Black Sails, Rainbow Flag:
Examining Queer Representations
in Film and Television

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Abstract

This thesis aims to present, discuss, and analyze issues relating to queer representations in film and television. The thesis focuses on existing tropes, such as queer coding, queerbaiting, and the “Bury Your Gays” trope that are prevalent in contemporary media, and applies the analysis of these tropes to a case study based on the television series *Black Sails* (2014-2017). The study forms its theoretical framework from representation theory and queer theory and employs critical discourse analysis and visual analysis as methods of examining the television series. The analysis explores the main research question: in what way does *Black Sails* subvert or reproduce existing queer tropes in film and television? This then leads to the discussion of three aspects: the way queer sexual identities are represented overall, what representational strategies are employed by the series in a number of episodes, and whether or not these representations reproduce or subvert media tropes. The results show that the series provides balanced and at times innovative representations of queer identity which can signal a change in the way LGBTQ themes and characters are represented in media.

**Keywords**: Black Sails, queer representation, LGBT characters, media studies, queer studies, media representations, Captain Flint, John Silver.
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1. Introduction

In the first few seconds of *Black Sails*’ pilot episode the viewer is transported aboard a ship at the pinnacle of the Golden Age of Piracy, in 1715, somewhere in the West Indies. The text that precedes these introductory images reads as such:

“The Pirates of New Providence Island threaten maritime trade in the region. The laws of every civilized nation declare them *hostis humani generis*. Enemies of all mankind. In response, the pirates adhere to a doctrine of their own... war against the world.” ("I", 2014)

Since classical antiquity pirates have been granted the title of *hostis humani generis*, or enemies of all humanity, due to their activity on the high seas which are freely shared by all countries and lie outside of any state’s jurisdiction. For this reason piracy is considered a crime upon all nations and, as a consequence, any nation may take action against it. The pirate then is seen in both history and media representations as a transgressive figure who threatens the stability of established power structures and enterprises. Driven to the edges of what is considered civilized, the pirates take action against their marginalization and produce their own culture based on resistance and subversion.

A similar discourse emerged two hundred and fifty-five years later around a wholly different group. During the pinnacle of the Sexual Liberation movement, somewhere in the United States, President Richard Nixon was watching the fifth episode of *All in the Family* (1971-1979), an American television series. The episode featured the first openly gay character depicted in a situation comedy (Kutulas, 2017, p. 137). Nixon’s reaction to this media representation survives recorded on White House tapes that were seized after the Watergate scandal: he was appalled, calling homosexuality and immorality the “enemies of strong societies” (Ibid.). Yet, despite such disapproval at the top of American political leadership, LGBTQ rights activists continued to advocate for fair media representations of sexual minorities and two years later, in 1973, some of them formed The Gay Media Task Force to serve as a resource organization for network television programming as it addressed LGBTQ themes.
A stark comparison can be drawn between the two statements describing piracy and homosexuality. It appears that, throughout the centuries, societies have always been confronted with subversive forces that in one way or another are placed outside the bounds of what is considered lawful, normative, or civilized. Both piracy and homosexuality have been universally shunned by hegemonic powers in the Western world as their visible presence was deemed to upset the balance of society (Sanna, 2018, p. 8; Kutulas, 2017, p. 146). Piracy was a threat to the integrity of empires and their practices while homosexuality was seen as a threat to the integrity of conventional family life and traditional social roles. These anxieties sparked many misconceptions and bias against members belonging to either groups, some of which are still present in our contemporary culture.

This thesis will discuss some of these misconceptions and biases, mainly as they are reflected in American media in the form of tropes and character archetypes. Focusing on the medium of film and television, the thesis discussion maps the importance, function, and nature of queer representations, also examining their significance when set against the background of piracy. These aspects will be discussed in the context of a case study that is based on the period drama *Black Sails* (2014-2017). Thus, the thesis is centered around the following research question: in what way does *Black Sails* subvert or reproduce existing queer representation tropes in film and television? This question explores media representations of marginal identities as depicted in the series through its portrayal of queer characters and themes.

The first part of the paper places its theoretical framework and methodology in the field of Media and Communication studies and also discusses elements relating to Cultural Studies. For a wider understanding, this part presents the background that motivates and informs the present thesis, including the social and historical contexts in which the addressed issues circulate and the existing body of academic scholarships that theorize and research these issues. This part examines what tropes relating to homosexuality exist in contemporary film and television, presenting media production practices and social and cultural contexts that led to their apparition and propagation.
The second part of the paper includes a detailed analysis as applied to the television series *Black Sails* in the form of a case study. This television series was selected due to the fact that it engages with queer characters and themes outside the scope of queer cinema, placing them instead in the context of a mainstream historical drama, and therefore producing diverse and complex representations of queerness. The analysis of the series will discuss the ways in which it recreates as well as deconstructs various tropes such as queerbaiting, queer coding, and the “Bury Your Gays” trope that are frequently used in film and television. Finally, the third part of the paper presents the concluding thoughts that succeed the analysis and it also addresses any potential ethical issues and limitations that may arise from this research.
2. Social and historical contexts

2.1. LGBTQ themes in American mainstream media

Much like the figure of the pirate, the queer character entered literary works and print media more predominantly during the 18th and 19th centuries. However, explicit descriptions of queer relationships were rendered impossible from a legal point of view since during this period homosexuality was deemed illegal across the United States (Myrvang, 2018, p. 39). As a result, authors had to rely on subtext or symbolism like comparisons with Greek or Roman myths in order to signal queerness to the reader. Positive representation of homosexuality was rendered impossible since the authors risked being accused of “endorsing” homosexuality and as such the only accepted representation was a negative one (Hulan, 2017, p. 18.). Thus, queer characters during this period were frequently portrayed as villainous or undesirable.

This censure of queer representation in the United States was also later extended to other forms of media. From 1934 to 1968 the Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, formally banned the depiction of homosexuality in films. The code was set in place to serve as a moral guideline for the content production studios could or could not include in motion pictures and show to a public audience. One of the forbidden issues was the depiction of “sexual perversion or any inference to it” (Kim, 2017, p. 158). While not explicitly stated, queer sexuality was widely understood to belong to this category. Consequently, any portrayal of homosexuality had to be signaled through coded signs, usually by applying characteristics of the opposite gender onto queer characters, which led to the propagation of stereotypical representations of queerness (Ibid.). Such representations included the effeminate and quirky gay male villain archetype as it can be observed, for example, in the character of Joel Cairo in the film noir The Maltese Falcon (1941).

The first openly gay characters appeared on screen during the 1960s, after the outset of the Sexual Liberation movement and the Stonewall Riots. Two of the most important Hollywood films of the decade to deal with representations of queerness were The Killing of Sister George (1968) and Boys in the Band (1970). Both films
were comedy-dramas adapted from plays and both explored issues of same-sex romance, closeted queer identities, institutional discrimination, internalized homophobia, and the underground gay and lesbian culture of many cities (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, p. 136). However, like previous Hollywood motion pictures, these two films also relied on the pre-established queer stereotypes of the Hays Code era to portray queer characters. As seen in Figure 1, lesbian characters were represented as masculine, wearing ties, men’s hats, fake moustaches, and short hair, while in Figure 2 it can be observed that gay male characters were represented as effeminate, wearing decorative scarves flipped over their shoulder and displaying the “limp-wrist” gesture that is commonly perceived as an indicative of homosexuality (Ibid, p. 24).

![Figure 1](queensfilmtheatre.com)
Television series also started to tackle real life issues that until then were only discussed in news or documentaries, therefore capturing the changing moral norms of society and modern life. The television series *All in the Family* was the first sitcom in the United States to depict an openly gay man. The character, Steve, subverted the stereotypical portrayal of gay men as effeminate by being shown as a former professional football player. Kutulas (2017, p. 141) notes that this character “represented the first real type of gay television character, inoffensive [...] because he neither camped it up nor congregated with other gays.” The lack of stereotypical queer markers makes Steve’s friend almost unwilling to believe that he is gay but it also earns Steve acceptance as a bar’s regular customer. Therefore, Steve is tolerated because there are no visible expressions of his sexuality or, in other terms, because he can “pass” as heterosexual.

However, some negative portrayals of homosexuality still permeated film and television, especially in dramas. Visibly queer characters were portrayed as tragic, their stories usually involving substance abuse, manipulative behavior, and broken families (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, p. 136). These dramas depicted social anxieties
relating to a more relaxed attitude towards sexual expression which were seen as endangering traditional values.

Nonetheless, the sterilized representation of queer characters such as Steve from *All in the Family* contributed a great deal in changing the negative public perception on homosexuality. As Kutulas (2017, p. 143) states, “while simplistic, publicly acknowledging gays’ humanity began a process of social evolution, undercutting notions of deviance and, on television, turning them into mimetic characters”. Starting with the 1970s, queer characters received more visibility and fuller lives as television series began to include and explore queer spaces like the gay bar. In this context, queer characters received the chance to directly assert their sexual desire.

This relative openness towards sexuality and LGBTQ culture and a rise in independently produced films also led to the apparition of queer cinema founded by queer artists, filmmakers, and activists. This movement in film was initially political as it was driven by outrage over the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, however, it was also aesthetically oriented popularizing, for example, the camp style. Queer cinema mainly addresses LGBTQ themes such as discovering one’s queer sexual identity, experiencing one’s first queer sexual or romantic experience, “coming out”, dealing with homophobia and with heterosexist discrimination, and overcoming internalized homophobia (Tyson, 2006, p. 339). Thus, queer cinema represents LGBTQ people and their lived experiences and is largely addressed towards an LGBTQ audience.

