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Mattheus M. Oliveira

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THINGS WE DARE NOT SEE: MEDIA REVISIONS OF INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIPS

by

MATTHEUS OLIVEIRA

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

2017

Things We Dare Not See: Media Revisions of Incestuous Relationships

by

Matheus Oliveira

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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Date

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Carrie Hintz

Thesis Advisor

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Date

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Elizabeth Macaulay Lewis

Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

Things We Dare Not See: Media Revisions of Incestuous Relationships

by

Mattheus Oliveira

Advisor: Carrie Hintz

Nowadays we can see a steadily growing acceptance of queer relationships in our films and novels, whether they are romance films or violent war movies. What we don't get to see are examples of incestuous relationships that are consensual and harmless. For example, when Luke and Leia accidentally share some romantic feelings in *Star Wars*, that bond is suppressed. We don't get an acknowledgment of a brother and sister's emotional support in the movie adaptation of V.C Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic*. This erasure stems from a long history of cultural and legal censorship of incest that only discusses harm. Even though we can imagine stories of genuine care and compassion, our novels, films, and television series still produce and censor along traditional ideas regarding what is taboo. In light of contemporary theorists of sexuality, these taboos can be challenged. Thinkers like David Lexter in "Incest" focus our attention on implicit research biases that read acts of incest and violence as the same experience. They reveal how the prevalence of survivor discourses have skewed the way people are expected to understand incestuous narratives.

Representations of incest are not implicitly harmful. If we, as both creators and audiences, keep these relationships behind closed doors or wrapped up in rape stories, we stand

to lose viewing an aspect of life that can be beautiful and supportive. Despite a history of cultural and legal actions against these relationships, this thesis argues that censorship practices on representations of taboo incestuous sexualities must be reexamined and ultimately rejected.

With an acknowledgment of the history of film censorship, this thesis looks to deconstruct these practices by examining four modern, mainstream works: George Lucas's *Star Wars* movie franchise, George R.R. Martin's "*A Game of Thrones*" novels and television adaptation by David Benioff, both the 1987 and 2014 film adaptations of V.C. Andrews's novel, *Flowers in the Attic*, and Joao Emanuel Carneiro's recent Brazilian novella *A Regra do Jogo*. In examining these works, I look to understand how portrayals of incest differ between standalone films and film franchises, and between genres as it performs before an imagined audience. To do this, I will first examine the social, religious, and legal perceptions of incest. From there, I will discuss both the brief romance and gradual revision of twins Luke and Leia's relationship in *Star Wars* as model for revising even harmless incestual relationships. Next, I will address the differences between novel and film adaptations of *Flowers in the Attic*, focusing specifically on how it sets a precedence for rewriting consensual relationships as violence. I compare these revisions with the secret relationship between Cersei and Jaime Lannister in *A Game of Thrones*. These relationships will be read alongside the romance of two cousins in the Brazilian novella, *A Regra do Jogo*, and the brother and sister relationship in *Flowers in the Attic*. This paper will analyze the ways incestuous relationships are: introduced or implied, defended or criticized within the narrative, maintained as focus of the main plot, and resolved if they need to be. Promotional material for serialized works, *Star Wars* and *A Game of Thrones*, will also be addressed. Some attention will be given to changes between novel and film/television adaptations of *A Game of Thrones* and *Flowers in the Attic*.

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I argue that the expectation of incest-survivor stories has established an image of the incestuous individual as either offender or victim. Any consensual incestuous relationship – one that does not fit the narrative of violence – is erased by the assumption that there is always a victim and always an offender. I will address how this expectation has forced our creative fictions to be rewritten so that consensual relationships are transformed into narratives of violence – namely rape – and so incestuous partners are punished. Non-consensual incest is violence like any other form of rape or sexual assault, and that should attract censure, outrage, and legal action. However, the assumption that all incest is non-consensual is problematic. In doing so, a new culture of shame and silencing is brought about that casts otherwise loving relationships as wicked and harmful – even when these relationships are fictional.

To prove this, I will first examine the ways in which religion, social norms, and scientific research have helped shape modern definitions of incest to not only implicitly mean violence, but also require that the narratives we write on incest be violent. From there, my thesis will explore four main texts: George Lucas' original *Star Wars* trilogy, V.C. Andrews' novel *Flowers in the Attic* and the 1987 film adaptation, George R.R. Martin's *A Game of Thrones* and its television adaptation, and finally João Emanuel Carneiro's telenovela, *A Regra do Jogo*. Each of these texts reveal to us the ways in which consensual incest seems to necessarily be rewritten as violent for a television audience. Ultimately, I am concerned with how this mode of censorship has impacted our film and television productions.



## Embarrassing Relationships

### Incest as Implicitly Abuse

We need to take a closer look at the concept of incest. It's a heavy word that immediately recalls a lot of pain, morality, laws, trauma, "funny" uncle stories, and non-consensual sex. Religious writings repeatedly address incest.<sup>1</sup> To address the taboo around and the difficulty of discussing incest, I will turn to several authors on the history of incest as both a practice and a topic of conversation that has been silenced. These authors trace how the religious policing of sex resulted in cultural shifts in Western thoughts about children and sexual repression. However, they also implicitly push forward a structure for incestuous narratives that necessarily require a victim and offender.

It goes without saying that religious institutions have been a major motivator for a viciously censorious history of sex: shaming, policing, abusing, silencing, moralizing, and repressing. Calum Carmichael in *Sex and Religion in the Bible* addresses the conflicting messages about incest in the Bible. Focusing primarily on Christianity, the Old Testament, and some intersections with Judaism, he pores through the many incestuous biblical couplings to understand where the religious rules regulating – not necessarily prohibiting – incest stem from. Some of the reasons are practical. A family is safer if it remains as devoid of sexual desire as possible. Otherwise we risk jealousy charged violence (Carmichael 139). Other reasons are more personal. Carmichael examines several incestuous relationships<sup>2</sup>: intercourse with a

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<sup>1</sup> Calum Carmichael in "Incest" reads a messy history of incest practices, both celebrated and condoned, as they change through the spread of Christianity and Western imperialism. After giving us a brief history of well-received histories and odd double-standards regarding incestuous couples (most of which mentioned were noble) Carmichael argues societal rejection of incest is built upon a patriarchal system that draws from religious law as its support.

<sup>2</sup> All of these rules assume that the potential offender is a man.

father/mother, father's wife, half-sister, granddaughter, in-laws, and the brother's wife. Almost all Carmichael's readings readily acknowledge a defense of patriarchal power that these relationships may otherwise jeopardize. What is so interesting is that the religious context reads incestuous relationships as challenges to familial power – not as violence in it of itself (assuming no physical or mental abuse).<sup>3</sup> It's a conversation of solidarity in the face of oppressive power, in Carmichael's cases patriarchy.

Although Carmichael does generate strong questions regarding how the societal rules around incest were formed and to what purpose, very little of his overview should be surprising. Alongside the religious history we will look at a series of cultural changes. In particular, I will look at how shifting cultural values around children have affected current views on incest. Wendy Evans and David Manes in "Narrative Structures and the Analysis of Incest" take a sociological approach to the history of how Western society has come to talk about incest. They note that child incest narratives have been historically shaped by shifting structures of patriarchal power, the natural impulse to have sex, ideas of childhood, and definitions of sexual abuse (Evans and Manes 304). However, Evans and Manes focus on sexual *abuse*. In doing so, they present a structure for incestuous narratives that necessarily requires a victim and offender. Whether the victim is a child or not, incest narratives, according to them, must be violent. No other relationships are ever considered.

Both religion and cultural norms have revealed how the practice of incest (both open and private) and its silencing have worked to maintain a patriarchal control of sex and bodies. These histories now inform our reading of fiction and the current culture of incest-survivor narratives. Joan Lynch, in "Incest Discourse and Cinematic Representation," is concerned about how

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<sup>3</sup> I do not intend to ignore an extremely well-documented history of silence and abuse, but it is important to see that incest was not always a conversation of victims and offenders. Rather it was a conversation of power and solidarity.

dominant patriarchy has subverted the serious concerns of incest survivor stories. Again, the narrative structure of victim and offender is repeated. Lynch resists the trope of the incest survivor as a damaged, sex-obsessed, dangerous individual by reading several films.<sup>4</sup> For Lynch, these films reveal how pervasive the taboo against speaking about incest is. The misogyny of the patriarchy silences what would otherwise be helpful and restorative survivor narratives (Lynch 43). Notice that Lynch is particularly concerned with pedophilia, and treats any form of familial relationship as incest. In fact, even step-relations, the bulk of her writing, are considered as incestuous. Moreover, it's not ever clear how or why she expands incest to include non-blood relations. Motivated by a need to address real, serious sexual harm, Lynch identifies incest with violence without explaining how incest changes the way we ought to read her texts or abuse narratives.

We now understand that incest as a term also means, implicitly sexual violence. It is not sex between family members, but also an intrinsically a *violent* relationship. This interchangeable definition is questioned when we turn to the work of Dorothy Wilner. In "Definition and Violation: Incest and the Incest Taboos," she examines a history of academic and social fascination with incest as it is informed by histories of sexual abuse (Wilner 2). Incest, according to Wilner, is concerned with sex, violence, legality, and morality. Although she acknowledges a distinction between incest as a sexual action and incest as a violation, even Wilner has trouble using "incest" to mean a consensual act. Instead she uses scientific language like "mating between primary kin" which treats consenting couples as research subjects (152). This is alienating, ignores individual humanity, and reveals to us what we already know; the idea of harmless incest is so foreign in a conversation defined by violent stories that the only way we

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<sup>4</sup> *Lolita*, *Murmurs of the Heart*, and *Nuts*.

can possibly tolerate it is by removing the term or jumping out of the Western culture to some undefined “other.”

In trying to pick apart the intersection of consensual sex and taboo, it is frighteningly hard to write a story of harmless romance even when filmmakers and writers are at the height of creativity. Although we will not be talking about erotica and pornography per se, our material will address texts that reveal how incest’s double meaning creates violent narratives and texts that problematize the incest-as-rape definition.

