees him for the first time and knows nothing about him or his past). Toby is smothered with (grand)motherly affection, momentarily indulging in the glamor of the Schupak residence. Not only Bree, but also Toby is wearing somewhat of a costume here, as he is instantly taken care of and dressed by Elizabeth. He returns with smoothly combed hair (up until now, his hair has always been greasy and disheveled), and a white buttoned shirt instead of his graphic T-shirt. That Elizabeth first combs her dog and then Toby with the same comb reinforces the notion that Toby is nothing more than a pet for her, or that both the dog and her grandson serve as fashion accessories she can adorn herself with in order to brag in front of the neighbors. Elizabeth even takes over Bree's role as a mother as she lovingly tells Toby to eat his broccoli – which he will not eat according to Bree – and then feeds him broccoli as if to prove her superiority.

When the whole family has dinner at a fancy restaurant, the scenes taking place might as well be taken from a comedy show. Murray tells Toby dirty jokes, for which he is immediately scolded by Elizabeth. Elizabeth assumes the role of head of the family as she gives everybody orders on where to sit, what to do and how to behave. As a consequence, she is compared to a “Nazi” by Bree’s sister who does not seem to be happy around her family either. When Elizabeth asks the waiter to take their picture, Toby asks for another picture with Bree alone, which hints at the fact that he feels more comfortable around her than with her family.

It is crucial to the scenes featuring Bree’s family that the term “transvestite” is mentioned, or that Bree and Sidney joke about Elizabeth’s wardrobe, especially about a pink gown ornamented with pink feathers, which is indeed reminiscent of drag performances. Notably, “drag performance” might hold subversive potential depending on how it is used. By itself, “drag” merely “[...] marks the expressivity of gender and reveals the relation between normative notions of what counts as “imitation” and “original”; in so doing it unveils the untruth of ‘true’ gender identity” (Pettitt 5). Within the small universe of Bree’s family, “Stanley” will always be the original, and Bree an “imitation,” a “man in a dress,” which definitely erodes drag’s subversive potential.

In the movie’s final scene, the notions of bricolage and pastiche are taken up again one last time. Bree has finally become a biological woman, as her naked body in the bathtub shows, and seems much more at ease with herself. Oddly enough, though, her predilection for “[...] pink clothing and house décor [...]” associated with ideals of femininity still prevails (Jensen 4). Her loose trousers uncannily match the sofa’s cover; both show a strikingly similar rose pattern. Toby has changed as well: his choice to dye his hair blond might either be understood as a nod homosexuality or as a prerequisite for his upcoming career in the porn industry. Finally, Bree hands him Calvin’s black cowboy hat, which is now devoid of meaning, but full of memories. Toby is fully aware that he is not even part-Native American, but part-Jewish, part-American, and wears this fashion item without necessarily referencing anyone or anything. He himself gives it significance, thereby providing one last instance of bricolage, revealing that there is no original to be imitated. Still in a certain way, both Bree and Toby have become “warriors,” “[...] both Bree and Toby have won their battles, and the only hint of racial difference discourse that remains is contained in the sign of the hat, which, after all, is a cowboy hat, not an Indian headdress” (Scherr 19).

5.4.4 Civilizing Wilderness

Cavalcante's concise summary that "[the] two [Bree and Toby] embark on a cross-country road trip where they develop their fledging relationship, traverse an idyllic American pastoral, and encounter a colorful cast of characters along the way" (86) perfectly grasps the core of Tucker's movie in less than three lines. Although being quite an unusual road movie, *Transamerica* naturally – due to its at least partial adherence to the generic conventions – revolves around a literal journey being undertaken. For most of the movie, the road functions as the main setting for the adventures experienced by the mismatched pair.

