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Television Criticism

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Emily Armstrong: Hegemonic Masculinity

This semester we discussed many important topics to be observant of when watching popular television that is heavily circulated through the media. The topic that caught my attention was hegemonic masculinity in television and all it promotes to its viewers. Hegemonic masculinity is an important concept to be elaborated on because it permits the idea of men's collective dominance over women to continue. This can be threatening to women because the media is constantly influencing men to behave in a certain way when in reality every person is not drawn to this ideal. It also is threatening to men because of constantly being presented with these ideas and pressured to meet them if they want to be successful in today's society. After hearing class lectures and reading the article "Nothing Suits Me Like a Suit: Performing Masculinity in *How I Met Your Mother*" by Lauren Jade Thompson on this particular topic I have decided to look into the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street* directed by Martin Scorsese in 2013.

On December 24th, 2013 the New Yorker released the press article "The Wild, Brilliant Wolf of Wall Street". In this article it touches on how this film is based on the autobiography of Jorden Belfort, a broker who made fortune on shady sales and spent a fortune on drugs, sex, and other self-indulgences before going to jail. It also includes how the three hour production is worth

every minute and is a hyper energized riot. I also am a big fan of Taylor Swift and in 2019 she released her album Lover with a song on it called “The Man”. The song’s message is about how as a male in today’s society it is socially acceptable to be aggressive when you're angry, have multiple women you are talking to, and all the privileges men hold. After rewatching the music video I discovered that it is supposed to be based on The Wolf of Wall Street and mock the alpha males in the film. It was very telling that based upon the message the song had she decided setting the music video to mirror the movie would match best. A specific line in the song that reflects the similarities to The Wolf of Wall Street is “Raking in dollars, And getting bitches and models”. Both of these messages inform consumers about the film and ideals that will be shown when watching the movie. It is important to make note of this feedback but also when watching to be able to critique and pick out what in specific may have led to these reviews.

The Wolf of Wall Street is a movie that is focused on the main character Jordan Belford, a former stockbroker and a financial criminal. Jordan is seen as fitting hegemonic masculinity because his character has all five key attributes. This movie promotes that if you are a man and have achieved all of these you will achieve the lifestyle that Jordan has. A lifestyle of owning a yacht, having multiple women fall into your lap, and be able to travel wherever and whenever you want. Aside from Jordan some other big characters in this film include Jordan’s wife Naomi Lapaglia, his close friend as well as business partner Donnie Azoff, and his close friend and business partner Donnie Azoff. Each of these characters help move the storyline along and help the audience to better understand how Jordan became the man he is. This movie is popular because it has a well put together cast, is an upbeat movie, and an interesting story to follow. Men enjoy this movie because it is the ideal lifestyle for a man and it is thrilling to see someone achieving it, while following their footsteps. In the article “Jordan Belfort’s Male Gaze and its

Effect on Filmgoers" it says the opening of the movie is Belfort is seen in a room full of male stockbrokers while passionately discussing his unabashed love of money, stating that, "Money doesn't just buy you a better life, better food, better car, better pussy, it also makes you a better person". After this introduction it leaves the audience seeing women as a commodity that can be purchased similar to food and cars. The article also makes note that after this opening scene it leads the movie into a misogynistic direction in only a matter of minutes. A critic on rotten tomatoes says "In a year of breathtaking sexism, here is a big three-hour helping of more of the same". When scrolling through critics' responses to the film I noticed the majority of these critics were white males (based on profile pictures) and most of their critiques on the movie are how well executed this movie was done. Whereas the few female critics focus more on how this film is seen as men bragging to friends of their "douchebag behavior".

An article I looked into to better understand hegemonic masculinity was "Nothing Suits Me Like a Suit: Performing Masculinity in *How I Met Your Mother*" written by Lauren Jade Thompson. When reading this I already had background on each male character presented and I hoped to see how their characters represented masculinity. In *Wolf of Wall Street* all of the males have all five aspects of hegemonic masculinity but in *How I Met Your Mother* the male characters only meet some. It is important when critiquing television shows to be able to point out different forms of masculinity. In this article it discusses how different aspects of hegemonic masculinity are represented within all three of the main male characters. The first character mentioned is Marshall Eriksen and he represents dominant masculinity and the invisibility of the heterosequal couple (Thompson 23). In the pilot episode he is seen asking his long term girlfriend to marry, this proves coupled masculinity because he is in a serious committed relationship from the start to the end of the sitcom. Marshall also is a lawyer which is more of a

masculine field and his physical appearance is large, broad, and tall. Thompson also makes an interesting point that he also represents contemporary masculinity, this merges “traditional” masculinity traits with physical and emotional softness (Thompson 23). Marshall showing an emotional soft side is a step in the right direction for male masculinity being represented in film. However his character still falls short by having being in a heterosequal relationship a personality trait.

