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Sexuality in HBO series and Iranian Cinema

- Porn or Poem? -

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DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Sexualita v seriálu HBO a íránském kině

Porno nebo Báseň?

Heiko Romu

D e c l a r a t i o n

I declare that I have prepared my Master's Thesis independently on the following topic

Sexuality in HBO series and Iranian Cinema
- Porn or Poem?

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

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Abstract

This work examines two notably different modes of presentation of sexuality - graphically revealing and concealingly poetic - in the cinematic visual narrative by analyzing and comparing series of the American HBO pay television network and films of the Iranian directors Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami.

The thesis intends to prove the research assumption that a greater freedom in the portrayal of sexuality leads into a stronger and more compelling narrative. The main question of the work is, does an unconcealed, visceral presentation have a significant advantage in viewer impact compared to a figurative, symbolical presentation. The work mainly focuses on finding and categorizing distinguishable visual, auditory and narrational elements, or the notable lack of them, and estimating their effect on viewer experience. A resolution to the assumption is based on the analysis of the material and research into critique in the reference literature.

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá dva pozoruhodně odlišné způsoby prezentace sexuality - graficky odhalující a tajně poetické - ve filmovém vizuálním vyprávění analýzou a porovnáním řady americké sítě placené televize HBO a filmů íránských režisérů Mohsena Makhmalbafa a Abbase Kiarostamiho.

Práce chce dokázat výzkumný předpoklad, že větší svoboda v zobrazení sexuality vede k silnějšímu a přesvědčivějšímu vyprávění. Hlavní otázkou práce je, zda má skrytá, viscerální prezentace významnou výhodu v dopadu na diváka ve srovnání s obraznou, symbolickou prezentací. Práce se zaměřuje hlavně na hledání a kategorizaci rozlišitelných vizuálních, sluchových a narativních prvků nebo na jejich výrazný nedostatek a na odhad jejich vlivu na zážitek diváka. Řešení tohoto předpokladu je založeno na analýze materiálu a výzkumu kritiky v referenční literatuře.

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Foreword

The idea for this thesis came from basic-level psychology studies I did years ago in college, and from seeing Mohsen Mahkmalbaf´s film *Gabbeh*. The first time, the film was simply boring - nothing seemed to happen. A few years later in film school, I saw *Gabbeh* again, and now the experience was different. There was intriguing sexual tension and an immense amount of alluded information. I got interested in Iranian very indirect and symbolic film language and storytelling.

Later, *The Game of Thrones* premiered on HBO. I was already impressed by the network´s continuing high quality, but *GoT´s* cinematics and storytelling were dizzying. There was also a lot of public critique about HBO´s style of including large amounts of bare skin and violence. When the time came to select a subject for FAMU thesis, it was natural to remember the big difference between the two different but strong film styles.

In this work, I want to examine two contrasting ways of storytelling and pick up impressions and ideas that could make me, and hopefully the reader also, a bit better filmmaker. A close reading of kisses and glazes has taught me to see the small, essential details much better. Next comes writing them into my films.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my FAMU professors for the immense amount of film art knowledge they have poured into the students. Especially big thanks belong to my thesis mentor Ondřej Zach, whose theoretical expertise was essential when I wrestled with semiotics, and whose know-how about the actual film industry helped with insights into the HBO style; and to Mary Angiolillo, whose teaching about practical thesis writing was indispensable. I tried to avoid excess academic bs.

I want to thank my parents, Markku and Helena, for their support and their belief in me. I love you. Thanks also to my sister Lotta, who had the resilience to wade through my draft versions and theoretical guesswork. Love you too!

Finally, thanks to my partners Linn and Naava. I was probably tired, boring, and irritable all the time when writing, and during most of my challenging FAMU studies. Thank you for your caring, support, and for putting up with me. Hugs and love!

Introduction

*"How would you like to have a sexual encounter so intense
it could conceivably change your political views?"*
— *The Sure Thing (Rob Reiner 1985)*

When I was preparing my recent short film, my directing professor suggested adding a sex scene. This was a pertinent suggestion, and I had thought about it myself. My film was of a contemplative style, about a young man with an uncommon love interest, and the style meant to emphasize "true love", the mental connection that brings them together. But it seemed we needed something more to make the choice real. In addition to the many symbolical scenes depicting the depth of his dilemma, we needed the medieval bloody rag on the windowsill after the wedding night.

Three years earlier, in an indie short, my main characters were an established couple. In the last scene, they bathe together, seizing an option they have not had for ages. I wanted the scene to be sexual, but not about sex - about longing and reconnection. It was shot with little skin visible, with minimal touching, mostly only looks and words left unsaid. Creating a hue of sexuality indirectly was very interesting - and difficult. Mohsen Makhbalbaf´s film *Gabbeh* brings this memory back. It is a challenging film at first, as without knowing the basics of Iranian culture, the sexual tension is hard to notice. But when you realize it, it´s very strong.

These experiences show how variable portraying sexuality on film can be. Depending on context and objective, diverse means are needed for the most impressive story. Covering sexuality is difficult, as most people have strong and opposing opinions about it. But eventually, most filmmakers want and need to talk about sexuality. So it is both professional and physiological interests that inspire the theme for this thesis.

Photo 1: the Thirties was an unprecedentedly erotic era in the pre-censorship Hollywood. (The Barbarian, Wood, 1933)

Scientific research shows sexuality is a key behavioral phenomenon in the human society.[1] It can be said that for most persons, sexuality is one of the strongest impulses affecting their thoughts and the choices in their life.[2] Even for asexual people, sexuality in the surrounding society is a very strong factor that just cannot be dismissed. Because of the importance of sexual behavior, it´s obvious that sexuality is very widely and strongly presented in media - television, cinema, literature, theater etc. Most persons in the industrialized countries spend a lot of time consuming mass media, and it has a great influence on our world view - including how we think about sex and sexuality. Approximately 85% of major motion pictures and over 80% of television programs have sexual content - which can be both explicit and implied, verbal and nonverbal, not always showing sex acts but at least referring to sexuality,[3] as is presented in Graph 1. An American adolescent is on average exposed to 17 instances of sexual talk or behavior on a hour of television.[4] The amount of sexual content is slowly but continuously increasing in most types of mass media, and there is no end to be seen to this trend.[5] We live in a sexual world with a thoroughly sexualized mass media.

Graph 1: growth of sexual content in media 1998-2005 (Brown-Strasburger 2007)
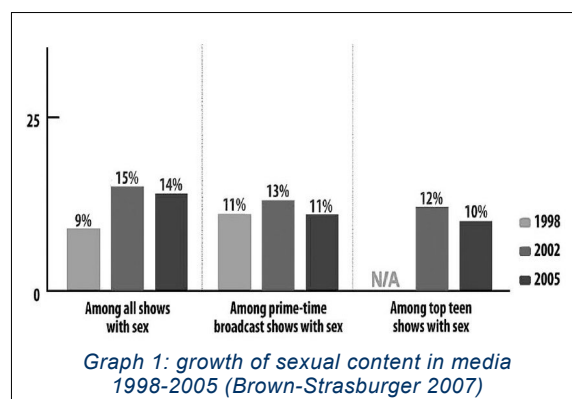
Sex and sexuality can be presented in the media varying from the explicit or *graphic*, to the implied-only, *symbolic* or alluded events. The first way is seen plainly in pornography, the other way is typical in the "higher culture" or "art". There are myriad variations between these opposite ends of the imaginary line. Deciding the style can be an artistic vision of the creator, a production decision stemming from the tastes of the target audience, or an external limitation caused by censorship, either by self-censoring or by external authority. For a filmmaker, there exists a key question - which manner of presentation makes the most compelling storytelling, the most inspired art?

Linda Williams writes: "*...explicit sex can be an essential element in storytelling in narrative cinema. It aids characterization; highlights themes; provides events which develop plot.*"[6]

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1   Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 2
2   Hyde, J. & Delamater J. (2019) Understanding human sexuality. p. 2
3   Tolman D. (2013) APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology, Volume 2. p. 373
4   Hyde, J. & Delamater J. (2019) Understanding human sexuality. p. 6
5   Brown, J. & Strasburger V. (2007) From Calvin Klein to Paris Hilton and MySpace: Adolescents, Sex, and the Media. [Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews, Jan 2008] p. 2-5
6   Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 3-4

She explains that seeing the physical actions can help to make an emotional connection to the viewers´ own bodies, integrating them into the sensual action, and without the visual connection, the experience of the characters would be left only intellectual, distant. Scientific studies indicate that sexual content increases viewers´ enjoyment.[7] Also, there is the common assumption that sexual content increases profits - "sex sells" - but scientific results are mixed, suggesting that sexual content increases attentiveness towards the films but decreases the effectiveness of related ads; so sexuality may promote a film but simultaneously make it a less-wanted product for the broadcasters.[8] Still, it is clear there are many seductive (sic) reasons for adding visible sexuality to a film or some other media product.

On the other hand, delicate subjects like love, human needs or sexuality may be better represented indirectly - symbolically or even by omission. Omission, or ellipsis, works by leaving something out and thus simultaneously pointing it out. Symbolical representation makes it possible either to depict something that otherwise cannot be shown[9] or to include a much deeper meaning than is possible without symbols.[10]

Chosen Media

In this thesis, I study the variation of sexual presentations from the viewpoint of a filmmaker. My research question is: **which style is more benecifial for the filmmaker and why**? What can be gained from using poetic symbolism, or from a show-everything approach, and what challenges or limitations do they put on the auteur?

My approach is to find answers by selecting specimens of the two different, opposing ways mentioned earlier - the explicit and symbolic - and sorting out their pros and cons: sort out distinctive representations of sexuality and the storytelling methods used in the narrative; deduce how the devices advance or complicate the audience reception; how limiting or liberating the means could be on the film production workflow or on the narration of the storylines.

For study material, I have selected the American HBO pay television network´s series, as the company is known for their liberal attitude in the representation of sexuality,[11] and feature films from the Iranian directors **Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abbas**

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7 Tolman D. (2013) APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology, Volume 2. p. 376
8 Tolman D. (2013) APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology, Volume 2. p. 375
9 Cook D. A. (2004) A History of Narrative Film, 4th edition.p. 188
10 Cook D. A. (2004) A History of Narrative Film, 4th edition. p. 202
11 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 274

Kiarostami and **Rakhshan Banietemad,** as the Iranian film production is known to be heavily censored by the theocratic state[12] and because all of these directors use poetical and allegorical style.[13] It should be specifically noted I´m studying and comparing styles, not time periods of production. The HBO series are made between 2015-2016, the Iranian films 1994-1996.

The series and films to be dissected are:
- *Girls*, episode "*Queen for Two Days*" (Season 5E5, 2016)
- *Westworld*, episode "*Contrapasso*" (Season 1E5, 2016)
- *Game of Thrones*, episode "*The Wars to Come*" (Season 5E1, 2015)
- *The Blue-veiled* (Banietemad , 1995, Modaresi, Pourmand)
- *Gabbeh* (Makhmalbaf , 1996, Daroudchi, Mahmoudi)
- *Through the Olive Trees* (1994, Kiarostami)

There is a detailed reasoning behind the selection. In depicting sexuality, as the imaginary line from pornography to a complete allegory is fascinatingly long. The first thought would be that examples as far away from each others as possible would make the most striking comparison. But this is not true. For several reasons, some extremities are excluded. First, pornography is discarded, because, as a filmmaker, I study narrative storytelling, and porn is not at all or only very slightly narrative.[14] Similarly, studying an absence is nonsensical, so I excluded works with completely abstract (non-sexual) themes and works where sexual content is completely censored. On the symbolical side, I wanted to be able to somehow define the reasons for the allegorical approach in them - in Iranian films it being religious censorship.

For the liberal approach to sexuality, HBO is a good example because their programming is widely agreed to be prominently erotic by audiences, critics and researchers. As a subscription channel they are free from broadcast indecency laws and can be almost whatever they want .[15] From the HBO range, I selected series that contain a wide representation of sexuality: the modern female viewpoint of Western relationships in *Girls*; the male gaze in the puritanical 19th Century period and the 2050´s near future sexuality in *Westworld*; the violent fantasies of *Game of Thrones*, which can be thought to be fantasies also in the erotic sense - modern Western (male) fantasies. These series have been countless times described as notably graphical in their depiction

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12 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 63
13 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p. 190-191
14 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 26
15 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 274

of sexuality, causing several outrages in papers and in social media.[16]

For the poetic style, Iranian film is a good example. The Islamic Revolution created a set of publicly defined censorship rules forbidding all sexual imagery in a zeal that feels incomprehensible to the Western mind.[17] Iranian films still contain stories of love and relationships, but by necessity the filmmakers have to present them in a hidden, allegorical or poetic way.[18] The selected films are from a period of a clearly defined and strict censorship, still allowing a bit more than only Islamic propaganda. The period is from 1989, when a slight loosening of censorship followed the arduous Iraq-Iran war, to 1996, when the growing exposure to Western culture sneaking in through satellite broadcasts caused a new tightening. Makhbalbaf, Kiarostami and Banietemad are good examples of directors, as their works are well known in the West and famous in Iran. Also, all are known for their interest in portraying human relationships, storytelling about love and for their use of strong poetic[19] and allegorical film language.[20]

It could be argued that in terms of genre, form and audience, there is a gap between the two styles of study, one being series and the other features, and further affected by one being American and the other Iranian. Despite the big differences, at first sight, the styles are well comparable and reflect each other well. For example, the demographics concur - Iranian films, although seen as art cinema in the West, are watched by a large audience, and similarly HBO, although sometimes seen as an upper-class channel, is subscribed to by a wide body of different people.[21] Cultural incompatibility can be dismissed by the fact that Iranian films have "*frequent and striking presence .. at important international film festivals*"[22] and that American series are extremely popular in Iran, even when strictly forbidden, watched through the ubiquitous illicit satellite dishes[23]. The reasoning for selecting the source materials is further discussed in chapter "*The source materials*" on page 26.

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16 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 170
17 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 77
18 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 128
19 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p. 191
20 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 121
21 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 34
22 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p. 145
23 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 120

Literature review

It was clear from the start that a through study of reference material was needed. The concepts are fluid, culturally dependent and osten lie more within the fields of anthropology, sociology or criticism than in storytelling or filmmaking. To define the key concepts I selected scientific and philosophical works. Background research on American television and Iranian film was essential also. And critical reviews and analyses by known authors form a base for comparison with my own thoughts.

For a starting point to reference literature, I chose essential books previously known to me, like David Bordwell's *Film Art* (2019) or Hyde's *Understanding human sexuality* (2019). The bibliographies revealed essential sources, and searches in internet reference databases gave even more references. Interestingly, many studies were about minorities, race, gender etc, or on subcategories like porn, but fundamental research on representations of sexuality in film as such was rare.

Semiotics

When I started to formulate my classification of sexual manifestations in media, it became quickly evident I needed more understanding of semiotics. Several elementary works helped in this: Robert Stam's *Film Theory – an Introduction* (2000), Cobley's *Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* (2001), and especially Bagheri's article *The Blue-veiled: A Semiological Analysis of a Social Love Story* (2021) with its classification system for representations of love, relationships and sexuality in Iranian film.

Sexuality in general

As knowing how to define sexuality and having some idea of the displays of sexuality on society is mandatory, I selected basic sociological research books. Hyde's *Understanding human sexuality* (2019) is used as an introduction to university sexuality research. Wiederman's *Understanding Sexuality Research* (2001) is a shorter study book, and Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1990) gives a philosophical backbone.

Sexuality in media

For the basic concepts of sexuality in media, I included books recommended by bibliographies and professors. Linda Williams is a fundamental writer on pornography. Newer research, Susanna Paasonen's, *Carnal resonance* (2011) and Kaarina Nikunen's *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture* (2009) add to that. Limbacher's *Sexuality*

in World Cinema (1983) is a bit old but a well known basic publication. As I concentrate on visuality, *Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema: Explicit Sex, Performance and Cinematic Technique* (2015) by Coleman and *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movie* (2009) by Benshoff & Griffin provide in-depth information about visualizing sex and sexuality.

HBO television series

Since my research material includes three HBO network series (*Girls*, *Westworld* and *Game of the Thrones*), I chose research and critique written on them. Only on *Girls* there was a readily available book concentrating solely on the series - *HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst* (2014) by Kaklamanidou & Tally - but I did find a good range of books with shorter articles about HBO series and philosophy. *The Essential HBO Reader* (2008) by Edgerton & Jones provides an understanding of the HBO-phenomenon name. *HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power* (2019) by McCollum studies representation of sexuality in HBO within a wider view.

Iranian cinema in general

To understand how Iranian cinema in general differs from the western cinema more familiar to me, I took *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (2016) by Blake Atwood to be essential reading. Based on Mohsen Makhmalbaf´s film *Gabbeh*, I knew that symbols and allegories are an integral part of Iranian film language, so reading the new *Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance* (2021) by Michelle Langford was insightful. In addition, shorter articles helped to understand Iranian culture and cinema in the context of an Islamic, patriarchal and non-Western country.

Makhmalbaf, Kiarostami and Banietemad

As my research material included the films *Time of Love, Gabbeh* (Makhmalbaf), *Through the Olive Trees* (Kiarostami), and *The Blue-veiled* (Banietemad) I selected books and articles about the filmmakers. As could be expected, there is much more written about male than female directors, but a brand new book, Maryam Ghorbankarimi's *The Films of Rakshan Banietemad* (2021) saved the day and gave an excellent view into this famous Iranian female director. For the male directors, *The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran (2005)* by Eric Egan and *The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami (2004)* by Alberto Elena were the most important of several well written books.

About the approach

The thesis explores sexuality in film within two intentionally diverse cultures: a Western high-budget pay television network considered very liberal, and a strictly theocratic Arab country with suppression of political discussion, sexual behavior, and artistic freedom. The emphasis is on visual and narrative differences, not on the cultural study as such. The objectives of the thesis are to discover 1) how the selected style affects the creative work, and 2) how the style affects the audience's understanding and reception of the works.

Graph 2: examples of sexual motifs by symbolicity

My working hypothesis is that the ability to freely choose the style and the narrative means enables a filmmaker to create an overall better film - thus any external limitation lowers the quality of the art. This is an admittedly Western philosophy: the society should exercise minimal restrictions on its citizens/artists. In more communal (or religious) societies people may and often do think differently. I will examine what limitations and advantages a chosen style could give a filmmaker: the number of available narrative devices, optional ways to work with actors, differences in selling points, publicity and audience reception, and possible later limitations (censorship). But overall valuation will be on artistic quality, as well is can be defined.