On the one hand, Bree and Toby travel across several states by car, making new and sometimes unpleasant experiences at each stopover, encountering "[...] unsettling stock characters [...]" (Ganser et al. 10) they would otherwise never have met. Following one of the generic conventions, the focus lies more on the temporal movement than on the goal reached; at least, disproportionately more time is dedicated to the journey than to the outcome (Ganser et al. 5-6). On the other hand, both start a symbolic journey as well, since "[...] one of the codes of road movies is *discovery*, usually *self-discovery* of the characters" (Jensen 2; emphasis mine). The constant movement and change of places allows for the characters "[...] to deal with internal and/or external conflict, while negotiating various destinations" (Jensen 2). That Bree experiences not only a transition from one state to the other, but also from man to woman, befits the character of a road movie as the "[...] journey on the road [...] expose[s] the complexities of gender and gender expression [...]" (Jensen 2) from a different angle than would be the case if Bree were e.g. to stay in one place the whole time. Of course, also Bree's and Toby's relationship develops and changes as the plot unfolds. This is partly due to the "[...] chronotope of the road as setting [...]" since this facilitates "[...] a kind of bonding between characters [...]" (Ganser et al. 6) that would otherwise not take place. Notably, "bonding" as such is not restricted to a particular gender (Ganser et al. 6) as is proven repeatedly in the course of the movie.

On first learning that "Stanley" has fathered a son in his youth, Bree is shocked and unwilling to take responsibility for him. Being forced by her therapist Margaret, Bree travels to the New York State Prison to face up to her past. At first, Bree is completely overwhelmed and unable to view the new situation in a positive light. Rather, she links parenthood to duties and responsibilities that she feels she cannot take on at this point

(Klippel and Knieper 196). It is particularly difficult for her that Margaret forces her to accept and acknowledge her *paternity* and thus fulfil a traditionally masculine role before she can become a woman (Klippel and Knieper 196). With this comes the shocking realization that Bree will always be Toby's *father* no matter what, and thus will never be able to leave this part of her past as "Stanley" behind.

Bree and Toby approach each other with a certain mutual mistrust. While Bree is anxious not to reveal too much and careful in the choice of her words, Toby is surprisingly open about his past (not when it comes to the fate of his parents, though, which is revealed only later). Bree is disgusted by the way Toby lives and offers him money to get by. Soon it becomes obvious, however, that the two of them will have to get along and start a cross-country journey. In crossing several states, the two as well step over the threshold separating culture from nature, which allows for Bree to make the bold move from man to woman⁸⁵ (Klippel and Knieper 196). Culture is usually associated with man, while nature is conventionally linked to woman, which has been dealt with extensively in the discussion of *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Contrarily, Toby's often crude behavior is constantly criticized and ameliorated by proper Bree. One could argue that while Bree transitions from culture to nature, Toby experiences quite the opposite as he ought to cross the boundaries from nature to culture to "become a man". Quite conventionally, crude masculinity is best shaped and smoothed by the counterpart of soft femininity (Klippel and Knieper 199), which Bree, however, does not represent.

Crossing the United States from East to West links their highly symbolic journey inextricably to the "myth of the frontier" (Straube 48) and to the aforementioned claim that Bree's journey is ultimately one from culture to nature. Their journey is accompanied by distinct animal imagery to compare human to animal, the wild, marginalized other within a "civilized" culture on the one side, and to constantly renegotiate the fuzzy boundary between culture and nature, civilization and wilderness, on the other (Straube 45-48.). Notably though, the wish to confront human's untamed other is dismantled as an illusion as "wilderness" only exists in an imaginary space:

Die <Frontier> hat sich jedoch in einen rein imaginären Raum verschoben und markiert hier nur noch die diskursive Grenze zu einer abwesenden Post- & Hyper-<Wildnis> [...] So begegnen die beiden Abenteuer_innen auf ihrem Weg durch den Kontinent nicht einem einzigen lebenden Wildtier. Ein platt gefahrenes Opossum, ein frisiertes Schoßhündchen, ein Plüschaffe, ein Plastikdelphin, motorisierte

⁸⁵ "Es geht damit um den Weg von der Kultur zur Natur bzw. zur Naturalisierung des Kulturellen über die Weiblichkeit" (Klippel and Knieper 196).

Souvenir-Squirrels, imaginäre Schlangen und ein paar wenige domestizierte Pferde und Hunde bilden die Fauna von *Transamerica*⁸⁶. (Straube 49, emphasis in the original).