The next male character Thompson looks into is Barney Stinson, who represents residual playboy bachelor. In the film he is seen as a single womanizing bachelor who is constantly seen looking for his next conquest (Thompson 23). Throughout the series he is also seen reading or blogging about books that serve as mock-handbooks and ideals of masculinity. An example of this is one of Barney’s books he constantly talks about entitled “The Playbook”. This book includes hundreds of unusual ways Barney has gotten women to go home with him or has wanted to attempt. Something that caught my attention when reading was that the character casted for this hyper-masculine character is played by Neil Patrick Harris actually who is an openly gay actor. His character is used to expose cultural images of masculinity and show “invisible gender” (Thompson 23). Invisible gender is when someone constructs and maintains masculine identity. Barney wearing suits in just about every episode is an important theme presented, his suits represent dominant masculinity. Thompson pays close attention to just how wearing a suit is seen as dressing up or wearing a costume Barney is using his suit to hide behind this invisible gender rather than show the person under the suit. From having background knowledge on the show there are flashbacks of before Barney began “suing up”, he was a sensitive and caring guy, but also the guy working a low income job and the guy who lost the girl (to a man in a suit). But Thompson reflects that wearing a suit in the most formal setting is

considered being overdressed. Using more traditional masculinity in a new generation is outdated. Barney also is seen wearing a specific suit to bed and rejecting Marshall's cotton sleepwear while comparing him to a cross-dresser (Thompson 26). Another way Barney shows fragility and the stability of hegemonic masculinity is in the episode 'Girls Versus Suits' where he tries to hook up with a beautiful woman who bartends at his favorite bar. She however tells him she will never sleep with him unless he abandons his suits. His suits serve as his masculinity and he is seen putting a suit in the men's bathroom of the bar simply to visit it because he has to approach the women in more formal wear to win her over. At the end of the episode he ends up choosing his suits over the girl and expressing this through a song encompassing all the reasons his suits are far better than a women. He even sings a musical number entitled 'Nothing Suits Me Like A Suit', about if he had the option to solve world peace or have all his suits he would choose his suits. His suits are to be seen as "an element of the performance of gender identity – and as representative of a masculinity with a strong hegemonic and traditional inflection that is seen as in decline" (Thompson 27). Barney is an important character to reflect on because he demonstrates hegemonic masculinity and all the harms and inner anxieties surrounding living up to the standards of masculinity.

The final character mentioned is Ted Mosby who represents emergent Masculinity and the Male Spinster. Thompson describes Ted as being the "new single man", one having desires that previously have been deemed to be the preserve of women. Ted is seen having anxieties over being single forever and over female reproductive sexuality (Thompson 31). Barney is some reading and blogging about guidebooks while Ted on the other hand is seen as reading women's self help books including one called *Of Course You're Still Single, Take A Look At Yourself You Dumb Slut*. Gendered invasion is another term mentioned in the article and is when the

assumption that the single female is desperate to find a husband has served as the creative catalyst for numerous series (Thompson 31). This is seen in *Ted* because he desperately seeks coupled monogamous relationships. Throughout the series Ted is constantly made fun of for anxieties while his best friends highlight their emergent status. He is portrayed as a sad and lonely individual, “ungendering ideals of ‘single’ living in a way that makes it an acceptable lifestyle choice for men and women” (Thompson 32). Overall *Ted* shows hegemonic masculinity by not being happy in his life until meeting his future wife and having his family. All three of these male characters taunt ideals of hegemonic masculinity and the harms and pressures they can cause on men.

In this film, a variety of characters fit the idea of hegemonic masculinity and all the aspects this attains. The five key attributes of hegemonic masculinity include physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality. Out of all of these aspects the characters all are able to meet four of the five, all failing to demonstrate frontiersmanship. The specific characters I want to focus on for this are Jordan Belfort, Donnie Azoff, and Max Belfort. These three men are all main characters who heavily appear on the screen. Male audience members are getting this idea shoved down their throat. At the same time women watching this show are exposed to male characters seeing them as disposable and women in the show are only seen as characters to meet a male's pleasures. It is important when watching *Wolf of Wall Street* to understand that the ideals set in the movie are not something that should be a reflection on how one carries himself as well as treats women.