This chapter will close with a reading of the original *Star Wars* trilogy by George Lucas. *Star Wars*, like many other movies, is no stranger to serious feminist analysis; Princess Leia’s infamous “slave” outfit in *Episode VI* already invites a wealth of readings on female sexuality, objectification, male gaze, and sexual maturity. *Star Wars* is a rich franchise that will playfully introduce us to how problematic incestuous relationships can be in even the most fantastical universe. It is useful to us not because it shocked American audiences with a taboo relationship, but because it works through a broad treatment of the subject; from setting up the brother and sister as romantic interests during the film and on posters to steadily revising this powerful, romantic image by switching up the pairings over the course of 6 years following the first movie’s success.

#### **Episode 4 – A New Love Triangle**

First released to movie going audiences in 1977, George Lucas captured viewers with the space odyssey *Star Wars*.<sup>5</sup> The film was in development since 1973. *Star Wars* introduced moviegoers to a fantastical world of lost Jedi orders, galaxy wide government corruption, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Later releases would add the subheading *Episode IV* and subtitle *A New Hope*.

dreams of the bright eyed, hopeful Luke Skywalker who quickly becomes wrapped up in an intergalactic political war after he saves kidnapped princess Leia. The film was met with outstanding success worldwide, grossing over \$700 million. The unprecedented success would lead to George Lucas to expand this film into the multi-trilogy franchise with an expanded universe told through novels, comics, and television spin-offs.

*Stars Wars* is striking because of its universe, its lore, and the heart pumping adrenaline of its space fights. However, it also uses familiar narrative elements: a recognizable coming of age narrative, the easily identifiable villains, and romantic subplots. The evolving romantic subplot between Luke and Leia will be our focus. We will be concerned with two different elements of the film: the promotional posters, and select scenes between Luke and Leia. Although the movie scenes are rich in romantic undertones between the characters, it is through the tactful use of advertisement that *Star Wars* reveals the embarrassment that an accidental incestuous couple has for creators. In fact, we can trace problems in the little romance we do see in the films – Luke’s original desires for Leia, the love triangle, and the revelation that Leia is Luke’s twin sister – by reading the posters alongside each other.

In 1977, the first *Star Wars* movie is finally released and audiences are teased with the first theatrical release poster (see fig. 1).



(Fig. 1. “Star Wars.” Style A. 1977.)

The scene isn't particularly romantic. We do not see any form of touching, no eyes are met, no indication of bated breath (or oxygen). Luke stands on top of the mound of earth, arms above his head holding a blazing lightsaber with his muscled chest exposed. Leia is in front of him, one knee on the mound holding a gun in her left hand and her right hand poised on her hip. Her right leg is exposed and she is not wearing any shoes. C3PO and R2-D2 are standing next to each other behind the two heroes. Darth Vader's helmet forms the space backdrop as ships fly towards the Death Star in the upper left. They are the heroes of the movie and both occupy a space of power, suggesting some form of intimate relationship.

Luke is an innocent hero with light hair, dressed in white and gold, whose broad chest invokes a normative image of masculinity.<sup>6</sup> He is, however, positioned behind Leia who is the second largest character in the image thanks to her billowing cape and flowing dress, overshadowed by Darth Vader's face in the space background. She is half posing, half ready for

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<sup>6</sup>Luke keeps his shirt closed in the films.

battle. Neither of them are communicating with each other, but we understand from their wardrobe, color palates, and proximity that we are supposed to read them in relationship with one another – as a pair whom together face the evil Darth Vader. We as an audience understand the two should eventually fall in love. This is the romantic narrative that the writing, the acting, and the art have drawn the audience into expecting. So powerful is this expectation that we do not need any actual romance to come to this interpretation as all of the narrative tools are pulling us along.

Moving from the poster onto the silver screen, we as an audience are drawn into the sci-fi world of lost Jedi orders and wicked Federation fleets. After a failed infiltration of a Federation ship, Princess Leia sends the small droid R2-D2 off with a recording to get help. Captured by sith lord Darth Vader, she is imprisoned. The scene shifts through space to the hero. Luke's first introduction to Leia happens on in his home planet Tatooine, in the opening scenes of the film, after purchasing RS-DS from some traders. As he tries to fix the robot, an incomplete recording of Leia plays. After his initial surprise, Luke remarks, "she's beautiful." The young Luke gazes at the image of the princess in distress, and continues to ask R2-D2 to replay the message. He is not yet concerned with the actual content of the message; it is mostly incomplete and requires that Obi-Wan be present before the message can be shared. Luke, as he admires Leia, performs the role of the innocent hero enchanted by the damsel in distress. Leia, on the other hand, is an incomplete image. Pleading for help on repeat, every replay of the message reaffirms her role as the desirable damsel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A role that we as an audience are quick to forget once her prison doors are opened and she grabs a gun.

After some deliberation, Luke, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Han Solo reach the ship where Leia is captured. While fleeing from a squad of Stormtroopers, Luke, dressed as a trooper, eventually stumbles across Leia's cell. After opening the doors, he runs in on Leia half-asleep on her bench resting on her side with one outlined leg visibly draped over the other. As Luke walks in, she slowly looks up unconcerned. The frantic battle music stops, and both Luke and Leia take a moment to look at each other. Luke's covered face denies us his emotions, but the exaggerated tilting of his head to the left convey to us that he is gazing as much as he is looking. The pulling back of his head reveals to us his surprise when Leia looks towards him. As she jokingly remarks "A little short for a Stormtrooper?" Luke is brought back into the reality of the moment.

Luke and Leia come, in this moment, to reinforce their gendered roles that have already been in development since Luke first saw her message. Since deciding to come to her safety, he has already transformed from the farmhand to a man in soldier's gear, armed and on a mission. With the helmet, he functions visually as another symbol for tyrant power that is characteristically masculine – all Stormtroopers are male in this film. His daring rescue has him gaze upon Leia, covered neck to toe in a white dress that is still sheer enough on her legs to see where her boots begin beneath the cloth. Her dress is remarkably clean, save for a large, dark smudge above her left breast. These outfits function as both a juxtaposition and a unifying visual marker. The white soldier – white knight, rather – has come to save the white princess. Even though we can see the uniform of her captors and understand that beneath is a boy from a desert planet, we understand implicitly that two are connected despite the stark differences that their outfits bring to the scene.

The witty commentary coupled with Leia's arm casually resting on her hip establishes Leia first as pleasant, charming. But where are we supposed to rest our gaze? On her face, her



legs, her chest? Even Luke is unsure with his unsteady gaze. Yet her dialogue imposes an instant bond, and a humbled Luke removes his helmet. It's an emblematic moment for Star Wars, where the calm acting and sudden shift in score take the audience and the characters out of the reality of a chaotic ship. The meeting of these two constructed by the costume design, score, acting, and promotional material establishes a profound connection – traditionally romantic in almost every way. The gendered roles the characters play and Luke's mixed motivations entice us to imagine this as love at first sight.

As they run away from the spaceship after the shock of Obi-Wan's death, Luke and Han Solo take a moment to comment on Leia. Luke dances around asking Han for romantic advice with Leia. Despite supporting Luke's affections, Han admits that he is at least mildly attracted to Leia. It's a playful conversation coming at the tail end of a victorious rescue where both the characters and the audience can relax from tense trash compactor scene and learn more intimate details about our trio. It also cements romance as a point of interest for our characters.

At the end of the movie, we have three characters wrapped up in a humorous love triangle that occupies some of our time but never takes over the plot. Luke clearly cares for Leia. Han is a begrudging, although still willing, tag along in military resistance and romances with foreign princesses. Whether we enjoy these three and regardless of what relationship we root for, an explicitly romantic triangle has been crafted into the space rebellion narrative.

### **Episode 5 – The Triangle is Resolved**

Riding the success of the first movie, George Lucas gets to work and produces the second film of the newly announced trilogy in 1980. *The Empire Strikes Back* is set three years, matching the production time, after the first film. Although it was released with fairly mixed

reviews, *Episode V* is generally accepted among fans to be the best film of the original trilogy, balancing action, Jedi mythos, the many evils of the Empire, exciting space travel, interesting planets, and further expanding on the relationships between Luke, Han, and Leia. Fans were excited to meet little green Yoda who promised them more insight into the legendary, supernatural Jedi Order, standing on pins when Han was frozen in a block of carbonite, and sitting on the edge of their seats when Darth Vader severs Luke's hand and speaks the infamous line, "I am your father." The film ultimately exceeded all expectations.

Yet within all this success in narrative, production, acting, and creativity, *Episode V* is the start of some odd promotional and narrative changes to the relations between our leads. The is evident from the theatrical release posters (see fig. 2).



(Fig. 2. "The Empire Strikes Back." 1980)

The art has changed by the second movie. The traditional drawing has been replaced with edited images of the actual actors. Han Solo and Leia dominate the poster, embracing each other as they are about to kiss. Luke looks off towards the audience while riding his beast and the robot companions are even further behind the main cast. Darth Vader makes up the upper half of

the background while the lower half reminds us of the frozen planet Hoth from the opening minutes of the movie.

Since the first movie, the trio now forms a resistance group against the Empire and their own private relationships have developed. The original love triangle that was played with in Episode 4 has been seemingly resolved before the film even begins and Han Solo has been revealed as Leia's love interest. Luke's role has completely changed. He is visually distinct from Han and Leia in his winter clothing as opposed to when their white clothes matched. He is dressed for the lower half of the advertisement. His mount, and by extension his torso, face away from Han and Leia. Luke, decked in exploration gear, is the furthest, on so many levels, from being a romantic interest. And this comes after the blazing image of masculinity behind Leia's exposed, shoeless legs on a moon. Luke stops being an objective image of idealized romantic masculinity. He is now a youthful explorer, separated from society alongside his steed dressed in winter wear. Romance, however, is still the concern of the poster despite whether or not Darth Vader will approve.

Yet as an advertisement, it is not clear why the relationships are clarified like this before the audience sits down. We are led to question what has happened to bring Han Solo and Leia together, but it uproots the playful competition between Han and Luke that initially developed their relationships and resolves the triangle before the audience can be drawn into the events of *Episode 5*. It both foregrounds the concern for romance within Episode V that fans are interested in while attempting to circumvent any questions about the triangle at the outset.

The film immediately follows through on the poster's promise. The opening scenes of the movie show Han and Leia bickering in the Rebel Alliance's frozen base on the ice planet, Hoth. Luke Skywalker, the main character, is nowhere to be seen. He is out exploring the tundra of

Hoth, exactly like the advertisement. Instead, Han continuously teases Leia about the romantic tension the two of them are feeling for each other, and Leia rejects every attempt to get her to agree. Their fighting stops briefly to save Luke from dying out in the frozen tundra, and eventually the two are standing beside a recovering Luke in the infirmary ward – still fighting. And the only reason the two stop bickering is when Leia, fed up with Han and his conceited grin, storms over to Luke, clenches his head, and angrily kisses him. Han is shocked, Leia walks away, and Luke leans back in his bed with his hands behind his head.

