"Three (Is Not a Crowd)": An Analysis of *Tom Tykwer*'s Polyamorous Film *Three*

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ABSTRACT: Many contemporary films about non-monogamies still depict them as adultery or side-notes of an 'unconventional lifestyle', but *Tom Tykwer*'s *Three* manages to be a trailblazer for a more realistic and mature portrayal of polyamorous relationships in cinema. Centred on an upper-middle class, childless, hetero couple in their early 40s who get romantically and sexually involved with the same man, the film narrative follows the transformation from a monogamous to a polyamorous relationship. This paper uses critical discursive analysis (CDA) for the analysis and finds that *Three*, besides dismantling monogamy as a futile intimate arrangement, also addresses social issues, such as mononormative adultery, male bisexuality, changes of emotional and sexual selfhood, ageism, childlessness, pregnancy and body image, and new familial forms.

KEYWORDS: polyamory, film, CDA, sociology

In Western societies where monogamy remains and continues to be promoted as the key principle – legally and societally – on how to organize intimate and family relationships, the negative or plainly ignorant portrayals of non-monogamies in cinema can further deepen misconceptions about polyamory for mainstream audiences. Representations of polyamory are therefore crucial for constructing polyamorous realities on- and off-screen, because popular media (e.g. film, television, social media) contribute to the public's general understanding of what intimacy (love, sexuality, relationships, family) is. Popular narratives can serve as stand-in educational tools for a wider audience, the vast majority of whom might not be

reading or have the privilege to read the latest feminist or queer theory text.[1] In the absence of formal education, public understanding of polyamory can be framed by popular media.

Media, typically used for entertainment, becomes an important source for constructing messages and images, consumed by a mass audience. Numerous examples of what is 'normal', acceptable and desirable in Western societies are therefore perpetually produced, which also equips them with the discretionary right to withhold (or ignore) public recognition or visibility to people, groups or ideas that differ from the current conventional ways of social living (Carter & Steiner, 2004; Kosut, 2012; Ward & Caruthers, 2001). As Kosut explained, "the history of mass media has been a history of exclusion" (2012, p. xx) and by exclusion it is meant that those people or ideas that did not belong to the dominant group or standard of hegemonic masculinity (see below) were unable to participate and be visible/heard in the media.

Films – as one of the media forms – are stories, embedded into technical, aesthetical and financial wrappings, but they also disseminate cultural ideas of the world we live in. Or, as Kellner (1999) put it, "films take the raw material of social history and of social discourse and process them into products which are themselves historical events and social forces" (p. 3). As social texts, by exploring identity (i.e. the development of characters), interaction (i.e. isolation or togetherness), inequality (i.e. class, race, gender, sexual orientation) and institutions (i.e. marriage/family in this case, Sutherland & Feltey, 2010; Turner, 1988), they carry parts of the dominant ideological script, but film nevertheless 'chooses' its position towards ideology. Prince (1997) has discussed three possible stances for films to partake: (a) ideological support (i.e. promotion of the dominant culture), (b) ideological critique (i.e. critical view of established norms) and (c) ideological incoherence (e.g. film as an ambiguous product that attracts many but offends as few as possible, p. 359).

The majority of mainstream cinema falls into the first category (ideological support); they mediate hegemonic norms and values (i.e. norms of an elite or dominant socio-economic group that reflects the norms of a middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender and white male), positioned as "natural", "normal" or even "objective", and therefore unquestionable and desirable (Hayward, 2000, p. 185). Despite the fact that cinema is an ideological apparatus by nature,

and that it puts (hegemonic) ideology up to the screen (let us not forget that even in art-house films conventional gender ideologies can go unchallenged), film has the potential to dismantle or, as Prince defined it, to take a critical stance against the dominant ideology, to represent what is considered culturally Other/ed (a concept that will be discussed further) as a non-Othered discourse.