Belfort fits hegemonic masculinity because his character has all five key attributes. Physical force and control is seen in Belfort but a specific example would be when his wife tells him she has filed for a divorce and wants custody over the kids. She tells him if he signs the

papers right away she will allow him visitation rights to occasionally see the kids but if not they should remain in her care. Once she informs him of this he gets out of bed and grabs a knife and begins ripping apart the couch cushions in their living room. After ripping them open he begins tossing the stuffing in them all over the living room. His wife then tries to have a conversation with him and in response he turns around and punches her in the stomach. The final part of the scene is him grabbing his daughter and driving the car straight into a tree, thankfully everyone in the car was ok and it was a minor collision. Rather than cause all this chaos and put his wife, child, home, and himself in an unsafe position he should have taken time to gather himself and come up with a reason as to why he believed they should not have a divorce. Instead this scene shows that not expressing your feelings and exploding is an acceptable way to cope with decisions one does not agree with. The next attribution is occupational achievement and Belfort achieves this by first starting as a Wall Street stockbroker but quickly working his way up and owning his own penny stock company. An important scene that demonstrates Belfort's occupational success is when he gets Azoff to join him in his penny company. In this particular scene Azoff compliments Belfort's car and follows up by asking how much he makes to have all these nice things. With Azoff not believing him he tells him if Belfort is able to show him a pay stub of \$72,000 he will quit his job and work for him. Belfort then reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a pay stub, then the scene cuts to Azoff on the phone quitting his job. This shows his occupational achievement because a guy he just met is willing to quit his current job just to work for him. The third aspect is familial patriarchy and this is achieved by Belfort having two kids and a wife that he provides for. A scene that shows this is when he is seen in the playroom holding his daughter while talking to his wife Naomi. This scene is brief but it gives insight that to be a man you need to get married and to be a father figure, enforcing the idea of familial patriarchy to

the viewers. Heterosexuality is the final aspect in hegemonic masculinity. Jordan Belfort shows this aspect arguably the most throughout this movie. For starters, Belfort throughout the movie is always shown surrounded by women and within the opening 15 minutes is even seen cheating on his wife with another woman. It is noticeable in the movie that all the men he hires in his office are also seen throughout the movie surrounded by women. Heterosexuality is a common theme presented in the film and used as a way to help male character show their hierarchy. All of these examples help in showing how *Wolf of Wall Street* promotes hegemonic masculinity as socially acceptable to its consumers.

Another character that meets the five aspects of hegemonic masculinity is Jordan Belfort's friend and business partner Donnie Azoff. Azoff demonstrates physical control in many scenes during the film. The one in particular that caught my eye though is a scene where Azoff sees a guy in the office cleaning out his fish tank during the day that their stock company is about to try and get a partnership with Steve Madden. He walks up to him and grabs his fish out of the tank and eats it in front of all the men in the office. He then proceeds to put out his cigarette on the man's chest and throw multiple punches at him. The way Azoff strives to publicly embarrass his coworker and physically attack him in a professional setting is one way in which he demonstrates hegemonic masculinity. Occupational achievement is the next attribute Azoff shows in the film. In the beginning of the movie he works for a mattress company helping in selling mattresses. After meeting Belfort though he then helps run their penny stock company, not only is this said in the film but you can also see it through his character. In the beginning he is seen wearing a mismatched shirt with tangled hair, as the movie progresses he starts wearing button down shirts with a sweater around his neck, by the end he is seen in full tux and done up hair. Azoff shows familial patriarchy in the film by having a wife and two children and by also

being the main source of income in his household. Heterosexuality is the final attribute to hegemonic masculinity and Donnie Azoff demonstrates this because he is married to a woman but is also seen in multiple scenes alongside Belfort surrounded by women. A particular scene that shows Azoff's heterosexuality is when he is struggling to figure out how to transfer all the money he has looted. He decides that tapping his money to a woman and having her leave the country with it. I think this scene sticks out to me because anyone with a passport for a foreign country could have transported the money but of course of all people it is a stunning woman he recruits to help him. Azoff's character again promotes the idea that by meeting all the aspects of hegemonic masculinity one can become an alpha male.

