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Doris Dier

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*For as it is written, the last shall be first
and the geek shall inherit the earth.*

- David Brooks

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1. Introduction

Geeks and Nerds have always been on the edge of society, outcasts living in the shadows, never invited to the cool parties, never getting the girl, ridiculed and avoided (Feineman 9). Over the last three decades, however, their misery seems to have come to an end. Finally, they are stepping into the ray of light, right into the hip center of the universe that seems to now revolve around them.

Various sources (e.g. Kendall, *Nerd Nation* 263, Zittlau 14) claim that the hey-day of Nerdiness and Geekiness began with the technological revolution. Back in the 1960s and 1970s computers were the size of buildings and only accessible to a few individuals who would be referred to as Nerds and Geeks. What they were called was actually of little importance, because to the vast majority they were close to invisible (Feineman 10). Nevertheless, the two terms, which were then used synonymously, started to spread and were used as an insult for those kids in school who had good grades and would later on become hyper-intelligent scientists (*Révanche* 01:55). The stereotypical image that was conveyed (and still is) was the one of

a pale group of distracted, unstylish, unathletic, uninvolved wallflowers who taped their thick, hornrimmed glasses with duct tape, wore pocket protectors filled with mechanical sported pencils [...] in nondescript polyester shirts and, if you asked anyone, wasted the best party years of their lives. (Feineman 10)

In the late 1970s and early 1980s personal computers, developed mainly in Silicon Valley, California, by “middle-class white kids from good suburban homes” (“Triumph of Nerds, Impressing” 3:16), found their way into our homes, changing our relationships with technology. They were no longer cryptic, oversized and faceless machines that would threaten our personal spaces. They became a part of us, as we have learned how to master them and integrate them into our everyday life. Over time we started to become dependent on them, needing them in so many ways, for work, school, communication, health etc. They are so essential to our lives now that they are treated as friends. In addition to that, those people who used to be mocked and made fun of, Nerds like Bill Gates, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs, had become incredibly rich and lived the lives the guy next door could only dream of.

Nevertheless, less fortunate Nerds, who did not end up as billionaires, could still help us with our computers and fix problems we would have with them, sometimes with a single mouse click. What they did looked like magic to the ordinary eye – a mysterious understanding between Nerds and the machine. As I will argue, this

resulted in an envious attitude that manifested in an ambivalent representation in the media.

Nonetheless, it is said that the turning point for Nerds and Geeks was when the iPhone was introduced in 2007 (*Révanche* 44:06). At this point, having a sophisticated piece of technology at one's disposal was seen as a status symbol, a must have for everyone, not a gadget for only a small part of society like the subculture of Nerds and Geeks. One could even argue that at this point the distinction between Nerds and Geeks took place. This is an aspect that I will discuss in this thesis, because when taking a close look at the medial representation of Geeks and Nerds, one can observe that this process took place long before the launch of the iPhone.

The central subject of investigation in this thesis is how this distinction, this change in perception of Nerds and Geeks, is represented in cultural artifacts such as movies and TV series. The claim is that over the last three decades the shift in the meaning of the term 'Geek' has led to a different perception of such characters in audiovisual media and a change of function they serve. It is my observation that in the 1980s, when Geeks and Nerds were considered to refer to the same kind of person, they were represented as stock characters, as tomfools the audience could laugh at. A decade later the representation started to change, as I will illustrate by closely investigating movies and TV series produced in the 1990s. This was also the time when the new Geek subculture formed. To confirm this proposal I will look at how subcultures are defined and whether or not Geeks classify as such.

In the beginning of the 21st century the shift in meaning had been completed, thus the representation of Geeks as laughable fools was outdated and consequently had to change. This newly found self-confidence could be observed in contemporary audiovisual media, but also the self-perception of Geeks bears witness to this development, an assumption I will investigate by analyzing online sources of Geeks performing their identity. The reason I chose this medium as my research area is, as I will argue, the fact that nowadays being a Geek primarily takes place there.

The identification (or definition) of Geeks is necessary in order to recognize them in audiovisual media. I will propose a definition of the term 'Geek', identify the features that distinguish them from Nerds, and by this describe the subculture that they constitute. By doing that I will also investigate how Geeks represent themselves and how this subculture performs its identity on the Internet. My findings will be the basis for my investigation of the media representation of Geeks. The research ques-

tions I am interested in asking when analyzing the audiovisual media I consult are as follows:

- How are the ‘new’ Geeks represented in audiovisual media?
- What function do Geeks serve in audiovisual media?
- Who serves as the ‘Other’?

By answering these questions I will illustrate that Geeks in audiovisual media are not a medial phenomenon, a frequently occurring stock character, but in fact the depiction of a subculture that has developed over the last three decades. My key argument will be that the progress overlaps with the development of the subculture that we nowadays consider as Geeks, and therefore the representation of Geeks and Nerds as one and the same stock character in audiovisual media in the 1980s has evolved to the representation of a distinct Geek subculture in the 2000s.

The majority of (scholarly and popular scientific) texts on Nerds and Geeks focus on the definition of either term, or seek to identify the distinguishing features. Yet, very few scholars have explored if it is valid to claim that Geeks form a subculture (e.g. McArthur). This thesis aims at contributing to this issue by investigating the identity and performance of self-declared Geeks on the Internet.

The media representation of Nerds has been considered under various aspects, but the texts I consulted never acknowledged the difference between Nerds and Geeks, because the terms were thought of and used synonymously. In this research paper I will take the ongoing process of distinction into consideration and thus elaborate on the specific ways of how Nerds and Geeks are represented differently, especially when the latter are thought of as a subculture.

2. Definition

In this chapter I will introduce approaches towards the definition and distinction between Nerds and Geeks. In the first part I will look at dictionary and lexicon entries. These reference works are supposed to be unbiased and consequently provide an objective definition of the terms. The section I have entitled ‘Discourse Definitions’ provides a summary of definitions by either self-defined Nerds and Geeks found on the Internet or scholarly texts.

2.1. Dictionary Definitions

I have decided to consult the digital and online editions of different dictionaries because they supply the most accurate definitions, compared to printed versions, which quickly become outdated, especially when looking at such relatively new terms with a changing meaning.

2.1.1. Nerd

The online edition of *Merriam-Webster* defines a Nerd as “an unstylish, unattractive, or socially inept person; *especially*: one slavishly devoted to intellectual or academic pursuits.” ‘Geek’ is listed as one of its synonyms.

The digital edition of the *New Oxford American Dictionary (NOAD)* identifies a Nerd as “a foolish or contemptible person who lacks social skills or is boringly studious” and “a single-minded expert in a particular technical field”.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* mentions the gender of Nerds, which is male. Also, the lack of attractiveness is referred to. In addition to that it is stated that a Nerd is “socially embarrassing”. One of the article’s example sentences further emphasizes the negative connotation of Nerdiness: “He’s nice, but kind of nerdy.”

2.1.2. Geek

Merriam-Webster lists more definitions for ‘Geek’. The initial meaning is the one of a carnival performer, often a wild man performing a curiosity. The second major meanings are: “a person often of an intellectual bent who is disliked” and “an enthusiast or expert especially in a technological field or activity”.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* again emphasizes the gender. Also, Geeks are “boring and not fashionable”.

In the *NOAD* a Geek is described as “an unfashionable or socially inept person”. Also, the second meaning of a “carnival performer who performs wild or disgusting acts” is mentioned. It is notable that the *NOAD* is not ignorant towards the word trend of ‘Geek’. Also, the distinction between Nerd and Geek is acknowledged. The question whether or not being a Geek is something to be proud of is asked:

A few decades ago, the answer would almost certainly have been no: the word was a cruel and critical label attached to clever, but socially awkward, people: *Trekkies, computer geeks, and unpopular college students*. In the last decade of the 20th century everything changed because the computer industry helped the socially stigmatized Geeks to achieve great success. The general perception of Geeks began to shift and turned into a positive thing. It now implied an “admirable level of knowledge, expertise and passion: **geeks** could do cool stuff,’ and they could fix your computer!

Nowadays it is socially acceptable to be a self-confessed or self proclaimed Geek, their field of expertise is no longer restricted to the world of science and technology, allowing devotees from all areas to identify themselves as Geeks (Movie Geek, Music Geek, etc.). The *NOAD* also states that Nerds “have undergone a similar change of image but to a lesser extent, with some negative terms such as *boring* and *pathetic* still commonly attached to the word.”