This moment flips the entire romantic dynamic established in Luke and Leia's first meeting. Gone is the suggestive, romantic body language, the shifts in score, and lines delivered with bated breath that was so meticulously constructed before. What was originally delivered to audiences as the heavily romanticized power couple has now become a funny kiss to get back at Han. This kiss seems to ignore all the work of *Episode IV* and set audiences up for Leia and Han's new, explicit romance. And this is the subplot that plays throughout the entire movie right until the end.

The final moments of the movie take place on the floating colony, Cloud City. While the three originally planned to meet up with Lando Calrissian, Han's old friend, they are betrayed and delivered directly to Darth Vader. Although he plans to trap Luke in carbonite, he first tests the procedure on Han. In the final moments before Han is trapped in carbonite, Leia kisses Han and whispers, "I love you." The two lovers are torn apart while Han is frozen, and Luke is separated from Leia to fight – and ultimately lose to – Darth Vader. Luke, Leia, and a semi-redeemed Lando eventually escape and the three separate. Luke goes off to train and start his own redemption subplot with Yoda while Leia plans the rescue of her love. On different planets. What was originally a sweet, classic romance between Luke and Leia has been desexualized and

trivialized with a funny kiss, a traumatic freezing, and a little green man. Severed hands and traumatic betrayals notwithstanding, they can't even function as emotional supports for one another.

### Episode 6 – Where Leia Always Knew

Finally, we arrive at the last film of the original trilogy, *Return of the Jedi*. Released in 1983 and set one year after the events of *Episode V*, the film concludes the epic space odyssey with respectable success. Despite criticisms of the annoyingly long screen time of the fuzzy Ewoks, the film challenges *Episode V* for the best in the franchise. And once again, the romantic focus has shifted in the promotional material (see fig. 3).



(Fig. 3. “Star Wars Episode IV: Return of the Jedi.” Style B. 1983)

There is no more romance once we look at *Episode 6*'s poster. From top to bottom we see the cast: Darth Vader, Luke, Han Solo, Leia. Spreading out from Leia are several side characters. Gone are the idealized drawings of the siblings leading us to think of a glory yet to come. Gone is the lover's embrace between Han Solo and Leia. Now we see the cast ready to face Darth

Vader, and Leia is dressed in her iconic slave outfit. All rendered against the background of space.

Leia is the focus of the poster, situated in the middle of the film title. Almost completely exposed, her role as a sexualized heroine, the center of both the protagonists and the audience's attention, has become apparent.<sup>8</sup> However, this role is presented separate from her relationship with either Luke or Han Solo. Whereas Episode 4 presented Luke and Leia as a pair, or, at least, a dynamic duo in matching outfits destined to fight the dark menace Darth Vader, this poster interjects Han Solo brandishing his gun between the black-cloaked Luke and Leia. While Episode 5 depicted Han Solo and Leia in an embrace as Luke looks off into the distance, this poster has the two looking at the viewer. What was once a visually marked romantic subplot has now been removed in this last film's advertisement.

Most of the final film avoids romance, much like the poster. *Episode VI* opens with a new, confident Luke in black robes and Leia, dressed in an assortment of outfits, rescuing Han from Jabba the Hut. After the rescue, the three plan their final assault to overthrow the Empire, bring back Darth Vader to the good side of the Force, and to reestablish Leia as a ruler. Amidst these events, a key twist shifted the way in which audiences viewed Luke and Leia. As Yoda slowly dies in Luke's arms, he suggests that there is a second heir to the Force and the legacy of the Jedi. This secret had been teased throughout the opening of the film, and is delivered, dramatic score shifts and all, expecting to surprise the audience.

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<sup>8</sup> This not to say, however, that Leia is at any point disempowered by either the events the outfit even as she is explicitly used to satisfy a heteronormative male gaze. Noah Berlastsky talks to this point in his article, "The 'slave Leia' controversy is about more than objectification."

The three fly to the planet Endor where they are greeted by the furry citizens, the Ewoks. Eventually befriending the people, the three plan their final assault against the Empire. The night before the final fight, Luke decides to have a final conversation with Leia between the trees, underneath the stars, and with Han just a short distance. After telling her that he has to leave the group to face Darth Vader or risk their entire operation, he reveals that Vader is his father. From there, the famous exchange between the two happens. Luke tells Leia, "The Force is strong in my family. I have it. My father has it, and, my sister has it." After a pause, Leia looks down and says "I know. Somehow, I've always known." They speak a bit more, the camera pulls back, and Luke is now the one giving Leia a kiss. It's not clear where, but presumably one on the cheek. This is a touching family reunion that quickly calls into question the romance in the past three movies. The calm score, Luke and Leia's close bodies, and the solemn tone of voice make this a tender moment.

But Han, like always, only complicates things. What began as a reassuring conversation between (now revealed) siblings quickly turns into yet another competition for Leia's affections. After Leia refuses to tell him about the exchange, Han looks at her angrily and yells "Could you tell Luke? Is that who you could tell?" His anger lasts only several seconds before he holds her both apologetically and consolingly, but it does recast Luke as, yet again, a romantic rival. Han is out of the loop, but Leia's lack of any commentary is what allows Han to continue thinking this way. The jealous concern that Han shares remains unresolved in part because Luke's new sibling status isn't enough to destabilize the love triangle.

With the defeat of Darth Vader and the destruction of the second Death Star, the final moments of the film are a celebration. Amid all the cheers, Han solemnly turns to Leia to finally resolve their hot-and-cold romance and ultimately give her his blessing to be with Luke. With a

laugh Leia reveals to Han that she and Luke are siblings. Han's face freezes into a look of shock as he slowly turns away from Leia and looks off into the distance. Han is, understandably, shocked by this revelation. But this scene is only minimally concerned with Leia's revelation. She sits there with a smile on her face, knowing how wrong Han was in his blessing. The two are in the middle of a celebration of their grand victory in the galaxy. They're also surrounded by fuzzy, little bear people in probably the most desexualized moment of the entire film franchise. It's a funny, lighthearted celebration that ends with Leia kissing Han with a smile on her face and kissing away his, and the audience's, worries.

### **Stepping Out of Space**

*Star Wars*, both in its conception and development, is narrative that has gone through an astounding amount of rewriting, revision, reproduction, updating, expanding, and more during its almost 50-year lifespan. Much of my reading of these films rests on hindsight; these changes in promotion and narrative begin to reveal an aversion to an accidental incestuous romance once all of the films are taken into consideration. *Star Wars*, however, isn't intentionally commenting on consensual incest. Rather, in crafting a fantasy universe that also happens to comply with both the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) film-rating system and normative idea of taboo relationships it lets audiences know that the only acceptable incestuous relationship is one that we craft by accident and that takes 6 years to revise into a de-sexed sibling relationship. With an understanding of the extreme lengths film creators will go through to revise incestuous relationships to be as non-threatening as possible, we will now address texts that explicitly deal with these romances.



## **Adapting Novels to the Screen**

In *Star Wars*, Luke and Leia's relationship, both in its initial presentation as a romance and quick transformation into rapport between long lost siblings, is a very small aspect of a much larger franchise. Compare their relationship to the thematic concerns of taxation, modes of governing, coming-of-age motif, questions on the nature of justice, terrorism, and the ethics of war and suddenly their original romance isn't a particularly big concern for the movies. However, the steady erasure of their romance tells us something about how audiences are not allowed to look at incest. Namely: as consensual, harmless, and performed like any other non-incestuous, heterosexual relationship. Even if a writer wanted to make a funny subplot about an accidental romance, the idea of a consensual relationship appears to be so offensive to the film maker's imagined audience that they will commit the 3 years after the release of the first *Star Wars* movie to erase the possibility of such a romance.

Part of this fear comes from the history of silencing and policing that writers like Evans and Manes have written about in their studies of incest. They talk about incest and violence and use the words interchangeably so often that we cannot even imagine that such a relationship could ever be consensual or loving. However, novelists and filmmakers have additional concerns. Issues regarding censorship and adaptation further inform their work. To understand how this practice of incest erasure and revision in our media works, we first must understand the set of expectations that audiences and producers have for adaptations.

### **Adaptation as Expectation and Judgment**

While fans may still poke fun at Luke and Leia's almost love, it's really a side conversation in *Star Wars*. The steady removal of the love triangle is as much a way to focus on

the core plot as it is a concern for consistency as the plot that gets written and rewritten behind the scenes between each movie. *Star Wars* stands on its own. It started out as a film, it's remembered as a film, and no amount of the expanded novel and comic universe (which has been relatively ignored in recent films) has made much headway in changing this perception for the casual audience.<sup>9</sup>

The following texts, however, do explicitly deal with incest. George Martin's *Game of Thrones* may be best known for its television adaptation, but fans of the show are painfully aware that the books lurk in the background, always carrying the danger of spoilers. *Flowers in the Attic* as a film may be more well-known publicly, but fan desire for a production that is true to the novels gave us a new film in 2014. *Star Wars* does not have this issue. *Game of Thrones* and *Flowers in the Attic* shift the concerns of this paper to questions about adaptations, about what is lost, and what causes that narrative change in the first place. Though this reading, we question why it seems that consensual relationships must be rewritten as dangerous or immoral.

When we talk about adaptations, whether to film or television, we are not starting a conversation about fidelity. That is, we are not judging the value of the adaption based on how similar it is to the original. Linda Hutcheon, in "On the Art of Adaptation," expands on the notion of fidelity. She explains that in the transition from page to screen, the massive amount of detail in any one novel needs to be compressed so it can actually fit into an hour and twenty minutes. Thus "this necessary compression means the trimming of expansive plot lines, the removal of much psychological analysis, and the loss of stylistic texture. Characters and events are omitted; colorful slang and expletives are deleted" (Hutcheon 110). This is a conversation

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<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the expanded universe isn't impactful/interesting/thought provoking/etc. But the everyday conversations we hear about are regarding the movies.

about loss – of meaning, of imagery, of sometimes really important plot points. This is the editing process. However, revision – rewriting plots – requires different thinking where instead of just losing texture and events we replace them with new “more appropriate” ones.