I have chosen a fairly technical approach to the subject. There is considerable literature about sexuality in film, but that is either enumerative like Limbacher's *Sexuality in World Cinema* or concentrates on the sociological aspects, often from a minority viewpoint, like Tasker's *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema.* David Bordwell brushes upon the history of sex in film in his books and porn studies often talka about the psychological and sociological aspects. But there is very little formative study about various displays of sexuality as possible narrational tools or how they impact the work of the filmmaker. So my approach is to study these representations as a set of interchangeable tools for expressing sexuality.
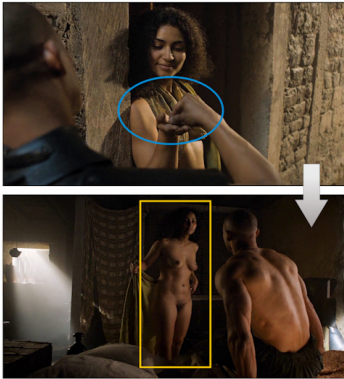
My research work is split into three areas: 1) briefly defining what sexuality is, based on definitions from reference literature; 2) finding and classifying the presentations of sexuality in the source material, based on my analysis and by studying the reference literature; 3) making a summary of my research and resolving the research question, based on the accumulated data about the classified contents.

The classification is a semiotical division and definition of all attributes that convey sexuality, stemming from film theory conventions, for example, Robert Stem´s work, augmented by recent studies, especially Asal Bagheri's division of expressions of relationships

THROUGH ACTION	THROUGH SOUND	THROUGH SYMBOLS
SUGGESTIVE	SPEECH	MONTAGE
DANCE ETC	INDIRECT	METAPHORS
LOOKS	COMEDIC	MISE-EN-SCENE
IMPLIED ACTS	POETRY	STYLISM
PARABLE	ALLUSIONS	FREUDIAN
ELLIPSIS	MUSIC	

Graph 3: examples of indirect presentations of sexuality

in her analysis of Rakshan Banietemad's *The Blue-veiled*. I have created a specific new semiotical denomination, **actifier**, a unit for representing 'sexual content elements' in the source material. An actifier is related to *signifier*, a unit of content, but includes a larger, unrestricted assortment of actions, meanings, symbols, etc - anything in the mise-en-scene or film narrative. The source material contains complex visual, auditive and narrative expressions, including absences (ellipse/pause/etc) and subjective conventions with possible sexual meanings (Freudianisms/style/taboos), as a whole inconsistent in any analytical sense, so an umbrella term is needed. Some examples of actifiers are shown in Graphs 2, 3, and 4.

My research method is a qualitative analysis of the source material. I use a close reading of the visual, narrative, symbolical and cultural points to find the sexual actifiers, which are sorted into the actifier catalog. The catalog is divided into two primary classes - the graphic and the symbolic presentations of sexuality. The main classes are subdivided further into various narrative alternatives.

GABBEH

GAME OF THRONES S5E1

| ACTIONS |
| COLOR SYMBOLICS |
| OBJECT SYMBOLICS |
| TACTILE FEEL |
| TEMPERATURE |
| SEPARATION |

| ACTIONS |
| TOUCH |
| DIALOGUE |
| FRONTAL NUDITY |

Graph 4: examples of taxonomy in the source material

Philosophy of the approach

The decision to use primarily a semiotical, rule-based classification and analysis method stems from the aim for objectivity and culture-neutral viewpoints: ultimately practicality. I treat the expressions of sexuality as the filmmaker´s narrative tools, not as societal issues or themes. A "mathematical" science like semiotics is a good way for this. Several other approaches were considered, nevertheless.

The psychoanalytical approach is self-evident when talking about sexuality. In everyday conversations about sexuality, (vaguely) Freudian viewpoints regularly come up. Psychoanalysis with Freudian concepts has dominated classical film theory.[24] I declined the psychoanalytical angle for several reasons. Classical psychoanalysis is often considered an outdated system, cognitivism and modern hybrid theories being favored today.[25] Conscious decisions of the patient and conscious observations of the audience are more important than Freud´s manipulation of the subconscious. Treading in regression, infantilism, narcissism, voyeurism, unconscious, alienation, identity or repressed desires is not needed to enjoy a story.[26] Psychoanalysis is narrowly based on fetishism and oedipal analysis of the guild-ridden Christian/patriarcthal cultures.[27] Also film theory has distanced itself from (Lacanian) psychoanalytic models towards post-modern multi-cultural, multi-race, multi-gendered model[28] - as it should be.

The feminist approach has definite truth in it: film characters have for a long time been mostly male protagonists solving male problems[29]; film has had an essentially male libido defining all sexuality; power structures and psycho-social mechanisms in films follow the oppression of the patriarchal society[30] with its whore/madonna - stereotypes, active males and passive females[31]. Film theory has been very male and biased and the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975) is very true. Even as feminism is undeniably visible in my work, a feminist-only approach is both too narrow for its focus on inequality and too wide for discussing the whole society. A semiotical "neutral" approach (accepting that semiotics has ballasts like hidden gendering[32]) is a better choice for this work.

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24 Branigan E. & Buckland W. (2014) The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory. p. 42
25 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 11
26 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 163
27 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 329
28 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 328
29 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 168
30 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 170
31 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 173
32 Stam, R. (2000) Film Theory – an Introduction. p. 42

Review of the material

"She was Lo in the morning, standing four-feet-ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks, she was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms, she was always Lolita. Light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin. My soul."

– Lolita (Kubrick 1962)

Sexuality is an essential human behavior,[33] and popular media does affect this behavior in dramatic ways.[34] Film is especially important media, as research shows that visual stimulation can cause direct arousal in the brain.[35] In storytelling, sexuality - attraction, relationships, struggles - is consistently a key element in film plots. There are myriad rules defining how sexuality can be presented,[36] stemming from religion and history.[37] The objective of this study is to compare sexual presentations in different film styles, HBO network TV series and Iranian films from the 1990s, divided into graphic and poetic styles, and deduce how certain styles may affect the work of a filmmaker.

VARIETIES OF LOVE	
NONLOVE	ACQUINTANCES
LIKING	CLOSE FRIENDS
INFATUATION	CRUSHES
EMPTY LOVE	SOME ARRANGED RELS.
FATUOUS LOVE	LONG-DISTANCE RELS.
ROMANTIC LOVE	FRIEND WITH BENEFITS
COMPANIONATE LOVE	LONG-TERM HAPPY COUPLES
CONSUMMATE LOVE	"EPIC" ROMANCES

Graph 10: Eight variations of love by Sternberg.

Qualifying, even recognizing sexual conduct is highly subjective and varies from observer to observer, being a product of cultural and personal context.[38] "*Human sexual practices are incredibly diverse, ranging from abstinence to anything goes*".[39] The occurrences of sexual actions in the sources are listed, cross-referenced to mentions in literature and analyzed. As the sources contain behavior from attraction and courting (Graph 7[40]) and actual sexual conduct (Graph 6[41]), the set of actions is quite large and it is divided into two lists, corresponding to the assumed poetic and graphic styles. These lists are then developed into the **actifier classification system**.

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS
ASEXUALITY/CELIBACY
SEXUAL FANTASY
MASTURBATION
KISSING
TOUCHING
ORAL SEX
INTERCOURSE
PARAPHILIAS

Graph 11: sexual behaviors according to Lehmiller.

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33 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 2
34 Wiederman M. W. (2001) Understanding Sexuality Research. p. 6
35 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 89
36 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 179
37 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 3
38 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 230
39 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 230
40 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 206
41 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 229

Classification system

In a film, visual or audible cues are needed to make the diegetic message - story - detectable to the audience. These are the mise-en-scène - actions, sounds, images, narrational devices like ellipses, montages, allusions and implications[42]. Considering sexuality, the reference material demonstrates that all imaginable units of mise-en-scène are in use: from simple visual motifs to complex, cultural-related symbols and editing devices like a montage. Film narration is a metalangue[43], and all these means are also semiotic signifiers[44]. To be able to assess and compare the sources, a classification system based on semiotics was created. To simplify the language of semiotics itself, all the units of meaning are called **actifiers**.

The actifier classification is a catalog of observable events - directly deductible or inferable by cultural knowledge the watcher may have - divided into a listing system based on Asal Bagheri's work.[45] Her semiotic units for 'love' are shown in Graph 8. The Ph.D. thesis level system has been simplified for the needs of this study. In my classification, I leave out any wider sociological context in favor of sexual behavior only, adding concepts related to film narrative, film language and cultural aspects - actions like violence - and separate the finds

Graph 12: Bagheri's division of semiotic units of love

into the poetic and graphical modes. This forms two actifier lists. Graph 9 shows the 46 actifiers in the poetic style (which mostly presents courting as visible sexual or romantic actions that are not allowed by the Iranian Islamic rules) and Graph 10 shows the 54 actifiers in the graphic style (which contain much more visible contact, actual sex and even violence).

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42 Bordwell D., Thompson K. & Smith J. (2019) Film Art: An Introduction. p. 112
43 Bordwell, D. (1985) Narration in the Fiction Film. p. 18
44 Bordwell, D. (1985) Narration in the Fiction Film. p. 17
45 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad. p. 145

Actifier content

Naturally, the actifier lists form only a simplified model of the studied films. Several hours of high-quality storytelling cannot be compressed into 80 words, semiotics or not. But the formulation is a lens through which the material can be investigated, and it seems it's possible to formulate the mise-en-scènes into relatively concise sets. The two general categories are interlinked on symbology: although Iranian films are much stronger in symbology, symbology exists also in the HBO series. Separation is sensible, as there is absolutely no open sensual contact or visible sex on the Iranian films, but in the series it is almost always present. Some symbols appear in both styles, this can be seen in further chapters about the individual works. Most of the actifiers are terms used in the film industry or otherwise self-explanatory, but a few are concepts made either by Bagheri[46] or the author.

1	absent action
2	absent dialogue
3	acting speed
4	animal symbol
5	blocking distance
6	blocking geometry
7	concealing costume
8	connecting object
9	contact neutralizer
10	ellipse
11	facial expression
12	fragmented body
13	glance (game)
14	in-between space
15	interrupted action
16	maximum nudity
17	mise-en-scene
18	monologue
19	movement direction
20	music
21	off-screen action
22	physical closeness
23	poetical dialogue
24	replacement behavior
25	replacement graphic
26	replacement subject
27	restricted colors
28	seeing far away
29	sense: heat, cold
30	separation by frame
31	separation by shot
32	substitute age
33	substitute animal
34	substitute dialogue
35	substitute gender
36	substitute image
37	substitute person
38	substitution dialogue
39	symbol: action
40	symbol: color
41	symbol: object
42	symbol: tactile
43	symbolic editing
44	symbolic sound
45	touch substitute
46	voiced desire

Graph 13: actifiers for poetic style (P).

1	blocking distance
2	blocking geometry
3	concealing costume
4	contact neutralizer
5	facial expression
6	fragmented body
7	glance (game)
8	interrupted action
9	mise-en-scene
10	monologue
11	music
12	physical closeness
13	seeing far away
14	separation by frame
15	separation by shot
16	substitute dialogue
17	symbol: action
18	symbol: color
19	symbol: object
20	symbolic editing
21	touch substitute
22	age difference
23	domination, BDSM
24	costume: revealing
25	dancing
26	dialogue: implied sex
27	dialogue: feelings
28	dialogue: relationships
29	dialogue: sex
30	dialogue: sexuality
31	dialogue: metaphora
32	dialogue: vulgar
33	eunuch
34	freudian act
35	homosexuality
36	incest (implied)
37	kissing
38	nudity: female
39	nudity: full frontal
40	nudity: male
41	nudity: mutilated
42	nudity: partial
43	prostitution
44	sex: group sex
45	sex: intercourse
46	sex: masturbation
47	sex: oral
48	sex: public
49	sensual touch
50	sexual touch
51	stripping
52	violence
53	violence, sexual
54	watching sex

Graph 14: actifiers for graphic style (G).

Actifier division

In addition to the actual terms divided by graphic/symbolic, the whole actifier system is broken into four general categories, based on Bagheri. These categories are **Iconic** (acting and physical interaction of objects on the film set, symbological meaning of both animate and inanimate objects); **Scenic** (spacial mise-en-scène, distances, light, location, connecting or distancing factors); **Technic** (narration means such as cinematography, editing, use of the frame and off-screen) and **Sound** (dialogue or lack of it, the linguistic of dialogue, diegetic or non-diegetic music and scenic atmosphere). The division is introduced in greater detail in the tables on the following pages.

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46 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad. p. 145

Bagheri´s classification

As Asal Bagheri´s definitions form a basis for my actifier classification, it is sensible to take a closer look at her work. She creates a structural semiotical system of manifestations of sexual relations in film in her Ph.D. work *Les relations homme/femme dans le cinéma iranien post-révolutionnaire, stratégies des réalisateurs, analyse sémiologique* (2012) and develops it further into a clear structure of manifestations of sexuality in her article *The Blue-veiled: A Semiological Analysis of a Social Love Story* (2021).

Bagheri builds her work on French semioticist, linguist and psychoanalys Anne-Marie Houdebine´s research, which she defines as an "*application specializing in flexible structures and imprecise objects*"[47] meaning expressions of human relations in art forms like film and theater. Bagheri studies man-woman relationships as a wide phenomenon, in which sexuality is a part, especially the expressions of love. Her shorter article concentrates especially on aspects of love, making it a compressed classification closer to my area of expressions of sexuality. I expand the mostly (Iranian) symbolic sexual taxonomy with (Western) graphical expressions. Bagheri´s system includes several cinematographic means (Technique) but I expand that with additional camera, mise-en-scene, and narrative devices.

Graph 5: Bagheri´s PhD work division of cinema objects

In her work, Bagheri analyzes her source films and builds a list of repeating, identifiable instances that convey relationship-linked action or storytelling. This catalog forms a "formal grammar" of film, including "hidden grammar" in the case of

Graph 6: Bagheri´s division of formal film structures

symbolic expressions.[48] As her classification is semiotical, resembling a list of recognizable but tightly separated "ingredients", it´s an extremely well-working reference system for my classification. The system is divided into four main areas, *iconic, scenic, sound and technical*, subdividing into *action, location* and *narration*[49] (Graph 7).

47 Bagheri A. (2012) Les relations homme/femme dans le cinéma iranien postrévolutionnaire, stratégies des réalisateurs, analyse sémiologique, PhD dissertation p. 59
48 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad.p. 141
49 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad. p. 141

As Bagheri studies Iranian films where "*censorship requires this kind of symbolism*"[50], her taxonomy naturally lacks any open expressions of sexuality. This is added to the actifier taxonomy as a **graphical** style, while Bagheri´s classification forms most of the symbolical side (Graph 8). The graphical part is mostly based on observations about the HBO series and secondarily on the Iranian films.

The strengths of Bagheri´s system are its fluency in semiotic definitions and its expertise in Iranian symbolic depictions of sexuality. Her founds in Banietemad´s *The Blue-Veiled* (E.g. abortive gestures or symbolic objects) helped me greatly in deciphering the other Iranian films too. It´s somewhat too concentrated on acting and props, lacking cinematographical narration, but as in all source material sexuality seems to be portrayed mainly with these tools, this is quite an insignificant shortage. With "Western" additions, it forms a great basis for classifying sexuality.

Strata	Categories	Variables	
Iconic	Gesture	Glances	
		Abortive gestures	
		Turn-around scenes	
	Connector	Children as animate "objects"	
		Inanimate objects	
		Symbolic objects	
Scenic	Space	Outside	
		Inside	
		In-between spaces	Car
			Courtyard
			Others
Sound	Additives	Linguistic	
		Music	
		Direct transition	
Technique		Off-screen	

Graph 7: cinematic depictions of love in Rakshan Banietemad's "The Blue-veiled" according to Bagheri.

Before I found Baheri´s system in the references, I had already roughly formed something similar but without the semiotical expertise. In learning about her system, it was a natural next step in transforming my classification sketch in her framework. Downsizing the scope from wider relationships to sexual behavior only and including the graphical style, plus some technical aspects of filmmaking, resulted in a perfect sorting system for my analysis. I´m very grateful for Ms. Bagheri - wheels don´t need reinventing.

SYMBOLICAL	"Iranian"	GRAPHICAL	"HBO"
ACTIONS		ACTIONS	
SUGGESTIVE	TOUCH	DECLARED	TOUCH
DANCE ETC	LOOKS	DANCE ETC	LOOKS
PARABLE	IMPLIED ACTS	PARABLE	REAL ACTS
ELLIPSIS	SEPARATION	ELLIPSIS	CLOSENESS
...		...	
SOUNDS		SOUNDS	
DIALOGUE	SYMBOLIC	DIALOGUE	SEXUAL
INDIRECT	MONOLOGUE	DIRECT	MONOLOGUE
POETRY	ALLUSIONS	POETRY	SUGGESTIONS
MUSIC	COMEDIC	MUSIC	COMEDIC
...		...	
SYMBOLS		SYMBOLS	
MONTAGE	TACTILE FEEL	MONTAGE	SKIN
METAPHORS	TEMPERATURE	METAPHORS	SWEAT
MISE-EN-SCENE	COLORS	MISE-EN-SCENE	COLORS
STYLISM	NUDITY LEVEL	STYLISM	NUDITY LEVEL
FREUDIAN	OBJECTS	FREUDIAN	OBJECTS
...		...	

Graph 8: the styles share several actifiers

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50 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad. p. 151

Actifier details

Actifier means any cinematic detail - device - that conveys information or feeling about sexuality or sexual behavior. The existing semiotic terms of *function, signifier/sign, affect* or *actant* are limited, as they either relate to language or to only parts of the cinematic information flow (like verbal information or the emotional impact on a watcher), or cover only part of the mise-en-scene. Metz´s *cinematic signifier* is too psychoanalytically laden and more about the study of culture than just classifying observations. I needed a simple umbrella term for listing "anything that can express sexuality" without including too much scientific complexity.

There is an obvious subjectivity in the taxonomy, as 1) the subject matter is largely psychological, sociological, cultural and thus different for different viewers 2) filmmakers often treat the themes intentionally allegorically and symbolically, even in the more graphical representations. Still, I

Semiotical Sign in		Mise-en-Scene =	Actifier
Verbal Information	Symbols	Story	Any Isolatable Cinematic Conveyer of Information or Feeling
Kinesics: Movements Gestures	(mediating) Objects	Direction	
	Omission	Space	
Facial Expression	Unobservables	Set	
		Cinematography	Culture Specific

Graph 9: actifier scructure and narrative content

aim for objectivity and comparability. For additional objectivity, literature references are used as background for my discoveries and deductions.

Finding the graphical expressions is relatively easy: most devices are visible by definition. The symbolic representations are trickier: the devices are often intentionally hidden and very subjective, as much in the subconscious than in the film language. I do my best to find and constrain the symbolic into a tangible depiction.

> *"Most theories on offer in film studies, however, are not hypothesis driven. .. Most of these theories have slender empirical support, but they are immune to testing or refutation because they tend to be vague, equivocal, truistic, or all three at once. They are incorrigible."*
>
> *David Bordwell[51]*

I agree with Bordwell that film theory can be vague and pompous. Theory is only good if it helps understanding or offers something new – not just creating more theory for its own sake or the creator´s glory. I hope my addition of actifier helps, not confuses or turns out to be superfluous.