2.2. Discourse Definitions

The first subsection of this chapter focuses on texts that aim at defining what is meant when referring to a Nerd. The second part relies on articles and statements that point at the differences between Nerds and Geeks. I included these aspects because I feel they help to grasp the specific meanings, since the boundaries between the meanings of the two terms are fuzzy and thus sometimes hard to follow. The third subsection then explains what a Geek is. The last part of this chapter is the summary of the previous ones and aims

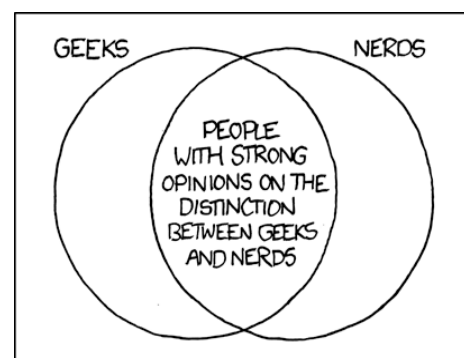


Fig. 1: A cartoon picture about the ongoing debate on the distinction between Nerds and Geeks by Randall Munroe. n.d. <http://xkcd.com/747> (30 November 2012).

at establishing a definition of Geeks that is valid for this thesis and the analysis of the performance of the subculture and the medial representation. The reason for me to also include illustrations in this part is the fact that many self-declared Geeks put great attention in the distinction between Nerds and Geeks and illustrate their opinion graphically. The graphs I provide are from websites that address the issue at hands. The authors included the pictures in their texts albeit they rarely are the creators of the very same. I have tried to identify the authors of the illustrations, but due to the heavy circulation of the images on the Internet it was not possible to locate the original source of every picture.

2.2.1. Investigating the Common Nerd

In his book *Nerds. Wo ein Brille ist, ist auch ein Weg*, Jörg Zittlau claims that Nerds did not emerge as late as the 20th century; their history goes back to the prehistoric era. In his opinion, cave men that would rather paint star constellations on walls than go hunting would classify as the first Nerds. Whenever the idiosyncrasy of Nerds was tolerated, they were able to flourish. Zittlau concludes that they function as an indicator for the liberty a society provides its members with; the degree of freedom of speech and opportunities for personal development can be measured by the amount of Nerds a society brings forth. Furthermore, Zittlau states that Nerds can be found in almost every historic period. Their first heyday was in the Hellenic period, where he identifies philosophers such as Thales, Heraclites, Archimedes and Aristotle. During the Middle Ages Nerds were restricted to the clerical field, where they could unfold their abilities in abbeys and monasteries. Their second heyday was the Renaissance period in the 15th and 16th century, when they could display their inept social behavior openly with no threat of persecution again. Michelangelo, Albert Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci would classify as Nerds in this era. In the 18th and 19th century the groundbreaking discoveries in science led to another “Nerd-Hype”, which culminated in the 1950s, the beginning of the computer era (12-22).

David Anderegg provides a summary of his research on the characteristic features of Nerds he undertook on the Internet. He states that “Nerds are, by definition: (a) unsexy, (b) interested in technology, (c) uninterested in their personal appearance, (d) enthusiastic about stuff that bores everybody else and (e) persecuted by nonnerds who are sometimes known as jocks” (*Save America* 23).

Although Nerds are commonly associated with, they are not restricted to science and technology. Their special abilities lie within the creative and subversive, and they can operate in any field of activity. Jörg Zittlau offers an “anatomy and psychology of the common Nerd” (29; my translation). He acknowledges the fact that his typology is not true for every individual, but emphasizes that there is a need for guidelines to allow communication about the subject. The attributes that Nerds share are:

- They are highly intelligent, but a high IQ does not automatically provide them with the ability to adapt to certain situations. What they do have at their disposal is a sheer endless creativity that allows them to think ‘outside the box’. Zittlau claims that people, who do not achieve high scores in a standard IQ test, would often qualify as Nerds because of that ability. This criterion seems to contradict itself, and the author is aware of that. What he attempts to explain here is that Nerds often have a high IQ, are socially awkward, and do not respond well to situations that involve social interaction. However, a high IQ does not automatically mean that one is a Nerd. Another feature that Nerds often possess is the ability to see the bigger picture, and this ability provides them with the creativity to perform brilliantly in a field (30-31).
- Being able to block everything out and focus on a subject is another ability that Nerds have. They forget everything around them and are devoted to their work. This determination results in the disregard of personal hygiene, health and appearance (31-32).
- Nerds are antisocial. They focus on a project and thus become socially isolated. They find it difficult to open up to others, and are perceived by them as uncommunicative and anxious (33). This is confirmed by David Anderegg, who points out that nerds “are shy. They have no swagger, no charisma” (*Save America* 5).
- Nerds have a strong sense of moral and loyalty. They do not move or digress from their principles and have a distinct feeling for justice (Zittlau 34-35).
- Money and appearance is not important to them (36).

For the coning of the term ‘Nerd’ Zittlau, like many other authors (e.g. Anderegg, *Save America* 35, Nugent 55), mentions the book *If I ran the Zoo* by Theodor Seuss Geisel. This book, which was published in 1950, is often credited to be the first printed medium to contain the word (Zittlau 22). According to Anderegg, just one year later the magazine *Newsweek* published an article which claimed that in in Detroit ‘Nerd’ had replaced ‘Square’ (a narrow-minded and boring person). In the 1970s one of the characters that appeared on the American TV series *Happy Days* used the term extensively which contributed to the relatively fast spread of the word¹ (*Save America* 36). This marks the rise of Nerds in the United States. In the 1980s they reached the top when computer companies such as Microsoft changed our everyday lives and the digital economy allowed the former invisible outcasts to earn large amounts of money and to acquire “economic credibility, the seedbed of social prestige” (Brooks).

Kendall suggests that there are two types of Nerds: “The bad nerd – asocial, bitter, too smart for his own good – might cause harm. The good nerd – lacking in social skills but still friendly, willing to use his intelligence to help others – just needs a little ‘dating advice.’” (“White and Nerdy” 511)

Summarizing we can say that the primary characteristic of Nerds is their deep interest, obsession or fascination in academic fields, science or technology. They are typically thought of as being intelligent, mostly due to the reason that they enjoy specializing and increasing their knowledge and abilities in their studies. A common feature of Nerds is their social awkwardness, the difficulties they have in forming both romantic and platonic relationships. They tend to be introverted personalities, which may be the reason why they are often subject to teasing and bullying.

2.2.2. The small difference

I have mentioned that the terms Nerd and Geek once were used interchangeably, a Nerd simply being “a geek with better grades.” (Brooks) Over the last two decades, however, the words developed two distinct meanings, which are still closely related but after all – different.

¹ *Happy Days* is an American sitcom (1974-1984). Arthur „The Fonz” Herbert Fonzarelli, played by Henry Winkler, used the term in its contemporary sense.

The website *wikihow.com* offers a detailed article on the distinction of Nerds and Geeks. The authors claim that both “terms can be viewed as either endearing or pejorative depending on how they applied, by whom, and to whom. And there is always passion aplenty involved in the definition and application of either term.” They also point out that the interpretation of the words is subjective but nowadays the term is increasingly connoted positively and a Geek is considered to be “someone with an interest or lifestyle having to do with niche activities, especially fandom and technology.” Their interests can vary and overlap with those of Nerds, but “most nerds enjoy the more intellectual forms of science fiction and most geeks have a higher knowledge of science or encyclopedic data than the general population.” The authors state that an important distinction from Nerds is that Geeks tend to have average grades. Another feature that aids to differentiate are their hobbies. Nerds engage more in academic pursuits and spend their spare time with scientific studies, whereas Geeks pursue unusual hobbies such as LARP², comic books or Cosplay³ (Wilson et al.).

The authors also claim that

[i]t is possible for someone to be a nerd and a geek, depending on definition. For example, people who like Star Trek may be interested in NASA level quantum physics. A tomato gardener may have a degree in bio-chemical engineering. Many “nerd” and “geek” interests interlace. Often being a geek leads to being a nerd, as people research areas of science and technology appropriate to their interest. Similarly, nerds can become geeks, as expertise leads to interests outside the typically “academic.” (Wilson et al.)

This quote demonstrates once again that the boundaries are fuzzy, or as Anderegg states, the terms are “elastic“ (*Save America* 35).

Jason Tocci, who coined the term ‘Geek Studies’, emphasizes “the term ‘Geek’ was an insult long before it was an overtly-named niche market or personal badge of pride” (3). In the social hierarchies of American high schools, students are still labeled as Nerds and Geeks in a devaluating way. In non-English speaking countries people who are good with computers and science are called Nerds or Geeks, but there is no comparable tradition. The terms are relatively new to the languages and

² LARP (Live Action Role Gaming) is a form of role-play. The participants act out the actions of their character and dress accordingly.

