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**REDIRECTING THE GAZE:  
THE WOMAN AND THE GLADIATOR ON TELEVISION IN THE TWENTY-FIRST  
CENTURY**

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INTRODUCTION

Every woman loves a gladiator. This common knowledge underpins the first-century CE Roman poet Juvenal's satirical portrait of Eppia, the runaway senator's wife who abandoned her husband and family because she loved the 'steel blade', and whose life story should persuade Postumus away from the insanity of marriage, lest he find himself raising a gladiator's son (*Satire* 6.80-113).<sup>1</sup> And its broader truth is suggested in a boast made in graffiti at Pompeii that 'Cresces the net-fighter is doctor to the night-time girls, the day-time girls, and all the others' (*CIL* IV.4353).<sup>2</sup> While there may be elements of fantasy in both proclamations, the satirist and seducer both trade on the allure of the gladiator to susceptible women. Sexual desire arises, moreover, in moments of viewing. Thus, for Ovid's predatory lover, the games, where women 'come to see and to themselves be seen', offer a prime occasion to pursue an erotic advantage, as 'Venus's boy' fights upon the forum sands (*Ars Amatoria* 1.97-9, 163-70). And it was the passing glimpse of a gladiator that led Faustina to conceive a passion that allegedly resulted in the birth of her gladiator-emperor son, Commodus (*Historia Augusta*, 'Life of Marcus Aurelius' 19.1-2). In the Roman imagination, visual encounters spark female desire; sexual encounters follow.

Modern representations of encounters between women and gladiators follow a similar paradigm. For example, in 2010 the author William Napier was invited by the *Mail Online* to narrate the last day of a gladiator whose remains had been uncovered in the gardens of York Museum.<sup>3</sup> Writing under the headline 'Lusted after by upper-class women but doomed to a gory end... the brutal life of a British gladiator', Napier describes women who 'watched breathlessly' when they visited Marco in his barracks on the night before his final fight; women who 'could not take their eyes off these beasts among men' and were permitted only to watch gladiatorial bouts from the back of the amphitheatre 'in case they should become over-heated by the spectacle below'; and 'spellbound' women who presented themselves to Marco and returned to their unknowing husbands, their 'eyes still shining with pleasure'.<sup>4</sup> One might compare this reworking to the principal narrative built around the remains of a gladiator and a bejewelled woman found in the barracks at Pompeii. In the romantic imagination of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, they could only have been lovers.<sup>5</sup> However, written in a pacy style to titillate readers at the sensationalist news website, more renowned for nude photos and sexposés, Napier's short story reworks older patterns to fit tabloid tropes about female promiscuity.<sup>6</sup>

The foregrounding of the women's gaze by Napier also reflects its wider elevation within a cultural milieu informed by two centuries of visualization, in painting and then film. From the front-row Vestal Virgins in the French painter Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Pollice Verso* ('Thumbs down', 1872) who stare intently at the triumphant gladiator and his victim, condemning him to death with a brandished thumb; to the well-dressed women in British artist Simeon Solomon's *Habet!* ('He is hit!', 1865) who stare outwards from their box and respond to the off-stage action with a mix of consternation (hands clutched to throats, brows furrowed), feral excitement (eyes lit up, teeth bared), and languorous desire (eyes heavy, mouth slightly upturned); to the women in the Italian Francesco Netti's *Lotta di gladiatori durante una cena a Pompeii* ('Gladiatorial fighting during a dinner party at Pompeii', 1880) who crowd around a bare-chested gladiator, as a drunken *soirée* unfolds in the background and the corpse of his defeated opponent is dragged away: across these canvases, the women's gaze marks their agency and generates narrative. Furthermore, their lusty responses to fighting and death establish a moral perspective – and a frisson of excitement – in their transgression of Christian propriety.<sup>7</sup> By setting up women as viewers, nineteenth-century painters moved beyond the confines of Roman art, where single gladiators and combat scenes provide the near-exclusive focus in mosaics, frescos and funeral reliefs.<sup>8</sup> While the body of the gladiator remains on display (even if implied rather than shown, as in

*Habet!*), it is integrated into a wider narrative and moralizing scheme that is activated by the impassioned female gaze.

Along with the elaborate architecture which authenticated new filmic representations of ancient Rome, these vectors were imported into Hollywood's Golden Age epics, where women joined men in the imperial box and in the serried ranks as eager spectators to the mauling of Christians by lions, in further exemplification of Roman depravity. So, in *Quo Vadis* (dir. M. LeRoy, 1951), slaughter in the arena before a mixed jeering crowd follows Nero's false indictment of the Christians for his own burning of Rome;<sup>9</sup> plus, it offers an occasion both for Christian resistance and the emperor's overthrow. Alternatively, in the politically loaded morality tale *Spartacus* (dir. S. Kubrick, 1960), where a private display staged for visiting Roman aristocrats at Batiatus' gladiatorial training school (*ludus*) provokes revolt, the gaze of individual women is key. In a much discussed scene,<sup>10</sup> the richly dressed Claudia (Joanna Barnes) and Helena (Nina Foch) choose their fighters for the match. Shots of the women looking through cage bars cut seamlessly to shots of each roughly-garbed slave; the bars on each edge of the screen establish the man so-presented as the object of their gaze. Their sexual delight is evident in long looks from beneath half-closed eyes, parted lips, and statements of appreciation and anticipation: 'Oh, they're magnificent!' 'Don't put them in those suffocating tunics. Let them wear just enough for modesty.' Their gaze is also proprietorial: 'I prefer that one', 'Give me that one', 'I'll take him. I want the most beautiful. I'll take the big black one'. Of the men, only one stares directly back in close-up. This is the titular hero, the 'impertinent' Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) who will soon lead the rebellion. In meeting Helena's gaze, Spartacus refutes her visual mastery, although he will soon fall victim to the women's merciless stares when set to fight Draba (Woody Strode) in the arena. There, however, he will also be under the worried eyes of Varinia (Jean Simmons), whose conflicted compulsion to watch and to tear her gaze away from the brutal spectacle, conveyed through a series of close-ups, illustrates concern for her friend and future lover. The predatory gaze of the Romans contrasts with the horrified and loving gaze of Varinia. Along with Spartacus' rebellious stare, each advances the characterisation and the film's narrative trajectory, within which the former gladiators, as victims of the 'disease called human slavery', strive (like good Americans) for freedom from the 'tyranny of Rome'.<sup>11</sup>

The modern mediatization of the relationship between women and gladiators through the gaze thus complicates the influential viewing model presented by the feminist critic and film-maker Laura Mulvey in her seminal article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'. Informed by psychoanalysis, Mulvey proposed that in cinema the viewer is automatically co-opted into a masculine viewing position, as the woman appears on screen as a subject of desire for the male protagonist.<sup>12</sup> And yet, in Roman gladiator stories, it is women who look, and their looks have consequence. Their gaze may convey sexual desire or lust for death (or a combination of the two), or it may suggest other drives and emotions, depending on the character. Moreover, it exists within a wider economy of viewing in which both men and women are implicated. Certainly, as Hark observes for *Spartacus*, within a wider reading that inverts Mulvey's hypothesis by highlighting the objectified male body, this economy may ultimately remain patriarchal.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Varinia's gaze affirms Spartacus' masculinity. However, within that economy, the gaze is constructive: gendered relationships are established within an intradiegetic frame that directs interpretation. As in our opening examples, to map the female gaze – to ask who it belongs to, where it is directed, who returns or avoids it, and what are its effects – is to acquire perspectives on gender relations within the framework of projected moralities. It is from this vantage point and with this mode of inquiry that the current investigation into the depiction of relationships between women and gladiators in twenty-first-century television proceeds, focusing on the historical drama series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (STARZ, 2010) and the competitive reality show *Bromans* (Electric Ray, 2017).

The present study thus picks up where feminist criticism of Mulvey began: seeking diversity and specificity between and within representations, outside of a model that demands all viewers be men (or 'masculinized' women) and all women be objects (or 'feminized' men), and all men and women are the same, regardless of social status, ethnicity, or age.<sup>14</sup> Already, working within and beyond Mulvey's model, a recent study of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* has argued for the implication of its voyeuristic female gaze within a network of power relations that expose the corruption of Rome (masters exploit slaves, regardless of their gender) and serve a feminist agenda (women enjoy sex and enjoy watching sex).<sup>15</sup> Yet, as the following analysis of *Spartacus* and *Bromans* will show, the female gaze

can convey a range of conditions and have various consequences. Active within the specific genre frameworks and in different narrative contexts, and directed by and towards particular characters, the female gaze may be desiring or loving or hostile, and it may empower or disempower its male recipient, or even be withheld to his detriment. Furthermore, when both television programmes are viewed in tandem, *Spartacus'* gender politics appear less straightforwardly progressive, and, along with *Bromans*, more reflective of the particularities of gender relations and identities for both women and men within today's postfeminist environment. Subjecting the relationship between the woman and the gladiator on television to our critical gaze reveals its continuing implication within popular moralities, shaped now by the preoccupations and anxieties of the twenty-first century.