Polyamory in Films

Despite the fact that love is one of the most common themes in popular cinema, polyamory as the central premise of a storyline is rare and, if polyamorous depictions take place, they are anything but realistic or just. The discourse on love in Western contemporary society means one thing: heterosexual, monogamous and romantic love.[2]

What is polyamory? Polyamory, as several authors have stated, is a form of long-term relationship in which people openly and consensually court multiple romantic, sexual and/or emotional partners at the same time with a focus on honesty, communication and safe sex (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2004; Aviram, 2009; Barker, 2005; Sheff, 2011; Weeks, 2003). Polyamorous partner constellations can include straight and/or LGBT+ folks having one or two primary partners (i.e. prioritized partner(s) in time and energy: sex, emotional support, long term commitments and plans) and other secondary ones (i.e. a partner that is secondary in terms of time and energy in a person's life in comparison to the primary relationship), or being in triad (where three people are involved with each other) or quad (two couples being involved with each other); some polyamorous people live together in families or tribes, some practice polifidelity (i.e. fidelity within the polyamorous group), while others are open (Barker, 2005, p. 76). Polyamory still gets confused with polyandry, polygyny or swinging due to the fact that love plurality is not part of a mainstream social mind-set when it comes to non-monogamous intimacy.

The prevalent Western-culture-based standard of sexuality (identity, desires, relationships, emotions) is hetero-mononormative[3] and it consists of three elements: (a) a monogamous relationship, (b) between a woman and a man and (c) where the man is active and the woman passive. Gayle Rubin (1984, 2007) stated that the marital, reproductive heterosexuality is at the top of the erotic pyramid, and anyone who is below it (e.g. unmarried, monogamous heterosexuals, long-

time same-gender couples, masturbators, promiscuous LGB+ folks, trans people, sex workers, BDSM persons, different-age couples, polyamorous folks, asexuals) is constructed as a sexual minority or is Othered, lacking in societal respectability, legality, institutional support and symbolic power (i.e. media representations).

That is why films mostly portray the popular or conventional notions about gender (e.g. men and women are opposites, gender roles are fixed), heterosexuality, intimacy (monogamy as a societal rule) and family (nuclear families with white, middle-class cis people) and leave out genders, relationships, intimacies and families that fall outside the lines of the hetero-monogamous paradigm. By ignoring them, they remain culturally unfamiliar and consequently Other.

Pickering has defined the Other as someone "who is different or uneven to us, a dichotomous opposite and therefore a bearer of negative traits because they represent the deviance from anything that is central, safe, normal and conventional" (2001, p. 204). Other is outside the social order and Lévi-Strauss has introduced us to two strategies for coping with the Otherness of others, one anthropoemic and one anthropophagic (as cited in Bauman, 2000, p. 101). The first strategy was referred to as "vomiting". It manifests as prohibiting physical contact, dialogue, social intercourse, commercial trade, etc., which in its extreme version means annihilation of the Others (incarceration, deportation, murder). The second strategy is called "ingesting". Here, the Other is no longer distinguishable from us (cannibalism, cultural assimilation), which means that their Otherness is annihilated.

When focusing on polyamorous representations in films, a tactic used to handle them is "vomiting" or the annihilation of the Other. Polyamorous people and relationships 'disappear' – either the relationship dissolves or polyamorists die/become insane/monogamous/straight (it is worth noticing that polyamory and bisexuality intertwine with each other in most of the films, explicitly or implicitly). Polyamory on the screen is therefore temporarily allowed as a 'pleasurable unconventionality', but is subsequently dismissed or disapproved. The message is clear: polyamorous relationships are not supposed to exist in monogamous societies because of their abjection (polyamory creates displeasure in others, but also stimulates curiosity) and potential disruption to the existing social, sexual, moral and emotional orders.

The homogeneity of classical cinema narrative of love is structured around an order-disorder-order nexus; in the case of non-monogamous films, 'order' is rep-

resented as a shaky façade of monogamous pairing, during 'disorder' the third character ('intruder' or Other) appears and 'order' usually means the restoration of the monogamous relationship. When love is the major plot in genres, such as melodrama, rom-com or comedy-drama, and the coupledom is under threat, the 'intruder' gets eliminated to re-establish the rule of mononormativity. Most of the cinematic incarnations of non-monogamous relationships were carelessly marked as adultery (more about adultery later on) where adulterers were shown as wicked and thus righteously punished (i.e. dead).