³ Cosplaying is to design, create and wear outfits of fictional characters.

thus the negative connotation is not as extensive. The stereotypical picture is there, but the ‘new’ pride in being a Nerd or Geek shimmers through (3-6).

Geeks are well aware of their difference to Nerds. They do not see themselves as alienated and self-pitying outsiders. New technologies provide them with a range of possibilities to show off their cultural capital. On the Internet Geeks can display their “supple sensibilities and well-modulated emotions”, becoming cultural producers of playful self-irony, mysterious references to media and social phenomena (Brooks).

Jon Katz draws a clear distinction between Nerds and Geeks:

Nerd is a term widely used to describe the sometimes socially awkward, technologically minded, gifted people who built the digital communication structures. Geeks are less interested and skilled in the mechanics of technology. They are more outward, political, and preoccupied with the applications of machinery and technology. If the nerd patched together the wires and software that creates an online community, the geek is the one setting its agenda, arguing about how it's used, and obsessed with its social applications (Katz).

What they have in common is that both may have been outsiders in one form or another, especially at school and work, a sad truth that is supported by the fact that there are many mocking (or even insulting) terms for smart and open-minded individuals. Another aspect I want to emphasize here is that concerning computers, Nerds are the one who would usually program the software Geeks then use. The connotation of the latter and computers is due to their ‘heavy usage’.

Phil Ciciora claims that the reason why being a Geek is so popular nowadays, compared to the negative stereotype of Nerds in popular culture that still prevails, results from the increased consumption of Geek culture: more and more movies based on comic books are released, a wider range of individuals play computer games or take part in virtual worlds. In his article Ciciora quotes Lori Kendall, who assumes that ‘Nerd’ is a “stickier term that is applied to people in a more negative way.” She concludes by saying that “‘Geek’ is something you can do and then leave behind, but ‘nerd’ is what you are” (qtd. in Ciciora), a statement that will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

2.2.3. All About Geeks

In 2012 the French/German TV station *Arte* showed Jean-Baptiste Péroitié's documentary *La Révanché des Geeks/Nerd Alarm!*. *Arte* provided a homepage where viewers were able to vote for their favorite Geek-figure in movies, TV, video games and comics. There was also a Quiz for testing one's knowledge on Geeks. The director gave an interview about his documentary which was also provided on the film's a homepage. He talks about the distinction between Nerds and Geeks and restricts the time period that the terms were used synonymously to the 1970/80s. Péroitié also claims the term 'Geek' itself derives from everyday language and has gone through a strong change in meaning over the last four decades, up to the point that in the last years Geeks became even en vogue, whereas the term 'Nerd' is still connoted negatively. While filming his documentary he was told by various Geeks that "a Geek is a Nerd who has girlfriends" ("Interview", my translation). He also points out that some people he spoke with would rather see themselves as Nerds because they think that Geeks are too smooth and socially accepted, i.e. the term Nerd hints some notion of 'rough edge' or a scandalous implication.

According to Péroitié the word 'Geek' is used heavily at the moment in France; it has become a "Buzzword", as he calls it – being a Geek is 'in'. People in Europe and the US declare that they are "proud to be a Geek" ("Interview", my translation). This demonstrates that Geekiness is not a phenomenon restricted to the Anglophone culture, which is also true for the usage of the term on the Internet. These phenomena will be looked at in more detail in chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.

In addition to that Péroitié states that that a Geek is indeed a technology and science fiction fan, but by now the term is also valid for someone who is passionately interested in a topic, up to the point of being obsessed. The negative connotation, meaning the synonymy with the term 'Nerd', has disappeared. He attributes this change to the context we live in nowadays: computers and technology have become a more and more important aspect of our lives. "Emblematic Power Geeks" ("Interview", my translation), such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, developed gadgets that possess a high value in our daily routine. Péroitié suggests that in a way everybody is a Geek, because nowadays we spend a considerable amount of time in front of computers or tablets or on the Internet – activities that used to be attributed specifically to Geeks. He also points out that many dominant contributors to the contemporary art and culture industry – especially in Hollywood – used to be childhood Geeks

in the 1970s, and therefore influence the global consumption of ‘Geek Matter’. This matter covers a vast spectrum of interests. Péretié claims that there are certain core figures that postulate the common denominator, the combining force, which contain myths and cultural icons that they as Geeks agree on, such as *The Lord of the Rings* or *Star Trek*.

Several authors emphasize the aspects of engagement, obsession and passion. Sugarbaker states that “[t]o be geek is to be engaged, to be enthralled in a topic, and then to act on that engagement.” (Sugarbaker) Kendall also refers to this distinctive feature: being a geek “tends to indicate expertise and passion about something.” (Kendall, qtd. in Ciciora). As Figure 2 indicates, unlike nerds, this excessive focalization does not result in social isolation and squalidness. Rather, Geeks being passionate and thus acquiring specialized knowledge about a subject leads to “a high degree of cultural awareness and poise that a nerd lacked.” (Brooks)

Another significant feature is the awareness of their identity, performance and cultural status. As Sugarbaker states, being a Geek is

now nearly always a self-label. [...]When people call themselves geeks, they're often making a joke at their own expense on the surface; it often sounds like a confession. For example, when a friend catches herself ranting about minute details of John Woo movies or the Warcraft series of games at the dinner table, she apologizes for ‘geeking out.’ Under this thin layer of apology, though, is a kind of pride. *Geeks seek to identify themselves as such, in order to find other geeks and simply to express their culture's existence.* (Sugarbaker, my emphasis)

Brooks suggests that this conscious self-labeling combined with the notion of a ‘guilty pleasure’ that is socially acceptable results in the “establishment of a new coolness, the geek style we are familiar with nowadays” (Brooks).

Sugarbaker points out another important characteristic: He sees Geeks as experts on a specific topic. For instance, one can be a computer Geek, a film Geek or

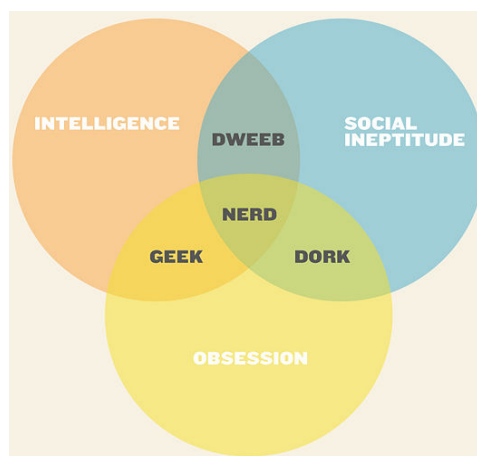


Fig. 2: A diagram illustrating different attributes of Dweebs, Nerds, Geeks and Dorks. N.p. <http://www.wikihow.com/Tell-the-Difference-Between-Nerds-and-Geeks>

even a watch Geek⁴. In his book *Nerds. Who They Are and Why We Need More of Them* David Anderegg confirms this viewpoint. Although he states that “[t]he terms ‘nerd’ and ‘geek’ are practically synonymous” (20), yet, whenever he refers to a certain field, he uses the term Geek: e.g. when referring to an individual with particular interest and abilities in mathematics he calls it a “math geek” (50).

2.2.4. Summary

For this thesis it is necessary to establish a clear definition of what a Geek is, since I will argue that they constitute a subculture and then investigate the way this subculture is represented in audiovisual media.

