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## Hybrid Masculinity and Power. Critical Discourse Analysis of the Neoseries *Money Heist*

The basic aim of the present study is to analyse discursive strategies applied by the creators of the neoseries *Money Heist* in constructing hybrid masculinity as well as gender power relations. The article presents the results of the analysis of 43 episodes of the show produced in the years 2017–2021. The discourse of *Money Heist* was studied with the use of the perspective of Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The principal theoretical framework consists of the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001) and the hegemonic masculinity theory (Connell 1987, 2005). The basic research methodology is Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA; Wodak, Meyer 2016) supported by Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA; Jancsary et al. 2016; van Leeuwen 2000). The results of the analysis lead to the conclusion that in making the image of the protagonist and most of the characters in *Money Heist*, the creators used discursive elements derived from hegemonic masculinity and non-hegemonic versions of masculinity. However, in many cases the hybrid images by no means serve to deconstruct the patriarchal status quo, but to mask the patriarchal power.

**Keywords:** category of masculinity, gender relations, power, neoseries, Critical Discourse Analysis

Męskość hybrydowa i władza. Krytyczna analiza dyskursu neoserialu *Dom z papieru*\*

Głównym celem artykułu jest przeanalizowanie strategii dyskursywnych zastosowanych przez twórczynię i twórców neoserialu *Dom z papieru* w konstruowaniu męskości hybrydowej oraz genderowych relacji władzy. Przedstawiono tu wyniki analizy 43 odcinków serialu zrealizowanych w latach 2017–2021. Dyskurs *Domu z papieru* badano

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w perspektywie krytycznych studiów nad mężczyznami i męskością (CSMM) oraz krytycznych studiów nad dyskursem (CDS). Główne ramy teoretyczne tekstu wyznaczają koncepcja męskości hybrydowych (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001) i teoria męskości hegemonicznej (Connell 1987, 2005). Podstawową metodą badawczą jest podejście dyskursywno-historyczne (DHA; Wodak, Meyer 2016), wsparte multimodalną krytyczną analizą dyskursu (MCDA; van Leeuwen 2000; Jancsary et al. 2016). Wyniki analizy prowadzą do wniosku, że w kreowaniu postaci protagonisty oraz większości bohaterów *Domu z papieru* wykorzystywane są elementy dyskursywne pochodzące z męskości hegemonicznej i niehegemonicznych wersji męskości. Jednakże te hybrydowe wizerunki często służą nie dekonstrukcji patriarchalnego *status quo*, lecz maskowaniu patriarchalnej władzy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kategoria męskości, relacje płci, władza, neoserial, krytyczna analiza dyskursu

## Introduction

The neoseries *Money Heist* (original Spanish title: *La Casa de Papel*) is a global socio-cultural phenomenon and has achieved iconic status. In 2020, it was the most popular non-English language series broadcast by the world's largest streaming service Netflix<sup>2</sup>. The first season was produced in 2017 commissioned by the TV station Antena 3, but the Spanish broadcaster abandoned the production of further episodes and resold the rights to the series to Netflix (Točená 2020). The main creator (showrunner) of the *Money Heist* is Alex Pina, a Spanish TV producer, writer and director. The series is set in the present day, mostly in Madrid and the nearby towns. A group of people (most of whom have criminal past), recruited by a mysterious person hiding under the pseudonym of The Professor, raid the Madrid mint and subsequently the Bank of Spain.

In recent decades, television series have been reshaping themselves, with new formats and genres emerging (Arcimowicz 2020). In contemporary culture, the TV series has become one of the most important forms of storytelling about the world and people. Increasingly, series are taking on the function of explaining a complex social reality (Dukaj 2012). At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, new series productions were initiated in the United States and then in other countries, which began to be referred to in the Anglo-Saxon literature as 'complex drama'

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<sup>2</sup> In April 2020, the fourth season of the series was watched on Netflix by 65 million households on average (Butler 2021). In the first quarter of 2021, the number of Netflix subscribers exceeded 207 million (Stoll 2021). Given that in some households two (or even more) people watched the series, and the fact that in many countries there are illegal or 'semi-legal' streaming services offering audio-visual content, it is impossible to determine the exact number of viewers of the *Money Heist*, but it can be assumed that this production was watched by several hundred million viewers.

(Mittell 2006: 33) and ‘quality drama’ (Feuer 2007: 146). In Polish research, this type of production is referred to as *neoserial* (neoseries) (Arcimowicz 2020: 11) or called a ‘post-soap’, which is an abbreviation for ‘post-soap opera’ (Filiciak, Giza 2011: 7; Kaja 2014: 66)<sup>3</sup>. The HBO productions such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* are most often cited among the first neoseries (Feuer 2007; Mittell 2006). Although they have grown out of older television forms, the new series in many cases radically break with this heritage. We find in them both interesting and controversial characters of men and women, often defying unequivocal interpretations (Arcimowicz 2016, 2020; Filiciak, Giza 2011). *Money Heist*, like many other neoseries, is a mixture of different genre conventions. This five-season production can be described as a crime series that also contains elements characteristic of other genres such as thriller, action film and black comedy.