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51 Branigan E. & Buckland W. (2014) The Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory. p. 28

ACTIFIER CATEGORIES OUTLINING

ICONIC	SCENIC	SOUND	TECHNIC	NARRATIVE
ACTIONS	**SPACE**	**LINGUISTIC**	**EDITING**	**DETECTABLE**
GLANCES/LOOKS	INSIDE	DIALOGUE	CUT	ACTIONS
ABORTIVE GESTURES	OUTSIDE	POETRY/COMEDIC..	DIRECT TRANSITION	SEX, TALK, VIOLENCE..
TURN-AROUNDS	IN-BETWEEN	SPEECH PATTERN	MONTAGE	DIALOGUE
CLOSENESS	CAR, COURTYARD	ALLUSIONS	ELLIPSIS	DIRECTNESS
DANCE	DISTANCE	SPEECH PATTERN	GAZE	EMOTIONS
TOUCH/TACTILE	SEPARATION	INDIRECTNESS	DREAM SCENE	
IMPLIED ACTS	SEPARATING OBJECT		DESIRES	
SUGGESTIVE ACTS	OUT-OF-FRAME ACTS		PROJECTIONS	
CONNECTORS		**MUSIC**	**MISE-EN-SCENE**	**INFERABLE**
INANIMATE OBJECTS	**SYMBOLS**	STYLE	LIGHTING	ALLUSIONS
SYMBOLIC OBJECTS	METAPHORS	FEELING	COLORS	CONNOTATIONS
CHILDREN AS IN-	NUDITY LEVEL	NON/DIEGETIC	TEMPERATURE	IMPLICATIONS
ANIMATE OBJECTS	STYLIZATION LEVEL		BLOCKING	INDIRECTNESS
CULTURAL	CULTURE NORMS		VISIBILITY	BEGINNING/ENDING
DETECTABLE /	TABOOS/VISIBILITY			EMOTIONS
INFERABLE	FREUDIAN			WANTS

Graph 15: Actifier outlining - extented Baheri division

COMPLETE ACTIFIER LIST

ICONIC	SCENIC	SOUND	TECHNIC
ACTIONS	**SPACE**	**LINGUISTIC**	**EDITING**
P1 absent action	P14 in-between space	P2 absent dialogue	P10 ellipsis
P3 acting speed	P21 off-screen action	G26 dialogue: implied sex	P12/G6 fragmented body
P11/G5 facial expression	P28/G13 seeing far away	G27 dialogue: feelings	P30/G14 separation by frame
P13/G7 glance (game)		G28 dialogue: relationships	P31/G15 separation by shot
P15/G8 interrupted action	**SYMBOLS**	G29 dialogue: sex	P43/G20 symbolic editing
P19 movement direction	P16 maximum nudity	G30 dialogue: sexuality	
P22/G12 physical closeness	G22 age difference	G31 dialogue: metaphora	**MISE-EN-SCENE**
G25 dancing	G23 domination, BDSM	G32 dialogue: vulgar	P5/G1 blocking distance
G37 kissing	G33 eunuch	P18/G10 monologue	P6 /G2 blocking geometry
P46 voiced desire	G34 freudian act	P23 poetical dialogue	P17/G9 mise-en-scene
G44 sex: group sex	G35 homosexuality	P38/G16 substitute dialogue	P7/G3 concealing costume
G45 sex: intercourse	G36 incest (implied)		G24 costume: revealing
G46 sex: masturbation	G43 prostitution	**MUSIC**	G38 nudity: female
G47 sex: oral	P32 substitute age	P20/G11 music	G39 nudity: full frontal
G48 sex: public	P33 substitute animal	P44 symbolic sound	G40 nudity: male
G49 sensual touch	P34 substitute dialogue		G41 nudity: mutilated
G50 sexual touch	P35 substitute gender		G42 nudity: partial
G54 watching sex	P36 substitute image		G51 stripping
G52 violence	P37 substitute person		P27 restricted colors
G53 violence, sexual	P45/G21 touch substitute		P29 sense: heat, cold
	P4 animal symbol		
CONNECTORS	P39/G17 symbol: action		
P8 connecting object	P40/G18 symbol: color		
P9/G4 contact neutralizer	P41/G19 symbol: object		
P24 replacement behavior	P42 symbol: tactile		
P25 replacement graphic			
P26 replacement subject			

Graph 16: Complete actifier list
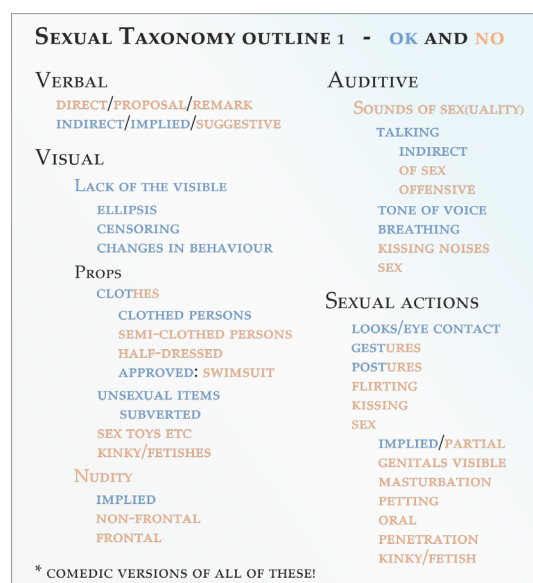
The source materials

The source materials for the study are the HBO network TV series *Girls* (2016), *Game of Thrones* (2016) *and Westworld* (2015) and the Iranian feature films *The Blue-veiled* (1995), *Gabbeh* (1996) *and Through the Olive Trees* (1994). They divide clearly into two very different styles: 1) there is **no open, visible sexual** conduct in the Iranian films 2) the HBO series **regularly show naked** bodies in a sexual context, sometimes in very explicit ways.[52]

> *"Contrary to the belief held by many abroad, censorship does not lead to better films and more ingenious ways of filmmaking."*
> Producer S. A. Moussazadeh, Iran, 2002

The research assumption of this work is "liberal is better" - the belief that artistic freedom leads to better art. The more narrative devices a filmmaker has and the stronger they are, the better the messages are conveyed. Some theorists say we must be able to envision *touchable bodies* to feel empathy, so realistic sex is essential for effective storytelling.[53] On the other hand, explicit scenes may not strengthen the narrative at all. Without symbolic levels, the action could be just surface. Best stories have subtext and the possibility for many interpretations.

Even in the Western European context it is difficult to define what people consider either appropriate or offensive - or what is sexual or nonsexual behavior to them. A lot of working time went into defining sexual actifiers and dividing them into symbolic/inoffensive/censorproof and graphic/offensive/censorprone, symbolic being the norm in Iranian films and graphic forming the HBO style. Graph 17 contains some sexual actifiers divided into these groups. I have done my best, but naturally many actifiers could to both groups as they are very **culture-dependent**, so ultimately it´s up to the reader to decide what they think.

Sexual Taxonomy outline 1 - OK AND NO	
Verbal	**Auditive**
DIRECT/PROPOSAL/REMARK	SOUNDS OF SEX(UALITY)
INDIRECT/IMPLIED/SUGGESTIVE	TALKING
	INDIRECT
Visual	OF SEX
LACK OF THE VISIBLE	OFFENSIVE
ELLIPSIS	TONE OF VOICE
CENSORING	BREATHING
CHANGES IN BEHAVIOUR	KISSING NOISES
	SEX
Props	
CLOTHES	**Sexual actions**
CLOTHED PERSONS	LOOKS/EYE CONTACT
SEMI-CLOTHED PERSONS	GESTURES
HALF-DRESSED	POSTURES
APPROVED: SWIMSUIT	FLIRTING
UNSEXUAL ITEMS	KISSING
SUBVERTED	SEX
SEX TOYS ETC	IMPLIED/PARTIAL
KINKY/FETISHES	GENITALS VISIBLE
Nudity	MASTURBATION
IMPLIED	PETTING
NON-FRONTAL	ORAL
FRONTAL	PENETRATION
	KINKY/FETISH
* COMEDIC VERSIONS OF ALL OF THESE!	

Graph 17: sexual behavior taxonomy outline

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52 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 325
53 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 230

Why HBO series and Iranian films?

It can reasonably be doubted whether comparing Western cable TV to Islamic cinema is sensible, or even possible. A narrative style could arguably be too culture-specific, have different themes, or just a bad choice for comparison. But the choice of materials has been made carefully, with specific reasons.

First, my aim is also practical - to review visual/narrative techniques and to catalog/describe them in a way that could help other filmmakers in selecting tools for their work. Because of this, I have selected examples that 1) **do** have sexual representations in them 2) have **different** styles. Just studying sexuality in any national/ sociological framework would tell something about narrating sexuality, but the divergence is needed for a meaningful comparison. With this selection, there will be both quite physical/graphical and very intellectual/ symbolic examples.

Photo 2: Westworld (HBO) - Gabbeh (Iran)

Regardless of cultural and geographical distance, the style sets are comparable. Culture-specific media requires prior knowledge, to some extent belonging to the target audience, so the narrative can be understood within their cultural paradigms. But American cable TV and Iranian theatre films have comparable audiences. For years, Iranian films have had a large festival audience in the West,[54] and American series are hugely popular in Iran.[55]

It could be questioned whether cable TV is at all comparable to feature films. TV is often thought of as low-quality entertainment, more about action or sports than thought or art[56]; feature films are usually expected to have 'higher' narrative quality[57]. But high-quality network companies, HBO in front, have pushed content standard to feature level, with cinematic style, aesthetics, complex narratives and a high degree of

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54 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p. 145
55 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 120
56 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 25
57 Bordwell D., Thompson K. & Smith J. (2019) Film Art: An Introduction. p. 489

reflexivity for over a decade [58]. Both HBO series and Iranian films in mid 90s can be said to be really popular media with a wide demographic - representing a wide range of people – "the masses". The audience sizes are also reasonably similar - in the tens of millions.[59] A pay channel naturally has a restricted audience, but a large subscriber base makes the demographics relatively unbiased. In Iran cinema is widely popular and even boosted by the goverment who thinks it an important propaganda element.[60]

It could be said that marketing set´s the style of companies more than artistic aims, making series incomparable to feature films. If the channel requires explicit themes and visuals, this could be considered reverse censorship affecting the storyteller just as actual censorship."Sex sells".[61] HBO openly defines explicit scenes as part of their marketing strategy[62], but denies requiring sex or violence, saying freedom and liberal attitude attract skilled filmmakers who want to tell stories in an unlimited way[63]. There is evidence of the claim being true and the themes coming from the artists[64].

Excluded genres

It can be claimed that some other source material would produce a better working comparison for this work. This is possible - the world is full of film genres and contentions - but initially interesting choices have been discarded for good reasons.

Porn is excluded because it doesn´t generally have a narrative and so is not storytelling[65]. However, kind of study cannot be written without discussing pornography at least shortly. Understanding pornography - especially the thin line between art film and porn - is mandatory when studying visual representations of sexuality. Pornography would naturally be sexually explicit visual material, and explicit sexuality can aid characterization in narrative cinema[66]. But it is clearly defined that pornography lacks narrative[67]. Porn's first and foremost objective is to arouse the watcher, not tell stories[68]. Of course
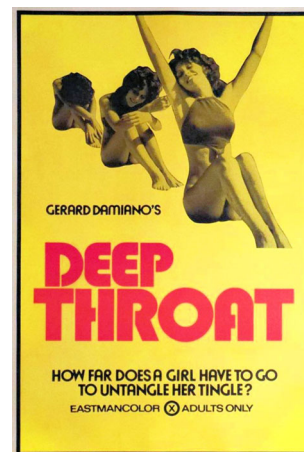
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58 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 3
59 https://www.statista.com/statistics/329277/number-hbo-subscribers/
60 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 19
61 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 322
62 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 274
63 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 321
64 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power.p. 279
65 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 26
66 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 4
67 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 26
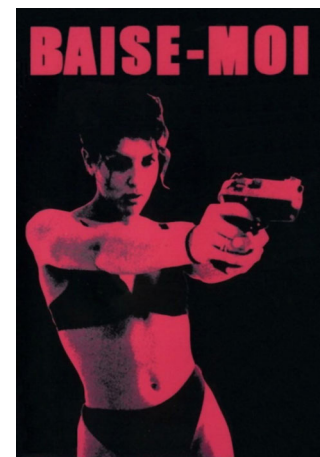68 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 31

some recognized films intentionally confuse this by using pornographic contentions, like von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013), but these films are also strong narrative art films. The lack of narrative is a strong argument to exclude pornography.

Art films are generally very liberal. However, they tend to be watched by a relatively small, specialized audience with the acquired ability to interpret and value often eccentric style and film language, not representing mainstream audiences.[69] I'll shorty deal some well-known art film area as examples.

French extremism (*Base-moi* by Trinh & Despentes, *Intimacy* by Chéreau for example) is often extremely sexual, and the term 'extreme' originated as condemnatory phrase .[70] It's not a genre for a wide audience – more of a festival speciality[71], which makes it not ideal selection for any comparison - a wide demographic. French extremism is relatively propagandistic and intentionally provocative[72]. Many critics agree that explicit sexual scenes enhance the narrative[73], making the message (propaganda) strike its target harder - but propagandism alters the storytelling and limits the audience.

Independent American film has interesting depictions of sexuality, especially in the social framework (like Clark's *Kids* and Solondz's *Happiness*) but like French extremism, it's far from wide audiences' film.

Greek Independent/East-European Avantgarde/ Finnish/Scandinavian film/horror/etc are left out because while sexuality can be a strong subject in the narrative or have visually strong and distinctive images, these are small areas for mostly specialised audiences. Furthermore, in the more artistic films (like Yorgos Lanthimos's films) sexuality is often mostly in the left-out or in the dialogue, studied in the subtext. And while this

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69 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 22
70 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 71
71 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 22
72 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 72
73 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 4

is an interesting way of handling the subject matter, it´s also distanced and nonvisual. Independent films also often lean on the Freudian viewpoint quite a lot[74], and psychoanalytical approach was already discarded.

Bollywood has strong cultural censorship rules on sexuality, but also lots of subversive conventions enabling (sexistic) erotic imagery like the cliché of women dancing in wet saris[75]; however Bollywood sexual imagery is quite generic and repetitive in artistic sense, compared to Iranian-style complex symbolics[76].
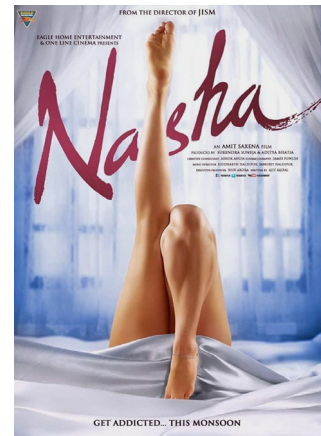
Young adult series have always sexual themes, but the stories are often thin and representations narrow, not interesting in visual or symbolical way. 14 years old doesn´t require the highest quality, as the majority of streaming series prove.

Disney/Marvel/other companies. Of the network context creators, HBO (intentionally) has the most sexual content. Disney and Marvel are known for their absence of sexuality, but many other companies also to stick to the American Christian sex taboo.
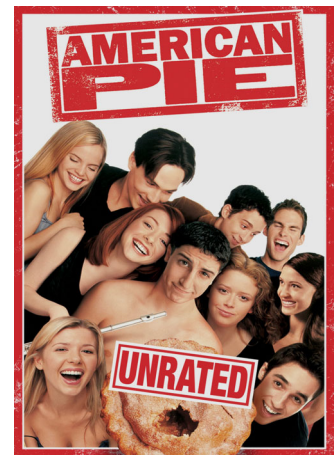
Finally, **mainstream Hollywood** is limited by the moral restrictions of the American culture. Even though Production Code was abandoned in the 60s, all sexual liberations have been followed by (self-)censoring backlashes. Because of this, Hollywood tends to be narrow and unimaginative in its representations of sexuality, to say nothing of the patriarchal white heterosexual norm. Sex and sexuality is often a juvenile laughing matter or an unsurprising middle-class drama with soft-porn tints[77]. Hollywood sexuality is an interesting part of the American culture and collective psyche but gives little as visual or narrative devices.

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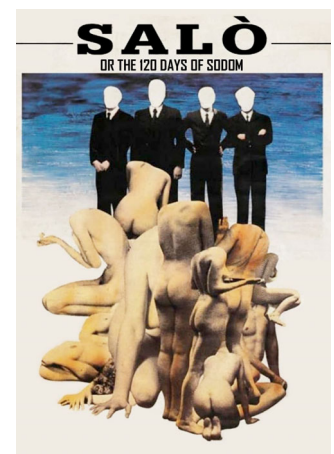
74 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 73
75 en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wet_sari_scene
76 Villarejo A. (2007) Film Studies The Basics. p. 78
77 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 353

Why compare 2015 and 1995?

Late 90´s had a surge of liberal sexuality in Western media. Art and underground films have been sexual before, and there are interesting other films (like in *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *120 Days of Sodom* (1976), *Law of Desire* (1987), *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover* (1989)...) but that´s still an exception by audacious directors. In the new Millenia Western media starts to turn more sexual overall, and the pay TV networks, with their freedom from many legal restrictions and self-censorship, were in the forefront - HBO expecially[78]. Shows like *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) which is in a way a liberal predecessor to Girls[79] and *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) with it´s many sex scenes can be mentioned. Still, it took time for sexualized programming to normalize. In 2010´s, no-one was not much bothered by sex in the TV anymore[80]. Mid 2010´s series are also very familiar to the author, so the period makes a good baseline.