The 21st century presented a breakthrough in the representation of LGBTQ themes and characters in mainstream media. Series such as *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-2009) helped bring LGBTQ matters to the forefront of television, presenting an explicit depiction of gay sexual practices, hardships, and sensibilities and trying to appeal to both heterosexual and queer audiences. Although limited in terms of diversity of portrayed sexual identities, these programmes widened the boundaries of queer representation in media and paved the way to contemporary forms of representation.
2.2. Black Sails

*Black Sails* (2014-2017) is a historical period drama created by Jonathan E. Steinberg and Robert Levine for Starz, an American cable television network. *Black Sails* serves as a prequel to Robert Louis Stevenson’s acclaimed adventure novel *Treasure Island* (1883). Set in 1715, during the Golden Age of Piracy, the series borrows famous characters from Stevenson’s novel such as Captain Flint, John Silver, and Billy Bones but it also adds characters inspired by real-life pirates like Blackbeard, ‘Calico’ Rackham, Anne Bonny, and Charles Vane, therefore combining fact with fiction.

The series is built around an ensemble cast, each character stemming from a different background and reflecting the intricacy of pirate life. The plot depicts the politics of New Providence Island, initially a British colony that later turned into a pirate haven, and portrays the subsequent war between pirates and the British Empire. The show offers a complex representation of piracy, navigating the dynamics and hierarchies of pirate crews while also discussing issues relating to colonial enterprise and imperial oppression, slavery, political tension and corruption, and societal mores. At large, the series offers a detailed commentary on hegemonic power and how marginal identities fit into or fall out of established systems. For this reason, the figure of the pirate and the figure of the queer character are essential to the series due to their subversive nature but also due to their history of being marginalized.

2.2.1. Previous representations of piracy in popular culture

The figure of the pirate has been present in the imagination of people and reflected as a result in popular culture for centuries. In British and American film and television, but also in print, the figure of the pirate is a subcategory of the outlaw archetype, a highly ambivalent and subversive character who on one hand commits criminal acts but on the other hand appears heroic and free while standing up against oppressive forces, thus turning into a particularly useful archetype for the creation of thrilling adventure stories. Sanna (2018, p. 8) argues that the pirate is
more than just an outlaw, the pirate is perceived as a special type of criminal who gained the status of being an “enemy of all mankind”.

The popularity of pirates in literature, print media, and popular culture rose during the second half of the 18th century, after the publication of *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (1724). The book was authored by one Captain Charles Johnson, believed to be a pseudonym of British writer Daniel Defoe. The book contains the (mainly fictional) biographies of famous pirates like Blackbeard and Anne Bonny, showing a romanticized view of the pirates’ lives and activities. The book proved instrumental in changing the popular perception on pirates, serving as a great inspiration for future authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson whose works in turn inspired contemporary media like the television series *Black Sails*.

*Treasure Island* solidified the image of the pirate as we know it today, sporting prosthetic limbs and talking parrots on their shoulder. Stevenson’s legendary pirate, Long John Silver, is considered the archetype for the manipulative, smooth-talking, and double-crossing villain motivated by greed. With the dawn of cinema, the figure of the pirate also entered the realm of film and *Treasure Island* received its first film adaptation in 1912, being the first of many more to come.

The transition to the medium of film brought pirate adventures to a larger audience and introduced them to a variety of genres. Early Hollywood films also began to represent pirates as protagonists rather than just villains, therefore reviving the romanticized image of the pirate. Zhanial (2018, p. 173) and Karremann (2011, p. 81) state that Hollywood fostered the production of an image of the male pirate captain as an attractive, heroic, and heterosexual outlaw, while Sanna (2018, p. 20) notes that the Hollywood pirate was mainly concerned with rescuing beautiful women from picturesque villains in exotic locations. Thus, the figure of the pirate was perceived as unequivocally heterosexual.

In the 21st century, the most popular films about pirates have undoubtedly been those of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. The five films were all listed among the top-50 highest-grossing productions of all time, attesting to the lasting popularity of the pirate in mainstream media and the importance of the franchise in
popular culture (Sanna, 2018, p. 23). The films seem to blend most of the characteristics previously attributed to the figure of the pirate and apply them to the protagonist Jack Sparrow, played by popular actor Johnny Depp. Sparrow is both a charming outlaw and a comical anti-hero, however, his character also departs from the established heroic and masculine pirate of Hollywood. Sparrow’s flamboyant persona with dramatic gesticulation, preference for negotiation over aggression, and dark eye makeup opens the discussion around a new pirate archetype: the queer pirate. As Karremann (2011, p. 82) notes, The Pirates of the Caribbean films rely on the transgressive nature of the pirate not only to create a morally ambiguous character but to also subvert normative notions of gender and sexuality.

2.2.2. A queer retelling

There are many reasons for why I decided to employ Black Sails as the basis of my case study. First and foremost, it is because the series offers a queer retelling of a novel that has at large been categorized by literary critics as imperialist propaganda and therefore a work that reinforces hegemonic discourses.

As mentioned before, Black Sails is loosely based on Robert Louis Stevenson’s Treasure Island and serves as its prequel, following the exploits of James ‘Flint’ McGraw and John Silver decades before the events of the novel. Treasure Island inscribes itself among the ranks of Victorian Era adventure stories that popularized the figure of the pirate as a villainous cutthroat. Zhanial (2018, p. 171) argues that “the pirates’ weather-beaten faces, scars, and mutilations, as well as their violent behavior were presented as signs of a return to a more uncivilized and primitive state of being.” These views mirrored imperial attitudes towards colonial territories which were deemed as primitive places awaiting the civilizing touch of the Empire, therefore giving motive to colonial expansion and oppression. These stories often featured young British boys going on adventures in mysterious and dangerous places and were usually devised to encourage young readers to commit themselves to the Empire’s cause (Răzman, 2018, pp. 2-5).

Fletcher (2007, p. 45) calls Treasure Island “perhaps the most successfully coercive children’s story in English,” as she argues that the novel encourages child readers to develop loyalties and prejudices similar to those of its young protagonist, Jim
Hawkins. However, as I have previously argued in my essay *From Dogs to Kings: Master Narratives and Plurality of Voices in Treasure Island and Black Sails* (2018), after a closer reading, Stevenson’s novel appears to be in fact an anti-adventure story portraying an act of exploitation which terrifies its protagonist but from which he is unable to escape due to the presence of oppressive imperialist forces. This argument is also raised by Gubar (2009, p. 70) who maintains that “rather than encouraging youngsters to seek out wealth and glory overseas, Stevenson depicts the project of draining foreign lands of riches as terrifying, traumatizing, and ethically problematic.” Therefore, Gubar emphasized Stevenson’s anti-imperialist sentiment that denounces exploitation.

Even so, the political intention behind Stevenson’s pirate adventure novel matters less than the audience it is addressed towards. What clearly transpires from both critical readings is that *Treasure Island* is in essence a work of children’s literature. *Black Sails*, on the other hand, with its 16+ Maturity Rating, is certainly not addressed towards children. The adaptation of children’s literature into films, which are usually meant for a larger audience, has long been a subject of debate. *Treasure Island* has been adapted into over 50 films and television series like Disney Studios’ *Muppet Treasure Island* (1996) or *Treasure Planet* (2002), yet most of them stay true to the juvenile direction of the original. *Black Sails* departs from this by adding graphic depictions of violence and sex that make the series unsuitable for children. However, it also adds another element that is still considered a sensitive topic to discuss in media which might be viewed by young audiences: representations of queer relationships.

Violence in children’s media such as cartoons or video games has been to some degree tacitly accepted by society at large, yet mentions of sexuality and especially homosexuality are often considered mature themes unsuitable for young audiences who are viewed as a vulnerable group. This implies that exposure to queer relationships is deemed more damaging to children than exposure to graphic depictions of violence (Myrvang, 2018, p. 41). This notion of “shielding” children from sexual and gender diversity was often used by social conservative groups to protest against representations of sexual minorities on television (Kutulas, 2017, p. 157; Hulan, 2017, p. 19).
Black Sails features five characters that have explicit queer sexual identities. One of them is Stevenson’s Captain Flint who in the television series is represented as bisexual. Given the predominantly masculine and heterosexual image assigned onto pirates and the reluctance to include LGBTQ themes and characters into media adapted from children’s literature, I would argue that the queer representation of Captain Flint, a legendary pirate figure from a seminal work of children’s literature, is groundbreaking and worthy of analysis. Moreover, the inclusion of queer representations among creations inspired by Stevenson’s novel is entirely new (Myrvang, 2018, p. 39). This makes a discussion revolving around this topic an addition not only to the field of media representations but also to the fields of transmediality and media adaptations.

2.2.3. Scope and genre

Another reason why Black Sails represents a valuable resource for this study is the genre in which it falls into and its main channels of distribution. Black Sails is a historical period drama broadcasted as an original series by the American premium cable and satellite television network Starz. In 2016, before the release of the series’ fourth and final season, Starz reported a number of 24.5 million subscribers in the United States, and the series averaged 3.6 million viewers per episode over its first three seasons (Ertan, 2018, p. 25). The series is also distributed on various streaming platforms and video on demand services like Netflix and HBO Nordic as well as Starz’s own streaming website and mobile application.

This shows that Black Sails is intended for mainstream consumption and, like other Starz original series such as Outlander (2014-) and Spartacus (2010-2013), it targets audiences aged 18 to 49 (Ertan, 2018, p. 6). This aspect is important because, although the queer narrative is an integral part of the series’ plot and character development, the series does not fall into the queer cinema category. According to Myrvang (2018, p. 39), the function of queer cinema is to explore and depict queer lifestyle through social, psychological, and personal perspectives. However, these productions are often entirely oriented around LGBTQ narratives and targeted towards an LGBTQ audience. As Ertan (2018, p. 13) notes: “stories with heterosexual protagonists can be about [...] any number of different storylines to
explore without limits. Stories centering on a queer protagonist will usually focus on one of a handful of storylines, such as coming out.” However, queer characters are more than just their sexualities and presenting them in contexts outside of LGBTQ culture broadens the diversity of their representation and make LGBTQ issues visible to a larger audience.

