

Sexualization

Discourses on gender and heterosexuality in *Cruel Intentions*



Rhea Eeltink – 3857735
Liberal Arts & Sciences
Supervisor: Peta Hinton
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Abstract

This thesis deals with the sexualization of a specific type of ‘good girl’ femininity as portrayed by the character Anette in the movie *Cruel Intentions*. Starting at the discourses of sexualization that have been taking shape since the 1980’s, I work towards a cohesive understanding of sexualization. This leads me to consider sexualization in a multitude of ways; as a process, a representational concept, and a theory. Thinking of sexualization as a theory, encoding the social world and creating meaning, it becomes a tool to address sexism. By focusing on adult femininity instead of Girls Studies, agency takes a central place in analyses of sexualization. Along with Saba Mahmood’s work on agency, Giddens’ Structuration Theory provides insight into the way agency and performances of gender and normative heterosexuality, that function as structures, converge. This is then applied to the characters Anette and Sebastian from the movie *Cruel Intentions* in the analysis. This analysis moves from the agency expressed by both Anette and Sebastian, to the ways gender and normative heterosexuality collide and influence their agency. Anette and Sebastian show a very specific dynamic between femininity and masculinity in their interactions throughout the movie. Finally, I look into the way sexualization discourse constantly recodes sexualization itself and the way this makes an analysis of sexualization an dual one, in which both the meanings encoded by sexualization and the recoding of sexualization itself are focal points. This then led to the conclusion that current dominant understandings of sexualization are limited in their engagement with agency.

Introduction

Sexualization can be theorized in different ways. One way is to describe sexualization as a process or experience that is part of what is considered normal maturation.¹ This process is located within the individual and is often seen as empowering. But sexualization can also be seen as a process that is done to an individual, which might inherently have an aspect of objectification² to it and is located outside the individual. Though this process might be influenced by and have an affect on the individual, it is a social process that involves more than just the individual and their ideas about themselves.

Since the eighties, the debate on sexualization has largely centered around young girls. This allowed writers to leave the notion of choice out of the discussion, enabling both feminists and right wing conservatives from the United Kingdom, United States and Australia to address the harm sexualization causes – finding unexpected allies in each other. Unfortunately this has also limited the conversation on sexualization, which still remains focused on this process as it affects minors, and concepts of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sexuality – judgments that highlight a politics on sex and sexuality. The impact of this has been to narrow or sidestep theoretical analyses of sexualization itself.

In order to move beyond these normative and restrictive approaches, this thesis proposes to move towards a discussion of sexualization as a process or theory through which we can look more broadly at traditional and heteronormative gender roles and the inequalities these encompass. It proposes to do this by analyzing sexualization in terms of a very specific representation of the young adult woman, embodied in the character of Anette Hargrove (played by Reese Witherspoon) from the 1999 movie *Cruel Intentions*³. With this figure, questions arise about the process of sexualization as it relates to agency within structures of subordination and the meanings that are being created about gender and heterosexuality.

This analysis will discuss the relationship that unfolds between Anette and Sebastian (played by Ryan Phillippe), because their interactions show a very specific traditional, or even stereotypical, performance of femininity and masculinity. Anette is portrayed as virginal, non-promiscuous and

¹ Multiple articles explicitly distinguish between sexualization and normal maturation, the latter is often explained in terms of normative middle class childhood and the idea that children are pure until corrupted: “Children are not sexual unless corrupted by adults or adolescents, the innocence of modern children is contaminated when they are sexualized by the sexuality that pervades the imagery on television and the movies.” (Duschinsky 2013a, 141)

² Objectification: to present or regard something (or someone in this case) as an object. (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/objectification>)

³ *Cruel Intentions*. Directed by Roger Kumble and produced by Neal H. Moritz. Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999. Film.

pure – as a ‘good girl’⁴. In the movie she is pursued by Sebastian Valmont, who acts as the aggressor. He is a figure who performs his masculinity by trying to persuade Anette, this seemingly unobtainable young woman, to have sex with him.

Since the 1980’s, the dominant focus in sexualization research has been in Girls Studies. This thesis will focus on sexualization as it applies to adult femininity, which is something that has not been extensively researched⁵.

Thus the primary question with which this thesis is occupied is:

How are discourses of gender and heterosexuality at work in the sexualization of the ‘good girl’?

In order to study the sexualization of the ‘good girl’, it is important to come to a clear and functional definition of sexualization as it applies to the research question. To this end, sexualization discourses from the 1980’s until the 2010’s will be explored. A close reading of a selection of articles will show the different truths about sexualization that have been constructed over time, and the development of these truths in relation to each other⁶. Investigation of influential literature in the field of sexualization will open for a discussion regarding the discourses of gender and sexuality at work in the sexualization of the ‘good girl’ via analysis of the film *Cruel Intentions*. In this analysis, substantial attention will be given to the way agency is positioned and assigned in relation to the performances of femininity and masculinity that unfold in the film. The analysis of agency offered in this research presents as a helpful tool or lens through which to critically engage with definitions of sexualization, and to make some preliminary suggestions for a theoretical framework that can be applied to the sexualization of the ‘good girl’.