What does this mean for Toby and Bree? Firstly, images of real or fake animals encountered in the course of the adventure allow for symbolic comparisons between themselves and the characters. Toby's stuffed monkey, strangely sharing a box with the head of a stuffed real deer, is a symbol for his – albeit lost – childhood. That the monkey is left behind as their car is stolen and pops up again and again in several scenes suggests that he has not come to terms with his past yet. The run-over possum could be read as joke, and merely gives Toby an opportunity to show off his biological knowledge. The imagined snakes merely illustrate one of Bree's irrational fears, that of filth, excrements, insects and animals like snakes (Klippel and Knieper 197). That she is afraid of snakes is almost satirical insofar as the snake represents a phallic symbol, which does not threaten Bree's real penis. The fact that she abhors her own penis makes it impossible for her to overcome her fear (Klippel and Knieper 197). Instead, she takes a huge stick, poking on the ground to scare away fictional snakes.

Images and talk of animals increase as the plot slowly but surely reaches its climax (Straube 49) and human nature is more and more compared to animal wildlife. This becomes increasingly clear when Bree and Toby stay with Mary Ellen in Dallas. The song sung by Mary Ellen in Dallas, "Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play," conjures up stereotypical images of the Wild West and the "Good Old Days". The appended "...with each other" by a friend of Mary Ellen's cheekily refers to their own human natures as animals, playing with each other, uninhibited by stereotypes or guidelines. Usually, deer and antelope do not "play with each other" as much as woman and woman or man and man are not supposed to "play with each other" in a heteronormative society.

After the motto party ("Gender Pride President's Day Weekend Caribbean Cruise Planning Committee"), Bree and Toby share a conversation about zoos, which act as a metaphor for Bree's life. Bree admits that she is fine with modern zoos, for although animals are "not free, they are at least safe" (Straube 51-52). Bree compares herself to the

⁸⁶ "The 'frontier', though, has been moved into a merely imaginary space, marking a discursive border to an absent post- or hyper-'wilderness' [...] When travelling across the continent, the two adventurers do not encounter any living wildlife. A run-over possum, a combed lapdog, a stuffed monkey, a plastic dolphin, motor-driven souvenir squirrels, imagined snakes, a few domesticized horses and dogs constitute the fauna of *Transamerica*" (my translation).

animals in modern zoos at this point, declaring what she wants to be: *safe*, comfortable in her body and in her environment. Like zoo animals, she will never be free in her “prison,” wrapped in the cloak of a biologically male body. She does not mind modern zoos, though, as much as she is content with modern society offering a relatively viable solution for her being caught in the “wrong” body. Just like Bree imitates “real” women so that she can be free, zoos pretend to “imitate” wildlife in their natural surroundings to suggest that the animals feel free. The zoo ultimately becomes a simulacrum: however hard people recreate caves and ponds for the animals, the original, nature, will never be reached (Straube 51).

Elizabeth’s lapdog allegorically represents the wish of Bree’s parents to form and challenge nature, as much as they want to shape Bree according to their wishes. Both Toby and the dog – both of them are combed by Elizabeth, one after the other – serve as status symbols they want to brag with. Similarly, the plastic dolphin that Elizabeth hands Toby in the pool represents somewhat of a parody of nature, an imitation of the sea and its real marine wildlife. One might interpret this as a silent nod to the above discussed merit of modern zoos; that although animals cannot be free, they are at least safe from extinction. Alternatively, the plastic dolphin could be read as criticism directed against institutions like SeaWorld, where dolphins are kept in pools where they clearly do not belong.

Bree’s sister Sidney provides another instance of a caged and domesticized animal. She, on the other hand, uses animal imagery to establish a connection to human sexuality. Besides, her attire forms a stark contrast to the light pink dresses her mother Elizabeth wears. Sidney, a former alcoholic, now sober for 18 months, wears a top with leopard print as a faint reminder of her exuberant youth. Leaning sensuously against the wall, she remembers her drinking times with an almost nostalgic “Those were the days”. Sidney feels like an animal in a modern zoo as well; safe, but not free. Safety is granted to her in the mansion of her parents, freedom for her is out of reach as a return to her wild youth would be insensible and unhealthy.