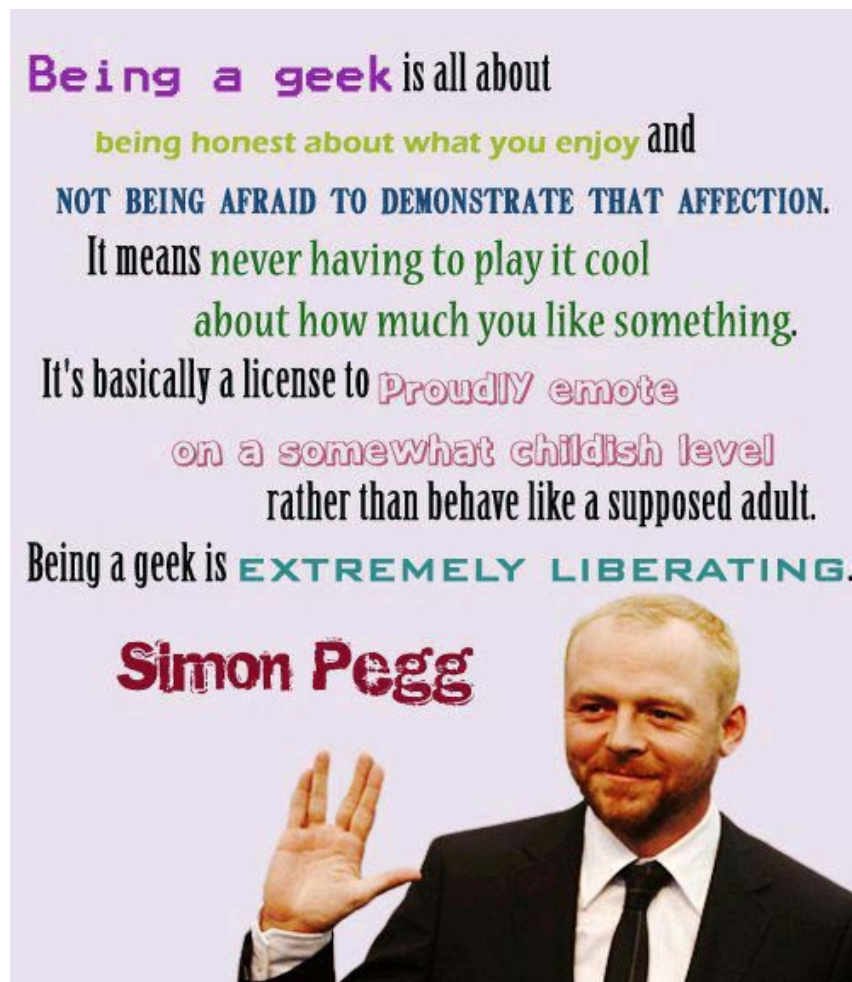


Fig. 3: Simon Pegg, who wrote the screenplays of and acted in various movies related to Geeks explains what being a Geek means to him.
 N.p. <http://9gag.com/gag/3897650>

⁴ cf. <http://www.watchgeeks.net>; a site entirely devoted to collecting and knowing all about watches. This is a curious example but it confirms Kendall's statement that sometimes the interests of Geeks are not shared by a lot of people (Kendall, qtd. in Ciciora). Sugarbaker lists the common fields of Geek interests: computers, videogames, star trek/star wars and comic books

- A Geek is a person who passionately and enthusiastically pursues any kind of hobby. One can be a film Geek, a photography Geek etc., thus Geekiness is not necessarily connected computers, science and technology. People, who consider themselves as being such, are actively participating in this social group: they consciously define themselves as Geeks and possess a cultural self-awareness.
- When we think of Nerds, we have a studious person with good grades in mind. Geeks do not necessarily perform well in the academic field.
- Nowadays being a Geek is a conscious performance. This results in Geeks being aware that they are a social group. Additionally, as Figure 3 suggests, they emphasize their pride in being a member of the subculture.
- Another attribute closely associated with Geekiness is the tendency to collect items, especially those who are connected to the cultural artifacts they consume. Their preferred genre in this field are comic books and movies that are based on these, as well as science fiction and fantasy genre media. Geekiness also indicates an affection for technical gadgets, which are sometimes created by them, but more often extensively consumed.
- Geeks 'know how to behave'. They are familiar with social conventions and do not find it difficult to engage in platonic and romantic relationships.

The aspects of cultural self-awareness and in how far this plays a role in the forming of a subculture will be discussed in chapter 3. This part also explores the concept of identity, which will then be applied in chapter 4 where I analyze the performance of Geeks on the Internet. The conclusions I draw will be the basis on which I will investigate the representation of Geeks in audiovisual media from the 1980s to the 2000s.

3. Being a Geek –

Identity, Performance and Representation

In the previous chapter I defined the distinctive features of Geeks, especially how they see themselves nowadays. I have used such phrases like ‘cultural self-awareness’ or ‘identify themselves’. The purpose of this chapter is to supply the theoretical framework the paradigms that I mention in this thesis are based upon.

3.1. Am I a Geek? The Concept of Identity

The concept of identity, which I want to investigate in this section, is a complex one. The reason why it is included in this thesis is its close relationship to the performance of an image, which is conveyed via representation; these two approaches are in turn the basis for my argumentation. I do not claim to present a detailed investigation of the concept of identity. My aim here is to approach the topic in order to provide a basic outline for this thesis.

In a culture we share meaning, a process that can take place because of our shared access to language. Representation via language is crucial: talking about our thoughts, ideas and feelings lets us create meaning and share it. This is how we distinct ourselves from and communicate with other communities, nations and subcultures. Meaning is also what lets us define our own identity, conceptualize who we are and where we belong to. (Hall, “Representation” 2-3.)

The New Oxford American Dictionary provides a basic definition of identity as “the fact of being who or what a person or thing is [and] the characteristics determining this” (NOAD). On a broader scale and in connection to culture, it is the sameness we imagine with a social group. This created image is ‘real’, which means it is true at all times and under all circumstances. When talking about personal identity, the attributes associated with the autobiographical self are “organized around a range of other more cultural attributes, such as character, personality, experience, social position or lifestyle.” (Robins, “Identity” 172) This does not mean that identities are fixed; they can also be fluid or in their limits consciously determined. A Bosnian living in Austria may always identify as a Bosnian, but her children might adapt different attributes, negotiating their identity as Austro-Bosnian, because factors such as language, political ideology, nation, religion etc. influence how they perceive and define themselves. Likewise, ‘simple’ symbolic cultural forms such as national dress,

certain diet, even hairstyles, express with what and whom we identify. Considering this, one of the crucial factors is also the relation to an assumed binary opposite, a vital aspect we need to distinguish ourselves (Brooker 131). In cultural and media studies, this opposition implies that there is a dominating and subordinating instance, such as high and low culture or favored and underprivileged groups (Purvis 53). Stuart Hall mentions this function too: Identities are points of identification, because they can exclude. They constitute processes that are never completed; identity is not the stable core of the self, but rather “increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions.” (“Representation” 4) The construction takes place within representation, discourse and difference, answering the question of who we will become rather than who we are and where we came from (4-5).

In this thesis we are also concerned with collective identity, which explores how an individual perceives its membership in a social group. The principles of unity and continuity are foregrounded in this approach. In order to form a collective identity, the group has to be conceived as a unitary and homogeneous entity that has to be maintained by the members. Robins refers to Benedict Anderson’s model of *Imagined Community*, in which “the question of identity has been restricted to the dimension of belonging. Belonging to such a community – a culture in common – has been regarded as the fundamental condition for self-expression and self-fulfillment” (“Identity” 173).

He furthermore emphasizes

the socially constructed status of all identities. Identities are seen to be instituted in particular social and historical context, to be strategic fictions, having to react to changing circumstances, and therefore subject to continuous change and reconfiguration. [...] An identity, then, has no clear positive meaning, but derives its distinction from what it is not, from what it excludes, from its position in a field of differences (173).

For my further argumentation this approach is vital. As illustrated above, the collective identity of Geeks has changed over the last three decades. I will illustrate in my analysis how Geeks distinguish themselves from others nowadays, how they create frontiers in order to protect themselves from other cultures, from the imagined threat these may execute on them.

Another important angle to consider for the subject matter of Geeks is the one of globalization. The image of stock exchanges, trading shares all over the world, is usually the first association we have when thinking of globalization. But in brief, globalization takes place as soon as we leave our houses, for example when we consume goods that have been imported from foreign countries; therefore we are connected to this culture that differs from ours. New technologies (with little doubt invented by Nerds and Geeks) opened an international market, which allowed multinational corporations to expand and made the division of labor to shift (for the better or worse) possible. Hence, local fabricated goods from one specific area can be consumed all over the world. However, “[t]hese new technologies, it is claimed, have not only created the conditions for the possibility of exchange on a world-wide scale, but will also eventually democratize the distribution of knowledge, communication, and even wealth and power.” (Grossberg, “Globalization” 148) The subject of this thesis is not the effect globalization has on the latter two. It is the ability to access information, but also the distribution of knowledge that is vital for the emergence of the Geek subculture. What has to be mentioned here is the fear of Americanization (i.e. mass media⁵ transmitting American capitalist culture, which would destroy local and indigenous cultures) that arose with the development of a ‘global village’. This idea of a global village sees “the world becoming a single interconnected society as a result of the new media of electronic communication.” (147) But this would be a too simplified understanding of globalization as a process that homogenizes everything; it is rather the receiver cultures that respond differently to the import that they are confronted with. It is furthermore argued that geography loses its influence on people’s lives (and thus is no longer a primary factor for cultural identity) and therefore they become aware of the world as a whole (149-150).