One of the most important factors shaping gender identity nowadays, in addition to family, peer group and school, is the mass media. Michael Kimmel writes: “If masculinity is socially constructed, one of the primary elements in that construction is the representations of manhood that we see daily in the mass media” (Kimmel 1992: xii). As a result of the socio-cultural changes related, among other things, to the emancipation of women and sexual minorities, the category of masculinity is becoming increasingly diverse and complex. The literature has begun to use the term ‘masculinities’, thus emphasising that there are multiple versions of the masculinity as such and that they are historically and culturally variable (Anderson 2009; Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Connell 2005; Connell, Messerschmidt 2005; Elliott 2016; Kimmel 1992).

The main aim of this article is to analyse the discursive strategies used by the creators of the *Money Heist* series in constructing hybrid masculinity and power in gender relations. I am interested in the fissures in the discourse and the manifestations of discursive masking of male dominance and gender inequality.

## Theoretical assumptions of the study

I analyse the discourse of the *Money Heist* series related to masculinity and gender relations using the perspectives of the Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM) and the Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). The basic theoretical framework of my reflections is formed by the theory of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987, 2005) and the concept of hybrid masculinities (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001), which is a development and to some extent a critique

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<sup>3</sup> In the present article, when referring to the *Money Heist*, I most often use the term ‘neoseries’ but also – mainly for stylistic reasons – the terms ‘next-generation series’ and ‘post-soap’.

of Raewyn W. Connell's theory which has dominated masculinities research in the last few decades.

According to Connell, the social order of gender that exists in contemporary societies belonging to Western culture is based on two pillars: the first concerns the domination of men over women, while the second concerns the domination of the hegemonic version of masculinity over other variants of the masculine identity, which have been referred to as: "subordinated and marginalised masculinities" (Connell 2005: 77–81). Hegemonic masculinity is marked by power, authority, aggression, competition, physical prowess and heterosexuality (Connell 1987: 186–187; Nijjar 2018: 3). This version of masculinity may be embodied by men who hold a lot of power, but this cultural pattern is also disseminated and reinforced by the creation of media images of 'tough' men (Connell 1987: 77; Demetriou 2001: 342).

The author of *Gender and Power* argues that hegemonic masculinity represents an ideal model to which a large group of men aspire, but which most of them are unable to realise in the real life. Men who benefit from supporting patriarchy (Connell refers to these benefits as the patriarchal dividend) but who do not embody all the components of the hegemonic masculinity form a category that the sociologist called a "complicit masculinity" (Connell 2005: 79–80).

According to the Australian researcher, subordinated masculinities mainly include homosexual men, but also some heterosexual men who do not meet the criteria for hegemonic masculinity, having the characteristics traditionally perceived as feminine, related to behaviour or physical appearance (Connell 2005: 78–79). Marginalised masculinities include men whose social and/or economic status is low due to their belonging to certain social classes and/or ethnic groups (Connell 2005: 80–81; Demetriou 2001: 341–342).

Connell's theory raised criticism (see Connell, Messerschmidt 2005; Kluczyńska 2017), which resulted in the emergence of new theoretical proposals. Demetrakis Z. Demetriou (2001) believes that Connell's (1987, 2005) assumption of the creation of hegemonic masculinity in relation to femininity and subordinated masculinities is correct. However, in his view, the contemporary hegemonic masculinity: "is a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities in order to ensure the reproduction of patriarchy" (Demetriou 2001: 337).

When the conditions that enable patriarchal reproduction change along the socio-cultural transformations, the hegemonic masculinity changes alike. Demetriou uses the term of "dialectical pragmatism" to describe the ability to incorporate some elements of subordinated and marginalised masculinities into the hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 2001: 345). The researcher deconstructs the binarism concerning the discrepancy between the non-hegemonic masculinities and the hegemonic masculinity, introducing the term of "hybrid masculine bloc"

to refer to the combination of different patterns of men's behaviour (cf. Demetriou 2001; Kluczyńska 2017).

The concept of Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe is an extension of the notion of "hybrid masculinities", this term: "refers to men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges, Pascoe 2014: 246).