However, one might still extract a positive and even progressive message out of the sad truth described above: as much as an original, uncivilized West is beyond reach, having been colonized long ago, quintessential notions of femininity or masculinity are revealed to be constructs as well. The romanticized wilderness is reminiscent of Bree and Toby irrationally constructing an idealized past (Toby wishes to be of Native American descent,

Bree declares her parents dead in front of everyone else). The tamed, dead or fake animals time and again remind the travelers to negotiate their ideas of authenticity and originality on a highly metaphorical level and force Bree and Toby to ultimately unveil some unpleasant truths and come to terms with their respective pasts (Straube 49). On her journey, Bree continually oscillates between borders, posing as a Christian, refusing to be a father, assuming motherly traits before finally revealing and accepting the truth, thereby refusing to assume a fixed (gendered) position.

What might be criticized is the fact that Bree seems to acquire traits usually described as “naturally” feminine (Klippel and Knieper 196). From initially refusing to accept parenthood, Bree grows to like her new role and inevitably develops motherly traits as she relentlessly instructs Toby on proper behavior. She never grows tired of admonishing him, telling him to wear a seatbelt and to take his feet off the dashboard in their car. Meals also always offer a perfect opportunity for her to educate him, “Eat your vegetables,” “You might want to use a fork,” followed by a cynical “Just an idea.”⁸⁷ At one point she is so disgusted and annoyed by his rude manners that she even moves to another table so as to avoid having to watch and being associated with him. It almost seems as if the further they protrude into the West, the more Bree identifies with her “[...] more traditional roles as mother and nurturer, the definitive markers of natural femininity” (Cavalcante 95). In the idyllic surroundings of the more rural states, Bree and Toby are caught in a dense net of “[...] traditional American tropes and discourses of family” (Cavalcante 95). Interestingly, Bree is referred to as Toby’s “mother” several times, a statement that she or he are both eager to refute immediately. Classifying Bree as Toby’s mother might just be another way of familiarizing the strange. Assuming that the feminine Bree could be Toby’s father would be “unnatural,” whereas re-positioning her as his mother feels safe for “[...] those familiar with normative codes of white heterosexuality and reaffirms more mainstream audiences she is still somewhat like them” (Cavalcante 95). Her hyperfeminine, almost old-fashioned attire, paired with pastoral surroundings, evokes feelings of nostalgia and comfort (Cavalcante 95-96), thus making the uncanny more familiar.

⁸⁷ Remarkably, Toby follows Bree’s well-intentioned orders most of the time. On other occasions, he behaves quite child-like, promising something in return for a gift, which fosters the association of Bree being a demanding, but also gratifying mother, and Toby making a promise that he knows he will break. (Toby agrees not to take any more drugs, for which he is rewarded with the cap. Immediately afterwards, he goes to the bathroom to take cocaine.)

Summing up Bree's parenthood, she seems less concerned with providing emotional support or guidance than with instructing and educating Toby on various topics, be it Native American culture, biology or geology (Klippel and Knieper 199). While Bree's constant instructions initially put a strain on their relationship, tension is relieved at the end when Bree acknowledges that Toby is already a grown-up. When Toby visits her at home, she hands him an ashtray and brings him the requested beer instead of scolding him (she had actually suggested a coke). Their relationship is now much more one of equals; however, Bree still tries to establish motherly authority. As Toby puts his feet up on the coffee table, Bree counters, "Young man, if you think you can put your dirty tennis shoes on my brand-new coffee table, you're gonna have to think again." Still, Bree's wording and the way she says it have changed so that Toby immediately obeys, which puts a smile on Bree's face. Both seem content with the ways their lives have turned out so far. Gone are the dead, fake, or domesticized animals and the only reminder of their adventure is Toby's cowboy hat. Although it is claimed that any subversive potential "[...] remains hidden beneath the mask of whiteness and clear-cut gender difference" (Scherr 19), this is not quite right, as Bree calls herself Toby's "father," thereby producing an "[...] incongruent picture [...]" (Scherr 19) of a happy family reunion. This deliberate crack in the picture provides cause for reflection so that ambiguous notions of family can be acknowledged as equally valid.