#### FEMALE AGENCY AND THE SUFFERING SELF IN *SPARTACUS: BLOOD AND SAND*

*Spartacus* (2010-2013) is a historical drama and action series created by Stephen S. DeKnight and Rob Tapert for STARZ, the US premium cable and satellite network, based on the life of the Thracian gladiator who led a slave rebellion in the Italian peninsula from 73 to 71 BCE. Set primarily in the *ludus* and arena in the Roman town of Capua, the first of four seasons, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*, covers the period of Spartacus' life as a gladiator: from his desertion from auxiliary service in the Roman army, after the commander Glaber breaks his promise to protect the Thracians, and his subsequent sale to the *lanista* Batiatus (in episode one), through his training and tribulations on and off the arena floor (across the season), to his instigation of revolt as a culminating act of vengeance (in the thirteenth and final episode).<sup>16</sup> It is within these symbolically resonant spaces and between the meagre points preordained by the fragmentary historical narrative that relationships develop between women in the household of Batiatus and the gladiators who inhabit its lower realms.<sup>17</sup> Written, acted and filmed in a melodramatic mode,<sup>18</sup> the action fosters high emotion amongst characters that enable viewers 'to *feel* the difference between compelling moral sides'.<sup>19</sup> While Spartacus (played by Andy Whitfield) offers the primary locus of emotional response and affect, befitting his role as protagonist, pains and pleasures are experienced across the ensemble cast. As a result, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* integrates a familiar masculinist narrative predicated upon "masochistic" spectacles of heroically suffering white men' into a complex scenario in which male and female characters of different wealth and social statuses possess ambitions, form relationships, and experience setbacks.<sup>20</sup> The result is a wide range of subject positions for viewers of any gender to align with,<sup>21</sup> as they navigate the moral terrain of human action on display in the villa, the barracks and the arena over the developing series. Thus, when women look at gladiators on-screen, it is as characters subject to the viewers' evaluatory gaze. To dissect the female gaze thus requires attention to individual characters acting in discrete moments within the forward-moving story.

Ilythia (Viva Bianca) is a central female character in this first season, and it is significant that during the opening minutes of 'The Red Serpent' (episode 1), she is sitting in the front row of the elite box in the arena, staring intently at the mortal combat. With the majority of this sequence focused upon what the prisoner waiting below sees and hears,<sup>22</sup> this constitutes a fleeting glimpse. However, it anticipates Ilythia's viewing position in the closing scenes when the episode returns from the lengthy flashback that explains how the prisoner arrived there. By this point, the pursuit of pleasure and a need for status have been established as Ilythia's primary goals. Her entrance early in the episode comprises a surprise visit to her husband Glaber (Craig Parker) in his military tent. Ilythia captures the Legatus' attention by moving in close, making eye contact and stealing kisses, before eagerly offering up her luscious naked body to his gaze and touch; all the while she persuades him to abandon the Thracians and seek more glorious victories elsewhere (and in doing so sets in motion events leading to Spartacus' defection and capture). Already she is a manipulator of the gaze. Now, holding Glaber's hand, as the ragged crowd roar all around, Ilythia fixates on the gladiatorial contest, smiling and leaning coquettishly forward when one of the Thracians is killed, and watching in anticipation as the four gladiators move in on the prisoner. Ilythia's gaze turns apprehensive only when the Thracian deserter wins and thereby thwarts Glaber's revenge for perceived humiliations, receiving at the same time his new name, Spartacus. These are pregnant moments, during which Ilythia, the woman who stares at gladiators in the arena, is positioned, via the long visual tradition reactivated here, as a decadent Roman and, through her specific visual responses, as a reveller in bloody death. It also offers the first indication of an antagonism with Spartacus, who, as the series progresses, becomes subject to a more vindictive gaze (see below).

In episodes that follow, Ilythia's quest for amusement leads her into ever closer contact with the gladiators who simultaneously fall more intimately under her gaze and become subject to her desire. Left to her own devices in provincial Capua, with Glaber away on campaign, Ilythia, not just a commander's wife but also senator's daughter, becomes prey to the would-be social climbers Batiatus and Lucretia (John Hannah and Lucy Lawless).<sup>23</sup> The attempts by this married pair to foster her embryonic fascination with gladiators to their advantage lead to a series of viewing encounters wherein the direction and intent of the gaze is reinforced by the dialogue. The potential first reveals itself in 'Sacramentum Gladiatorum' (episode 2) when Ilythia is waiting in the villa with Lucretia, whom she recognizes as a kindred spirit: not 'a proper Roman woman' after all. Drawn by shouts and grunts, Ilythia goes out to the balcony which overlooks the *ludus*. Following first behind and then cutting to a close-up of Ilythia's face, with eyes widening and lips parting, the camera reveals her enthrallment at what she sees: pairs of muscled men fighting with wooden swords and shields. It is a transgressive and voyeuristic moment: forbidden from the *ludus* by her father, Ilythia now observes without being observed, the overpowering sounds and smells leading her to wonder at this 'fever dream'. Significantly, when Glaber fetches her, she protests 'I want to watch the gladiators!', before kissing Lucretia on the lips: her gaze lingering for a moment on the woman who can offer her entry into this new world of visual (and erotic) delights.

From her higher vantage point and status, Ilythia occupies a position of power over the men she describes as 'animals' and 'beasts' (compare the film *Spartacus*, and Napier's short story, discussed above).<sup>24</sup> And yet, nurtured by Lucretia, her captivation also leads to her ensnarement. Two events at a pre-games party in 'Legends' (episode 3) raise the stakes, when the guests generally and Ilythia specifically are offered invitations to look and touch. As during training, the gladiators are dressed in shorts, their muscled torsos oiled for the occasion. While in the background, women take advantage of the opportunity to caress Spartacus, Ilythia favours his rival Crixus (Manu Bennett):

Ilythia: Your Gaul is of a fine cut, is he not?

Lucretia: None finer in all the Republic.

Ilythia: Such a man! I tremble to see him in the arena.

Lucretia: As do we all.

As she expresses her desire, the camera again focuses on Ilythia's eyes as they take in Crixus' body; her gaze, and then her fingers, linger on his chest and she only fleetingly meets his eyes. In the subsequent sex scene, when gladiator Varro (Jai Courtney) and an unnamed female slave are forced to perform for a Roman crowd, it is again the powerful male body that merits Ilythia's ocular delight ('I've never seen a gladiator fuck before. Look at the way he rams her. Like an enraged bull.') and draws her touch. As elsewhere noted, this scene of sexploitation clarifies the power relationship of the Romans and the slaves,<sup>25</sup> and the final exchange of gazes between an aroused Ilythia and baleful Varro reinforce this. But Ilythia's demand 'Can he do it again? Make him do it again', as she for the first time looks Varro in the eyes, also marks her compulsion towards the 'unimaginable pleasures' promised by Lucretia.

The objectification of male bodies by Roman women during the party scene might be read as a productive inversion of the authoritative viewing position traditionally afforded to men over female bodies in the visual arts. The problematics now associated with this dynamic, stimulated particularly by Mulvey's feminist deconstruction, are thus cast onto the Romans (male and female), whose superior power is crystalized in Ilythia's fervent gaze. However, the viewing dynamics at the party are complicated by the presence of other spectators. In the scene with Crixus, these are Lucretia, whose troubled gaze follows Ilythia's hands as they touch her gladiator-lover, and Naevia (Lesly-Ann Brandt), a slave with whom Crixus is developing a personal relationship. As they take their leave, Ilythia and Lucretia each train desiring eyes on Crixus, but Naevia looks on more tentatively, and Crixus reciprocates with a smile. Then again, Ilythia also exchanges stares with Spartacus. Completely disregarding the body that so enchants other women, she instead states disgruntledly 'The Thracian yet lives', before dismissively asking 'is there nothing more of interest to see?' Looking directly back (echoing the insolence shown by Kirk Douglas' character in the film, above), Spartacus remains silent and brooding, in keeping with the menace suggested by the accompanying synthetic musical shimmer. Thus, while sexual objectification is one mode of viewing, there is diversity in how women look – and even how a single woman looks – at gladiators. The female gaze might convey sexual

desire, love, worry or hostility, depending on the characters' developing relationship. Already by episode three, this is morally coded.

The emotions and tensions and morality underpinning both scenarios are given greater play in 'Shadow Games' (episode 5), when Spartacus and Crixus, garbed only in their underpants, are presented for a private viewing by Ilythia and Lucretia, richly dressed and reclining, with Naevia standing to attention behind. The set is sparse and darkly lit, and Ilythia dominates the scene, while the two other women look on with visible discomfort. First, Ilythia compels Spartacus to look at her when she moves up close and describes the pleasure she will later take in reporting the very moment of Spartacus' death in the arena to Glaber, 'when we are entwined in our bed'. Next, she demands Crixus disrobe. After laughing to see his fully naked body, she confidently approaches, walking around and touching Crixus' torso, whilst surveying his whole body and exclaiming breathily, 'Hard like marble. Would that every man were carved so'. With this evaluation, Ilythia raises the gladiator into the epitome of the Classical masculine form, as imagined in the short film *Olympia: Fest des Völker* (1936) by the Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl, when Myron's Discobulus ('discus thrower') statue resolves into a naked male athlete,<sup>26</sup> and echoed in the veneration of the 'physical prowess, power and dominance' that transferred from Polyclitus' Doryphorus ('spear carrier') into the hyper-muscular bodies of the Spartans in the film *300* (dir. Z. Syner, 2006):<sup>27</sup> a veneration, through the Classical peplum heroes of the 1950s and 1960s, that is more widely found within the 'indefatigable' and 'invincible' 'hard body' of the male Hollywood lead who is 'heroic, aggressive and determined'.<sup>28</sup> Yet, by contrast to all these examples, Crixus stands erect, motionless and impotent. Locked in position by Ilythia's gaze he is unable, through lack of action, to realize this heroic identity.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, he is in danger: for this time, Ilythia's sexual desire for the gladiator contains a death wish. When Lucretia asks whether Ilythia might intercede to have Crixus removed from his fight with Theokoles, nicknamed the Shadow of Death, an undefeated gladiator who might kill him, Ilythia replies, 'I long to see it.' Unlike Lucretia and Naevia, Ilythia has no affection for the man, only desire for his powerful gladiator body and the pleasures in sex and death that it promises.