For Iranian cinema, mid 90´s is also an especially interesting period. The Islamic censorship is still very strong, but filmmakers have lived with it more than a decade, and have developed superb subversive techniques to avoid the censors. In the new millenia Iranian filmmakers will start increasingly to shoot outside Iran to ease the actual production[81]. The storytelling becomes more free, but with a Western freedom that looses some of the poetic speciality of Islamically censored cinema[82].
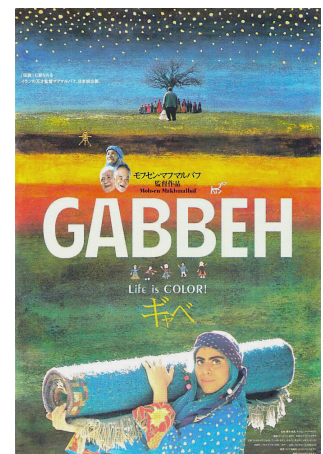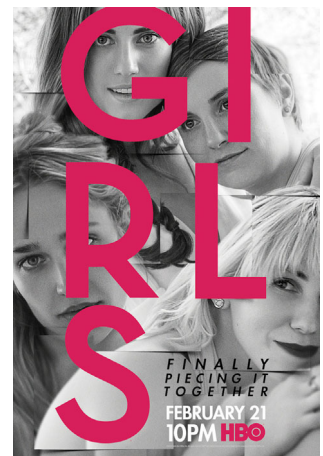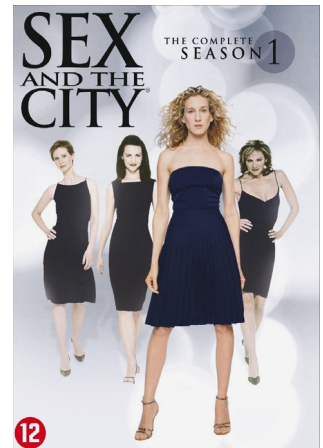
78 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 274

79 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 79

80 Schrodt P. (2019) Every Game of Thrones Nude Scene, Ranked by Whether Anyone Really Needed to Be Naked.

81 Langford M. (2021) Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance. p. 10

82 Langford M. (2021) Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance. p. 10

The HBO TV series

"You should be kissed — and often — and by someone who knows how."
– Gone with the Wind (Fleming, Cukor 1939)

HBO - Home Box Office - is an American pay network company that has received critical praise for high quality and major awards for its series[83]. HBO is known for its tendency to show nudity, violence and vulgar dialogue[84] but it has also been argued that this is a means of providing more creative freedom to its filmmakers.[85] HBO series often contain complex, controversial themes and explicit storytelling devices can be essential, beneficial elements in narrative cinema.[86] The reasons for selecting HBO for source material have been argued earlier in length.

HBO storytelling has been criticized for whether "*sex, violence, and occasional rape .. are necessary to the world building and plot*"[87] but there are also opinions that "*in order to construct 'visible' sexuality, characters must 'perform' sexuality*".[88] That performance HBO has a lot of. In the three source episodes, there are 15 **nude scenes**, 9 **sex scenes** (including one orgy) and 10 scenes of **violence**. In *Girls*, the most feministic of the series, sex often conveys empowerment and intimacy,[89] *Westworld* and *The Game of Thrones* use sex and sexuality more as a scene backdrop (naked lovers talking, bandits conspiring in a brothel)[90] proving the critique of HBO 2010's shows being "*hegmonically masculine*".[91] However, "*explicit sex can be an essential element in storytelling in narrative cinema. It aids characterization; highlights themes; provides events which develop plot*"[92] and sexuality is very cinematic in the HBO series.

Photo 26: HBO channel slogan

Photo 27: Opposition of HBO´s open sexuality. Religious right Anti-HBO campaign slogan (Morality in Media)

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83 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 32
84 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 274
85 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 279
86 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 4
87 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 170
88 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 310
89 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p. 19
90 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 171
91 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 35
92 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 4

Sexuality, religion and skin

Although the USA is considered much more liberal than Iran, there are still restrictions on showing sexual content. Liberal representations are mostly seen in R/X-rated films and on pay TV programming. Hollywood films regularly test these restrictions, but quickly quell to the moralists.[93] As the pay channels are free from the 'minority protection' restrictions, they who actions without allusion or concealing[94]. Because of this, the HBO visual style contains lots of **nudity**, **sex scenes**, bold **dialogue**, **BDSM** and other fetishistic sexuality - never seen in Iranian films, but rare in American terrestrial programming too.

The HBO series contains much less sexual symbology and indirect presentations than the Iranian films, as can be seen on the actifier comparison table. There are still symbols (and Freudianisms) in the series, especially in *The Game of Thrones*.

INDIRECT ACTIFIERS	HBO	IRAN
SYMBOLIC OBJECT	11	68
LOOK	17	28
MISE-EN-SCENE	8	25
SYMB SUBSTITUTE	14	17
FRAME SEPARATION	-	9

The source series

The TV-series studied in this thesis are selected for their widely-known sexual content, variegating genres and for the generally approved high quality.

- *Girls*, episode "*Queen for Two Days*" (Season 5, episode 5, 2016)
  - aims for showing realistic modern sex/relations
- *Westworld*, episode "*Contrapasso*" (Season 1, episode 5, 2016)
  - 19th Century environment and contemporary attitudes
- *Game of Thrones*, episode "*The Wars to Come*" (Season 5, episode 1, 2015)
  - complete fantasy, some scenes bordering on kinky

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93 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 311
94 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 277

Girls

GIRLS

Girls is an HBO network company comedy-drama created by Lena Dunham. It premiered in April 2012 and ran until April 2017, with 62 episodes in five seasons. The plot follows the everyday and romantic struggles of an aspiring writer, Hannah, after her parents stop supporting her financially.[95] The series has received notable awards like the Golden Globe and applause for its humor, realistic portrayals of women and feministic overtones, but also critique for its noticeably white cast and wealthy middle class worldview - and its frequent on-screen nudity.[96]

In episode 5 of season 5, "*Queen for Two Days*", Hannah and her mom leave for a female-empowerment weekend camp. Loreen, the mother, hopes to clarify her marriage problems with Tad, Hannah's father, while Hannah wants to have some time away from her overwhelming roommate Fran. In an interlude, Hannah's friend Jessa is having steamy sex including some kinky roleplay with her boyfriend Adam. In the camp, Hannah becomes bored with mostly older people around and ends up flirting with a female yoga instructor. In a subplot, Shoshanna, Hannah's friend, is working in Tokyo and having a budding romance with Yoshi. Shoshanna's friend Abigail visits Japan and they talk about relationships and sex. In the meanwhile, Jessa and Adam talk about relationships and sex too. In the yoga camp, Loreen and a group of older women have their version of men-and-sex talk. Hanna does not join her mother and the ladies because she is having sex in the sauna with the yoga instructor. The act is interrupted awkwardly as it just becomes too hot for Hannah, but the lesbian encounter is an eye-opening experience for her. In Japan, Yoshi talks with Shoshanna about losing their virginity together. In the end, Hanna talks with her mother, who has decided to continue her marriage with Hannah's father.

In this episode, the typical blatant talk about relationships is well presented, as is Hannah's frequent nudity. Interestingly often the series was not criticized for nudity as such, but comments were made about Hanna's actor Dunham whose body is "*unconventional or film and television .. where the norm is thin and toned*"[97]. Some of Hannah's sex scenes have been criticized for being masochistic and resembling rape.[98] The general tone of *Girls* is satirical and feminist, considered an ironic portrayal of young women's lives .[99]

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95 www.imdb.com/title/tt1723816
96 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Girls_(TV_series)
97 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p. 31
98 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p. 19
99 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p- 74

Actifier review

Table 1 shows the statistics of actifiers in the episode, with non-direct actifiers in blue and graphic ones in red. *Girls* is the most **talk-based** series in the source materials - dialogue is used to convey sexuality 11 times. *Girls´* raunchy reputation partially comes from Hanna´s dialogue, which is graphical (and ironic).[100] Surprisingly the episode contains only two **sex scenes**. They don´t differ much from any contemporary film sex scene, although they are successfully made realistic (sweat, non-perfect bodies, spontaneity). In addition to sex, there are six **nude** or partially nude scenes. Nudity is used in the same casual way as sex, as series creator Lena Dunham wants to represent the life of young women in a realistic way[101]. The **realism** is visible in the series in other ways - compared to *The Game of Thrones* or *Westworld*, *Girls* uses relatively little of symbols or allegories of any kind. It´s anchored in modern real life, and its actifier set is the most limited of all the sources. In addition to talk and sex, **glances** and **kisses** are seen.

MOST COMMON ACTIFIERS
GIRLS

G29 TALK	33
G24, G38 NUDITY	6
G45, G46 SEX	2
G37 KISS	1

time	Girls	dialogue: implied sex	dialogue: feelings	dialogue: relationships	dialogue: sex	dialogue: sexuality	dialogue: metaphora	dialogue: vulgar	nudity: female	nudity: full frontal	nudity: male	sex: masturbation	stripping	other blue
00:10	Hannah and her mother talking about sex			■	■	■								
02:30	Shoshana and Abigail talk about sex			■	■	■								
04:30	Hannah talks with yoga instructior			■	■	■		■						
06:00	Hannah stripping for bed, discussion			■	■								■	□
07:13	Sex scene btw Jessa and Adam			■	■				■	■	■			□
09:10	Yoga lesson													
10:00	Walking in nature		■	■	■									
10:59	Shoshana and Abigail talk		■	■	■									
11:52	Spa, bathing (nudity)								■					
13:50	Dancing, sexual moves		■	■										□
14:35	Jessa and Adan talk, also about sex		■	■	■	■								
18:30	Older woman talk about sex		■	■	■	■								
20:00	Sex with yoga instructor, masturbation		■	■					■			■		□
23:30	Jessa and Adam kiss			■										□
24:00	Shoshanna's boyfriend talks of sex and virginity		■	■	■									□
26:30	Hannah and mother talk		■	■										□

Analysis table 1: actifiers in the Girls episode "Queen for Two Days"

100 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p. 75
101 Kaklamanidou B. & Tally M. (2014) HBO's Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst. p. 29

Westworld

Westworld is an HBO network company dystopian western series created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy. It premiered in October 2016 and is still running on 2021, with 28 episodes being made this far. The plot begins by introducing the high-tech amusement park where android "hosts" let visitors play violent Wild West games and expands into the real world as the hosts gain sentience and begin a fight for their human rights. Westworld has received praise for its acting, narrative and themes, winning several Emmy Awards. The series has also been criticized for misogynism, violence and nudity.[102]

In episode 5 of season 1, "*Contrapasso*", the travels of Dolores, a female host, and Logan and Teddy, two shady young men, continue. They arrive at Pariah, a town offering illegal business possibilities. On arrival, the town's wild nature is revealed - there are ragged soldiers marching around and people having public sex on the streets. In an interlude in the park's technical space, technicians repair damaged hosts, naked and bloody androids around them. At night in Pariah, Dolores and Teddy talk about their feelings, holding hands while a carnival distracts them. The death and sex motifs bring Dolores to a memory - a "therapy session" with Dr. Ford, the original inventor of host android technology. Dolores sits naked while the doctor interrogates her. The technicians are seen arguing, one of them brutalizing a "dead" female android. In Pariah, naked, gold-painted women invite Logan and Teddy to a brothel. In the tech complex, an administrator accuses a technician of raping an android and blackmails him. In Pariah, Dolores listens as Logan and Teddy discuss a lucrative but risky plan. Around them is a brothel full of naked people who have all kinds of sex and sexual games. There is also a brief homoeroticly-flavored fight between Logan and Teddy. Later outside in a romantic scene, Dolores confesses to Teddy that she needs him. The episode ends in several gunfights, a train robbery and schemings by many characters.

Westworld contains considerable nudity and sexual violence nudity, by which the series comments on our current society[103]. The themes include economic inequality, gender roles - especially men's "right" to female (host) bodies, male gaze,[104] patriarchy and violent male superiority fantasies.[105]

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102 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westworld_(TV_series)
103 Devereux C. (2020) Hysteria in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction p. 172
104 Devereux C. (2020) Hysteria in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction p. 168
105 Devereux C. (2020) Hysteria in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction p. 169

Actifier review

Table 2 shows the statistics of actifiers in the episode, with non-direct actifiers in blue and graphic ones in red. *Westworld* doesn´t use a lot of allegorical content, but the **set** conveys sexuality continuously, in the form of the deactivated, usually naked host robots. Indeed, **nudity** is the most often used actifier. Notable is the habitual connection of **violence** to nudity - the hosts are forever mutilated and bloody. This episode has only two **sex scenes**, but the second shock being a public orgy event in a brothel, with dozens of **naked** people of any gender.

Interestingly **contact neutralizer**, a very Iranian allegory device, is used in the form of control units and other distancing tech tools. The hosts are shown to be machines only, so sex with them is not 'real'. Otherwise mise-en-scene is used several times to partially hide nudity, in a suspense-creating way. Costumes are mostly there for undressing. *Westworld* uses a lot of **glances**, maybe because it often draws from the classical western film aesthetics. Gazes in *Westworld* tend to be very male; ofter there are women under the male gaze, intentionally exaggerated in the scene of 80-years old Anthony Hopkins interviewing naked Evan Rachel Wood. **Dialogue** is the last, often-used actifier. Interestingly detail is the 1890s language, which creates both distancing and emphasis; respectful townsfolk talk very differently from the prostitutes.

Most common actifiers *Westworld*	
G39, G52 NUDITY	15
G7 LOOK	5
G9 MISE-EN-SCENE	8
G4 CONTACT NEUTR.	4
G37 KISS	3

time	Westworld
04:00	Dolores is standing at a graveyard
05:40	Arriving to the town of Pariah
10:30	At parks´s techical spaces
15:30	Dolores and Teddy talk at night on Pariah
16:00	A carnival distracts them
17:15	Dolores in "psychiatry session" with Dr. Ford
23:40	Technical space
32:00	In Pariah, gold-painted naked hookers arrive
32:30	Park technical space
33:40	A technician is accused of rape
37:00	The brothel scene in Pariah

Analysis table 2: actifiers in the Westworld episode "Contrapasso"

Game of Thrones

Game of Thrones is an HBO company fantasy drama series created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss based on novels by George R. R. Martin. It premiered in April 2011 and ran until May 2019, with 73 episodes in eight seasons. The story revolves around the leaders of the fictional Seven Kingdoms of Westeros. The series has a very large ensemble cast and complex, years-spanning simultaneous plot lines. *Game of Thrones* is one of the most successful series ever made, receiving Emmy, Golden Globe, Hugo and Peabody awards, among others.[106] The series has also been criticized for its recurrent nudity and violence.[107]

In episode 1 of season 5, "*The Wars to Come*", teenage Queen Cercei is foretold by a forest witch that she will someday be succeeded by someone younger and more beautiful. At the present, her father Lord Tywin is buried and Cercei meets her brother Jaime, with whom she has a long-standing incestuous relationship. Outlawed Tyrion arrives with the scheming eunuch spymaster Varys to meet Queen Daenerys in Mereen, where Daenerys is continuing her revolution. One of her soldiers has an encounter with a whore and is brutally killed by a political insurgent. In the aftermath, the Queen's advisor Missandei talks with commander Grey Worm to find out why a castrated soldier would visit a brother. In the North, the Red Priestess Melisandre talks with noble bastard John Snow and makes a sexual pass on him. Schemer Petyr Baelish continues his schemes, escaping with noble Sansa, who he is constantly and unsuccessfully wooing. Back in the capital, Cercei meets with noble leaders; many of the discussions have sexual overtones. Rival noble Margaery comes to talk with his brother Loras and finds him in bed with his lover Olyvar. In Mereen, political problems continue, and Daenerys talks about them and their personal history in bed with her lover Daario. Finally, power struggles end up with a resistance leader being burned in the North.

In the episode, many scenes have either sexual overtones or openly sexual actions. Sexuality is usually connected to power struggles and personal gain, being a political tool as frequent as passion. Sexuality also often connects to violence in the series, the killing of the soldier being a good example. In this episode the scene with Loras balances the displayed sex by being more homosexual than usual in the *Game of Thrones*; mostly the series complies with the heteronormativity of American society[108].

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106 https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947
107 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Game_of_Thrones
108 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film. p. 329

Actifier review

Table 3 shows the statistics of actifiers in the episode, with non-direct actifiers in blue and graphic ones in red. Contrary to its graphic reputation, *The Game of Thrones* narrates sexual desires a lot with **gazes** and **dialogue**. Look is probably the main device in this episode, with some very gentle **touches**. Overall the characters talk a lot - and in the background there is often **nudity**. In some scenes the 'HBO doubt' is in order - is the naked skin there only for marketing? Mostly the discussion-nudity combination works, adding realism and emotion to storytelling. Equalitywise the episode is good, male nudity is shown almost as much as female.

The Game of Thrones has surprisingly many **symbols**, 7 actifiers in the episode. Interestingly, 4 instances can be seen outright Freudian (a young girls´ blood, falling female statues, swords as male power). Stemming from the original fantasy world, the symbolics are often more an additional production design layer than narrative hints; they aren´t essential for the storytelling. *GoT* also tends to merge **violence** with sexuality and BDSM is an integral part of sexuality in the story world. For several characters this is part of their personality and generally works storytelling-wise. Otherwise the series´ representation of sexuality often has more the feeling of lust than love - which differs from the original books´ intention.

MOST COMMON ACTIFIERS
THE GAME OF THRONES

G7	LOOK	12
G29	TALK	7
G49	TOUCH	5
G24, G39	NUDITY	4
G53	VIOLENCE	2

time	Game of Thrones
04:30	Young teen girls (Cersei) meet a witch
08:00	Cercei meets Jamie at the church
13:00	Statue of a naked woman god is falled down
13:50	A soldier goes to meet a prostitute
17:00	Melisande comes to meet Gray Worm
23:15	Sansa and Petyr watch a practice fight
25:30	Brienne sharpens her sword
26:55	Noble party
29:50	Loras is bed with Olyvar
32:45	Tyrion walks with Varys
37:15	Daenerys with Daario, apparently after sex

Analysis table 3: actifiers in the Game of Thrones episode "The Wars to Come"

Films from Iran

"The Cinematographer must abstain from discontented remarks directed toward the person of the Sultan in any manner, explicit or indirect, brief or at length."
– Once Upon a Time, Cinema (Makhmalbaf 1992)

Iranian films have for more than two decades enjoyed a high assessment at Western film festivals and are gaining more viewers all the time. Iranian cinema is highly affected by religious censorship, especially during the 1990s,[109] and has developed an original, symbolic way of handling sensitive themes. This makes Iranian cinema, especially the 'new' period from 1989 to 1996,[110] an interesting subject for this study.

"*In Iran virtually every aspect of film production and distribution is under government control and has been for most of the industry's history. .. The Islamic regime tightened censorship and imposed strict religious control over film .. Men and women cannot touch each other in movies unless married or related and women must observe Islamic dress codes.*"

In these statements, Richard Phillips[111] defines Iranian film very concisely. Iran has also a centuries-long tradition of Arabic/Islamic poetry, and these works are still widely studied in Iranian schools.[112] The censorship combined with poetry produced a unique symbolic film style, which was in its purest form in the new cinema period. In the 2000s, Iranian filmmakers started to make films outside Iran to avoid the worst censoring. More naturalistic and visible portrayals of love and relationships started to appear in Iranian films[113], unfortunately somewhat lessening the poetics.