Admittedly, the final scene exhibits a great deal of ambiguity as the camera moves out of Bree's house, leaving the audience to watch through the curtains, speculating only about what might be coming next (Scherr 19). The adventures are over and the battles are won, leaving *Transamerica* a movie about "[...] family values" (Ebert) after all. As mentioned above, part of the criticism directed against the movie is owed to the fact that "otherness" seems to be safely contained by the end of the movie, presenting the main characters reconciled and more at ease within a secure interior. Racial differences are glossed over, the border between nature and culture, animals and humans, wilderness and civilization, has been safely reestablished. As Cavalcante notes, Bree's role as parent undeniably renders her more familiar to mainstream audiences:

It is the construction from within the culturally familiar, the dismantling of a mythology that repeatedly constructs transgender at the margins or within a post-modern futurity that allows Bree to emerge as a popular figure whose difference is not feared (97).

Still, it does not seem fair to deny the movie its merits. After all, transsexuality and gender performance are highly contested and delicate issues; though it can indeed be argued that

the portrayal of Bree Osbourne and the ways that issues like “otherness” are dealt with are sometimes problematic. Although Bree is securely placed within the discourse of the culturally familiar at the end, making the movie ultimately one about family and friendship, it can be argued that “[...] these kinds of normalized discourses are often first steps in a long, arduous journey towards greater social acceptance and political equality” (Cavalcante 97).

6. Conclusion: Gendered Identities, For Better or Worse

In retrospect, the question as to whether gendered hierarchies have been aptly assessed and successfully deconstructed in recent road narratives cannot be definitely and satisfactorily answered. The portrayal of binary role relationships is an infinitely twisted and complex phenomenon informed predominantly by highly contested power relations. Power in this sense must be understood as “[...] a product of human activities [...]” (Fishman 397) and, by dint of being a “product,” it does not exist outside the socio-cultural discourse in which it is created. Likewise, “[power] relations between men and women are the outcome of the social organization of the activities in the home and in the economy” (Fishman 397) and are shown to be perpetuated and re-enacted in the movies under consideration. Relying mostly on psychoanalytic theory expounded by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well as on feminist theory as epistemological lenses, the analyses of the movies *Thelma & Louise*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, and *Transamerica* have shown how the subordination of women to men in heteronormative societies is achieved via classification and the ascription of rigidly framed roles. Incorporating concepts such as Judith Butler’s notion of “performativity” or Fredric Jameson’s “pastiche,” ingeniously appropriated by Annie Pettitt, however, draws attention to discontinuities within these narratives that endow the movies as well as the characters they feature with a distinctly subversive potential.

Feminist theory in this context has proven to be especially useful in laying bare hidden instruments which allow patriarchy to ensure the continuing subordination of women (Barry 117). Particularly with the emergence of the hard-to-pin-down concept of gender it became evident that notions like masculinity or femininity are ultimately nothing more, but also nothing less than historical constructs, produced only to stabilize and secure male hegemony (Cameron 23). Gender, however, is seen to be performed according to what is required in a given situation or time (Butler, *Acts* 520). What has become obvious is that there are no innate qualities defining masculine or feminine behaviors, or, to put it differently, “[...] there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender” (Goffman, *Gender* 76). It is exactly this portrayal of gender that has been analyzed in the movies mentioned.

Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise* was taken as a starting point for questioning generic conventions of popular road narratives. When the movie was released in 1991, it was heavily attacked for “[...] being guilty of male-bashing [...],” for featuring two female

troublemakers as protagonists and a pantheon of tragi-comic male characters (Willis 120). However, the movie ultimately adheres to conventional patriarchal Hollywood narratives as the two befriended women are punished for their violent and transgressive behavior. Attempting to imitate language, behavior and style typically coded as “male” does not endow them with enough subversive power to challenge male hegemony:

This dramatic transformation cannot be read, however, as a revelation of the “natural” body underneath the feminine masquerade of the housewife and service worker. Rather, the prominence of this bodily transformation [reminds] of women clearly “reconstructed” on screen [...] These revised embodiments of femininity stress the body’s constructed character as costume [...]. (Willis 127)