Furthermore, Ilythia's gaze brings death directly to the trainee gladiator Segovax (Mike Edward) and indirectly to Varro. Both are a consequence of her growing hatred for Spartacus, whom she blames for her husband's dishonour, which leads to mockery by her friends (in 'Mark of the Brotherhood', episode 8). In the first instance, having chosen the well-endowed Segovax from a line-up of 'spectacles' offered to her for purchase by Batiatus, she promises his freedom if he will murder Spartacus. When a botched attempt results in his castration and crucifixion, Ilythia shows no remorse,<sup>30</sup> as she turns away sharply from the bloody sight of Segovax's exposed and mutilated form and the condemned man's searching gaze. Segovax's body, once purchased, is hers to view and discard. Secondly, the seduction of Numerius (Liam Powell) in a bathing pool on his coming-of-age birthday – replicating the scene in episode one when Ilythia reveals her body to her husband, firmly locking the male gaze – brings about the death of Varro, when the biddable young lover, acting on Ilythia's request, rules that Spartacus end their play fight by executing his best friend ('Party Favors', episode 10). The fraught scene is replete with close-ups of all the principle characters, as they struggle to understand the shocking turn of events and comply with the powerful Romans' demands. Unsurprisingly, when it comes to a stop, the swirling camera that expresses Spartacus' emotional turmoil as he looks around a room full of happy people clapping the result comes to rest upon the smiling face of Ilythia. Where once she gazed upon Varro with desire, she now revels in the gladiator's death for the pain she sees it brings her enemy.

In sum, Ilythia's sexual objectification of the gladiators is concomitant with a denial of their humanity. Under her gaze, men who otherwise form intense bonds of love and friendship and demonstrate moral probity are reduced to animals or statues. Indeed, when Ilythia is lured into having sex with a gladiator, it is again as a statue that the man she thinks is Crixus appears: gold-painted, he stands stock still, his face hidden behind a golden mask (episode 9, 'Whore').<sup>31</sup> However, Ilythia's eyes can also convey deeply felt emotion, such as confusion and horror, when that man is revealed to be Spartacus. Furthermore, her gaze also has persuasive effects, leading men to acts of folly that harm Spartacus, but also ultimately themselves (Glaber's ruinous military venture; Numerius' murder by Varro's vengeful wife). And it is met by resistance and hostility. This woman's gaze is constitutive of her character, at the same time as it governs her variously textured relationships with gladiators.

The same might be said for Lucretia and Naevia, in the loving gaze they each turn towards Crixus. However, there is a crucial difference in how their gaze is returned. Whether watching from the balcony or from the box in the arena, Lucretia's eyes are fixed on Crixus, the Champion of Capua, showing concern when he hits the floor during Spartacus' final test to become a gladiator (episode 2) and pleasure in his victory against the same opponent at the Vulcanalian games (episode 3), for example. By contrast, whenever Crixus looks upwards from the sands his eyes ultimately rest upon her attendant, Naevia. This disjunction runs through every encounter between them. As his *domina*, or mistress, Lucretia demands his attention. In the scene that sets the terms of this relationship (episode 3), Lucretia moves into the light, revealing her breasts through an open tunic, while Crixus is in the shadows, so that his body cannot be fully seen. Yet, the conventionality of this position, with the male character viewing the female object of his gaze, is unsettled when Lucretia moves forward to meet her lover's gaze (like Ilythia towards Glaber and Numerius). Although Crixus says his 'blood rises', thinking of the 'touch of your lips, your breasts, and all of the pleasures below', he has already established he will do 'whatever *domina* desires'. Correspondingly, it is Lucretia who initiates the sexual encounter: 'I need your cock inside me and I need it now'. Crixus actively obliges, but this is a semblance of desire. Unbeknownst to Lucretia he arrives late to their tryste because he has been initiating conversation with Naevia; and as this new relationship develops he finds it more difficult to conduct the original affair. So, when Lucretia offers herself to him (episode 5), he pleads distraction ahead of a difficult opponent. Lucretia's eyes moisten and waver as she contemplates his death and foregoes pleasure (and the possibility of impregnation) to ensure his safety. Even after the betrayal is revealed, and Naevia taunts her that Crixus 'never loved you, he only did as commanded', Lucretia's eyes flinch when they watch Crixus flogged (episode 12, 'Revelations'). Crixus, however, shows how little affection he has for Lucretia when he gazes straight into her eyes and stabs her in the stomach, killing their unborn child ('Kill them All', episode 13). Unlike Ilythia, Lucretia's desire for the gladiator is mingled with love; but founded upon inequality and compulsion, and ending with the beating and expulsion of Naevia, it is just as exploitative. Like all the Romans slaughtered in the slaves' vengeful rampage, she reaps an appropriate reward.

By contrast, the reciprocity underpinning Naevia and Crixus's relationship is encapsulated by their mutual gaze. Although Crixus reveals he had previously seen Naevia accompanying her mistress to the games, they first encounter one another on-screen when their eyes meet midway between the sands and the balcony that separates them (episode 3). Even when Naevia explains why she cannot enter into a relationship with the gladiator, they look each other in the eye, as they do when they kiss (episode 4), and during stolen conversations across the bars of the gate that separates the gladiators from the main house (and so symbolize the barriers to their relationship set by their status as slaves: episode 8), and eventually, in the snatched moments before they make love (episodes 9 and 10). Matching findings by experimental psychologists that sharing a prolonged and unbroken gaze fosters feelings of passionate love, even between strangers,<sup>32</sup> this gaze sustains them. For Crixus, whose status is bound up in his victories on the sand, 'there is no meaning to glory without your eyes to witness'; and so Naevia promises 'They will never be absent again' ('Old Wounds', episode 11). Forced repeatedly to watch her beloved risking his life on the sands or having sex with their *domina*, Naevia's steady but expressive eyes become an emblem for the Roman slave, whose body and relationships are dictated by others. However, in sharing the gaze, Naevia and Crixus temporarily assert agency within the limited confines available to this woman and this gladiator.

In its treatment of 'the woman and the gladiator', *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* intensifies and extends existing tropes to meet melodramatic imperatives towards emotion and morality, within the framework of a complex television serial involving a diverse cast, where characterisation is deepened episode by episode.<sup>33</sup> That around thirty percent of the primary characters are women makes for a female-oriented story in which individuals demonstrate agency and express desire,<sup>34</sup> facilitated by their directed gaze. This gaze establishes connections between characters; plus, as an index of interiority, each gaze conveys an emotional state. In the exchange of gazes and the revelation of sentiment, relationships deepen. And through that gaze, thanks to subtle camera action, viewers enter the fantasy, seeing the world from different characters' perspectives. This enables them to try out alternative identities or to enter into temporary alignments with certain individuals across the gender spectrum and morality positions, as argued for melodrama and television serials generally.<sup>35</sup> However, prompted by the camera, that alignment might shift between characters. Thus, a viewer

might join Ilythia in her objectifying enjoyment of naked Crixus, but the responses of Lucretia and Naevia, in tandem with the immediate dialogue, may undermine the appeal.

Such complications are strengthened by the moral coding afforded by the narrative. Every viewing situation is implicated within a forward-moving story that from the first, and progressively, encourages antipathy towards the Romans and sympathy for the slaves. It might appear, therefore, that *Spartacus* joins other feminist television projects in opening up 'the diverse relations to power women inhabit',<sup>36</sup> thus exemplifying a twenty-first-century attentiveness to intersectionality.<sup>37</sup> However, most strikingly, the female character who displays the greatest agency and who desires most openly and indiscriminately is an irredeemably 'bad woman'. Viewers might relish Ilythia's wickedness; nonetheless that relish would be based upon recognition of her transgressive qualities. Any sympathy felt at her evolving predicament would necessarily negotiate those bounds. At the same time, the woman who gazes honestly and equally at her male lover is elevated into an exemplum. Thus, although it expands the range of relationships between 'the woman and the gladiator', *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* replays a very conventional morality by vilifying the promiscuous woman and revering the loving heterosexual couple.

Certainly, with Naevia asserting and realizing her desires, she does not quite fit the model of women who are 'passive, voiceless, and powerless – worthy of praise' that are traditionally juxtaposed with women like Ilythia who are 'vengeful, violent, promiscuous, disruptive – requiring restraint'.<sup>38</sup> However, Naevia does become subject to the will of others: the rising slave Ashur, who claims her as a reward to provoke Crixus, and an angry Lucretia, who is also motivated by jealousy towards violence. It is true again that in *Spartacus* not all vengeful women are negatively portrayed: thus, in the final rampage, Aurelia (Brooke Williams) slaughters Numerius to avenge her husband Varro's death, looking him firmly in the eyes. Any potential consternation over this female appropriation of the vigilante role more commonly inhabited by male characters in film is mediated by its contribution to the overall grand project,<sup>39</sup> led by the marauding gladiators. Indeed, Aurelia's motivations as a bereaved partner are ultimately those shared by Spartacus and Crixus. Their shared quest for justice stands in contrast to Ilythia's excessive reparation for status-related injuries: persecuting Spartacus and eventually locking her Roman tormentors in the villa with the rampaging gladiators, which even the Roman soldiers protest. Thus, within a morality scheme where good and bad are measured by a characters' place in a scheme of (sexual) exploitation, long-standing misogynistic paradigms remain at play.

In the final evaluation, to assert agency and follow their desire for gladiators ends badly for every woman (including Aurelia, a free woman whose husband's indenture and eventual death at the *ludus* leaves her without protection or resource, so that she too must become a slave). This follows the impulse of melodrama to 'redistribute the visibility of suffering across the social whole', meaning everyone must suffer.<sup>40</sup> Even Ilythia is a victim, entrapped by Lucretia into having sex with Spartacus in front of a friend, and trapped in the villa after she murders that friend and Lucretia spots an opportunity for blackmail. Furthermore, the ending of the women's relationships with the gladiators in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* does not end their suffering. Ilythia's escape allows her to return in *Spartacus: Vengeance* to renew her malicious friendship with Lucretia, who although stabbed in the belly, lives to see another series and to cut Ilythia's unborn child from her belly, before jumping into oblivion; Naevia will also reappear, traumatized and hardened by abuse (and unable to connect emotionally with Crixus), to be killed in *Spartacus: War of the Damned*. Owning and directing the gaze is no guarantee of empowerment in the unfolding melodramatic economy.