But where Hutcheon expands our notion of what an “adaptation” might mean as film technology improves, she remains concerned with the demands of the audience: “What happens when these readers see their favorite books depicted on-screen according to somebody else’s imagination?” (111). The audience responses are predictably varied.<sup>10</sup>

My thesis takes a different approach. Instead of listing off inaccuracies between novel and adaptation, we will look at how audiences are fed coded, moralistic judgments that come from a messy intersection of writing, adaptation, editing, censorship, age ratings, marketing, and violence. Ann-Marie Scholz in “Adaptation as Reception,” offers a transnational, multicultural approach to understanding how adaptation is both informed by and informs audiences and producers about the expectation of narratives on screen. She acknowledges how “the relationship between literary text and filmic adaptations can be approached from historical angles that emphasize social, political, and cultural questions has had articulate (though isolated) supporters” (Scholz 658). This play on expectation, particularly as it is influenced by the society we live in, gives us the theoretical space to discuss these intersecting influences on our ideas of incest. It allows us to understand how cultural norms about incest – both helpful and harmful – shape the way we look at incest stories. It also allows us to question why we look at even stories of consent as violent.

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<sup>10</sup> Fidelity may be nice to have, but even a quick survey of the opinion of authors on adaptation doesn’t give us much insight. Most of these comments are about how accurate the film is to the novel, and not about criticizing the changes in meaning or the implicit moral bias behind these edits. (Writers on the Film Adaptations of Their Work: *Déjà Vu*)

Scholz argues that “reconceiving adaptation as a form of reception also calls for explicit attention to the transnational and cross-cultural dynamics of the process itself, for the agents on both the producing and the receiving end are rarely from a single nation or a single culture” (659). This is a step away from fidelity, which aims to reproduce – possibly enhance – the original source material. Scholz, and other writers, is asking for a closer look at how we, as audiences and producers, intentionally add bias to adaptations. While there isn’t enough space to extensively address transnational concerns, this paper takes note of the need for more attention to the dynamics of the adaptation process, and the values that this process necessarily juggles before it produces a PG-13 film or MA television series. In order to explore this process as it problematizes incest stories, we will explore V.C Andrew’s *Flowers in the Attic* and the HBO series *Game of Thrones*.

### **Flowers in the Attic**

Published in 1979, V.C Andrews’s *Flowers in the Attic* introduced an American audience to the subtly dark story of the Dollanganger family; of four innocent, blond children trapped in an attic and forced to grow up on their own under the vicious eye of their grandmother. In this story of tortured youth, Andrews takes her readers down a carefully constructed path of sinister paranoia as we watch a family relive and be punished for a cycle of incest meant to disturb and frighten his readers. The 1987 film adaptation, sporting a surprisingly low PG-13 rating, graced screens to relative success but poor reviews. Dealing explicitly with incest, *Flowers in the Attic* is as much a reflection of social attitudes towards incestuous relationships as it is a narrative for the repression of sexuality.

Andrews’s work explores incest through a story of young sexuality that would, in any other novel, be perfectly romantic. Imagine it; two young lovers, trapped by a wicked woman,

turn to each other for support. Carolyne Larrington speaks to the question of mutual support in “Sibling Incest” as she observes that “incest narratives are not only about sexual transgressions: they also speak to deep-rooted concerns about the emergence of young people into adulthood, embarking on life outside the family group” (156). Incestuous narratives explore how these concerns are exacerbated when the young people are embarking on life outside the family - already frightening – with another family member as the romantic partner. *Flowers in the Attic*, through Christopher and Catherine’s captivity and resulting feelings, shows us how these look. Despite the gravity with which incest narratives treat sexual relations, Larrington reminds us that “while the sexual relationship with the sibling is not necessarily coercive, its outcome is frequently catastrophic” (156). This catastrophe written in print form and rewritten for the movie-going audience is our concern.

These same “deep-rooted concerns about the emergence of young people into adulthood” that Larrington references is concerned with bodies and sex – concerns made worse when we talk about children. Andrews never shies away from discussing children’s sexual development, and takes care to update the readers as the narrative moves along. For Andrews, children’s bodies, specifically the older siblings Christopher and Catherine, are subjects to be observed, and not brushed over. *Flowers in the Attic*, then, becomes an exploration in childhood sexual maturity as much as it is a horror story about taboos.

Our first image of the children is noticeably desexualized. For the first seven chapters of the novel, they remain innocent, white, blond-haired children.<sup>11</sup> This innocence is echoed in conversations the children have with each several months into their imprisonment. Take the

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<sup>11</sup> Their grandmother may think otherwise, and Andrews does take moments to examine their bodies, but the children remain desexualized despite this observation. Much of their sexuality is provoked by outside judgement rather than by their own curiosity.

following exchange between Christopher and Catherine roughly four months into their ordeal. In the midst of renovating the attic into a space where they and the twins can lead the illusion of a healthy life, the two spend much of their days reading. Eventually the conversation switches to male and female anatomy, and the two comment on each other's bodies. When discussing genitalia, Catherine praises women for being "neatly packaged" to which Christopher responds,

Yes, Cathy, I know you approve of your *neat* body as I approve of my *un-neat* body, so let all of us rejoice that we have what we do. Our parents accepted our bare skins just as they did our eyes and hair, and so shall we. And I forgot, male birds have their organs 'neatly' tucked away inside, too, like females. (154)

Bare bodies are discussed relatively unabashedly by the two who often find themselves living in their prison in some state of undress. This particular moment of playful conversation transforms into a statement of bodily acceptance where they distinguish their bodies through gendered terms of neat/un-neat, as a form of female/male identification. This is also a moment of competition, where Christopher is trying to win an imagined game by bringing up that "male birds have their organs 'neatly' tucked away inside, too." By loosely identifying themselves with animals (small birds) the conversation at this point is not concerned with incestuous acts their grandmother obsesses over throughout the novel. That Christopher is too embarrassed to share with Catherine the reasons a male bird may become aroused only reaffirms their innocence.

Their childish bodies, however, are slowly changing. Andrews uses their growth to bring us back into the fear of incest. In particular, she identifies in both Christopher and Catherine qualities that remind both each other and the reader of their parents. By having the two embody these images, Andrews invites us to image an inevitable incestuous future. The passages marking their maturation are almost exclusively moments where there are on some display with one

sibling observing the other. Catherine catches her brother one night staring at her after boldly planting a kiss on her cheek:

Chris swept his eyes from my hair down to my bare toes that just barely peeked from beneath my long gown, and his eyes told me something they never quite said quite as eloquently before. He stared at my face, at my hair that cascaded down past my waist, and I knew it gleamed from all the brushing I gave it every day. He seemed impressed and dazzled, just as he had when he'd gazed so long at Momma's swelling bosom above the green velvet bodice. And no wonder he had kissed me voluntarily – I was so princess-like. (202)

Catherine's clothing is a consistent detail throughout the novel – particularly her nightwear. This scene does not imagine simple pajamas, but an intimate outfit. Christopher's gaze is taking in her whole body, and Catherine identifies her own features as her brother looks up and down her body. It is a classic image of beauty with long blond hair that pulls the gaze down to her waist, although not particularly sexual. Yet when their mother is mentioned, the tone changes.

Catherine reminds him of their “Momma's swelling bosom above the green velvet bodice.” Andrews subtly transitions us from sleepwear to an image of a woman whose breasts are only accented by her clothing. And this happens without any deliberate enticement by Catherine; Christopher already sees in Catherine the image of his beloved mother.

While Catherine's embodiment does bring us to questions of sexual attraction, she still sees herself in overtly romantic terms. She's “princess-like,” but not yet a “woman.”<sup>12</sup>

Catherine's observations of Christopher punctuate their time in the attic, but often end in a small lament about their changing relationship or the consequences of their time in the mansion. One

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<sup>12</sup> As opposed to Christopher who has already been regarded as a “man.” It doesn't take much reading to understand that the quotes signify a sexualized connotation for the terms.

night, however, the two make a daring trip out the attic window, down the walls, and into the forest where they come across a lake. With barely a word between the two of them, they strip down to their underwear – Catherine notes that she has no bra – and go for a swim. After a short while, they come to rest on the bank and Catherine gazes at her brother.

That was my Christopher Doll, the eternal optimist, sprawled beside me, all wet and glistening, with his fair hair pasted to his forehead. His nose was the same as Daddy's as it aimed at the heavens, his full lips so beautifully shaped he didn't need to pout to make them sensual, his chin square, strong, clefted, and his chest was beginning to broaden . . . and there was that hillock of his growing maleness before his strong thighs, beginning to swell. There was something about a man's strong, well-shaped thighs that excited me. (263)

From Catherine's eyes we get an incredibly sexually charged gaze. She concerns herself with Christopher's whole body, "all wet and glistening" to catch her attention. His "sprawled" posture invites both Catherine and us as readers into this gaze. He is immediately identified with their father through his nose. With that image in mind, Catherine does her own trace down his body. Christopher is inherently sexual, with lips "he didn't need to pout to make them sensual" and a steadily broadening chest that is immediately link to sex as she examines his growing groin. We learn Catherine likes strong thighs.

The two, as their steadily sexualized bodies are discussed and observed, remind the reader that incest is still the main concern. Christopher and Catherine are constantly depicted as younger versions of their parents as they care for the twins and mature through puberty. By embodying their parents, the two present readers with the lingering concern that they may act out what husband and wife are expected to do. It is a powerful, meditated change, where the siblings



still retain their pride in their bodies while frightening the people around them with their blossoming sexuality.

Differences aside, the film follows the events of the novel closely in condensed form save for two significant instances. Throughout the film, the children remain trapped within the attic, suffering and alone with their thoughts. Despite several scenes that imply incest between Catherine and Christopher, nothing ever comes about on screen. In fact, at no point in the film are we ever lead to believe that the two ever participated in incestuous activities. The bath scenes tease us, with Christopher's lingering stares and the slowly moving camera along Catherine's body, but never do the two act anything out.

