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**The representation of women in a Czech soap opera:
The clash of genre conventions and feminist ideals in the
Czech soap opera *Velmi Křehké Vztahy*.**

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MA Programme Euroculture Declaration

I, Tereza Chalupova hereby declare that this thesis, entitled “The representation of women in a Czech soap opera: The clash of genre conventions and feminist ideals in the Czech soap opera *Velmi Křehké Vztahy*.”, submitted as partial requirement for the MA Programme Euroculture, is my own original work and expressed in my own words. Any use made within it of works of other authors in any form (e.g. ideas, figures, texts, tables, etc.) are properly acknowledged in the text as well as in the List of References.

I hereby also acknowledge that I was informed about the regulations pertaining to the assessment of the MA thesis Euroculture and about the general completion rules for the Master of Arts Programme Euroculture.

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Abstract

This study deals with the conventions of soap opera in the context of the Czech Republic by investigating the program *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* (Very Fragile Relationships, VKV) and addresses feminist arguments concerning the structure and content of the program. Two main hypotheses were examined. The first suggested VKV follows a previously established soap formula and the second, that these conventions and formula are inherent in supporting a patriarchal society. Overall, evidence was gathered that showed VKV to fit an international standard of soap operas but with some interesting deviations. For the second hypothesis, specific examples were found in VKV which illustrate the clash between gender and genre, and the importance this holds for identifying the media as a supporter of the patriarchal system.

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Introduction

The soap opera has become a phenomenon around the world. Appearing first in America, this genre has spread and evolved into different local variations yet still keeping its distinctive features. The fate of soap operas has been similar to that of mass produced fictional romantic novels. It is a female genre condemned to be a low culture. The genre is denounced by many for its mass production practices and genre conventions which bind the medium to follow certain rules, or in other words determine the production of the same text over and over. Others have sought to defend the soap opera, offering explanations of uses and advantages of its existence and the continuing production of such soaps. However foremostly, these texts are loved by many. Its popularity is undeniable and therefore there is a need not only to denounce or defend, but rather look in depth critically, and objectively evaluate.

As many other countries nowadays, the Czech Republic creates its own soap opera tradition with serials like *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* ('Very Fragile Relationships' my translation), *Ordinace v Růžové Zahradě* ('Medical surgery in the Pink Garden' my translation), *Ulice* ('Street' my translation), which is a German serial franchised to many countries, and *Ošklivka Katka* (Czech version of Ugly Betty). It was not until 2004 when the first domestically produced (self-proclaimed never-ending) serial appeared on Czech TV. The important thing is not only the appearance and popularity of these serials, but also the depictions these serials offer to their audiences, how they deliver their messages to the audience and what these messages are. The insight gained by investigation of such content and how this content represents a social group (in this case with the focus on women) should be of great interest to us.

This paper will negotiate then two phenomena, the soap opera genre with its characteristics, and the feminist concerns of the representation of women in this media. This will be done using the serial *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* (henceforth VKV) as a case study. This serial claims to be the pioneer of the Czech soap opera genre. This research, therefore, will look at the characteristics of soap opera as such and will investigate the VKV serial in order to acknowledge similarities and differences between those

characteristics. Furthermore this study will have a detailed look at the content of this soap opera and consider feminist criticism of the media's depictions of women in them.

This paper would like to connect these two phenomena through its research and engage in a debate about the possible clash between them. It will be interesting to consider the findings in the light of the soap opera as a female genre as well as the conventions of the genre.

Firstly this paper will provide a theoretical overview of relevant concepts mainly focusing on media, feminism, and feminist concerns about media. On the basis of the theoretical overview hypotheses will be developed which then will be investigated through a textual analysis of eight (hour-long) episodes of VKV. The media part of the theoretical overview will focus on three main aspects of media (the producer, the message and the audience). Though the actual research part of this paper focuses mainly on the message, it is important to keep in mind the context of meaning production. In the second part of the theoretical overview, feminism is introduced, including the historical development as well as the contemporary concerns of feminists. This is followed by the gender and media literature review where the issues considering gender inequality in media will be evaluated. Furthermore the soap opera genre will be introduced through a short overview of its history as a female genre. Some current research studies which are relevant to this dissertation will also be presented.

The methodology will detail research methods and the results chapter will present the data. The final parts of this paper will evaluate the hypotheses, discuss some controversial findings, and analyse them in the light of the genre conventions and the genre criticism.

Theoretical overview

Media

Introduction

In a society with twenty-four hour news channels and internet addiction clinics, the media has become an important medium for, not only social interaction, but communication on all levels (I.e. government to people, advertising, pressure groups, etcetera). For different people the term media can mean different things. It could refer to entertainment, education, money, persuasion, a tool to control the masses, a tool for democracy and more. Whatever view of media we take, one thing we can agree on and that is that media produce certain media texts¹, which are then presented to audiences. The following chapter will cover the position of media in society and then focus on its interaction with feminism, and then finally combine these with a review of literature concerning the media text of soap opera.

When analysing a media text we need to be aware of three main aspects which shape this output. We need to take into account the producer, the media companies which create the text and the fact that these are formed in a business environment and follow certain rules and strategies of organizations. Further we have to concern ourselves with the actual text: what and when is produced, in which form, how often, and equally important is the part which is played by the audience; who they are, how they consume the text, and how do they further utilize it. This model of *producer – message – audience* very much covers the main topics which we need to assess when thinking about media and media messages.

Producer

¹ The term media text is used here to mean products and messages that are produced by the media for consumption by the public. The term does not only refer to written but all forms of messages (audio, visual) and, importantly, a text can be used as a subject for analysis (see Deacon *et al.* 1999 and Thwaites *et al.* 1994 cited in Burton 2005: 49).

Some academics see the media as a necessary tool which enables societies to accomplish their democratic values. The media, over time, have become something resembling a public sphere (see Habermas, 1991). It is the place where opinions are given and discussed (although perhaps not on such an equal footing). Nowadays, as we would like to maintain democracy, the media is a necessary tool for the people to communicate, especially if we consider the increase of population since the 17th Century when the public sphere is said (Habermas, 1991) to have first developed. Papacharissi writes: ‘When thinking of the public, one envisions open exchanges of political thoughts and ideas, such as those that took place in ancient Greek agoras or colonial-era town halls’ (2002:10). Now with millions of people sharing one country, one government, one democracy, but certainly not one opinion, this notion of every member of the ‘public’ debating ideas becomes unfeasible, even impossible. So mass media communication has come to theoretically substitute the live debate, and inform a huge amount of people, providing a place for the exchange of ideas and opinions. However, the realisation of this ideal is extremely debatable (as will be discussed below).

With the more centralised ownership of media we could argue that an ‘elitist public sphere’, rather than all-inclusive, is in effect in contemporary society. The public sphere as originally described by Habermas excluded certain classes, women, and ethnicities and yet today the same is true on the basis of financial means, for example Rupert Murdoch whose attitudes underline the output of the media he owns. Media in Britain, especially newspapers, “exercise a continuing prerogative both to bias the news and to slant the comment” (Tunstall cited McNair, 2000: 140). The adverse effects of concentration of ownership of the media were referred to in Chomsky’s now-famous statement that:

The media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely interlinked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege and limiting debate and discussion accordingly.
(Chomsky, 1989:10)

Although a lot has changed since this statement (for example battle over rights to reproduce content on the internet) over time, most of the world's media are owned by a decreasing number of conglomerates (Stevens, 2010: 9).

In addition there is always the need to make a profit, as media are constructed and adapted to commercial policies that underline their existence in today's capitalistic society. In order to understand media we need to look at the media companies and their drive for survival, depending on public success and uncertain profit potential. As today's Western societies are running in the capitalistic system, whose main value is dependant on the free market, this aspect of media needs to be taken into account when we try to look closer at the motivations and workings of today's mass media. Therefore all media output is very much dependent on its social success and its audience because what would be the point of media if nobody would read, listen or watch it. As Burton states: "Media texts intend to engage people, to convey some kind of information, and to produce reactions in their audiences which justify their continuing production" (2005: 45).

As explored above, media companies are market driven organizations producing a commodity they can sell to consumers, therefore the media output can be treated as a commodity and media audience only as consumers. With this "the market liberal ideology of freedom of choice in the marketplace of opinions is in fact a justification of the privileging of corporate speech and of giving more choice to investors than to citizens" (Keane cited in Burton, 2005: 7). Therefore the Western endorsement of democracy and freedom of choice, through the support of the free market and the private media which produce a vast array of output, does not "add up to a genuine freedom of choice for all sections of society" (Burton, 2005: 7). As media ownership is becoming more concentrated we can see that the "free market contradicts healthy pluralism" (Burton, 2005: 27) as we might have plurality of media but the output is limited in its variety of points of view. Also advertising revenue has been argued to have "more impact on programming than democratic ideals" (Papacharissi, 2002:19).

This is not to say financial profit is the only concern of media companies. There are other important influences on the media, for example different laws and regulations

which are embedded with different agendas according to the institutions which produced them. For example laws against hate speech in the UK which influence the publication of certain media texts as they must adhere to the laws when operating in that country. Hate speech laws are also a good example of freedom of speech's limits in some environments (for a detailed explanation see The National Council for Civil Liberties, 2010). Government interventions, although supporting the interests of citizens, irrevocably also supports its own status, i.e. that of the status of governing elite. Every government attempts to exercise power over media with more or less success. "Policy issues around media institutions and their output are of course the most tangible and immediate expression of political attention to the public sphere" (Dahlgren, 1995: 12). Good examples of this are war coverage, censorship on news reporting (see Jones 1991) and self-censorship in such examples as pictures of dead soldiers returning to America being a taboo (Macedo and Steinberg, 2007: 266).

Globalisation of media institutions

Following the capitalistic model and aiming for the greatest profit, it is no surprise that powerful media institutions are spreading their business across the borders of their own countries. And it is usually the companies of the western world, which have the capital to buy other smaller businesses abroad, and then through these distribute media texts which are coherent with their institution's practices. There have been concerns about cultural imperialism, where some cultural values get more possibilities to be presented by the media and legitimise themselves thanks to the ownership of a certain media. There is also a concern of cultural impoverishment when other alternative cultural outputs are substituted by standardised media texts. As Burton explains "the 'developed' world tends to dominate this cultural export business" (2005: 31), however this domination can be imperative to the appearance of new cultural streams as it can provoke rebellion. We have to keep in mind that media texts made in western countries present to the audience a picture of the world as the western producers see it. Because of the dominance of such media texts it has been argued that the developed countries are imposing their views and opinions about different affairs as well as traditions, cultural norms, and conventions on the rest of the world. While there may remain domestically produced media (such as the film industry in India and soap operas in

South America) , only in TV show sales the U.S.A. has 80% of sales in the global market. (Burton, 2005: 31). But it is important that this is not a one-way process as other cultures do have a impact on western media products, such as the film *Slumdog Millionaire* which features a few Indian film customs (such as Indian dancing in songs) but overall is a British media product resold to the world. When talking about the TV programmes which are sold, these programmes give us an idea about what is right, what is wrong, how we should behave in certain situations and how to see others. Through this process of socialisation, the media is a powerful agent specifically in television (Andersen and Taylor, 2005: 85-87) and therefore the amount of western produced films and TV programmes is important on a worldwide scale.

On the other hand, new technologies enable not only the big institutions but everyone to create and distribute texts, this supports the production and dissemination of alternative cultural texts. In the past the production and distribution of music was dependant on record companies. If someone's music was not seen as having an audience out there it wasn't produced by a record company. This however could also be an incentive for an opposition's appearance. For example relatively high-tech recording equipment is nowadays available to the wide public for an affordable price and there have been quite few cases when a music band has recorded their records at home, distributed them through the internet and in doing so avoiding the major record labels. This has been true of smaller (punk) bands for a long time and more recently by well-known artists such as Radiohead. Another example of this would be the availability of news online and decreasing newspaper sales in the UK. Regardless of the new technologies capabilities, alternative views are still in a minority in comparison to the media production of the big record labels and media conglomerates.