Poetry, sexuality and religion

Because the Islamic leaders have a bifold attitude to the cinema - fearing Western propaganda, on one hand, but needing their own "education tool" on the other[114], film-watching is both strongly recommended by the government and strictly regulated by it. The export of less-censored films to international festivals for propaganda gains is allowed, while the same films are either banned in Iran or are extremely strongly critisized in the media (which is completely state-controlled).[115]

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109 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 77
110 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 21
111 Phillips, R. (2000) The Silence and The Door, two films by Mohsen Makhmalbaf p. 1
112 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p. 190
113 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 16
114 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 19
115 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 119

Iranian filmmakers have invented ingenious ways of subversive storytelling, and Persian poetry with its strong symbolism is an essential tool[116]. Poetry is still studied in schools and widely read even by laymen, both 12th Century Omar Khayyam and contemporary Forugh Farrokhzad being very respected. This background gives Iranian audiences a special aptitude for understanding poetic film style.[117]

Maybe surprisingly, Prophet Muhammad opposed celibacy, and Islam has very few ascetic traditions; Muhammad saw intercourse in marriage as the highest good of human life.[118] It could be said the current strict sexual censorship in Iran comes more from the local Arab traditions and from the tyranny of the current patriarchal theocratic government than actually from Islam.[119]
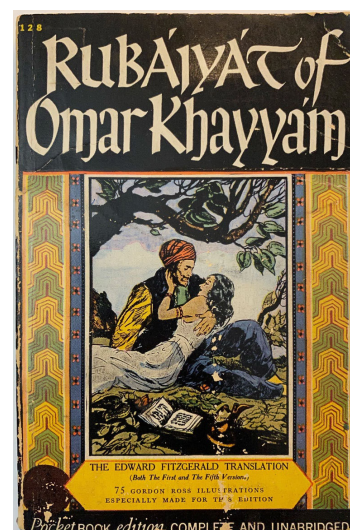
Photo 25: Oman Khayyam´s poems, loved and well known in Iran - and also very erotic.

The source films

The feature films studied are selected for their high use of symbolics and lack of any open sexual conduct, which is banned by the Islamic laws.[120] The films are:

- *Through the Olive Trees* (1994, Kiarostami)
  - young man on love with an unreachable girl
- *The Blue-veiled* (Banietemad, 1995, Modaresi, Pourmand)
  - love in first sight between different social classes
- *Gabbeh* (Makhmalbaf , 1996, Daroudchi, Mahmoudi)
  - extremely stylished and symbolic love story

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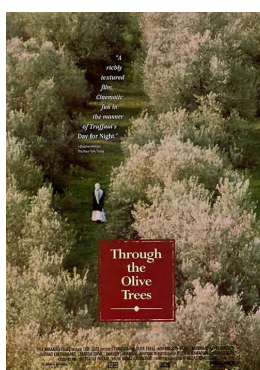
116 Elena A. (2005) The Cinema Of Abbas Kiarostami. p.190

117 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 74

118 Hyde, J. & Delamater J. (2019) Understanding human sexuality. p. 481

119 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 54

120 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 173

Banietemad: *The Blue-veiled*

     The Blue-veiled is a feature film directed by Rakshan Banietemad in 1995.[121] It is from the second period of her career, one of the films focusing on women in love[122]. Banietemad herself is a social realist director, but her style is also romantic.[123] *The Blue-veiled* is unfortunately quite unknown in the West, but has received awards at film festivals like Locarno and has very positive critiques on internet film sites.[124]
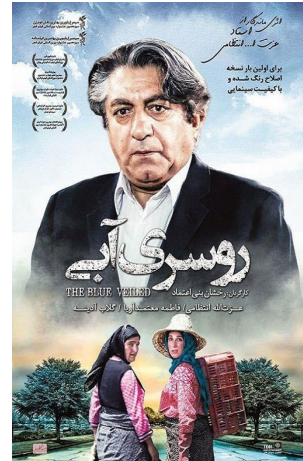
     The Blue-veiled tells the story of Rasul and Nobar, who fall in love at first sight, but because of vastly different social status cannot marry. The film opens with Nobar arriving at the food factory owned by Rasul and asking for a job. The rules of Islamic society make it impossible for them even to talk, but Rasul notices her and orders the factory manager to hire her. Their first look is remote, he in his office, she in the yard. They meet face-to-face when Rasul decides to kindly bring Nobar the lunch she forgot at the factory. Even this is a look through a large room, with no words spoken. Rasul is only able to speak to Nobar's young sister Senobar, children being exempted from the Islamic gender separation rules. The lover's first discussion is work-related, in his office - real feelings cannot be voiced. Later, Nobar talks about her feelings with a female friend. In the tomato field, Rasul brings food to Senobar - symbolically to Nobar. Rasul decides to help Nobar by finding a husband for her - a symbolic action. Nobar won't accept anyone. Finally, Rasul confronts Nobar in the fields, blaming her for not accepting help, and Nobar runs away. Rasul goes to her house and is invited in: only Nobar's hand is visible; a sexual act is implied. Later Rasul confesses both his desire and fear for the socially unacceptable love in a monologue; there is no touching, but a large amount of symbology - flowers, fruits, water, *substitute touch* and elliptical editing. A dream-style scene hints about *temporary marriage.* There is a period of continued meetings, longing looks, *contact neutralizers* and *in-between spaces* - special symbolic elements of Iranian storytelling. Rasul's family - his adult daughters - learn about the affair and are shocked, fearing for the whole family's reputation. There is a crisis, and Nobar offers to leave to protect Rasul. Rasul finally confesses his love publicly and marries Nobar against all opposition.

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121 www.imdb.com/title/tt0114310
122 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad. p. 141
123 Ghorbankarim M. (2021) The Films of Rakshan Banietemad.p. 144
124 http://iffa.net.au/the-blue-veiled

Actifier review

Table 4 shows statistics of actifiers in the episode. Almost all action in the film is **symbolic** or **elliptic**, as Islamic rules forbid open sexuality. *The Blue-veiled* utilizes many distancing devices like **contact neutralizers, connecting objects**, and **blocking distance**. These work very well in the storytelling, creating expectations and suspense. The film notably uses a nonsexual child as a connecting person in many scenes - a safe target for signs of caring and love. Talk - especially **monologues** - is an important narrative device. Desires cannot be told directly to their target, but they can be voiced rhetorically, and there are 3 quite Shakespearian romantic monologues. **Glanses** are another important feelings-revealing action - often combined with mise-en-scene divisions like **distance** or **frame separation**. Like with symbols, the separation devices work narration wise very well, adding suspense, a feeling of longing and tragedy. *The Blue-veiled* contains no open **touch** between the lovers - touch is either **inferred** or shown only partially, like when Nobar´s hand reaches out of the door. Again, this adds tension and suspense.

They eventually turn red and pretty in the moonlight.
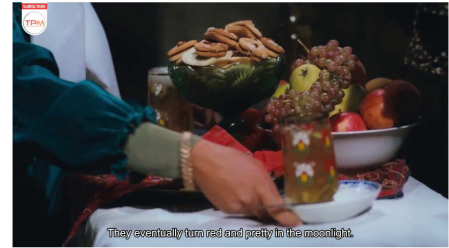
Most common actifiers *The Blue-veiled*	
G37 Symb substitute	19
G27 talk	14
P8 symbs object	13
P13 look	10

Analysis table 4: actifiers in the Blue-veiled by Banietemad.

Makhmalbaf: *Gabbeh*

Gabbeh is a feature film directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf in 1996.[125] It is a highly symbolic story of Gabbeh, a young girl in love with a man from a different tribe, but who her father will not allow her to marry. Gabbeh is also an Iranian woven rug, which symbolizes the woman in the film. *Gabbeh* has received several festival awards and was the Iranian film chosen for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1997 Oscars, although it was not nominated.[126]

The film starts with a gabbeh rug floating in the stream. There is a woven picture of two people riding - a glimpse of the film's ending. An old couple arrives at an apple grove. They fade to the young woman, lying on the rug, beside the weaved-in riders. The old woman touches the young, showing they are related - or the same person. Apples and birds are Persian poetry symbols of sexuality and freedom. Gabbeh falls in love with a horseman, who is always seen from a distance. Her father says she can only marry when her uncle returns. In a dreamlike sequence, the uncle comes and does a lesson about colors - which are forbidden from women's dresses by Islamic rules. The tribe moves. Gabbeh hears the howl of a wolf, her rider, and smiles. The uncle courts a woman. Her uncle courts a woman, the courtship done through poems. Gabbeh watches in symbolical editing, following the tale. There is sensuality in the sound: splashing, almost like sex; the wolf howl is also sexual, but Gabbeh's yearning is seen only in her gaze. She sees the rider and approaches, but is barred by family members. The women color yarns for rugs - a connection between romantic frustration and color. We see Gabbeh in rain, water symbolizing sexuality. She's impatient. There is a wedding feast - and dancing, shown only as rug images, dancing in public being illegal. The tribe moves again, walking over colorful symbolic rugs. Gabbeh hears his lover's howl - we see their gazes, the rider far away but closer now. As the tribe walks, Gabbeh leaves scarves for him in the snow, as breadcrumbs to follow, signs of love. He touches a snowball - symbolically touching her. She feels the cold - his touch. Arriving in a city, she waits. Uncle sees her waiting, does nothing, and so gives permission. Back in the grasslands, Gabbeh sees a goat giving birth, a symbol for freedom. She leaves with her lover, her father follows with a rifle, we hear two shots and a howl. In the end, there is the old couple; the woman wearing a similar color to the young, and the old man howling.

125 www.imdb.com/title/tt0116384
126 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gabbeh_(film)

Actifier review

Table 5 shows statistics of actifiers in the episode. *Gabbeh* is extremely full of **symbols**. Almost the whole story is told through symbols - desires of the young lovers, marriage feast dances, birth and death (images on the rug, colors, flowers, animals, sounds). The symbology requires some knowledge of Iranian culture, but narratively works extremely well, creating several (intentionally confusing) story layers and lots of suspense. *Gabbeh* has almost no direct **touch**, but a huge amount of symbolic touches via **connecting objects, symbolic substitutes** and **symbolic editing**. It is interesting how strong emotions - love, yearning, lust - can be expressed with an actual touch. Gabbeh´s symbolical connection is often much more sexual than a visual touch or a sex scene.

The **dialogue** is relatively sparse and allegorical, with actual Persian poems; it can be challenging for a Western audience. There are a lot of **looks** - often emphasized by **blocking distance**. These distancing devices again work very well, either creating interesting suspense or strong, unseen connections between the lovers.

Most common actifiers
Gabbeh

P8 SYMB OBJECT	46
P37 SYMB SUBSTITUTE	16
P13 LOOK	10
G27 TALK	7

time	Gabbeh — Mohsen Makhmalbaf
02:00	Two people on horse, a drawing in water
02:30	Gabbeh looking almost at camera
03:30	The old couple
05:15	Old woman washing the rug by the brook
08:20	Gabbeh sees the Rider from far away
10:50	School color symbol scene
16:15	Gabbeh washing her feed on the brook
22:58	Tribe moves
25:30	Uncle courting a woman
33:00	Family members separate the lovers
34:15	Gabbeh in rain
36:20	Wedding feast - dancing
38:17	Tribe walking over colorful rugs
44:00	The mother gives birth
54:40	Gabbeh looks at the Rider very far away
56:47	Gabbeh leaves scarves for him on snow
1:00:05	Gabbeh at bed
1:03:22	Old man dusting rug, picking apples
1:06:15	The birth of a goat
1:07:16	Gabbeh rides off with the Rider
1:09:00	The rug, the lovers in the pattern together

Analysis table 5: actifiers in the Gabbeh by Makhmalbaf.

Kiarostami: *Through the Olive Trees*

Through the Olive Trees is a feature film directed by Abbas Kiarostami in 1994.[127] The story tells about a director making a film, and hiring a young man, Hossein, as an actor. He has made a marriage proposal to a girl, Tahereh, but he is rejected by her family for being too poor. By chance, she is also hired as an actress, but refuses to talk to Hossein, avoiding him during the filming. The director finds this out and tries to help the young people - as Tahereh seems to have feelings for Hossen. *Through the Olive Trees* was selected for Best Foreign Language Film at the 1994 Oscars, but it was not nominated.[128]
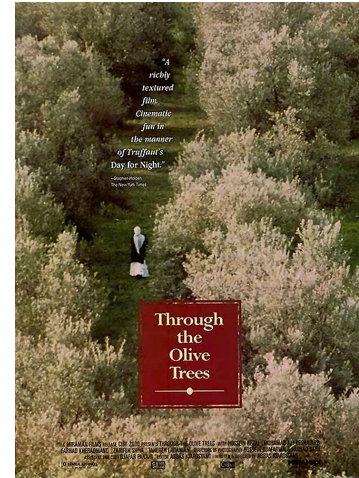
The film begins with the director selecting a girl for an actress - Tahereh. Producer Mrs. Shiva tries to find suitable clothes for her, and Tahereh is revealed to have strong opinions. After gathering some flowers - symbols of sexuality - as props, the filming starts with Tahereh and Hossein as actors. But she won't talk to him. The director talks with Hossein while they drive from the locations and Hossein reveals his history with Tahereh. There is a lot of talk about marriage, customs and relationships, as they can be discussed with same-sex people. They stop to talk with Mrs. Shiva who drives another car, and Hossein sees Tahereh with her. They only exchange gazes. Hossein meets her grandmother, asking permission to marry her but is declined. Olive trees separate him and the grandmother as he follows her. After a night in the film camp, the director talks with Hossein again; female hitchhikers show again that young woman must be silent because of customs. The filming continues, and the director commands Tahereh to talk, which she reluctantly does. In the scenes, Hossein and she are always separated by set, and they are not seen to talk directly, but flowers, symbols of love surround them. During a break, Hossein brings tea to the crew, and while serving Tahereh, voices his desire. She does not answer. The day ends, and too impatient to wait for a car, Tahereh leaves to walk home, carrying a potted flower. The director tells Hossein to follow. He walks after her for a long time, speaking a long monologue about his desire to marry her, promising to be a perfect husband, but Tahereh doesn't stop or answer. The olive trees of the grove keep separating them as the film set earlier. They arrive at an open field and he stops following her, just looking after her, hesitating. Finally, he runs, and in a very long shot, meets her for a few seconds in the middle of the fields.

127 www.imdb.com/title/tt0111845
128 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Through_the_Olive_Trees

Actifier review

Table 6 shows statistics of actifiers in the episode. *Through the Olive Trees* is full of distancing. Characters are separated from each other by **blocking geometry**, **symbolically substituted** by other characters, or **out of the frame** completely. In the famous final shot, the lovers´ embrace either happens or is too far to see. The separation emphasizes the strength of Hossein´s infatuation and his desperation very well. **Symbolic objects** (flowers, tea, veil) are used in interesting ways, conveying character intentions.

There is quite a lot of **dialogue**, but important speech is always in monologue, often with **substitute persons** (super-distanced by both old age and gender). **Absent dialogue** - silences, replacement actions - is often used. Tahereh even comments she will not talk with Hossein! **Gazes** are important, with the specialty of Tahereh often looking away and **set design** blocking gaze lines. The impossibility of connection creates a strong frustration which helps the audience to connect and sympathize with Hossein. It can also be interpreted as a political critique of the theocratic Islamic separation rules, adding a layer to the film.

Tahereh...

MOST COMMON ACTIFIERS *THROUGH THE OLIVE TREES*	
P8 SYMB OBJECT	20
P37 SYMB SUBSTITUTE	13
G27, G28 TALK	10
G30 FRAME SEPARATION	9
P13 LOOK	8

time	Through the Olive Trees — Abbas Kiarostami
02:00	Young women in veils
03:00	Tahereh in seen in the first time
10:45	Mrs. Shiva meets Tahereh
14:10	Young boys bring flowers
16:00	Scene being filmed
28:15	Director and Hossein discuaa while driving
34:30	Tahereh and Hossein see each other
36:20	Hossein talks to Tahereh's grandmother
39:15	Hossen sees Tahereh from car-to-car
53:20	Hossein and Director talk
1:04:08	Scene in film
1:07:35	Hossein looks at Tahereh
1:19:45	Hossein offers tea to Tahereh
1:25:50	Tahereh in film set
1:28:10	Hossein similarly inprisoned by set
1:28:45	Tahereh in car, Hossein outside
1:31:28	Hossein follows Tahereh
1:40:05	Hossein & Tahereh on the field

Analysis table 6: actifiers in the Through the Olive Trees by Kiarostami.

Analysis of the material

"Listen, I appreciate this whole seduction scene you've got goin', but let me give ya a tip: I'm a sure thing. OK? So, I'm on an hourly rate. Could we just move it along?"

– *Pretty Woman* (Marshall 1990)

The basis of the analysis are the **actifiers**, divided into symbolic (Iranian) and graphic (HBO) groups. The Introduction chapter discusses the background and theory of the actifier system. HBO series can contain both symbolic and graphic actifiers, marked with respective colors. Iranian films can only have 'censorproof' actifiers.

Comparing the contents

Keeping in mind the definition of sexuality (Page 70), comparing two initially very different representation styles is certain to produce ambiguous results. The conclusions are by the author, and are always disputable. Starting from statistics, the occurrences of actifiers are shown in Table 8 color-coded as graphical and symbolical. It's easy to see HBO series contain mostly graphic representations and Iranian films only symbolic ones.

Talk and **looks** are the two most common actifiers between the two groups. Gazes can, comedy excluded, contain only relatively neutral sexual references, so looks are always considered symbolic. The Iranian dialogue talks about sexuality only with euphemisms; Western dialogue can speak directly; in *Girls* dialogue can be almost written porn.

Symbology is notably different in the styles - when in Iranian films symbols are essential even to approach sexual matters, in the HBO series symbology is mostly used to add flirting or a titillating "Freudian" layer over the already plain, probably clearly seen sexual scene. The Western symbology system, while not inferior as

ACTIFIER COUNT HBO SERIES	
dialogue: relationships	16
glance (game)	14
mise-en-scene	11
dialogue: sexuality	13
dialogue: sex	12
symbol	11
violence	11
costume: revealing	10
freudian act	10
nudity: female	9
domination, BDSM	8
sensual touch	8
dialogue: vulgar	7
kissing	6
nudity: full frontal	6
physical closeness	5
contact neutralizer	5
nudity: male	5
dialogue: implied sex	4
concealing costume	3
separation by shot/frame	3
substitute dialogue	3
touch substitute	2
dialogue: metaphora	2
sex: intercourse	2
sex: public 2	2

ACTIFIER COUNT IRANIAN FILMS	
symbol: object	28
symbol: color	25
mise-en-scene	24
glance (game)	23
monologue	21
symbol: action	18
blocking distance	15
absent dialogue	14
separation by shot	13
replacement behavior	12
substitute person	12
substitute dialogue	9
connecting object	8
touch substitute	7
symbolic sound	6
voiced desire	6
replacement subject	5
separation by frame	5
animal symbol	4
maximum nudity	4
substitute age	4
substitute gender	4
symbolic editing	4
contact neutralizer	3
replacement graphic	3
facial expression	2
poetical dialogue	2

Table 8: actifiers in Iranian films and HBO series.

such, is narrower compared to the extremely complex Persian poetry -referencing Iranian symbology. In Iranian films, sexuality simply cannot be addressed on the visible level but must always hide in the visual or textual subtext.