#### GIRLS ON TOP AND GIRLS IN LOVE IN *BROMANS*

When women look in STARZ's *Spartacus*, they do so within a highly crafted fictional world that is realized through sets, costumes, actor movement, camera work and editing and within the confines of a pre-arranged narrative. The encounters between women and gladiators in the competitive reality series *Bromans* similarly unfold within an orchestrated environment. There are two key differences, however. The performers are non-professionals and their performances are unscripted.<sup>41</sup> Thus, when women look, they do so freely. Nonetheless, this looking occurs within the 'contrived reality' established by the parameters of the game show.<sup>42</sup> For *Bromans*, this is as follows. A group of young men, supported by their girlfriends, travel 'back in time to live like gladiators in ancient Rome' and



compete for a place in the Emperor's Games.<sup>43</sup> Under constant surveillance in the 'television space' provided by the Roman sets at Nu Boyana studios in Bulgaria,<sup>44</sup> the couples must complete a series of challenges. For the women, dressed in bikinis and voluminous white mini-dresses, these revolve around their new status as Roman wives: crushing grapes to make wine, preparing dinner, and going to the beauty spa, for example. For the men, wearing gold lamé shorts and strappy leather harnesses, tasks centre on athletic activities, from gym workouts to one-on-one trials. Reflecting the hierarchy in *Spartacus*, everything takes place under the supervision of Dominus (actor and comedian Tom Bell), here the Emperor's assistant, and the trainer, Doctore (former Marine David Macintosh, and Tornado from the 2008-9 Sky1 reboot of the television game show *Gladiators*). At the end of each episode, the two men join the Emperor (actor Gary Kemp) to select poorer-performing men for potential eviction, a choice then decided by the contestants' popular vote. By episode eight, only four Bromans remain to 'fight it out' in the coliseum. In narrative terms, these games are the crowning moment in the competition, and a winner emerges (or a hero arises, as promised by the intertitle cards, mimicking promotional material for the film *Gladiator*, 2000, dir. R. Scott). Thus, at a fundamental level, *Bromans* is a cis-gendered format, with prescribed roles for men and women. It is also oriented towards heterosexual and homosocial interactions. Across the series, the edited highs and lows of individual and shared achievement by the young men and women, along with the twists and turns of their personal relationships, engage viewers' emotions.<sup>45</sup> The gaze of the female contestants is directed within this preloaded frame.

Strikingly, from their very first appearance, the 'girls' or 'girlfriends' are afforded active viewing positions. Following the model of other competitive reality shows like *Love Island* (ITV Studios, 2015-present), which similarly aims to attract a young 'gender neutral' viewership to the UK digital channel ITV2,<sup>46</sup> *Bromans* opens by launching its contestants into their new world and capturing their responses (episode 1). The separate entrances each comprise shots of the men and of the women walking through the streets of 'ancient Rome'. The camera stays tightly with the men, showing their location within the constructed Roman world, which they break into by shaking hands with the locals. By contrast, the women's perambulation is intercut with scenes of Roman daily life unfolding around them, as they make their way towards a dress shop. For both groups, their questions and wonder appear to arise in response to what they see. However, while several of the men (three future finalists) are singled out for their personal opinions, the women's group response is conveyed by the voice-over narrator (radio presenter Roman Kemp). With typical irony he remarks, 'These girls are all about observing Rome's culture and traditions. They're not here just to eye up the local men.' At the same time, a downward shot of a seated man and an unattributed comment, 'He's quite fit' (i.e. attractive, in English slang), humorously counter this assertion and establish the assembled women as desiring viewers.

This positioning is sustained by the very next scene, when the women emerge together from a changing room into the street, wearing identical white mini-dresses. Striding forward, their bare legs elongated by an upward camera angle, they draw the attention of that fit young man. But looking around, smiling widely, and provocatively mussing their hair to a pointed musical refrain – 'Top Predator' –, they revel in the attention. Mimicking the way sexually assertive women from hip hop music videos may be at once desiring subjects (within the narrative) and desirable objects (for the viewer), the women appear in control.<sup>47</sup> This 'predatory' position carries forward into the coliseum, where they are confronted with a row of naked Bromans. The women's laughter soon progresses into wolf-whistles and catcalls – 'Babe, you look fit!', 'I'm gonna keep him naked!' – and demands for a 'flash', which the men duly oblige, generating mock-shocked faces and one horrified declaration, 'I've been violated!' In terms of the competition, this encounter in the arena sets up the first challenge: the women must dig up clothes buried in the sand for their boyfriends to wear. But it also establishes a dichotomy. Whilst on arrival at Rome the women are empowered by their new clothing ('We look like princesses'), the men have been undressed and diminished. After stripping somewhat reluctantly and transforming themselves, on Dominus' order, into slaves, the Bromans are next seen complaining ('it's a nightmare this', 'can't get much worse'), and throughout the segment they resolutely cover their genitals. Like the beefcake gladiators who populate *Spartacus*, their tanned muscled bodies are a spectacle to behold.<sup>48</sup> However, they are also a source of female amusement, with one woman enjoying a playful bum-slap and another indulging in penis-pouch-poking, when they fail to find the clothes and their respective boyfriends are given a thong ('It's only what he wears around the house when he's cleaning for me'). Deploying 'Medusan' laughter – essentially turning the female gaze upon

the male in challenge to the dominant spectator hierarchy sketched by Mulvey – the ‘unruly’ girlfriends subvert the expected veneration of the male body and deny its visual power (just as one bloke is denied dominance in the household economy).<sup>49</sup> The results may be more humorous than deadly,<sup>50</sup> and in the middle of all this, the women strip down to their bikinis and scrabble around on their hands and knees in the sand, offering their own well-toned bodies to the camera’s gaze. But there are no comparable comments to objectify and trivialize. Indeed, as their girlfriends band together to joke and holler, the men chuckle along, but do not articulate their own ripostes. The women stand in control, as mistresses of the gaze and of the spoken discourse.

*Bromans* thus begins by establishing women as desiring subjects who welcome the camera’s attention and embrace the power of the gaze. This consonance between looking and desiring is replayed when Doctore first appears. He too makes his entrance walking through the streets of Rome, but his musical accompaniment is a pulsing rhythmic fanfare, and it is not until he arrives at the palace that he is fully revealed. Shown briefly in full-length from behind, he then appears as a series of body parts: a muscled torso with pecs and six-pack and striding legs. The splicing continues with more lingering shots on broad shoulders, a massive back and rippled stomach, as Doctore addresses the ‘citizens’ and identifies himself to camera. ‘Raised in flame, forged in iron’, his stated purpose is to ‘break’ and ‘build’ the Bromans and ‘forge them into gladiators’. Leather armour, skirt and boots complete the *Spartacus*-inspired fantasy of a powerful man. Like the Roman woman in the street who drops a loaf of bread in astonishment or the one who turns her head in appreciation, the viewer may revel in this passing mountain of manliness, who by himself conforms to Hill’s definition of reality television as a ‘spectacle of excess’.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, this is exactly how the girlfriends respond. With their boyfriends marshalled in a line up, keeping their own eyes firmly on Doctore as he roars the rules, the women ogle. Filmed at a distance, it is difficult to identify who says what, but the conversation is uni-directional, and even invites further visual contemplation: ‘Oh, he’s gorgeous! / He’s delicious! / Ah, look at his eyes! / He’s fucking gorgeous! / Oh my god, he’s lovely! / Oh my god, he’s sexy, inne?!’ Doctore’s powerful physique invites their stare and their desire, and the girlfriends unanimously oblige.

Once again, the Bromans come off worse. In the dramatic moment, Doctore’s physicality is a source of anxiety for Tom, who professes ‘he is so scary’, and for Richard, ‘he makes me feel like a little peanut’. Each man subordinates himself not only to Doctore’s training regime, bearing his exercises and his insults, but also to his physical prowess (it is noteworthy, perhaps, that Glenn, the thinnest of the boys, poo-poo’s his girlfriend Summer’s observation that ‘He’s just so big. None of the lads compare’, and declares himself the ‘fittest’). Later in the series, this translates into anxiety over Doctore’s sex appeal. Relaxing in the sun after training, the Bromans openly discuss their partners’ lust for Doctore (episode 7). At the same time, the women, enjoying a luxury Roman spa, are talking about exactly the same thing. By shifting back and forth between the two groups the show confirms the men’s fears, as the women recall Doctore’s fitness (Jade), speculate over his penis size (Cherelle), declare that they would ditch their boyfriend for Doctore (Rachel), and hypothetically welcome his advances (Rhiannon). These conjured betrayals are never realized, although later Doctore promises he’ll take Rhiannon on a date, if Tom loses his chariot race (he does; no on-screen date follows). Tellingly, however, both Jordan and Dino refer to the moment when their partners Jade and Cherelle first saw Doctore. The women’s ownership of a sexually voracious gaze raise spectres of infidelity that the boys bring out in the open to laugh about and chase away.

Targeted towards their naked boyfriends and muscle-bound Doctore, the desiring female gaze denotes the masculine body as an object of admiration within the show’s heterosexual economy. This is confirmed by the women’s open sex-chat, not just at the spa, but during the wine-making activity (episode 2). ‘So what you are saying is the best thing in a bloke is their willy?’, asks Natalie, before Nicola declares ‘I like a bit of leg, though’, and Cherelle adds ‘I do like a good arse’, as they sit around drinking and guffaw at their own naughtiness. Away from the boys, who naively wonder if their girlfriends are face-painting, this is the truth women speak in wine. In so-describing the conversation, Dominus alludes to the famous Roman maxim.<sup>52</sup> More accurately, however, the tone and content reflect the frank speaking enjoyed by the glamorous, sexually liberated female characters during moments of homosocial bonding in the television series *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). Like Carrie and her friends, the girlfriends’ talk is ‘resolutely heterosexual and phallic’, even as it associates them again with ‘unruly women’.<sup>53</sup> Together the girlfriends indulge in ‘boyeurism’: the

'equal opportunities objectification' that underpins postfeminist discourses of female choice and empowerment.<sup>54</sup> Again, the conversation establishes the girlfriends as women in control. And yet, for all this objectification recalls the visual disaggregation of Doctore into body parts, when it comes to Doctore, the women imagine their own subjugation: 'I would genuinely let him bang in my back doors', says Rhiannon at the spa (episode 7), while Natalie giggles to Cherelle 'I bet you'd rather he punished us', as they wonder what exertions the trainer is putting their boyfriends through (episode 3). Sharing submissive fantasies reminiscent of E. L. James' best-selling *Fifty Shades* (Vintage, 2011-2017) erotic novel trilogy that 'romanticises abuse',<sup>55</sup> the women actively embrace sexual passivity to a physically dominant male. Ironically, then, the girlfriends express their liberation by opting into sexual subordination (playing X-rated versions of Varinia in the film *Spartacus*, alluded to above, where the self-freed slave begs the ex-gadiator Spartacus to forbid her to leave him, but without the emotional attachment). Any power the women might claim along with the gaze is neutralized by this imagined surrender.