*Black Sails* is set against the background of piracy, a context which, as previously discussed, has been associated with a predominately masculine and heterosexual space. The introduction of explicitly queer characters into this space therefore broadens the scope of not only pirate adventure stories and the newly emerging (albeit so far singular) queer pirate archetype introduced by the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise but it also allows for the integration of queer discourse outside the scope of queer cinema and into mainstream film and television. Therefore, the series provides a rich and novel subject of analysis especially in terms of queer media representations.
3. Previous research

Queer media representations have started to benefit from an increased critical attention in the past few decades as issues relating to portrayal of queer characters and themes have permeated from the field of queer studies into the field of media studies. American media such as film and television receive a central place in many of the academic inquiries conducted around this topic and it also represents the focus of this research. Therefore, this thesis takes its roots from and contributes to the study of queer representations in American film and television.

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin provide an overview of the history of queer media representations in American cinema in their book titled *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (2006). The book offers a valuable insight into American attitudes of the 20th and 21st centuries regarding sexuality as well as extensive discussions on how Hollywood and independent cinema deal with representations of queer issues. The authors present the stereotypical representations of early cinema that popularized the image of the effeminate gay man and the mannish lesbian woman and discuss the presence of queer media producers such as Dorothy Arzner and George Cukor in Hollywood during the Hays Code era. The book also engages in debate about experimental images of sexuality that were usually followed by public backlash and more conventional film representations of queer identities. The authors especially emphasize the importance of independent filmmaking in the development and popularization of queer cinema. Benshoff and Griffin (2006, p. 288) conclude that queer characters are nowadays treated more favorably in American cinema, but “this does not mean that all aspects of sexual diversity are granted the same amount of attention: there are still more television shows about gay men that about lesbians; there are more representations of white queers than queers of color,” reflecting that there is still room for improvement.

Another work that engages with queer media representations is *Stereotyping* (1987) by film theorist Richard Dyer. This seminal work provides the theoretical foundation of this research relating to media representations as it elaborates on stereotypical portrayals of queer characters in a number of American films. Dyer
presents the ideology that informs these stereotypical representations and explores the strategies through which they are relayed on screen. He identifies iconography (the use of visual signs) and structure as methods of stereotyping and exemplifies them in various queer films such as *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) and *Boys in the Band* (1970). Thus, by examining the strategies identified by Dyer, the present research aims to contribute to the study of media representations and expand the area of research from film to television.

However, studies discussing queer media representations outside the context of queer cinema are less frequent and this is even more evident when accounting for queer representations in mainstream media. The case study of this research addresses this gap as it is based on a mainstream television series that places queer representations outside the scope of queer cinema. Instead, *Black Sails* places discourses relating to queerness against the historical, cultural, and social background of piracy. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise offers a similar yet so far singular case in which a queer reading is widely applied to a mainstream pirate adventure narrative and particularly to its protagonist, Jack Sparrow.

Jack Sparrow's persona canonically undermines binary categorizations as his representation constantly oscillates between heroic, anti-heroic, comical, and campy (Steinhoff, 2007). The movies provide viewers with clues about the protagonist's sexual identity, signaling both his heterosexuality and queerness. On one hand, Sparrow claims to have a bride in every port and he receives slaps from several upset women, indicating that he had various heterosexual affairs (Zhanial, 2018, p. 174). On the other hand, many critics such as Fradley (2012), Karremann (2011), Steinhoff (2007), and Zhanial (2018) argue that Jack Sparrow's performance purposively destabilizes notions of heteronormativity and that the movies have intentional homoerotic subtext, particularly in scenes between Sparrow and Will Turner.

Moreover, the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise also portrays the pirate as an ambiguously gendered figure. Jack Sparrow’s flamboyant costume, his heavy eye makeup, numerous rings, and accessories that adorn his hair and beard can be seen as stereotypical feminine markers and as queer coding devices. However, he also exudes stereotypically masculine attributes by playing on the already established
trope of the hypervirile Hollywood pirate captain. Thus, “playing with filmic conventions and mythological images of the masculine pirate, Captain Jack Sparrow’s representation escapes any kind of final categorization” (Steinhoff, 2007). His dandified version of the masculine and heroic pirate denaturalizes normative categories, representations, and concepts of identity.

Regarding queer representations in *Black Sails*, Jessica Walker explores the connection between the pirates’ anti-imperialist effort and queer subversion of normativity in her essay *Civilization’s Monsters: The Doomed Queer Anti-Imperialism of Black Sails* (2018). She argues that in *Black Sails* heteronormativity is tied to colonialism’s greed and abuses, while queerness is linked to the pirate’s idealism, adventure, and freedom from social constraints. She emphasizes that the organization of pirate ships is often perceived as an egalitarian utopia and thus she places Flint’s tyrannical captaincy as the incentive behind the failure of the pirate resistance, arguing that the piratical monster and the imperialist tyrant are two sides of the same coin: one makes the rules, the other breaks them, but both do so in the service of getting what they want, regardless of the human cost.

Walker’s work brings great additions to the discussion regarding the pirates’ relevance to popular culture, offering a detailed and interdisciplinary analysis of the history of pirates and their representation in media both when applied to *Black Sails* or film and television in general. Therefore, the work provides a valuable source of theoretical and analytical material for my own study. However, while dealing with media representations of piracy, the essay scarcely address queer representations. Walker notes that queer relationships all too often meet with bad ends in historical narratives but she fails to address the existence of contemporary harmful media tropes such as the “Bury Your Gays” trope that continue to propagate these tragic narratives surrounding queer relationships.

Thus, the present study aims to address this gap by exploring some of the existing media tropes that relate to queer media representations, including the “Bury Your Gays” trope. This study looks at the way *Black Sails* deals with representing queer characters and themes and places these representations in the context of queer discourse and representation theory rather than only in a historical context. Yet the study also takes into consideration the fact that the series is set during the Golden
Age of Piracy and features legendary pirate figures from both history and fiction. Therefore, this thesis makes use of Walker’s and other similar works that discuss the figure of the pirate in media and popular culture in order to also account for the way in which discourses related to piracy influence the representation of queer characters in *Black Sails*.

The study of this television series is also socially relevant due to the message of the series, its engagement with queer characters and themes, and the contemporary social contexts in which this series circulates. As noted by scholars such as Walker (2018) and Swaminathan (2018), *Black Sails* relies on a diverse cast of characters and promotes the agency of individuals belonging to marginalized groups such as women, people of color, and queer people. This is especially important when considering that in the United States these groups have been systemically oppressed, ostracized, and silenced by hegemonic powers, as reflected in the example of President Richard Nixon that was previously discussed in the introduction of this paper (Kutulas, 2017, p. 137). This marginalization still persists to this day and it can be observed in the way media productions treat queer characters and queer audiences. For this reason, the study of a mainstream television series that tries to cater to both queer and heterosexual viewership and engages with diverse and complex queer issues is relevant for the development of fair media representation.
4. Theoretical framework

4.1. Representation theory

Before proceeding to present the theoretical discussions behind media representations, it is important to mention why representation is necessary. In the seminal work *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), Stuart Hall relates that representation is used to give meaning to things through language, to make sense of the world, of people, objects, and events, and to express a complex thought about those things to other people (Hall, 1997, p. 17). Therefore, representation is used as a tool of not only communication but also understanding, thus affecting our perception of ourselves and of the world we live in, playing an important part in the formation of our identity.

Media representation is directly tied to identity as it presupposes the embodiment on screen of a character who reflects a certain social type, a member of a given group, or a social role. Both media studies and cultural studies engage with politics of representation in order to construct and analyze the social dimension of cultural texts which draws upon functions of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity. These aspects depend on existing power structures and, since representation connects meaning to culture, cultural texts often tend to reproduce discourses and forms of representation that promote the hegemony of one social group over the other (Hall, 1997, p. 15). The repeated reproduction of these aspects creates tropes, meaning common or overused themes or devices, that appear in media forms like film and television and lead to the creation of stereotypical representations of individuals belonging to certain social groups.

Richard Dyer, in his essay *Stereotyping* (1984), describes stereotypes as mechanisms of boundary maintenance that are characteristically fixed, clear-cut, and unalterable; they are simple, memorable, and widely recognized characterizations in which a few traits are foregrounded and development is kept to a minimum (Dyer, 2006, p. 355). Stereotypes rely on principles of similarity that aid the formation of mental representations, thus leading to generalizations and the erasure of individuality of those who are being stereotyped. In film and television,
stereotyping takes place most often through iconography, which is the use of a certain set of visual symbols or iconic signs, but stereotyping may also employ indexical signs such as written or spoken language. Both iconic and indexical signs hold semiotic meaning.

Dyer (2006, p. 355) links stereotypical representation directly to marginal identities by stating that stereotypes are devised to indicate those whom the rules of society are designed to exclude. He also identifies stereotyping as a hegemonic process by which dominance is maintained by ruling groups: “the dramatic, ridiculous or horrific quality of stereotypes [...] serves to show how important it is to live by the rules” (Ibid., p. 356). For this reason, it comes as no surprise that transgressive identities like queer gender and sexual identities that depart from normative social roles are often represented in media via stereotypical tropes.

Yet Waggoner (2018, p. 1879) warns that “when the repeated tropes are used within an already marginalized community, LGBTQ fans and their identities also become marginalized, causing a misrepresentation for understanding themselves and others.” Thus, Waggoner emphasizes the necessity for fair media representation and reflects that these practices have a direct impact on not only our culture and society but also on people’s lived experience of identity. However, not all tropes are negative and not all stereotypes are inaccurate. This thesis will explore some of the stereotypical representations applied to queer individuals in film and television, arguing whether or not they have a negative aspect.