When we talk about media we need to concern ourselves with many aspects of the media. Since the late 1990s the Internet has created a platform for cultural exchange and cultural interaction. It is this technological progress which enables more people to enjoy the advantages of media. The Internet enables more of a reactionary consumerism of media where the audience is not only able to passively receive but is also encouraged to get involved and interact. This can be provided through the use of mobile phones as a voting device for reality shows which then give live results. The Internet also provides a

stark example of the audience actively choosing and regulating the information that is presented to them as well as providing a place for discussion rather than just being informed. However the Internet's freedom is debatable as well as how this freedom is available to the commercial sector because the Internet also enables commercial businesses to utilize this medium to their interests. The internet gives advertisers much more sophisticated techniques of advertising and targeting audience than for example on TV.

Most recently we can see this process happening with social networks like Facebook and Twitter, who were firstly meant as a social domain (for purely social interaction) are now being used by businesses to track information about their products and services as well as introducing themselves to possible consumers on this mediated yet more personal level of interaction. (BBC, 2010). The reason so much effort and money has been spent on this is that the media has the ability to create meanings through its different media texts, and these meanings may have an influence on people's lives (I.e. including what they buy) through socialisation.

Media texts can produce meaning and have the potential to change opinions and behaviours of its audience. It is in this potential that the main power of media lies. Especially if this potential is used to the advantage of one group and to the disadvantage of other. In this case it is possible to look at the advantaged group to be the producer and the disadvantaged group the audience. This process of the creation of meaning is a very complex process and might be to some extent useful to business. I will introduce the theory explaining this process later on in the section dealing with audience as this process is connected to the producer but even more so to the audience.

Message

When we talk about the message or the text itself again there are many aspects to be considered. These are the form of the text, for example if it is written, visual or audible text, what kind of visual text it is, is it an animation or camera footage, what words in what order are used and so on. One of the most important aspects relevant to our aim is the genre and the gendered text. Genre represents a set of conventions which a certain

text follows in order to achieve a certain kind of output. Genre serves as a tool, as a recipe, which if all the required ingredients are put in in required order guarantees a particular result. Critics of the phenomenon of genre on one hand see genre as a negative thing which creates the same text over and over but on the other hand a tool which gives power to the audience as the audience can predict what the text is going to look like, the progression, maybe even the end of a story (see Burton, 2005: 71). Therefore if we go to the cinema to see a thriller we know that we should expect a lot of action while if we go to see a romantic comedy we know that the story is going to revolve around a couple who is at the end of the film are going to end up together with the promise of happily ever after. This knowledge is a reassuring fact for the audience and for the producers putting forward this knowledge assures a certain market which will be attracted to it.

Dominant western media texts are proliferating other countries markets and the many of these texts are genre texts. To specify this to our intended research, American media products, especially films and TV series occupy a stable place in the schedules of TV channels available in the Czech Republic. The *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* soap opera presents itself as the first Czech soap opera. The genre is not unknown to the Czech audience as the American soap operas like Days Of Our Lives, Dallas and others were running before the appearance of a Czech soap opera. Therefore I would assume that the production of a local soap opera, though maybe sporting some specific features as native actors and surroundings, would inevitably follow the conventions of the genre text. From this I draw my first hypotheses that:

Velmi Křehké Vztahy is a Czech soap opera produced for the Czech audience which employs a soap opera formula and conventions of a genre text known to foreign producers.

This is very important as it forms the basis of my next hypotheses and assumptions. The specific formula and conventions of soap opera will be investigated later in the theoretical overview.

Audience

Up to now, the role of money, profit and the capitalist environment in which media operates has been focused on, however to claim that financial means are the most important factor and concerning today's media completely does not encompass its whole nature. There is always the underlining need to make a profit which surrounds contemporary media but there are many other phenomena which have certain influence and shape the media. These phenomena altogether create a network of things which envelopes the media, its institutions, production, and distribution and it might be said to navigate in this network so there is an evident path of means that leads to an assured target. These will now be explored further.

Encoding decoding media effects

According to Stuart Hall, there are two main processes going on during the media communication process (1997: 166). The first process is encoding and the second process is decoding. The first refers to the production of a text while the other refers to its reception. The basis of these processes consist of the construction of a meaning through the employment of certain codes. These codes refer to a "system of meaning which relates visual signs and spoken and written language (linguistic signs) to the different ideological positions by which a cultural order is either legitimised or contested (Philo, 2008: 535). When talking about encoding we talk on the level of producers and of the intentional use of codes to produce a preferred reading while when we talk about decoding we talk about the audiences and their personal and individual perception of a text.

The audience has a very important role to play as it 'reads' the text. "The text has the potential for meaning, and perhaps the potential for selective and partial meaning. But this potential is not realized until some process of cognition in the mind of the audience/reader actually 'makes sense' of that text" (Burton, 2005: 82). Therefore the audience gives meaning to certain media messages.

Burton explains that there are three main ways how the audience reads a certain text. First reading is preferred reading, which is the meaning that the producer intended the reader to get out of that media text. Then there is alternative reading, which means that

the reader has 'translated the message in his own way, not exactly the way the producer intended, but this interpretation does not challenge the original message/moral. The third way of reading a text is the oppositional reading which rejects the dominant meaning (Burton, 2005: 90-91). The different reading of messages depends so much on the individual, because

people do not indiscriminately absorb every message (...)
Media audiences interpret what they hear or see in the context of what they already know and what they learn from other sources. They selectively highlight, oppose or reconstruct statements. They are often able to analyse and deconstruct dominant themes, drawing on personal experience, political belief or a general critique of media or government sources. (Kitzinger, 1998: 207).

This brings us to an important point considering the audience, that they are active in their perception of media and in creating the meaning which is taken from a particular text. This can be intentional or unintentional. The text may result in people gaining a particular meaning out of a certain message however it might just as well not be the intended message. It may evoke different messages to be accepted. Every individual is working as an interpreter while engaging with media texts. To this interpretation job he/she brings in his/her 'life story'. This life story is represented by all the specifics which create this individual: identity, past experiences, values, beliefs and so on. This life story then modifies the interpretation.

There is a theoretical model which explains the relationship between text and meaning which assumes that "the text is vehicle for meaning" (Burton, 2005: 47). Many earlier theories were rethought and progressed from the assumption that meanings which are produced by media and spread through media texts are necessarily having an effect onto the audience regardless if the subjects want or either consciously decide to accept this message. This older theory was known as the hypodermic hypothesis. Through this theory the viewer is considered to be just a receiver . However another, more recent and more apt model considers the text to be rather a "kind of stimulus at the interface between producer and audience" (Burton, 2005: 47).

As I already mentioned it is the potential of media texts to effect people in certain ways through which the power of media is seen. There has been a progression since the hypodermic hypothesis in thinking about media effects and the hypodermic theory has been substituted by the 'aerosol spray analogy'. In this theory the media message is 'sprayed' on the audience and some "hits the target, most drifts away, very little penetrates" (Mendelsohn's idea presented in Naidoo & Wills, 2000: 241).

Another important theory is the two flow effect theory, which explains the media's effects as indirect where the important elements are so called 'key opinion leaders', who represent the active responding people within the audience. These people then disseminate the media message to other people by interpersonal communication. "This suggests that the mass media may be important in raising awareness and communicating basic information, but interpersonal sources, such as friends and known experts, are most influential in persuading people to make changes" (Naidoo & Wills, 2000: 241). The impersonal impact hypothesis, recognises the importance of interpersonal communication and suggests that the "impersonal nature of mass media is less effective in influencing personal concerns than in influencing societal concerns" (Kniazeva, 2004: 222).

Another theory is the theory of 'uses and gratification' which explains that the audience is active and uses the media to satisfy their own needs. As the mass system dependency theory shows, people use the media to achieve their own personal goals, thus they become dependent on the media in order for personal progress.

For the purposes of this dissertation (and the importance of media production-message-audience) these previous theories demonstrate the complex socialising role of the media and the concern of the media's effects on the public. This is important for the second part of the theoretical overview: feminism. The media, being such a profound part of contemporary society, has been heavily in the focus of feminist research. In previous academic research, media texts have been investigated in order to show the underlying messages that are presented to the audiences on a daily basis. These messages then have the possibility to be harmful to the aim of the feminist movement

and the strive for equality, or support the patriarchal social order. Therefore they have attracted much feminist criticism.

Feminism

Introduction - what is feminism

Feminism started off as a movement for more equal economic, political, and social opportunities for women. It is based on the inequality between sexes, which still appears in today's society. The history of feminist movements is divided into three main stages called the first wave of feminism, the second wave and the third wave. They represent the time periods in which women's movements were profound, relatively unified, and coherent. The first wave of feminism which started in 19th century was mainly concerned with the fight for political recognition and was successful with the suffragette movement gaining the right to vote for *all* women in 1928 in England and at a similar point in time in other countries. It was followed with the second wave feminism which saw the political and cultural aspects of inequality as tightly interlinked and inseparable. The famous slogan that guides the second wave feminism was 'the personal is political' and represents the idea that every private experience of inequality is a result of a higher unequal settings. It was first used by Carol Hanisch who wrote an essay with this title in 1969. It claimed that it is the patriarchal system of society that is to blame for the subordination of women.

Third wave feminism, which began in the early 1990s, was rather a reaction to second wave and challenged second wave opinions by questioning what is actually good for women. As feminism so far just focused its forces on just a segment of the female population (white middle class), it became obvious that in its fight for equality the feminist movement was discriminating and unequal itself. "Most people in the world are Yellow, Black, Brown, Poor, Female, Non-Christian and do not speak English" (Lorde cited in Mohanty *et al.*, 1991: 1). Third wave is marked by variety of different movements which while essentially different can be summoned under the umbrella of feminism. Even we can understand that the pressing problems of female community in

developing countries is essentially very different to the situation of women in developed countries. Even women in the same country who might just be burdened with different economic situation have different point of view on feminism and what the fight for equality should look like. There are different problems, therefore different solutions. However the issue is still of women as the disadvantaged social group.

The idea started from the fact we are living in patriarchal society where men are the ones who exercise most power and to the disadvantage of women. The first feminists focused on the political powers which were mainly appointed to men however with its development the feminists found out how the inequality envelopes all parts of private and especially public life.

Feminism today

The word feminism might connote various different things for different people. From the first successful powerful movements at the start, feminism went through a period of time the 1980s and 1990's when the word feminism and feminist became a "dirty word" connected with "old , anti-male" (McRobbie in BBC Radio 4) militant women and therefore many young women, did not identify themselves as feminists. This backlash from 2nd wave feminism gave revival to theories of ultimate differences between men and women, physical as well as psychological through popular culture, for example books like *Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus*. Feminism carries with it too much history and consequences of the previous actions and this results into disjunction of feminist ideas across the feminist field. There is the segment of society which equates feminism with man-hate and sees feminists as not fighting for equality but rather for power. Throughout the course of time feminism as a phenomenon picked up many different negative as well as positive connotations. What we have to keep in mind is the variety of people who live on this planet and how everyone's interpretation of feminism might be different. Feminism as any other kind of ideology has many forms and shapes. It is the same as with some religion, we have more orthodox religious people, or less orthodox. There are different ways of interpreting what the right way of living of a Christian is and so on. It is the same with feminism. Feminism

is still an ideology concerned with the well being of women however it has developed into much more complex notion than at the start of its existence.

Gender is one of the main terms which the feminists ideology revolves around. Gender as opposed to sex refers to the social construction of being female or male. While people are born male or female, this division is defined by the physical differences of having a vagina or penis, gender is something that is achieved by socializing one into the role of a man or a woman. As Simone de Beauvoir famously said "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (1989: 281).

In her book *Gendered Worlds*, Aulette *et al.* explain the contemporary method of viewing gender as being disadvantageous to both men as well as women. The authors give an example from the recent catastrophe when the tsunami hit Indonesia in 2004. 75% of the quarter of a million people who died in this disaster were women. Research has shown that though the physical strength does have some validity in justifying these number, other, social aspects are even more important elements when an environmental disaster comes. Gender and the social conventions connected to this social division are a strong determiner of life and death in situations where we would say everyone is equal. The research that has been done explains how the bringing up one as a girl does influence an individual's abilities for survival. The realities of gendered upbringing for example that young girls are not taught to swim, are not to climb up trees and are required to wear skirts then disadvantaged them when the actual catastrophe approached. To prove that gender is disadvantageous to both sexes an example of soldiers has been put forward. Being in majority male because of the gendered view of men as protectors results is that they are mainly men who then die in armed conflicts (Aulette *et al.*, 2009: 1).