Here are some quick cinematic examples where 'intruders' or cheating wives were punished

- *Anna Karenina* (2012) – the adulteress (*Keira Knightley*) kills herself;
- *Chloe* (2009) – the intruder (*Amanda Seyfried*) is killed by the adulteress (*Julianne Moore*);
- *English Patient* (1996) – both adulterers (*Kirsten Thomas Scott* and *Ralph Fiennes*) die;
- *Fatal Attraction* (1987) – the intruder (*Glenn Close*) is shot by an adulterer's (*Michael Douglas*) wife (*Anne Archer*);
- *The Good Girl* (2002) – the intruder (*Jake Gyllenhaal*) commits suicide;
- *To Die For* (1995) – the adulteress (*Nicole Kidman*) is killed by her husband's family;
- *Unfaithful* (2002) – the intruder (*Olivier Martinez*) is killed by an adulteress' (*Diane Lane*) husband (*Richard Gere*).

There is also a body of contemporary non-monogamous films where polyamory or non-monogamy is not represented as adultery, but as another form of intimacy, less Othered and more favourable

- *Contracorriente* (eng. *Undertow* 2009) is a Peruvian ghost story where a polyamorous relationship is possible only with a gay ghost (*Manolo Cardona*) without the approval of the main character's wife or village at large that condemns homosexuality;
- *El Sexo de los Ángeles* (eng. *Sex* of *Angels,* 2012) is a Spanish drama where a young couple in their 20s (*Astrid Bergès-Frisbey* and Álvaro Cervantes) expand their relationship into a love triad with Bruno (*Llorenç González*). Their polyamorous love flourishes afterwards;
- *Head in the Clouds* (2004), a war tale where war as a symbol of chaos enables

less conventional intimacies (i.e. non-monogamies). The polyamorous relationship between *Charlize Theron*, *Stuart Townsend* and *Penélope Cruz* ends with both bisexual women killed (one by a landmine, the Other – polyamorous initiator *Charlize Theron* – by an angry post-war mob);

- *Henry & June* (1990), a film based upon Anaïs Nin's (*Maria de Medeiros*) diary, tells a story of her involvement with artistic couple Henry Miller (*Fred Ward*) and his wife June (*Uma Thurman*). Despite the fact that Nin was married at that time, the storyline does not condemn her polyamorous desires towards the Millers. However, the short-lived triad dissolves with Nin returning to her husband and the Millers divorcing;

- *Savages* (2012), a crime thriller where protagonists are primarily labelled as savages. Their "savageness" could emerge from their criminal activities (drug smugglers or undisciplined citizens) or polyamory (i.e. 'uncivilized' intimacy). However, nobody dies and a polyamorous relationship in a V-form (*Taylor Kitsch*, *Blake Lively* and *Aaron Tyler-Johnson*) stays in tact despite all the criminal hardship they encounter;

- *Summer Lovers* (1982), a story of a young couple (*Daryl Hannah* and *Peter Gallagher*) in their 20s on vacation in Greece who create a new triadic relationship with another young woman (*Valérie Quennessen*). It is one of the few films where the ending (after the quarrel they decide to spend the rest of the vacation together as threesome) undoubtedly raises hope for new, although short-lived, non-monogamous intimacy;

- *Threesome* (1994), a college story where the possibility for a polyamorous relationship between three college students (*Josh Charles*, *Lara Flynn Boyle* and *Stephen Baldwin*) only serves as a cautionary tale for its 'unnaturalness'. The emotional triad is dissolved after their awkward sexual rendezvous, so they part ways;

- *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (2008), a film preoccupied with human relationships, also focuses on the newly formed, triadic, intimate relationship between artists *Scarlett Johansson, Javier Bardem* and *Penélope Cruz* that eventually dissolves due to the indecisiveness of the third party (*Johansson*). Bisexual women are here represented as confused or even mad (*Cruz*), which feeds the existing bi-stigma (e.g. inherent inability to choose, mental instability, etc.).

These non-monogamous films have one thing in common: although the relation-

ships are not Othered by default, the protagonists are. They are artists, students, criminals or members of the working class and do not belong to the societal class hegemony. Some of them still perpetuate the mononormative diction on poly-amory ('death of polyamory'), but there are also exceptions (e.g. *Summer Lovers*, *Savages*, *Sex of Angels*).