As a large part of sexualization discourse has its focus in ‘girls studies’, it is important to determine the differences between the sexualization of a minor and an adult. Agency plays an important role here, as sexualization discourse was originally shifted away from a focus on adults in order to avoid discussions of agency. In order to engage precisely this discussion of agency, this thesis will include a chapter on this term, as it applies to the sexualization of an adult. For this, I will be engaging with Saba Mahmood’s work on agency and Anthony Giddens’ work on Structuration Theory.

I have chosen several articles on sexualization, most notably *What does sexualization mean?* by Robbie Duschinsky. This text not only gives a good overview of the different discourses

⁴ The ‘good girl’ is a form of respectable femininity, described by Valerie Walkerdine (1990) as quiet, studious, responsible, obedient and domestic. Being a ‘good girl’ is generally a move away from sexuality, as engaging this too early or in the wrong way can position a girl or woman as ‘bad’ (Orellana 1999, 73).

⁵ During the search for literature on sexualization there was plenty to find on the topic of sexualization of girls, but very little specific to the sexualization of adult women.

⁶ Frost, Nollaig, and Frauke Elichsoff. "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory." In *Feminist Research Practise: A Primer*, edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber. 2nd ed. (Boston: Sage, 2014), 45.

surrounding sexualization, it also goes beyond sexualization as a representational concept and moves towards sexualization as a theory.

Another key reading is the American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, as this has been recognized by writers contributing to the body of work on sexualization as authoritative. Their definition of sexualization has been quoted in nearly every article that was published after their report came out in 2007. Their definition of sexualization will not only enable me to ask questions about the connection between agency and sexualization, it will also provide an entry point into my analysis.

The analysis of sexualization discourse will allow me to theorize the sexualization of the 'good girl' figure in *Cruel Intentions*. This theorization will consist of three parts: (1) Locate instances of sexualization within *Cruel Intentions*, (2) analyze the expressions of agency involved and, through that, the meanings being created about gender and heterosexuality. This will be followed by (3) an analysis of the way labeling *Cruel Intentions* as sexualizing recodes sexualization itself.

Chapter 1: Discourses of Sexualization

Introducing Sexualization

In the introduction I introduced the following research question: How are discourses of gender and heterosexuality at work in the sexualization of the 'good girl'? Along with this research question I want to propose several sub questions which together will allow me to take a dual approach to sexualization. On the one hand I will be talking about the dominant understandings of sexualization, as developed in the public and academic discourse since the 1980's, and the way meanings are being created through the use of sexualization. Looking into these topics, I want to pay specific attention to the connection between sexualization and agency, so the sub question that forms here is as follows: What understandings of agency inform definitions of sexualization?

On the other hand I will be looking at the way the discourse on sexualization in itself is one of meaning making. The question I will be asking here is: How is the use of sexualization recreating our understanding of the concept of sexualization itself?

In order to answer these questions, it is important to get to a basic understanding of what sexualization is and where it came from. As Duschinsky shows in his article 'The Emergence of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010', sexualization has been widely discussed since the term was coined by Graham Spanier in 1975⁷. Though extensively researched, a universal definition of sexualization seems hard to find. This has to do with the nature of sexualization as a term and a concept. The term emerged as a portmanteau of the words 'sexual socialization' and was originally meant to signify three aspects of sexual maturation: "development of a gender identity; acquisition of sexual skills, knowledge, and values; and development of sexual attitudes or disposition to behave"⁸. When Anne-Marie Schiro published 'Play Cosmetics for Children: Dissenting Voices are Heard in the New York Times' in 1981, she was one of the first to publicly discuss sexualization and the way "sexist cultural representations have been undermining the confidence and social power of young girls"⁹. Her article was the first in a line of publications from journalists and academics in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom, focusing on the sexualization of young girls in contemporary culture. These discussions originated from two different groups, feminists on the one hand and right wing conservatives on the other. Both parties addressed the issue in ways that benefited their own politics.

On the one hand, early feminist commentators strove to highlight the corrosion of childhood by early and harmful sexualization. These self-identified feminists used the construction of the

⁷ Duschinsky, Robbie. "The Emergency of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010." *Sexual Politics* 20, no. 1 (2013a): 138.

⁸ Spanier, Graham B. "Sexualisation and Premarital Sexual Behaviour" *The Family Coordinator* 24, no. 1 (1975): 4-35.

⁹ Duschinsky, Robbie. "What does sexualization mean?" *Feminist Theory* 14, no. 3 (2013b): 258.

innocent female child, as a site of sexual and moral purity, to discuss sexism and harmful socialization of women in western society¹⁰¹¹. The figure of the girl allowed these feminist writers to discuss these issues whilst circumventing liberal discourses about free choice¹². To do so, they drew “on established feminist tropes for the critique of rape culture and pornography”¹³ in order to show that “stereotypical forms of adult sexuality”¹⁴ were being transferred onto children. An example of such a stereotypical form of adult sexuality, as this is transferred onto young girls, can for instance be seen in the figure of the ‘sexy little girl’, found in music videos, on magazine covers and in movies¹⁵. Ariana Grande is a contemporary version of this figure, with her youthful, almost pre-pubescent looks and her sexy music videos¹⁶.

The second group to quickly get involved in the discussion of sexualization were right wing conservatives. Their opinion on the harmful effects of sexualization were grounded in traditional family values and the need to return to them¹⁷. In contrast to the feminists who framed sexualization as a problem of sexism, the right wing discourse focused on sexualization as a problem of public decency¹⁸. This moved the public conversation on sexualization towards a discussion of morals, and away from sexism.