In Andrew's novel, Christopher steals out into the night to steal loose change and dollars from his mother's bedroom when she is out on her many trips, in an effort to fund their escape from the mansion. One night, Christopher returns in shock after overhearing a grim revelation; the first night Catherine snuck out to steal money for their escape, she kissed their sleeping stepfather. As he recalls sneaking into his mother's dresser to look at the dirty book he tells his sister that "I thought about you and me, and these should be blossoming years for us, and I had to feel guilty and ashamed to be growing up, and wanting what other boy my age could from girls who were willing" (351). Again Andrews bring our attention back to the relationship between the siblings. Christian is concerned about how their youth has been twisted by the events in the attic. However, he reflects more specifically here on his sister and himself. The language acknowledges them as man and woman, not brother and sister, and Catherine's lack of control in the face of their stepfather forces Christopher to reconsider his own sexual repression.

Outraged as he recalls his stepfather's story he lashes out at his sister, "[I] t was you, wasn't it? How could you be so bold, so indiscreet? [. . .] You think you're the only one wound

up, right? You think you're the only one with frustrations, with doubts, suspicions, and fears." (352). This is a scene of their breaking point, where Christopher shoves into the open the sexual and moral frustration that we have only heard Catherine voice so far. He yells, "Damn you and your romantic notions! Now they're on to us!" (352). Christopher chastises his sister on multiple levels. Her sexual promiscuity – if we could even call it that – is condemned as reckless, endangering their plans for freedom. But even more, Christopher call out her self-motivated (if traumatically induced) expression of sexual desire. She's "bold" and that behavior is seen as dangerous throughout the novel. Although Christopher call this transgression another "romantic notion," he is concerned with the feeling of being "wound up" that they both share. That Catherine would take the opportunity to kiss their stepfather further complicates this issue. He may not be related to them, but this small kiss brings us as readers back into the cyclical relationship of incest that the family fears with Catherine showing affection yet again for another family member. So though Christopher's outrage may be understood as largely a mix of their jeopardized plans and pent-up feeling, we read this as an outrage for feeding into the wicked cycle that their grandmother has been condemning them off.

Through this fight, Catherine remains innocent. Despite being violently shaken by her brother, she thinks "I did not understand what he had in mind, nor, if I am to give him credit, do I really think he mean what he said, but passion has a way of taking over" (355-356). Unlike her brother, Catherine still lives with a romanticized view of romance that is only slightly disturbed with sexual thoughts. She remains a picture of innocence – tempted from time to time but all resisting. Her brother, however, can no long resist and so Catherine finds herself wrapped up in his passions.

After declaring his jealousy-fueled ownership of his sister, he wrestles his sister to the floor. Angry, frustrated, and jealous the two struggle before finally consummating their desire in a scene that Andrews clearly intends to make us uncomfortable. Andrews has Catherine narrate:

It wasn't much of a battle. I had the strong dancer's legs; he had the biceps, the greater weight and height . . . and he had much more determination than I to use something hot, swollen and demanding, so much that it stole reasoning and sanity from him. And I loved him. And I wanted what he wanted – if he wanted it *that* much, right or wrong. (356)

There is a struggle, and that immediately calls into question Catherine's consent. She does acknowledge a shared need, "I wanted what he wanted," but bases her desire on his lack of control. Christopher is transformed, in this moment, to a beast of passion without his sanity. Although this whirlwind of feelings does not deviate from other romantic scenes of passion, it is particularly striking that this moment comes about largely without rational thought. That Catherine continues throughout this scene to act according to Christopher's lust rather than her own further problematizes this moment. She resists as we all expect her to when a man is violently attempting to have sex with her and when she is forced into an incestuous experience. This moment is further cast into a moral sphere as Catherine implicitly agrees, in questioning "right or wrong," that this is a moment of sin. Yet her eventually passive acceptance of Christopher both casts Catherine as complicit in this affair while simultaneously robbed of her choice.

Andrews writes an incredibly complex moment. Characterized as sinful, the two are transgressing. Christopher is initially a sub-human sexual offender, but our window into Catherine's thoughts denies us – or at least attempts to - the space to condemn Christopher's actions as we come to see her own complex feelings be mediated and resolved by her brother's

own aggression. Though we may feel strongly that Catherine, ever the pure flower, would never initiate anything on her own, her acceptance of this moment in deference to her brother forces us as readers to pause.

This is a brief moment, however, and the siblings awkwardly put back on their clothes in silence. In these moments, Catherine brings up the final and possibly most horrific concern; “Now there might be a baby. A baby to make us pay in life and not wait for hell, an everlasting fires reserved for such as us” (356). The downward spiral of demonized incestuous feelings, punishment for the children because of their actions of their parents, years of imprisonment with only your same-aged sibling for emotional support, years of hellfire preaching and damnation come culminating in the final fear. That fear is possibility of a monstrous child that they will carry with them as a constant reminder of their sin. This alongside the fear that the possible child will prove to them not only their own sin, but also that their grandmother’s accusations are actually true – that their parent made more monsters. This is the iconic moment where Andrews brings all the taboo of incest for display to her readers, and the psychological horror comes to fruition.

The film audience never sees this scene – at all. No fade to black, or camera that slowly rises to the sky. Film audiences were baited by the cinematography – lingering shots on Catherine’s naked body in the bathtub or Christopher standing in the door looking at his sisters – into the assumption that the two will finally give in, and fans of the novels expect this to be true. Instead the final scene of the film takes place in the house. The three surviving children, angry at the betrayal by their mother, interrupt the wedding. All the guests sit in silence as the three blond-haired, blue-eyed children walk towards their mother. Their mother slowly backs away from the children as Catherine continues to berate and expose all her secrets, and eventually trips

over the balcony and dies by strangulation in her own veil. The children walk away uninterrupted. The epilogue, however, is the same between the mediums.

### **Where We Decided Matricide is Better for the Kids**

Instead of grasping with a complex scene of incest that challenges the reader with questions of consent, sin, violence, and morality, the film kills off the “villain.” This leaves the audience with a different question - what is this death is meant to avenge? Are we to understand this scene as rightful justice for the death of Cory and months of imprisonment? Catherine’s lines ask us to think this as she screams about the suffering the children have gone through. But that can’t be the only reading, because that would ignore the overall theme of the movie – incest. It is visually impossible to just have this reading because the children, in both the novel and film, are always reminding the audience that this is a story about incest. From this, we have to read this death as a judgement – incest is evil that will be punished. The children walk away freely not only because the guests are in shock, but because they are innocent where their mother is guilty.

But Andrews takes his readers through those messy questions, and asks the reader to make the decision. Catherine reminds us that she shares Christopher’s desires – “I wanted what he wanted” (356) – and challenges the how evil the experience really is. Andrews doesn’t write a falling out between the siblings, and the three find some stability at the end of the novel without having to punish their mother. The children, Catherine and Christopher, privately decide for themselves whether or not they have been damaged by their actions. Although the film isn’t any less complex, it does solicit from its audience a judgement that the novel does not. It asks the audience, by killing their mother, whether the children have triumphed over, or escaped, from the horrors of incest. Regardless of the reading, someone *is* harmed.

This is the judgement that *Flower's in the Attic* film forces us to face. In making these narrative changes, whether it is because of censorship law or moral concern, a judgement on incest is made for the audience – and rather violently in those last 20 minutes. For social, cultural, and legal reasons, it is safer to murder a bride on her wedding day with her own veil because she fears her daughter's yelling than to attempt a fade away sex scene. It is a lecture - remember that Catherine is yelling in front of all the guests - about the dangers of incest. It tells the audience that they should be afraid, that there are serious consequences even in consensual relations.<sup>13</sup> The film denies the audience the ability to decide for themselves how they should judge these relationships. It is an explicit message of terror and fear that replaces the messy questions that Andrews trusts his readers to work through.

Does the film, with a completely different ending, deserve its PG-13 rating? The depends on whether romanticizing child captivity and presenting a hysteria about young sexuality that ultimately has a daughter yell her mother to death is something we think child audiences can see. Ratings aren't particularly helpful, but they do tell us that these events are not considered offensive by the regulators. Emotional support between siblings is offensive because we can't imagine consensual incest. It's much better to make a redemption story where the kids walk away harmed, but ultimately triumphant in the wake of their dead mother. But *Flowers in the Attic*, although iconic, is not a recent publication. Even with the narrative changes, we still have an identifiably story that readers and audiences will inevitably grapple with on their own. What contemporary work do we have at our fingertips now?

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<sup>13</sup> Corrine honestly loved her uncle, but for some reason that fact is thrown off the balcony with her in the film. She may have been bad with money, but it seems a bit extreme to kill her. The children were fine with her running off with her new husband in the novel.

## Game of Thrones and Horrible Timing

In contrast to *Flowers in the Attic*, *Game of Thrones* doesn't waste time berating its characters with fear and scorn – Cersei and Jaime Lannister, twins of the noble house Lannister that currently rules the land, hardly ever suffer a religiously charged lecture. Nor does *GoT* ever deny the actual couple the opportunity to speak for themselves; Cersei repeatedly, though discreetly, defends her relationship to advisors, in-laws, and the like. *GoT*, then, unlike *Flowers in the Attic*, explores intimately the actual relationship of incest while acknowledging the dangerous space incest exists in. We don't have a grandmother taking out her anger on children, but rather Cersei speaking confidently, but discreetly, about why she cares about Jaimie. *GoT* then forces its viewers to understand intimately precisely why Cersei and Jaimie persist. And in a show where no character is safe, that Cersei still sits on the iron throne with her head on her shoulders and her man at her side should look completely bizarre when we compare her situation to Catherine's hanging mother.<sup>14</sup>

George R. R. Martin's series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, represent the shift in these censorship practices that problematized *Flower's in the Attic's* original adaptation. The first volume, *A Game of Thrones*, was first published in 1991 and the most recent volume, *A Dance with Dragons*, was published in 2011 with the series still ongoing. The growing popularity of the series eventually resulted in a television adaptation by television network HBO produced by David Benioff and B. D. Weiss titled after the first volume, *Game of Thrones (GoT)*. A dark, medieval fantasy series set on a continent that alternates between extended periods of summer and winter, the plot deals with political struggles, extreme violence, horrible rape, and a family

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<sup>14</sup> Cersei and Jaimie are still alive and well as of season 6 as I write this paper. "Well" is a relative term in this series, to be fair.

that is scattered across the continent trying to survive on their own while facing the looming threat of a mysterious race known as “White Walkers.” The series, both as a novel and a television adaptation, explores in detail the plotlines of the extensive cast of characters. While almost everything is interesting, we will be concerned with struggle of two particular characters, sister and brother Cersei and Jaimie Lannister.