The dominance of the women as a group, along with the sexual challenge posed by Doctore's hyper-masculinity to the Bromans, is further lessened by the pervasiveness of loving gazes, directed by individual girlfriends towards their partners. Although the couples (mostly) look upon each other affectionately throughout, the set-piece games are the prime occasion for the girlfriends to stare adoringly. An early training session in the palestra-cum-cesspit provides a good example (episode 2). Here, divided into groups of four, with the two winners then competing, the men must jump between pillars and strike each other with pugilistic drumsticks without falling into the dirty water below. By contrast to the visual tradition sketched above and utilized in *Spartacus*, where women who cheer on gladiators are ciphers for corruption, these women's role is to show support. This they do by watching intently from the side-lines, whooping, gesticulating, shouting their boyfriend's name and clapping, as if at a sporting event. Moreover, in the post-match interviews, the girlfriends stand by the Bromans' sides, looking ahead while the men reflect on their performances, and also up towards them. So, after his first cess-pit victory, Rhiannon flashes her eyes towards Tom to agree he is sexy, offering him a quick kiss alongside a 'well done'; and after the second she turns to address him directly, praising his accomplishment and modesty. Looking at him, she concludes 'you are the one to watch' (echoing, in fact, Dino's words to Tom earlier in the episode). Tom's triumph is witnessed and confirmed by his girlfriend's steady gaze. His final opponent, Dino, meanwhile enjoys Cherelle's ocular attention, as he graciously concedes defeat, whilst also promising future success. Victor or loser – like Crixus, watched by Naevia – both men gain affirmation and strength as objects of their girlfriend's gaze.

Conversely, that gaze can be denied to detrimental effect. In the interview following Liam's failure in the very same competition, Ellie delivers damning criticism; and while Liam looks directly at her, she barely flicks her eyes towards him. Her pit-side performance is equally off-key. First, standing cross-armed, when the round finishes, she looks away. Then standing above Liam as he defends his best attempt, she looks over his head; and when she eventually puts her arms around the crying giant, her eyes flit around. A little later, with Liam hanging his head and blaming himself for not following her instruction, Ellie reproaches him again; and when she eventually deigns to look at him directly, it is with squinting eyes. These two sequences articulate an uncomfortable personal relationship. Tellingly, it is Dino, in conversation with Tom, Cherelle and Brandon, who provides a guiding perspective: 'You gotta be there for your partner, didn't you, really?' Liam is a big muscly man, who by failing to win any of the training exercises fails to live up to the promise of his size (as he and others repeatedly observe); and from Ellie he suffers verbal and emotional abuse. This positioning is maintained until the end of episode 5, when Liam receives a supportive 'we've got this' kiss in the run up to banishment, and afterwards, when Ellie finally stands by her man, her eyes looking up towards Liam's face (episode 5). In the final moments, with the gaze of his girlfriend directed where it should be, both he and his relationship are redeemed. Liam may not have made it to the Emperor's games; but through this visual reframing, the couple receive a happy ending.

In *Bromans*, the loving female gaze thus operates within a moral scheme, whereby behaviours within relationships are endorsed or proscribed by how it is applied or refused. This is further illustrated by the argument between Kai and Modina, during which the angry girlfriend weaponizes her gaze (episode 2).<sup>56</sup> Like Liam, who will shortly suffer Ellie's ire, Kai failed at his task, and again Modina is physically on higher ground. However, rather than deny him her approval through refusing her gaze, Modina keeps Kai firmly in her line of sight, as she angrily berates him, and follows him closely as he

turns his back and moves away, the eyes hidden by her enormous sunglasses boring into the back of his head: 'Are you fucking thick? Are you thick, Kai? Kai? Kai?' Again, other couples provide a sharp contrast, with Cherelle and Nicola welcoming back victors Dino and Brandon with assertions of faith and smiling hugs. And after Kai gets angry and smashes up a chair, hearing Modina laugh at him, there is a full conversation around what has happened, with one member of an appropriately behaved couple, Brandon, telling Kai that Modina is behaving badly, and the other, Nicola, suggesting Modina might have responded differently. Both propose, with different degrees of directness, that it is the girlfriend's job to be understanding and encouraging. Summer too labels Modina 'out of order' to the seated group, and Kai even berates himself in intercut straight-to-camera testimony. In this way, the drama is deconstructed as it continues to unfold. If the reality game show might more widely be considered a 'moral laboratory' that encourages viewer reflection on appropriate emotional response through its dramatized situations, then *Bromans* very firmly guides the interpretation to this particular clash.<sup>57</sup> In the end, Kai attempts a reconciliation, repeating 'We're meant to be a team'. Tempers have abated, and, Modina, with her sunglasses now removed, holds Kai's gaze steadily; but although the sequence ends with Modina sitting quietly beside Kai, she looks firmly away.

Given the moral dimension, it is unsurprising when Kai and Modina are voted out at the end of the episode, receiving, like Liam, a single vote. Whenever the loving female gaze is absent, discontent between couples and banishment from *Bromans* follows. Indeed, in light of the premise of the show, there is logic to the fact that it is the strongest couples who make it to the finals: Dino and Cherelle, Tom and Rhiannon, Nicola and Brandon, and Jordan and Jade (episode 8). Now, in a series of 'departing warrior' vignettes, the desiring and the loving gaze of the girlfriends combine. Standing side-by-side in their new leather armour, each Broman is approached by his girlfriend. Filmed downward from behind their shoulders, each girl is caught looking up and into her boyfriend's face, smiling warmly as she delivers encouragement for the final games. For Jade (prime fancier of Doctore), Jordan is 'so fit', and to Nicola, Brandon 'looks amazing'. Heartfelt kisses follow. Dressed as gladiators, the men enter the arena where they receive the adulation of the crowd, before stripping down to their gold shorts; and the girlfriends join the audience for one last round of robust cheering. As first Jordan and then Brandon go out, then Dino loses to Tom, the women stand by them and praise their accomplishment, restating their love and pride. The triumph of the men is a triumph of their relationships, as exemplified by runner-up Dino's motivation 'to fight for my queen [Cherelle]' and Rhiannon's declaration that she will marry Tom, making him a double-winner (even though Tom seems most delighted to please his mum). The female gaze thus stands in service to the male ego, in a conjured world where good women desire and love in service to their men. This is clearly encapsulated in the end-of-series montage, which replays moments from across the series. As the focus shifts towards the couples, the background music switches to 'Praise You', sung by a soulful Hannah Grace (2017): 'We've come a long, long way together, through the bad times and the good. I have to celebrate you baby (Jade: 'I feel so proud of him, I definitely want to marry him'), I have to praise you like I should (Rhiannon: 'He is literally the heart and soul of my life')'. There are reflections of feminist aspirations in the priority afforded to partnership and equality here. However, the lines that open the closing credits capture the power dynamic: 'You make me glad that I'm a woman, cos you're a feeling, thinking man. I'm going to please you every way I can. I have to praise you (*ad nauseum*).'<sup>58</sup> Thus, in closing, the series expresses female subjectivity, but ultimately in subordination to the male.

This duality sits at the nub of *Bromans*' gender representation, as established through the female gaze. As in *Spartacus*, that gaze is consequential. It articulates what women want in a man and affords them a position of dominance over their male partner. However, it also implicates them in the sustainment of male ego and status. This inconcinnity is exacerbated by the fact that like the men who draw their scrutiny and affection, the women spend most of the programme under-dressed. Thus, their near-naked bodies are constantly offered up to the viewer's desiring gaze. Such ambivalence typifies the representation of women in a twenty-first century postfeminist environment, where 'postfeminism fetishizes female power and desire while consistently placing it within limits'. Rather than representing free expression of female sexual desire, the boyeurism of the girlfriends is patterned upon pre-existing 'sexist codes of exploitation' established through the centuries-long articulation of male sexual desire by and for men; and the women are corralled by the show's narrative drive and the moral evaluation imbedded in the groups' conversation towards 'matrimonial and maternalist models of femininity'.<sup>58</sup> This correlation may seem unsurprising, given that reality television 'is caught up in what is happening now'.<sup>59</sup> But, because by its very conceit reality television

claims to offer access to authentic human experience and emotion,<sup>60</sup> its representations also generate understandings of 'reality'. Consequently, through dissemination and consumption, they have a 'reality effect'.<sup>61</sup> Hence, despite being attuned to its contrivances, one newspaper critic can still imagine that *Bromans* offers 'probably the most accurate reflection anywhere on TV of what young men and women are still like'.<sup>62</sup>

In this light, *Bromans*' gendered agenda, as revealed by following the female gaze, is far from benign. Although some of the women initially identify themselves by their independent achievements (for example, Nicola is a law student, Rhiannon studies musical theatre, Summer works as an administrator), over the series they are reduced to 'perfect' manifestations of female fidelity, or censured for their failure.<sup>63</sup> By contrast to the *Bromans*, where indicators of class come into play, with Dino fixating on 'posh-boy' Tom, and where Bolton-based Jordan and Geordie Calum each play up to class-infused 'northern' stereotypes of the bawdy joker and drunken brawler, the women are never differentiated according to wider social identities, such as class, race and sexuality (beyond heteronormativity) that inform everyday experience in the actual world. Defined exclusively by their relationships to men, the women are implicated within a postfeminist ideology that claims, with the feminist project complete and equality achieved (evidenced by the girlfriend's sexualized gaze), the 'return' to a nurturing role within a heterosexual partnership is the natural option.<sup>64</sup> This is in keeping with the positions offered to women within romance-oriented reality formats.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, with relationships established and remaining steady, there is less opportunity for the sort of 'counterhegemonic scripts of gender expectations' that have been argued for dating shows, where bad behaviour by women entertainingly disrupt and so partially destabilise the imperative towards heterosexual coupling, even as the show moves towards it.<sup>66</sup> These could include the contemporary series *Love Island*, to which *Bromans* is frequently compared,<sup>67</sup> and to similar series that not coincidentally feature contestants from the programme: *Ex on the Beach* (MTV International, 2014-18: starring Brandon and a previous girlfriend, along with Chet and Helen, in series 4) and *Make or Break* (Elephant House Studies for Channel 5, 2017, including Richard and Sophii). Whereas competition and criticism – insult and verbal injury – are fostered *en route* to romantic breakdown or success for contestants in these beach-based shows, in *Bromans*, men and women are already living out the fairytale ending. For all the girlfriends wield their gaze with apparent autonomy, they are locked in a supportive role by gender ideology that governs the 'reality' scenario.