Bridges and Pascoe describe three consequences of the proliferation of hybrid masculinities. Firstly, through the "discursive distancing", hybrid masculinities can create the impression that they are cutting themselves off from hegemonic masculinity, when in fact they are supporting it. The creation of hybrid masculinities also results in the "strategic borrowing". Men belonging to privileged groups can create hybrid masculinities by borrowing some of the symbols and elements associated with the versions of masculinity situated lower in the gender order. They can thus expand their masculine capital, but this does not imply a negation of the hierarchy of masculinity. A third consequence of the hybrid masculinities is "fortifying boundaries". Bridges and Pascoe argue that the phenomenon of subordinated masculinities being taken over by white heterosexual men from a privileged group, while only seemingly blurring the boundaries between different unequal status groups, actually serves to conceal and maintain a system of inequality in historically new ways, often using dividing lines related to gender, sexuality, race and social class (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Kluczyńska 2021).

Another theoretical perspective for the research I have undertaken is provided by the assumptions formulated within the Critical Discourse Studies. CDS is: "not interested in investigating a linguistic unit *per se* but in analysing, understanding and explaining social phenomena that are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach" (Wodak, Meyer 2016: 2).

CDS remain faithful to the general tenets of the broadly understood critical theory originating from the Frankfurt School (Reisigl 2017: 48–50; Wodak, Meyer 2016: 6). Adopting a critical stance in CDS implies an in-depth analysis of the data collected, setting it in a socio-cultural context, and clarifying the position of the participants in the discourse. Critical analysis aims to uncover fissures, inconsistencies, contradictions and paradoxes in the internal structures of discourse, and to detect the ideological, persuasive or manipulative nature of discursive practices (Reisigl 2017: 50–51; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 24–25).

CDS perceive the discourse as a non-accidental use of language and a form of social practice, and emphasise that in discourse analysis it is important to understand the context in which the discourse is produced and received (Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 258; Wodak, Meyer 2016: 5). In line with these CDS assumptions, I use a dialectical conception of discourse, according to which discourse is shaped

not only in a contextual – social and cultural – manner, but it also plays itself a role in forming and changing that context (Fairclough, Wodak 1997: 258; Reisigl 2017: 51).

## Methodology of own research

In my research, I used the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). A lot of untrue myths have grown up about the CDA. That is why it has to be clarified that CDA is not a method but a research perspective on which at least several methods are based (Wodak, Meyer 2016: 3). When analysing the neoseries *Money Heist*, I referred to the postulates formulated by representatives of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), which is one of the most prominent methods within the Critical Discourse Analysis (Reisigl 2017: 44). The choice of this method was motivated by the fact that the tools specific to DHA enable the in-depth analysis of media messages and the identification of manifestations of discursive reproduction of power, domination and inequality occurring therein (Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 24–26). Furthermore, DHA allows for the application of different theoretical concepts and methods that are useful in the context of the topic under study (Reisigl 2017: 44–49).

A key element of the DHA is the analysis of the discursive strategies employed by the creators of media messages. Following the views of one of the most prominent representatives of the DHA, Ruth Wodak, it can be said that discursive strategy means systematically repeated ways of using language<sup>4</sup>, it is a more or less defined, consciously adopted programme of action aimed at achieving specific social, political, psychological goals (cf. Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 35). The Austrian researcher's reflections should be supplemented by the observation that discursive strategies can also serve a mercantile purpose, as is the case with many media messages, including the TV series.

Scholars using the DHA generally distinguish five types of strategies (Reisigl 2017: 52; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 55), but due to the specificity of the chosen neoseries and the limited framework of the article, I will focus on three of them, which I consider the most important from the point of view of the topic and aim of the research, namely the nomination, predication and argumentation strategies. “Nomination strategies” refer to identifying people and the way they are represented in the speech from the linguistic point of view. “Predication strategies” involve categorising groups and social actors, assigning them specific characteristics, traits and roles in the discourse. This type of strategy can be combined with positive

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<sup>4</sup> I understand the concept of language broadly, encompassing not only the spoken and written word, but also the non-verbal codes.

statements or negative social stereotypes and prejudices. “Argumentation strategies” are used to justify either positive or negative judgements (Reisigl 2017: 52; Reisigl, Wodak 2016: 54). Ancillary role is played by topoi that act as rules of inference (Krzyżanowski 2010).

In the TV series discourse, in addition to strategies related to the spoken and written word, there are also strategies based on non-verbal codes, which is why in my research, in addition to the DHA, I used some assumptions of the Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) method. I sourced from the MCDA mainly tools for describing the symbolic dimension of object attributes, sociocultural connotations, the visual construction of power and assumptions about stereotyping strategies (Jancsary et al. 2016; van Leeuwen 2000).

By 30 September 2021, which is when this article was completed, a total of 43 première episodes of the *Money Heist* post-soap had been broadcast and I analysed them all.