At the end of the pilot episode of *GoT*, young Bran Stark scales the side of a run-down tower outside of his village. When he reaches the top of the tower, he is shocked to discover Queen Cersei having sex with her twin brother, Jaimie Lannister. As Cersei covers herself repeating, “He saw us!” Jaime grabs the boy by the shirt collar. After a sardonic “the things I do for love,” Jaimie pushes little Bran out of the window. (SE01EP1)

Both in writing and on screen, this scene is both as shocking and enticing as it is easily formulaic. The young child, Bran, exploring on his own like he usually does comes across a moment of horror. The actual sex only occurs in an abandoned tower secret from the rest of the world. Bran’s discovery terrifies all parties – Jaimie notwithstanding. Bran is caught off guard and is slipping, while Cersei is stuck in place covering herself. Only Jaimie is able to move; he’s the only who can because he has to. Cersei is unable to defend herself from prying eyes and Bran is unable to move precisely because he can’t imagine a response. Bran is punished for climbing into this situation. It doesn’t matter whether he’s a child, innocent, or able to keep a secret. Just like the twins live in constant danger of being seen, everyone around them live in danger of seeing. This danger is common with secretive romances. The twins don’t stay together very long, however, and are eventually torn apart for much of the series with Jaimie struggling to get back to Cersei.



The HBO series is fairly faithful to the novels. Fidelity starts to fall apart as the seasons go on. Cersei and Jaimie speak throughout the series about each other to other people in vague terms; most of these conversations center around the love the two share for each other. Season 4 episode 3, however, brought viewers a heavy shock. Jaimie, finally back from his exile abroad, finds out that his son, Joffrey, has been killed and he runs to see Cersei. He comes in on her mourning over their son and initially consoles her with an embrace as she asks Jaimie to kill their brother, the supposed murderer. Dodging the issue, the two share a somewhat passionate kiss until Cersei stops. Jaimie, in shock, call her a “despicable woman” and proceeds to rape her. Jaimie repeats “I don’t care” despite Cersei’s cries. It’s a dark scene. Both are grieving, both have spent the last three seasons longing for each other. Cersei is eventually seen wrapping her legs around Jaimie, but the “you’re a despicable woman” and “I don’t care” overwhelmingly cast this scene as a rape (SE04E3). Jaimie becomes the violent lover, and he chastises Cersei for obscure reasons. Is she despicable because she is reacting emotionally to the death of her forbidden son? Is she despicable because she is refusing sex? Cersei is being punished by Jaimie for both – Cersei is raped because she is “detestable” for wishing for the death of her brother, for keeping Joffrey’s true father a secret from the world, and for being in a relationship with her twin. Yet right now, the dialogue and acting only point to Jaimie as a violent man.

The twin’s relationship is cast into doubt here. Jaimie walks in and fulfills a classic, misogynist role that aligns easily with Wilner’s observations on incest. Jaimie is dismissive, aggressive, insulting, and violent. Debra Farreday, in “Game of Thrones, Rape Culture, and Feminist Fandom,” speaks to the fan reactions towards this scene:

In understanding why this scene—in what is after all a notoriously violent and sexually explicit TV program, attracted such widespread concern—we need to place the current

outpouring of feminist reaction to media texts depicting sexual violence in the context of wider debates about rape culture and its relation to social and mainstream media that have grown up in response to highly publicized cases. (Farreday 21)

She proceeds with an extensive legal history of, unsurprisingly, more victim and survivor stories of rape and incest. She comments that “Examples like these demonstrate the extent to which the Internet and media has become a site of struggle over sexual violence, both in reproducing rape culture and in resisting it” (22). For her, *GoT* provides a rich space of feminist discussion, where fans are readily aware of the uncomfortable material they are consuming while willing to argue for the feminist power of the female characters (23, 24).

For her, the scene is clearly rape. The more interesting issues lie in the conversation between those who condemn and those who defend the scene. She criticizes an interview where the episode director, Alex Graves, gives a response that the scene isn't problematic because consent is fluidly given by the end of the scene signified by Cersei's wrapped legs. (Martin 2014). She argues that “As an assurance of consensuality, this is troubling. Graves' [...] overlooks the question of whether a sexual act that begins non-consensually can ever ‘become consensual’ [...] The use of terms like ‘stupid’ and ‘complicated’, again, echo the language often used to trivialize rape in contemporary society: boys will be boys” (Farreday 29,30). Farreday has invested herself in this offense of being shown a rape scene, and continues to argue how the show dangerously contributes to rape culture. It seems that, for Farreday, the problems with this scene are about its existence in the first place. Rape scenes, even more so if incestuous, should not have a place because of the danger of trivializing, or worse justifying, the violence on screen. It's not, however, a conversation about how this scene problematizes consent, or how the twins are forced into a violent and secretive relationship because of the world they live in. Farreday

takes time to reach beyond the show to acknowledge how producers and actors and audiences have pushed a particular judgement on the scene – that it should or shouldn't exist. Consent is assumed to always be clear and simple to see, that sexual violence in television is too dangerous to accept freely as a creative tool.<sup>15</sup> It not a conversation that acknowledges that this scene is very heavily rewritten. In the novel that Farreday overlooks, this scene is much more complex than an interview and fan reactions would suggest.

The television Jaimie is a completely different Jaimie from the novel. In *A Storm of Swords*, written from Jaimie's perspective, his journey to Cersei is filled with shifting thoughts about his distant feeling towards his dead son and his absolute dedication to Cersei. When Jaimie finally sees Cersei mourning next to their son, he reflects that “she has never come to me [Jaimie],” that “she has always waited, letting me to come to her. She gives but I must ask” (Martin 850). This is a mirror opposite of the television series which denies us Jaimie's thoughts and is easily portrays him as a more demanding figure. The narrative continues to be broken up by Jaimie's thoughts reclaiming his place as Joffrey's father with “*our* boy.”<sup>16</sup> Cersei still demands their brother, Tyrion's, death. Like the episode, they embrace in grief, kiss in consolation, and Jaimie attempts more. Like the episode, Cersei initially rejects him. She fears “the risk, the danger, about their father, about the septons, about the wrath of gods” (851). It's the same fear that pushed a little boy off a tower. But right now the only meaningful difference is a bit of dialogue and that Jaimie places Cersei on the table in the novel instead of pushing her onto the floor.

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<sup>15</sup> I do not mean to justify rape as an act, or to argue that the scene isn't problematic. I do, however, challenge arguments that aim to ultimately censor our narratives because of uncomfortable/detestable imagery that is ultimately fictional.

<sup>16</sup> Emphasis added. (850)

What we don't get is the next moment after Jaimie pulls off her dress. Cersei drops her fear of getting caught and encourages Jaimie. "Hurry" she tells him, "quickly, quickly, now, do it now, do me now. Jaimie Jaimie Jaimie" (851). This is much more than some wrapped legs at the tail end of an otherwise rape scene. It's a moment, in the novel, of grief as they are beside their son's corpse, of urgency as she keeps repeating "quickly," and longing. Cersei, in her grief and fear and deep sense of betrayal, is still happy to have Jaimie back with her. Romantically happy, despite her circumstances and his incredibly poor timing as she repeats; "yes, I have you, you're home now, you're home now, you're home" (851). Joffrey is forgotten in this arguably happy reunion. So happy, or maybe so desperate, that despite Cersei quickly chastising him for his terrible timing, Jaimie still take this moment to propose, "I am sick of being careful [...] Marry me" (52). It's a rebellious act, and we could argue Jaimie is reacting to Cersei's fears more than actually suggesting the two of them run away together. But what is striking is Jaimie isn't a misogynistic rapist, but a lover who is in love – not just violent lust.

But despite Ferreday's serious criticism of the sexist power dynamics in television production and the trivializing of rape by both the actors and produces of *GoT*, there is very little discussion of the shift from consensual reunion to rape. It's a bizarre change in a very violent, very sexual show with otherwise responsible portrayals of uncomfortable sex. HBO erases Cersei's position in the scene and casts Jaimie as a rapist. The novels don't give us this specific harsh line. It's a scene where grief and joy and fear intersect and problematize consent – but the episode doesn't honor that. While separate, the twins are non-threatening for audiences. When together, its seems that the two must be participating in some violence, either by hurting those around them or each other, before HBO will share the scene with its audience.

We are left torn. On the one hand, the scene challenges the audience with whether or not they should reevaluate the relationship between the two. On the other, we have a television adaptation that undermines a previously equal power dynamic in Cersei and Jaimie's relationship that looks eerily like the violent definition we reviewed when looking at Wilner. What do we do with these twins? Season 4 episode 10 gave viewers a new development. Towards the beginning of the episode, Cersei meets with her father again about the topic of her upcoming marriage. Shortly after this scene, Cersei speaks with Jaimie alone. The two briefly discuss Cersei's disgust for their dwarf brother. When Jaimie questions Cersei's belief that anyone can decide who becomes part of their family, she changes the conversation with a simple, "I do and so do you." As she walks over to Jaimie and asks him to make a decision, presumably about their brother, she kisses him and says "I choose you." He responds in simple disbelief, "those are just words." It's a simple love conversation repeated throughout the series.

"Yes, like the ones I said to father." She kisses Jaimie and continues her monologue, "People will whisper, they'll make their jokes. Let them. They're all so small I can't even see them. I only see what matters." It is terribly romantic, overtly tender, and a complete turn-around from Cersei's uncomfortable resistance back in episode 3. Cersei rejects her father's control over her romantic life. She rejects, after almost three seasons, the fear of being caught by other people. Notice that Cersei explicitly describes the values against which she fights, and which she decides against. The fear of rumors, that reoccurring social judgement from outsiders looking in, is "so small I can't even see them" and opposed to the absolute commitment she shares with Jaimie, "what matters." It is a simple comparison of public vs private, and it's a debate that Cersei asserts needs to be resolved privately. We, as an audience, are simultaneously accepted,

by our viewing, and rejected, by Cersei's words, in this private exchange. We get to watch, but we don't get to judge.