There is ambivalence too in the depiction of the *Bromans*. After all, the boyfriends are belittled by the female gaze, when it combines with laughter and aligns itself to the alpha male or turns hostile. Thus, in the rebalancing of power towards women, they have 'lost out': a long-running claim in discourses that represent masculinity 'in crisis', advancing from a postfeminist assumption of female emancipation to claim detriment to men.<sup>68</sup> This might be witnessed further when the men are invited to guess which body-sculptures (of bottoms, breasts and a foot) belong to their girlfriend (episode 3). A few off-colour jokes are met with rebuke, with Ellie remarking to camera that 'The women were absolutely mortified at the boys' comments'. Thus, on the one notable occasion that the men turn an evaluatory gaze on the women's bodies, their assumed right to comment is disputed. *Bromans* was made before the influential #metoo movement took off (although broadcast around the same time), disputing the sexual claims men make over women's bodies; but it may still reflect contemporary sexual politics. This is represented in Britain by the 'No More Page 3' campaign in 2014-15, which successfully challenged the daily presentation of women's breasts to male scrutiny in the British tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*.<sup>69</sup> The *Bromans*' lusty responses may represent a continuing negotiation over the issue; but interestingly, they mostly demonstrate a proprietorial appreciation towards their girlfriends, reacting with pleasure and pride to their physical attributes, captured in plaster of Paris (e.g. Dino on Cherele's thigh gap).<sup>70</sup> While the women's desiring gaze finds its frankest expression in relation to another man, the men's desiring gaze is endorsed within the bounds of a committed relationship. This situates them at some distance from the promiscuity that masculinist discourses claim as the natural disposition for any man,<sup>71</sup> and more in line with a tabloid vision of appropriately confined female sexuality.<sup>72</sup>

At the same time, playing loosely with the tropes with the costumes of gladiatorial epic, *Bromans* celebrates a hyper-masculinity grounded in muscularity that expresses itself through physical prowess and heterosexual appeal. This may be campily executed, with mortal combat substituted with physical labours that are merely strenuous and occasionally comical (especially when the *Bromans* complete

their tasks blindfolded), and that are executed with a sincere commitment to 'glory' and 'honour' and victory that edges upon parody. Nonetheless, the historical role-playing element, which includes the subjection of the gladiator to the female gaze, allows the Bromans to 'assume the identities of idealized men' or 'heroic male identities'.<sup>73</sup> This may not be 'one-size-fit-all', with Glenn refuting the desirability of Doctore, for example. And certainly, far from celebrating an 'unreconstructed masculinity' centred on physical dominance, as might be expected in association with their 'hard' action hero bodies,<sup>74</sup> the tender-hearted Bromans love their girlfriends and care what they think (not dissimilar to Spartacus and Crixus). In fact, although they are referred to throughout the series as 'lads', and appropriately enjoy banter whilst indulging in overtly masculine pastimes, the Bromans eschew the sexist and objectifying attitudes common to 'lad culture'.<sup>75</sup> Instead they weep, throw themselves into washing the sheets, express love through poetry, and indulge in beauty regimes, in near-perfect combination of the 'new man' as 'nurturer' and 'narcissist'.<sup>76</sup> Ultimately, then, the girlfriends' gazes confirm the desirability and lovability of the Bromans, bolstering their masculinity as it winds between 'traditional' and 'new'. Challenges via the hostile gaze when men fail to live up to expectations in the more traditionally masculine arena of competitive game play are quickly eliminated, through shared opprobrium and ejection of the offending women, along with those failing boyfriends. Such are the contours of today's hegemonic masculinity, as proffered by *Bromans*, where navigating old and new masculinities *en route* to victory in the Emperor's Games is a measure of success.<sup>77</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: BETWEEN SUBJECTIVITY AND SUBORDINATION

Following the gaze between the woman and the gladiator in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* and *Bromans* reveals the series' internal gender dynamics, inflected by their mode (drama/reality) and genre (melodrama/game show) and embedded in the narratives and associated moralities of their individual story worlds. In moments of looking, the two series afford female characters emotional agency: to desire, to love, to hate. These moments also establish them in positions of dominance over or reciprocity with the male characters who capture their attention. The gaze thus textures the relationships pursued on screen, which are both specific and complex. At the same time, however, female agency is constrained by misogynistic narrative conventions (the 'bad woman') and the paradoxical postfeminist celebration of women's sexual liberation and their subordination of that liberation into monogamous heterosexual relationships. Although they each present and explore a range of relationships, together *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* and *Bromans* endorses only one way for a man and woman to be together. They thereby follow a conservative moral code.

The consequentiality of the female gaze thus goes beyond the parameters set by Mulvey for looking and being looked at and its elaboration into 'masculinized' and 'feminine' viewing modes associated with sexual power and dominance, even when inverted to address women looking at men. Rather, the female gaze on television reflects a different general proposition: that the act of looking is a fundamental element in human interaction. At the same time that Mulvey was applying earlier psychoanalytic theory to exemplify the viewing strategies of film in the 1970s, experimental psychologists were demonstrating how the gaze, in conjunction with facial expression, verbal utterances, body posture and movement, acts as a 'signal' within any social situation. This signal works by arousing of emotion by which the recipient of the gaze decodes their ocular interlocutor's attitude of affiliation, disaffection or dominance.<sup>78</sup>

As a visual medium, television replicates this process and introduces a third interlocutor, the viewer, who observes but does not participate in the situation. Furthermore, its moments of viewing are framed within narratives and exhibited through its particular technologies of production, associated with filming and editing, and dissemination (primarily) on the domestic small screen. Thus, the viewer decodes the gaze, often as a proxy-recipient thanks to television's preference for close-ups.<sup>79</sup> In creating meaning, the viewer is guided by their cultural training in decoding body-language,<sup>80</sup> as well as by the response of the recipient within the unfolding dramatic moment and wider story, which the viewer also observes. Thus, when television viewers watch women looking at gladiators they draw upon personal experience, prior viewing experiences and their series-specific knowledge to navigate the dynamics of the relationship encoded in the gaze. The viewing moment thus depends upon earlier cultural products that inform this reading, and is constructive of new ways of understanding the human relationships illustrated on screen.

The moralities encoded within *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* and *Bromans* thus enter popular gender discourses: newly presented, 'the woman and the gladiator' promotes a set of ideas that operate within the complex terrain of the twenty-first century, in which advancements towards equality between women and men in the social and political spheres meet resistance through propositions about men and women articulated within popular culture, including television. Designed to appeal to both men and women, and for *Bromans* particularly to a younger crowd, the shows afford subjectivity to both genders and offer sex spectacles for their individual and shared enjoyment. However, ultimately they subordinate women into a heterosexual paradigm, wherein the male survives to avenge a wrong experienced by his partner (Crixus/Naevia) or the woman sublimates herself in service to the man (the *Bromans*' girlfriends).

Of course, there is always the potential for television to be read 'otherwise'. Lived experience and personal beliefs may lead an individual to look and interpret representations against the grain of a programme's dominant ideology in ways that undercut it.<sup>81</sup> This is neatly illustrated by the social media chat on the Twitter hashtag #Bromans that accompanied the final episode. Where on occasion *Bromans*' heteronormative viewing model was extended by the female viewer at home who marvels at hot bodies and praises their achievements,<sup>82</sup> it was more frequently disrupted by the expressions of gay male viewers who condemn this aspect or expressed sexual desire for the *Bromans* or celebrate the show as homoerotic.<sup>83</sup> Through such extradiegetic chat 'bottom-up' responses supplement the 'top-down' messages within the public discourse, which might again be confirmed or complicated by other promotional material or on-line responses, as well as the 'water cooler' conversations that inform individual interpretations but leave no visible mark. Hence, for example, the intradiegetic female gaze in *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* has been eclipsed online by homoerotic responses in blogs and magazines and again on Twitter,<sup>84</sup> which is narratively encouraged by the inclusion of gay characters, as well as by a hyper-masculine exercise community.<sup>85</sup>

To conclude, although *Bromans* and *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* foreground women, granting them agency and giving open play to female sexuality, they are subservient to a patriarchal discourse that sustains female subordination by shutting down alternatives to other sorts of relationships and power positions. It may be some progress that the best relationships are founded on equality between the sexes, and that programme makers reportedly anticipated female viewers would enjoy the male bodies on display.<sup>86</sup> But in terms of the story world what ultimately matters is the agency of the male, established via the glorious victory of the triumphant hero, whether pursued with melodramatic seriousness or high camp (arguably each series attempts both). In this, the programmes echo Hollywood's recent gladiator films, where female characters are adjuncts to the primary male, and so opportunities for women to look are minimised. Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, for example, utilizes the ruse that 'rich matrons pay well to be pleased by the bravest champions' to enable Lucilla (Connie Nielsen) to visit the Maximus (Russell Crowe) in his prison cell. However, their relationship is much in the past, having finished long before the Roman general was betrayed and enslaved. She looks at him affectionately, but beyond their first meeting at the beginning of the film, she is motivated to talk to him by a desire to remove from power her brother, the emperor Commodus, and thereby protect her son. He in turn loves his dead family; and his heroic endeavour against their murderer, Commodus, is rewarded with reunion in the afterlife, to which Lucilla speeds him in his final moments, looking into his eyes with tears in her own. With their relationship desexualized – and notably, although the film made its male star into a sex symbol, neither Lucilla, the obligatory Vestals in their prime seats in the arena and the female fans who try to touch him as he walks by, have the opportunity to survey Maximus' uncovered gladiator body – Lucilla's affection is directed towards Maximus' personal fulfilment.