In 2007 the American Psychological Association (from now on APA) formed the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, which published an influential report on sexualization. They defined sexualization as follows:

“Sexualization occurs when [1.] a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; [2.] a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; [3.] a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; [4.] and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.”¹⁹

¹⁰ Duschinsky, "The Emergency of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010." 140.

¹¹ Duschinsky, "What does sexualization mean?" 259.

¹² Idem, 259.

¹³ Idem, 258.

¹⁴ Rush, Emma, and Andrea Nauze. *Corporate Paedophilia: Sexualisation of Children in Australia*. (Deakin, A.C.T.: Australia Institute, 2006), 1.

¹⁵ Durham, Meenakshi Gigi. *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Can Do about It*. (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁶ Ariana Grande is a popular American singer who performs her femininity in a very specific way. Whilst being sexy, she is always also ‘cute’ in an almost childlike manor. She speaks to the representation of the ‘good girl’ in popular media.

¹⁷ Duschinsky, "The Emergency of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010." 140.

¹⁸ Duschinsky, "What does sexualization mean?" 259.

¹⁹ American Psychological Task Force. "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls." (2007), 2.

Since this report was published it has been cited by numerous articles, including all the sources on sexualization used in this thesis. This reaffirms its authoritative position within the public and academic sexualization discourse.

A close reading of this definition of sexualization shows how both their definition of sexualization and the previous focus of sexualization discourse on minors speak to the way discourses of agency are attached to sexualization. For example, part 3 of the definition is about sexual objectification, which is described as being made into a thing, an object, rather than being seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making. As the capacity for independent action and decision making are often seen as important parts of agency, this speaks to the way sexualization or sexual objectification denies the sexualized, or the 'object', any agency and as such denies them the power to act against or change the meanings assigned to them. The same goes for the fourth part of the definition which speaks of sexuality as something imposed upon a person. Sexualization is framed as that which is 'done to' a person, something in which that person has no say themselves, in which they have no apparent agency. Throughout these understandings of agency in connection to sexualization runs an undercurrent of the sexualized being imagined as lacking in power, passively undergoing what is 'being done to them' by other parties that in effect hold all the power.

Sexualization as a Theory

A large part of the public and academic discussion on sexualization has been contributed in the name of feminism. These feminist voices used the construction of the innocent female child, as a site of sexual and moral purity, to discuss sexism and harmful socialization of women in western society²⁰²¹. It is this feminist perspective on sexualization, along with the work of Robbie Duschinsky, that offers a way of theorizing sexualization as more than simply ‘something that is done to a person’.

In the chapter on agency I will touch upon Saba Mahmood’s description of feminism as both an analytical and a politically prescriptive project²². Mahmood argues that feminism “offers both a *diagnosis* of women’s status across cultures as well as a *prescription* for changing the situation of women”²³. Although it is hard to speak of one singular feminist perspective, the range of perspectives that are categorized as feminist have this dual approach in common. Feminism is politically motivated, and any analysis will include ideas of how to work towards improvement of the social, political and economical position of women²⁴.

Sexualization as seen from a feminist perspective is a tool to address sexism in society. Early on in the discussion on sexualization, feminists used the figure of the ‘girl’ to leave questions of free choice out of the discussion in order to focus on the sexist content of sexualizing messages²⁵²⁶. Using the then still relatively new concept of sexualization, these feminists strove to highlight inequality. This use of sexualization as more than the definition published by the APA Task Force is something Robbie Duschinsky worked towards in his 2013 article ‘What does sexualization mean?’.

Duschinsky proposes that the term ‘sexualization’ “has served as an interpretive theory of contradictory gender norms, using the figure of the ‘girl’ to gesture towards an intensifying contradiction between the demands that young women display both desirability and innocence”²⁷. As mentioned before, the focus on ‘girls’ enabled a discussion of sexualization as a manifestation of sexism. This discussion of sexualization becomes very interesting when you look at it as a theory that not only signifies something about sexism, but by extension also about gender, femininity,

²⁰ Duschinsky, "The Emergency of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010." 140.

²¹ Duschinsky, "What does sexualization mean?" 259.

²² Mahmood, Saba. "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." *Cultural Antropology* 16, no. 2 (2001): 203.

²³ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." (2001): 206.

²⁴ This is the definition of feminism given by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie during a TEDx talk she gave in Euston in 2012. Her talk gained in popularity and influence when Beyoncé sampled part of it in her song ‘Flawless’.

²⁵ Duschinsky, "The Emergency of Sexualization as a Social Problem: 1981-2010." 140.

²⁶ Duschinsky, "What does sexualization mean?" 259.

²⁷ Idem, 255.

masculinity, agency and power relations. To this end, Duschinsky quotes Wendy Brown²⁸: “Theory does not simply decipher the world, but recodes it in order to reveal something of the meanings and incoherencies with which we live.” When considering sexualization as a theory, rather than a representational concept²⁹, it becomes a tool through which social issues can be addressed. When something is deemed sexualizing, labeling it as such means that there is more at play than it simply being deemed sexual, there is always a gendered aspect to consider. Further analysis will highlight other facets in play, such as specific forms of femininity or normative heterosexuality. The label ‘sexualization’ is an invitation to further analysis, effectively signifying that there are sexist representations operating. Because of the lack of a clear definition of what sexualization ‘is’ or ‘does’, applying the label ‘sexualization’ also has the effect of recoding the word itself, recreating what we understand sexualization to be. This makes the analysis of instances of sexualization a double one in which we can both look at that what is deemed sexualizing or sexualized, and what this tells us about the way we understand sexualization.