### Discursive strategies concerning hybrid masculinity in the neoseries *Money Heist*

The male characters appearing in the *Money Heist* represent different versions of masculinity, but an important group can be categorised as hybrid masculinities (cf. The Professor, Denver, Bogota)<sup>5</sup>. Given the large number of characters that appeared in this neoseries over the course of five seasons, I will focus on the character of The Professor who is the protagonist and *spiritus movens* of the *Money Heist* plot. It is a complex figure, and a very intriguing one from the point of view of the research topic I have undertaken. I would like to mention that in order to better illustrate the issues raised, I also include analysis of other characters, where necessary.

The plot of the first two seasons of the *Money Heist* was built around the robbery of the Madrid mint. The outline of the plan for the audacious robbery was created by The Professor’s father, who robbed banks to raise money to pay for his son’s enormous medical expenses. After his father’s death, the plan had been worked out in detail for many years by the post-soap’s protagonist. The Professor is a man in his forties who is the most important character of the *Money Heist*, but information about him is provided slowly and sparingly. It is worth quoting here the words concerning this main character and spoken by Tokyo, who is one of the main female characters and acts as narrator for four seasons: “The Professor, no criminal

<sup>5</sup> The men and women involved in the robbery of the Madrid mint and the Bank of Spain bear aliases that are the names of the capitals of different countries. Female characters are assigned prominent position in this post-soap’s plot, and some of them are leading roles (e.g. Tokyo, Lisbon).

background, no records. He hasn't renewed his ID since he was nineteen. For all intents and purposes, a ghost, but a very smart ghost" (*Money Heist*, S01E01)<sup>6</sup>.

The strategy of indeterminacy makes The Professor remain a rather enigmatic figure to the very end. Although we learn more and more about him as the series' plot develops, we miss the information about his education, livelihood or intimate relationships from before the mint robbery. Indeterminacy also applies to the way the main character's gender identity is created. Actually, from the beginning of this post-soap, we experience a kind of 'tug-of-war', as the *Money Heist* alternates in different proportions, depending on the episode, strategies characteristic of portraying characters embodying hegemonic masculinity and discursive elements from the non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (see Table 1).

Table 1. Essential verbal and visual discursive strategies used in the creation of The Professor's gender identity and interpersonal relationships

Types of discursive strategies	Versions of masculinity referred to by the discursive strategies	
	strategies (or their elements) associated with hegemonic masculinity	strategies (or their elements) associated with non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (and/or traditional femininities)
I. Nomination strategies	Terms indicating power, dominance and control: "brains of the operation", "big brother", "lone wolf", "professor"	Terms in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity: "tender man"
II. Predication strategies	Giving a leadership role Strategy of risk and determination in pursuing the goal Strategy of male superiority over women Negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of women and subordinate masculinities	Giving a leadership role Strategy of risk and determination in pursuing the goal Strategy of male superiority over women Negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of women and subordinate masculinities
III. Argumentative strategies	Topos of the male power Topos of rationality Topos of gender difference (intellectual and physical superiority of men over women)	Topos of shyness and romantic attitude in relationships with women Topos of bodily weakness (resulting from sickliness in adolescence)

<sup>6</sup> English-language translations of the *Money Heist* characters who speak Spanish come from Netflix.



Types of discursive strategies	Versions of masculinity referred to by the discursive strategies	
	strategies (or their elements) associated with hegemonic masculinity	strategies (or their elements) associated with non-hegemonic versions of masculinity (and/or traditional femininities)
III. Argumentative strategies	Topos of the 'weakest link' (for women and men representing subordinate masculinities)	Topos of loss of control over the course of an event Topos of showing feelings and emotions Topos of distancing oneself from physical violence
IV. Visual symbolic strategies Using subject attributes	Elements of the strategy: Motorbikes (black sports motorbike and cross motorbike) Clothing (black leather jacket) Premises and equipment (robbery command room filled with monitors, bug microphones) Gadgets (black motorbike helmet)	Elements of the strategy: Car (1992 red SEAT Ibiza) Glasses Clothing (woollen, usually brown jacket, shirt open at the collar, carelessly tied tie)
V. Visual symbolic strategies related to the body, motor skills and external appearance	Elements of the strategy: Physical fitness and knowledge of Eastern martial arts Resistance to pain Strengthening exercises which also improve physical fitness	Elements of the strategy: Physical appearance typical of a popular culture stereotypic portrait of an intellectual rather than a leader of a criminal group
VI. Visual strategies related to gestures, facial expressions and other behaviours of the main character	Elements of the strategy: Clenched fist signifying obstinacy and stubbornness in pursuing the goal Facial expressions signalling anger and desire to retaliate	Elements of the strategy: Crying and screaming as an expression of despair Facial expressions indicating nervous tension and/or distress Adjusting glasses with fingertips as a sign of nervousness

Source: own elaboration.