Touch is a central part of HBO/Western sexuality. Sex is touch - and neither sex nor touch between young people of different genders can be shown in Iranian storytelling. It is fascinating for a Western person how strong sexual tension can be constructed by using indirect narrative denying touch. Symbols, symbolical editing (juxtaposing "innocent" images), gazes, and the frustration stemming from continuing distancing can feel very much like the real-life longing for someone.

Blocking is another storytelling device used in very different ways. The Western narrative is fluent with teasing, but in the West the films almost always have a clear visual closure - the girl gets the girl. Iranian films must avoid any sexual closures because the censors, and favor unsettlingly open endings. And before the end, **mise-en-scene** is used to keep the lovers far away from each other. Set design **separates** and **distances**, while in the HBO series characters are either continuously close or quickly reach each other.

Most used indirect in HBO	
GLANCE	14
MISE-EN-SCENE	11
SYMB OBJECT	7
MUSIC	5

Most used graphical device		
DIALOGUE	(GIRLS 27)	45
NUDITY		12
FREUDIAN ACT		10
COSTUM		7
SEX		7

Nudity or any visible skin outside the hands and face area is of course an impossibility in Iranian cinema. In the HBO series nakedness is almost expected, both part of the set decoration and as part of the action and even character development. But like in Western films suspense from the expectation of nudity can be a very strong story element, in Iranian film the impossibility of seeing any skin at all is likewise a superbly strong - maybe stronger - narrative component.

Most used indirect in Iran	
SYMBOLIC OBJECT	68
GLANCE	24
MONOLOGUE	15
BLOCKING	14
MISE-EN-SCENE	17
SUBSTITUTE PERSON	12

Photo 31: most common actifiers

ACTIFIER STYLE COMPARISON - IRANIAN FILM, HBO SERIES (SYMBOLIC, GRAPHICAL)

WESTWORLD — THE BLUE-VEILED
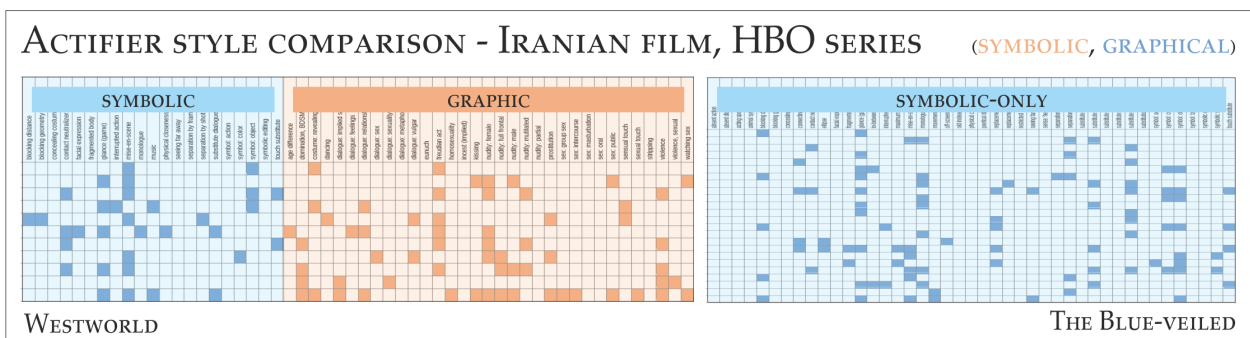
Graph 19: Iranian films have almost 100% symbolical sexuality; HBO series are maybe 80% graphical and 20% symbolic.

HBO series - graphic

The key advantage of HBO productions is the freedom to show almost whatever visual material the creators wish. There are undeniably complex narratives, high-level casts and directors, and feature-style reflexivity[129] but the sexual programming is an outright strategy for attracting subscribers too.[130] But what details form the attraction and what does it give to the storytelling?

Sexual curiosity is a key human feeling, and we have a strong wish to bypass taboos.[131] The suspenseful titillation of the Iranian narratives is intriguing and strong, but finally (quite quickly in HBO´s case) witnessing physical sexuality creates a special satisfaction too. **Nudity**, **unrestricted touch**, **graphic dialogue**, and **visual sex** are the main visual graphic actifiers in the HBO style - features in about 25% of the running time of the episodes studied. The **dialogue**

GIRLS
GoT
Ww
PARTIAL OR FULL NUDITY, SEXUAL ACTS   (55 mins / 221 mins)
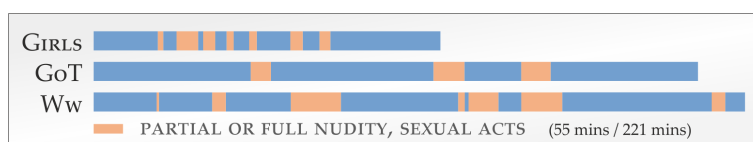
can also be strongly sexual, especially on *Girls*. Sexual dialogue added in, close to half of the episodes is filled with open sexuality never possible in the Iranian cinema. None of the series is especially **symbolic**, but on the other hand, HBO creators are free to use innuendos and **Freudian** connotations impossible in most openly-available media, playing with violence, age difference, homosexuality, group sex, and even necrophilia. Unfortunately, these are often just additions, but in theory, the freedom would enable the discussion about almost any societal issue.

At its best, the devices available at the HBO storytelling can create strong realism like in *Girls*, intriquing dark fantasy like *The Game of Thrones*, or biting dystopian study like *Westworld*. These series would not be possible without the freedom.

Photo 3: shots with full nakedness in HBO series (Westworld, Game of Thrones)

129 McCollum V. (2019) HBO's Original Voices: Race, Gender, Sexuality and Power. p. 3
130 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 274
131 Hyde, J. & Delamater J. (2019) Understanding human sexuality. p. 2

Examples of visual sexuality

Photo 12: casual nakedness (Girls,
Game of Thrones, Westworld)

Photo 13: sex scenes (Girls, Westworld)
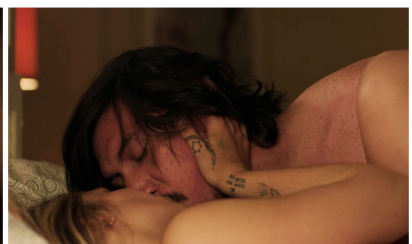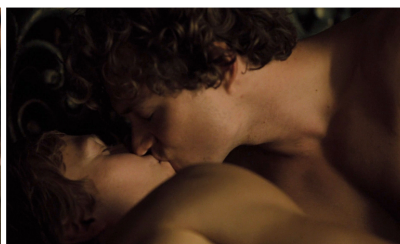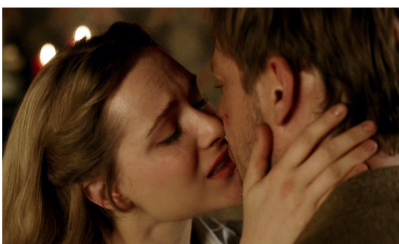
Photo 14: kisses (Westworld, The Game of Thrones, Girls)
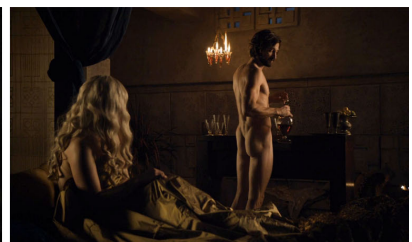
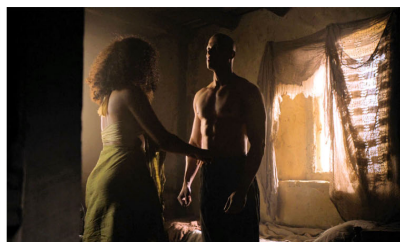Photo 15: gazes - male or female? (Westworld, The Game of Thrones)

Iranian films - symbolic

The defining essence of the example Iranian films are **symbology** and **distancing**. The strongest parts of storytelling in all the films come from the neverending, thwarting longing the characters experience. They wish to be near to another person, but the Islamic rules in the form of the whole mise-en-scene are there to separate them. Actual distance, **separation** by frame and set design, costumes and blocking keep them far away. The filmmaker does their best to help - symbolic objects, **substitutes** for talk and touch subvert the rules. **Symbolic editing** connects lovers and partial framing makes it possible to see men and women close to each other. Actual poetry in **dialogue** hides sexual messages from the censors and adds clever connotation layers. As touch is rarely possible, **gazes** grow to extreme importance. More messages are sent by looks than by talk.

A large challenge in the Iranian style is the time needed to use the devices, and the knowledge to understand what is being told. It´s difficult to create Western-style quick, gripping storytelling - but who says that´s even needed? The films flow in a slow, compelling way, taking the time needed and using slowness to create believable atmospheres.

Photo 4: substitution person (Through the Olive Trees, the Blue-veiled) - talking with a same-sex person instead of the love interest

Photo 23: distancing by distance (Gabbeh, Through the Olive Trees)

Photo 5: scenes from Iranian films: symbolic props, separation by set (Gabbeh, Through the Olive Trees)

Examples of symbolic film language

Photo 6: frame separation (Olive Trees, Blue-veiled)

Photo 7: set separation (Olive Trees, Blue-veiled)

Photo 10: symbolic sex act in The Blue-veiled: arriving at night in a wedding dress, walking together with a man after not-seen sex

Photo 8: substitute object (child - Blue-veiled), connecting object (scarf, showball - Gabbeh)
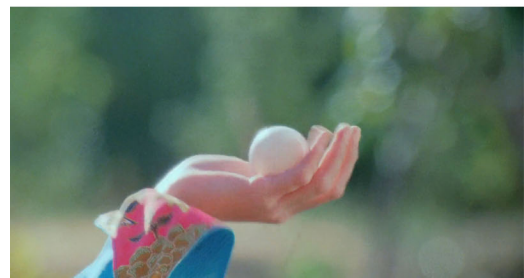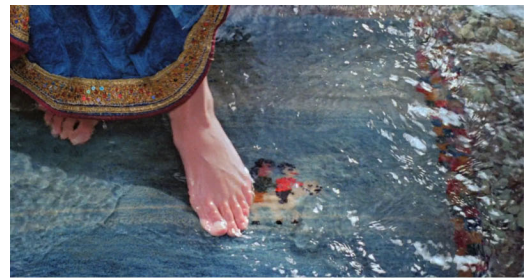
Photo 9: approvable "nakedness" in Iranian cinematography (Gabbeh, Blue-veiled)

Common and different

Many of the most versatile actifiers are shared between the styles. Some are used extensively only in either HBO or Iranian storytelling.

Looks are used almost identically. Gazes are close to culture-independent, so love, longing, hate, lust and fear are shown on the same way. **Talk** is universal too, and all the sources have dialogue , using it for exposition, character development and storytelling. Iranian dialogue of course steers away from open sexuality but is full of allegories, while HBO texts can be close to pornographic. Both styles can lead to a equally good, compelling storytelling.
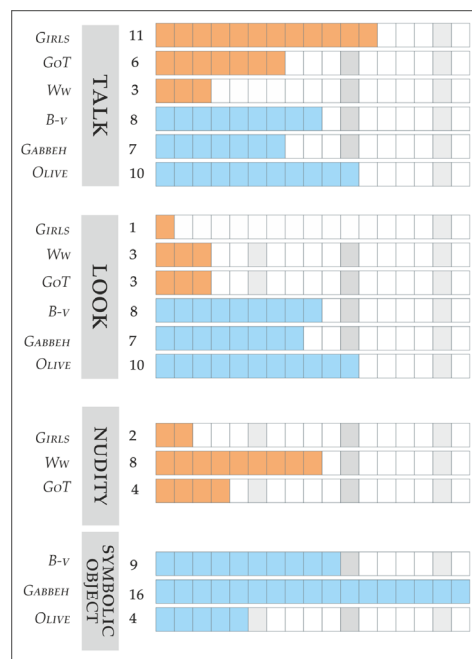
Graph 31: the most common actifiers

Touch is universal too. Maybe the strongest kind of touch is a hand touching hand, an expression which is identical to all the sources and used often. (Photo 11) In the Iranian films touch is sometimes absent, which can emphasize the *need* very much. In the HBO series touch can be almost unlimited - loving, lusting, hurting - which is often an advantage, showing lusty *want*. **Nudity** happens in HBO only. In Iranian film, nudity would result in an instant ban, so it´s always **inferred** or symbolic (Photo 9). **Sex**, which is graphically shown with almost no limitations in the HBO style, can exist in Iranian storytelling too, but only in a very delicately inferred way (Photo 10).

Symbols are used in some ways in both styles, but much more extensively in the Iranian style. *Gabbeh* is so full of complex symbology it´s almost impossible to under-stand without studying Iranian and Persian culture even a bit (Graph 18). Persian poetry enhances *Gabbeh* in a way Freudianity adds to *The Game of Thrones*.

Photo 11: comparison of styles - dialogue scene (Blue-veiled, Westworld)

Well, which is better?

My opinion, when starting this work, was that the Iranian films were beautiful, but for any story about sexual subjects, or even just love, I´d prefer the graphicality of the HBO style. It would be more compelling for the filmmaker and the audience. Also, Mahkmalbaf says bluntly he sees no creative benefits coming from restrictions[132]. Today I have some different thoughts. The best part of Iranian storytelling is, in my opinion, the **suspense**. The characters are forced to wait, which gives them time to emotionally connect and to make them interesting. The impossibility of touch or even talk is a great obstacle.

Keeping the touch symbolic can feel stronger than a carnal one (Photos 20, 21). An invitation that is always hidden is intriguing (Photo 22). It´s great to see beautiful people close to each other, but separation may create a stronger connection (Photo 16). Being only able to touch the other´s belongings, not them, is similar (Photo 17).

The Iranian devices I don´t miss so much are the extensive **distancing** and the **absent sexual acts** (Photos 18, 19); I think closeness and the ability to show intimate touch when the character most needs it are indispensable.

Photo 20: symbolic touch from Gabbeh - he touches the showball, she feels the cold (and his touch)
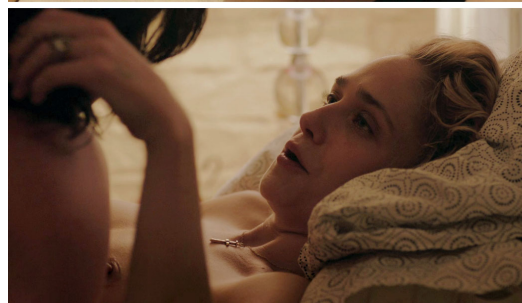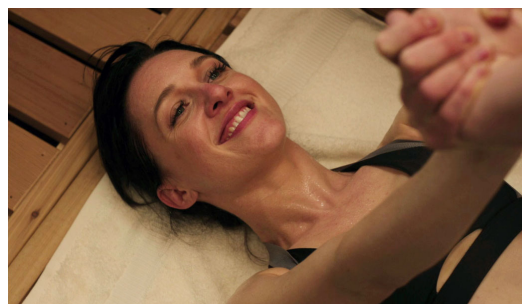
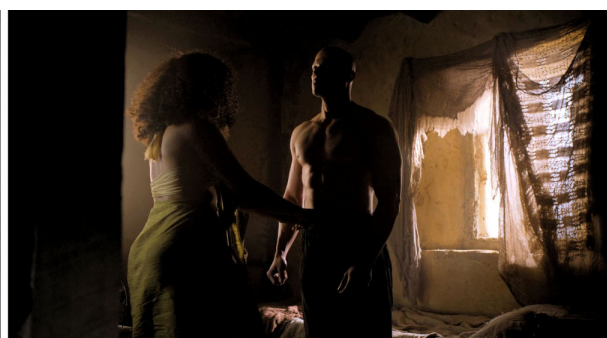*Photo 21: very real touches from Girls*

Photo 22: comparison of styles - invitation (The Blue-veiled, Westworld)

132 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 143

Visual comparisons

Four visual comparisons of some of the strongest actifiers: **separation/contact** (16)**, touch/substitute** (17), **visual sex/absense of sex** (18) and the (female) **body** (19).

Photo 16: talking about feelings
(Through the Olive Trees, Game of Thrones)

Photo 17: touching him - via substitite object, directly
(The Blue-veiled, Westworld)

Photo 18: presenting sex (The Blue-veiled, Girls)

Photo 19: the female body (Gabbeh, Westworld)

About effectivity

The three areas where the "effectivity" of a certain film making style can be appraised:

• **effect on the artist**: added/reduced creativity, production process ease, storytelling power
• **effect on the audience**: understandability, story impact/emotional capability, acceptability
• **commercial effects**: marketability, societal issues (censorship, reputation), production costs

Photo 28 and Photo 29 compare and sum up the main abilities and challenges in both styles.

The Iranian style´s special ability is the power to **subvert censorship** - allegory has proven very powerful against unimaginative state censors[133]. Allegories **add context/connotation** layers to the films, which benefits the narratives, giving more information to the viewer.[134] Poetic language and symbols (colors, objects, actions) require complex acting and complex viewer interpretation, which adds **suspense** - actions are not instant, and waiting intensifies emotions. **Distancing** and hiding also build up emotions - as sexual actions cannot be shown, the stakes get higher in way of the 'horror film don´t show´ -tactics. An absence can feel much stronger than the actual thing.

PROS AND CONS OF ACTIFIERS	
GLANCE	
PSYCHOLOGICALLY STRONG	AMBIGUOUS (SUBTLE)
SUSPENSEFUL, INTIMATE	
CLEARLY DIRECTED	
REVEALS PERSONALITY	
CULTURE INDEPENDENT	
MONOLOGUE/DIALOGUE	
COMPLEX MESSAGES	CULTURE DEPENDENT
CLEAR INFORMATION	AMBIGUOUS
EMOTIONALLY STRONG	STATIC ACTION
PERSONAL	PRONE TO CENSORING
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	
MISE-EN-SCENE/BLOCKING	
CINEMATIC, CONCRETE	UNFEELING
GIVES EXPOSITION	CULTURE DEPENDENT
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	
SYMBOLIC OBJECT	
CONCRETE, TACTILE	CULTURE DEPENDENT
HELPFUL TO ACTING	DIFFICULT TO NOTICE
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	
SUBSTITUTE PERSON	
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	CULTURE DEPENDENT
ADDS SYMBOLISM	LESSENS FEELINGS
	AMBIGUOUS
MUSIC	
EMOTIONALLY STRONG	CULTURE DEPENDENT
VERSATILE	DEPENDS ON TASTE
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	AMBIGUOUS
FREUDIAN ACT	
PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER	CULTURE DEPENDANT
ADDS SYMBOLISM	REQUIRES LEARNING
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	PRONE TO CENSORING
SUSPENSE	COMEDIC POTENTIAL
COMEDIC POTENTIAL	
COSTUME	
VERSATILE: HIDE&REVEAL	CULTURE DEPENDANT
ADDS SYMBOLISM	CENSORING TARGET
SUBVERTS CENSORSHIP	
NUDITY	
STRONG IMPACT	LEGAL CHALLENGES
EMOTIONAL, AROUSING	PRONE TO CENSORING
CULTURE INDEPENDENT	OFFENSIVE POTENTIAL
SEX	
VERY STRONG IMPACT	LEGAL CHALLENGES
EMOTIONAL, AROUSING	PRONE TO CENSORING
SHOCK POTENTIAL	OFFENSIVE POTENTIAL
CULTURE INDEPENDENT	NARRATIVE NEED?