As Duschinsky points out, the discussion on sexualization – and the differentiation between ‘sexualized’ and ‘healthy sexuality’ within that discussion – have “helped to raise awareness of the uninterrupted reproducing of gender inequities in heterosexual relationships”³⁰. Apart from more recent years, in which men have become increasingly sexualized too, it has traditionally been women who have been the focus of sexualization discourse, who have been sexualized. This gendered aspect of sexualization as a representational concept is further reinforced by the “capacity of the noun-stem ‘sexual’ to mean *gender* or *erotic*”³¹. Whilst most of the attempts of defining sexualization, like the APA Task Force’s report, focus on sexualization as something or someone ‘being made’ (inappropriately) sexual, sexualization also denotes a strong gendered component. Duschinsky explicitly voices his concern with the harm gender power causes young people, harm “which is missed and left unaddressed due to blind-spots in heteronormative assumptions about sex and gender”³². Sexualization as a representational concept is heteronormative, and it is this heteronormativity that frequently allows sexism to go unnoticed because it goes hand in hand with heteronormative social assumptions that are seen as ‘normal’ in western society³³.

²⁸ Brown, Wendy. *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 139.

²⁹ Using the term ‘sexualization’ as a representational concept lines up with discussions of harmful sexualization and subsequent normative arguments. I believe moving towards an understanding of sexualization as a theory more easily enables a discussion with respect to the content of sexualizing messages, allowing further analysis of (in this case) gender and normative heterosexuality.

³⁰ Duschinsky, “What does sexualization mean?” 256.

³¹ *Idem*, 258.

³² *Idem*, 255.

³³ *Idem*, 255.

Normative Heterosexuality

In her article 'Menarche and the (Hetero)Sexualization of the Female Body', Janet Lee makes a connection between sexualization and heterosexualization. She explains that "sexualization implies heterosexualization, meaning that women are taught to live an discipline their bodies in accordance with the prescriptions of heterosexuality, experiencing themselves as sexual objects for heterosexual male viewing, pleasure and also as mothers of men's children"³⁴. This is reflected in the strong, but unspoken, focus on heterosexuality in sexualization discourses.

Heterosexuality, like maleness and whiteness, is an unmarked category³⁵. Ross Chambers explains that unmarked categories have a "touchstone quality" of normalcy, "against which the members of marked categories are measured and, of course, found deviant, i.e. wanting"³⁶. Heterosexuality, as an unmarked category, is thus a benchmark used to evaluate people who identify as anything other than heterosexual. But heterosexuality also greatly influences those "kept within its boundaries", as there are many different ways people can act out their heterosexuality³⁷. There are "hierarchies of respectability" within heterosexuality, "and what tends to be valorized as 'normative' is a very particular form founded in traditional gender arrangements and lifelong monogamy"³⁸. So when talking about normative heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, we are not only talking about "a normative sexual practice", but also about "a normal way of life" in which specific forms of heterosexuality are seen as superior to others³⁹.

This 'normal way of life' includes ideas about binary, 'normal' gender roles, making normative heterosexuality more than just a sexual orientation. Normative heterosexuality "depend[s] on and guarantee[s] gender division", as "gender defines the social categories women and men and locates them differentially" in a way that normalizes the idea that men and women 'belong together'⁴⁰. As Judith Butler wrote, this "regulation of gender has always been part of the heterosexual normativity"⁴¹. It is this interconnectedness between heterosexuality and gender that Duschinsky speaks to when he was talking about harm caused by gender power, and this same interconnectedness between heterosexuality and gender becomes apparent when analyzing sexualizing messages.

³⁴ Lee, Janet. "Menarche and the (hetero)sexualization of the Female Body." *Gender & Society* 8, no. 3 (1994): 344.

³⁵ Chambers, Ross. "The Unexamined." *The Minnesota Review* 47 (1996): 142.

³⁶ Chambers, "The Unexamined.", 142.

³⁷ Jackson, Stevi. "Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity." *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 1 (2006): 105.

³⁸ Jackson, "Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity.", 105.

³⁹ Idem, 107.

⁴⁰ Idem, 105 & 107.

⁴¹ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 186.

In this thesis, sexualization will thus function as a paradigm for analysis and interpretation. This approach to sexualization will help encode the discourses connected to it, such as the discourses of agency, gender, and normative heterosexuality.

Chapter 2: Theories of Agency

As already mentioned, in most of the discourses on sexualization the focus has been on young girls, as their being a minor excluded their agency. This prevented arguments against sexualization from being shot down by assertions centering around free will. But what happens when the young girl is a woman?

When looking at sexualization in connection to adult women, agency becomes an undeniable and important factor. In making this claim, however, it is necessary to touch upon the broader question of what agency is, given that our definitions start to shift and broaden as well. To this end I will address the questions: What is agency? And how can we understand agency in relation to sexualization, gender and heterosexuality?