The BBC website just recently had a news story about men being the weaker sex, bringing forward the fact that men generally die much earlier than women and are much more susceptible to heart attacks and strokes. This, as some experts explain, is due to the lifestyle the males in our society are living. Drinking alcohol much more than women, not exercising enough, and when actually ill not going to the doctor. Men are also more likely to become involved in street fights and die as a consequence. How

much do these correspond to the hegemonic masculinity picture where men are “patriotic, violent, tough, uncompromising hero” (Aullette *et al.*, 2009: 6).

There have always been assumptions about the lives of men and women being determined by nature, this includes (but is not exclusive to) their bodies, their appearance, and their sex. Aullette introduces the 'standard story' which represents the development of an individual: in case one is born a male, he will grow into a man and be attracted to women, in case one is born a female, she will grow into a woman and be attracted to men. But basing this assumption in biology can be tricky as it assumes that it is easy to distinguish sexes according to their biological make up. Instead, research done by Fausto - Sterling in 2000 in America, shows that almost two newborns in every hundred are born with different chromosomal equipment than just the XX or XY (which are the two which determine the sex of an individual) or are born with an anomaly which makes them appear female though owning male chromosomes and vice versa. In addition the common practice is that babies who are *naturally* born with both sexes are surgically transformed to be either one or the other sex. This pattern is also extended when the psychological setting of an individual does not fit with his/her body, for example when somebody feels like a woman trapped in male body, again surgery is used in order to create the natural (woman in a female body and man in a male body). “Medicine thus has stepped in to normalize gender: to make sure that adult men will have masculine childhoods, and a consistent gender dichotomy will be preserved” (Connell, 2005: 49). The line between what is created by nature and what is created by culture (society) is therefore not as clear as we would like to think. From the reasoning above we can see that it is not enough to use biology as the sole base for gender division and the consequences of such in the world.

Gender (not sex) then we can claim is a creation of society. It is constructed on three levels: the individual level, the interpersonal level and the constitutional level. The individual approach deals with identity, and how this identity shapes our assignment of a particular gender role. The interpersonal approach focuses on social action and how gender can be defined through social action, and day to day interaction with other human beings. The third, structural and institutional approach, explains how the structures of businesses are determined by gender and how then as a consequence,

gender is again reproduced. From this it can be seen how integrated the gender system is in our society and how it is manifested on many different levels (Aullette *et al.*, 2009).

According to Sandra Bem there are three ways of seeing the world while employing the gender attitude. 'Androcentrism' which means that the man is seen as the purely human, the norm. This can be visible for example in the use of language where while talking about humans we have a man and a woman and a mankind word which is derived from man to encompass all humans. Every variation of a human being which is not man is either something less or more than a man, either lacking something or surplus. These people are seen as deviant from the norm or as the 'Other'.

Another gendered way of perceiving the social order is to see it through binary gender differences, where something is either female, or male and usually these are exact opposites. We can see this expressed through the stereotypes of women supposedly being submissive, irrational, and emotional while men supposedly being the exact opposite, authoritative, rational and unemotional.

The third way of explaining the social order is through essentialism which assumes gender to be "biological or social trait[s]" which "does not vary among individuals or over time" (Bem cited in Aullette *et al.*, 2009: 49). The feminist movement has been proving this idea wrong carrying out different research, which demonstrate that in different times and in different places around the world there are different social orders in existence (for example see Aullette *et al.*, 2009:chapter 1).

Gender can be seen as one of the systems by which the power relations of this world are kept and validated. Aullette *et al's* main claim is that gender, as well as race and sexuality, are social constructions through which the power distribution among people are maintained and organized. These constructions serve to categorize people. These constructions intersect with each other and create multiple identities, for example black female lesbian, which then occupies certain status or position on a ladder or hierarchy. If we really want to investigate society, we have to be aware that gender is only one of the organizing systems which creates and serves inequalities, and through focusing on

gender we have to keep in mind this intersectionality as all the systems work together, influence each other on different levels and together create different meanings. The earlier feminist movements were criticised for failing to accommodate other inequality systems within its study of gender. Therefore, for example, women of different colour were omitted in the feminist research and the movement.

To prove the earlier essentialist opinions about gender wrong, we don't have to go far. Connell (2005) in her book explains how the current gender order developed, through history and the technological development of states. For example, the now challenged view of women belonging to homes, bringing up children, tidying up and cooking or so called domestic sphere has been brought up by the emergence of factory work and how this changed the family economics. The former taken for granted assumptions of different spheres of influence, public sphere for men and domestic sphere for women, as a result of different economic settings again proves that gender is not given by biological differences but rather a social construction which is very often not questioned. Therefore the new societal progress should ensure new possibilities for women wanting to enter the public sphere. There is certain progress in this issue visible, however this concept is still threatening to the wider public, manifesting itself, for example, in the much spoken about glass ceiling for working women, women being under-represented in politics and so on.

Women's labour: unpaid and unappreciated?

The patriarchal society of today is essentially built on capitalistic values. Patriarchy and capitalism go hand in hand. The economic power of the West enables companies to move to different countries. With the spread of their production they also bring in organizational practices which follow certain rules, represent certain values. Through globalisation then ideologies about women and men are being disseminated. This, some academics argue, creates a global gender order, where western ideas about gender are being imposed onto other cultures and societies. In addition the western countries often see their ideologies as the right way to live and are ignorant to other culture's values and traditions.

When we describe people in general or even ourselves there are many aspects to our identity. We could say, white, Czech, non-Christian, female, heterosexual, young etcetera. Those and other categories brought together create an individual and everyone's identity is unique, as I mentioned there are multiple identities. From this fact it is obvious that there is not one universal woman but many different women, who vary in appearance, values, beliefs, behaviour, sexuality, and so on. However the reality of the existence of so many different variations of women means there is a dominant picture of a proper woman circulating the society and the media. This is also true for men, as there is one dominant idea of what a man should look like, how he should behave, what qualities he should possess and so on. Connell was the first to introduce the concept of *hegemonic* masculinity and explained how through the history this concept developed (2005: part 2). Four main developments of the 14th, 15th and 16th century were particularly important for creation of masculinity. She identifies "cultural change,... creation of overseas empires, ...growth of cities that were at the centres of commercial capitalism and onset of large-scale European civil war" (2005: 188) as key developments. She identifies gentry masculinity as the first hegemonic masculinity that appeared and one from which European/American masculinity developed.

She also claims that the women's movement, the progress of capitalism and the "power relations of empire" (2005: 191) caused gentry masculinity to be substituted by new hegemonic masculinity and also caused the appearance of different subordinated forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity then represents the "idealized, culturally ascendant masculinity", the picture of "patriotic, violent, tough, uncompromising hero" (Aullette *et al.*, 2009: 6). Hegemonic masculinity represents one extreme of the gender system corresponding to the male part of society, on the other hand there is subordinated femininity, a "media version of womanhood that is "organised, financed, and supervised by men" (Connell cited in Aullette *et al.*, 2009: 6). The proper woman is "young, thin, conventionally beautiful, heterosexual, and often nurturant" (Aullette *et al.*, 2009: 6). These two notions represent the borders, which lie on the opposite sides of gender spectrum. However real people usually do not conform to these extremes but rather find themselves somewhere on the line between these two. Unfortunately these images still appear in today's society as the prototypes of exemplary man and woman

and the possibility that these images serve as a norm can help us investigate gender stereotypes.

Some critics have been concerned with the development of feminism from being a powerful movement through to becoming a dirty word and then into relatively contemporary low-key feminism (BBC Radio 4, 2010). Have women become so placated by the progress of laws and incentives which were established in developed countries to support gender equality that there is no big reason to fight? New technologies, especially the internet, have given women a platform where feminism and its connected issues can be discussed, without there having to be a need for militant or protest action. Has the fight moved into the the virtual sphere of media after beginning on the streets of the early 20th century and spending much of the next decades in academic journals and broadsheet newspapers?

Today's feminism might represent something completely different from the first ideas of feminism, however the change was inevitable with the progress of time and emancipation. Feminism has been redefined and the pressing issues and questions have been re-discussed and redrawn. As gender is seen as the base for inequality between men and women it is a focal point for feminists.

Today the focus of feminists should be on gender diversity and the acknowledgement that gender should not be a binary system and is interconnected with other systems of inequality. This is closely connected to identity and the fact that *no one is just a woman or just a man*. The main challenge then is that though we need to overcome simplifications like the binary gender categories (that is also true for separating gender from race, class and other inequality systems) we still need those in order to make inequality visible. The same is true for identities, as identity is created greatly by one “not being the Other” (Lorber, 2005: 14).

What is the situation of women in contemporary society?

In many western countries the position of women improved from being owned by men and dependant on them considering their social status as well as economically.

Through emancipation women have become more independent. However to claim that men and women in today's developed world are equal is an over-exaggeration. The incentive today certainly involves equal opportunities for both sexes, which is in many cases established by law. The fact is that regardless of these laws, women experience discrimination (such as the glass ceiling effect) and are under-represented in high posts and ruling positions (Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010). Furthermore, although ensured by law, some companies still discriminate on the basis of gender, race and other factors. An example of this would be Walmart, the world's biggest retailer, which is at the moment facing America's biggest law suit concerning gender. Walmart has been proved to pay less to women and to offer women less possibilities for promotion (WalmartWatch, 2010).

Media and Gender

So far this literature review has established that gender is a constructed categorical system which disadvantages women and men. It supports the current societal status quo and therefore prevents equality between sexes.

The media are institutions which fall under capitalistic pressure and create messages which correspond to the ideological cultural requirements of the western world in order to make profit. It serves to legitimize the patriarchal order of the world and justify inequalities. We can therefore see the media as a tool for the inequality systems, which are normalised and presented as reality.

Together then the media and gender create a very good team in the complexity of contemporary society. The media reproducing the ideas of gender to the wider masses, stating such as the way things are and should be. Unchangeable. Many academics and especially feminists have been looking at this problematic representation of men, women and gender in the media.

As any institution in capitalistic world, media institutions are no exception to the fact that it is a gendered institution, therefore embedded by practices which inconvenience

women. The easiest place we can see this gendered nature of media institutions is in employment and the disproportion between the number of employed women and positions which they occupy (Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010). Lorber explains that “The ideal worker, from the point of view of the boss, is one who needs the job for survival or to support a family but whose family does not interfere with the job.” (2005: 75). This explains why men are the ideal workers in contemporary society. It also illustrates the link between family and work. Family must be important to individuals just enough to motivate them but not too important so they would prioritize family over work. A study conducted in 2004 concerned about the disparity between employment of women and men showed that of the 57 companies which were researched only 68 women from the total number of 1 247 of executives were employed. These companies were 57 of the top 500 American companies which had the highest yearly revenue. Therefore female views are also missing in the production part of the media message creation.

Already mentioned in the first part of the literature review was how what media are offering to the audience is a representation, not the original. Furthermore these representations do not necessarily have to represent real state of affairs as much as certain point of view of these affairs.

Representation is closely connected to the rather complex process of media message production. As I already explained in more detail before there are three major points to mention when considering media messages: the producer (or sender), the content (or message) and the consumer (or receiver). Each of these three aspects represent a separate intricate system of processes which, for example, relates to the selection of content, the identity of the author and institutional and organisational impact of the producing company; the style in which certain text is produced or the specific *reading* of certain media text by a segment of the audience. In their introduction of *Critical Readings: Media and Gender*, Cynthia Carter and Linda Steiners consider the concept of hegemony as a dominant force in shaping media messages (2004). The concept of cultural hegemony represents the dominance of one social class over others and maintaining the dominance by acquiring the consent of the other classes to accept a system that creates privileges for this group. This is happening though persuasion rather than by force, positing the privileging system as publicly wanted and chosen.

According to Antonio Gramsci, who is a father of this notion, there are a few tools which serve in order to support the hegemonic structure. One of which is the media. Carter and Steiners explain:

the message of media texts never simply mirror or reflect 'reality', but instead construct hegemonic definitions of what should be accepted as reality.
(Carter & Steiner, 2004: 21)

Therefore the media serves as a tool for keeping the status quo and the representations which appear in media support the dominant views, values, and beliefs of the dominant class. This claim has been at the centre of feminist criticism of media representations of women. The feminists saw that the media serves the patriarchy, reproduces it, and by subtle persuasion, makes it the desirable norm.