Photo 28: comparing pro´s and cons

IRANIAN STYLE		HBO STYLE	
PROS	ABLE TO SUBVERT CENSORSHIP	**PROS**	PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT
	COMPLEX MESSAGES (SYMBOLICS)		VISUALLY STRONG, CINEMATIC
	CREATES SUSPENSE (DON´T SHOW)		CORPOREAL, INSTINCTIVE
	INTELLECTUAL / DISTANCING		CREATES ATTRACTION/AROUSAL
	REQUIRES LEARNING	**CONS**	PRONE TO CENSORSHIP
CONS	VERY CULTURE DEPENDENT		LEGAL CHALLENGES
	MENTAL / DISTANCING		NON-INTELLECTUAL
	AMBIGUOUS		MARKETING, NOT NARRATIVE

Photo 29: evaluating advantages and disadvantages in the two styles.

133 Langford M. (2021) Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance. p. 2
134 Langford M. (2021) Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance. p. 3

Finally, symbology creates an enjoyment of its own: audiences love the intellectual challenge and success of recognizing allusions and intertextual references.

HBO´s strength lies in the freedom to show almost whatever the authors wish - and what the audience wants to see. "*Erotica [is] openly portrayed on HBO but only alluded to elsewhere on television*"[135] This freedom helps to draw in talented creators, who "*could realize their stories to their full extent .. whether the stories were happy or sad or violent or tragic or sexua*l".[136] As visible (graphic) sexuality is considered at least helpful, maybe essential, to connecting with the characters,[137] the freedom from censorship is a big asset. However, it is very difficult to assess the practical impact of this freedom.

By comparing film review sites like IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes scores, it´s clear all the source material series and films are loved by audiences, getting high values. This shows both styles can undoub-tedly strongly touch the audience. The scores are so equal there is no significant statistical difference. For really scientifically dependable

	🍅	IMDb
GoT	9.2	8.5
Ww	8.5	7.3
GIRLS	7.3	7.5
BLUE	6.7	N/A
OLIVE	7.7	8.9
GABBEH	6.9	7.9

results a larger-scale, practical research combining statistical psychology with film art studies would be needed. The reference literature used in this work doesn´t give any definite answer. Most writers - Iranian filmmakers included - seem to prefer freedom and contradict a creative impact stemming from forced improvisation by restrictions. In the scope of this study, the final answer is left to personal feelings and opinions.

"Censorship leads to a reduction in freedom of expression and a resulting drop in quality, with art being replaced by trite and low-grade productions.

Mohsen Makhmalbaf[138]

Photo 24: the look is common in all cultures. (Gabbeh, Westworld.)

135 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. 277
136 Edgerton G. R. & Jones J. P. (2008) The Essential HBO Reader. p. 279
137 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 310
138 Egan E. (2005) The Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics & Culture in Iran. p. 143

About methodology

This work is composed of three parts: 1) analysing the source media, 2) creating the actifier classification, and 3) evaluating the storytelling methods. The first two are standard close reading and semiotical divisioning. The last is a relatively subjective appraisal. It would be interesting to widen the study into a survey of actual audience experiences of the storytelling devices, but that would be a Ph.D. level research combining statistical psychology and film theory. For this work, the scientific standard is hopefully acceptable as it is.
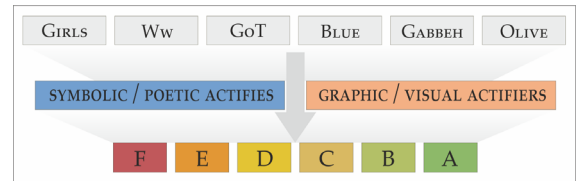
Estimations on reliability

The close reading of the materials is very likely reliable. The findings are independent and my own, but they seem to correlate well with the critical references. Others are seeing the same as the author. Of course, the analysis division could be more detailed, going to a second-timing and micro-expression level, but this is outside of a Master´s thesis scope. Listing 50-80 actifiers per series/film (a one-minute resolution on average) is likely enough to produce relevant deductions.

Assigning the media contents into the various 'lockers', or even deciding *what* is sexual is, is experimental - not to mention culture dependant, subjective and apt to change as time goes by. As the main classification principle is derived from a Ph.D. work, there is a solid scientific basis for the taxonomy. The symbolic/graphic division is new work and thus up to critical reviewing; it is solely the author´s work, but based on definitions on sexual psychology references like the *Understanding Human Sexuality*. It could likely benefit from additional references, but material on sexual storytelling *methods* is rare, being more about the sociological themes of the films like the *America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies.*

Effectivity appraisal is the most subjective part of the thesis, but still based on source media critique on the references. The author´s own experience in filmmaking gives some practical-based understanding of how narrative methods cope in the nature. Still, however carefully I aimed to keep the study neutral and scientific, the last part is prone to some idiosyncrasies. But this is art, and in art there are no definite rights and wrongs. Also the reader should be free to form their own opinions and disagree with the writer.

Conclusion

"You have no idea how bad it gets. And I'm not you. I can't make it
on a couple of high-altitude fucks once or twice a year!"
— *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee 2005)

It is evident that sexuality is an essential part of storytelling.[139] Sexuality is a key human phenomenon[140], and it forms at least a side story in most tales. Sexuality can be presented indirectly, allegorically, or undisguised and graphical. Often the symbolical way is used because of social control - censorship.[141] This study aims to determine which style is preferable for a filmmaker who can select their tools freely.

The HBO style is good in showing striking, even shocking actions. Sexual desire is shown in touch, bite and sweat drop that doesn't leave much to the imagination. And often we need to see to be able to empathize.[142] Most of us enjoy seeing beautiful bodies, and many have at least some desire to peek, to see what is private. The graphical style responds to both needs, need, bringing release to a craving. But there can also be too much, either for personal preferences or narrative functionality. Moviegoers want to see good stories, not just porn. Also suspense of often a more effective storytelling device than the actual event.

Iranian storytelling is especially good at creating expectation, suspense, and longing. Because of Islamic censorship, the narrative needs to be outwardly asexual and this gives a lot of space to subtlety. Devices like distancing, separating, substituting, and repeating are tools that create obstacles - and every Shakespeare reader knows epic love needs obstacles. Action is transferred away from the censorprone mundane level into the symbolic world, where dreams can come true. This both restricts and liberates the filmmaker - and the watcher. In *Gabbeh*, after dozens of symbolic hints about passion and lust, a snowball connecting lovers miles away is strong, beautiful storytelling. But still, as we never see even a kiss, does it feel like a closure?

I started this study with a feeling that the graphical actifiers would offer better means for attention-grabbing, emotional storytelling. In writing this study, I have found, listed, and seen dozens of methods used in a great way in the films. Many of the methods are something I'd like to try. But interestingly, the symbolic means have

139 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 26
140 Lehmiller J. J. (2014) The Psychology of Human Sexuality. p. 2
141 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 179
142 Coleman L. (2015) Sex and Storytelling in Modern Cinema p. 4

quietly risen to the top tiers. There seem to be a lot of narrative strength in indirect storytelling. Watching *The Game of Thrones* overlapping with *Through the Olive Trees* often feels like HBO squanders scenes of naked skin that could be much more effective if we first had to wait for them to happen. But - we still finally want to see the bodies!

The symbolic actifiers often feel more attractive, more versatile, and the tools for creating suspense seem essential for strong storytelling. But at the same time, there are graphical actifiers that would be fundamental in treating sexuality. If the story only has indirect, symbolic means, we lack

> ### TOP 10 FAVOURITE ACTIFIERS
> 1. GAZES - OVERALL ONE OF THE BEST CINEMATIC TOOLS
> 2. SUSPENSE VIA THE UNABILITY TO TOUCH OR BE NEAR
> 3. SYMBOLIC EDITING, BRINGING TOGETHER DISTANCED SHOTS
> 4. KISS - EXPECTATION, TOUCH, LONGING, UNCERTAINTY
> 5. HOLDING HANDS (WITHOUT THE CHANGE TO DO MORE)
> 6. RELEASE IN THE FORM OF SEXUAL TOUCH/SEX AT LAST
> 7. SEPARATION BY SET DESIGN; A NICE, SMART DEVICE
> 8. SYMBOLICS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH FREUDIANITY
> 9. SUBSTITUTE OBJECTS AND PERSONS - ADDS LONGING
> 10. COVERING COSTUME - CHANGING TO REAVELING COSTUME

the intimate performative sexuality essential for a strong 'corporeal' connection. [143] The most effective storytelling cannot be reached with singular means only.

Thus, the **conclusion** is that it´s not possible to declare one style is 'better'. When trying to estimate the actifiers, it´s clear that both classes contain essential tools. The Iranian suspense and symbolism somehow feel more "adult" and fascinating in an intellectual way, the HBO graphicality appeals strongly to the physical body. *Mens sana in corpore sano* - a filmmaker with a sound mind should combine the styles.

I have learned many things that will affect my creative work in the future. Hopefully, I´m more sensitive to the subtle narrative ways and can combine widely different methods better. After watching sources for dozens of hours and writing for weeks, now could be a good time to try some practical filmmaking again.

Photo 30: The Thirties were OK with female-to-female intimacy. (Mädchen in uniform, Sagan, 1931)

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143 Benshoff H. M. & Griffin S. (2009) America on Film: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies. p. 310

Filmography

HBO Series

1. *Girls* (2012-2017, Dunham) - Season 5, episode 5
   www.imdb.com/title/tt1723816/

2. *Westworld* (2016-present, Nolan, Joy) - Season 1, episode 5
   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0475784/

3. *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019, Benioff, Weiss) - Season 5, episode 1
   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0944947/

Films

4. *Through the Olive Trees* (1994, Kiarostami)
   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111845/

5. *The Blue-veiled* (Banietemad , 1995, Modaresi, Pourmand)
   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114310/

6. *Gabbeh* (Makhmalbaf , 1996, Daroudchi, Mahmoudi)
   https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116384/
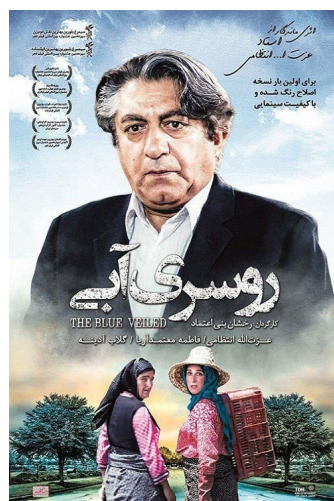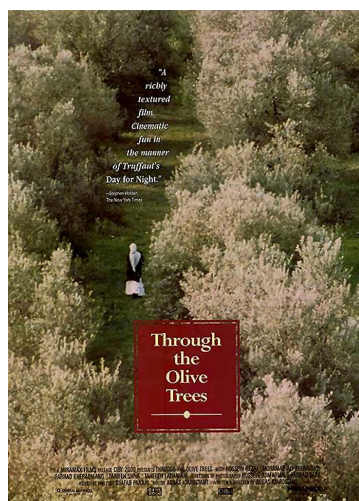
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Glossary

art	**Art** is a diverse range of human activities involving the creation of visual, auditory or performing artifacts (artworks), which express the creator's imagination, conceptual ideas, or technical skill, intended to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power. Art can also have ***motivated porposes***, for example 1) art for communication, having an intent directed toward another individual 2) art for political change, which has been one of the defining functions of early 20th-century art 3) art for social inquiry, subversion or cause 4) art for propaganda, or commercialism. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art
asexual	**Asexuality** describes a lack of sexual attraction. Asexual people may experience romantic attraction, but they do not feel the urge to act on these feelings sexually. Asexuality is a sexual orientation, like being gay or straight. It is different from celibacy or abstinence. https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/327272
censorship	**Censorship** is the suppression of speech, public communication, or other information, on the basis that such material is considered objectionable, harmful, sensitive, or "inconvenient." Censorship can be conducted by governments, private institutions or other controlling bodies. Common pretexts for censorship include national security, protecting children or other vulnerable groups and promoting or restricting political or religious views. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Censorship
Islam	**Islam** (Arabic "submission [to God]") is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion teaching that Muhammad is a messenger of God. It is the world's second-largest religion with 1.8 billion followers, known as Muslims. In Islam, prohibitions against extramarital sex are strong and permissible marital sexual activities are confined to marital relationships. Homosexuality is strictly forbidden. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam
narrative	**Narrative** is defined by David Bordwell as '*a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space*'. Narrative is generally accepted as possessing two components: the story presented and the process of its telling, or narration, often referred to as narrative discourse. Story is a series of represented

events, characters (or agents for some), and actions out of which the audience constructs a fictional time, place, and cause–effect world, or diegesis. Narration is a set of representational, organizational, and discursive cues that deliver the story information to the audience. Narratives must always be studied in relation to history, including the history of film style, modes of production, and the history of narrative theory itself.

http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Independent-Film-Road-Movies/Narrative-DEFINING-FILM-NARRATIVE.html

poetic

Poetry is a form of literature that uses aesthetic and often rhythmic qualities of language to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, the prosaic ostensible meaning. Poetry uses forms and conventions to suggest differential interpretations of words, or to evoke emotive responses. The use of ambiguity, symbolism, irony, and other stylistic elements often leaves a poem open to multiple interpretations.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry

pornography

Pornography (shortened to **porn**) is the portrayal of sexual subject matter for the *exclusive purpose of sexual arousal*. Pornography may be presented in magazines, animation, writing, film, video, and video games etc. In film, pornography as a genre is marked by a *lack of narrative strength*. Various groups within society consider depictions of a sexual nature immoral, addictive, and noxious, attempting to have them suppressed under obscenity laws, censored or made illegal.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pornography

self-censorship

Self-censorship is the act of censoring one's own discourse. This is done *out of fear* of the preferences of others, or the government, but usually without overt pressure from any specific authority. Self-censorship is often practiced by film producers, film directors, publishers and other kinds of authors. In authoritarian countries, creators may remove material that their government might find controversial for fear of sanctions.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-censorship

sex

Sex is often used ambiguously. It can mean 1) one of the either of the two major forms of individuals in many species - female or male or 2) sexually motivated phenomena or behavior - sexual intercourse or 3) genitalia.

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sex

sexuality	**Sexuality** is a central aspect of being human. Throughout life we encompass sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, behaviours, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include many dimensions, not all of them are always present. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research/key-areas-of-work/sexual-health/defining-sexual-health
symbolism	**Symbolism** is the use of *symbols* to signify ideas and qualities, by giving them additional meanings that are different from their literal or visual sense. In a way, *symbolism is the art of hiding meaning behind something aparently non-related*. A symbol is a mark, sign, or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. Symbols allow people to go beyond what is seen by creating linkages between otherwise very different concepts and experiences. Generally, symbol it is an object - image, word, action or event - representing another, to give an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. The academic study of symbols is semiotics. https://literarydevices.net/symbolism/
taboo	**Taboo** is a prohibition imposed by social custom or as a protective measure; something that is not acceptable to say, mention, or do. Taboos can be based on intellectual, moral, religious, or cultural norms. Taboos are present in virtually all societies. Taboos can help use resources more efficiently, but they can be used to suppress a subsection of a community. Taboos can add cohesion, helping a group to maintain its identity in the face of others and create a feeling of "belonging". https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/taboo
Western	**Western** culture is commonly said to include Australia and New Zealand, Canada, EU countries, the NATO military alliance, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The concept of the Western has its roots in the theological, methodological and emphatical division between the Western Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. By the mid-20th century, Western culture was exported worldwide through globalization and the emergent mass media creating a phenomenon often called *Westernization*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_world

Appendixes

Source material review notes

These are the full notes from the audiovisual source reviews.