The final character I want to focus on is Jordan Belfort's father, Max Belfort. Mr. Belfort demonstrates physical control throughout the film but a scene in particular is when his character is first being introduced. The viewer learns that everyone calls him "mad Max" because of his temper. In the scene he hears the phone ringing while he is watching a television show and begins to scream and swear at whoever decided to call his house at such an inconvenient time. He is throwing his arms around and hitting walls on the way to pick it up, this demonstrates physical control because he should have just declined the call rather than having an outburst over such a minor problem. Max Belfort achieves occupational achievement because at the start of the film he is in retirement but as the film continues he gets hired by his son to be an enforcer in the stock company. By going from unemployed to employed at a successful company is an occupational achievement. Familial patriarchy is demonstrated in the movie because Mr. Belfort has a wife as well as a son and is seen helping to provide for both of them. Heterosexuality is accomplished by this character because he is married to a woman and is also constantly trying to help his son by giving him tips about women and marriage. This shows that he not only wants

women in his life but also believes that his son needs to have women in his life as well. Although Max Belfort is only seen occasionally in the movie, anytime his character is on screen male masculinity is right along with him. It also is telling that the main character's dad carries all of these aspects because even if he is not explicitly pushing any of his ideals on to his son he is constantly being exposed to these behaviors and demonstrates all five just like his father. Unfortunately Jordan Belfort, Donnie Azoff are only a few examples of characters that demonstrate hegemonic masculinity and in this movie there are many other men who also meet all five aspects and are also viewed as alpha males.

After watching Wolf of Wall Street and reading articles on hegemonic masculinity I applied what we had learned in class to the film. In class Coach had taught us that in television criticism it is important to ask yourself after viewing if the film we just watched is something that reinforces the status quo or if it challenges it. This is important because being able to identify this allows the viewer to decide if the message presented is one they want to carry into their own life or if the ideals are only used because it will sell to consumers. Wolf of Wall Street not only negatively follows the status quo but pushes it onto viewers and makes the audience think if they follow it they will receive all that the main characters do in this film. They will get not only their dream girl but other women as well, they will become wealthy, hold a quality job, and be surrounded by guys who share the same ideals. It is a sexist movie and is a portrayal of misogyny, the women in the film are constantly shown in revealing outfits and are seen as disposable. Something to note is there are many scenes of the men doing crude things and the women not only noticing but merely laughing as though that is supposed to happen. A scene in particular that comes to mind is when the stock company gets a good company to invest with them and Jordan Belfort decides to throw a huge party for everyone in the office. He even makes

a deal to the receptionist that if she shaves her head he will give her \$10,000 in cash to get a boob job because she has the flattest chest out of the few women in the company. She agrees almost instantly and one of the men begins shaving her hair off. This is an example of a sexist scene because instead of just giving her money for shaving her head he makes it a point that with the money she gets it must get put into working on her physical appearance because it does not meet the beauty standards created by the men of the office. Another scene that comes to mind is when Belfort is explaining the particular strippers he orders as well as his reasoning for hiring them. All of his reasons are heavily influenced again on beauty standards. In the film the none of the characters are part of the LGBTQ community but the way in which they use the word gay is constantly used in a negative or demining way. A scene in particular that proves this is when Jordan Belfort leaves his mansion to go on a business trip. When he returns Naomi tells him that she has reasonable suspicion that their butler was stealing his money. When Belfort notices \$10,000 worth of his money is missing he starts to question the butler. When he questions the Butler and as he is trying to explain the situation he says “this is just gay” and moments later the Butler is getting beat up by Belfort’s friends. This scene shows that by someone just saying the way someone is handling a situation leads to him getting violently beat up, leads me to believe they are not pro-LGBTQ. Another reason they are against the LGBTQ community is that every male character is seen as an alpha male in the film and they would think a gay or bi man is lesser of a man because of their lack of attraction to women.

In conclusion, hegemonic masculinity can be found in many movies and tv series so it is important to pay attention when viewing. Understanding that these films are made because it is what sells but even if a male is able to achieve all five aspects of masculinity this does not guarantee all the rewards it is typically seen with. When one watches a movie or tv series it is

best to ask the question “is this supporting or going against the status quo?” Television criticism has been a course that has pushed me to understand the deeper meaning within films and after watching *The Wolf of Wall Street* as well as reading related articles I am able to reflect on how each aspect of hegemonic masculinity was used.

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