*Pompeii* (dir. P. Anderson, 2014), by contrast, is full of close-ups of the Roman noblewoman Cassia (Emily Brown) looking with love and desire at Milo, played by *Game of Thrones* pin-up Kit Harington. The film ends with the deaths of the lovers, who are caught in the pyroclastic surge from Vesuvius. Turning Cassia's head to avert her gaze from the impending doom, Milo urges Cassia to 'look at me, just me'; then, meeting her gaze, he moves in for a final kiss. Although Cassia has proven herself a feisty companion, helping Milo to escape from his nemesis – Cassia's suitor Corvus (Kiefer Sutherland), who led the slaughter of Milo's family in Britain – and choosing to stay with him amidst the ash-filled clouds and falling fire, her final moments are directed by Milo, who manfully wraps her in

his muscled arms. In a disaster movie that cannot end well, this is exactly where Milo should be, fulfilling his heroic potential as the manly lead in a historical romance. By comparison to these filmic examples, the ensemble casts and generic formats of the television series *Spartacus* and *Bromans* facilitate a wider range of female viewing positions, including those that challenge the male. However, given the delineation and limitation of these subjectivities, there is only the impression of equality. Twenty-first century stories featuring 'the woman and the gladiator' leave the man firmly in control.

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- <sup>1</sup> See Braund (1992: 75-6) for Eppia's place in Juvenal's 'misogamist' theme.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted by Jacobelli (2003: 48-49), alongside companion inscriptions that declare Cresces to be 'master' (*CIL* IV.4356) and Celadus the Thracian to be the 'heartthrob' and 'pride' (*decus*) of the girls (*CIL* IV.4397, 4345). On the two gladiators' self-styling as seducers, see Garraffoni and Funari (2007: 191).
- <sup>3</sup> The discovery is recorded in more detail by the *Yorkshire Post*. n.a. (2010).
- <sup>4</sup> Napier (2010).
- <sup>5</sup> As Hopkins and Beard (2005: 82-3) point out, eighteen other people were also present, no doubt seeking shelter like the jewel-wearing woman.
- <sup>6</sup> As Bingham and Conboy (2015: 131-63) observe, the 'pleasure agenda' that has defined the UK tabloids since the 1960s has fostered a discourse that is marked both by titillation and moralizing, by which a celebration of female sexual agency sits alongside a default orientation towards family values, as the tabloids seek male and female readers.
- <sup>7</sup> For the moral dimension, see Spier (2010) on *Pollice Verso*; Prettejohn (1999) on *Habet!*; Figurelli (2013: 194-50) on *Lotta di gladiatori*.
- <sup>8</sup> As evident in images illustrating Pearson (1973); a first-century AD relief depicting a pair of men looking down from a raised colonnade provides a notable exception: Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano 62660 (see Jacobelli 2003: 16, figure 14).
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. *Faithful Unto Death (Christianes ad leones!)* by the English painter Herbert Schmalz (1897), with its naked women strapped to posts. Although women are prominent here as victims, rather than perpetrators of Roman corruption, they are singled out within the crowd on a descriptive label: 'There in the fierce glare of the Arena, waiting for the end. Waiting, under the pitiless eyes of a blood-thirsty multitude, from Senator and patrician dame, to low buffoon & parasite': see [www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/herbert-gustave-schmalz-carmichael-1856-1935-faithful-1938895-details.aspx](http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/herbert-gustave-schmalz-carmichael-1856-1935-faithful-1938895-details.aspx) (last accessed 20 June 2019). For the further influence between painting and film in arena scenes, see Junkelmann (2004: 81-5), who juxtaposes this painting with the binding of Lygia in *Quo Vadis*; cf. Rich (2019), who evidences the use of *Pollice Verso* in the same film.
- <sup>10</sup> See Hark (1993: 154), and Strong (2013: 172-3).
- <sup>11</sup> As the situation is described in the film's prologue. See Winkler (2007) on *Spartacus*' Americanized ideology.
- <sup>12</sup> Mulvey (1975); Mulvey (1989: 29-38) refines the model.
- <sup>13</sup> Hark (1993), referring to the role of Varinia in the 'recuperation of patriarchy' at p. 162.
- <sup>14</sup> See Gamman and Marshment (1988: 5-7); Prid (1988: 1-3), and Neale (1993).
- <sup>15</sup> Strong (2013).
- <sup>16</sup> Later seasons *Spartacus: Vengeance* (S03, 2012) and *Spartacus: War of the Damned* (S04, 2013) depict the bloody battles through which the army of freed slaves marched from victories to defeat; in a detour made necessary by the illness of Andy Whitfield, who originally played Spartacus, *Gods of the Arena* (S02, 2011), created a back story for the occupants of the *ludus*, and a new hero to join the fight in the shape of playboy gladiator Gannicus. See Augoustakis and Cyrino (2017: 2-8) for further details of the series' history. Because the present study is interested in how the female gaze operates within a discrete narrative unit, it confines itself to *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*.
- <sup>17</sup> For the full series' mediation of the historical record, see Klima (2015).
- <sup>18</sup> With shades too of horror and pornography: see Mueller (2018: 143-8).
- <sup>19</sup> Mittell (2015: 244), original emphasis, drawing particularly on Williams (2012).
- <sup>20</sup> Quoting Fradley (2004: 239), for whom the film *Gladiator* (dir. R. Scott, 2000) symbolizes the evolution in Hollywood action heroes towards the embodiment of white male narcissism and paranoia.

<sup>21</sup> On melodrama's cross-gender appeals and subversive cross-gender effects, see Mittell (2015: 245-59).

<sup>22</sup> See Hobden (2019); Gardner and Potter (2017: 221-2) provide a wider exploration of arena viewing positions, focusing on episode 5 ('Shadow Games').

<sup>23</sup> For a sympathetic reading of their motivations, see Cyrino (2017).

<sup>24</sup> Noted by Mueller (2018: 139).

<sup>25</sup> Hobden (2019), building upon Simões Rodrigues (2017: 46).

<sup>26</sup> See also Squire (2011: 16-23, esp. 21-2). Riefenstahl's film sequence is also discussed by Winkler (2017: 263-4), in preface to observations on a fascistic aesthetic in *300*. These have disturbing implications for the fetishization of the hyper-muscular body in tandem with an ethic centred on glory and honour, cornerstones of Nazi ideology replicated *ad nauseum* in film and television (including *Spartacus*). Having traced the impulse back to the artistic and intellectual traditions that informed Nazi ideology, Squire is more sanguine: 'whether we like it or not, Nietzsche's fantasy of becoming "Greeks in our bodies" remains our fantasy today' (24).

<sup>27</sup> Turner (2009: 131-9), quoting 136.

<sup>28</sup> On peplum bodies, see Rushing (2008) and O'Brien (2014); the term 'hard bodies' was coined by Jeffords (1994).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Dickson and Cornelius (2015: 177), for whom the active poses of these two statues convey 'military might'.

<sup>30</sup> Noted by Foka (2015: 43).

<sup>31</sup> 'As though he were a statue of an Olympian god': Simões Rodrigues (2017: 48).

<sup>32</sup> See Kellerman, Lewis and Laird (1989), although the gaze length of 2 minutes somewhat exceeds the moment on television.

<sup>33</sup> See Mittell (2015: 133). 'Complex television' is his framing description of today's frequently multi-season serials.

<sup>34</sup> The calculation by Foka (2015: 42) for the entire four series roughly holds for this first season. Note her inclusion of Ilythia and Lucretia in the 'action woman' category, alongside those who physically fight in seasons 3 and 4.

<sup>35</sup> Ang (1997: 164); Mittell (2015: 128-9) follows film theorist Smith (1995) to replace viewer 'identification', which implies that viewers insert themselves into the fiction, with a threefold process of character engagement that incorporates recognition, alignment and allegiance.

<sup>36</sup> See Lotz (2001: 115), attending to the American television series *Any Day Now* (Lifetime, 1998-2002), where the prisms to be negotiated are class and race. Lotz describes this as a 'postfeminist' concern; however, already contested at the time of writing (p. 106), the meaning of this term has shifted over the past two decades, as theorists pin down different sorts of post-third-wave feminism that characterise the twenty-first century. More regularly (following Gill 2007b) postfeminism denotes a neoliberal ideology that declares the aims of feminism achieved and supplants feminist action in society with an embodied care of the self that foregrounds sexual subjectivity, empowerment and choice, alongside the consolidation of gender roles around female domesticity. It is this definition that is deployed in discussion of *Bromans*, below; and the label 'postfeminist' is thus avoided here in favour of 'feminist' to avoid confusion.

<sup>37</sup> See Davis (2009).

<sup>38</sup> As defined by Young (2017: 1-2).

<sup>39</sup> Springer (2011) thinks through the complexities of female vigilantism in film, where women execute violence against men in pursuit of 'justice and change' (p. 278), by posing a possible interpretation of female empowerment against the sublimation of the woman into masculinist fantasies; the avenging woman's isolation (noted at p. 280) is particularly relevant as a contrast point here.

<sup>40</sup> Zarzosa (2013: 9).