One of the first and most influential inquiries into the representation of women was done by Laura Mulvey in her paper *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* where she focuses on the representation of women in Hollywood films. She draws a theory about why the Hollywood camera treats women as it does, criticizing these practices as demeaning women, leaving them only as objects to be 'looked-at'. She explains her theory with the help of Freud's concept of castration anxiety. The castration anxiety complex represents the male's acquisition of the 'penis' in contrast to the female's 'lack' of penis. This fact is a threat to men as they see women as 'lacking', and as the powerless 'creatures' they would become if they lost their phallus. This is where the castration anxiety comes from. Freud explains how the male subconscious deals with castration anxiety through fetishism, that "The fetish is a substitute for the woman's (mother's) penis" and "it remains a triumph over the threat of castration and a protection against it" (Freud, 1977: 353). In order to make the image of a woman pleasurable (and not threatening), the film industry employs ways of structuring the film that correspond to these unconscious processes. She claims that the camera acquires the male gaze and that the camera uses close ups in order to segment the female body and "transform[s] it into something satisfying in itself" (Mulvey, 1975: 14), making the woman a safe object to be looked at with pleasure. This technique she names fetishistic scopophilia. Another way to turn a woman into a pleasurable image

is called voyeurism, which according to Mulvey is when the “pleasure lies in asserting guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment and forgiveness” (Mulvey, 1975: 14). Furthermore these images, according to Mulvey (1975: 11), cannot be enjoyed by women, but only by men, because they offer to the female viewer no alternative choice of identification than with the male gaze or with the passive woman. These conventions are also relevant to television.

Tania Modleski draws on part of Mulvey's theory in order to explain one of the main features of the soap opera genre. Film, which enables the spectator to identify only with the one main male protagonist (as explained above by Mulvey's theory), stands in contrast to the genre of soap opera which consists of different subplots, offering different points of view. At times it offers the spectator the possibility of identifying with the good character, while at other times seeing the scene from the bad character's point of view:

A viewer might at one moment be asked to identify with a woman finally reunited with her lover, only to have that identification broken in a moment of intensity and attention focused on the sufferings of the woman's rival.

(Modleski, 1979:13)

She explains that the audience is forbidden the feeling of power by the impossibility of identifying with one main character and therefore not being able to follow the storyline through this identification until it reaches a successful end or resolution. Soap opera's resolutions of different subsequent storylines on the other hand result in another evolution of the story, therefore continuation, so “the narrative, by placing even more complex obstacles between desire and its fulfilment, makes anticipation an end in itself” (1979: 12).

By removing the possibility of identifying with one omnipotent male character, Modleski argues that the viewer is on the one hand deprived of the power, which this identification provides, but subsequently pushed to accept the 'ideal mother' role, to be the one who agrees with the good motives but also is empathetic of the bad motifs. It is

the mother character who knows where, what is happening, and why. It enables the viewer to have knowledge of situations, but does not give him/her any power to do anything about it: “On the one hand ...[soap opera] plays upon the spectator's expectations of the melodramatic form, continually stimulating (by means of the hermeneutic code) the desire for a just conclusion to the story, and, on the other hand, it constantly presents the desire as unrealizable, by showing that conclusions only lead to further tension and suffering” (Modleski, 1979: 32).

The history of the representation of women in media is connected to that of women's position as a subordinate minority group in society. Gaye Tuchman (in Lindt, 2004: 5) argues that the representation of minorities is actually marked by symbolic annihilation, she explains this to mean that the representation in media is always symbolic rather than realistic and that the actual act of being represented by media is an exhibition of power. Therefore, certain social groups which have no power may be well destined to non-existence or *unimportance* through non-representation - symbolic annihilation (Gaye Tuchman in Lindt, 2004: 5). She argued that “through absence, condemnation and trivialisation the media reflect a social world in which women are consistently devalued” (Tuchman in Lindt, 2004: 5). Though women are represented by media, she argues that they are portrayed as a minority subordinate to white males and that this representation is marked by condemnation and trivialisation of the way that they may be depicted as irrational, childlike creatures dependent on men for support and security, or only valued for their attractiveness and sexual allure and their domestic position in society. In addition this position in the domestic sphere is subordinate to the public sphere and men's work in public sphere is valued more than that of women as housewives. Furthermore when they dare to cross the line of their assigned position, certain rather unpleasant consequences follow. This goes with Mulvey's claim about the daring 'looking' woman who needs to be punished by the narrative development: such a woman who needs to be saved by a male.

Another debate connected to the representation of a minority is that of stereotypes. Considering the stereotype as a socio-psychological phenomenon, some academics see stereotyping as negative, while others see it as less so, even as a necessary tool in the cognitive process of human thinking. Considering the way people interact with the

surrounding world, the advantage of stereotyping is that it helps us to categorise and analyse a situation quicker and without much mental effort (Gorham, 2004: 15). This socio-cultural theory suggests that stereotypes and stereotypical thinking are highly connected with power relationships in the world. The social, economic, and political structures are represented through the use of stereotypes and as Michael Pickering argues, stereotypes not only reflect these structures, they also serve to maintain them and the world's power relations, which are dependent on those structures (Pickering, 2001). However, stereotypes are not flexible and do not support flexible thinking “in the interest of the structures of power which ...” they uphold (Pickering, 2001: 3).

Stereotyping practices:

attempt to maintain these structures as they are, or to realign them in the face of perceived threat. The comfort of inflexibility which stereotypes provide reinforces the conviction that existing relations of power are necessary and fixed.

(Pickering, 2001: 3)

As I stated above, the media seem to support the hegemonic structures of society and this is partly done by the stereotypical representation of a specific minority group. As Ann Lindt explains: “people being stereotyped are reduced to a few characteristics that are socially relevant for understanding that group's place in society” (Lindt, 2004: 18). Indeed, the earlier² feminist analyses of the portrayal of women in media saw women as being exclusively depicted in such stereotypical terms as “pretty, passive and domestic” (Carter & Steiner, 2004: 39). Carter & Steiner explain that:

media images through to the end of the 1980s tended to stay within a narrow set of sex role stereotypes, primarily limiting women to a domestic/private sphere that experienced uncertain, if not low social status compared to that of men. ...men were usually depicted in a wider range of occupational roles, primarily in the public sphere, which enjoys higher social status.

(Carter & Steiner, 2004: 14).

There are two main stereotypical representations of women in films and television

² Here 'earlier' is used by Carter & Steiner to refer to studies done in the 1970s such as Tuchman 1978.

(Williams, 1996: 17). The 'good (benign) one' represents women as angelic, usually dressed in white, passive, blond, virginal, helpless, and as the victim. This good woman can also be represented by older woman, representing their maternity and wisdom. The second, the 'bad (malign) one', portrays women as evil, demonic, usually dressed in black, dark hair - displaying her sexual desire -, and active. In movies this is the 'women vamp' or 'femme fatale'. This stereotyping comes from the same assignation of activity and passivity (as Mulvey explains) in films and very much connected with sexuality. As long as a woman is a passive sexual object to look at, that is fine, but the moment she expresses her own desires, her sexuality, when she becomes active, when she 'looks' (as opposed to 'being looked at') she becomes very frightening to the male viewer, and therefore she "must be punished" (Williams, 1996: 17).

Soap opera

In the following section soap opera is introduced as a genre and its origins are summarised. This is in order to show the context in which soap operas operate and also to illustrate the development from the first ever soap operas and the soap operas which are currently shown in the Czech republic.

The soap opera developed originally from a radio program which was to accompany women while doing their housework during day time. The name itself, 'soap opera', was derived from the fact that the sponsors and producers of the first radio dramas were soap makers who tried to sell their product through the narrative of this program (Hagedon, 1995: 46). It was the first time that advertisers tried to use a narrative structure to sell a product. As the former "stories that sell the soap" (Nochimson, 1992: 12) literally, the soap opera nowadays still has a negative connotation of being a low cultural genre. Soap operas may have started as an advertising project, but since the first radio dramas in the 1930s, soap operas have taken their own path away from its advertising beginnings. The current soap operas have transcended their original aim of selling a product to represent "fictional dramas which uphold [a] woman's point of view" (Nochimson, 1992: 13).

Irna Phillips is considered to be the mother of the genre (Nochimson, 1992: 13). During

her work, which started during the 1930s, she relegated the advertising aspect of soaps to second place and replaced it with the concerns of the heroine at the forefront of the narrative. After a few successful radio shows, in some of which she focused on the “career women” - and therefore challenged the assumed place for women in society - she achieved success with creating the genre of the TV soap as we know it today, with the title *As The World Turns* which ran for more than half a century. During a “half-hour time slot”, using the new possibilities which were presented by TV as a medium, “Phillips altered dramatic conventions of time and space to create the now old-fashioned, but then radical, soap opera style employing thoughtful elongated moments and a multitude of close-ups” (Nochimson, 1992: 15). The soap opera became a widely popular genre with serials like *The Young and The Restless*, *Dallas*, *Dynasty* and others, which became known worldwide and watched by millions. Latin America’s version of soap opera is called telenovela and attracts even higher viewing figures in America than traditional soap operas mainly due to the Hispanic community (Marling, 2006: 43).

What we understand under the notion of soap opera today is a television genre that is primarily aimed at female audiences. The genre of soap opera, whilst not remaining static, has always embraced the:

raditional literary genres of drama and the novel, including the serial form popularized in the nineteenth-century novels and newspapers and its dominant theme is that of realism (Hobson, 2003: xii).

There are a few aspects to soap opera which make it a female gender. Harrington and Bielby explain how “certain conventions” of soap opera can be seen as “feminine and especially resonate with the experiences of female viewers” (1995: 15). One of the distinctive features of soap opera is its open ended structure, which enables the production of countless serials. Therefore soaps have also been referred to as never ending serials. Tania Modleski explains that this feature, the *waiting* for the final resolution corresponds very much to the reality of women in society, who are often waiting for their husband to come back or for the children. “Soap operas invest exquisite pleasure in the central condition of a woman's life: waiting” (Modleski, 1983:

88). Also the emphasis on "networks of relationships and verbal interaction, the consistent use of close-up camera techniques, the fragmentation of storytelling...the emphasis on domestic concerns" all add to the "femaleness" of the soap opera. The authors explain that psychology studies showed that women more likely identify themselves in terms of belonging and attachment to others, therefore the focus on relationships is more relevant to women. Also "women tend to emphasise verbal self-disclosure in their own interpersonal relationships" (Rubin in Harrington & Bielby, 1995: 16) and so the verbal interaction is also one of the aspects seen as feminine. The constant close-up on the faces of the protagonists is supposed to bring the audience closer to the character, their needs and wishes. The caring role has been assigned to women for long time and so the elongated close-up which provides the viewer with enough time to analyse the actual character's feelings of the character regardless of the verbal part is considered to be predominantly relevant to female audiences. Fragmentation of story telling is another feature which relates to women's social situation. Through the fragmentation, information gets repeated many times from many points of view and therefore the viewer can hardly miss anything even though she (presumably) misses a part of the story in order to attend some domestic task. Finally the focus of the soap on domestic issues again rather conforms to the assumed sphere of influence of women which is the domestic, in comparison to the public sphere of men. Therefore the whole genre is presumed to be a women's genre, made for women and viewed by women.

Tania Modleski also identifies a trait which soap operas followed in 1979 when she first wrote about them:

since there is so much intermingling and intermarrying, [between families] class distinctions quickly become hopelessly blurred. Children figure largely in many of the plots, but they don't appear on the screen all that often; nor do the very old. Blacks and other minorities are almost completely excluded.
(1979: 31)

Although this was written about American soap operas in the 1970s, (and the representation of minorities has greatly increased) this is an interesting point when

considering Czech soap operas. Another interesting point raised is that:

In soap operas, women as well as men frequently work outside the home, usually in professions such as law and medicine, and women are generally on a professional par with men. But most of everyone's time is spent experiencing and discussing personal and domestic crises.

(Modelski, 1979: 31)

This aspect seems to be at odds with previous (more general) studies of the representation of women in mass media and so would be an interesting aspect to analyse when conducting the research for this dissertation.