4.2. Queer theory

The previous sections of this paper have offered a general elaboration on social and cultural factors that influenced media representations of issues relating to queerness, noting prevalent social discourses attached to the subject. However, in order to be able to conduct an analysis, a theoretical framework must be established. For this purpose, I will employ critical theory, or more specifically queer criticism, to introduce the main theoretical discussions surrounding representations of queer characters in film and television and also to present the theoretical perspectives that will be applied to the case study and will guide the analysis.
Queer theory emerged in the second half of the 20th century as one of the many oppositional discourses, like feminist and postcolonial theory, that aimed to counter hegemonic narratives. The theory was introduced in academic scholarship to identify a body of knowledge connected to queer studies. Scholars examining gender and sexuality, especially in historical contexts, have long struggled with terminology for gender and sexual concepts, therefore, the term queer is a reappropriated word used as an inclusive term that offers a collective identity to which all non-straight individuals can belong (Tyson, 2006, p. 335). Throughout this paper, the term queer is used as a marker of gender identities that differ from cisgender ones and sexual identities that differ from heterosexual ones.

Queer theory is connected to but not identical with gay and lesbian critical theory. Unlike lesbian and gay studies, queer theory rejects binary categories and does not emphasize the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy. Instead, it embraces more flexible identities, defining individual sexuality as fluid, fragmented, and dynamic (Fradley, 2012, p. 297). For this reason, the theory provides a good analytical framework for my case study, as the sexualities of queer characters represented in *Black Sails* appear fluid and unconstrained by a certain label or dichotomy.

For queer theorists, an individual’s sexuality is independent of biological sex or the way societies translate biological sex into gender roles (Tyson, 2006, p. 335). Instead, queer theory scholars view sexuality as socially constructed and therefore not as a fixed and demarcated category but rather as directly influenced by culture. This perspective offers a sound basis for the analysis of a work of media such as *Black Sails* because, as the series is set against a historical background in which definitions of sexuality differ from modern ones, queer theory allows for a broader reading and understanding of the television series, its cultural context, and the identities represented in it.

Moreover, as critical theorist Tyson (2006, p. 336) affirms, “queer criticism reads texts to reveal the problematic quality of their representations of sexual categories”. By employing queer criticism and applying it on my case study, I can begin a discussion relating to media representations and their treatment of queer characters.
4.3. Queer media representations

In this discussion, I will approach the following issues relating to queer media representations which often appear as tropes in film and television:

4.3.1. Queer coding

Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble* (1990) formulates the concept of the “heterosexual matrix” which accounts for how people make assumptions of another person’s perceived gender and sexuality based on normative frameworks in society. Her concept takes its roots from the idea that gender is socially constructed and performative and therefore able to shift across a spectrum where femininity and masculinity are dynamic and can intersect (Butler, 2006, p. 185). However, she argues that normative frameworks encourage a fixed and binary view on gender, biological sex, and sexuality which in turn promotes a hegemonic model of intelligibility “that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (Ibid., p. 208). As a result, most people make sense of each other’s gender and sexual identity through these fixed binaries.

Thus, due to the heterosexual matrix, a female who appears feminine would be understood by society as heterosexual, while a female who appears masculine would be understood as lesbian, and a male who appears feminine would be understood as gay. Of course, this view does not provide an accurate understanding of people’s identities and it also leads to the erasure of identities that lie outside of this dichotomy such as bisexuality, asexuality, or transgender and non-binary identities.

Butler (2006, p. 208) also talks about the “compulsory practice of heterosexuality”, used to describe the pressure put by society on individuals to conform to heterosexual behavior and practices. Throughout this paper, this notion is discussed under the term “heteronormativity” which is the assumption, often unconscious, that heterosexuality is the universal norm by which everyone’s experience can be
understood and, therefore, that heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation of an individual (Tyson, 2006, p. 320). Ertan (2018, p. 8) argues that the normative view on heterosexuality sets up any other sexual identities such as homosexuality or bisexuality as something to be questioned and explained and, as a consequence, a person is considered heterosexual until stated otherwise.

This assumption led to the practice of queer coding in media forms like film and television. Kim (2017, p. 157) explains this practice as follows: “to be coded gay is to be implicated as having or displaying stereotypes and behaviors that are associated (even if inaccurate) with homosexuality or queerness.” Queer coding is usually employed in situations in which a character’s gender identity or sexual identity is not explicitly stated, however, openly queer characters can also be queer coded in order to strengthen their representation. Queer coding emerged from the homophobic understanding that homosexuality is not just a sexual orientation but a flaw in the nature of a person and that it would therefore manifest in the person’s traits and personality (Ibid.). For this reason, queer coding relies on physical characteristics, costuming, props, body language, interests, and dialogue in order to signal an assumed inherent queer nature of a character.

Gay male characters are often queer coded in media through elements that are stereotypically perceived as feminine. Delicate facial features, thin bodies, and the use of makeup are used to signal physical characteristics associated with homosexuality. These are frequently used in tandem with flamboyant and luxurious costuming that usually features bright colors, ruffled clothes, and androgynous styles (Kim, 2017, p. 159). Gay male characters have also been represented as being overly concerned with their appearance and having refined tastes, especially in fashion (Dyer, 2006, p. 358). Moreover, femininity is also emphasized in the way gay male characters sit, walk, and talk. This is suggested through high pitched voices, lisped speech, exaggerated gesticulation, and elegant mannerisms.

Lesbian characters, on the other hand, are repeatedly queer coded by using elements that are stereotypically associated with masculinity. Their costuming employs clothing with hard, precise lines that lack frills or decorations and do not emphasize femininity (Dyer, 2006, p. 359). The garderobe of queer coded lesbian characters may include items of male clothing such as men’s shirts, while short hair,
a deep voice, and lack of makeup are used as physical characteristics that signify lesbianism (Kutulas, 2017, p. 148).

However, lesbian characters are also sometimes coded as hyperfeminine. In this case, they have seductive mannerisms and wear elegant clothes, smart coiffure, and quality jewelry, clearly showing a great care for their appearance (Kutulas, 2017, p. 149; Dyer, 2006, p. 359). Karremann (2011, p. 75) argues that by taking the marks of a traditional gender role to an excess, a character can cross the threshold of that gender and become visible as its opposite. Therefore, by appearing too feminine, a female character may still be perceived by the audience as queer. However, this can come at the cost of being fetishized, especially by a heterosexual male audience who may oversexualize these characters (Myrvang, 2018, p. 37).

Queer coding can also appear in the form of textual cues rather than markers assigned onto characters. For example, homosocial bonding, meaning the depiction of strong emotional ties between same-sex characters, can stand in as code for homoerotic subtext in film and television (Tyson, 2006, p. 339). Similarly, same-sex doubles, or same-sex characters who look alike, act alike, or have parallel experiences, may function as gay or lesbian markers, signaling sexual similarity between the two (Ibid., p. 340).

4.3.2. Queerbaiting

Queerbaiting is a term employed by media fans to criticize or describe a strategy used by media producers, writers, and networks by which they attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via suggestions of homoerotic subtext between characters in popular television that is never intended to be actualized on screen (Brennan, 2018, p. 189). This strategy allows media producers to capitalize on queer viewership while also avoiding to alienate the heterosexual identifying audience.

This strategy has been viewed by LGBTQ rights activist groups and series fans alike as exploitative because it reinforces heteronormative narratives and denies queer characters space and representation on screen or even invalidates their identities. Nevertheless, Brennan (2018, p. 193) relates that these practices have been widely identified in popular television series like Smallville (2001-2011), Supernatural
(2005-2020), *Merlin* (2008-2012), and *Sherlock* (2010-2017), in which signs of intimacy such as longing looks and touches have been interpreted by fans as code for homoerotic subtext between the series’ central characters.

Yet the actualization of homosexual relationships in television has been largely avoided by media producers. Detective series *Sherlock*, for example, features interactions between the two male leads that are suggestive of attraction or flirtation and the series has various characters confusing the male leads for a couple, yet the producers have sought to shut down queer readings of the series (Ng, 2017, para. 3.3). Historical fantasy series *Merlin* also has a similar case of on screen representation of potentially homoerotic subtext and off-screen denial of it (Brennan, 2018, p. 192). In contrast, Ertan (2018, p. 10) exemplifies *Supernatural* as a case of queerbaiting where the series’ creators implied that one of the main characters had feelings for another male character but these feelings never explicitly materialized on screen. In these cases, authorial intentions preside over audience agency, simultaneously encouraging and invalidating queer readings of the works.

Ng (2017, para. 2.11) clarifies that queerbaiting manifests itself when viewers have high expectations for quality canonical queer content but consider the quality of the actual queer content of the series to be low. Furthermore, Ng (2017, para. 2.8) explains that fan expectations arise from the reading of multiple texts and paratexts that take account of queer contextuality. Here, paratexts include promotional material and public commentary from producers, while queer contextuality refers to viewer experiences of LGBTQ media narratives in general.

Fans’ position in relation to queerbaiting reflects characteristics of what Henry Jenkins describes as textual poaching and resistant reading. In his work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Fan Culture* (1992), Jenkins names the appropriation by fans of mass-media texts or characters within them as “textual poaching”. He proposes that this is a subversive way of engaging with media since fans are active and reactive interpreters and not just passive consumers (Jenkins, 1992, p. 110). Thus, fans create their own meaning of cultural texts and “poach” from them in order to create new artefacts like fan fiction, fan art, and other elements of fan culture. In a later work titled *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (2006), Jenkins also discusses the practice of resistant reading. This practice
is undertaken by fans in order to “repair gaps or contradictions in the program ideology, to make it cohere into a whole that satisfies their needs for continuity and emotional realism” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 111). Thus, fans create their own meaning and interpretations to address or negotiate a perceived gap caused by media producers. This transforms fandom into a participatory culture where fans are both consumers and producers.

Queerbaiting then stems from the participatory aspect of fan culture as fans interpret television series in a multitude of different ways and produce their own meaning. Yet media producers’ denial of queer readings can indeed be considered as negative since it undermines the audience’s agency.