In the first episodes, The Professor appears to be a poised, amiable and rather shy person, especially in his relationships with women, but as time goes by, he reveals his other face and then the characteristics typical of the neoseries anti-heroes, such as rationalism, lust for wealth, determination to achieve the goal, lying and insusceptibility to external influences become more and more prominent in his discourse (cf. Arcimowicz 2020; Darska 2012; Major 2011).

The protagonist appears at the very beginning of the first episode of the *Money Heist*. A man pulls up in a car to a woman in her thirties walking along the pavement, nicknamed Tokyo (who is being pursued by the police for shooting an officer),

and offers her a share in the robbery of the Spanish mint. The outward appearance, manner of being and object attributes that the main character possesses (at the beginning) do not indicate that he has power. The Professor does not look like the leader and ‘brains’ of a criminal group about to carry out the biggest robbery in the history of the 21st century, but rather reflect the popular culture stereotypic portrait of an intellectual: he wears a brown woollen jacket, a shirt open at the collar with a rather carelessly tied tie and glasses.

The Professor invites Tokyo into his old and small car, a 1992 SEAT Ibiza, which has nothing to do with the luxury limousines generally used by the leaders of organised crime groups in films and TV series. The literature in sociology/anthropology of objects and gender studies points out that the car can symbolise social and economic status, as well as act as a phallic symbol associated with power and domination (Dant 2007; Komisar 1972). Contemporary culture categorises cars into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, as well into cars for ‘real men’ and ‘effeminate men’ (Arcimowicz 2019). The category of ‘masculine’ cars mainly includes vehicles that have a powerful internal combustion engine, great horsepower and/or are large, while ‘feminine’ and ‘non-masculine’ cars are small and have poor performance, just like The Professor’s car.

In the following episodes of the post-soap, the situation changes. Although The Professor does not have a car that could be a symbol of hegemonic masculinity, he does have two black motorbikes: a sports one (in season one) and a cross-over one (in season four), which can drive very well. The motorbike, like the car, can be an object attribute emphasising hegemonic masculinity. The non-verbal discursive strategies include also colour pattern, which plays a role in the categorisation of vehicles: dark colours, especially black, are associated with cars and motorbikes intended for men, while pastels and white, by virtue of contrast, are reserved for ‘feminine’ vehicles (Arcimowicz 2019)<sup>7</sup>. It is worth mentioning that The Professor, moving on a motorbike, is dressed in a black leather jacket and wears a black helmet.

As the plot of the neoseries develops, terms appear within the nomination strategies to indicate that the main character is the dominant and controlling figure. Tokyo and other gang members call him the “brains of the operation”, the “big brother”, the “lone wolf”. The main character’s hegemonic masculinity is evoked by a scene appearing early in the series. It depicts The Professor walking at the head of a group of eight thieves, heading towards a rented mansion where, under his leadership, they will prepare to rob the mint. It is worth noting that the scene

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<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions to the colour rule described above, but they do not fundamentally challenge the stereotypes associated with the colours of ‘female’ and ‘male’ vehicles.

in question is accompanied by loud rock music and was shot in slow motion to heighten the tension.

Subsequent scenes show the protagonist, who, like an academic lecturer, explains the eight robbers sitting behind the desks what their task will be. The training takes five months, during which the Professor's personality traits such as composure, precision and intelligence are revealed. The adjudication strategy of giving a leadership role to The Professor is clearly visible during the robbery. This strategy is correlated with other strategies such as the strategy of risk and the strategy of determination in pursuit of the goal, linking the figure of the protagonist to both the hegemonic masculinity and the figure of the anti-hero. The plan to rob the Madrid mint appears to have been worked out to the finest detail, but is nevertheless very risky, as no one has carried out such an audacious robbery before.

It should be noted at this point that the discourse of the neoseries is constructed in such a way that the audience is supporting (at least up to a certain point) most of the serial anti-heroes and anti-heroines involved in the mint robbery with moral relativism being the most important argumentative strategy. The morally, legally or socially reprehensible behaviour of The Professor and the members of his gang is sometimes justified by the post-soap's authors who suggest to us that the question of what is and what is not allowed should be considered not only in the context of legal norms, but also in the life circumstances of the given person (cf. Arcimowicz 2020). The topos of special circumstances makes us realise that some of the people involved in the attack are in a difficult financial or family situation and need money to pay for expensive medical treatment or to provide care for their loved ones (I refer here to the living situation of Berlin, Moscow, Nairobi or Bogota).