In a last attempt at secrecy while Cersei escalates their kissing, Jaimie says, "someone will walk in" to which she quickly responds, "I don't care." Notice that the positions of power have been reversed since episode 3. Jaimie now acts reluctant at the thought of being exposed and it is Cersei who is commanding the moment. It's a scene about freedom for the twins, about Cersei demanding respect from her family and the public by disregarding the risk of getting caught. Where Jaimie once took control of their shared grief to force a reconnection with his sister (for better or worse), Cersei rejects the family patriarchy and similarly elicits Jaimie to sleep with her so they can claim their freedom. The scene comes to an end, and we understand that the two reject living in the same fear we saw at the start of the series. But notice that, despite their romantic rebellions, this is a scene of romance. The declaration of love, the two lovers who were kept apart for so long, the silent history of care and affection. But this scene is also read alongside Jaimie's original advance back in episode 3. The situations are now reversed with Cersei initiating sex and Jaimie responding with caution. The scene ends and the audience understands that the twins have fully rejected the secrecy they've lived in – and no one had to die or be raped for it. In affirming their love, the two are displayed in the least violent, most romantic scene.

### **Strategies For and Moving Past Adaptation**

Broadly, we have three different reactions to projecting incest on screen. First, we can just portray what happens in the novels, as the pilot for *GoT* does. But that scene was designed to hook audiences into the dark, dangerous, and sexy world of the series. It's not a moment of particularly strong characterization but a scene where the audiences are solicited to invest in the

outcome of a couple who pushes little boys out of tower windows. Hardly an emotional moment of lovers against the world. If simple fidelity can only exist when it is pushed as a dark hook for a larger franchise, then our next option seems to be to just cut out the scene altogether, like *Flowers in the Attic*. Lower the rating of a literary sensation with an interesting but vague dynamic and capitalize on that fandom while avoiding the pearl clutching sex. But that experience resulted in the hanging of a mother, arguably by her daughter. For the kids, of course. So if we don't have the promotional backing, and simply replacing the incest winds up with really weird consolatory violence, then we can try the third method; keep the MA rating and turn the messy sex that's comes about when two people are trying to sort through a heavy mix of grief and frustration into rape. And just about every option assumes Wilner's and fellow theorists' incest/violence dynamic.

Except that all falls apart with Jaimie and Cersei in season 4 episode 10. There is no violence in their lovemaking. Declarations of love, when they are as painfully obvious as in that episode, are noticeably nonthreatening. Love when pitted against social norms, taboos, and the threat of violence is allowed full range for monologues and kissing and embraces. Incest, that creepy "mating between primary kin" that Wilner wouldn't go near, carries none of those violent fears. These are the moments that enrich our understanding of the characters – they are more human to us because they struggle to love whom they please. This scene provides a new, interesting narrative that only enriches an otherwise expansive story that *GoT* provides. And this is all possible because producers trust that audiences can accept a romantic story as just happy romance, instead of fear baiting them with rape and murder. *GoT* isn't unique in its portrayal of harmless incest, but it does give evidence that our visual storytelling doesn't have to be policed for audiences to enjoy.

## (Over)Dramatic Taboo Subplots

### *A Regra do Jogo*

Despite the dismal treatment of even consensual incestuous relationships, it is actually in soap opera and telenovela where we find an alternative to these otherwise grim portrayals. *A Regra do Jogo*, written by João Emanuel Carneiro and produced by Rede Globo, is a Brazilian telenovela that aired from August 31, 2015 to March 11, 2016. It follows the story of Romero Rômulo, a local hero who is admired by citizens for his work in fighting government corruption and supporting the citizens of the favela but secretly uses his position to recruit jailed criminals into his crime syndicate. The bulk of Romero's story involves hiding his criminal activities while navigating a romance with Atena, a swindler who tortures him as much as she loves him.

Although the show is overwhelmingly concerned with government corruption and the class divide between favelas and metropolitan cities, we will be concerned with a much smaller romance.

Luana, a young woman from a large working class family who makes money by selling sandwiches on the beach, and her cousin Cesário, a timid young man whose upper middle class family struggles with mental illness, share a small romance amidst the family drama.<sup>17</sup>

Before we discuss the two lovers, we first should understand the unique ways in which soap operas and telenovelas operate. First, we will explore the conventions of the genre, taking some time to discuss the melodramatic elements that are commonly used to dismiss the genre. From there, we will discuss how the genre introduces taboo subjects and treats the characters that practice them.

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<sup>17</sup> Relationships between cousins are not technically taboo, especially when compared to the siblings in previous texts. That said, the relationships we do see – particularly with narratives set in contemporary times – are few and far between. The variety of relationships to discuss is sparse enough that I includes cousins where I might otherwise ignore them.



## Soap Opera as Tools for Social Commentary

Although there are important distinctions between American soap operas and Latino telenovelas, – soap operas run without a foreseeable end with actors that are minimally recognized outside of their role while telenovelas are written to ultimately conclude and whose stars are recognized as celebrity figures – the two share many of the same elements. Dialogue dominates every scene, sets are fairly empty and are used as backdrops for more conversation, family trees often get very large and very messy very quickly, and monologues are everywhere. For our purposes, the following discussion of the genre will analyze soap opera conventions and will identify telenovela distinctions as they become relevant.

Soap operas and telenovelas are, for the most part, intended to appear realistic in the sense that they have very little magic or sorcery. Very few fantastical element, if any, make up the narrative. Yet despite an attempt at realistic characters and recognizable settings, the genre is often dismissed as overdramatic and unrealistic. Charles Derry in “Incest, Bigamy, and Fatal Disease” analyzes this disconnect. He writes that “If soap opera seems somehow less ‘realistic,’ it may be because this genre refuses to hide the fact that it is presenting us with an unabashedly stylized view of the world” (Derry 5). Everything from the suspiciously empty small town streets, the families that sit down and talk for hours on end, the monologues, and the three episode long scenes just to open a door reflect this stylization. The realistic elements – characters, setting, ordinary romantic and health problems – are exaggerated to fit the episode of the day. By doing so, what might originally be seen as a common conversation transforms into an extended emotional roller coaster, where characters fly through a range of feelings. These (over)dramatic moments are embraced by producers, with changes in background music and close-ups exaggerating the drama. The “stylized” moments ask audiences to invest intimately

with the drama in ways that are different than television series like *GoT* or films like *Flowers in the Attic*. By investing oftentimes multiple episodes into one conversation, audiences are asked to examine each exchange as something that will have profound effects for the overall narrative.

The amount of investment needed to sustain the drama of a soap opera does not only come from the realistic setting, but from a unique connection with the characters themselves. Although films and television series do require their audiences to relate to the characters and setting, soap operas ask that we invest daily as we watch the characters grow alongside us. According to Jason Loviglio in “Public Affairs: The Soap-Opera Cultural Front,” soap operas “encouraged a closeness between listeners and characters that would come to be called “parasocial intimacy”” (Loviglio 77). Through daily episodes watched at home, either during your daily shows for the daytime soaps or sitting down with your family for the late show, audiences are expected to invite these characters into their lives. For long running series, audiences grow alongside characters and visa-versa. Derry notes that “stories in soap opera mirror the haphazardness of life,” suggesting that the confusing and increasingly complex web of drama they write are indicative of how audiences deal with problems themselves (5). Messy, uncomfortable, and many times without a satisfying conclusion.

But how do we make the move from endearing characters to taboo breakers? We will now discuss how the complex narratives, large casts, and focus on dialogue allow soap operas and telenovelas to explore taboo narratives in open and explicit ways.

### **Navigating Taboo**

Soap operas and telenovelas do two things: they destabilize our ideas of a stable family and lack a clear moral framework by which audiences can judge characters. Breaking taboos has

come with consequences; namely, the general dismissal of the genre. Regardless, “the soap opera has been a demythizer and breaker of subject matter taboo on TV. Many of the shows have been early vehicles for open exploration and discussion of heretofore hush-hush topics [...] nearly all of the current controversial issues have had an exposure on the soaps” (LaPota and LaPota 559). In mirroring social norms, soap operas often provide criticism by exploring controversial topics. These criticisms are personal in nature, commenting on very intimate parts of our daily lives when plotlines delve deep into the domestic sphere.

Soap operas problematize romanticized ideas about stable family structures and gender norms. Characters are constantly thrust into complex family trees where relationships mix, mingle, disappear, reappear, and are hidden. Loviglio observes that “soap opera’s claims to realism are based in their explorations of various types of domestic uneasiness: the problem of feeling out of place at home. Taken together, they call attention to the staginess and melodramatic impracticality of an idealized, private sphere of domesticity” (80). Family is the largest concern in soap opera. Any one storyline leverages a host of family relationships – adoption, blood, marriage, step-relations – to construct increasingly complex dramas. Any one character can go through three, four, possibly five fathers with a sixth having rolled into town to claim his son who we might suddenly understand is dating his cousin. Soap operas’ unstable family unit creates a space whereby family and gender can continuously be disturbed in frequencies that other genres cannot reproduce.

Alongside disrupted ideas about family is a unique lack of central morality. That is, soap operas lack a central character with whom to interpret its many events. Frances Ferguson in “On Soap Opera” observes that “soap operas are filled with morally ambivalent characters in a very special way [...] there is no privileged specter to size them up definitively” (Ferguson 22).

Without a hero or anti-hero, and because the star of the show is always shifting, there is no consistent character who can determine what is right or wrong. By dividing up the narratives attention amongst different characters with different motivations, soap operas prevent any one character from dictating the morals of the show.

Furthermore, the intentional use of taboo is rarely presented as a binary good/evil. Rather, taboos are seriously explored as topics or traditions to reconsider. LaPota and LaPota observe that “characters with points of view and attitudes in opposition to the conservative are presented [...] not as ‘monsters’ or ‘weirdos’ but as sincere, thoughtful people operating from their own individuality and rational convictions, and their own value systems” (559). Compared to the frightening narrative of *Flowers in the Attic*, soap operas treat taboo topics as suspenseful, but not necessarily wicked or frightening. More importantly, taboos are discussed explicitly in the open. Where *GoT* will have Cersei and Jamie running in secret from the rest of the cast and speaking in code whenever they suspect discovery, soap operas will write extended monologues for adulterers or bigamists. *Flowers in the Attic* spends most the movie hiding the children and talking around incest with the occasional suggestive bathroom shot. Because soap operas use dialogue as the main means of communicating character feelings, sentiments, and judgments – as opposed to relying on set, score, or camera work – it isn’t possible within the genre to keep taboos a secret.