4.3.3. The “Bury Your Gays” trope

“Bury Your Gays” is a trope that has appeared in various forms of media since the end of the 19th century. Works using the trope feature a same-sex couple wherein one of the lovers dies, usually mere moments after the characters’ relationship is confirmed for the audience (Hulan, 2017, p. 17). In earlier works featuring this trope, after the lover’s death, the surviving character goes through a “process of reacclimation whereby they realize that their attraction amounted to an experiment or temporary lapse in judgement [...] then fall into the arms of a heterosexual partner to live happily ever after and lead a normal, straight life” (Ibid.). Therefore, the trope reinforces a heteronormative narrative and invalidates or even erases the character’s queer identity.

While still repeatedly used in contemporary film and television, the trope tends to push the heteronormative narrative less than before and it now generally recognizes the characters’ queer identity. Instead, the trope is used at large by media producers and writers for shock value (Waggoner, 2018, p. 1877). The trope is also sometimes referred to as the “Dead Lesbian Syndrome” due to the large amount of female characters who fall victim to the trope. Waggoner (Ibid.) relates that in the 2015-2016 television season, 10 out of the 35 women-loving women characters represented on television died.
The numerous deaths of queer characters on screen sparked a large protest campaign among fans in 2016, especially after the death of Lexa, a lesbian character featured in CW Network’s widely popular young adult drama *The 100* (2014-). The character was killed in the third season of the series less than two minutes after she and the series’ female lead have established an intimate relation. Moreover, the death seems to be unjustified as imperative to the plot since Lexa is killed by a stray bullet, not as the result of an attempt to save her lover but rather as an accidental occurrence (Waggoner, 2018, p. 1883). This development has sparked outrage among the fans of the series who launched a social media campaign marked by the hashtag #LGBTfansdeservebetter, therefore condemning the use of the “Bury Your Gays” trope as a negative example of queer representation and as potentially harmful to the LGBTQ audience and community, especially when taking into account the high suicide and mortality rates among LGBTQ individuals.
5. Methodology

5.1. Research approach

This thesis aims to present, discuss, and analyze issues relating to queer representations in film and television, therefore placing the subject of research within the field of Media and Communication studies, relating more specifically to politics of representation and media representations of marginal identities. It focuses on existing tropes such as queer coding, queerbaiting, and the “Bury Your Gays” trope that are prevalent in contemporary media and applies the analysis of these tropes on a case study based on the television series Black Sails.

The analysis is centered around the following question – In what way does Black Sails subvert or reproduce queer tropes in film and television? – This question then leads to the discussion of three aspects: the way queer sexual identities are represented overall, what representational strategies are employed by the series in a number of episodes, and whether or not these representations reproduce or subvert existing media tropes.

The following study is a qualitative research which takes its ontological and epistemological assumptions from contemporary hermeneutics. This paradigm was chosen due to its interpretative function which is imperative in decoding the meaning behind the textual and visual signs presented in the television series that consist the subject of analysis for this study.

Contemporary hermeneutics builds on and develops the traditions of classical hermeneutics which were concerned with discovering the meaning of texts (Blaikie, 2007, p. 151). Therefore, hermeneutics can be loosely defined as a philosophy of the interpretation of meaning. However, the scope of contemporary hermeneutics is no longer seen as confined merely to interpreting written documents. Instead, the meaning of the term “text” here has been expanded to include organizational practices and institutions, economic and social structures, culture and cultural artifacts, and so on (Prasad, 2002, p. 23). This allows for the paradigm to be applied in a research such as this, focusing on a television series as a cultural text that can
be “read” and therefore understood and interpreted through the lens of representation theory and queer theory.

However, the use of hermeneutics as epistemology and methodology of understanding has been criticized as being subjective since the interpreter, or in this case the researcher, mediates the interpretation of a text and therefore applies the text to their own subjectivity (Blaikie, 2007, p. 155). In order to address this issue, I am employing critical hermeneutics, or depth hermeneutics, a strand of contemporary hermeneutics which relies on critical theory as a theoretical perspective and makes use of a methodical and objective approach to knowledge (Prasad, 2002, p. 25). Critical hermeneutics views the process of interpretation as fundamentally motivated by the goal of critique and, for this reason, the researcher must look beneath the surface language of the text to unveil and retrieve those meanings that often lie buried beneath the surface (Ibid.). This approach will facilitate an in-depth approach to analyzing the television series and will enable me to view it critically in order to explore and describe the artifact’s multiplicity of meanings.

5.2. Methods and data sample

Critical discourse analysis was chosen as a method of analyzing the selected television series because it offers a transdisciplinary approach that allows me to employ theories from both media studies and queer studies and use them to analyze the linguistic, semiotic, and interdiscursive features of the series as a cultural text. Critical discourse analysis also enables me to discuss the relation between changes in discourse and the implications this has on queer media representations. Furthermore, this method provides a useful tool in the light of the research’s approach as both the paradigm and method used in this study view cultural texts as bearing discourses which are socially situated, and therefore holding meaning that can be interpreted in a social, cultural, or historical context (Blaikie, 2007, p. 154).

Fairclough (2012, p. 453) relates that the term “discourse” can be used in an abstract sense as a category which designates broadly semiotic elements such as language, or it can be used as a category for designating particular ways of representing aspects of social life, like in the case of feminist or queer discourses that both
represent issues of inequality from different perspectives. It is worth noting that discourses often interact with each other, leading to an interdiscursive approach to texts.

Fairclough (2012, p. 458) also states that “discourses include representations of how things are and have been, as well as imaginaries – representations of how things might or could or should be.” Therefore, they are directly concerned with social change, including change in social practices and change in how these social practices are articulated. They also, as mentioned above, relate to a certain context, allowing social practices to be analyzed in relation to social events.

In the present research, critical discourse analysis is employed to analyze the semiotic elements of the series, including speech, dialogue and other indexical signs, soundtrack, and setting. These elements are then placed in the context of various media production practices (which are understood here as part of larger social practices) and social and historical events to establish their meaning. They are also filtered through the lens of queer discourse and occasionally feminist discourse in order to negotiate their representational nature and value when set against the context of television and existing media tropes such as queerbaiting and the “Bury Your Gays” trope.

The research also employs visual analysis in its discussion and assessment of the case study. This method was chosen mainly due to the inherent visual nature of the medium of television but also due to its significance to media representations. It also relates to the paradigm that informs this study because, as Hall (1997, p. 19) argues, visual signs and images, even when they bear a close resemblance to the things they are meant to represent, are still signs and carry meaning and thus have to be interpreted.

Visual signs rely on a scopic regime that refers to a culturally constructed way of seeing that affects not only what visual signs we take into consideration when looking at an image but also how we perceive them (Rose, 2001, p. 6). This constructed way of seeing often produces specific visions of social difference, marking hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality and so on (Ibid., p. 9). For this reason, I will analyze the technological, compositional, and social levels of certain
visual signs that appear in *Black Sails* and subject them to a critical analysis in order to examine whether or not they reproduce tropes such as queer coding.

The primary data for this analysis was extracted from a selected number of episodes, focusing on episodes “I” (S01, E01), “II” (S01, E02) and “XIII” (S02, E05), and also employing the script as an additional source. The data was retrieved using a single-stage non-probability sampling method and the episodes were selected based on a purposive/judgmental approach. Since the series has a number of 38 episodes divided into four seasons, it offers a large pool of data that needs to be sampled in order to serve the purpose of this study. For this reason, the aforementioned three episodes which explicitly deal with representations of the characters’ queer identities were purposively selected for an in-depth analysis. These episodes introduce the series’ queer characters and portray the formation and development of their relationships. Additionally, five other episodes, “IX” (S02, E01), “X” (S02, E02), “XI” (S02, E03), “XV” (S02, E07), and “XXVIII” (S03, E10), were employed to provide context for the analysis.

The episodes were first viewed in an unassuming manner as through the eyes of a casual viewer, then a second viewing took place with the intent purpose of critical observation. Finally, the screenplay of the episodes were also consulted in order to get a broader view of the context, however, these were not available for all episodes and, consequently, they were used only for consultation and orientation purposes rather than as a primary source of data.

5.3. Ethical considerations

An important ethical consideration in this study is the use of terminology. As previously mentioned, the term “queer” is a reappropriated word. In this paper the word is used as a collective term that refers to all gender identities that differ from cisgender ones and all sexual identities that differ from heterosexual ones. This term is mainly used here to refer to queer sexual identities rather than to gender and is intermittently used alongside the terms “gay,” “homosexual,” and “LGBTQ.” Here, “gay” and “homosexual” are broadly used to include individuals of all genders rather than just male, while references to specific queer male sexuality is signaled through the explicit mention of gender such as in the phrasing “gay men” or “gay male
characters”. Moreover, in this study bisexuality is understood as equivalent to pansexuality and thus expressing attraction to all genders.

Another ethical consideration revolves around visual ethics since the study employs various images taken from *Black Sails* and two other films. It is important to take into account that visuals sometimes have more impact on their audience than plain text and they must be carefully selected (Rose, 2001, p. 10). Therefore, the images included in this study omit depictions of overtly negative portrayals of queer characters or scenes that contain sensitive content such as violence or abuse that may cause distress to the reader.

Furthermore, another major ethical factor lies in what visuals represent since they can be used to mislead. Misleading and missing content is an issue that violates ethical standards of veracity and fair play, thus the study employs images with unaltered content. The only form of editing used was cropping (Figures 2, 6, and 9) which was necessary due to formatting issues but this was done minimally and in a way that does not alter the meaning of the images. In the case of Figure 9, cropping was employed to avoid depictions of nudity and to reduce the sexualized representation of female characters. The editing of this image was minimal and not intended as a method of censorship but rather as a moral choice from the researcher to prevent the propagation of an overtly sexual scene that may contribute to a voyeuristic tendency of viewing lesbian characters and women in general (Rose, 2001, p. 25). Nonetheless, the inclusion of this image was also deemed important for a comprehensive comparative analysis of queer representations in *Black Sails*.