Methodology

This article takes a qualitative approach to explore the representation of polyam-ory in a selected film – critical discursive analysis (CDA). As a research method, it highlights the role of discursive practices that maintain the construction of social reality as objective, and by deliberately advocating to focus on subtle or subver-sive meanings within the dominant discourse, it aligns with the oppressed social groups (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 64). The dominant societal and film discourse regarding love and marriage is – as already thematised – embedded into hetero-mononormativity, any 'detour' into the world of non-monogamies is portrayed as adultery. The body of (non-consensual) non-monogamous films (15 of them) was used as an evidence of past film production against the future polyamorous cin-ema, slowly beginning with *Three*. The reason only Western films were chosen to represent non-consensual non-monogamy is because both types of film-making share a similar cultural background (i.e. Western values, mores and conventions).

The material for analysis was obtained by simultaneously watching films and taking notes on what was shown and told, but mostly if and how the dominant ideological premise about non-monogamy was reinforced or challenged. By us-ing CDA, language and other semiotic features of the data could also be analysed, and, therefore, was an appropriate research method for a study which uses media text as its source.

Three – The Beginning of Polyamorous Cinema

Together with the aforementioned *Sex of Angels*, *Three* paves the way to what can be regarded as the polyamory-oriented cinema that is more invested into repre-senting polyamorous stories accurately and realistically.

The German film *Three* (3, 2010), directed by Tom Tykwer, is a story about a

couple's transformation from a monogamous relationship to a triadic polyamorous family. It is centred around a 40-something, upper-middle class, childless, hetero couple (Hanna, played by *Sophie Rois* and Simon/*Sebastian Schipper*), who – unaware of each other's actions – get romantically and sexually involved with the same man (Adam/*Devid Striesow*).

Films, as described before, are social texts and provide a web of intertwined social themes, and these dictate which ideology is (re)produced (conservative or progressive), how interactions between characters are executed (traditional or non-traditional takes on intimacy), which institutions are being challenged (monogamy in our case) and how identities are being transformed (do polyamorists prosper or die). *Three* – unlike other love stories and non-monogamous films – reverses the conventional narrative of film where monogamy is institutionalized as the only intimate option that will be restored after a 'disorder' (e.g. monogamous adultery) happens. *Three* has a clear message: it is the monogamous relationship that is headed to 'death' and not polyamory.

Besides *Three*'s central premise – the transformation from dyadic to triadic relationship by abandoning monogamy and embracing polyamory – the film also addresses several social themes or issues that create a more realistic portrayal of a polyamorous love story: the lingering shame about mononormative adultery, presence of male bisexuality, changes of emotional and sexual selfhood, ageism, childlessness, pregnancy and body image, and new familial forms.

No Mononormative Adultery and Bi-invisibility

The futility (and film's subtle dismay) of Hanna and Simon's monogamous relationship is quickly recognized in the first film sequence – they are not having sex anymore and quarrel a lot. Lack of sex and quarrelling can be signs of an intimacy crisis where their relationship of 20 years will either dissolve or, if this was a monogamous narrative, they would engage in adultery – an 'acceptable' solution that would keep the relationship artificially alive. Both of them will later engage in 'a secret affair' with Adam, but this non-consensual both-side cheating situation eventually evolves into a consensual love triad.

As already mentioned, past representations of non-monogamy in films were depicted as infidelity due to the dominant mononormative language where any

deviation from coupledom was understood as cheating, because it was the only concept intelligible to the public (Ritchie & Barker, 2006). The language of love is saturated with representations, mores or expectations about hetero-coupledom, where monogamy, heterosexuality and fidelity create the 'Holy Trinity of Love'.

Cheating is morally condemned, but conceptually and emotionally easy (Mint, 2004, p. 57); it is morally 'bad' to be sexually/romantically involved with more than one person at the same time, unless if it is in secrecy. It is open polyamory that is societally unwelcoming. The cheater is the demonized Other soon to be eliminated so 'moral people' can measure their value upon not being like them. But this is not the narrative in *Three*. The third person (Adam) is not eliminated, the monogamous relationship is not restored, and no one is named a 'cheater'. Adam becomes a vital part of the existing coupledom (Hanna and Simon) and a new love triad is formed.