<sup>41</sup> For these underpinning features of reality television, a hybrid form of programme that crosses genres, see Biressi and Nunn (2005: 2) and Oullette (2014: 4-5), for example. Although they are not trained actors, reality participants are required to perform: 'to project an aura of real-life ordinariness coupled with an ability to accomplish a series of tasks with some measure of aplomb' (see Kilborn 2003: 13). Indeed, some of the *Bromans* cast might be considered 'professional' reality television participants.

<sup>42</sup> A term used by Andrejevic (2004: 117), and set against the 'promise' of reality television to reward viewers with 'unedited access' to the daily lives of its subjects through surveillance.

<sup>43</sup> See [https://www.itv.com/presscentre/sites/default/files/bromans\\_press\\_pack.pdf](https://www.itv.com/presscentre/sites/default/files/bromans_press_pack.pdf) (last accessed 20 June 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Versus 'real-world' locations favoured by documentaries and docusoaps: see Hill (2015: 10). Nu Boyana Studios have been used in televisual and filmic dramatizations of ancient Rome, including the comedy *Plebs* (Rise Films/ITV2, 2012-2018), the dramatized documentary *8 Days that Made Rome* (October Films/Channel 5, 2017), and the manga-inspired film *Thermae Romae II* (Fuji Television, 2013). See <https://nuboyana.com/our-galleries/nggallery/sets-galleries/roman> and <https://nuboyana.com/movie-reel/> (last accessed 20 June 2019).

<sup>45</sup> See Hill (2014: 122) on the consonance between drama and affect in reality television's 'passion play'.

<sup>46</sup> For ITV2's target audience see <https://www.itvmedia.co.uk/advertising-on-itv/our-channels#channel-itv2> (last access 20 June 2019).

<sup>47</sup> Compare Railton and Watson (2011) on the video for Khia's 'My neck, my back' (2002: 78-9), where sexual intent expressed in the lyrics is reinforced through a visual scheme in which the performer-as-object acknowledges and so controls the gaze in 'a discourse of female empowerment'.

<sup>48</sup> For the shared physique/aesthetic, see Gómez Ponce (2017: 19, with figure 3).

<sup>49</sup> As this form of laughter is described by Rowe (1995) 9-11.

<sup>50</sup> Compare Green (1998: 189-211), where same metaphor describes the actual endpoint of an encounter with the face of Medusa in Greek myth, when women confront and kill men in 'rape-revenge' films.

<sup>51</sup> Hill (2015: 10).

<sup>52</sup> A sentiment first asserted in the male sphere of the Greek drinking party (see Rösler 1995); it is not entirely clear from Pliny's citation that he endorses the principle (*Natural History* 14.141).

<sup>53</sup> Following *Sex and the City*, as analysed by Gill (2007a: 216-19), and referencing Rowe (1995). Women's magazines offer a longer term equation between 'new women' and openness about sex, although frank speaking by women (rather than to women) is a 1990s phenomenon: see Macdonald (1995: 171-77).

<sup>54</sup> Quoting Gill (2016: 625), discussing an article in the women's section of *The Evening Standard* newspaper by Betts (2015).

<sup>55</sup> 'Romanticized abuse' is the label given by Case and Coventry (2018: 633) to delineate the packaging of sex featuring bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism within a standard romance story centred upon a young female protagonist. They supplement an examination of *Fifty Shades*' erotic propositions within the prism of feminist debates over pornography and interpersonal violence between men and women with results from a reader response survey. Interestingly for *Bromans*, while male and female respondents tended to query the applicability of *Fifty Shades*' romantic model of (female)submission-(male)domination to their own relationships (645) and favoured negotiation over sex roles towards balance (648), younger women were most likely to expect it (647).

<sup>56</sup> Note that Modina's anger here fits a dominant strand in the depiction of black women in the media generally and in reality television particularly: see Springer (2007) and Tyree (2011). This racializing of emotion may be moderated by the fact Nicola, who counsels Modina (see below), is also a woman of colour; but Nicola herself will become embroiled in an argument with new arrival Helen (episode 4), an obnoxious white woman with a thick northern English accent who responds violently to Nicola's

antagonism and is unceremoniously evicted along with her equally disruptive boyfriend Chet as a result. The politics of race and class may both be at play here.

<sup>57</sup> Krijnen and Tan (2009).

<sup>58</sup> Quoting Negra (2009) 4-5.

<sup>59</sup> Hill (2015: 1).

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, van Bauwel (2010), where emotion appears repeatedly as a route to crossing between televisual and lived realities.

<sup>61</sup> Grumbein and Goodman (2013); 'reality effect', Deligiaouri and Popovic (2010) 83.

<sup>62</sup> Delingpole (2017).

<sup>63</sup> Although the dissection of the 'feminine perfect' by McRobbie (2015) focuses on body-oriented self-care, the compulsion upon the girlfriends to define themselves within models of female aspiration and attainment set by postfeminist ideologies suggests its appropriateness here. See also n. 70 below.

<sup>64</sup> A trend recognized by Negra (2009) in narratives about and conversations around women's lives in contemporary films, magazines and advertising.

<sup>65</sup> See Weber (2014: 25-6); Grumbein and Goodman (2013: 98-9).

<sup>66</sup> See Gray (2009, quoting 1).

<sup>67</sup> Evidenced, for example, in newspaper reviews by Saunders (2017) and Heritage (2017), and a promotional interview by the *Bromans* cast with Tutton (2017), where similarities and differences are framed around content and style.

<sup>68</sup> See Edwards (2006: 7-24), who describes this strand in the discourse as representing a 'crisis from without', in relation to institutions, rather than 'within', that is to say in men's experiences and understandings of what it means to be male (7-8).

<sup>69</sup> See Holland (2019).

<sup>70</sup> The thigh gap, attainable only for women with particular body shapes and/or through long-term dieting and exercise, is another component of the 'perfect' (see n. 63) to which women have recently been invited to aspire through its normalization via social media: see Swash (2013). Arising from a pornographic aesthetic, with its visually articulated promise of intimate access, and linked to anorexia and image-related mental health problems, this is another 'harmful cultural practice' normalized within Western culture, of the sort described by Jeffreys (2005). The extent to which this is imbedded in the culture exemplified by *Bromans* is encapsulated in the surname of the contestant, personal trainer and fitness model Cherelle Perfect.

<sup>71</sup> See Fine (2017) for the dissemination and origins of such myths, and the suppression in public discourses of scientific studies that contradict them.

<sup>72</sup> See n. 6, above.

<sup>73</sup> Steenberg (2014: 197), in discussion of 'gladiatorial television', defined as any reality show that includes 'interpersonal violence, competition and the display of men's bodies' (192).

<sup>74</sup> See Tasker (1993: 1) for whom 'the muscular action hero was ... the antithesis of the "new man"... and the feminist gains he supposedly represented'. Even the new peplum hero who 'must be hard but forgiving, built but agile, exposed but impermeably armored, sensitive but hard-hearted, violent but not aggressive' (Elliott 2011: 67) does not go this far.

<sup>75</sup> So Nichols (2018: 75-6) summarizes the phenomenon of the 'lad'.

<sup>76</sup> Benyon (2002: 98-125).

<sup>77</sup> See Benyon (2002: 17), on the integration of 'new man-ism' into the corpus of hegemonic masculinities, or 'successful ways of being a man'. Note the plural, masculinities: Lotz (2014: 37-40) emphasises how what constitutes 'hegemonic' changes between situations, and between television series, so that individual products generate their own ways of being a man by making natural certain behaviours and attitudes.

<sup>78</sup> See Argyle and Cook (1976), with Rossano (2013) for an accessible summary of how understanding of these principles has been pursued in the wider field of study over time.

<sup>79</sup> As might be suggested by Hamilton (2016), a cognitive study demonstrating that 'direct gaze' via photographs create arousal and response akin to those experienced during actual mutual gazing.

<sup>80</sup> So Ellis (2009: 103-4) describes the decoding of emotions performed on television. Note that although while Rossano cites earlier theories that regard the gaze as universal, more recent studies suggest that how the gaze is met and interpreted may be culturally specific as well as context-dependent: for example, Gobel, Chen and Richardson (2017).

<sup>81</sup> Oppositional readings are an underrunning current in the presentation by Fiske (1987) of how television shows direct their own readings.

<sup>82</sup> For example, Luna @LunaARights (5 November 2017), to Broman Brandon Myers: 'Gorgeous guy with a lovely personality. Was a pleasure to see you on the telebox keeping calm while the hot heads were losing it'.

<sup>83</sup> Compare, for example, Alun Saunders @alunsaunders (3 November 2017): 'Watching #Bromans for the first time. @itv hit a new low in disgusting, straight, white, primitive, heteronormative trash. Be ashamed' (GIF: Commodus from the film *Gladiator* gives a thumbs down); or Liam Swan @swanseasucker (2 November 2017): 'Anyone else getting slightly aroused watching @tomtrotter1 and @dinoportellipt wrestle? #Bromans'; or Brain Thompson @BrianDoyle1974 (3 November 2017): 'No more homoerotic violence with genitals flaying about in gold speedos like boiled eggs in a silk hanky esp@dinoportellipt #bromans (emojis: crying face, aubergine, peach)'.

<sup>84</sup> For example, in a blog on *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* by Vitale (n.d.), a continuing interest in the full series by Advocate.com (e.g. Peeples 2013, featuring a muscled-up 'gay gladiator' Agron from later seasons), and on Twitter: Manish Mathur @TheManish89 (12 February 2015): 'watching #SpartacusBloodandSand very much hashtag homoerotica'.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, 'Andy Whitfield's Spartacus Workout' at *MotleyHealth*, slogan 'no nonsense fitness': <https://www.motleyhealth.com/celeb/andy-whitfields-spartacus-workout-and-diet> (last accessed 20 June 2019). The article includes a video of the actors in training and on set, cuts from the series (bodies fighting, bodies on display), and interviews.

<sup>86</sup> Although as Strong (2013: 170-1) notes, the way actors Viva Bianca and Erin Cummings (playing Spartacus' murdered wife, Sura) imagine female viewer responses replicates the notion of physical subordination identified above in relation to *Bromans*.