In addition, there are some themes which typically occur in soap operas. These are “the evil woman, the great sacrifice, the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse, marrying her for her money, respectability, the unwed mother, deception about the paternity of children, career vs. housewife, the alcoholic woman (occasionally man)” (Weibel in Modleski, 1979: 14). The themes will be searched for in the study.

One of the advantages of soap opera, as seen by Nochrinson, is the fact that women do not have to get punished when they do something bad (as in contrast to Mulvey's theory) (1992). She sees this as especially connected to the feminist aspirations of women, for example not being tied to their domestic position at home. In a patriarchal society this used to be seen as behaviour which had to be punished through the story's progression, but thanks to the genre of soap opera, which refuses to end because “it would be impossible to solve the imperatives of melodrama – i.e. the good must be rewarded and the wicked punished – and the latent message of soaps – i.e. everyone cannot be happy at the same time” (Modleski, 1979: 30), and so this doesn't have to be so. There is room for not only either bad or good women but also for women who are bad as well as good, depending on the situation.

The *evil woman* represents one of the most important, as well as profound figures in soap operas. As Campbell explains: “A soap opera without a bitch is a soap opera that doesn't get watched. The more hateful the bitch the better” (cited in Modleski, 1979:

103). This statement is confirmed by Modleski. It has to do with the mother/spectator position that the viewer accepts, and the villainess represents the “negative image of the spectator’s ideal self” (Modleski 1979: 15). Furthermore, “[t]he extreme delight viewers apparently take in despising the villainess testifies to the enormous amount of energy involved in the spectator's repression and to her (albeit unconscious) resentment at being constituted as an egoless receptacle for the suffering of others.” (Modleski, 1979: 15).

We have to keep in mind that the main aim of the soap opera, as with any other program, is to attract an audience. As Carter and Steiners rightly state “the media product is not the product that is the central commodity. It is the audience that is the central commodity sold to advertisers” (Carter & Steinar, 2004:20). Though we might think that the publicly financed broadcasters (such as the BBC) would be free from this need to make a profit, they still have to satisfy a significant audience in order to justify being publicly financed. Nowadays “[t]he soap opera is one of the most powerful and cost-effective genres on television” (Hobson, 2003: xii).

From the text above we can see that it is through the conventions that genre is considered to be ‘female’ and that these conventions very much correspond to the assumed gender differences which are considered to be natural and which the feminist movement tries to overcome. There is a certain clash between the women's pro-equality movement and women's genre of soap opera. My second hypothesis then would be that:

Although the soap opera is supposed to be a female genre, where the writers are female and the audience is presupposed to be mainly female, the VKV soap opera uses stereotypical depictions of women as well as gender ideology of patriarchal society.

The above studies have argued that the ideologies about gender are strongly embedded in society, and when the subordinated group gets a chance to define itself it has no alternative picture to present. Judged by the popularity of such gendered texts, the

audience also is comfortable with the picture they receive. It will therefore be interesting to see from the results if the genre of soap opera (and thus VKV) predetermines this text to be supporting the unequal gender system. This will be further analysed in the discussion.

Current studies on women and media

In their 2008 study, *Constructing Gender Stereotypes Through Social Roles in Prime - Time Television*, Lauzen *et al.* investigate 124 prime-time programmes running in 2005 and 2006 on six major American networks and looked at the social roles of women in these programs. Their research is based on the connection between social roles and stereotypes assuming that “social roles” and their division (and observation) “provide at least in part the substance of gender stereotypes” (Eagly cited in Lauzen *et al.*, 2008: 201). They compared the social roles in which women performed on the TV to social roles that were assigned to men. Their hypotheses have been confirmed as women's social roles were mainly of interpersonal nature featuring family, friends, love and so on while men's roles were of work-related nature. They also investigate if the gender of the creators has an influence on this social role assignment. When the writer or writers were female both men and women in that particular programme were likely to appear in interpersonal roles while when the writers were men, both sexes were more likely to appear in work related social roles.

Considering Czech academics who deal in their research with representation of women in media, especially visual media, we have to mention Iva Baslarová who has written on this topic in various publications. Her writings encompass the general gender and media issues and also deal with contemporary programming that is available for the Czech audience. In her study, *Depicted female story in a soap opera, a telenovel, and a TV series in the perspective of film feminist theories*, she investigates three genres and the depiction of women. She has done a semiotic analysis of the genre texts and came to the conclusion that though these are supposed to be feminine genres, they are very much representing women in stereotypical ways, being passive, beautiful, nurturing and so are represented in such ways as for a male viewer. However her research in this paper only deals the foreign soap operas and telenovelas, and one Czech serial, which

does not represent a Czech equivalent of a modern soap opera. Her other writings deal with audience and their perceptions of feminine texts and how gender identities are created through these texts. Although not possessing the same resources as a full-time academic, this thesis will attempt to add this spectrum of research by analysing the first ever domestically produced soap opera: *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* (Very Fragile Relationships).

Methodology

Velmi Křehké Vztahy

For my analysis I have chosen the first domestically produced soap opera, *Velmi Křehké Vztahy* (Very Fragile Relationships, VKV). This soap opera started in 2004 as the first Czech ‘never ending serial’, but under a different name, which the producers had to change because of a disagreement with the original production company. It was running under the current name from 2007 to 2009. The original serial occupied a prime time slot in the TV schedule twice a week and had approximately 2 million viewers at its peak. The last series was aired in 2009 at 8pm (also prime-time) twice a week and had a consistent average of 1 250 000 viewers. The producers showed the last episode in December 2009 and had 1 059 000 viewers from the targeted group of audience (adult over 15) (Velmi Křehké Vztahy 2010a). I have chosen this serial as it is the pioneer among soaps produced in the Czech Republic, following an era of foreign imported soaps (such as Dallas, Dynasty, Days of Our Lives) and telenovelas produced in Latin America (such as Cassandra, Muñeca brava). Since VKV began there have been many more Czech soap operas. I have also chosen this soap opera because it has its own website, where one can find links to the episodes streamed, as well as a lot of information concerning the plot and the characters.

Based on the literature review two main hypotheses have been devised:

Hypotheses 1 (HY1): Velmi Křehké Vztahy is a Czech soap opera produced for the Czech audience which employs a soap opera formula and conventions of a genre text known to foreign producers.

Hypotheses 2 (HY2): Although the soap opera (and thus the VKV serial) is supposed to be a female genre, where the writers are female and the audience is presupposed to be mainly female, the VKV soap opera uses stereotypical

depictions of women as well as gender ideology of patriarchal society.

The aim of this study is to investigate these hypotheses and their validity. I will do this by analysing the program's content. This method is identified as content analysis and can be defined as any systematic procedure which was created in order to survey the content of a message (Walizer and Vienir, 1978). In the theoretical overview some conventions of soap opera genre were identified as they were presented by other academics as well as a 'formula', namely by Tania Modleski. Through content analysis it is possible to identify which conventions the Czech soap opera follows. The whole structure of the text will be considered, including but not limited to, methods of shooting as well as typical storylines, topics, and characters. The typical conventions of soap opera with actual (countable) appearances in the VKV media text will also be identified. In order to accommodate the second hypothesis we will connect the characteristics of the media text with the problematized issues of today's gender debate. Quantitative as well as qualitative methods will be used in order to support the hypothesis as the inspection of different phenomena demand different approaches (Arksey and Knight, 1999).

Pilot study

In order to test the research methods we devised a pilot study in which the sample was limited to one episode of the serial. This episode was the seventy-seventh episode from the second series called *Čeho je moc* ('What's too much' my translation).

Based on other academics' research, certain features have been identified as the conventions of soap opera genre. Namely, it has a never-ending structure of the text, parallel storylines, cliff-hanger scene, particular settings, typical characters (for example the bad woman) and certain themes which appear within the storyline. The text was searched for appearances of these.

The second hypothesis focused firstly on the film feminist theory by Laura Mulvey and her claims of the camera's gaze is a male gaze. Therefore an investigation into how the

camera treats women was needed. The text was analysed in detail to acquire evidence of the camera's techniques which sexualize the female body presenting her as a passive object to be looked at, the segmenting of female body through the camera lenses and story progressions which punishes the sexually assertive females. Furthermore, issues which get discussed by today's feminists are brought onto focus. Phenomena as intersectionality and multiple identities, the public and domestic sphere of influence, and the stereotypical good versus bad woman were also researched for the second hypotheses.

Throughout the pilot study the methodology worked well, however, some minor aspects needed to be revised and adjusted. For the first hypotheses, the conventions of soap opera were identified in the selected sample. The analysis of the episode uncovered certain evidence of the genre conventions. Also the soap opera very much correlated to the soap opera formula as described by Modleski. These visible features were, the never ending structure of the episode, inter-cutting of parallel storylines, the cliffhanger, and particular settings. However some conventions, for example the evil woman were not detectable in the relatively short period of one episode and therefore additional viewing or other sources would be necessary to acquire more information. Including more episodes in the sample, as well as adding the official website as another source of information, should provide more in-depth insight into the current issues of characters and the context of affairs. Therefore further study in the enlargement of the sample as well as the use of the website as an additional source of information will result in providing more evidence to support the original claims.

The second hypotheses was only in part proved in the pilot as some issues were present in that given episode while others were not. The episode provided evidence of camera techniques which were described by Laura Mulvey, however there was not evidence of the progression of the storyline punishing the sexually assertive female. This, though, could be proved by analysis of further episodes. There was evidence of the division of public and domestic spheres and women being represented more often doing unpaid domestic work. Quantitative data showed that men in that given episode occupied less variable jobs than women which could suggest that the division between spheres is not valid any more. On the other hand, the skills of women with certain qualifications were

often discredited by being on maternity leave, being unemployed, or retired. Therefore further investigation of this point could provide more detailed information. Also there were less women with a higher education degree. This claim could be taken forward by some qualitative data to reach a deeper insight into an individual's particular circumstances (for example the use of this degree by occupying higher job position). There were obvious indications providing the image of just one kind of a woman, as all the women in this episode were white, heterosexual, and (a majority) young, beautiful and of middle class status. This could be disproved by further viewing or supported by further evidence.

The pilot study was helpful in that that it provided reassurances that there are relevant things to be found in this serial. Therefore an additional, seven episodes were chosen in order to be analysed. The sample of investigated material increased to eight consecutive episodes. Whilst this is not a large-scale sample, it is based on the assumption that VKV (like every soap opera before it) has not changed its style or conventions since its first series.

Source

These episodes are all freely available online through Prima broadcasting company's website (see VKV 2010a). In order to improve the research and limit the possibility of being unable to qualify certain phenomena, it was also decided to use the official website in order to help whenever the viewing did not provide enough information as well as a background information source and reference point. The official website is a very suitable source, because it provides additional information which was devised by the producers. This source is therefore the producers' interpretation. In other words it is not so open to interpretation as the portrayal of a character. The assumption is that with more quantity and in-depth information the possibility of subjective interpretation can be minimised.

Sample

The eight episodes of VKV soap opera were selected circumstantially, following the

pilot study episode. Consequent episodes were selected as the sample in order to better understand the context of current storylines and with the aim to limit the number of characters (because with the progress of the program new characters and actors are introduced into the story). As the lack of contextual information was one of the problems the pilot study identified, this selection should give us a coherent picture of running affairs. Each episode is 55 minutes long. The titles will be analysed separately as it is a repetitive text. Also the short overview of previous episode and short overview of coming episode will be left out of the episode analysis as the scenes there have already been or will be viewed in full context either in the previous or following episode. One of the weaknesses that was discovered from the pilot was that the episode had to be viewed many times in order to record all the data. Therefore for the full study a checklist was drawn up containing all the measurable criteria developed from the literature review. This checklist (see appendix A) was used to view the first episode from the pilot again in order to note additional data and for the presentation of such data in a coherent manner.

The unit of analysis is dependable on the researched factor, for example when searching for the segmentation of female body: a close up of a part of a female body with the exception of face which objectifies the woman and makes her safe to watch for the male audience, this is the technique as described by Mulvey (1975). Sometimes the unit is represented by a scene, or a shot, however when we want to search for certain progression patterns in storyline the unit has to be increased to a whole episode, even to more episodes. Furthermore additional information provided by the website can serve as a lens through which to interpret actions and behaviours of characters.