While *Thelma & Louise*’s eponymous main characters fail to deconstruct their abovementioned “feminine masquerades” by seemingly assimilating to patriarchy via clothing and attitude, the protagonists of George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* call into questions the depictions of traditional action heroes or heroines. Although said movie features strict dichotomies such as man/culture – woman/nature very prominently, it simultaneously questions those associations through the ambiguous characters Max, Furiosa, and sidekick Nux that defy outdated notions of violent masculinity and frail femininity. As the plot unfolds, Max and Furiosa become allies that only succeed in overthrowing the current nightmarish order of the Citadel when they work together. Complementing each other on various levels, Furiosa becomes a true visionary foreseeing and ambitiously fighting for a better future for women, while Max embodies “restless sensuality,” a relentless urge to keep moving that drives the action forward (Laderman 59). In the end, Max disappears as he belongs to the male domain of rough adventures, while Furiosa stays in the safely contained space of the Citadel to help build a better tomorrow. Even though no “[...] revolutionary ideas to contemporary gender politics [...]” are offered, director George Miller is said to have made a “[...] multi-layered statement regarding the socially transmitted expectations placed on women by men [...]” (Gallagher 55). On her mission to end male oppression, Furiosa exhibits and uses subversive potential as she clearly shows that a darkish world where women are merely “things” cannot be left intact.

While gender roles are mostly reaffirmed in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the necessity of assuming a fixed sexed position is called into question altogether in Duncan Tucker’s *Transamerica*. Tucker quite explicitly shows that “[...] beliefs about gender, about masculinity-femininity, and about sexuality are in close interaction with actual gender behavior [...] so that they might ultimately even trigger self-fulfilling prophecies”

(Goffman, *Arrangement* 304; emphasis in the original). By narrating the story of the transsexual protagonist Bree/Stanley who not only travels across the USA, but also crosses borders separating “man” from “woman” in her final reassignment surgery, Tucker succeeds in showing that gender is performance and not connected to biology. On their way to the “Promised Land” California (Ganser et al. 3), Bree and her son Toby provide instances of “pastiche” by alternately posing as a Christian, a cowboy, a warrior, without ever “[depending] on a prior given [...]” (Pettitt 5). This testifies to the potentially empowering postmodern conception of “identity” as “[...] a constant switching among a range of different roles and positions, drawn from a kind of limitless data bank of potentialities” (Barry 139). What their self-fashioning amounts to is the extremely liberating discovery that identity, including gender, is man-made and therefore possibly prone to change. Although Tucker’s movie has been criticized for sugarcoating racial discourse and filtering the narrative “[...] through the lens of “white vision”” (Scherr 20), *Transamerica*’s reconciliatory ending “[...] offers a glimpse into some of the spaces in which transgender individuals interact with society” (Jensen 6) on a more light-hearted level. With her overaccentuated femininity and clumsy moves, Bree teaches us that there is no essence of “womanhood” and that gender is always acquired through socio-cultural discourse (Jensen 6).

What links *Thelma & Louise* to *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Transamerica* is that said movies more or less follow the conventions established within the genre of the road movie. All three movies rely on the chronotope of the road as the site on which the narrative is fleshed out (Ganser et al. 3). Obviously, the geographical journey stands proxy for the character’s inner journey of self-discovery on the road.

Arguably, the three movies considered feature distinct universes; however, all of them are steeped in the firm belief in challenging white male heterosexual hegemony. Simply copying and imitating masculine behavior is likewise punished in a firmly intact patriarchal order, where vicious transgressors a.k.a. “Bitches from Hell” are symbolically sentenced to death (Griggers 133), as shown in Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise*. Frankly reversing binaries will not automatically herald change either: matriarchy is proven to be as unlivable as patriarchy, as becomes manifest in George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road*. It seems that the only way to dismiss age-old binaries lies in the re-arrangement of categories that have been invested with symbolic power for such a long time that they appear “natural”. In creating and appropriating one’s self-image without referring to already established and approved role models, one might find a viable alternative to the

patriarchal world of order and logic. Duncan Tucker's *Transamerica* might offer exactly such an example, a promising base to start an arduous journey towards acceptance and equality.