Banietemad: The Blue-veiled

05:50	Nobar asking for a job
	- Rasul notiving her
	- exchanging glances: love at first look
09:20	Rasul hears Nobar left
	- interest through dialogue
	- total separation from her in frame and time
13:34	Young child talks to Rasul
	- symbolical contact connecting unsexual person
13:55	First direct look
	- Rasul and Nobar exchange glances
15:42	Rasul resting, photo of dead wife beside him
	- longing via an object
19:31	Nobar looks after Rasul
	- he in car, "in-between space"
	- gaze revealing want
	- flowers and fruits as symbols of sexuality
19:50	Rasul and Nobar in the office
	- glanze game
	- on separate frames, then far-away
	- separation of social class also
	- monologue as confession of interest
21:05	Nobar talks with a female friend
	- about men and marriage
	- interest shown through approved subjects
	- monologue as confession of interest
24:22	Rasul at the tomato field
	- watching Nobar playing with a young girl
	- flowers, fruits, colors - symbols of sexuality
	- Rasul gives food for the young girl
	- conneting child again, symbolically Nobar
	- inanimate object as substitute of touch
29:30	Nobar wash fruits
	- symbols of sexuality: fruits, colors and water
	- talking about Rasul
	- monologue as confession of love
36:35	Rasul talks about Nobar missing
	- absense: longing look toward the tomato field
43:50	Rasul helps Nobar's relative
	- Nobar watching Rasul
47:49	Rasul searches for a husband for Nobar
	- desire through replacement behavior
49:00	Rasul confronts Nobar at the tomato field
	- turn-around: halted action
	- throwing tomatoes to ground: halted sexuality
	- flowers as sexual symbols
	- inanimate object as substitute of touch

49:53	Nobar talks about Rasul
	- exposing desires to female substitute
	- monologue as confession of desire
54:34	Rasul goes to Nobar's house
	- off-screen action: only her hand visible
	- imagined sexual act
	- inanimate object as substitute of touch
55:09	Rasul confesses his desire
	- separated by mise-en-scene; gazes
	- connecting object: slippers as symbols
	- naked feet visible: as much skin as possible
	- talking about marriage: replacement action
	- inanimate object as substitute of touch
	- fragmented body (insert closeups)
	- ellipse: cutting away from scene, sex is imagined
1:01:20	Nobar washes laundry
	- sexual symbol: water in a pool, wet skin
1:02:10	Night of temporary marriage
	- wedding dress: symbol of sex
	- feet visible: as naked as possible
1:03:40	Rasul in Nobar's by the small pool
	- child as contact neutralizer, symbol of Nobar
	- Rasul talks about Nobar to the child
	- sexual objects: Nobar makes fuit and pastry
1:07:02	Nobar calls Rasul
	- separation by mise-en-scene: phone
	- separate shots of them
1:08:30	Nobar and Rasul in his car
	- in-between space
	- gazes, talk; no touching
	- turn-around: Nobar exits car, symbol for kiss
	- Nobar's longing gaze
1:20:20	Nobar talks to Rasul about her feelings
	- monologue as confession of love
1:25:00	Separated by train
	- desires by their movement directions
	- glanzes
	- sepated by mise-en-scene

Makhmalbaf: Gabbeh

02:00	Two persons on a horse, drawing under water
	- relationship/the story to come
	- symbolic editing: riders leave together
02:30	Gabbeh looking almost at camera
	- female gaze - does she look at a lover
	- her smile
03:30	The old couple
	- talk about gender roles
	- they look at each other (reverse shots)
	- Gabbeh is sawn lying on the rug, in front of a brook
	- birdsong, edit to bird (symbol of freedom)
05:15	Old woman waching the rug by stepping on it on the brook
	- symbolic reference to young Gabbeh's feet
	- old woman is shown when young cannot
	- old and young touch, they are connected by editing and symbology (important for later)
	- the old man says he would marry Gabbeh is he was younger (linking the old man to the mysterious rider)
08:20	Gabbeh sees the Rider from far away
	- young woman falls in love with him
	- the man is always seen from far away (censorship rules)
	- the man howls (sexual symbolic sound)
	- Gabbeh explains her father forbids the relation
10:50	School color symbol scene
	- color also has defined symboloty in the Iranian poetry
	- Islamic rules limit woman´s desses to dark grey, black colors
16:15	Gabbeh washing her feed on the brook
	- naked feet
	- flowers from water (symbol of female freedom)
	- the bird (symbol of freedom)
	- Gabbeh talks about a wedding (symbol for her desire)
22:58	Tribe moves
	- Gabbeh hears the Rider howl like wolf
	- sexual call
25:30	Uncle courting a woman
	- in long shot
	- he uses poetry
	- birdsong (symbol of freedom)
	- the young woman sees this via symbolic edit (juxtaposing to her want for the Rider)
	- other people voicing her desires
	- juxtaposing symbolic characters to shown characters
	- sexuality of sound: splashing, almost like sex. The howl is also sexual, the wolf is in pursuit. Wet goatskin...
	- looks (=yarning)

33:00	Family members symbolically separate the lovers
	- sexual frustration is connected to colors
	- splashing water (Freudian)
34:15	Gabbeh in rain
	- water symbolized sexuality
	talking about her uncle's marriage (her want)
	- wet clothes
36:20	Wedding feast - dancing
	- dances shown in rug images, as dancing in public is illegal in Iran
	- apples, symbols of (female) sexuality
	- uncle and bride together, symbol of Gabbeh's desire
38:17	Tribe walking over colorful rugs
	- color as symbol of sexual frustration
	- obstacles between Gabbeh and the Rider
44:00	The mother gives birth
	- not seen (very long shot)
	- animal birth instead
54:40	Gabbeh looks at the Rider very far away
	- hears his howl
	- this happens repeatedly
56:47	Gabbeh leaves scarves for him on the snow
	- breadcrumbs for love
	- snowball as weight - he touches only the snowball (symbolical touch)
	- she feels the cold - his touch
1:00:05	Gabbeh at bed
	- she cannot sleep, she is in need
	- she hears his howl
	- she looks, trying to see him, many times
	- uncle sees this, and does nothing - so giving permission
	- looks between men and women are basically not permitted, unless they are family members, so no sexual
1:05:00	The birth of a goat
	- symbol of her realizing she needs her freedom
	- Gabbeh leaves with the Rider, riding together
1:09:00	The rug, the lovers in the pattern together
	- on a same horse, sexual joining

| | Kiarostami: Through the Olive Trees | |

02:00	Young women in veils
	- hidden sexuality
03:00	Tahereh in seen in the first time
	- veil, hidden sexuality
	- talking with an old (unsexual) man
10:45	Mrs. Shiva meets Tahereh
	- discussion about suitable clothes
14:10	Young boys bring flowers
	- symbols of sexuality
16:00	Scene in film
	- talk between woman and man
	- woman is not shown at all
	- not in same frame
27:00	Scene in film, with Hossein
	- Tahereh will not speak to Hossein
	- Hossein is improper suitor for her
28:15	Director and Hossein discuss in car
	- Hossein's desire is voiced
	- talk about marriage
	- forbidden relationship
	- confessing desires to older man
34:30	Tahereh and Hossein see each other
	- looks, but not at each other after
36:20	Hossein talks to T's grandmother
	- voicing his desire to marry
	- being forbidden
	- obscured by the olive trees!
39:15	Hossen sees Tahereh car-to-car
	- obscured by other people
	- avoiding looking/passionate watching (male gaze)
	- gazes meet, no talking
	- facial expressions
41:50	Director and old man talk
	- about marriage
	- substitutes for Hossein's thoughts
53:20	Hossein and Director talk
	- about relationships
	- Hossein admits his desire for Tahereh
	- hitchikers: different language, not able to talk: symbology for Hossein's situation and Iranian courtship
1:04:08	Scene in film
	- Director commands Tahareh to talk

1:07:35	Hossein looks at Tahereh
	- she don't look back
	- Hossein's monologue, his feelings
	- flowers: symbols of sexuality
	- separated by mise-en-scene objects
	- H talking to T as a film character
1:19:45	Hossein offers tea to Tahereh
	- symbol for marriage proposal
	- symbol for forbidden contact
	- again separated by set objects
	- again flowers, symbols of sexuality
	- Hossein voicing his wish to marry
	- they are always on different shots
1:25:50	Tahereh in film set
	- like behing bars in a prison
	- she looks, maybe at Hossein
	- boys taking flowers away - symbol of forbidden sexualty
1:28:10	Hossein similarly inprisoned by set
	- symbol for desire and impossibility
1:28:45	Tahereh in car, Hossein outside
	- symbol for desire and restrictions
	- look, but always avoid direct gaze
	- the flowers in the car
	- Tahereh leaves, carrying flowerpot
	- Director gives H leave to follow her
1:31:28	Hossein follows Tahereh
	- throught the olive trees
	- like with the grandmother
	- Hossein reveals his feelings to her
	- Tahereh don't answer, don't look
	- trees separating them
	- talk about desire and customs
1:40:05	Hossein & Tahereh on the field
	- very long lens
	- very brief interaction
	- not clearly revealed what happens
	- he runs through the field, possibly happy. Diagonal, breaking the rules?
	- happy music: marriage will follow?

HBO: Westworld	HBO: Girls

	HBO: Westworld			HBO: Girls
04:00	Dolores is standing at a graveyard		00:10	Hannah and her mother talking about sex
	- connecting female body to death			- older people´s sex
05:40	Arriving to the town of Pariah		02:30	Shoshana and Abigail talk about sex
	- naked people and sex on public			- dildo, "cat" as sexual metaphora
10:30	At parks´s techical spaces		04:30	Hannah talks with yoga instructior
	- dozens of fully naked "dead" host bodies			- masturbation
	- female nudity		06:00	Hannah stripping for bed
15:30	Dolores and Teddy talk at night on Pariah			- nudity
	- touching hands, discussion about feelings		07:12	Hannah mentions sex to her mother
	- looking eye to eye		07:13	sex scene bw Jessa and Adam
16:00	A carnival distracts them			- discussion about ejaculation
	- many half-naked people		09:10	Yoga lesson
	- Logan invites Teddy to a brothel			- instructor "cunt"
17:15	Dolores has psychiatry session with Dr. Ford		10:00	walking in nature
	- Dolores in full non-frontal nakedness			- revealing bikini
	- Ford holds her hand		10:59	Shoshana and Abigail talk
	- Ford´s gaze all the time on her			- "inside Katy Perry's vagina"
23:40	Technical space		11:52	spa, nudity
	- technician brutalizes a naked female body		13:50	dancing, sexual moves
	- the host body is dead		14:35	Jessa and Adan talk, also about sex
	- blood, injury			- "fuck"
32:00	In Pariah, gold-painted naked hookers arrive		17:45	Hannah has sex with yoga instructor
	- inviting people to a brothel again		18:30	older woman talk about sex
	- full frontal nudity, sexual talk		20:00	sex with yoga instructor, masturbation too
32:30	Park technical space		23:30	Jessa and Adam kiss
	- a female technician programs a fully naked male host		24:00	japanese boyfriend talks about sex and virginity
	- full frontal nudity		26:30	Hannah and mother talk love and relationships
	- dominating roleplay			
	- another, mutilated naked male bodies			
33:40	A technician is accused of rape			
	- CCTV photos of the event			
	- talk of sexual violence			
37:00	The brothel scene in Pariah			
	- many fully naked people, male and female			
	- implied sexual acts, no visible penetration			
	- kissing, touching female genitals			
	- acted group sex			
	- bdsm implications: harnesses, possible blood			
	- homoerotic violence bw Logan and Teddy, almost kissing			
44:05	Dolores & Teddy outside			
	- open talk about feelings "I need you"			
	- passionate kissing			
55:00	In tech space, a technician talks with a host			
	- full female nudity			

HBO: Game of Thrones

04:30	Young teen girls (Cersei) meet a witch
	- witch demands blood - sucking finger
	- "give me a taste"
	- talk of the girl having children
	- blood dropping from finger
08:00	Cercei meets Jamie at the church
	- they have incestous relationship
13:00	Statue of a naked woman god is falled down
	- symbol of sexual violence
	- symbol of gender unequality
13:50	A soldier goes to meet a prostitute
	- several partially naked women
	- undressing, full frontal female nudity
	- sensual touching
	- a killing
17:00	Melisande comes to meet Gray Worm
	- revealing clothing
	- talk about the brothel
	- talk about men´s brothel habits
	- talk about castrated men
20:00	Red Woman with John Snow
	- she touches, making him touch herself
	- John lets touch linger, eyes closed
	- she stares at John, asking "are you a virgin"
23:15	Sansa and Petyr watch a practice fight
	- Sansa avoids looking at Petyr
	- Petyr stares a Sansa
25:30	Brienne sharpens her sword
	- Freudian connotations
26:55	Noble party
	- Tommen holding hands with Marguerite
	- Tommen looks after her
	- Cercei talks to Lancel in revealing robe
	- they talk about "unnatural relations"
29:50	Loras is bed with Olyvar
	- intimate touching, partial nudity
	- homosexuality, kissing
	- Marguerite watches men kiss while eating
	- female gaze at the leaving man's buttocks
	- talking about marriages
32:45	Tyrion walks with Varys
	- Varys's being eunuch mentioned
37:15	Daenerys with Daario, apparently after sex
	- Daario is fully naked, Dany in bed
	- Daario tells his mother was a whore
	- talking about sex
	- two naked person in bed

Actifier explanations

Detailed descriptions of the actifiers in the symbolic group.

ACTIFIER EXPLANATIONS	

SYMBOLICAL MODE

ACTIONS

P1 absent action	An action that *should* happen - kiss of blow to come, something audience would expect.
P3 acting speed	Quicker than slower action, reflection passion, fear etc. emotion.
P11/G5 facial expression	Expression revealing or hiding an emotion. Maybe most important acting device.
P13/G7 glance (game)	The look, or the omission of it. Connecting glanzes, responding to a look. Very expressive.
P15/G8 interrupted action	Action that starts, inferring emotion or agenda, but stops, maybe telling something else.
P19 movement direction	Coming closer, or backing away. Attraction pulls people closer, but so does hate.
P22/G12 physical closeness	Closeness is very telling, it can be friendship, intimate attraction, or violent intrusion.
P46 voiced desire	After a desire is expressed (also unverbally), a treshold is passed and all have changed.
G49 sensual touch	An act revealing a lot about a person, and telling about deep emotions.

CONNECTORS

P8 connecting object	An object both persons can touch simultaneously, even if they cannot touch each other.
P9/G4 contact neutralizer	Object or person (small child) making otherwise sexual contact unsexual and acceptable.
P24 replacement behavior	Action done when acting on want is impossible - gripping fruit instead of person e.g.
P25 replacement graphic	Something shown instead of actual act - TV screen, a rug with an image (Gabbeh).
P26 replacement subject	Action done with nonsexual or non-taboo person - see substitutes.

SPACE

P14 in-between space	Space not defined by strict rules, not home nor public; rules and psychology of treshold.
P21 off-screen action	Act happening hidden but close, with off-screen sound or not. Close to implied action.
P28/G13 seeing far away	Distancing a difficult or taboo action using blocking and deep staging.

SYMBOLS

P16 maximum nudity	In Iranian "nudity" is symbolic, very partial and context-dependent; uncovered feet e.g.
P32 substitute age	Sexually-related action with very old or very young, nonsexual person. Discussion mostly.
P33 substitute animal	A human birth would be impossible to show, but a goat birth replaces it symbolically.
P35 substitute gender	Same-sex act, usually discussion, can replace man-woman action in Iranian film.
P36 substitute image	Something shown instead of actual act - TV screen, a rug with an image (Gabbeh).
P37 substitute person	Action done with nonsexual or non-taboo person - talking with man instead of woman.
P45/G21 touch substitute	Object or person (small child) making otherwise sexual contact unsexual and acceptable.
P4 animal symbol	Animals have strong symbolic values: freedom, sexuality.
P39/G17 symbol: action	An action implying sexual content. Eating a fruit may symbolize having sex.
P40/G18 symbol: color	In Iran, bright colors are considered sexual and forbidden to women.
P41/G19 symbol: object	Objects may have connotations coming from poetry and (Jungian) archetypes.
P42 symbol: tactile	Symbol used to convey qualities of a forbidden personal touch (connecting object).

LINGUISTIC

P2 absent dialogue	"Things left unsaid" - a very common device in Iranian film. Audience fills the space.
P18/G10 monologue	Feelings are often told in a monologue
P23 poetical dialogue	Quoted poems or poetical language can be used to disdance sexuality to symbology.
P38/G16 substitute dialogue	Subtext - talk about sexuality is changed to something else.

MUSIC

P20/G11 music	Music convays emotions. It can strengthen or subvert the image, and is difficult to forbid.
P44 symbolic sound	Birdsong, passing of train etc can be used to convay meaning. Often related to poetry.

Actifier explanations

Symbolical mode

Editing

P10 ellipse	Editing technique to "leave out the beef". Action is cut out and audience fills the gap.
P12/G6 fragmented body	Showing parts of body in separated closeups. A distancing technique to sexuality.
P30/G14 separation by frame	A man and woman are shown in different parts of the frame, to avoid (sexual) closeness.
P31/G15 separation by shot	A man and woman are shown in separate shots, implying sharing the space.
P43/G20 symbolic editing	Montage, juxtaposing two shots. Connotations created by editing are difficult to ban.

Mise-en-scene

P5/G1 blocking distance	People of different sexes are separated by distance in the scene. Selective focus can be used.
P6 /G2 blocking geometry	Using set design to separate people in chaste way. Objects can also conceal people.
P17/G9 mise-en-scene	Various means - art design, blocking, movement and camera - to comply to censorship.
P7/G3 concealing costume	In Iran, only a woman's hands, face and feet can be shown. See "maximum nudity".
P27 restricted colors	In Iran, women are restricted to dull colors to avoid sexual arousal.
P29 sense: heat, cold	Devices to imply sensation/sexuality - cold of snow, hot of fire, cutting or soft objects.

It should be noted there are several actifiers shared by both the symbolic and the graphical group. Some actions, for example, gestures, can be done either in a totally non-sexual way or in a very indecent way. Instead of listing dozens of different gestures, they are all listed under "gesture". Dialogue, monologue, gaze, and music are similar dual-purpose actifiers. The sharing causes some inaccuracy in the analysis, but in the scope of this work, it is acceptable.

Detailed descriptions of the actifiers in the graphical group.

Actifier explanations

Graphic mode

Actions

G25 dancing	Dance expresses emotions and physicality. Dancing together tells about attraction.
G37 kissing	Kissing can be chaste sosial sign, but usually it tells about romantic attraction.
P46 voiced desire	After a desire is expressed (also unverbally), a treshold is passed and all have changed.
G44 sex: group sex	Extreme case of sex mostly only seen in porn, often related to prostitution (Westworld).
G45 sex: intercourse	"Having sex" - commonly considered the climax (sic) of a physical relationship.
G46 sex: masturbation	Expressing a social point (loneliness etc), a strong sexual drive or young age.
G47 sex: oral	"Not yet sex" - often assiciated to porn or prostitution also. Can tell about power dynamics.
G48 sex: public	Usually limited to porn, fetishes and extreme situations. Used for shock value (Westworld).
G49 sensual touch	An act revealing a lot about a person, and telling about deep emotions.
G50 sexual touch	Next level of touching - want is reveleled, and (usually) permission to touch granted.
G54 watching sex	Intense action revealing character personality, or tied to forced story line.
G52 violence	Reasons for violence are countless, both persona and story driven. Extreme action.
G53 violence, sexual	Even more extreme action, related either to fetishes (consensual) or just violence.

Symbols

G22 age difference	Romantic feeling between people of different age may be taboo or liberating.
G23 domination, BDSM	Sexual relation with either consensual domination or repression. Device for shocking.
G33 eunuch	Condition that may have sexual connotations. (Game of Thrones) Shocking device.
G34 freudian act	Any apparently innocent action with subconscious sexual meanings. Storytelling device.
G35 homosexuality	Homosexual acts imply taboos and inequality but also liberal attitudes.
G36 incest (implied)	An universal taboo used to convay strong messages in storytelling. Can be fetish.
G43 prostitution	Social or personal situation, possibility for liberal sexuality or social commentary.

Linguistic

G26 dialogue: implied sex	Implication can a storytelling device, sexual proposal or way to hide sexual content.
G27 dialogue: feelings	Telling about or discussing sexual feelings. Quite neutral in West, forbidden in Iran.
G28 dialogue: relationships	Relationship talk can be neutral, but when sex is included, it's part of personal space.
G29 dialogue: sex	Partners or close friends can discuss about sex, otherwise it's a proposal or offputting.
G30 dialogue: sexuality	Discussion about sexuality in general can be neutral in the West.
G31 dialogue: metaphora	Using sexual metaphors in dialogue is often considered a suggestion.
G32 dialogue: vulgar	Vulgar talk defines persona, aims for shock value or is a sexual suggestion/attack.

Mise-en-scene

G38 nudity: female	In the West, female nudity is almost normal in non-family entertainment.
G39 nudity: full frontal	Frontal nudity is the domain of porn, art film or a device for shock value.
G40 nudity: male	Male nudity is much more restricted than female; showing the penis is almost taboo.
G41 nudity: mutilated	Mutilated nude bodies are definite shock imagery, for war or horror (Westworld).
G42 nudity: partial	Partial nudity can be a suggestion or just a costume choise in the West.
G51 stripping	Stripping is a definite sexual action, either inside a relationship or porn/prostitution.

List of graphics and photos

Graphics

Photos

Unless otherwise indicated, all graphs are created by the author.

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