Breaking taboo involves both a social and creative risk. As we’ve seen in reviewing *GoT* and *Flowers in the Attic*, the treatment of taboos is mediated by audience and rating. Incest, even if it is the central concern of a narrative, is seldom explicitly addressed. Depending on the rating, as in *Flowers in the Attic*, some narratives may never discuss the taboo at length at all and

instead focus on characters related to the taboo but not explicitly involved.<sup>18</sup> Other ratings may give us a tension filled secret romance, as in *GoT*, with some revisions to show that taboo breaking is still punishable. Either way, all the narratives we explored so far share a fear that incest, when found out, may spread or corrupt others.<sup>19</sup> This structure of taboo breaking and punishment repeats endlessly in soap opera. Derry notes that “Anyone who violates a taboo and challenges society can then become taboo and infect others” (Derry 10). Taboo characters are threats to everyone else, so they are contained any number of ways. Characters can be locked up, ostracized, killed, tortured, abandoned, etc. No matter the method, “the contagion of the taboo-breaker is itself a kind of punishment which insures that taboo-breaking is not condoned” (10). So long as characters are punished, soap operas have been able to keep their use in suspenseful stories.

### ***A Regra do Jogo – How Chaste Should We Be?***

*A Regra do Jogo* breaks away from the politics of taboo usually found in soap opera and telenovela; rather, it offers us an idea of what incestuous relationships might look like outside of a moralizing context. We will focus on three scenes: Luana and Cesário’s first kiss, Cesário’s conversation with his mother after the relationship falls out, and the first night the two sleep together.<sup>20</sup> Afterwards, we will compare the scenes with the behavior we saw in *GoT* and *Flowers in the Attic*.

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<sup>18</sup> For *Flowers in the Attic*, the children are certainly products of incest, but the PG-13 film erases any romance the children may have. The audience deals with sweet, blond, innocents rather than the taboo itself.

<sup>19</sup> The children’s grandmother in *Flowers in the Attic* hides the truth about their parent’s relationship for about half of the novel and film. Cersei and Jamie selectively tell their children the truth about their heritage, and it always ends with the death of the children.

<sup>20</sup> For simplicity, I will be translating the dialogue and will only focus on the original Portuguese if it is relevant.

Luana and Cesário are paired up relatively early in *A Regra do Jogo*, starting in “Namoradinha.”<sup>21</sup> After a night out drinking, Luana and Cesário find themselves on a beach with friends and family. While their friends and Luana’s brother go for a swim, Cesário decides he’d rather sit and nap off the alcohol he drank just hours ago. Luana stays behind to lay beside her cousin, despite Cesário saying he is bad company. Luana gets up and responds by asking, “Who says that I wanted to talk,” and surprises him with a kiss. After they finish, Cesário with half lidded eyes asks “Do you want to sleep with me?” Luana laughs, tells him to slow down, and suggests that “first we stay. Then we go out. We court each other. Then we make love. No?” Luana is the first to initiate despite Cesário positioning himself as undesirable – “I’m not good company.” Hung over, Cesário isn’t thinking romantically. Luana is the one to shift the conversation to romance with her kiss. Her control of the situation remains as Cesário asks if she wants to sleep with him. By setting up the romantic plan, audiences are given a preview of how things ought to unfold. Luana expects some dating, some courting, and eventually they might become intimate. The exchange is playful with Luana pushing her cousin to be more open and Cesário’s humorous attempts at staying sober enough to have this conversation.

We should put a lot of pressure on the context in which this conversation takes place. Previously, incestuous relationships were initiated and explored in private. Catherine’s sexual gaze is first seen after she and Christopher have run away from the attic for a day. Cersei and Jaimie are only ever affectionate behind closed doors or in empty towers hidden away in a forest. Luana and Cesário, however, are in broad daylight with people around them. Their kissing is just as visible as the other couples on the beach. Furthermore, their conversation is explicit. This partly due to the genre’s extensive use of dialogue. The two have to speak openly and in detail

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<sup>21</sup> Aired September 29, 2015.

about their relationship precisely because it is through dialogue that soap operas convey the narrative. There is very little action beyond kissing in this scene, and so explicit conversation is necessary. It directly addresses romance, directly asks for a relationship between the two, and ends with a very clear intent for the two to sleep with each other.

Despite what we've seen in Derry, there isn't a punishment to be found. Luana and Cesário see each other, they fight, and they talk about other family issues. Their romance is a minor detail for most of the telenovela. Rather, the big problem arises after Cesário proposes because Luana doesn't want to enter a marriage before having sex; Cesário wants to wait. The big issue isn't family getting too close, but a disagreement over when people should have sex. In "E agora, Romero?"<sup>22</sup>, Cesário is distraught. Rather than wallowing alone at home, he goes to his grandmother, Nora, and his first words are "Is there something wrong with me?" She invites him to crawl into her bed with him like when he was a boy. "She didn't say yes," Cesário shares, "she thinks we have to have sex first. She thinks a husband and wife only understand each other when they have sex. I want it to be something special." Altogether, it is a fairly odd line. According to Cesário, Luana is looking to a deeper understanding of Cesário and she wants this experience to happen sexually. It is an intimate exploration and one that she describes as filled with meaning. Cesário think differently and finds the whole experience to be ruined outside of wedlock. Cesário discredits emotional exploration with another not because this kind of sex is disagreeable, but because there is no religious sanction.

While stroking his resting head, Nora responds smiling, "This thing about marrying a virgin, it's been out of style more than 40 years." There is a playful way in which his anxieties

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<sup>22</sup> Aired November 11, 2015.

around sex are figured not as struggle of personal philosophy, but an attitude of the times. Sex attitudes, as Nora puts it, are constantly shifting with the times. She goes on to ask, “You don’t need to be so radical about everything. How can you be a communist with this Victorian thinking?” Cesário is offended and asks his grandmother to respect his thinking to which she answers, “Yes, I’ll respect you but you also have to respect the way [Luana] thinks. She is a modern woman.” In this moment, Cesário is asked to confront the idea of sex as something that can exist outside of marriage. His own philosophy, which Nora has deemed antiquated, has to be weighed as equal to Luana’s. The struggle is about whether to have sex at all remains unanswered largely due to Cesário’s inability to decide on what ideals he values more – his love for Luana or his conservative ideas on marriage. This reminds us of Ferguson’s observation of soap opera treating each character’s voice equally, as even when Cesário is the only one present neither value is privileged over the other. Because of this, audiences are denied an answer to the sex question as well. Imagine sitting down with your children and watching this scene – many Brazilian families certainly did. Yet *A Regra do Jogo* chooses to remain neutral on this matter. The audience has to make the decision, not the telenovela.

*A Regra do Jogo* has to end, unfortunately, and we do eventually arrive at an answer. Cesário proposes again, still choosing to wait, and Luana accepts. After a ceremony, the two are ready to consummate their relationship in “Embosacda.”<sup>23</sup> Cesário is happy, but nervous. He still struggles his desire to remain chaste. This moment with Luana is nerve wracking, but it is also something he eagerly anticipates.<sup>24</sup> When he shares his nervous excitement with Luana, she responds with her own nerves. In the moment Luana says “This is to make love for real. It’s like

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<sup>23</sup> Aired February 10, 2016.

<sup>24</sup> There are no complicated feelings of anger and stress like we saw between Catherine and Christopher, and no one is afraid of being walked in on like Cersei and Jamie.



the first time for me as well.” This scene leverages both Luana and Cesário’s desires and affections. In response to Cesário’s concerns, Luana repositions herself on equal ground; she is also a virgin, if only in feeling. The slight imbalance we saw back in “Namoradinha” is gone. Luana shares control with Cesário by aligning their experience together. Saturated in romantic language, their relationship is so pure that this experience allows Luana to metaphorically travel back to her own first time. On cue, Cesário responds, “And now we don’t have to wait, because we are married and I really want you” It is a common, romantic scene. Two lovers finally married and ready to commit an act of love to consummate their marriage. And the overall tone is one of romance and celebration. Unremarkable, but sweet nonetheless.

Everything from initiation to reception has changed. The differences between *A Regra do Jogo* and the other texts are numerous. Before we saw the women in each relationship as the unwilling victims of their partner’s acts of violent passion. Now we see both partners dealing with their relationship openly, in full conversation with the people around them, and no one dies. Before we saw characters dealing with their romantic feelings behind locked doors, speaking in private or in code. Now we have entire speeches about sex. This relationship is possible in large part because it exists within telenovela which requires that actions and motivations be explicit to the audience.

## **Conclusion**

At the end of a multi-million dollar film franchise, cult hit movie phenomena, gratuitously gory television show, and politically charged telenovela about government corruption, what do we have? What happens when the prospect of an incestuous relationship risks being show to movie and television audiences? Well, *Star Wars* tries to avoid the issues by editing away Luke and Leia’s relationship, a relatively harmless move. But as for *Flowers in the*

*Attic*, we can poison the children, kill Cory, *and* have Catherine scream her mother to death in front of both the wedding guests in the movie and audiences in their seats. For *Game of Thrones*, the producers up the ante by doing more than slowly killing off each one of the Cersei and Jamie's children; they rewrite the relationship so that Cersei is the one who gets punished with rape in front of television audiences because sibling relationships seemingly must be abusive. A *Regra do Jogo* steps away from this pattern, albeit with cousins. Despite a strong tendency to dismiss soap operas in the US, that telenovelas are a widely watched and acclaimed genre in Hispanic and Latin America strongly tells us that we can stomach incestuous romance.

We should pause here; none of this is to suggest that we need to write more incestuous stories. These relationships are necessarily problematic because they introduce into romantic relationships a myriad of power relationships, issues of consent, and health concerns that ought not be oversimplified by sweet romance. A history of trauma – both spoken and unspoken – can't be ignored, and should be addressed seriously with much care. For very good reasons explored by Wilner, Evans, Lynch, and other scholars, we ought to be concerned about incestuous relationships as they occur in real life.

I, however, argue that we ought to give pause to the moralized and often vindictive judgement we enact in our creative narratives. Particularly, this thesis calls for a closer examination on a very real concern about real people has caused our writing to require that even fictional narratives be violent. By doing so, writing then perpetuates the idea that all of these relationships must be this way. By forcing the idea that these relationships are exclusively violent, we actively stigmatize the few relationships that may well be nurturing and loving.

The solution to incest on screen, then, can't just be to rewrite in a bit of murder and rape. Not only does this behavior result in writers and producers leveraging violence versus taboo, but

it also creates a precedent where we find it justifiable to punish those who have done no wrong in consensual relationship simply because we disagree with their choices. When rape is better for audiences to watch than a tearful reunion, we might start to get nervous.

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