A potential ethical issue in this study may also arise from the nature of its focus and paradigm. Contemporary hermeneutics relies on “the self-interpretation of the reader through ‘appropriation’, [...] the convergence of the horizons of the writer and the reader” (Blaikie, 2007, p. 155). Therefore, this methodology is subjective and, as mentioned above, can represent a limitation to the current research. For this reason, it requires self-reflection from the part of the reader/researcher and a critical rather than an empathetic approach.

However, I am aware that my social location (meaning my gender, sexual identity, race, and social class) shapes my experiences and perspectives which ultimately
influence the way I relate to cultural texts and my subsequent interpretation of them. For this reason, a self-reflexive approach to Black Sails as a cultural text positions me as a queer reader who is more biased towards perceiving and expressing a queer reading of the television series and its characters. Furthermore, as I have partially included discussions referring to media fans in my theoretical framework, I must also position myself as a fan of the series who, as a consequence, may hold biased interpretations of the text’s meanings. Yet through the choice of my theoretical framework and methods of analysis I have tried to diminish this subjectivity and view the cultural text I am analyzing through a critical eye.
6. Presentation and analysis of results

6.1. Queer characters and themes

Queerness in *Black Sails* is represented from the offset of the series, the pilot episode already introducing two queer characters to the audience. The first is Eleanor Guthrie, the governor’s daughter and the head of trade operations on New Providence Island, who is represented as bisexual. Her sexual identity is reflected by first introducing a conflict with her ex-lover, Charles Vane, one of the island’s pirate captains. In episode “I,” Charles and Eleanor enter into a heated argument with each other in which Charles warns Eleanor that “if you ever challenge me again in front of my crew, I may just forget that I loved you once” (“I”, 2014). Their former romantic relationship is also shown through Eleanor allowing Charles to later intimately touch her face and hair.

This exchange is then immediately followed by another scene that establishes a new budding relationship between Eleanor and a woman called Max. Hurt after her altercation with Charles, Eleanor seeks out Max who tends to Eleanor’s bruise, touching her face in a similarly intimate manner as Charles previously did, therefore showing an equivalent romantic relationship between the two women through instances of homosocial bonding and doubled or parallel experiences and feelings (Tyson, 2006, pp. 339-340). It is interesting to note that the series applies doubling as a practice between characters of different genders as opposed to the “same-sex doubles” convention, yet it is still used to code queer relationships. Charles and Max have similar feelings and experiences with Eleanor, and doubling is also applied to Flint and Miranda in their relationship with Thomas, as I will shortly elaborate in the following section of this paper. In the scene, Max comforts and reassures Eleanor and the two are ultimately shown having sex. Thus, Max is presented as the second queer character of the episode.

No other queer character is introduced until season two when, in episode “IX,” Max establishes a new romantic relationship with another queer woman, Anne Bonny. In the first season of the series Anne is portrayed as Jack Rackham’s partner, taking inspiration from the historical accounts of the real life pirates who were married to
each other (Swaminathan, 2018, p. 144). However, while at first presented as hostile towards Max, Anne grows to realize that she is attracted to Max and she has a hard time accepting her feelings. In the second season of the series, the two develop a relationship which Anne initially hides from Jack. Later in the series, Anne tells Max that Jack saved her from a previous abusive marriage, and she relates that while she is grateful to him she also has doubts about certain aspects of her life:

“Now I wonder... maybe Jack took me from something I was supposed to figure my own way out of. Maybe he took away the chance to get strong enough to save myself, to grow up. Instead, I went with him, did what he did, did what the others did. Thought I’d become one of them. If I’m not what I was when I was born and I ain’t what I’ve become instead... what the fuck am I?” (“XV”, 2015)

Therefore, Anne has to discover and accept her queer identity, and her character development deal with themes relating to overcoming internalized homophobia and experiencing her first queer romantic and sexual encounters. Her narrative reflects instances of what Butler (2006, p. 208) describes as the compulsory practice of heterosexuality as Anne feels obliged to follow a path of heteronormativity and to repress her queer sexual identity. Her story also deals in part with “coming out” as a theme when Jack discovers the relationship Anne has with Max and in turn the two discuss the effect this has on their own relationship (“XI”, 2015). Ultimately, Jack, Anne, and Max form a polyamorous relationship which Walker (2018, p. 179) describes as a successful romantic and economic triangle that allows them to circumvent the restrictive social practices of class, gender, and race enforced by the 18th century English society.

Another queer relationship is introduced in episode “XIII,” when Captain Flint’s past is presented. Before becoming known as the feared pirate captain Flint, he was known as James McGraw, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy who was assigned to help Thomas Hamilton, an idealist politician, solve the problem of piracy in New Providence Island. In this episode it is revealed that the two men had a romantic relationship, and that this relationship had been discovered by Thomas’ father who was a powerful and conservative political figure opposed to his son’s reforms.
As a result of this discovery, Thomas is hospitalized by his father in an asylum, Flint’s career comes to an end, and he and Miranda, Thomas’ wife who was aware of and supported the relationship between the two men, are both exiled from England. When Flint is discharged from his office he is told by his superior, a character who until then was presented as a father-figure to Flint, that: “I would like to defend you. I would like to remind myself that every man has his flaws, his weaknesses that torment him. I would like to help you recover from yours. But not this…. it is too profane, it is too loathsome to be dismissed” (“XIII”, 2015). Therefore, this episode not only addresses the queer sexual identity of one of the series’ main characters, but it also addresses issues of homophobia and systemic discrimination that both Flint and his loved ones have to face. These issues are important themes to tackle in a series revolving around the narratives of queer characters because they reflect and represent the marginalization, the prejudice, and the hardships that members of the LGBTQ community also have to face in real life, thus granting the series social relevance towards current social practices and events.

Moreover, later in the series, Flint is also presented as “coming out” to his friend John Silver by telling him the story behind his relationship with Thomas. Silver is surprised but understanding, and expresses genuine regret over the injustice that Flint had to endure (“XXVIII”, 2016). Thus, the series also engages with “coming out” as a theme and portrays a positive reaction to it. I would argue that this response is made even more meaningful by having it come from Silver who, just like Flint, is a character who has an almost mythical status as a fearsome and bloodthirsty pirate in popular culture and among Treasure Island fans, and who would therefore not be commonly interpreted as sensitive towards other people’s plight. By utilizing Silver’s character and representing him as a tolerant figure, the series invalidates the homophobic response of earlier characters and offers Flint a cathartic experience where his sexual identity is finally recognized and accepted. This experience is implicitly refracted upon a queer audience who is exposed to positive representation. In turn, this representation also reflects a change in historical narratives and media production practices as it shows that queer sexualities are now increasingly accepted by society at large and people have more understanding of queer identities.
The most visibly queer coded character in *Black Sails* is Anne Bonny. Her representation is coded through both iconic signs like her costuming and also indexical signs like her speech. Anne talks in a low husky tone that makes her sound tough, unfriendly, and at times even threatening. Throughout the series her dialogue is comprised of short lines that always get to the point, standing in contrast with the majority of other characters who have a preference for long and elaborate dialogue. Her speech is also often marked by the use of profanities, however this is not unusual as most characters use them. These semiotic elements can be observed in the following exchange:

“Anne Bonny: Awfully pleased with himself, isn't he?

Jack Rackham: Why shouldn't he be? With Mosiah gone, Flint no longer holds the votes to remain captain. Once the Walrus's men realize Mr. Singleton's limitations, we'll have a host of talented defectors eager to swell our ranks. And he only gets stronger.

Anne Bonny: He doesn't get shit without you bringing up that Singleton business in the first place.

Jack Rackham: Yes, well, we all have our roles to play.” (“I”, 2014)

As mentioned in the theoretical part of this paper, a husky or deep voice has often been employed as an indexical sign in media production practices to queer code lesbian characters (Dyer, 2006, p. 356). Anne’s menacing tone and rough dialogue emphasize traits stereotypically associated with masculine behavior which in turn has been associated by society at large with lesbianism due to the binary enforced by the heterosexual matrix which assumes an inherent correlation between a person’s gender expression and their sexuality (Butler, 2006, p. 208). In addition, Anne’s masculinity is also suggested through her clothing and the way she sits and walks.
As seen in Figure 3, Anne wears trousers, high boots, and an open leather vest, items that during the historical period presented in the series were considered part of male clothing. Utilizing menswear for female characters is yet another common media production practice in queer coding lesbian characters (Kutulas, 2017, p. 148). However, Anne’s representation has to be put in a historical context as she is inspired by the real life pirate Anne Bonny whom historical accounts frequently describe as dressing up as a man in order to serve on board ships. While Swaminathan (2018, p. 144) notes that Bonny would commonly wear dresses and reserved her men’s clothing to wear during a fight, this might still serve as a motivation behind the series producers’ choice to have Anne’s character wear items of male clothing and thus influencing her representation in the series. Nevertheless, her masculinity is also shown through other iconic signs like her body language, as in Figure 3 both her arms and legs have an open position, making her body frame look larger. This is also emphasized by the compositional level of the image since the way her body is positioned takes more space on screen.

The trademarks of Anne’s costume are her hat and her two short swords. Anne is frequently represented wielding swords and other weapons as also seen in Figure 3. On one hand, this costume prop highlights her aggressive nature and her physical

**Figure 3.** Anne Bonny as portrayed in *Black Sails* by Clara Paget. Source: “II”, 2014.
prowess, traits that are stereotypically seen as masculine. On the other hand, they also hold semiotic meaning since, as Fradley (2012, p. 295) notes, a sword is never just a sword. From a psychoanalytical point of view, swords and other weapons like pistols or arrows represent male imagery because they can be interpreted as a phallic symbol (Tyson, 2006, p. 20). Therefore, through wielding these weapons, Anne is symbolically asserting her masculinity.