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8. Abstract

Die hier vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich mit der Frage, ob eine Dekonstruktion herkömmlicher Vorstellungen von Männlichkeit bzw. Weiblichkeit und den damit verbundenen klischeebehafteten männlichen bzw. weiblichen Rollenbildern in modernen amerikanischen Filmen möglich ist. Da die Dichotomie von starken, vernünftig agierenden Männern und emotionalen, irrational handelnden Frauen in klassischen Hollywoodnarrativen seit jeher perpetuiert wird, um die Illusion inhärenter Unterschiede in männlichen bzw. weiblichen Verhaltensmustern und Denkweisen aufrechtzuerhalten, soll nun untersucht werden, welche Bilder und Konstrukte in Filmen verwendet werden, um besagte Klischees zu reproduzieren oder gegebenenfalls auch aufzubrechen.

Die drei in der Arbeit analysierten Filme, Ridley Scotts *Thelma & Louise*, George Millers *Mad Max: Fury Road* und Duncan Tuckers *Transamerica*, gehören alle dem Genre des Road Movies an. Dieses Genre bietet fruchtbaren Boden für das Unterfangen dieser Diplomarbeit, da es seit seiner Entstehung in den 1960er Jahren ein klar männlich dominiertes Genre war, in welchem Abenteurer und Freigeister die vermeintlich unendlichen Weiten des amerikanischen Westens erkundeten, während Frauen höchstens Nebenrollen einnahmen, welche sich mehrheitlich auf die häusliche Sphäre, den ihnen zugewiesenen Innenraum, beschränkten. Daher ist es interessant zu sehen, inwiefern sich dieses Genre in den letzten Jahrzehnten verändert hat. Abgesehen davon wird das Konzept der „Identität“ im Genre des Road Movies konstant in Frage gestellt und im Verlauf der metaphorischen Reise dekonstruiert, adaptiert und neu geschaffen. In diesem Kontext stellt sich auch die wohl berechtigte Frage, ob dann nicht auch klassische Konzeptionen von Männlichkeit und Weiblichkeit genauso veränderbar seien.

Den theoretischen Hintergrund der Arbeit bilden psychoanalytische Konzepte von Sigmund Freud und Jacques Lacan sowie feministische Theorien. Zu Beginn des Theorieteils wird Augenmerk auf ein paar fundamentale Konzepte Sigmund Freuds, wie etwa die Traumdeutung und den psychischen Apparat, gelegt, welche dazu dienen, latente sexuelle Konnotationen und damit die Mechanismen der Unterdrückung von Frauen im Patriarchat offenzulegen. Jacques Lacans Konzepte des Imaginären, des Spiegelstadiums und der Symbolischen Ordnung skizzieren grundlegend die Sozialisation des Menschen, beginnend mit der harmonischen Einheit mit der Mutter im Imaginären über die Erkenntnis des Selbst im Spiegel, bis das Kind schließend in die väterliche Symbolische Ordnung, dominiert von Sprache, Gesetzen und Normen, eingeführt wird. Feministische

Theorien haben es sich zum Ziel gesetzt, naturalisierte Dichotomien, die Männer mit Kultur und Vernunft, und Frauen mit Natur und Emotion assoziieren, aufzubrechen. Judith Butler stellt ebenfalls das dyadische Paar von Geschlecht und Gender in Frage, indem sie auf den performativen Charakter des Konzepts Gender hinweist. Indem sich Charaktere bewusst entscheiden, bestimmte Rollen anzunehmen oder abzulehnen, oder sich aus der Verbindung von disparaten Elementen eine neue Identität schaffen, welche keiner Imitation eines schon vorhandenen Originals bedarf, subvertieren sie sowohl die schablonisierten Rollenbilder des Patriarchats als auch die strikt geregelte Symbolische Ordnung. Dies soll anhand mehrerer beispielhaft ausgewählten Szenen aus obgenannten Road Movies bewiesen werden. Den Abschluss des Theorieteils bildet eine Einführung in das Genre des Road Movies, welche Entstehung, Konventionen und konstitutive Elemente zusammenfasst.