Three elegantly avoids the mononormative love language; however, it does not employ the polyamorous one either, as if there were no words for their situation. They are in transit, liminal, between the old territory of monogamy and new horizons of polyamory. The lack of explicit articulation of polyamory or bi words in *Three* does not rob its enunciation in practice; the film is filled with positive polyamorous and bi depictions or, as San Filippo (2013) put it, "the degree to which screen text contribute insight to the discourse on bisexuality [or polyamory, added by author] bears little relation to the number of the times they dare speak their name" (p. 11). *Three* combines polyamory (e.g. to love more than one at the same time) and bisexuality (e.g. to desire more than one gender) which creates an erotic triangle – a relationship structure that cannot align with the mainstream dual models of sexuality and intimacy. It is the men who are bisexual; Adam, a divorced singleton, has acknowledged his bisexuality, but Simon, one part of a hetero-coupledom, has to embrace it.

One of the most visible paradigmatic shifts about male bisexuality in *Three* is revealed in the matter-of-factness of Adam's bisexuality – it is neither glorified nor demonised (e.g. societal threat who disturbs heterosexual nuclear families, mentally unstable or silly characters that need to be killed or at least heterosexualized, Bryant, 2010; Russo, 1987). He is portrayed as a complex human being with an ex-wife and children, an academic career, with good social skills and a handful of hobbies. Simon, on the other hand, who is forced to rethink his sexual identity,

ignorantly falls into a cultural trap of sexual binarism when he wants to redefine himself; after his second sexual encounter with Adam, Simon nervously explains to Adam that he is not gay. This unfortunate cinematic bi-invisibility can be mirrored with the societal bi-erasure, especially when it comes to men (Bryant, 2010; Vicari, 2011).

Bisexual men have been unfairly represented in the cinema mostly due to the persistent cultural myth that they are closeted homosexuals. The reason why bisexual characters are still underrepresented in comparison to their gay counterparts in the cinema can be found in the still persistent sexual binarism (heterosexual or homosexual). Bisexuality invokes ambiguity, a state that most homo- and heterosexual people are not comfortable with, almost like how polyamory amplifies anxiety with mononormative persons. The alliance between bisexuality and polyamory is almost inevitable; both, bi and polyamorous ideologies advocate openness, limitlessness and possibilities and they defy the institutionalized system of exclusivity (one person/one gender/one relationship, Mint, 2004, p. 69). *Three* embraces this bi/polyamorous cross fertilisation despite the avoidance of those words, which in this particular film does not mean that there is avoidance of what these words signify.

The Changeability of (Mono) Emotional Selves

The "adulterous" behaviour of the monogamous coupledom and Simon's newly discovered sexual fluidity also demand the re-evaluation of their emotional selves. Emotions are inherently connected with sexual selves, so the continuous usage of mononormative discourse (language, ideas, imagery) is impossible. *Three* is foremost an emotional journey – how to cope with polyamorous emotions in a mononormative society that allows and enables hidden adulteries but condemns open polyamory. Intimate encounters with Adam leave both (Hanna and Simon) pleasantly reinvigorated and questioning – Hanna's old love for Simon did not fade away despite her new lust for Adam and the same can be said for Simon. As their sexual desire changes, so does their emotional mind-set.

Emotional enculturation in Western society is also planted in hetero-mononormative grounds: how to act, behave and think in heterosexual couplings where

certain emotions are allowed and cherished (e.g. possessiveness, exclusion) and others are banned (e.g. lust and love outside the existing dyad, sexual fluidity). Alongside the traditional notion of sexual orientation as fixed is the same belief about emotional selves as unchangeable. Averill (1986) has written that the acquisition of a new emotional framework can also be achieved during adulthood, or, to put it differently, emotional readjustment does occur in order to adapt to the new emotional reality, emerging later in a person's biography (p. 108). Polyamory also means a new emotional vocabulary and organisation (e.g. openness, communication, multiple desires, time sharing and scheduling in practice), so polyamorous people can become comfortable in theory and practice.

Three deliberately shows the characters' internal struggles; firstly, when Hanna and Simon are engaged in secret relationships with Adam outside their monogamous pairing and secondly, when the truth about their triad is finally out. The desire to relinquish the old mononormative emotional pattern and rewrite them according to their intimate state is conditioned with their move from one socio-cultural context (monogamy, singlehood) to another (polyamory). *Three* dives into the blind belief that emotional struggles and necessary readjustments, together with the complexity and high maintenance of polyamorous relationships, will happen by itself. This contradicts with the polyamorous ideology of openness and communication and is one of the film's weaknesses. However, *Three* is a film about new learnings about intimacy, so the protagonists still have to learn how to 'properly' react and solve their love situation.