In addition, Anne’s hat is commonly obscuring the upper part of her face, creating an aura of mystery as the hat hides away the identity of its wearer. Before Anne is introduced as a character towards the end of episode “I”, the series previously employs hats as a costuming device to mask the gender identity of another minor character. In the beginning of episode “I,” John Silver as a new recruit is subjected to a prank devised by his crewmembers. His colleagues come to him looking concerned, warning Silver that Blackbeard, a fearsome pirate captain, wishes to meet him in private. They lead Silver to a brothel in a dark and smoky room where he is greeted by a figure whose face is obscured by a large hat. However, Silver soon realizes that the figure is not Blackbeard but instead a prostitute employed by his crewmembers to “initiate” him into the debaucheries of pirate life.

When comparing Figure 4 with Figure 5, the same scopic regime can be observed as both images invite a way of seeing that raises questions about the gender identity of the portrayed characters. Moreover, the formal and structural organization of the
image with its strategic angles and lightning also work towards creating this effect of mystery. As a consequence, Anne Bonny is represented as an ambiguously gendered character whose queer identity is visibly coded in her speech, body language, and costuming.

Another character in Black Sails who is queer coded is Captain Flint. However, his coding is not as evident as in Anne’s case. At first glance, Flint appears to embody the figure of the Hollywood pirate captain whose masculinity and heterosexuality are undoubted. At the end of episode “I,” Flint asserts his physical strength by killing the man who threatened his position as captain in a sword fight, and he then regains the trust of his crew by devising a cunning plan and using his great skill of oratory to convince them to follow him. Aggressiveness, leadership, and physical strength are considered signs of masculinity (Karremann, 2011, p. 70) and are attributes that stand in stark contrast with the stereotypical image of the effeminate and squeamish gay male character often represented in film and television.

However, Flint’s character is also marked by iconic and indexical signs that code his identity as queer. Gay male characters are commonly represented as overly concerned with their appearance and having refined tastes and elegant mannerisms (Dyer, 2006, p. 358). At a closer look, Flint seems to perfectly fit into this description. Flint is a particularly eloquent speaker who demonstrates great intellect. He uses long phrases, sometimes employing references to literature or renowned figures in his dialogue:

“When the king brands us pirates, he doesn’t mean to make us adversaries. He doesn’t mean to make us criminals. He means to make us monsters. For that’s the only way his God-fearing, taxpaying subjects can make sense of men who keep what is theirs and fear no one. When I say there’s a war coming, I don’t mean with the Scarborough. I don’t mean with King George or England. Civilization is coming, and it means to exterminate us.” (“I”, 2014)

This attribute sets him apart from the majority of his crew who see him as “aloof, too educated” (“I”, 2014). It is also noted by one of the crewmembers that Flint is an avid reader and collects books from the ships he plunders (Ibid.). His interest in fine and luxurious things can also be visually observed through the décor of his cabin.
As seen in Figure 6, Flint’s desk is covered with several volumes, confirming his passion for reading, and also with various decorative objects such as an ornate box and a golden lamp. Other shots of the cabin present a candelabra, a hammock, and a bookcase among other things, therefore making his cabin the most well organized, luxurious, and clean space presented on the ship. Similarly, other visual signs like his costuming also reflect his care for appearances.

In Figure 7 Flint’s immaculate white shirt and long black coat stand in contrast with the washed out and unkempt look of his crewmembers. Moreover, the composition of the shot also sets him apart as the metal bar that obscures the central view of the camera creates a visual division between Flint and his crew. In addition, Flint is not only apart from them, but also above them as the low camera angle positions him at the top of the screen. These visual signs mark Flint as an “other,” someone who stands out through a number of subtle differences from the majority, thus signaling his queer identity.
In episode “XIII”, the romantic relationship between Captain Flint and Thomas Hamilton is revealed through a series of flashbacks. The previous episodes anticipate this revelation by presenting the context in which Flint and Thomas meet, their debates about piracy, their joint effort to restore New Providence Island under British rule and so on. Walker (2018, p. 182) remarks that these debates are queer coded as Thomas uses romantic allusions to describe his political union with Flint, likening the two of them to Adam and Eve: “the Lord beheld the man made in his likeness and He beheld his solitude, and He said 'It is not good that he is alone.' And the moral of the story? Everybody needs a partner. You are the partner assigned to me ...” (“X”, 2015). This comparison blurs the lines of the nature of their partnership, leaving room for a queer reading.

These contextual episodes also anticipate the actualization of the two men’s relationship through the dialogue Flint has with Miranda, Thomas’ wife. Miranda relates to Flint: “I remember what it was like the first time I met him. There’s a feeling one gets when in the presence of the truly great men. It’s something quite indescribable. I imagine you’re having it as we speak” (“IX”, 2015). By mirroring
Miranda’s feelings towards Thomas to those of Flint’s, the series creates a doubling through parallel experiences and feelings between the two characters, signaling an equivalence in their relationship towards Thomas. Moreover, Fradley (2012, p. 295) notes that male identity within the homosocial continuum is formed through an “erotically fraught fascination with other men.” Thus, Flint’s awe for Thomas’ idealism, political passions, and persona serves as subtext for homoerotic desire, enabling him to discover his queer identity.

6.3. Queerbaiting... or not?

Black Sails features a total of five queer characters in its narrative: two of these characters, Max and Eleanor, are introduced from the pilot episode of the series, while Anne is heavily queer coded and her attraction towards Max is hinted at throughout the first season and actualized on screen early in the second season. Therefore, the series establishes a background in which queerness needs not be veiled. And yet, although he is the central character of the series, Captain Flint is the last one to be introduced as queer. I would argue that this is highly unusual and I will examine this representation by identifying the discourses that influence it.

As previously noted, the queer narrative of the series is opened in episode “I” by two female characters. At the end of the episode, they are portrayed in an explicitly sexual scene which is also continued in the beginning of episode “II”. As a consequence, there would be no reason to consider that the series shies away from explicit representations of queer sexuality. However, as Myrvang (2018, p. 40) observes, except for a few moments of modest expression of affection there are no other scenes that explicitly represent the relationship between Flint and Thomas, while there are numerous occasions of female nudity and sex. Myrvang (Ibid.) explains this by remarking that there appears to be an underlying fear or reluctance to fully embrace the idea of homosexuality between men in popular culture, and Ertan (2018, p. 12) also adds that lesbian characters are allowed more freedom to embrace their sexuality on screen.

However, lesbian sexuality and lesbian relationships tend to be fetishized or oversexualized. This social practice of oversexualizing women and female characters can be viewed as an effect of the “male gaze” wherein women situated in
a patriarchal power structure are perceived as objects of male desire and are subordinated to the sexual role this structure assigns onto women (Tyson, 2006, p. 102). Rose (2001, p. 24) states that there exists a voyeuristic tendency of viewing women in visual media wherein “men act and women appear,” while Ertan (2018, p. 12) relates that female sexuality is used to draw in straight male viewership. Thus, by employing numerous instances of female nudity and sexuality, the first season of *Black Sails* tries to establish a male audience who would be more accepting of representations of lesbian sexuality than gay male sexuality.

This is an intriguing practice as it virtually opposes the basis of queerbaiting whereby homoerotic subtext is used to attract queer viewership but queer relationships are not meant to be actualized on screen (Brennan, 2018, p. 189). Yet by explicitly actualizing a specific type of queer relationship, *Black Sails* tries to attract a mainly heterosexual audience. It is also interesting to note that after the first season and, therefore, after establishing a regular audience, the show greatly reduces depictions of sex and nudity to the extent that by the third and fourth seasons they are almost non-existent.

In addition, the scenes where Flint’s sexual identity is revealed need to be placed into context. The first kiss between Flint and Thomas is shown right after Miranda tells Flint:

> “You say you fight for the sake of Nassau [...] for the sake of Thomas and his memory. [...] I think you are fighting for the sake of fighting. Because it’s the only state in which you can function, the only way to keep that voice in your head from driving you mad. [...] The one telling you to be ashamed of yourself... for having loved him.” (“XIII”, 2015)

Unlike Eleanor and Max’s relationship which evolves in the less heteronormative society of the pirate world, Flint’s relationship with Thomas developed in the midst of the homophobic social practices of 18th century England. Consequently, Flint is still struggling with his identity as a queer man and with the tragic circumstances in which his relationship with Thomas ended. Therefore, this scene is placed within discourses of internalized homophobia and identity struggle and, as I have previously argued in another essay, the scene showing the kiss (Figure 8) is shot at
an angle where their faces are partly obscured by shadows, as if to confer that this/moment, as seen through Flint’s memory, is too private and personal to be presented
in full view of the world (Răzman, 2019, p. 10).

Figure 8. Thomas Hamilton (left) kissing James ‘Flint’ McGraw (right). Source:
“XIII”, 2015.

The sequence following the kiss briefly represents the relationship between the two
men, showing them in an intimate but not sexual setting. The sequence makes use
of soft focus and lighting, slow camera movement, and a quiet soundtrack with no
audible dialogue to create a candid effect. Ertan (2018, p. 19) argues that these
techniques present Flint and Thomas’ relationship as tender and loving, subverting
the common representation of gay men as promiscuous and predatory. Relationships between gay men have frequently been represented in American film
and television as toxic or abusive, usually by portraying an older man preying on a
young and often naïve boy (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, p. 88). Thus, by depicting
two men of the same age in a non-sexual context, Black Sails departs from previous
negative representations of gay male sexuality and promotes a more positive, albeit
sterilized and tentative, image of their relationship. While not ideal, this form of representation deconstructs myths regarding the questionable intentions of queer people and reflects a less problematic approach to queerness.

However, the problem still remains in the oversexualized representation of lesbian relationships. The difference between the representation of lesbian sexuality and gay male sexuality in *Black Sails* can be observed by comparing Figure 8 with Figure 9, noting that in the latter Eleanor wears a sheer robe, Max is nude, and her kiss with Eleanor is brightly lit and more sensually presented in the setting of their bedroom, while in the former the two men are fully clothed, their faces partially hidden by shadows, and they are located in the dining room, an otherwise more neutral setting. This striking difference confirms a more voyeuristic approach towards the representation of women in the series which is harmful because it objectifies female characters and it may lead to a fetishized view of lesbian sexuality.