Additionally, globalization allows the cultural exchange to “destabilize settled and established identities” (Robins, “Identity” 174). I suggest that this is also true for the other way round, that globalization lets people emphasize their local cultural heritage. But this is not the subject matter of this thesis. The point is that the intertwining of nationalities, the fact that geographical positioning of the individual becomes less important, allowed the subculture of Geeks to emerge. As mentioned in chapter 2.2.3., Geekiness is a global phenomenon; it is not restricted to the Anglophone lan-

⁵ Ott and Mack define mass media as „communication technologies that have the *potential* to reach a large audience” (2). They „collapse space and transcend physical distance” (2).

guage community, the word and its meanings are loaned to other languages such as French or German. There are also native terms in languages that refer to a person with Geek-like attributes, as for example in Tokyo the term ‘otaku’ does. In England⁶, as part of the Anglophone language community, there is yet another word with the same meaning (‘boffin’) (Nugent 10-11). Having access to cultural artifacts transmitted by mass media and the possibility to communicate via different channels enables Geeks all over the world to create their identity as such. People, who are interested in ‘Geek Matter’, have global access to like-minded individuals they can exchange information with. Additionally, it is now simpler, or even possible to constitute and define an identity: since they are able to communicate their thoughts and opinions via various channels with easy access, they can also formulate and enforce their distinctiveness. Before, the general umbrella term ‘Nerd’ referred to anyone who was, broadly speaking, interested in science and/or technology, but no one could really inform the majority that there is a difference. Now, the global interchanging of meaning allows their synonymous identity as Nerds to be destabilized and reformed; it is hence split into Nerds and Geeks, a phenomenon that has been picked up by the media and represented in different ways.

3.2. Is this a Geek? Aspects of Representation

As mentioned above, one of the side effects of globalization is the development of mass media. The present-day idea of a medium is the distribution and circulation of information by a channel of communication and the term itself refers to the institutions of broadcasting and printing. It is a one-way communication, a minority addresses many individuals (Morley, *Media* 212), which carries with it that the elite group, who controls the content of the information that is communicated, influences large audiences and potentially executes manipulative power over them (Morley, “Communication” 49; Ott & Mack 12-13). In the various types of media there are, signs and symbols are made to convey certain meanings, a process referred to as representation. These signs and symbols claim to stand for some feature of reality, aiming to appear ‘natural’. Representation is an essential feature of social life because this is how we can communicate and make sense of our surroundings. The media

⁶ Nugent explicitly states ‘England’. Whether or not he refers to the United Kingdom as a whole or indeed England is unknown. The online edition of *Merriam-Webster* identifies it as a “chiefly British” term (“Boffin”).

“preserve, transmit and create important cultural information. [...] Thus, the assumption is that how members of society see themselves, how they are viewed, and even treated, by others is determined to a great extent by their media representation.” (Bernstein, “Representation” 260) Baudrillard goes so far as to claim that people live their lives as if they were playing in a movie. The pictures that we have in our minds are patterned accordingly to the preexisting images we have consumed before (Baudrillard, qtd. in Cain et al. 1555).

Media construct a version of reality for the audience. They do so by selecting a specific bit of information out of whatever there is to be represented. If we watch a movie about polar bears, this is what it is being focused on and consequently shown to us; everything else that is going on in the world is not part of the representation. An “interpreted and constructed reality” (Bernstein, “Representation” 262) is hence mediated to the audience, which is not always aware of this aspect. If a piece of information is illustrated in a ‘realistic’ way, media consumers are more likely to accept the facts as given and do not question them (261-263). This is what scholars, who analyze media from a rhetorical viewpoint, focus on: they look at “texts for the ways they encourage audiences to inhabit certain moods, believe certain ideas or undertake certain actions.” (Ott & Mack 99) We need to keep in mind that “[m]edia messages cannot help but convey meanings, and meanings are never neutral or objective.” (100) Ott and Mack quote Roland Barthes, who distinguished between denotation and connotation to explain how we associate and combine meanings with our experiences. Barthes in turn relies on Ferdinand de Saussure’s terms ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’. The signifier refers to the actual realization of a word, the form that we can experience by our senses. The signified is the mental image we have in our mind of that very same thing. Barthes approaches these ideas from two different levels. On the denotation level we have the literal meaning of a word and its mental representation. In addition to that there are several other associations that operate on the level of connotation. Mack and Ott use the word ‘lion’ as an example: The denotation is the image of a large cat, but there are other associations that we connote, such as courage or pride, which the word ‘lion’ evokes in our minds (105).

All these aspects have to be considered when talking about stereotyping, which is the “process of constructing misleading and reductionist representations” (Ott & Mack 140). Hollywood movies are usually consumed by a wide audience and in order for this large amount of viewers to understand what is shown on the canvas, the

filmmakers make use of stereotypes. Certain characteristics and features are repeatedly presented, creating a type that the audience can easily recognize (Bernstein, “Representation” 264-265). The ways stereotypes are depicted shape the opinions and beliefs of the viewers, and since it is a vast audience that is reached and influenced by the selected and/or limited representation of reality via the audiovisual media, the stereotypes thus can manifest themselves in the minds of many. Additionally, Ott and Mack state that “[m]edia stereotypes by definition make value judgments about the worth, taste, and morality of another culture” (140), resulting in stock representations and furthermore allows a hegemonic group to establish how another subordinated group is perceived. This detail is of great importance for the analysis of the Nerd stereotype that I will discuss in chapter 5.

3.3. I am a Geek! The Concept of Performance

It is a simple conclusion that when there is something represented in audiovisual media, it has to exist in ‘real life’ first. This is where performance enters the stage. This concept provides a framework for investigating the actions we participate in to form our culture, society, and more important, ourselves.

Basically, our sheer existence is a performance. When we speak, what we wear – it can all be considered as us being on stage, performing for an audience that we seduce to perceive ourselves the way we want them to. As simple as this explanation may seem, it is, however, not. This is why I will introduce the concept of performance/performativity in more detail in this chapter, in order to provide a well defined basis for my investigation of how Geeks represent themselves, i.e. how they perform their identity.

3.3.1. The Starting Point: Austin's Speech Act Theory

I included this digression on Austin’s speech act theory because I want to emphasize the importance of utterances and how they constitute performances. The study of performance roots in the thoughts and theory on speech acts by the English philosopher J. L. Austin, who pointed out the way in which utterances are at the same time performances – how words are actions. This approach has been further developed to the claim that every promise, threat, story – simply every utterance makes a change in the world, even if it is only a confidential conversation between

two individuals. “They are 'performed', like other actions, or take place, like other worldly events” (Loxley 2). Words are not simply reflections of reality but a power to create it (2).

In 1955 Austin delivered a series of lectures at Harvard University, where he proposed his theory about speech acts, but his thoughts were not received well by his audience. The notes of these lectures were published as a book, *How To Do Things With Words*, posthumously in 1962. Hence a wider readership had access to Austin's theory. An “interest that has not only been sustained over decades, but has also repeatedly managed to renew itself just when it seemed at last to be exhausted” (Loxley 7) followed this publication. Up to the point when Austin gave his lectures there were two views of language. The approach he attributed to the 'logical positivism' defines the normal business of language, which is making statements such as ‘The cat naps on the couch.’ These utterances have to be evaluated as being either true or false. Special cases, such as interrogatives or imperatives, were treated as anomalies. The usual “linguistic business” (7) was considered to be the reporting of reality. “This view of language is termed 'the descriptive fallacy': the mistaken assumption that language use is essentially *constative*, aimed at the production of true or false statements or descriptions.” (7)

Austin considered utterances to have the appearance of a normal statement, but at the same time allow the speaker to perform an action. An example for this special usage of language would be the phrase ‘I do’ at a wedding. The grammatical form is that of a statement, but there is no aspect of describing or reporting in this phrase. It is in fact an action, in this situation saying equals doing. Austin called this kind of utterances *performatives*. John R. Searle, Austin’s student, expanded his mentor’s theory to include that all utterances are a form of action, of doing something. They are not only “performative at certain heightened moments or ceremonial events [...]”. Searle believed that whenever there is *intention* in speaking there is also the performative” (Madison & Hamera xvi).

3.3.2. Going Further: Playing, Performing, Acting the Self

Austin’s speech act theory was the basis for the assumption that while we speak we perform. Performance theory adapts this approach and broadens it: Not only our utterances let us perform, our whole being, even our clothes, our gestures, our conventions. All of these are factors of how we constitute our culture, social role,

identity – what we are, what defines us is performed by the totality of our appearance. This is also true for what we decide to be, we can change the concept of ourselves by performing differently.