(Monogamous) Childlessness → (Polyamorous) Family

At the beginning of *Three*, the narrator explains Hanna's and Simon's coupledom: they have been together for almost 20 years, both of them are in their early 40s and are involuntarily childless. The storyline here does not dwell much on Hanna's miscarriages and does not portray her as a misfortunate case. In a more mainstream film, Hanna, a woman in her 40s, could (or would) be portrayed as a desperate, futile old/er woman, beyond her child-bearing (and rearing) years, but this is not the case in *Three.*

Monogamous Hanna and Simon are involuntarily childless (*cannot* have kids); they would embrace the role of parenting – an expected obligation from an aver-

age adult – but cannot due to the biological circumstances. This is a less stigma-tised characteristic than being voluntarily childfree (do not *want* kids), something that still resonates with selfishness, coldness or materialism (Park, 2002). Their involuntary childlessness can be interpreted as a symbol of monogamous futil-ity while Hanna's pregnancy in the polyamorous triad represents the new fertility. Monogamy is barren/dead, polyamory is fruitful/alive. Polyamorous pregnancy in *Three* adds a new dimension to the whole concept of polyamory on- and off-screen.

As is evident from the social history of families, families reshape themselves in response to shifting social conditions and change through their life-span (divorce, remarriage, widowhood, Coltrane & Collins, 2001; Giddens, 2000; Sieder, 1998; Švab, 2001). Nuclear families may be the idealized cultural standard, but that does not erase the existence of "Other" families (e.g. joint, foster, rainbow, one-parent or polyamorous families).

Polyamorous families are another step in forming family ties that do not neces-sarily involve bio-legal connections between the persons involved and, as LGBT+ families, they challenge heterocentric family forms, face similar challenges (i.e. discrimination, stigma, custodial issues, and relationships within family of origin) and create strategies to navigate family life (Sheff, 2011, p. 489). However, polyam-orous families have not come under the same societal scrutiny as LGBT+ families because the mainstream public is still unaware of polyamorous people. But by gaining more visibility in society, polyamorous families can become the symbol of familial nonconformity (and scrutiny?) not only because they include same-sex partners, but because they include multiple partners.

Polyamorous pregnancy in *Three* merely hints at the potential struggles that await sexual minorities: a lack of familial role models, discourses and practices on which they could pattern their families (Sheff, 2011, p. 498), but also legal issues. Polyamorous people's desire for legal recognition of plural marriage is not as vital or important for their social existence as same-sex marriage is for LGBT+ commu-nity. This assumption is reaffirmed in *Three,* where Hanna and Simon have already entered into an ostensibly monogamous marriage, so Adam is – despite being an equal partner in their polyamorous triad – seen as a "close friend", which is one of the tactics for polyamorous people to make their relationship socially acceptable to other (monogamous) people. This ability to stay closeted as a polyamorous per-

son serves as a buffer against the stigma of sexual nonconformity, but the *Three* triad is also protected by their socioeconomic and cultural privileges.[4]

Pregnancy, Body Image and Age/ism

Hanna's pregnancy also introduces us to the transgressive representation of a pregnant body. In the dominant culture, pregnant women are not viewed as sexually desirable or having sexual desires. The reasoning behind this societal assumption lies in the dominant culture's definition that a sexually attractive woman is young, white, thin and non-pregnant (Bartky, 1998; Bordo, 2003; Wolf, 1992). The other aspect of desexualising pregnancy is to retain the traditional dichotomy of women as being either maternal (Virgin Mary archetype) or sexual (whore), but not both. A desiring pregnant woman is therefore liminal or Other within the patriarchal framework. As Young (2005) has stated: "she [a pregnant woman] may find herself being desexualized by others, but she may find herself with a heightened sense of her sexuality" (p. 53).