The concept of agency has been described in a multitude of ways, ranging from common understandings – Agency is the capacity of an agent (a person) to act, or choose to refrain from acting – to intricate theorizations of agency as it relates to the social world in which an ‘agent’ finds themselves. In her article ‘Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival’ Saba Mahmood engages with agency in the context of women’s participation in Islamic movements, specifically through “an urban women’s mosque movement that is part of the larger Islamic revival in Cairo, Egypt”⁴². Her focus is specifically on women’s agency, and the way this focus on *locating* – not creating – women’s agency previously helped recognize the agency of women in positions often deemed submissive or oppressive⁴³. Mahmood introduces a central question within feminist work on agency: “How do women contribute to reproducing their own domination, and how do they resist or subvert it?”⁴⁴

This “operation of human agency within structures of subordination” has been a point of focus within the humanities and social sciences since the 1970’s, and it is still very relevant today⁴⁵. In this line of reasoning, however, Mahmood points out that agency is framed as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)”⁴⁶. This way of theorizing agency assumes an universal desire to be free from subordination or oppression. Mahmood views this idea of women’s agency as inherently similar to resistance to oppression, as well as the universalized desire for freedom, as products of what she calls “feminism’s dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically*

⁴² Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." (2001): 202.

⁴³ Idem, 205.

⁴⁴ Idem, 205.

⁴⁵ Idem, 205.

⁴⁶ Idem, 206.

prescriptive project"⁴⁷. Feminism, she argues, "offers both a *diagnosis* of women's status across cultures as well as a *prescription* for changing the situation of women"⁴⁸. Because feminism's political object is for women to be free of subordination, analyses of inequality are often worked out in ways that attempt to reduce this inequality. The assumption of a universal desire to be free from any type of subordination or oppression can be understood from this perspective, but does not necessarily have to be true. There is a particular understanding of freedom operating here, which Mahmood goes on to describe as follows; "In order for an individual to be free, it is required that their actions be the consequences of her 'own will' rather than of custom, tradition, or direct coercion. Thus, even illiberal actions can arguably be tolerated if it is determined that they are undertaken by a freely consenting individual who acted on her own accord."⁴⁹ This definition of freedom seems to be placing agency in a vacuum, uninfluenced by outside factors.

In contrast, some social theorists suggest that *both* agency and structure are factors in shaping human behavior. In these approaches, agency is, similar to the common understanding of the concept, often seen as the capacity of an 'agent' to act upon situations⁵⁰. On the other hand, structure has been considered as playing a more constraining role: described by Chris Barker as "the recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available"⁵¹. Structure can thus be thought of as social contexts, influencing the way people express their agency⁵². Influential social theorist Anthony Giddens argued that definitions of agency of structure that describe these two concepts as part of a dualism between the individual and society is not complex enough a representation of the way agency and structure interact⁵³. He introduced Structuration Theory, proposing that the two be reconceptualized as a duality⁵⁴. According to Giddens, the interaction between agency and structure is what ensures the continuing existence of structure⁵⁵. This means that, whilst structure influences agency, the way agency is acted out within social structures is what recreates these structures and effectively sustains them.

⁴⁷ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival.", 206. Original emphasis.

⁴⁸ Idem, 206. Original emphasis

⁴⁹ Idem, 207.

⁵⁰ Sibeon, Roger. "Agency, Structure, and Social Chance as Cross-Disciplinary Concepts." *Politics* 19, no. 3 (1999): 139.

⁵¹ Barker, Chris. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. (London: Sage, 2005), 448.

⁵² Sibeon, "Agency, Structure, and Social Chance as Cross-Disciplinary Concepts.", 139.

⁵³ Giddens, Anthony, and Christopher Pierson. "Structuration Theory." In *Conversations with Anthony Giddens: Making Sense of Modernity*. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998). 75.

⁵⁴ Giddens, Anthony. *The Constitution of Society Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. (Cambridge: Polity Pr. [u.a.], 1984), xxi.

⁵⁵ Sibeon, "Agency, Structure, and Social Chance as Cross-Disciplinary Concepts.", 139.

In her article 'Gender as a Social Structure', Barbara Risman argues that gender functions as a social structure. Seeing gender as a social structure "situate[s] gender as embedded not only in individuals but throughout social life"⁵⁶. This makes it possible to go from contemplations of gender as something that is located in the individual as part of their identity, towards theorizations of gender as an outside factor that is learned and acted out. Thinking of gender as a social structure makes it possible to see different expressions of what is considered to be the same gender as the effect of "actors compar[ing] themselves and their options to those in structurally similar positions"⁵⁷, meaning; as we grow up within the category female, we learn what kinds of behavior are acceptable or even normative within that box. We eventually choose which kind(s) of (in this case) femininity suit us best. Herein lies also the power of gender, according to Risman. When male and female are seen as markedly different categories, "women [are] unlikely to compare their life options to those of men"⁵⁸. It is when these categories are no longer seen as decidedly different that the social structure of gender is experienced as oppressive.

So while Mahmood's article speaks of agency as autonomous, separate from custom, tradition or coercion, social theorists offer a way to theorize agency as it is influenced by outside factors, like gender, as these are part of the structure of social life.

⁵⁶ Risman, Barbara J. "Gender as a Social Structure, Theory Wrestling with Activism." *Gender & Society* 18, no. 4 (2004): 431.

⁵⁷ Risman, "Gender as a Social Structure, Theory Wrestling with Activism.", 431.

⁵⁸ Idem, 432.