Specification of researched phenomena:

Based on the literature review and the pilot study results I have identified some phenomena which will be search for through the analysed text.

Open-ended structure

Refers to the structure of an episode which leaves some of the introduced problems unresolved, assuring the next episode.

Cliff-hanger

Refers to the last scene which cuts unexpectedly before revealing some suggested information or in the middle of an action. This is promised to be uncovered in the following episode.

Close up, face in detail, and music

This represents a camera movement in which the face is shot in detail accompanied by music. The close up is a “Shot taken with the camera very close to the subject, revealing a detail only; in relation to the human subject, a shot of the face only, the hands only etc. (Reisz and Millar, 1995: 398). In this case only the close up of a face is relevant.

Soap opera formula

In this part, it will be monitored, if the VKV follows the soap opera formula as stated in the previous chapter by Modleski (1979). These include where is VKV set, if there are two or three main families whose members are interconnected starring in the soap opera, if there are several generations of those families represented, what social class do those families belong to, how many times do children and old people appear on the screen, if there are any appearances of minorities, and if men are on a professional par with women.

Fragmentation of storyline and parallel sub-plots

This represents that the episode is presented as a set short scenes, which are divided by a musical interlude, and which show what is happening at different places at the same time.

Setting

The research will identify the main settings and environment which provide the background to the stories and will identify if they correspond to the common settings which are used in foreign soap operas. In comparison to Modleski, who identifies where the whole soap opera is set (a small town), here we talk about more local settings such as the protagonist's house, the local restaurant, etc.

Appearance of certain themes

Here the appearance of themes is namely that of “the evil woman, the great sacrifice, the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse, marrying her for her money, respectability, the unwed mother, deception about the paternity of children, career vs. housewife, the alcoholic woman (occasionally man)” (Weibel in Modleski, 1979: 14).

The evil woman

The evil woman, as was already noted in the theoretical overview, is very important for the soap opera genre. This evil woman refers to the bad, sexually assertive, mean woman, who is plotting behind other people's backs, betraying, cheating, and generally does the things which are deemed to be wrong by the society.

Segmentation of female body

Based on Laura Mulvey's theory of the camera's point of view being male, we will look at the same techniques of shooting as were proved to be employed by the Hollywood film industry. I will specifically focus on scenes which objectify the female body through close up segmentation. A close up of a face does not belong under this phenomenon.

Assertive woman - punished

The storyline patterns will be followed in order to uncover if 'active' and sexually assertive females are punished through the progression of affairs.

Domestic versus public sphere

This part of the research will specifically focus on women in the domestic sphere - depicted to do unpaid domestic work (looking after children, cooking, tidying up, washing up, washing clothes, ironing, et cetera). The depiction of women in the public sphere (focused on their execution of paid work) will also be of consequence.

Homogenic female

One of the main present issues which contemporary feminists have been emphasizing is that there is vast variety of women inhabiting this planet and that other inequality systems intersect to create a complex power relations order. As the earlier feminists have been criticized for their omission of other subsections of the social class of

women (for example ethnicity) and their issues, the media were also criticised of offering its audience predominantly pictures of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. We will therefore have a look at how, or if at all, minorities of women are represented. We will specifically search for different ethnicities, sexualities and others depending on the offering of the analysed text and relate this to the local context, that of the Czech Republic and Prague.

The good woman and the bad woman

Further we will be looking for the most proclaimed stereotypes of women on the screen and they are the good woman and the evil one. The search will specifically focus on the appearance of characteristics as well as behavioural patterns and their combinations which stand in opposition of each other, one adhering to the *passive* (blond, virginal, good female) in comparison to the *active* (sexually assertive, dark haired, bad woman). The focus of this part is on the contrast between these two, when and if they appear together.

Results

The episodes were watched between October and November 2010. They were first aired in June and September 2008. The results are based on the checklist (see Appendix A) and other relevant information taken from the official website. This was done to gather information about characters and storylines and other contextual information to reach more complete picture of the VKV soap opera.

First, the conventions of soap opera genre were tested using hypothesis one as a frame.

Open ended structure

Specifically the findings showed that all episodes sported the typical never ending structure of the program, as some issues got solved within one episode while new problems emerged and were then solved in later episodes.

Cliff-hanger

The cliff-hanger is a quite common feature of this serial as only two out of the eight episodes did not have an unfinished scene at the end of its running time.

Close up, face in detail, melody

The close up of a protagonists face is another prominent feature appearing many times in an episode. Many times, these close ups were accompanied by music to evoke a sense of importance serving. Also the close up accompanied by music served to break the storyline when the old scene finished a new scene was presented to the viewer.

Fragmentation of storyline

The fragmentation of the storyline appeared in each episode. In every episode the camera offered the audience viewpoints on many different subplots running in parallel. These subplots may have or may not have intertwine throughout the episode. The program then is constructed as a row of mini-stories or mini-episodes, scenes from different places with different protagonists, according to different affairs. Generally these mini-stories are divided by musical interludes. As a rule these mini-stories do not

last long, the majority of them are not in excess of two minutes.

Soap opera formula

Considering the soap opera formula, the VKV soap opera very much follows the stated soap formula as described by Modleski in the theoretical overview (1979). The plot revolves around one main family, the Rubeš family. There are a few other families which appear besides the Rubeš family, and they are usually somehow connected to the main family. Throughout the episodes which were selected as a sample it was seen that another profound family is the Strnad family who are represented by a father, his young wife and two sons. The father expresses his dislike of one of the female members of the Rubeš family, while the one son rather tries to persuade that same female to go on a date with him. The same son, together with his father, bought a significant share of a business which is also partly owned by a member of the Rubeš family and they become associates. Coincidentally this member is the same fancied woman. Here the Strnad family represents rivalry as well as infatuation. (This rather resembles the typical romantic 'Romeo and Juliet' scenario). The story then conforms to the “two or three families, intimately linked together” (Modleski, 1979: 31) that represent the main protagonists of a soap opera. Furthermore, other protagonists which were not originally members of the main family, somehow become part of it either through marriage or a different means. Another of Modleski's points was about the generational span of these families. This is no different in VKV as the Rubeš family members are represented by three generations. Throughout the episodes we meet the grandmother, her children and her children's children. The Rubeš family occupies a big villa, while one of the main characters, Andrea Rubeš, owns 40% of a hospital and, according to the surroundings in which the characters operate and the clothes they wear, we should infer that this family is not poor. Based on the Czech Statistical Office's classification of status in employment (or socio-economic status, I.e. class) most of the characters are in the higher classes (see Czech Statistical Office 2009). This is another aspect of the 'fairly well to do' status of the families which fits the soap opera formula (Modleski, 1979).

Considering the appearance of children in these episodes, I would agree with Modleski's claim that they do not appear on the screen very often, though they belong

to the story. Generally children appeared on average twice in every episode. A few times there was a pram present on the screen, however the baby was not visible therefore I did not count these occasions as appearances.

Old people also represent the minority of the protagonists however the appearance of them is much more frequent than that of babies and children. In the episodes there appeared seven characters who were older than 50 in comparison to twenty-eight characters between 18 and 50 years old. Also the amount of time the camera spent on old people was in comparison much lower than when the focus was on 'handsome and beautiful' younger protagonists. Furthermore all of the main protagonists in this soap opera are of white-European ethnicity and of Czech nationality. There was one noticeable disparity between the soap opera formula and the content of VKV and that was that this soap opera is set in Prague, rather than a small town.

Considering the main protagonists appearing in these episodes, the female character's jobs are: a manager, medical nurse, housewife, student, doctor, self-employed ballet teacher, lawyer, on maternity leave, businesswoman, theatre director (unemployed), model, retired senior lecturer, a director of a foundation, secretary, police officer, and student. The male protagonists appearing in the episodes work as doctors, lawyers, retired lawyers, businessmen, senior university lecturers, doctors, painters, bankers, owners of casinos and restaurants, police officers, and students.

A substantial part of the program is set in a hospital and it is important to notice that the doctors are exclusively male with only one exception. In addition the only two protagonists who are nurses and appear on the screen are both female.

It is also worth mentioning that despite the diversity of women's occupation in VKV, many of these occupations are usually tied to the home or at least can be run from home (housewife, on maternity leave, self-employed ballet teacher, unemployed, retired). There are three women who stay at home to look after a child in comparison to one man, who has custody of his child, however it does not stop him from working full-time as a lawyer.

Also the distribution of academic titles is unequal as more men have titles than women,

generally in the whole soap opera (11 in comparison to 3) and 9 males in comparison to 3 females in the eight episodes viewed. Therefore I would not see women on a 'professional par' with men in this Czech soap opera. Based on these titles, the educational inequality between men and women is clearly visible.

Settings/environment

The repetition of certain settings and surroundings as the background for the serial has been noted. There are venues which appear regularly as the place where events happen.

These include:

Home - in this category the homes of protagonists (their houses and flats) are included.

Hospital

Offices – with the exception of the hospital's offices

Social areas – restaurants and a wine bar

Outdoors – specifically streets

While searching for themes which are typical for the genre it was found that throughout the viewed episodes the evil woman is represented by Simona Rubešová and there are no appearances of great sacrifice, marrying her for money or respectability and no deception about the paternity of a child. Themes which do appear within the set sample are an estranged lover and spouse, the unwed mother and career woman versus housewife. In the case of the alcoholic woman the episodes did not present any evidence however it was found from the web page that in past the grandmother of Rubeš family had problems with alcohol in the past episodes. (VKV 2010d)

There are many female protagonists starring in this soap opera. Based on the viewing of the episodes that have been chosen as well as the information that the producers have available on the Internet, Simona Rubešová was identified as the evil woman.

Simona represents the villainess in this soap opera and according to the official website is “a businesswoman who does business by cheating. She wants mainly money” (VKV 2010b, my translation). We can identify the character immediately from the titles of the serial. The titles consist of different scenes in which the main characters are introduced. These seemingly unrelated scenes are connected through the colour red which appears

in each scene colouring different props. It is for example, the close up of a red shoe, red apple, red folder, and a red line signalling the beating of a heart on a hospital monitor. In the last scene the red turns into a red electric wire in a studio. After the close up on the wire there is a scene where Simona is walking forward and stomping down on the wire. At that moment the music that runs with the titles is interrupted by the sound like when the power goes off. After that, the music restarts and there is a close up on the wire connecting with another wire, representing the *connection*, the *relationship*, that is at the core of the serial (as stated in the title). From this it can be seen that the character of Simona Rubešová literally *stomps down* on the relationships, interrupting or breaking them, she stops the music and fun.

The webpage offers a short text supposedly written by the character herself:

I will have to marry Bořek after all. In the end the idiot will be left to me. In addition he has started to be jealous and pesters and pesters. The pestering is becoming tiresome. However it might not be necessary. I already spent nearly all the money from Filip but I smell a new bigger pretty-packet. I have a nose for it. I have to get to Strnad's and get to the map and then, hooray, to Africa. Everyone will see who Simona Rubešová is, especially Andrea and Robert. Is it possible that Alena is so naive?

(VKV 2010b, my translation).

From viewing the episodes it was deducted that Simona is Bořek's girlfriend. However she lies to him and cheats on him with another man who is supposed to have a secret map that leads to treasure. With the progression of this subplot she steals the map and plots behind her boyfriend's back to travel to Africa on her own. Episode 77 offers an account of her 'evilness' as Simona and her co-worker find a lost wallet full of money. Simona decides to keep the money expressing her opinion in a dialogue with her co-worker Alena Strnadová:

Simona: There's at least fifteen thousand (Czech crowns in the wallet).

Alena: Whose is it?

Simona: Now, it is ours.

Alena: Wait, we cannot keep it.

Simona: Why not? Nobody knows we have it. (putting the wallet in her handbag). Let's go.

(Episode 77, my translation)

With the progression of the research, the focus of the analysis shifted to certain phenomena which are of concern to contemporary feminists.

Segmentation of the female body

This feature was not so consistent to appear within every storyline as in the horror films of Mulvey's study (1975). The most profound appearance is shown in the titles, specifically right at the start of the titles where the viewer is presented with a close up of a high heeled shoe, which is typical of fetishistic scopophilia (Mulvey, 1979: 14).