Three's last sequence contains the new representation of pregnant sexuality and bodies. All three of them – with Hanna visibly pregnant – are naked and headed to jointly share their bed as a triad. There are several visual transgressions that defy societal expectations about body image and the objectifying male gaze. Firstly, their naked bodies (especially Hanna's) are not sexualized, only sensualized when the eye of the camera slowly drifts over their intertwined limbs. Secondly, the idea of a desirable and desiring pregnant woman, who is preparing for sex with her two lovers, is delivered without any moralistic judgements. And thirdly, the last shot of them lying on the white bed in the white empty room, naked, is almost clinical. The camera slowly pulls away as they are getting smaller and smaller while the microscopic lens is put on top of them. This is the film's final confirmation of its message: polyamorous relationships are a new step in the social evolution of intimate relationships. An image of a pregnant woman (Hanna) as sexually charged and her male partners (Simon and Adam) as lusting for her is also groundbreaking in current cinema because not so long ago using the word "pregnant" or showing pregnant women on TV was unwelcome at least.[5] Those images of their polyamorous love further push boundaries of a social acceptability about gender, sexuality and body.

Another dimension of *Three* is related to age or ageism (i.e. stereotyping of, and discrimination against, someone based on their age; Butler, as cited in Calasanti, 2007, p. 335). The past and current portrayals of non-monogamy have been more or less ageist; protagonists were beautiful young people in their 20s (i.e. in all of the films mentioned earlier), but the *Three* trio is not young[6] – they are in their 40s – and not too pretty but still visually relatable. Age is also of no issue when it comes to Hanna's pregnancy as the film's narrative does not indulge in ageist assumptions about motherhood and 'proper' ages. However, Hanna as a first-time mother in her 40s can also be seen as transgressive if – as the traditional framework about motherhood claims – procreation is inevitably linked with youth or young female bodies.

The Polyamorous Semiotics of Three

On behalf of its visual nature, film communicates or generates language through several signifying practices – cinematography, editing, lighting, sound, mise-en-scène, costumes, dialogue and others. To additionally accentuate polyamory, there are three signifiers reoccurring during the film: the number three (3), death and water; where the former serves as an amplifier of polyamorous triad and the last two as metaphors of a personal transformation.

Not only does the *number 3* appear as the title of the film, but it is also discretely interwoven into the narrative itself. The first appearance of *number 3* happens at the beginning of the film, in a modern dance performance sequence where three dancers (one woman and two men) are passionately engaged with each other. This sequence is shot in a minimalistic setting – only three dancers, dressed in black, dancing in front of white canvases. The visual language of this mise-en-scène indicates their forthcoming struggle (e.g. the intense, interwoven dance) while the white background symbolises the absence of polyamorous social reality or as Turner (1988) claimed, "[t]he film's construction of social world is authenticated through the details of the mise-en-scène" (p. 85). But it can be read also as an opportunity – a blank page – to write a new, polyamorous love story. The second display of *number 3* is almost too quick to miss; it is braided into a conversation between Hanna and Adam at their third (!) encounter when he says, "good things come in three" which sounds almost as an eerie prediction about their upcoming

polyamorous triad. Finally, there is a film sequence, intensifying the *number 3* with elements of a different film genre (i.e. magic realism) and specific editing. Editing is another element of a film's visual language, and in this particular sequence it differs from the rest of the film. While typically the editing maintains an illusion of seamless continuity of time and place (Turner, 1988), here, the editing technique uses jump cuts from different scenarios with faster pace and, together with the narrator's voice, explains the almost predestined importance of the *number 3*:

> Simon's mother had only three months to live, but she died by taking 39 sleeping pills on September 3rd at 3:09, Simon's sister moved to Stuttgart in 1993 and was aged 39, came to see his dying mother by train at 9:30 at moonlight tariff 39 euros.

This jump-cut sequence resembles the popular French film *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) and can be read as a directorial bow from *Tykwer* to *Jean-Pierre Jeunet*.

The second signifier present in *Three* is *death* as a metaphor for a character's change or transformation, unlike in the aforementioned array of polyamory-hostile films where annihilation of cheaters and adulterous affairs had the sole purpose of re-establishing the hetero-mono-normative order. *Three* upends this by using the symbols of death (e.g. cancer, mother's death, dental decay, miscarriages) to signify the end of monogamy and Simon's heterosexuality. Simon has to rethink his sexuality, so the testicular cancer he overcomes can be interpreted as a wake-up call to live his life as authentic as possible (i.e. polyamorous bi man), while the narrative does not pry into Hanna's reproductive health to avoid the cultural denouncement when women cannot bear children. The death of Simon's mother who was suffering from pancreatic cancer and Simon's dreams about his teeth falling out are both shot in black and white, which according to Turner (1988) "serve as a guarantor of truth, an amplification of the real" (p. 28). The sequence with Simon's mother on her dying bed resembles South-Asian shadow play which can be read as an internal strife between real/hidden and unreal/public, while the dream sequence echoes the aesthetics of *Ingmar Bergman's* work with its visual bleakness and the feeling of existential inescapability. All those symbols of death represent an ending of Simon and Hanna's monogamous era, the rejection of the

unquestioned societal mores about hetero-mononormativity and the beginning of a new life.

Complementing the previous one, the last signifier is *water*. Water represents – especially for cancer-survivor and newly-bisexual Simon – cleansing and rebirth from being 'dead' (cancerous, monogamous, hetero) to be 'alive' (healthy, polyamorous, bi). The public swimming pool serves as a place for his sexual and symbolic rebirth where he meets his future lover, Adam. This facility and their encounter is reminiscent of gay bathhouses, culturally more recognizable places for gay hook-ups, however their sexual relationship quickly evolves into an emotional one. Being in a swimming pool can also be interpreted as a substitutional womb where he is – after his mother's death – reborn as a human being. Water is an element that wipes away everything that holds them back and offers a clean slate for the future.

Conclusion

Films as social texts 'speak' to us; they can provide moral instruction (good-bad), social observation (normal-abnormal) or political judgement (powerful-powerless). Positive representations of non-monogamies are crucial in eliminating the aura of Otherness, pinned to them on behalf of the past film representations that were not depicting them in a polyamory-literate, polyamory-conscious or even polyamory-thoughtful way.

Three as an openly polyamorous film has its weaknesses, mostly related to the lack of intersectionality (race, class, disability, geo locale, culture, age, sexuality, gender) or acknowledgement of the privileges of the trio involved (whiteness, middle-class status, maleness, high social/economic capital, live in an urban area, and are cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical and citizens). There is also an absence of the words 'bisexuality' and 'polyamory' which in this particular case does not create an absent-minded film about those topics, but builds the new paradigm of bi/polyamorous love.

But not to be overcritical and dwell upon its weaknesses, what *Three* and future films about non-monogamies can do is what lesbian and gay cinema facilitated for LGBT+ folks: visibility, recognition, acceptance, familiarisation, normalisation and 'de-Otherness' in general. As have LGBT+ cinematic representations changed over time – from demonization to acceptance – so can polyamorous cinema, with films like *Three* changing the narrative about dyadic love to endorse

other types of intimacy. The slogan 'Love is Love', usually employed to advocate marriage equality, can finally broaden the idea of love to polyamorous love and to cross over into 'love' genres: big budget or independent dramas, melodramas, rom-coms and TV shows where the premise could be polyamorous love – normalized, accepted, respected, de-Othered. Let us not forget: we see society through film and film through the prism of society we live and create.

Endnotes

1   This is where cultural education becomes essential. There are no poly communities in Slovenia nor is polyamory being academically thematised or even publicly recognized. There are a few works, found in the national data base for undergraduate diplomas and postgraduate theses (less than 10), but these academic papers are lost in the plethora of other more popular topics. Positive and non-judgemental representations of polyamory via film narratives are crucial for those who may lack a nuanced understanding of the topic because these narratives provide (albeit discursive) possibility to reconceptualise and revalue intimate relationships.

2   The adjective "romantic" is used in a modern, Giddens-esque manner; a type of hetero-monogamous love where women are positioned as passive objects and men as active subjects.

3   Mononormativity, a term coined by Pieper & Bauer, means "the presumption of couple-dom and the unfair discrimination against those whose relationships do not fit into the conventional couple form" (Wilkinson, 2010, p. 345) and heteronormativity – a complex social, economic and cultural system – positions heterosexuality as normal and dominant (Warner, 1991).

4   Privilege is a social advantage, rooted in membership in the dominant social group (e.g. whiteness, middle-class status, maleness, high social/economic capital, living in an urban area, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical, citizens). As Kimmel and Ferber stated, "privilege is invisible to those who have it, and is understood as universal and generic, although it unintentionally hides the persistent system of social inequalities" (2010, p. 3).

5   More on how and when pregnancy became public can be found in Renée Ann Kramer's book *Pregnant with the Stars: Watching and Wanting the Celebrity Baby Bump* (2015).

6   As it is stated in the European Social Survey research, youth ends at the age of 35 (Abrams & Swift, 2012).

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