Performance theory derives from dramaturgy, where performance is concerned with the aspects of acting and presenting a play. The realization that what is happening on a stage can also be assigned to ‘real life’ led to the investigation of cultural processes as performances. Rituals and “clearly defined cultural situations” (Carlson 4) were thus investigated as if they were plays:

For many of us performance has evolved into ways of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world. The insistence on performance as a way of *creation* and *being* as opposed to the long held notion of performance as entertainment has brought forth a movement to seek and articulate the phenomenon of performance in its multiple manifestations and imaginings. (Madison & Hamera xii)

Accordingly, nowadays the concept of performance is applied to various “objects or practices” (Loxley 140), depending on what exactly is under consideration. Researchers use this paradigm to look at the way performance create cultures, but within this intertwined net of theories there is also the idea that performativity creates personal identity, where it “has come to mean that we perform multiple and shifting identities in history, language, and material embodiments.” (Bell 174) When we talk about social performance, the objects of study are not as explicitly marked as on the broader scale of cultural performance. What we look at is the ‘everyday life’, the interactions between individuals. Still, the crucial difference is that rituals or routines are not as clearly recognizable in the same way as cultural performances. A wedding, which would qualify as the latter, has certain fixed participants (actors), a ‘script’ that outlines what there is to do, an audience that appreciates the ‘action on stage’ etc. The performance of identity, as I will demonstrate, does not necessarily need all these components.

Performance is not always a cognitive action, most of the time we are not aware that we effectively perform for others. Whenever we interact socially, there usually is an exchange of information; we want to grasp as much as possible from our opposite and vice versa. “Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what [the individual] will expect of them and what they may expect of him.” (Goffman 1) As mentioned above, for the

construction of an image there are different sources of information (clothing, facial expression etc.). When we do not know the individual we are confronted with, we apply knowledge that we have from previous experiences to the current situation, i.e. we draw from the stereotypes we have stored in our mind. Despite that, people are also able to influence the way they are perceived. Their interests lie in presenting themselves in the best (or most sufficient, because making a good impression may not always be the primary goal) way possible, applying means and methods to serve their intention. If I want to evoke the notion of me being extremely popular, I might set my phone alarm to go off every other minute and pretend that they are calls I have to answer (Goffman 1-2). The person I am trying to impress will either be annoyed or perceive me as being incredibly in demand. What matters here is my intention, the way I perform in order to achieve a certain perception for my opposite. The actions of an individual influence the definition of the situation, but they need not necessarily be as conscious as the example I have just provided. Sometimes people express themselves in a particular way “but chiefly because the tradition of [their] group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response [...] that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression” (Goffman 6).

Summarizing, performing one’s identity is the attempt to control or unconsciously influencing the impression one leaves with other participants in a given situation. It is the playing of a ‘part’ or ‘routine’ for others in order to achieve a communicative goal. With this in mind, I will investigate how Geeks perform in the analysis part of this thesis.

3.4. Are we Geeks?

In this chapter I will briefly introduce the concept of culture. I am well aware that I am merely scratching the surface of the complex and vast discourse on culture and subcultures, but this research project does not seek to enter the ongoing debate; the reason for including this very short investigation is to outline the frame Geeks as a subculture are embedded in.

One of the features of culture is, as I will illustrate, the media. As an inevitable process, members of a culture create meaning. What these members convey among each other, the meanings that circulate within that construct, is transported in the different media a society has at its disposal. I will also introduce the concept of sub-

cultures in order to present a model after which I will argue that Geeks indeed form a subculture.

3.4.1. Culture – A Very Short Investigation

The definition and perception of culture are not fixed, they are rather processes that evolve and take on new forms in a sense that the notion and understanding of culture change. An important view on the subject for the era from the 1860s to the 1950s was that of Matthew Arnold, who in his 1869 essay “Culture and Anarchy” claims that the former is “the best which has been thought and said in the world” (6). By the best he means what is considered to be ‘high’ culture, the sum of great works in art, literature, music and philosophy, which is shared and consumed by only a small amount of educated members of a society. A more ‘modern’ approach is to think of culture as “the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of ‘ordinary people’” (Hall, “Representation” 2). The whole of this is referred to as mass or popular culture, and would, in an Arnoldian view of culture, be considered as reduced in its quality and value. Nowadays the approach towards culture is more rooted in the scientific study of human society and social relationships. The term thus refers to the individual ways of live people have, the distinctiveness of their community, nation or social group. The focus lays on the shared values a group or society has. Culture is now seen as a “process, a set of *practices*” (2). It is not artifacts such as literary or musical works, but the exchange of meanings between the members of a society. “To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves [...] in ways which will be understood by each other.” (2)

3.4.2. Subcultures – Scratching the Surface

Ken Gelder provides one of the countless definitions of subcultures: they are

groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do and where they do it. They may represent *themselves* in this way, since subcultures are usually well aware of their differences, bemoaning them, relishing them, exploiting them and so on. But they will also be rep-

resented like this by others, who in response can bring an entire apparatus of social classification and regulation to bear upon them (1).

When we talk about subcultures, we need to keep in mind that they are indeed social groups, the specific feature of them being that they are represented in opposition to mass culture, and thus form a community within a society (6). They are not discrete entities, but rather “always in the process of acting upon and being acted on in turn by, the world around them” (8). What is true though for all individuals is the desire to be members of a group, participating in a certain role. To achieve that goal they commit to the practices that signify that membership, “incorporate them into [their] behavior and frame of reference.” (Cohen 53) Once participating, one cannot help but to compare oneself to others within and outside the social group. As the logical consequence, one is more comfortable when surrounded by members of the same subculture, since differences imply criticism. This is also why one seeks to adjust as much as possible to the social group one is part of, because if one differs, it is at the same time criticism; this leads to an inevitable alienation from the group which in turn results in the inability to satisfy social relationships. (53)

To answer my question whether or not Geeks form a subculture, it is necessary to investigate how subcultures form. “The crucial condition for the emergence of new cultural forms is the existence, *in effective interaction with one another, of a number of actors with similar problems of adjustment*” (Cohen 54). If individuals of a group somehow become alienated with their fellow members, and their own shared values or problems do not yet exist as a cultural model, the possibility for them to form a subculture is given. In this new social environment the actors share the same norms and beliefs, they feel more comfortable and ‘at home’. However, this does not mean that the process of developing a new subculture takes place consciously. It is the formation of new ‘group standards’ that form a shared body, which the members can refer to and draw from. Cohen considers subcultures to be a ‘solution’ for the issue of colliding interests within a social group. Once such a solution has emerged, “a certain amount of group solidarity and heightened interaction among the participants” (57) can be observed (54-57).

John Irwin suggests that subcultures should be viewed as an action system, i.e. a person’s “beliefs, values and cultural meaning have become explicit categories of action” (75), which causes the participants to constantly engage in the comparing, sharing or negotiating of their cultural patterns in order to maintain boundaries and

form a consistent relationship. This notion of action causes the participant to function as an actor who is 'on' when performing the subculture. To illustrate this thought, Irwin talks about "the Negro [who] is 'on' when he is in the company of whites" (75). He concludes that

with the growing recognition of subcultural pluralism [...] more persons are finding themselves judged by outsiders [...]. They are increasingly 'on'. They more often see themselves as performers in various 'scenes' and are becoming more aware of the dimensions of their various performances (75-76).

This approach of subcultures is an interesting viewpoint when investigating the performance of the Geek-subculture on the Internet.

4. Geeks as a Subculture – Performing an Identity

In this chapter I will argue that Geeks indeed form a subculture and investigate how members of this subculture perform their identity on the Internet. The reason why I have included this analysis is to explore in what way ‘real’ self-identified Geeks perform in accordance to the definitions I have provided in chapter 2. By that I aim to find out if these definitions are valid for the representation of Geeks in audiovisual media.

Robert E. Park argues that the organization of life in cities allowed social groups to set up and flourish. The urbanization of man brought with it that outsiders, eccentric characters and similar, who used to be excluded from society into an isolated existence when living in a small community of villages, were able to form “a milieu in which, for good or for ill, their dispositions and talents [could] parturite [sic] and bear fruit.” (32) For contemporary subcultures, the Internet serves as the ‘city’, a virtual location where members of a subculture can exchange meanings (McArthur 60-62; Williams 173). The virtual space provides “an opportunity for would-be members of cultural groups to seek out like-minded individuals” (McArthur 62). It is possible to exchange information, opinions, knowledge, skills and beliefs without being exposed to each other, because the web allows a certain amount of anonymity, thus Geeks do not have to fear persecution, bullying or similar negative experiences they might have made in real life. Also, Geeks have claimed the Internet from its beginning, being part of its development and of the online communities from day one. It is their ‘Great Keep’, the place where they feel superior to others. Activities such as online gaming allow them to share their passion with people from all over the world. It does not matter if they live in a small village near Vienna or anywhere else – there is no need for a physical city in order for them to form a subculture, but this virtual space was necessary in order for the subculture to emerge. Natural boundaries are set aside, aspects of classification ethnicity, social status and class are not relevant. It is a global subculture that is almost independent from time and space.