Chapter 3: Method

The aim of this thesis is to theorize the sexualization of a very specific type of adult femininity, namely, that of the stereotypical, virginal 'good girl', and to explore what this sexualization tells us about performances of gender roles and normative heterosexuality, as well as about the concept of sexualization itself. The method I will use to analyze sexualization in relation to the 'good girl' femininity in the 1999 movie *Cruel Intentions*, is a discourse analysis.

As Nollaig Frost and Frauke Elichaoﬀ describe in their chapter 'Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory', discourses can be seen as patterned ways of understanding⁵⁹. Adding to that, Chris Weedon refers to Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as follows:

"Discourses, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and the emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern."⁶⁰

A discourse can also be described "as a site of struggle, where forces of social (re)production and contestation are played out"^{61,62}.

Following this, discourse analysis is explained by Frost and Elichaoﬀ as allowing "for the analysis of language, spoken or written, and of images, symbols, and other media representations. Discourse analysis aims to understand how realities are constructed through these media, and to observe cultural and societal influences on subjective experiences"⁶³. The public and academic discussion of sexualization is such a site of reality construction, and doing a discourse analysis on sexualization will allow me to understand the multiple ways sexualization can be theorized as a concept, process, and practice. These different approaches to sexualization will enable me to study the sexualization of the 'good girl'.

The complex nature of the concept of sexualization is another reason discourse analysis is such a relevant method. Because there is not one clear definition of what sexualization is, the meaning of the word is reconstructed every time it is used. This means that the discourse surrounding sexualization not only functions as a site of struggle, in which meaning is discussed, but as a site of creation in which the recoding or sexualization alters the concept itself. Doing a discourse

⁵⁹ Frost, Nollaig, and Elichaoﬀ. "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory.", 47.

⁶⁰ Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 108.

⁶¹ Frost, Nollaig, and Elichaoﬀ. "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory.", 47.

⁶² Lazar, Michelle M. "Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis" *Critical Discourse Studies* 4:, no. 2 (2007): 144.

⁶³ Frost, Nollaig, and Elichaoﬀ. "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory.", 46.

analysis will not only allow me to explore the existing discourse on sexualization, it will allow me to go deeper into the way the discourse creates its own subject.

In my analysis chapter, I will use a three step plan to approach scenes from *Cruel Intentions*. These steps are as follows: (1) I will apply the label 'sexualization' following the narrow definition of sexualization as outlined by the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. This label will serve as an invitation for (2) further analysis into the meanings that are being created, specifically focusing on agency, femininity, masculinity and normative heterosexuality. Lastly (3) I will analyze what labeling this scene or the meanings in it as sexualization means for our understanding of the concept of sexualization.

What I am doing here reflects the dual nature of feminism as explained by Mahmood⁶⁴. Working with a feminist lens, I have a dual goal of analyzing both the sexualization of the 'good girl' and sexualization itself. Using a feminist lens means that my analysis will inherently be colored by the nature of feminism as a political project, as well as by my personal location as a scholar. As Adrienne Rich describes in 'Notes Towards a Politics of Location'⁶⁵, it is important to recognize this location. Researchers function within academic research conventions that move them to "present their research as coherent and complete", making their work come across as 'neutral'⁶⁶. However, in the same way that discourses are "shaped and adjusted through the lens of other discourses", researchers are influenced by the discourses they find themselves in⁶⁷. Self-reflexivity and acknowledgment of perspectives, such as the feminist one I am taking in this thesis, help to turn a 'neutral' researcher into a author who is transparent about their position in regards to the research.

⁶⁴ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival." (2001): 206.

⁶⁵ Rich, Adrienne. "Notes Toward a Politics of Location (1984)." In *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985*. (New York: Norton, 1986).

⁶⁶ Frost, Nollaig, and Elichaoff. "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Critical Theory.", 40.

⁶⁷ Idem, 40.

Chapter 4: Analysis

The aims of this analysis of *Cruel Intentions* are as follows: (1) I want to make connections between sexualization and normative heterosexuality, (2) I want to open up questions of agency in sexualization, by shifting away from the figure of the ‘girl’ and towards ‘women’. I also (3) want to connect gender-as-a-structure to the types of femininity and masculinity displayed in *Cruel Intentions* as boxes that ‘complement’ each other but also leave little space for change.

As mentioned earlier, I will be using this definition of sexualization put forward by the APA Task Force in their 2007 report:

“Sexualization occurs when [1.] a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; [2.] a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy; [3.] a person is sexually objectified – that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; [4.] and/or sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.”⁶⁸

It will serve as a starting point, enabling me to label the relationship between Anette and Sebastian as sexualizing – inviting further analysis into the representations of gender and heterosexuality, as well as making it possible to look into the way this definition might be restrictive to our understandings of the workings of sexualization. On this basis I will show how it also functions as a starting point for further analysis of sexualization discourse itself.