Figure 1.1



There have been only a few other examples of this segmentation within the eight episodes. One specifically evident scene is from the episode 83, where one of the protagonists is opening a bottle of wine, while the camera slides up her body offering

the audience a view of the protagonist's cleavage.

Figure 1.2



However most episodes did not offer such segmentation of female body. Altogether, I found three scenes which treated the female body in such manner (in episode 78 , episode 80 and episode 82). One example of such objectification of female body is presented when a close up of a female body is in the foreground of the scene. This is further emphasized by the present male who does see this woman as a sexual object. (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3



Assertive woman

During the eight episodes only one example of this was perceived in the case of the successful lawyer Barbora Strnadová. She is a young, pretty, professional who is said to be a very good lawyer. She is also one of the few female characters who are actually often seen doing her job. She is currently divorcing her husband. Her reputation is

being put in jeopardy because of deliberate bad gossip (which was predictably caused by Simona, the *evil woman*) and regardless of her professional qualities she has to be aided by her male work colleague to solve this matter successfully. This co-worker is also emotionally involved with her. Furthermore when dealing with an unwanted male's attention it is again her co-worker who directly explains to the other man that this lady does not want him. No other manifestations of this phenomenon were perceived, however from the web page search it was discovered that there were also other examples of punishing the assertive female earlier in the storyline (VKV 2010).

Domestic verses public sphere

In this section the search focused on four main categories: women shown doing unpaid work (housework and looking after children in particular), men shown doing unpaid work, employed women shown at work but not working, women who were portrayed actually doing their occupation, employed men shown at work but not working and men who were depicted doing their job.

Unpaid domestic work: Generally women were more often represented as full-time mothers, cooking, ironing and looking after a baby.

Paid employment: More men were represented in paid work in comparison to women in paid employment.

Hegemonic female

It has already been pointed out that all the characters are Czech, white, and middle/higher class. Now focusing only on women; the episodes presented mainly women between 18 and 32. These women then occupy the majority of the program's running time. These women are represented by:

Stana Libalová, a “head nurse, general in skirts” (VKV 2010c) who is 29 years old, white, slim, heterosexual in a relationship, and a local gossip, in heterosexual relationship.

Marcela Rubešová, caring for her friend's baby full time, 28 years old, white slim, heterosexual, in a relationship with her ex-husband.

Daniela Hartlová, teacher in a kindergarden, however at the moment recovering from a surgery trying to become a full time mother to her few months old son who has been in

the care of her friend Marcela, white, slim, heterosexual, single widow, scared to be alone.

Alena Strnadová – 27 years old, married to much older man (throughout the episodes it is suggested she married him for the financial security he offers, however she claims to be in love), slim, heterosexual, runs a foundation, “blonde from blond jokes – too much intelligence is certainly not her flaw” (VKV 2010c)

Anna Pešková – 25 years old, nurse, on maternity leave at the moment, in long term relationship, her to be husband does not want her to work, slim, heterosexual, as the storyline continues she decides to work part time, regardless her husband's wishes.

Barbora Strnadová – 32 years old, slim, successful lawyer, however when she gets in law trouble it is her male colleague who sorts it out for her, in the process of divorcing her husband, in a kind of relationship with her co-worker, heterosexual

Ilonka – 24 years old, slim, “laughed at serial's poor girl” (VKV 2010c), secretary, single.

Kristyna Lišková– 18 years old, slim, white, just out of relationship, student.

Ivana Sykorová – 30 years old, slim, dance teacher, in a relationship, heterosexual, white, does not cook or do much housework but has the money, has three children, her home is a sanctuary for other protagonists too.

Mudr. Helena Lacinová-Kratká – married, slim, white, heterosexual, doctor. Her thoughts : “I never thought I would say it but I want children...It is interesting that it took Robert to change me like that” (VKV 2010c).

Nataša Langová – 22 years old, slim, police officer, married, heterosexual “sporty brunet” (VKV 2010c).

Simona Rubešová – twice divorced, gold-digger, slim, she is where she thinks she can get some money.

By looking at the main female characters who appear in the searched sample, a judgement can be easily done that these women are all pretty and slim. The relevance of this to feminist theories will be evaluated in the discussion.

Good V Bad woman

I noted above the evil/bad woman does appear in the VKV soap opera. However there is no such strong counterpart to this character. We could though see another character

which is fundamental for the soap opera and that is the character of the mother. One main mother figure could be identified and, although not necessary being the typical (white virgin) good woman, she represents the opposite to the evil one in some aspects.

Jiřina Rubeřov is a grandmother from the Rubeř family. She is a 54-year old lady with blond hair. She is the one who looks after the whole Rubeř family and is a full-time housewife. She knows most of the things that happen to the family members. She is the good mother, nearly as good as the spectator him/herself but not quite because she does not always know everything. Her duties character is described as follows:

[She] looks after her children and then after the children's children. She loves her children, but does not understand them any more. She wants to protect them from the evil of this world, but they reject her efforts. On the other hand, she does not want to admit it herself, that everything does not go according to her plan; she can get annoyed and even does things out of spitefulness.

(VKV 2010d, my translation)

In episode 77, while cleaning up the dishes, she discusses her plans to go to see an astrologist in order to find out what the future of the family members will be (if they are going to have children in one case). She proclaims: "I will ask about all of you when I'm there, I'll ask about the whole family"(Episode 77). In this episode she represents the image of a 'good mother' (but rather pathetically; her space is limited, she needs the 'vision' of an astrologist, etc.). This matches to the description by Modelski who identifies the character as someone who "sits helplessly by as her children's lives disintegrate (...) Her primary function is to be sympathetic, to tolerate the foibles and errors of others" (Modleski, 1979: 15). In the final scene after she returns from the astrologist, she seems depressed as she has discovered that one member of the family is in grave danger. Overall it can be argued that this character seems very much in order with the stereotypical passive benign woman. This character then serves, on some level, as an opposite to the evil woman represented by Simona Rubeřov .

Though the soap opera is considered to be a female genre, and according to Modleski offers the audience different kind of identification than the film genre, we can see that some stereotypes which have been based on Mulvey's active/passive theory still appear in soap operas. In this case the VKV. We can see the passive mother and the active villainess as the good verses the bad woman. The implications of this will be discussed further, amongst other issues, in the discussion chapter.

Discussion

The results have shown evidence that the Czech soap opera VKV does in many aspects follow the conventions which were described by earlier researchers as typical characteristics of the soap opera genre. These results will now be discussed and analysed.

Hypotheses 1 (HY1): Velmi Křehké Vztahy is a Czech soap opera produced for the Czech audience which employs a soap opera formula and conventions of a genre text known to foreign producers.

The never ending structure is kept throughout each fifty minute episode as a few complications get solved while others appear. This is emphasised by a short overview of unsolved complications from previous installment before the actual episode, which again ends with short overview of suggested resolutions (and thus only hints at which complications will be solved in the following episode). However it could be claimed that the VKV soap opera defies its never ending structure. It is not a coincidence that it is called “never ending” and soap operas referred to as never ending serials as the lifespan of such serials can be extraordinary (for example *As The World Turns* which was discussed in the literature review). The VKV has now finished, it ran for five years from 2004 till 2009 and within this time 540 episodes were aired. In comparison to foreign soap operas this a relatively short period. Despite this, it still follows many more of the conventions of the genre and has to be considered a soap opera.

One of the best known characteristics of the soap opera genre is the 'cliff hanger' or the last scene in the episode which is cut just before the resolution of a problem/situation, leaving the viewer *not knowing/curious* what will happen. The majority of the episodes I analysed present this 'cliff-hanger' as a scene that was cut in the middle and finished at the start of next episode. The fragmentation of the story line is again in place as the viewer is following a few subsequent stories which share equally the running time. Also very typical for the soap opera genre is also the hospital setting as a waiting room

serves as the place where "friends and family members" (Modleski, 1982: 106) are forced to stay together and discuss the tragedy that occurred, their attitudes, feelings and future predictions. The VKV soap opera follows this tradition as a big part of the storyline revolves around a hospital, either in business terms (disagreements between the shareholders) or a place where the ill are healed. The other venues, the home and the social venues as bars and restaurants also suggest that it is the private life issues which are mainly dealt with during the program.

In the theoretical overview it was explained how the media and their production are determined by their capitalist values and therefore also television and its programming. It also has been emphasized by modern feminists how the oppression of women is closely connected to the capitalistic values of contemporary society. So the business aspect of the VKV soap opera is also relevant although it was not an intended target set by the methodology. It was interesting to notice the marketing practices of the VKV. The producers use specific techniques in order to establish a claim of familiarity to its audience.

The abbreviation VKV, standing for *Velmi Krehke Vztahy* (Very Fragile Relationships), is not my invention. It is the actual name under which this soap is *sold* to the audience.

The original soap opera, under the name of *Rodina Pouta* (Family Bonds), did not dispose of any short version of its name. It only had a logo, which depicted two interconnected wedding rings. This logo was commonly used in advertisements of the soap. The new name, however, made use of the rather symmetric passage of letters V K V and a new logo was created where there are three squares next to each other (see below):

Figure 1.4



The colouring, which is pink for the outside boxes and dark red for the middle box, also supports the symmetric form. The pronunciation of this abbreviation should be [wee:ka:wee], basically using the letters' spelling form, but in this case the promoters of the program use [wee:ka:wee:tchka], which in translation means VKVs but also objectifies and pluralises it, and creates the impression of a slang word, which would be created by the lay people, the audience itself. The use of this pronunciation creates an illusion of 'common folk talk' (as opposed to grammatically correct high language, which people do not talk among each other on day to day basis) and familiarity, which should make the audience feel more comfortable and connected, subtly saying: *this is the program for you*. This strategy has also been used in the UK with the long running soap Coronation Street, referred to as 'Corrie' in advertisements. VKV, then, follows the marketing tactic of another soap opera in the UK.

One of the points in which the VKV did not correspond to the soap opera formula was that it did not represent men and women on professional par which was suggested as a common characteristic of soap operas. Women's occupation were more varied than that of men. It could be seen as women having wider choices in their selection of life course. However different jobs carry different social statuses with them. There are jobs which are connected with higher wages as well as the power position. For example we could have a look at the relationship between the occupation of a doctor and a nurse. The doctor is indisputably seen as a higher step on the social ladder. Higher wages as well as the doctor being the boss in such a team creates a certain power relation which identified the minor and the dominant in such an arrangement. Doctor being the dominant while nurse being the minor.

There are seven protagonists who occupy the position of a medical doctor in the VKV soap opera, six out of the seven are male, and only two nurses, who are both women (in addition one of them is on maternity leave most of the running time); this certainly does not portray a professional par. Furthermore, in the eight episodes analysed, the only female doctor is in the final episode hit by a car and quickly becomes a helpless patient in comparison to being a successful professional. She also does not belong to the group of doctors (men) who meet for a beer outside their workplace. The only time she is actually meeting another doctor for a social meeting is not because of her doctor

status, but because of her *female* status when one of her co-workers fancies her. From this evidence, the inequality is obvious.

The inequality at the workplace is well documented by researchers and proved by the numbers which show how women constantly receive lower payment for doing the same job as men and that there is a under-representation of women in higher job positions (Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010). In the case of the Czech Republic the *Corporate Gender Gap Report* identified the country to be 74th out of 134 considering its equality ladder. The state scored 0.68 on the scale where 0 = inequality and 1 = equality. The average difference between the wages of men and women in the Czech republic is nearly 20%, under the average of the European Union. The researchers showed that approximately 33% of all employees are women however 0% out of those occupy the CEOs posts (Zahidi and Ibarra, 2010). Across the full dataset, we find that the biggest barriers identified by the respondents are “general norms and cultural practices in your country”, “masculine/patriarchal corporate culture” and “lack of role models” (2010: 11) with the Czech Republic, identifying the lack of role models as number one barrier. Where else than in the mass media representations should we look for role models. The feminist concern of the domestic versus public sphere of influence and strive for equality is therefore very much justified. The VKV representation suggests that women have entered the paid public sphere of men, however their influence and positions in that sphere are still that of a *subordinate class*. It could be argued that the fact that other soap operas may represent men and women on a equal level implies that the nation which produces such text is much closer to gender equality than the Czech republic.