![Figure 9](image-url). Eleanor Guthrie (left) kissing Max (right). Source: “Il”, 2014.

Another interesting point to consider is that all the queer characters in the series are first presented as having some sort of sexual or romantic relationship with a character of the opposite gender. This representation plays on the principles of the heterosexual matrix and makes the audience assume that the characters are
heterosexual by default. By choosing to withhold the reveal of the main character’s queer sexual identity until the series’ second season, the series draws in a heterosexual identifying audience who might otherwise not find a series with a queer protagonist and theme relevant or appealing to them. Thus, Black Sails employs once more a subversive approach to queerbaiting, an approach which some of the series fans took to calling “heterobaiting” (thomassmcgraw, 2017). This representation also presents sexuality as fluid, corresponding to the perspective informed by queer theory that views sexuality as dynamic and socially constructed (Tyson, 2006, p. 335). Therefore, without invalidating its characters’ experiences, Black Sails recognizes that engaging in sexual activities with someone of a different gender does not make the characters any less queer.

6.4. Unbury Your Gays

As a prequel to Treasure Island, Black Sails is expected to work towards placing its characters in a narrative that leads towards the original work. This holds a grim promise for the characters since in Treasure Island Captain Flint is said to have died of alcoholism somewhere in Savannah and John Silver escapes with his life by a narrow margin. Moreover, due to its historical setting, Black Sails also incorporates historic events that a contemporary audience knows are doomed: we know that the Golden Age of Piracy came to an end, we know that the British Empire reasserted its rule over New Providence Island, and we know that Anne Bonny and ‘Calico’ Rackham were captured and hanged for acts of piracy. All these elements point towards a futile endeavor and a tragic end for the series’ protagonists. Walker (2018, p. 178) claims that the pirates’ doomed fate is further underscored by the series’ association of piracy with queer relationships. This is because of the “Bury Your Gays” trope that often condemns queer characters to an untimely death.

In Black Sails, queer relationships also first appear to be ill-fated. Eleanor and Max’s relationship only lasts for two episodes before Eleanor chooses to sacrifice this relationship in order to secure her position of power. Flint’s relationship with Thomas is also shown to have ended tragically with Flint exiled from England and Thomas rumored to have committed suicide after being hospitalized in an asylum. Anne’s relationship with Max is marked as well by uncertainty since Anne’s violent
past and present drag Max into dangerous situations. Thus, everything indicates towards the death of the series’ characters.

However, as Walker (2018, p. 179) remarks, “Black Sails ultimately rejects the literary and historical narratives that shape it; these characters [...] end the series alive, happy, and continuing to resist colonial rule, sailing past the boundaries of the show’s narrative to flourish indefinitely.” Jack, Anne, and Max resolve their differences and establish a successful partnership, both romantically and politically. Flint, while being deposed as captain and leader of the pirate resistance, is nonetheless reunited with Thomas who is alive but unable to leave the plantation in Savannah where he was exiled and hidden by his family. Similar to the way the series subverts the ubiquitous queerbaiting trope, it also rejects the “Bury Your Gays” trope. This decision to give a happy ending to its queer characters might be a direct response to the #LGBTfansdeservebetter campaign launched by The 100 fans one year prior to the release of Black Sails’ final season. Thus, by providing positive representations of queer relationships, the series marks a departure from harmful tropes and engages with the idea that LGBTQ audiences and characters do deserve better.

The only queer character to die in the series is Eleanor. However, Walker (2018, p. 186) argues this by underlining the fact that Eleanor serves as Flint’s reverse: “she rejects sexually and socially queer partnerships in favor of retaining her power by submitting herself to heteronormative patriarchy.” While Flint wages war on the Empire that condemned and led to the dissolution of his queer relationship, Eleanor seeks the Empire’s legitimacy by entering a relationship with the new governor of New Providence Island, a choice which ultimately leads to her death. Therefore, her death does not take place solely for shock value, as it usually does in the case of the “Bury Your Gays” trope (Waggoner, 2018, p. 1877). Instead, Eleanor’s death is used to strengthen the series’ message that hegemonic power leads to the oppression of marginal identities and that resistance is necessary in order to subvert it.

This message and the ways in which Black Sails engages with queer characters and themes make the study of the series socially relevant when accounting for the systemic marginalization of the LGBTQ community in a predominantly heteronormative society and culture like that of the United States. The series
provides queer characters with an agency that was otherwise socially removed from or inaccessible to queer individuals and it subverts a majority of stereotypical narratives that were historically assigned onto queer individuals by hegemonic powers. Thus, the series promotes a sense of empowerment to minority audiences and also spreads awareness and understanding to a mainstream audience. The diversity of queer sexual identities represented in the television series also adds to the overall diversity of queer media representations especially when situating these representations outside the scope of queer cinema and into mainstream media and, consequently, the academic study of this series also provides a contribution to the field of queer media representations and media studies.
7. Conclusion

As elaborated in the previous parts of this paper, societal view on homosexuality in the Western world has, for the most part, been a negative one and this homophobic attitude was made plainly visible across various types of media, ultimately developing into negative tropes which are still reproduced in film and television to this day. This presents a problem in terms of media representation because it not only leads to the association of queer people with harmful views about their identity and intentions, but it also promotes stereotypical views about sexuality and gender in general. For this reason, there exists a present need for fair media representation of queer issues.

The television series *Black Sails* was analyzed in order to discuss the way in which tropes are subverted or reproduced. *Black Sails* features five explicitly queer characters, out of which four are major characters of the series. The television series engages with a vast array of LGBTQ themes such as “coming out”, homophobia, first queer love, self-discovery, and heteronormativity. These themes are commonly encountered in queer cinema, however, they are not as frequent in mainstream media where they are rarely explored in depth. By placing queer narratives in the context of piracy, the series gains a broader scope of representation and provides a diverse way of portraying queer characters on television and departs from conventional queer cinema narratives that mainly revolve around LGBTQ culture.

*Black Sails* employs queer coding through iconic and indexical signs in order to signal, to various extents, the queer sexual identity of some of its characters. These representations are informed to some degree by historical and literary accounts of piracy but they are also influenced by pre-established stereotypical representations of queer characters such as the mannish lesbian trope. The series also reproduces negative representations of lesbian sexuality by portraying lesbian characters and their relationships in an oversexualized manner and mostly for the purpose of attracting a heterosexual male audience. At the same time, the series rejects oversexualized representations of gay male relationships, undermining the portrayal of gay men as predatory and promiscuous, yet the underlying discourses behind this choice are ambiguous.
Nevertheless, the series also harbors positive queer representation by subverting two major media tropes. Firstly, *Black Sails* subverts queerbaiting by explicitly presenting its characters’ queer sexual identities through various media production practices that extend this representation to a mainstream audience comprised of not only queer audiences but also heterosexual audiences. Secondly, the series rejects the “Bury Your Gays” trope by providing its queer characters with relatively happy endings despite the doomed narratives in which they were locked in by previous literary and historical accounts and, therefore, responding to contemporary social demands for fair representation of queerness.

Thus, the series provides balanced and at times innovative representations of queer identity which can signal a change in the way LGBTQ themes and characters are represented in media forms such as film and television. Certainly, as presented in this study, the representation of queer characters on screen has come a long way since the early days of cinema, yet as Benshoff and Griffin (2006, p. 288) also note, there is still room for improvement, especially regarding the representation of lesbian sexuality and queer people of color. While *Black Sails* adds more nuance to the effeminate gay man trope by removing some of its more evidently stereotypical elements and allowing gay male characters to retain their masculinity, it also reinforces the image of the masculine and unfriendly lesbian character showing that more progress is needed in this area.

Nonetheless, because of its diverse and complex engagement with queer characters and themes, *Black Sails* proves to be a valuable source of analysis and the research of this series contributes to the field of Media and Communication studies, particularly queer media representations. However, it is also important to note the limitations of this study. Because this research is based on the case study of a singular television series, the analysis and subsequent findings are difficult to generalize and to apply more broadly to the field. While the selected media tropes are demonstrated through theory to be widely circulating in contemporary film and television, the methods of reproduction and subversion of these tropes presented in this study may be a particularity of *Black Sails* and can be therefore difficult to apply to another case. This limitation has been in part addressed by relating the case study to larger social and historical contexts and previous research that present similar
media production practices and indicate a change in the way queer representation is engaged with in media.

Even so, some other limitations still remain. The focus on the medium of television makes the research harder to relate to film studies that, while greatly influencing representations in television, still have other conventions and regulations. The inclusion of film in this research has been deemed relevant due to the close historical connection between film and television and because of the interdiscursive nature of their representation strategies. Furthermore, the scope of this study is also restrictive because it only focuses on media production in the social and cultural context of the United States. This makes the study more difficult to generalize and it does not offer a comprehensive understanding of a greater social scale.

Moreover, academic sources relating to Black Sails are scarce, a factor which greatly limits the prospects of discussing and analyzing this series within the field of Media and Communication. Yet, this thesis represents a contribution to the study of the television series as a mediated cultural text and invites further investigation and research. The theoretical perspectives from which this study takes its roots mostly address gay and lesbian media representations, however, another particular point of interest would be a discussion surrounding representations of bisexuality and the issue of bisexual erasure. The representation of bisexual identity in Black Sails was touched upon in this study but not fully explored due to formal and temporal constraints. However, this issue could be further explored in a more extensive future research paper. Similarly, an analysis of media effects upon the series' fans would serve as an intriguing research topic that could assess to what extent are queer audiences affected by media representations of queer characters and what is the reception of mainstream audiences towards a series with a large number of queer protagonists.

To conclude, the subject of media representations is deemed important in order to discuss the prevalence of mainly negative representations of queer characters and themes in film and television, and the overarching aim of the current case study is to reflect on how these representations can be redressed. Fair media representation is thus vital in supporting the acceptance of marginalized groups and in promoting understanding of not only different social groups but also of one's own identity.
References