J. A. McArthur has investigated the performance of Geeks in online chat rooms to find out whether or not “groups of geeks engaged in online chat constitute a subculture” (63). He supports his argument by data he collected while analyzing text-based content in online chat spaces. McArthur investigated and evaluated posts that offered content about the Geek culture. He observed that the participants demonstrated subcultural traits such as “resistance to the mainstream culture in terms of appear-

ances and entertainment” (66). Also, those who violated the norms or were not able to participate in the subject matter were excluded, whereas like-minded individuals were included in the activity of the social group. Another finding was that Geeks are very active participants of culture, self-shaping their perception from “the once derogatory term and put it to use as a term of power” (69).

For my investigation of how Geeks create their identity on the Internet I will look at three examples. The first website I want to analyze is *GeekDad.com*, which lets me explore the shared interests of the subculture. The site is part of the entertainment section of *wired.com*, a daily technology news website which is closely linked to the monthly print publication *Wired*; both are part of the Condé Nast company (“FAQ”). *GeekDad* was started in 2007 by one of the editors of *Wired*, Chris Anderson. In 2010 the Time Magazine named it one of the ‘Best Blogs’. It is described as targeting “fathers with a nerd bent” (Fletcher 2010). *GeekDad* provides content that focuses mostly on activities, games, movies etc. that can be shared by both children and adults. There are several authors that contribute to the site; all of them are self-declared geeks. For instance, Matt Blum, the managing editor of *GeekDad*, declares that he has many “geeky interests” (“Blum”), Jonathan H. Liu, another contributor, sees himself as a “board game geek” (“Liu”).

Matt Blum writes about the issue of distinguishing between Nerds and Geeks. He says that the reason for this development lies in the “explosive growth of the World Wide Web.” People who used to bully and tease Geeks now turned to them for aid with their computers. He states that Nerds are “brainy like geeks, but also socially inept.” Blum generalizes them as weird looking and strangely acting; he perceives them as only talking about their subjects of interest. He claims that the negative meaning of ‘Nerd’ still persists, mainly due to movies such as *Revenge of the Nerds*, which will be discussed in the analysis part of this thesis (Blum).

Ron Eglash too suggests that the term “*Nerd* is still used in the pejorative sense; its routes to science and technology access are still guarded by the unmarked signifiers of whiteness and male gender” (60). The aspect of gender performance will be considered in more detail in chapter 5. Blum concludes that the major difference between Geeks and Nerds is the latter’s social awkwardness and inability of ‘normal’ social behavior. Geeks do highlight their differentiation from Nerds, pointing out their ability to engage in social life and their ‘normality’ (Blum). I argue that the reason for this strong standpoint is the negative representation of Nerds in the 1980s, as

I will present in the following chapter. Geeks do not want to be associated with their “close cousin” (Anderegg, *Save America* 28) anymore, thus they are trying to establish and emphasize the norms and values they share as a subculture.

The front-page of *GeekDad* provides a general overview of subjects Geeks are interested in. The first two articles on November 11, 2012 were entitled: ‘*MythBusters*. Apparently to Air Cannonball Accident Tonight’ and ‘A \$13 ARM Single-Board Computer’. The first article refers the popular TV show *MythBusters*. The Australian production first aired in 2003 on the Discovery Channel, but meanwhile many international TV stations broadcast the show. The concept of the show is to investigate so-called ‘urban legends’ and to find out whether or not they can be verified scientifically. In this article, the author talks about a video that shows an accident that happened “running a calibration test on cast iron cannonball” (Weeks). Since the editors find this issue worth mentioning, even putting it on the front site, it implies that *MythBusters* is the kind of TV program Geeks are likely to watch. In the second article the author gives advice and provides a manual on how to build a working computer for a small budget (Geekdad Rewind). It is true that the scientific content of *MythBusters* and the instruction guide for building a computer are interests that are more common for Nerds, but as I have stated in chapter 2, the boundaries are fuzzy and especially in these areas the interests of Nerds and Geeks overlap.

Next to the links that forward the visitor to the articles, there is a section entitled “Elsewhere. What we’re reading”. The headlines in this part of the front-page redirect to third-party websites with articles the editors consider of interest and importance for their target audience. This feature is valuable, because here self-declared Geeks share their interests; at the same time, they also define what matters are supposedly of importance for Geeks outside the editorial staff of *wired.com*. Others, i.e. individuals who do not consider themselves as part of this subculture, are immediately able to grasp the shared values and the cultural artifacts Geeks consume by going through the articles and links provided on this site. The links cover reports such as the announcement of the release of a web series spin-off from *Battlestar Galactica* (a popular science fiction TV series), a portrait of a US senator who plays World of Warcraft (one of the most successful online role game ever), the story of a man who proposed to his girlfriend in front of the entire *Star Trek* cast, etc. Summarizing, the topics that are treated in these stories mostly evolve about science fiction/fantasy TV shows and movies (e.g. the TV series *Dr. Who*, the soon to be released movie *The*

Hobbit, an announcement that *Ghostbusters 3* will be filmed soon, etc.), gaming (not only computer gaming, but also board games or construction toys such as *LEGO*), scientific subjects (e.g. “Exposing Kids To 10 Hours Of Science A Year Makes Them Smarter”, “First Private Space Resupply Mission Has Been a Complete Success”) and, since it is a site addressed at Geeks with children, activities and DIY-projects for fathers and sons.

Innergeek.us is a website that provides a ‘geek test’ (which, as I have found out during my research, is quite famous on the Internet). The owner of the domain and author of the content, Yvette Beaudoin, performs her identity as “geek girl” on this site. On the front-page she states that she is “fascinated by geek culture of all types and by what makes someone a geek”. Her blog, which she actively wrote until 31 December 2011, focuses on her “life as a geek girl” (Beaudoin). Most of the entries are tagged with catchwords, which easily allow the visitor to find out what most of the input is about, ergo what is on the mind of a self-declared geek. A popular tag is *Star Wars*, which supports the popular claim that the movies are considered to be a quintessential feature of Geek-fandom. Beaudoin also links to other sites that are concerned with ‘Geek matter’; her focus lies on contents that define what a Geek is and what variations there are. The conclusion is that *innergeek.us* establishes the borders, values, interests and practices of the subculture, giving insight in the life of a self-declared geek, which allows the analysis of how geeks perform their identity.

The Geek test on Beaudoin’s site asks the users to tick questions such as “I have programmed a calculator in math class” or “I want to own my own comic book store” (Beaudoin). The areas that are covered here focus mainly on cosplay, science, math, comic books and science fiction/fantasy literature and movies. Thus the notion is created that this is what Geeks are mainly concerned with. The test also demonstrates the broad scale of interests the members of the subculture share, as I have mentioned in chapter 2.2.3 and 2.2.4.

The last Geek performance I want to investigate in this chapter is an article by Tara Tiger Brown, entitled “Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away”, which was published in the online edition of *Forbes*. Brown too identifies as a “geeky girl”. In this article she reflects on her growing up as such and compares this experience to what it is to be a Geek nowadays. She claims that

[n]ow, a geek is synonymous with anyone who has an Internet connection. When I was growing up being a geek wasn’t something you wanted

advertised but you felt pride in knowing that you were really good at something or were a subject matter on something obscure (Brown).

What Brown does here is vital for her identity and as a consequence the formation of a subculture: she stakes out the borders of her subculture and defines how she differs from her Others, which are actually inevitable for the formation of a subculture. The concept of the ‘Other’ is related to that of identity. As I have mentioned in chapter 3.1., in order to define ourselves we need something we can contrast with. “Identities are constituted out of the play of difference, on the basis [...] of their difference from other identities, assuming their positive meaning through what they exclude.” (Robins, “Other” 249) Therefore, the Other constitutes everything that we are not, which could on the one hand provoke fear and anxiety, but on the other hand we understand that there is a need for contrast, because this is what makes it possible to define ourselves in the first place (249).

Brown lists several activities she engaged in when she was young, stating that these made her ‘uncool’ in the eyes of others. She emphasizes the exclusion of the social norm she experienced in her childhood, presenting this fact like an achievement. The definition she provides for Geeks nowadays is coherent to the one I proposed, with the aspect added that “the once coveted term is now being used as a marketing gimmick, and those who truly deserve the label are lost in the noise”. With this statement Brown creates the notion that being a ‘true’ Geek is combined with being an outsider (liking “something so much that you were willing to forgo social outings and popularity”), being different to the mainstream, an awareness that is a distinctive feature of subcultures.