Creators of the *Money Heist* gain the sympathy of the audience for the series' anti-heroes, including The Professor, by juxtaposing their behaviour with the actions of the authorities. The anti-establishment topos of exposing the hypocrisies, lies and crimes committed by the Spain's ruling elites is extremely important here. Top politicians, high-ranking military officers (e.g. Colonel Luis Tamayo, Colonel Alfonso Prieto), police officers (e.g. Inspector Alicia Sierra) are all people who will not hesitate to do anything to keep their power, and are portrayed as lying, unscrupulous and deprived of moral compass. In contrast to this bleak picture of the Spanish elite, The Professor's gang is referred to in the *Money Heist* discourse as a 'resistance movement', and its members are portrayed as victims of neoliberalism seeking emancipation in the only way that is available to them. Most probably,

this way of constructing the discourse had quite a considerable impact on the success of the series in question, especially among young viewers<sup>8</sup>.

In the first season, The Professor is generally presented as a person in control of events, calm and acting rationally (the topos of rationality), but in subsequent episodes the strategy of “borrowing” (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001), which involves incorporating certain elements from subordinate masculinities into the identity of the main character, becomes increasingly apparent. It is manifested mainly through visual symbolic strategies related to gestures, facial expressions and physiological responses to stress, which makes The Professor, unlike many other pop culture figures representing hegemonic masculinity, not deprived of feelings and emotions.

The situation at the mint turns out to be much more complex than the protagonist of the series had assumed. The escalation of psychological tension resulting in violence leads to fatalities on the part of both the uniformed services and the robbers. These dramatic events were used by the creators of the *Money Heist* to outline the non-hegemonic face of the main character. When some participants in the robbery (first Moscow, then Oslo, Berlin, Nairobi and Tokyo<sup>9</sup>) die as a result of gunshot wounds, The Professor is unable to control his emotions: he cries more than once, his trembling hands and facial grimace emphasise his nervous tension and suffering. Another exemplification of the issue can be found in the scene showing the main character’s reaction to the news concerning the police finding the location of Lisbon’s daughter (Lisbon is The Professor’s partner, and her child is used by the secret services to blackmail the woman). The Professor gets out of the car, then gets down on his knees and begins to scream in an act of despair.

It should be noted at this point that the main character’s plan was to rob the mint without bloodshed or the use of physical violence against the hostages. The Professor, in a conversation with Nairobi (one of the gang members), says that this was his father’s wish: “He wanted me to fulfil his dream without hurting others” (*Money Heist*, S01E12).

The strategy of discursive distancing oneself from an important aspect of hegemonic masculinity, namely the use of violence (Bridges, Pascoe 2014), applies not only to the figure of The Professor, but also to other representatives of hybrid masculinities. Let us note here Denver, a young and impulsive man who do not execute the order given by Berlin (who coordinates the action at the mint on behalf of The Professor) and refrain from killing one of the hostages plotting

<sup>8</sup> I make this thesis on the basis of my own observations and the information contained in the documentary *Money Heist. The Phenomenon* (2020).

<sup>9</sup> There is every indication that Tokyo dies in the fifth episode of the fifth season, but we cannot be entirely sure of anything in the series. Even the death of the hero or heroine can be only apparent (Fiske 1987).

against the persons involved in the robbery. Denver looks after a wounded woman and soon falls in love with her with reciprocity. Confiding in his partner, he states: “When you shoot someone, you feel like shit, you know? You hate yourself for it” (*Money Heist*, S05E03).

Discursive distancing from violence is an important element in the construction of hybrid masculinities, but in the case of The Professor and other characters the declarations are not always confirmed by actions. It should be made clear that the deaths of several people close to The Professor do not dissuade him from pursuing his goal (to rob the mint and the bank). Moreover, when he learns that Nairobi is shot dead by the bank’s security commander, he changes his attitude to one that is more aggressive and marked by violence. During telephone conversations with participants in the attack, he states that Nairobi’s death means war with the police and the military. It is worth quoting here the following words of the series’ narrator: “At that moment, the Professor no longer felt any pain. He was detached from his emotions and operated like a machine” (*Money Heist*, S04E07).

### Gender power relations in the discourse of the *Money Heist*

Power is a social relationship, a relationship between people and social groups, it is related to their position in the social hierarchy, it implies power and the capacity to influence others (cf. Duch-Krzystoszek 2007: 29–30). As it was emphasised by authors dealing with the gender issues, categories of masculinity and femininity in culture are constructed in a relational manner (Bourdieu 2004; Connell 1987; Kimmel 1987).

I would like to now look at The Professor and his relationship with Raquel Murillo, who at the beginning of the series is the antagonist of the main character and by the end of the second season becomes his partner. Inspector Murillo leads a group of police officers tasked with rescuing the hostages and capturing the perpetrators of the robbery; she negotiates with The Professor, leader of the criminal group. The policewoman does not know The Professor’s identity (she only contacts him by phone), which the man tries to exploit. He wants to get close to the divorced woman and thus obtain information on the police’s plans. The Professor follows the woman and enters the pub after her. There, he initiates a conversation and arranges another meeting.