Also some points which were investigated might have much less importance in the context of Czech Republic and do not carry so much significance. The issue of minorities appearing in the soap opera has much less relevance for the context of the Czech Republic than it has for American or British soap operas for example. The issue of race is not so profound in the Czech Republic as it is in countries with a long history of large-scale immigration. The Czech Republic, although having some minorities, is a more homogenized country (Czech Statistical Office 2008). The largest minority is the Romany community which is thought to be around 220,000 (Lhotka, 2005).

The inequality of men and women in employment in VKV was analysed for hypothesis one but because the evidence showed a gender gap *that doesn't benefit* women it can also be used for hypothesis two as well. The inequality shows stereotypical representation of women's influence (or even place) being in the *domestic* and not public sphere.

Hypotheses 2 (HY2): Although the soap opera is supposed to be a female genre, where the writers are female and the audience is presupposed to be mainly female, the VKV soap opera uses stereotypical depictions of women as well as gender ideology of patriarchal society.

Considering Laura Mulvey's segmentation of the female body, it can be seen that, although not so prominent in the genre of soap opera, it still has some validity as I have noted scarce appearances. The interesting issue seems that probably the most tangible example of such shooting technique appears right at the start of the serial's titles where the audience is offered the close up of a female leg in a red high heeled shoe. It is one of the first scenes that the viewer is presented with. More specifically the titles start with a view over Prague, the Czech capital, then focus on a red convertible sports car and the third scene is a close up of the leg of a female who is getting out of that car. These shots follow one after another and take five seconds altogether. This sequence with the use of the colour red, sports car and red high heeled shoe on a female seems to be cut out of a magazine for men where pretty women and pretty cars go hand in hand. Why would the producers set up the first scenes in such a way that corresponds to the male gaze when further analysis does not prove such gaze being employed in such manner again in the actual storyline. Assuming the first scenes would be the only ones which could be viewed by an accidental viewer, such scenes do not have to be coincidental. This arrangement could well be intentional as the soap opera, although predominantly a female genre, tries to attract the greatest audience possible which may include a male audience too. Regardless of the fact that the majority of soap opera viewers are women, there are also men who watch soap operas.

In her book *Cinema of The Other Europe*, Dina Iordanova claims that the post-communist representation of women in media has not improved but rather worsened from the previous era (2003). She states that women have been "sexed up" and that it does not have to be exactly the result of the sexual expressions in the media being suppressed in the communist era, but simply the discovery by producers that "sex and violence sell" (Iordanova, 2003: 140). She proposes that because of a lack of regulation and "an absent political will to tackle problems that adversely affect women" the depiction of women in media has suffered. It could be argued then that the segmentation of female body in VKV could be a manifestation of the recent fascination with violence and sex (connected to the post-communist era as Iordanova argues) although it is not common practice for the genre.

The manifestation of stereotypes was visible in the VKV soap opera. For example, one of the subplots deals with the relationship of one man and two women. The man is a lawyer and is engaged to a woman who is the mother of his child. He wants his future wife to stay home with the child as a full time mother. On the other hand he is also in love with his successful lawyer co-worker, who has no kids. This man reaches an impasse as he claims he wants to get married to the mother of his child but he also cannot give up his co-worker. He wishes he could make a one woman out of the two, he expresses these feelings to his friends. The mother of his children is kind, but there are sparks running between him and the co-worker. This story represents the two stereotypical counter characteristics of a woman and the impossibility of union between these two, the kindness and the passion. The passive mother, versus the active ambitious careerist.

This story has to end only by marriage and regardless his inner fight the man finally marries the mother of his child. Furthermore the career woman was punished within the story by losing her child. This is a clear example of the assertive woman getting punished for her *active* role.

This story also represents one progression which counters the stereotypical story progression because when the wife decides to go back to work, she works part time despite the arguments of her husband. However soon after this decision the department

in the hospital where she works is closed down because and her position is again in jeopardy. However there would be need to follow this storyline further to make final conclusions.

In the results it was also recorded how the majority of female protagonists were slim and beautiful homogenic females. Jean Kilbourne explains how this beauty ideal is connected to slenderness. She identifies the trend 'the slimmer the more beautiful' in the advertisement industries. She explains that this is happening because of the men's fear of women. She explains that with the age of emancipation when women acquire more equal status to men and with it they acquire more powers. For example with the constitution of the right to vote, women were enabled to have influence in the political sphere which previously used to be the domain of only men. Therefore women are required to be small and thin so they compensate their power excess through their non-threatening small thin physical image. This is of course connected to the exaggerated femininity (and sexuality) which has been often discussed in connection to representation of women in media as, again, a way of making the female less threatening to the male viewer.

Implications of the conventions of soap opera (VKV) and feminist ideas

The VKV soap opera is constructed generally, with small deviations, as a genre text. In particular evidence is supplied that it is created abiding by the rules and laws of the soap opera genre. It is exactly because of these conventions which shape the VKV soap opera that it is classified as a female genre. The notion of a female genre could be misleading as one could think that therefore it should be offering a different point of view to that of male genre texts. Some academics, namely Tania Modleski, claim that the soap opera genre does exactly that, by constructing the soap in such a way which would accommodate the female viewer. Offering an alternative gaze by following different rules of construction of the text. The structure of the program is therefore devised in such manner which should make it more appealing for the female viewer and be in accordance with their real life conditions. However what the feminists would like to imagine under the label of providing a *different point of view* would be rather connected to the actual content of such program rather than literally a different point of

view by the camera. The different point of view would be expressed by new modern representations women, defying of stereotypes, and the appearance of new role models for women who are further emancipated and powerful. In some cases the representation of facts could be enough.

The conventions that accommodate the female viewer however do not necessarily challenge the position of women in the world as many of the conventions include stereotypical representations or are based on stereotypical assumptions. It merely shapes the media text so it fits the physical and psychological needs of women. Therefore I would claim that the soap opera genre is causal to VKV essentially supporting the patriarchal system. In the case of VKV and the disparity in employment of men and women this soap even more profoundly sustains the gender inequality.

It is the typical characters of the soap opera, like the evil woman or the mother, which at the same time represent stereotypes of women. It is the structure which is constructed around the subordinate position of women in households and the storylines which doom the assertive women and support the passive female. Therefore overall, what identifies soap opera as a female genre is exactly what is *ideologically consistent* with the patriarchal system.

Further interpretations of soap opera's place in society

Based on this research it could be claimed that the soap opera genre, through its structure and content, does not challenge the status quo of western contemporary unequal society. However, as Mary Brown explains, the importance of a soap opera does not lie only in the content but also in the communication networks that this genre creates. She sees the soap opera as providing a platform for women to discuss the problems they encounter on a day to day basis. By talking about the *episode I saw yesterday* women discuss the problems the characters encounter and relate it to their own lives, therefore questioning the patriarchal order and women's position in it. Brown sees this as a certain kind of resistance to the dominant system, allowing women to negotiate the issues of femininity. The actual existence of the website for VKV represents this networking aspect of soaps, as the website provides a forum,

where the audience can discuss the characters and therefore allows oppositional dialogue by viewers of the episodes.

Mary Brown therefore sees the soap opera as an initiator of public debate through which some decisions and changes could be made. However, in order to assess this claim it would be necessary to do more research on the audience of soap operas. As was mentioned right at the start of this dissertation the *message* and its content are only part of the process of meaning creation.

Suggestions for improvement and further research

This research was done in good faith that it would investigate the phenomenon of soap opera in the context of the Czech republic. It was planned (and achieved) to show some layers of the VKV soap opera which are not visible unless a specifically focused investigation is done. The analysis is a tentative insight into the workings of the soap opera, I.e. how does the VKV serial deal with the genre conventions and how does the soap opera correlate to contemporary feminism. The focus of this research was mainly on women, as the soap opera is supposed to be a female genre and also because of the constant problematic issue of gender inequality and women being the subordinate group in the patriarchal systems of western societies. Men were not in the prime focus of this study and the situation of men was noted during this investigation only as a comparison to the situation of women. Therefore it could be possible that some important information considering the gender system may have been missed. As women do not exist on their own on this planet, and for the creation of a binary gender system, men represent as important a group as women it could be helpful to also have a deeper look at the media text analysed here while focusing on the male. This could give us some evidence of the problematic issue of representation of men as well.

A more thorough insight into the VKV soap opera could be helpful. A regular viewer or fan would have a better overview of the media text, however on the other hand he/she could be biased in the assessment of such information. At some points the viewing of the program was the only way to reach certain information as the official website contains few inconsistencies. The web page seemed unfinished and incomplete and at

times the information reached through this source confused rather than clarified points.

Conclusion

This study dealt with the phenomenon of soap opera and certain stereotypical depictions inherent in the binary gender system of the Western world. This was done with the case study of the Czech soap opera VKV.

First a theoretical overview of relevant concepts was presented in order to establish a springboard for the following research. This overview addressed the media in general and the academic debates which surround the message production and its consumption. This was followed by a short historical overview of the development of feminism and then an up-to-date account of contemporary feminist concerns. Gender was established as essential term when considering feminism. A connection between gender and media was put forward and from here the overview moved onto the soap opera genre specifically. From this theoretical overview two hypotheses were drawn.

After establishing the basis for the actual research of this study, the analysis of the text was carried out and findings noted. These were represented by two groups of searched phenomena. One group referred to the soap opera genre conventions while the other to the actual depictions and portrayals of certain characters, their situation and characteristics.

The findings have indicated that the VKV soap opera does in many aspects conform to the genre of soap opera. However variations were observed. This could be a result of the local Czech version of the genre as well as the natural development of the genre over time. Some of the searched criteria were established by academics who were investigating texts which were produced a considerable time ago (see Modleski, 1979). However, the fact these are still visible in the 21st century validates their inclusion.

Considering the aspects related to gender equality, the segmentation of female body throughout the serial was rare as well as the punishment of an assertive female in the storyline's progression. However they still did appear in these texts. The main issue which was consistent in *defying* the genre conventions and the formula of soap opera was the professional representation of genders. According to the formula laid out in

previous research, men and women should be on an equal level, however the VKV soap opera showed the male protagonists to occupy job positions with higher status as well as being presented in these positions on more occasions. This is also of great concern to feminists and they strive for a more equal society. Therefore some evidence remains of a struggle between the two 'spheres of influence' for men and women (i.e. public for men and domestic for women) and a gender gap is visible in the workplace of VKV. The removal of a gender gap is on the agenda of many Western nation states when policies are being developed in order to promote equality of employment and opportunities. Therefore this is relevant as messages people read from media can have an influence on their behaviour through socialisation (i.e. a woman's ambitions and expectations of employment). Considering the role, mass media play in the contemporary modern world it is important to look into the portrayals of different social groups by media texts.

As noted, the portrayal of women in the media is of importance to the strive for equality. However, some genre conventions can determine such portrayals which are not helpful to the feminist cause. Soap opera, with its conventions and formula, is an example of such a genre as in most cases it requires stereotypical representations in order to actually be a soap opera. The research into VKV has provided some examples of this in modern day Czech Republic. Conventions such as the evil women were in contrast to the objective reality of women (that a person is not/very rarely so one-dimensional). The exception to soap opera conventions (status in employment as mentioned above), *still* does not provide any encouragement to feminists as it further exasperates the gender gap.

This may suggest that in the conflict between genre and gender (i.e. which has the most influence over a media text), gender is more powerful, determining the content of text's message (whether accepted or not by the audience).

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Appendix A

Checklist

Episode:

Length:

Soap opera conventions:

Feature	Yes/No	Details and specifics
Open ended structure		
Cliff hanger		
Close up, zoom in on face in detail + music		
Soap opera formula		
Fragmentation of storyline, parallel sub-plots		
Setting		
the evil woman, the great sacrifice, the winning back of an estranged lover/spouse, marrying her for her money, respectability, the unwed mother, deception about the paternity of children, career vs. housewife, the alcoholic woman (occasionally man)		

Feminist issues

Feature	Yes/No	Details and specifics
Segmentation of female body, (typically the close ups of female legs or the camera presenting the female body in close up moving up or down the body to present different body parts to the wiewer) with the exception of facial close up		
Assertive woman - punished		
Domestic sphere V Public		

sphere		
Homogenic female		
Binary female characters characters(good versus evil, blond versus dark haired, housewife versus career woman,...)		

Additional information: