

Complicity and the Representation of Sex Workers: The 'Fallen' Women of Holbeck in BBC's Documentary Mini- Series *Sex, Drugs and Murder*

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Introduction

2016 suggested a historical shift in approaches to sex work policies in the UK. Jeremy Corbyn spoke out publicly in favour of “decriminalising the sex industry”,¹ and the Home Affairs Select Committee suggested the revision of laws prohibiting activities linked to sex work.² On a more practical level, the City Council of Leeds permanently established the first legal red light zone in the inner-city area Holbeck, where activities associated with sex work, such as soliciting, are tolerated during the night.³ Considering the UK's long history of criminalising and marginalising sex work, these actions seem

¹ Corbyn, qtd. in Paul Waugh: Jeremy Corbyn Backs Decriminalisation of Prostitution, Calls for More 'Civilised' Treatment of Sex Workers. 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2016/03/04/jeremy-corbyn-prostitution-decriminalisation_n_9384148.html (last viewed on 15 June 2017).

² Janet Eastham: A Radical Moment for Britain's Sex Workers. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2016/jul/04/sex-workers-commons-inquiry-prostitution-brothels-soliciting-legalised-womens-safety-stunning-victory> (last viewed on 15 June 2017).

³ Ryan Fletcher: The Realities of the UK's First 'Legal' Red Light District. 2016, <https://www.vice.com/sv/article/8gk3ea/holbeck-leeds-sex-work-scheme-policing-austerity> (last viewed on 15 June 2017).

ground-breaking. Against the background of the shift in legal approaches, BBC Three released a mini-series about Holbeck, called *Sex, Drugs and Murder: Life in the Red Light Zone* (2016-2017). The sex worker organisation Prostitutes Collective criticised it for “colluding with the government in hiding the devastating consequences of their austerity policies”.⁴ This accusation points to questions of complicity which documentaries about sex workers have sparked since their emergence, especially regarding issues of voyeurism, exploitation, sensationalism, and stereotyping. This paper will explore the politics of representing a particularly vulnerable group through the concept of complicity. I argue that the media framings of sex workers⁵ found in BBC Three’s series are intrinsically complicit in the legal and spatial policing of street sex work.

First, I will inspect how different ‘prostitution frames’ and related narrative conventions have been linked to public discourses and laws in the UK. The second part will then examine *Sex, Drugs and Murder’s* framing of sex worker(s) and the space they occupy by identifying dominant frames and their modification. My analysis is based on the question of how framing is achieved through the use of realist stylistic devices and intertwined with general assumptions common to the documentary form. This will allow for a widening of the understanding of complicity to include issues of genre. As will be shown, narrative techniques and the deliberative mode which are constitutive for documentaries can be subject to complicity critiques.

Framing (Street) Sex Work in Media Discourses and Policies in the UK

Media studies recognise framing as a way to “tilt a story interpretation”, for instance by utilising familiar stereotypes and storylines to facilitate the audience’s understanding and viewing satisfaction.⁶ The framing of sex work lends itself particularly well to claims of potential complicity because for most

⁴ English Collective of Prostitutes: Statement: BBC 3 Film is Yet Another Biased Piece on the Sex Industry. 2017, <http://prostitutescollective.net/2017/05/17/bbc-3-film-yet-another-biased-piece-sex-industry/> (last viewed on 15 June 2017).

⁵ In this paper, I will mostly deploy the terms *sex work/sex worker*, following claims by those in the sex industry that it holds less negative connotations than other labels. I will use the terms *prostitution/prostitute* as well in order to differentiate it from other forms of sex work not discussed in this paper, such as pornography or phone sex operations.

citizens – and arguably politicians – mediated images of prostitutes are the only source informing their knowledge and imagination. The following part will illustrate the intricate links between prostitution frames and their narrative conventions on the one hand, and policy trends and punitive measures in the UK on the other.

Symons and Gillis identify the ‘social/moral order frame’ as a portrayal of the prostitute as a “*deviant* against who (sic!) society needs to be protected”⁷. This notion goes back to gender and sexuality discourses of the nineteenth century. The prostitute working on the streets was symbolically placed in opposition to the ‘Angel in the House’ – the sexually restrained, respectable and virtuous woman who ideally remained in the private sphere of the home.⁸ As a result, the prostitute’s sexual and spatial transgression was considered a threat, not only to the ‘good’ citizen’s morals but to their health, as they were thought to be responsible for the spreading of venereal diseases.⁹ This was mirrored in the UK’s legal framework of that time. The English Contagious Diseases Act of 1860 permitted the incarceration of women believed to be prostitutes and their forced medical examination, while the prostitute’s clients were subject to neither legal nor medical interventions.¹⁰

This notion of sex work as a threat remained prominent well into the twenty-first century, becoming manifest in narrative conventions surrounding themes of “disease, criminality and moral malaise”.¹¹ As a ‘social ill’, the sex industry

⁶ Helga K. Hallgrimsdottir et al.: Fallen Women and Rescued Girls. Social Stigma and Media Narratives of the Sex Industry in Victoria, B.C., from 1980 to 2005. In: *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*. Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 265-280, here p. 268f.

⁷ Katrien Symons, Kristien Gillis: Talking About Prostitution and the Representation of a (Problematic) Group. Identifying Frames in Flemish News Coverage on Prostitution. In: Nina Peršak, Gert Vermeulen (eds.): *Reframing Prostitution. From Discourse to Description, From Moralisation to Normalisation?* Antwerp 2014, pp. 121-143, here p. 122, emphasis in original.

⁸ Jane Arthurs: *Television and Sexuality. Regulation and the Politics of Taste*. New York 2004, p. 98f.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Phil Hubbard, Jane Scoular: Making the Vulnerable More Vulnerable? The Contradictions of Street Prostitution Policy. In: David Canter et al. (eds.): *Safer Sex in the City. The Experience and Management of Street Prostitution*. New York 2009, pp. 135-153, here p. 136.

¹¹ Hallgrimsdottir et al., *Fallen Women*, pp. 270-271.

is seen both as an attractor and a producer (notably due to its prohibition) of criminal activities. Media outlets moving within this frame draw on stereotypes that centre on degeneracy and potential contagion. Overall, they conceptualise sex work as a problem: a threat for the individual's health and morals, destructive for communities as a link to the "criminal underworld" and consequently destabilising for the social body at large.¹² Often, a spatial solution is advocated: "containment in order to protect the innocent as well as business owners".¹³ The symbolic dichotomy of the 'deviant' prostitute on the street and the 'good' woman in the house is thus perpetuated on the level of spatial order.

The social/moral order frame therefore illustrates the link between sex work, space and power relations. The tension between the supposed threat that sex work poses for the moral order and the 'good' citizen trying to maintain it, have often materialised spatially in the form of red light areas as a result of a "complex negotiation of social groups".¹⁴ In Birmingham, for instance, street sex workers were re-located to specific areas in the 1990s, due to community protests and pickets who systematically reported on sex workers to the police. The latter subsequently constructed a new surveillance system and increased arrests.¹⁵ Following Michel de Certeau, the geographical shifting of sex work via strategies of surveillance and segregation can be considered as the production of a 'purified' space.¹⁶ The heterosexually structured, supposedly 'whole' and ordered city is endangered by the disruption that sex work and its transgressive notions pose. The regulatory gaze of the police and residents creates a marginal space for sex work and its invisibility.¹⁷

¹² Symons, Gillis, Talking, p. 123.

¹³ Hallgrimsdottir et al., Fallen Women, p. 271.

¹⁴ Phil Hubbard, Teela Sanders: Making Space for Sex Work. Female Street Prostitution and the Production of Urban Space. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. Vol. 27, No. 1 (2003), pp. 75-89, here p. 80f.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

However, spatial politics are not merely imposed on marginalised groups but must be seen as an effect of resistance as well. Sex workers utilise the space of red light districts in order to escape the public's voyeuristic and regulating gaze and to avoid punitive measures.¹⁸ The space opens up the possibility for a sense of community, collaboration and protection, thus minimizing the undisputed risks of street prostitution. Still, unsupervised but illegal red light districts are less safe for street sex workers with regard to possible exploitation by procurers and clients.¹⁹

Relating this back to framing, media coverage of the conflict in Birmingham played a significant role in the subsequent spatial isolation.²⁰ This is not to claim that representations had an immediate effect. Rather, following Steve Pile,

“associations are made through figures of speech, such as metaphors and metonymy [...]. The interactions of these associations produce intricate and dense matrices of meaning that are ‘topographical’ in the sense not only that difference is produced ‘spatially’, but also that matrices are played out in specific sites.”²¹

One could argue that Pile, too, implicitly claims that narratives are complicit in the production and ordering of spaces. The mediated figure of the criminal and diseased prostitute is discursively “‘spoken’ through different symbolic and material domains, including the body and the city.”²² Therefore, it has to be stressed that the invisibility of sex work in everyday life and the ensuing relevance of framing mentioned above are discursive productions rather than indicative of the supposedly criminal nature of prostitution.

The prostitution frame labelled ‘oppression/sexual domination’ does not construct the sex worker but the sex industry as problematic because it is viewed as a reproducer of women's sexual and economic exploitation.²³ In

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 83ff.

¹⁹ Hubbard, Scoular, *Vulnerable*, p. 136.

²⁰ Hubbard, Sanders, *Space*, p. 79.

²¹ Qtd. in *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Symon, Gillis, *Talking*, p. 124.

contrast to the frame discussed above, female sex workers are considered victims of an 'evil' industry, but remain on the opposite end of notions of female virtue; they are 'fallen' women. Narrative tropes prominent in this frame construct stories of women who cannot be saved, often despite their family's "considerable effort to locate and reform the[m]".²⁴ A familiar protagonist is a drug-addicted woman who is incapable of making reasonable decisions with regard to her own safety. The sex trade and those on the demand side, on the other hand, are depicted as the perpetrators of unequal gender relations and are inextricably linked to violence and murder.²⁵

This framing became more dominant in the 1990s, when media stories "show[ed] workers to lack responsibility, agency and capability".²⁶ Likewise, sex work researcher and advocate Teela Sanders notes a gradual change in policy framing in the UK, which manifested in new legal consultation documents, reports and bills during the first decade of the twenty-first century.²⁷ Instead of continuing the responsabilisation of female street sex workers as immoral causers of public nuisance, the documents construct a victimhood narrative: "The socially excluded victim was used as a vehicle to 'do something' about the existence of prostitution per se."²⁸ This, however, did not result in policies directed at structural issues related to poverty, social and economic marginalisation or abuse, but in punitive sanctions and forced welfarism, subsumed under the notion of "Anti-Social Behaviour Orders" which urged women to leave the industry.²⁹ This new set of orders included, for instance, compulsory rehabilitation meetings following arrests for

²⁴ Hallgrimsdottir et al., *Fallen Women*, p. 271.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 272f.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 273.

²⁷ Teela Sanders: Controlling the 'Anti Sexual' City. *Sexual Citizenship and the Disciplining of Female Street Sex Workers*. In: *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. Vol. 9, No. 4 (2009), pp. 507-525, here p. 511f.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 513-516.

soliciting or loitering and resulted in a tightly-knit surveillance network.³⁰ Yet, as Sanders emphasises, the disciplining measures and monitoring strategies applied here are setting the women up to fail because they offer short-sighted solutions to complex issues and reasons behind the involvement in prostitution.³¹

Both the social/moral order and the oppression/sexual domination frame thus legitimise state sanctions. But while the former centres on strict criminalisation and exclusion, the latter aims at turning sexually 'deviant' into 'morally good' women, re-establishing gendered ideals of sexuality.³² Unlike narrative tropes found in various media outlets which suggests that women in the sex industry remain in a vicious cycle, UK policies that construct women as victims seem to be based on the premise that they can be helped – if the women cooperate and alter their behaviour.³³

The concept of complicity proves helpful in making sense of this difference in attribution of agency between the media and policy frame – both of which I have labelled 'oppression/sexual domination frame'. Both framings conceptualise sexual and economic exploitation as the main cause for prostitution, but focus on individual women – not structural violence in gender or economic power relations. One could argue that it is precisely the media attention on these women as helpless victims which creates the acute urgency and reasoning to 'save' them and thereby legitimises the new shift in policies described above. These new policies suit the logic of the neoliberal state aiming at activating its citizens' potential, therefore addressing the women instead of systematic inequality. Even though there are two contradictory assumptions about the capability of women in this frame, one presupposes the other and renders the complicity of media frames visible.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 516.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 513.

³² *ibid.*, p. 519.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 517.

The last frame to be introduced here is unique in the sense that it derives partially from people involved in the sex industry themselves who have chosen the more inclusive term 'sex worker' to direct attention to prostitution as a "form of employment"³⁴ rather than an indicator of moral indecency. While working conditions may still be criticised, prostitutes are portrayed as capable of making rational choices, their engagement in the sex industry being one of them.³⁵ Sex workers engaged in feminist activism and organisations such as the International Union for Sex Workers challenge the one-sided proliferation of stereotypes in the media.³⁶ They claim that positive, more diverse representations would legitimise their work, thus acknowledging the impact of cultural framing on their lives. In this sense, one can speak of a call for anti-complicity: "a commitment to understanding and resisting structures that cause harm" and a call "to be defiant, in collaboration with others, in the force of structural wrongdoing"³⁷.

Strikingly, representations *within* this frame have also been the object of complicity critiques, for instance by scholars such as Jane Arthurs³⁸ or Karen Boyle³⁹ who focus on sex work documentaries. They argue that television documentaries which construct female sex workers as sexually liberated beings who choose to be in the industry and which appropriate a "feminist discourse of agency, choice and empowerment", tend to depoliticise the issue, and once again omit the discussion of structural power relations.⁴⁰ They may claim legitimacy because of a pro-rights framing while actually satisfying male, heterosexual viewers' voyeuristic desires and

³⁴ Arthurs, Television, p. 99.

³⁵ Symons, Gillis, Talking, p. 122.

³⁶ Arthurs, Television, p. 99.

³⁷ Afxentis Afxentiou et al.: Introducing Complicity. In: Michel Neu et al. (eds.): *Exploring Complicity. Concept, Cases and Critique*. London 2016, p. 1-15, here p. 11.

³⁸ Arthurs, Television.

³⁹ Karen Boyle: Courting Consumers and Legitimizing Exploitation. In: *Feminist Media Studies*. Vol. 8, No. 1 (2008), pp. 35-50.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 40.

mainstreaming the sex industry.⁴¹ Following Arthurs, the danger in this sex work framing lies once again in the focus on individuals and a lack of political questions one could ask, such as what kind of working arrangements and policies are connected to safe and fair sex work.

In contrast to the other frames, the sex worker is attributed agency here, but not in connection with a 'spoiled' sexuality or other 'destructive' drives. The challenging of tropes and stereotypes as well as the acknowledgment of the diversity of people and working conditions within the industry are believed to lead to a shift in policies. The recent approaches in political rhetoric and reconsiderations of policies alluded to in my introduction might point to a beginning judicial reversal set off by a new cultural framing. However, it would be too simplistic to argue that one frame has been replaced by another. While the arrangement of the frames introduced in this paper does suggest a chronological order of different narrative conventions and stereotypes that have appeared during different times, it is precisely the juxtaposition of frames that is significant. Prostitutes are – depending on the context – both culprit and victim, both responsible and incapable.

Questions of complicity are omnipresent in the discussion of representations of prostitution, even when they oppose dominant cultural frames. This indicates that sex worker representations are complex negotiations of various actors and economic conditions, which follow different rationales. It has been demonstrated that the concept of complicity provides a fruitful lens which discloses how discourses move, affect and legitimise laws and the politics of space. The upcoming analysis will look at the mini-series *Sex, Drugs & Murder: Life in the Red Light Zone*, specifically its framing of Holbeck and its sex workers following the establishment of a legal red light zone.

Framing Holbeck and its Sex Workers

In a total of thirteen episodes produced between July 2016 and October 2017, *Sex, Drugs & Murder* features eleven female street sex workers. Their

⁴¹ Arthurs, *Television*, p. 96f.

personal lives are explored through interviews in their homes, on the street or 'on-scene' observations of conversations with friends and partners. BBC Three, an online channel also accessible via *YouTube*, released approximately one episode per month, thus creating a sense of immediacy of what is presented. Documentaries are commonly perceived as direct portrayal of 'reality'.⁴² Their appeal and power derive from the assumption that the people and places depicted are observable in the same way by the audience outside of their television. The BBC documentary markets itself that way as well, promising an "uncompromising look".⁴³ In fact, however, as Nichols points out, documentaries – despite their indexical quality – must be regarded as "a way of *interpreting* the world" rather than a straightforward representation of reality.⁴⁴ To make an argument, documentaries utilise and modify their 'evidence' of the world. Documentaries which assume a deliberative role include the portrayal of a problem as well as the presentation of a certain solution.⁴⁵ These characteristics render the potential complicity of documentaries visible. Therefore, a documentary dealing with sex work can be subject to complicity critiques due to both its framing and its deliberative capacity. The series at hand will thus be examined with regard to both of these aspects.

The female protagonists working in Holbeck are predominantly in their twenties, British, addicted to crack cocaine and/or heroin, and share stories of physical, mental and/or sexual abuse in their childhood and teenage years. The viewers learn that four of them have children who live with other family members or in foster care. Over the course of the series, several of the women enter new relationships which are marked by jealousy and disputes over money. Most of them state ambitions to stop using drugs but none succeeds permanently. Several of them are also in and out of jail due to possession of class A drugs, shoplifting, assault, missing court dates,

⁴² Bill Nichols: *Introduction to Documentary*. 2nd ed. Bloomington 2010, p. 42.

⁴³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episodes/p04cq5w8> (last viewed on 05 December 2017).

⁴⁴ Nichols, Introduction, p. 34f., emphasis in original.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 105.

kidnapping or working outside of the legal time frame (between 8pm to 6am). The majority of them repeatedly change or lose residency because of evictions, break-ups and disputes with neighbours.

The implied ideal of a 'normal', middle-class life is unattainable for them, and it serves as a foil to underline their divergence. Stable family lives, relationships or housing are what the women all aspire to but constantly fail to achieve. They state ambitions to get back in touch with family members, take up jobs or go to school. Only one of them, Mel, does get clean after a forced withdrawal in prison and moves in with her sister, but relapses and disappears after a few weeks. The 'normal' population of Holbeck is only presented in the background of shots of the city; and implicitly referred to in the mentioning of holidays. The series which consistently refers to the women as "sex workers" also explores their hobbies and job qualifications ranging from massaging to painting. It expands their identities to loving sister, friend and pet-owner. However, these depictions of interests and relationships are all corrupted by the women's drug addiction and involvement in sex work. Every positive aspect of their lives is negated, which is achieved through a 'documentary voice' that transgresses the level of diegesis by utilising realist stylistic devices.

A major technique in the series is the use of (extreme) close-ups. The women's faces and their hands are constantly shown from a short distance, exposing and highlighting their skin, teeth and fingernails, visibly damaged from the use of crack cocaine or heroin. Their body here becomes a signifier of decay and disgust. As the series progresses, the women's appearance and their skin also function as structuring devices for the story: the further the series moves along, the more scratches and scars cover their skin. Diseases – other than their drug addiction – are another theme the women allude to and connect to their job, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, depression or pneumonia. Kaleigh remembers using bleach and Amy tests herself for STDs out of constant fear of contagion.

The close-ups further serve as a means to emphasise or visualise emotions that supposedly lie beneath their statements. The series uses interviews, sometimes "masked", sometimes audible through the interviewer's voice, to produce a psychological and emotional realism, which renders the women's inner emotions "accessible to the viewer" and "tap[ping] the pre-existing

emotional reservoir of their audience”.⁴⁶ The interviewers frequently provide follow-up questions to foster an emotional response, such as “Would you rather have your kids?”⁴⁷ (when Kaleigh states her love for her dog), “Was this your business?”⁴⁸ (when Sammy Jo is standing in front of her empty beauty parlour), “And how old is [your son] now?”⁴⁹ (when Amy remarks that she has not seen her child for a long time).

The series’ thematic and visual focus on the women verges on the ethical concerns that documentaries about any social group entail: “We as an audience receive a sense that the subjects in the film are placed for our examination, [...], often they seem to come before us as examples or illustration, evidence of a condition.”⁵⁰ Because documentaries rely on generalisations to prove a point about a larger issue⁵¹, they are particularly prone to revert to stereotypes or narrative tropes connected to a group in order to make an argument. Considering *Sex, Drugs & Murder*’s selection of subjects which lacks diversity with regard to their background or experiences, the series does follow this logic of generalisation. This leads to the question: What is conceptualised as the major reason for concern here, the problem that presses for a solution?

To answer this question is to identify the framing of sex work(ers) in the documentary. As highlighted above, the protagonists and the storyline clearly follow the script of a victimhood narrative. The women address structural problems on several occasions, such as the failure of the foster care system, the intrusive questions of rehabilitation clinics and punitive curfews which fall into legal working hours. Bee, the oldest sex worker featured in the series, states: “Everything that they’re doing, it’s like they’re pushing the girls over

⁴⁶ Nichols, Introduction, p. 177, 134.

⁴⁷ *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, Complicated Love, Episode 2 (UK 2016).

⁴⁸ *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, Money Can’t Buy You Love, Episode 3 (UK 2016).

⁴⁹ *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, So this is Christmas?, Episode 4 (UK 2016).

⁵⁰ Nichols, Introduction, p. 61.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 101.

the edge. It's like they give us enough rope for us to hang ourselves."⁵² Nonetheless, these issues are not further investigated but remain marginal in the documentary's construction of exclusively personal narratives.

While the women are constructed as helpless victims, it is rather the men, the sex industry and the drug abuse which are framed as sources of their problems. Drug addiction is often presented as a reason to enter the sex industry, and sex work in return is conceptualised as a cause of drug addiction. While sex itself must be kept out of the camera frame to claim legitimacy as a 'serious' documentary⁵³, it is referred to repeatedly by the women's recounting of explicit details. They share their clients' 'perverse' requests, one asking to "shit on him" and another wanting to have a cucumber inserted which he then brings home to his wife to eat. Again, the interviewer follows up with questions like "How does that work?"⁵⁴ or "Why would anyone want that?"⁵⁵ in order to get a more detailed description and offering an opportunity for the women to distance themselves from these practices. The sexual deviance is thus not coined on the women working as sex workers, but on the clients. The oppression/sexual domination frame is accordingly intertwined with the social/moral order frame. The consistent use of the word 'sex worker' points to an awareness of the politics involved in labelling. But rather than granting the women actual agency or the ability to make rational choices, this aspect further authorises the documentary in speaking about them. Taking a closer look at the series' framing of the space of sex work will uncover what kind of solution is suggested.

The majority of interviews or observations of conversations between the women and/or their partners take place inside their apartments or rooms. The (extreme) close-ups of the women's bodies are frequently interspersed with close-ups of objects of the interior: syringes, condom wrappers, crack pipes, spoons, aluminium foil, scattered clothes and make-up and cans of

⁵² *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, On the Edge, Episode 11 (UK 2017).

⁵³ Boyle, *Courting*, p. 43f.

⁵⁴ *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, Welcome to Holbeck, Episode 1 (UK 2016).

⁵⁵ *Sex, Drugs and Murder*, Under Pressure, Episode 8 (UK 2017).

instant meals. They are filmed by a hand-held camera, adding to a sense of instability and authenticity. The juxtaposition of the audible narratives by the women and the depiction of the interior create a symbolic association between the 'chaotic' space and the women's inside. This notion is strengthened when considering that new – most often negative – developments in the sex workers' lives (e.g. harassment, attacks, evictions, arrests) and stories about a client's sexual 'perversion' are often followed by images of Holbeck. Frequent bird eye shots which track the streets of Holbeck usually depict cars, driving into the city, mostly at night and often feature white on-screen-texts providing information. This way of straightforward filming can be considered 'photographic realism' which documentaries require for their production and claim of 'authenticity'.⁵⁶ At the beginning of each episode, bird eye shots are used as an opening to the show. One could argue that the camera's gaze inspects the 'unordered' space in these sequences, and the cars driving into the area represent its 'pollution', namely the incoming demand for sex trade. Once again, the women are not constructed as evil forces, but it is their presence that is visually associated with the chaos in their apartments and with the occurrence of 'perverted' sex and its supposedly adherent violence.

It is important to note that the series explicitly does not locate itself in just any British red light district, but in Holbeck where sex work is tolerated. The Episodes on *Youtube* are named 'Christmas' or 'Turning 30' but share the same appendix: 'inside Britain's Legal Red Light District'. On the one hand, it is implied once again that 'normal' life events are corrupted by the involvement in sex work. On the other hand, the word 'legal' points to the series' preoccupation with the establishment of Holbeck as a tolerance zone. The new legislation is referred to repeatedly as a breaking point, both for the area and the sex workers. Every episode introduces one of the women by locating her in Holbeck, continuously mentioning that Holbeck has become Britain's first 'legalised' red light zone in 2014 and one murder as well as 40 incidents have been reported since. The women note more 'girls' offering

⁵⁶ Nichols, Introduction, p. 134.

lower prices and sex without condoms. News clips are inserted to visualise the murder of Holbeck sex worker Daria Pionko. In the first episode, a business owner and a female resident are interviewed, the former stating that she had fewer customers, the latter worrying about the women.

The impression that the new legislation is the series' pivotal point is sustained in the last episode, called 'The Final Update'. The final minutes of the episode alternate between grim updates on the women's lives and statements about Holbeck. The dense succession of quotes, images of the women, the area, and the alarming musical theme once more construct a sense of urgency. The legalisation in Holbeck and the women's fate are tightly bound together in this sequence. Overall, the series suggests that the construction of a tolerance zone has not proven to be a solution for the sex workers. Rather, by means of framing, the series argues that the legalisation of sex work will further endanger the area and the women likewise. The implication of this logic then is that a renewed prohibitive regulation of sex work would be both beneficial to the women and to Holbeck.

Conclusion

BBC Three's series exemplifies how ethics of the telling, told and production intersect. On the one hand, the series is complicit in the generalisation and stigmatisation of sex work(ers) because of its framing. While appropriating elements of a sex work frame, the documentary constructs a one-sided image despite interviewing eleven different women. Disease, disgust and sexual deviancy are dominating themes. The women are rendered subjects incapable of escaping their situation. Holbeck's particular new legislation is conceptualised as the only cause which can be reversed.

The docu-series' complicity is further tangible in its narrative and aesthetic techniques. The documentary form is inherently linked to questions of complicity due to its assumed connection to reality, its use of realist stylistic devices and its potentially deliberative function. By narratively and aesthetically shifting the women's personal down-ward spiral onto the city and by confronting its viewers with 'real' facts and figures and a realist style that conveys 'authenticity' of the issue at hand, the documentary presses for one very 'real' solution: revoking the legalisation of sex work in Holbeck. In opposition to the streak of decriminalisation attempts in the UK, the series is

complicit in forming the social imagination in a way which has informed strict anti-sex work policies and spatial politics before.

Nonetheless, it is possible to note ruptures in *Sex, Drugs & Murder's* rather monolithic narrative and they are provided by the women themselves. They allude to the failure of policies and correctional measures of the last decades which viewers would have most likely not encountered otherwise. While documentaries are prone to complicity, they do offer spaces for agency and counter-hegemonic readings. This might also point to the possibility and characteristics of anti-complicit representations. One way of resisting dominant, harmful frames is to construct complex characters and offer people linked to the sex industry (including clients, male sex workers, non-British sex workers, sex worker advocates and activists) the opportunity to actively participate in and control a narrative. I argue that this would challenge harmful institutional, cultural and social structures.

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Bio

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