***Cruel Intentions* and Agency**

The movie *Cruel Intentions* first introduces Sebastian, played by Ryan Phillippe, as a privileged, white, upper class young adult. He shares a luxurious home and a manipulative demeanor with his equally privileged, white and upper class stepsister Kathryn, played by Sara Michelle Gellar. Twelve minutes into the movie he introduces Anette by showing Kathryn an article Anette wrote for



Cruel Intentions (Kumble 1999) A

Seventeen magazine, titled ‘Why I plan to wait’. He calls Anette a challenge, describing her as “daddy’s little angel, a paradigm of chastity and virtue” and revels in the thought of what “screwing

⁶⁸ American Psychological Task Force. "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.", 2.

the new headmaster's daughter before school starts" will do for his reputation. "She'll be my greatest victory."⁶⁹

This scene introduces the relationship between Anette and Sebastian as one of sexualization. By reducing Anette to a victory for him to further his reputation, Sebastian not only sees her sexual appeal as her only value, he also sexually objectifies her by making her into a thing for his use and enjoyment, imposing his desire upon her without her knowing – or consent. In doing so, the direction this sexualization takes is one of privileging Sebastian's desire, disregarding any agency Anette might have in the matter. Using the definition of sexualization created by the APA Task Force as a measure, it is clear that his attitude towards Anette is to objectify and sexualize her⁷⁰. Though not explicit in every interaction they share, Sebastian's sexualization of Anette runs as an undercurrent throughout the movie.

The meanings that are being created here have to do with agency and, through that, with heterosexual femininity and masculinity. Sebastian attempts to pull all the agency towards himself, never considering Anette's agency as something that will hinder him in his pursuit to bed her, even though it is made clear that she has no intention of complying. Her articulation of her agency (saying no in advance of his request) only makes him more determined to manipulate her. On this point, Sebastian's denial of Anette's agency lines up with patriarchal narratives that equate virginity to "empty of desire and void of sexual agency"⁷¹. Virginity seems to abnegate agency, which is ironic in this case, as Anette expressed her agency by explicitly stating her preference for virginity.

The article in which she states her virginity is exactly what moves Sebastian to objectify her on the basis of her innocence, instead of seeing her as a multi faceted person. His desire for her is based in her innocence – and in line with this, his capacity to corrupt her innocence. And while the focus on 'girls' within sexualization discourse makes discussions about innocence and corruptions a central point of focus, moving from the 'girl' to the 'woman' shifts this point of focus towards discussions about agency and the way gender and normative heterosexuality shape expressions of agency.

⁶⁹ *Cruel Intentions*. Directed by Roger Kumble and produced by Neal H. Moritz. Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999.

⁷⁰ American Psychological Task Force. "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls.", 2.

⁷¹ McClintock, Anne. "Chapter 1: The Lay of the Land: Genealogies of Imperialism." In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 30.

***Cruel Intentions* and Heteronormative Gender Roles**

From the start, the sexuality that we are contending with in this movie is one of heterosexual desire. Anette's virginity is based in heterosexual relations and Sebastian has no moment of doubt about whether or not Anette will be interested in him, or in men in general. The assumption of her heterosexuality is automatic, and can be explained by the nature of heterosexuality as an unmarked category⁷². As the automatic assumption of heterosexuality turns out to be correct, for both Anette and Sebastian, their performance of heterosexuality can be located somewhere in the "hierarchies of respectability" that constitute the range of heterosexual performances⁷³.

In this case, we are talking about a highly gendered performance, lining up with ideas about the way men and women 'naturally' complement each other. Sebastian's masculinity is firmly introduced as one in which the man is actively chasing women. He builds his reputation by bedding 'hard to get' women, he is actively sexual and will go to any length to get what he wants. Whether it is the added effect of his privileged upbringing or simply his privilege being a man, he does not consider the possibility of getting a 'no' for an answer. His performance of traditional masculinity fits perfectly with the 'good girl' femininity put forward by Anette. Where Sebastian seems to aggressively pursue her, she comes off as unassuming, polite and well mannered. Throughout the



Cruel Intentions (Kumble 1999) B

movie, we see Sebastian moving towards her, repeatedly seeking her out in order to manipulate her into liking him so as to eventually sleep with her. She constantly maintains her modest and unassuming stance, never inviting him, always turning him down politely and in a respectable manner. Their performances of

masculinity and femininity, her carefully navigating his pushing and pulling, seem to fit together perfectly, and as such, are a great example of the way gender roles and heterosexuality intersect. Their complementary gender performances reinforce the idea that their heterosexuality is natural and that they, as a man and a woman, belong together⁷⁴.

In turn, this amplifies heterosexual norms and the restrictive notions of masculinity and femininity already in place. This normative performance of masculinity leaves no space for the

⁷² Chambers, "The Unexamined.", 142.

⁷³ Jackson, "Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity.", 105.

⁷⁴ Idem, 107.

accompanying feminine agency to be about anything more than consent or non-consent. Bringing us back to the dominant discourse surrounding sexualization, this champions concepts surrounding femininity as 'pure' and masculinity as 'corrupting'. However, while it may seem that Sebastian and Anette appear to fit this discourse perfectly, to say so would be to continue to limit Anette's agency to a simple 'yes' or 'no' – and this is not the case.

As said before, this discussion about innocence and corruption is one that has its focus in 'girls' studies and, as Anette is a young adult, this is not the relevant focus we need in order to discuss her agency. Indeed, if we look at Anette as an adult, her agency becomes much more interesting. Mahmood shows that expressions of agency can be diverse, broadening the concept of agency to include types of action (or inaction) that are not necessarily oppositional in nature⁷⁵. Sebastian's sexualization of Anette is an oppressive attempt to take away her agency, and her response seems to be subtle. Whilst she does express her agency in an oppositional manner, by consistently staying close to her beliefs and turning him down, she always stays polite and well mannered.