In fact, from the beginning of the post-soap, the strategy of the protagonist’s intellectual superiority over Inspector Murillo becomes apparent, which is linked to the topos of gender difference and the strategy of adjudicating the superiority of the man over the woman. Raquel becomes embroiled in an affair with The Professor, not realising that she is a tool in a game that he – up to a certain

point – is playing. In the course of negotiations related to the robbery, the policewoman gives the impression of being unable to cope with a cunning and intelligent adversary such as The Professor.

In the second season, the thread concerning the relationship between The Professor and Raquel is given more prominence than in the initial episodes of the neoseries. The man stops treating the woman instrumentally and an affection is born between them. However, this relationship is complicated because The Professor cannot unveil his true identity. After some time, Raquel begins to realise that she has fallen in love with the most wanted criminal in Spain. She feels cheated and is distraught, but at the same time determined – despite her feelings for The Professor – to get him arrested. The sixth episode of the second season is particularly important for the further development of the love plot (and other series themes): the policewoman points a gun at the main character, who tries to convince her that his feelings for her are sincere: “It was all planned out, Raquel. Everything. All of it. I’m sorry. It was all planned out, except what happened between us” (*Money Heist*, S02E06).

The man, taking advantage of Raquel’s moment of inattention, his physical strength and knowledge of Eastern martial arts, overpowers the woman, who is knocked down. When the policewoman regains consciousness, The Professor says: “I broke free. I could have escaped. I could have killed you, Raquel” (*Money Heist*, S02E07).

The man gives the policewoman her gun and walks away. The thread described is important because it implicitly reveals discursive strategies that affirm male power and dominance. We can speak of a patriarchal ideology here, because ultimately the man is the ‘master’ of the situation and can decide the woman’s fate. Furthermore, we deal here with the strategy of negative stereotyping women (Eunson 2016), when Raquel is portrayed as being out of control of her emotions and weak in contrast to The Professor, who is poised and strong (both mentally and physically). These strategies resonate strongly in season three, in which The Professor and Raquel are already a couple and the now former policewoman adopts the nickname Lisbon. The transformation of the series’ character from a policewoman to a gang member and partner of its leader was dictated not only by her feelings for The Professor, but also by her disillusionment with the corrupt public institutions.

The protagonist of the series, as in the previous seasons of this post-soap, directs the robbery of the Bank of Spain from afar, but this time he is assisted by Lisbon. The two move around the country in a camper van (so to confuse the police), equipped with the latest electronic devices.

From season three onwards, it is the uncompromising and devious police inspector Alicia Sierra who becomes The Professor’s main antagonist. Sierra’s actions, which are, let us add, often illegal, result in the couple being ambushed and having to flee. Lisbon is captured by the police. Unlike the Professor, she does not manage to lose

the police pursuit (she cannot climb a tree). What is revealed here, once again, is a strategy of male superiority over women concerning intellectual supremacy and greater physical fitness.

Thanks to a clever plan by The Professor, Raquel is recaptured (in the fourth season of the series) from a prison convoy. However, this is not the end of the main character's troubles. Well along in her pregnancy, the tenacious Sierra discovers the gang leader's hideout. The surprised man is captured by the policewoman. It seems that this time The Professor will be defeated, but the course of events changes radically as the pregnant woman goes into labour. The Professor cleverly plays up the situation that has arisen and the policewoman, seeing that she cannot handle the birth herself, frees The Professor and puts herself at his mercy. We can thus speak here of a topos of gender difference (the woman giving birth is helpless) combined with a strategy of the superiority of man over woman (intellectual, but also due to anatomical differences between the sexes).

Not all power relations relating to gender categories are interactions between women and men. Relationships within a group of men or women can also be of gender nature, as exemplified by the hierarchy of different versions of masculinity among men (Connell 2013: 129).

In the discourse of the *Money Heist*, the lowest place in the hierarchy is occupied by subordinate masculinity, represented (at least up to a certain point) by the twenty-five-year-old man nicknamed Rio. This man with outstanding IT skills is supposed to be responsible for breaking electronic security at the mint. The sensitive and romantic Rio, who is partnered with Tokyo, is captured by the police in the third season of the post-soap. Thanks to the negotiations of The Professor, who offers to hand over the compromising documents to the state authorities, Rio is freed. Let us note that of the dozen or so people who make up (over the five seasons of the series) the criminal group, the police arrest only women and a man who represents subordinate masculinity. We can speak here of a strategy of stigmatisation combined with the topos of the 'weakest link'; this term is actually used in the discourse of the series to describe Lisbon and Rio. Both are mainly driven by emotion in their behaviour and their actions often contradict the precise plan of action outlined by The Professor who remains rational.