Den Ausgangspunkt der filmischen Analysen stellt Kapitel drei mit einer eingehenden Betrachtung jenes Filmes, der 1991 das Genre des Road Movies revolutionierte, indem statt zwei männlichen Protagonisten zwei befreundete Frauen das Steuer übernahmen: Ridley Scotts *Thelma & Louise*. In diesem Teil der Arbeit wird observiert, auf welche Art und Weise *Thelma & Louise* mit Konventionen des Road Movies bricht und patriarchale Strukturen hinterfragt, an denen die gleichnamigen Protagonistinnen schlussendlich zerbrechen. Es wird argumentiert, dass Thelma und Louise letztlich deshalb zum Scheitern verurteilt sind, weil sie Sprache, Verhaltensmuster und Kleidung, welche konventionell „männlich“ kodiert sind, einfach übernehmen. Diese Übernahme gesellschaftlich approbierter Geschlechteridentitäten bestätigt die patriarchale Ordnung mehr als sie zu unterminieren, da hier klischeehaft anmutende Rollenzuschreibungen letztendlich doch intakt bleiben.

Der Hauptteil der Diplomarbeit soll nun untersuchen, inwiefern sich traditionelle Darstellungen von Männlichkeit bzw. Weiblichkeit in jüngeren Road Movies verändert haben. Kapitel vier induziert die Diskussion männlicher und weiblicher ActionheldInnen mit einer Analyse von George Millers 2015 erschienenem Road Movie *Mad Max: Fury Road*. Auf den ersten Blick fällt auf, dass besagter Film stark mit Dichotomien arbeitet, welche Männlichkeit mit Gewalt, Herrschaft und Rationalität assoziieren, während Frauen entweder rein der Reproduktion dienen und mehrfach „Dinge“ genannt werden, oder aufgrund ihrer Emotionalität irrationale bis leichtsinnige Entscheidungen treffen, die ein Weiterkommen erschweren. Eine genauere Betrachtung enthüllt jedoch, dass die Hauptcharaktere Max und Furiosa keineswegs in herkömmliche Schemata von

ActionheldInnen passen und gemeinsam jene Schreckensherrschaft beenden, unter der Männer als Krieger ausgebildet und Frauen als „Gebärmachines“ eingesperrt werden.

Kapitel fünf, welches den Fokus auf Duncan Tuckers *Transamerica* von 2005 legt, hinterfragt und dekonstruiert schließlich herkömmliche Konzeptionen von Geschlechteridentitäten, indem es die Geschichte der transsexuellen Bree alias Stanley erzählt. *Transamerica* befürwortet eine postmoderne Auffassung von Identität, welche es den ProtagonistInnen Bree und Toby erlaubt, mithilfe disparater Accessoires ihre eigene Identität zu kreieren und auch unkonventionelle Rollen anzunehmen. Die im Laufe des Films ständig wechselnden Kleidungsstücke und Accessoires deuten stark auf den performativen Aspekt von Geschlechteridentitäten hin, der es Bree und Toby schlussendlich erlaubt, sich von den Erwartungshaltungen ihrer Mitmenschen zu befreien. Mit dieser Feststellung schließt die Arbeit ab, nachdem verschiedene Strategien, schablonisierte Rollenbilder zu hinterfragen, vorgestellt und anhand filmischen Materials analysiert wurden.

Eine vollkommene Dekonstruktion der vorherrschenden maskulin dominierten Ordnung gelingt weder in *Thelma & Louise*, noch in *Mad Max: Fury Road* oder *Transamerica*. Dennoch kann man argumentieren, dass besagte Filme einen essentiellen Beitrag dazu liefern, stereotype Darstellungen von Männlichkeit bzw. Weiblichkeit zu hinterfragen und somit einen wichtigen Schritt in Richtung Akzeptanz und Gleichstellung der Geschlechter setzen. Was die drei zugegebenermaßen sehr unterschiedlichen Filme vereint, ist, dass deren Charaktere heteronormative Diskurse hinterfragen und dass – zumindest in *Mad Max* und *Transamerica* – lebbar Alternativen zu ebendiesen entworfen werden. Indem vorgefertigte Rollenbilder kategorisch verworfen werden, weisen die ProtagonistInnen der neueren Road Movies darauf hin, dass Geschlechteridentitäten konstruiert und daher auch potentiell veränderbar sind.