What we see here is an expression of agency that is influenced by Anette's performance of femininity. Gender functions as a structure, effectively limiting the possible ways to react⁷⁶. This is where the APA Task Force definition of sexualization falls short in its grasp on agency. Their definition limits the understanding of agency to choices of the individual, disregarding the influence of structure. With their narrow understanding of agency, which lines up with the narrow ideas of agency Mahmood describes, expressions of agency are required to be clearly oppositional to be recognized as such – meaning that agency is thus 'taken away' by sexualization. However, as the analysis of Anette's performance in *Cruel Intentions* shows, we cannot think agency just like this. When approaching normative heterosexuality, and the performances of femininity and masculinity associated with this, expressions of agency are constrained yet nevertheless available. It is these types of interactions between structuring factors and agency that Structuration Theory describes. In almost the same way Anette's agency is being limited by the structuring properties of femininity and normative heterosexuality, Sebastian's expression of agency is also strongly influenced – and thus limited – by the structuring properties of masculinity prescribed by normative heterosexuality. It might seem like the aggressive way he performs his masculinity gives him an advantage over the passivity prescribed to Anette by her 'good girl' femininity, but his options are nevertheless limited. There are certain aspects of aggressive, 'woman-chasing' masculinity that he cannot go against in expressing his agency. I believe this is also what is happening with the 'good girl'. Politeness and

⁷⁵ Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agency: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival.", 206.

⁷⁶ Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, 448.

good manners are so important to this performance of femininity that they are prioritized over explicitly oppositional expressions of agency – Anette never tells Sebastian to go fuck himself.

Sexualization Discourse

As I explained earlier, the concept of sexualization is characterized by a unique fluidity. By labeling the interactions between Sebastian and Anette sexualization, I am effectively recoding sexualization myself. I might have started with the definition of sexualization put forward by the APA Task Force, but , through my work with agency, I have changed the understanding of sexualization I will work with in the future. Where the APA Task Force speaks of sexualization as something that denotes agency, I believe this understanding of sexualization is narrow and leaves the person who is being sexualized virtually no say in the matter.

Beyond simply denying ‘the sexualized’ any agency, the APA Task Force definition leaves no room in the theorization of sexualization for alternative understandings of sexualization as signifier of sexist and heteronormative messages. The APA definition is all about the harmful effects of sexualization on the sexualized, but I would like to argue that sexualization *itself* may not be what is wholly harmful here. It is the limiting messages about what types of behavior are normative, and thus deemed acceptable, are. Looking no further than the APA Task Force definition takes us only so far, enabling only judgments about right versus wrong, or acceptable versus deviant. And as my analysis of sexualization discourse has shown, sexualization is most interesting when seen as an invitation for further research.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have looked at the way gender and heterosexuality are at work in the sexualization of the 'good girl' figure. In the first chapter I went into sexualization discourse, sexualization as a theory and normative heterosexuality. In the second chapter I went into agency and structure, and the way the two intertwine when it comes to sexualization. The third chapter holds explorations on discourse analysis as a method. In the fourth and final chapter I analyzed the sexualization of the 'good girl' figure as found in the 1999 movie *Cruel Intentions*.

Sexualization is intricate, as it can be approached as a representational concept, as a theory or as a process. For this thesis the most important way of reading sexualization was as a theory, following the definition by Wendy Brown that describes theory as not only deciphering but also recoding our social world⁷⁷. Sexualization, especially from a feminist perspective, is a label that can be applied in order to invite further analysis into meanings that are being created and the lens it provides for understanding this phenomenon. In *Cruel Intentions*, these meanings pertained to performances of gender and normative heterosexuality.

Especially significant in the analysis of sexualization discourse itself, but also of sexualization in *Cruel Intentions*, is the way agency is expressed or denied. Instead of focusing on Girls Studies, like much of the discourse surrounding sexualization has done since the 1980's, I explicitly focused on an adult subject, making agency a particularly important site for exploration. Combining Saba Mahmoods work on agency with Anthony Giddens work on structure, I found that agency and structure are in flux, this interconnectedness in which agency is influenced by structure, which is in turn reinforced by expressions of agency, is what Giddens described with his Structuration Theory. An example of this structure is gender, as people express their agency in line with available gender roles.

When looking at *Cruel Intentions*, my analysis started with what sense of agency is available in this example of sexualization, which moved towards gender and its intersection with normative heterosexuality. I found that, in the case of Anette and Sebastian, there is a specific dynamic between masculinity and femininity that left little space for change. The structuring aspects of gender, and thus normative heterosexuality, made it so that, while Anette is shown to be a smart young woman, her agency was limited by her 'good girl' femininity, showing how the diagnosis of sexualisation involves a re-subscription to a normative performance of femininity.

Finally, I went into the way the lack of a clear definition of what sexualization 'is' or 'does', makes applying the label 'sexualization' also have the effect of recoding the word itself, recreating what we understand sexualization to be. This makes the analysis of instances of sexualization a double one in

⁷⁷ Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 139.

which we can both look at that what is deemed sexualizing or sexualized, and what this tells us about the way we understand sexualization. In the case of this thesis, I found that current dominant definitions of sexualization are limiting to any analysis that does not want to focus on normative proclamations, due to the lack of engagement with agency, or structuring factors such as gender and normative heterosexuality.

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