## Discussion

The existing theoretical background seems sufficient for a sound analysis of most TV series characters. However, in the *Money Heist* (as in many other post-soaps) we encounter (anti-)heroes – important for the development of the plot – whose

masculinity is difficult to define, not only because of the mixing of different strategies in the discourse, but also because of theoretical and methodological problems.

In the neoseries in question, we find the characters of Berlin and Palermo. These men behave in a highly hegemonic manner for a long time, but it should be noted that Palermo is a declared gay man, while Berlin is most likely a bisexual one. According to Connell (1987, 2005), only heterosexual men can be representatives of the hegemonic masculinity. This position is disagreed with by other representatives of the CSMM, e.g. Demetriou believes that hegemonic masculinity is not always a conglomerate of practices carried out exclusively by heterosexual men. According to this sociologist, hybrid images appearing in popular culture can combine with non-heteronormativity, but at the same time be a certain mutation of the hegemonic masculinity (Demetriou 2001).

It is worth adding that the patriarchal and hegemonic image of Berlin is blurred over time by the borrowing of elements other than the bisexuality from the non-hegemonic versions of masculinity. It turns out that Berlin suffers from an incurable disease, is able to externalise emotions and feelings, and is an aesthete who enjoys painting and drawing. It can therefore be said that in the discourse of the *Money Heist*, he becomes another representative of the hybrid masculinities after The Professor and Denver. Hybridisation is thus a strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy, and hegemony reproduces itself through, among other things, hybridisation (Bridges, Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001; Kluczyńska 2021).

It should be noted that the creators of the *Money Heist* use a queerbaiting strategy, popular in the series format today and consisting of 'luring' but also 'confusing' and/or 'teasing' queer audience by suggesting in veiled form the non-heteronormative identity of the characters (Kobus 2017)<sup>10</sup>. This strategy applies to the character of Berlin, but also up to a certain point to The Professor, because at the beginning of the series one gets the impression that he is an asexual person. The *Money Heist* discourse also features female characters whose sexual identity, at least some of the time, is undefined (e.g. Tokyo and Nairobi). Aldona Kobus, analysing the commercial dimension of non-heterosexual heroes and heroines of neoseries, writes: "The ambivalence of queerbaiting captures the attitude of producer forces towards queer audiences, who are seen, on the one hand, as an attractive market and on the other as an unbearable burden to be accepted by the cisheterosexist hegemony that largely dictates what is accepted in the media content" (Kobus 2017: 144–145).

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<sup>10</sup> In the 21st century, there are a growing number of series aimed primarily at non-heterosexual audiences (e.g. *Queer as Folk*, *The Bisexual*, *Tales from San Francisco*, *Special*) in which non-heteronormative male and female heroes and heroines are the primary characters, but these productions (often referred to as the "LGBT series") generally do not have the same reach as series that are by default aimed at a broad audience.



The emergence of new characters with complex identity can be interpreted in the context of the socio-cultural changes that have taken place over the last few decades in the Western world; I am referring to greater moral freedom (including sexual freedom) and more identity patterns (including gender ones). It can be said that post-soaps are, on the one hand, a reaction to socio-cultural transformations and, on the other hand, a response to the changing preferences of the audience who experiences these transformations (Arcimowicz 2016; Kaja 2014). However, it should not be forgotten that neoserries are commercial cultural texts, in the vast majority of cases they are not created to break the status quo, but to arouse emotions and attract the attention of viewers.

### Concluding reflections

The creators of the *Money Heist* employ varying conglomerates of discursive strategies in creating the image of the protagonist, but also of the other characters, in each episode and season. They accentuate the character's personality traits and subject attributes differently, bringing one or the other to the fore. The male figures represent different versions of masculinity with hybrid images being the most prominent. The characters' relationships with women or other men (in the case of non-heterosexual men) are compiled, which is a feature present in many post-soaps.

In the *Money Heist* and other neoserries (we can point to such productions as: *The Bridge*, *Ray Donovan*, *Ozark*, *Elite*, *New Amsterdam*) the category of masculinity is negotiated and appears in new guises. However, these new images of men in many cases do not serve at all to deconstruct the patriarchal gender order, but rather to mask the patriarchal power. The incorporation of some elements from subordinated and/or marginalised masculinities into the still prevailing cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity and the magnification of non-heteronormative images of men in neoserries, more often serves the reproduction of hegemony, patriarchy and capitalism than the emancipation of the non-hegemonic masculinities (cf. Arcimowicz 2020; Demetriou 2001). The strength of the hegemonic masculinity lies in its ability to adapt to changing socio-cultural conditions and should be understood as a block capable of embracing what is useful for the project of domination at any given historical moment (Demetriou 2001: 348–349).

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