The author perceives the implementation of Geeks into mainstream culture as a threat to her identity, and continues to present ways to single out ‘true’ Geeks. In her opinion, an example for this rare species would be her husband, whom she describes as “a coffee geek, an art geek, a meme geek, and a punk-rock geek. He is super passionate and obsessive about the things that he is interested in.” By doing that, she again specifies the features of the subculture and illustrates how members perform. Her intention is to single out “posers”, which in her opinion “over-saturate the geek culture”. It is hard work and requires patience and obsession to be a Geek, and only if these requirements are met, one is allowed to consider oneself as such (Brown).

The identity that Brown performs with this article is that of an outsider, who is not singled out by the masses, but rather who chooses to be one. At the same time

she broadens the spectrum of Geekiness by mentioning all the different interests of her husband.

After investigating how self-declared Geeks perform their identity I propose that it is indeed valid to consider them as constituting a subculture and the way they perform is coherent to the definition of Geeks I proposed in chapter 2.

At this point I want to suggest it is more accurate to think of the term 'Nerd' as a label that others put upon individuals rather than it being one's identity as indicated by Kendall (qtd. in Ciciora); 'Geek', however, should describe the new subculture that has developed over the last three decades. To call someone a Nerd was and still is an insult, a generalization to indicate that one is different from the own self. The actual traits that are associated with the label have been discussed extensively in chapter 2, where my analysis of various definitions have confirmed Kendall's claim of negativity connoted to the term. In this part of the thesis I have illustrated that Geeks on the other hand are proud of who they are, they embrace and emphasize their identity, thus actively converting it into a subculture. In the following analysis of audiovisual media I hope to find proof for my claim that the representation of Nerds in the 1980s is coherent to the negative label and has, over the last three decades, turned into the representation of the subculture of Geeks.

5. Geeks in Audiovisual Media

Nowadays the Internet is the Geek's stronghold, but they were there already, when the cyberspace was still a futuristic dream. Long before there was even a thought of computers in our living rooms, yet even that they would be connected to each other and users would be able to exchange information, Geekiness took place down in *Dungeons & Dragons*⁷, in Middle Earth, in outer space "where no man has gone before"⁸. In the darkness of the cinemas, Geeks could relish on movies such as *Star Wars* or *Alien*, but also in the comfort of their homes, glued to the TV screen, they would enjoy series such as *Star Trek*, *Batman* or *Battlestar Galactica*. Science Fiction and Fantasy are genres usually associated with Geeks, but Geek characters appear in every kind of movie there is. The constant struggle between Nerds and Geeks and the rest of the world is a story that Hollywood has often told. The examples I provide demonstrate the common usage of Geek characters in the decade that I am looking at.

What I will investigate in this part of the thesis are the signs and symbols that are used to depict Geeks, the stories that are told about them, the functions they have in movies. Since there is now a distinction between Nerds and Geeks, the focus lies on how the 'new' Geeks are represented in contemporary audiovisual media.

5.1. 1980s – The Dark Days of Geekiness

In this decade, the distinction between Nerds and Geeks was in its infancy. They were seen as and thought of synonymously; therefore depictions of 'true Geeks' are rare. Rather, in the 1980s, when characters were referred to as Geeks, it was actually characters that represented the Nerd label. This is why I have included characters in my analysis that portray the typical features of the stereotype (high-waister pants, glasses) in order to construct a basis my argumentation can build upon. I also want to mention that I am aware that the plot descriptions I provide exceed the usual length, yet since the analyses of the relevant scenes go into very much detail I

⁷ Dungeon and Dragons is considered to be THE Nerd/Geek game. It is a role-playing game, where each participant plays a specific character. The dungeon master leads the game and plays out all the other characters (e.g. monsters the players have to battle) the other participants face along their quest.

⁸ "To boldly go where no man has gone before" is a famous quote from the original *Star Trek* series. It was used in the opening sequence of each episode.

feel it is necessary to provide the reader with sufficient information in order to avoid confusion.

5.1.1. Revenge of the Nerds – Representation of the Nerd stereotype

The first movie I want to introduce is *Revenge of the Nerds*, directed by Jeff Kanew, released in 1984. It is a comedy that satires life in college, all the different social groups and the conflicts they are engaged in with each other.

The friends Lewis Skolnick (played by Robert Carradine) and Gilbert Lowe (portrayed by Anthony Edwards) enroll into Adams College to study computer science. There, the ‘ruling’ fraternity, the Alpha Betas, torment them from the moment they arrive at campus. When the brotherhood burns down its own dorm, they take over the freshmen’s house, leaving them without accommodation. The new students have to move to the gymnasium, where the dean tells them that they are either allowed to join a fraternity or find their own housing. Gilbert, Lewis and a small group of other students are not invited by any brotherhood. Together they find a run-down house, which they renovate. The Alpha Betas are jealous and continue to threaten and harass them. When the roommates file a complaint with the Greek council, whose president is the leader of the Alpha Betas, their protest is rejected because they are not part of any fraternity. As a result the Nerds apply to several brotherhoods, and are turned down by all but one, which eventually accepts them. In order to impress their president they decide to organize a party, which is disturbed by a prank the Alpha Betas play. Seeking revenge, the Nerds also play tricks on the Alpha Betas and their associated sorority. Finally, after they win the school’s annual Greek games (which they do by using their ‘nerdy wits’) and a dramatic showdown, the Alpha Betas are beaten and the film ends with the Nerds celebrating their victory.

The font used for the opening credits evokes the notion of computers, a feature typically associated with Nerds (see Figure 4). In addition to that, “the movie establishes the nerd identities of the two key protagonists [...] through their stereotypically nerdy appearance, their intent to attend Adams College because it has the ‘best computer department’, and their extreme attention to technical detail in getting there.” (Kendall, *Nerd Nation* 266) It is also worth mentioning that Gilbert is worried about leaving his mother in the beginning of the movie. This is a reoccurring feature of Nerds in movies: their care and concern of others serves to create sympathy within

the audience. This might be due to the fact that the terms ‘Nerd’ and ‘Geek’ are often used as an insult, and thus this feature should reverse this negative notion.



Fig. 4: A screenshot of the opening font (00:30).

In the opening sequence it is also clearly stated that the parents are proud of their sons (05:02), they see nothing wrong with their appearance and interests, an aspect that will be of importance later in this analysis. However, Lewis’ father is also portrayed as a Nerd. He and his son wear the same glasses and dress similar, a resemblance that goes beyond genetics. Nerdiness seems to be something that is passed on from parents to children.

The theme song addresses all the prejudices and stereotypes associated with Nerds. It also hints what the movie is about:

So go ahead, put us down
One of these days we will turn it around
Won't be long, mark my words
Time has come for revenge of the Nerds!(02:10)⁹

What we will see is apparently a story of emancipation and conquest. The title song also points out the visual representation of Nerds. They wear “buttoned down shirts and a pocket full of pens“ (02:40), which is precisely how the protagonists and Nerd characters from other movies are depicted (see Figure 5). Another feature are glasses, a symbol that on the one hand stands for intelligence, but in the case of Arnold Pointdexter, one of the protagonists’ roommates, it serves as a comical element. Although Arnold wears huge glasses, he is practically blind and keeps on running into obstacles, an element of slapstick humor. In addition to that, the eyewear enlarges his eyes, which is another means to ridicule his character. The title song suggests other names that are used to refer to Nerds: “So if they call you a dork, a spazz or a Geek” (04:20). That being so it is justified to assume that the terms ‘Geek’ and ‘Nerd’ were used synonymously.

⁹ The complete lyrics of the title song are provided in the appendix section of this thesis (chapter 8.1).



Figure 5: Lewis and Gilbert.n.P. http://images.businessweek.com/cms/2012-10-24/1024_revenge_nerds_630x420.jpg, 9 November 2012

During the opening sequence the music continues while the singing pauses. Lewis, his father and Gilbert talk about girls. It is hinted that the freshmen did not make good experiences in high school, but they are very optimistic for college. This is another typical feature of the representation of Nerds: bullying, exclusion, harassment and outsiderdom often mark their school time. Not surprisingly Lewis admits that he has not been lucky with girls yet (05:28), but he is encouraged by his father, who is convinced of the potential his son bears. It becomes clear that the freshmen have one priority for their time as students: girls – there is little else on their mind. They do not worry about grades, studying or new friends (maybe because they have each other); their knowledge and skills seem to come naturally. This element contradicts the definitions of Nerds that I have researched and illustrated in chapter 2. Usually they are not really concerned with the opposite sex. Even in contemporary films that have Nerds and Geeks as main characters, the whole plot – or at least an essential part – consists of the wooing for the desired female, usually the most popular girl

in school. This is an element of storytelling, a plot that is realized in many different ways.¹⁰

When Gilbert and Lewis unload the car's trunk and carry their belongings to their dorm room, a lot of slapstick elements are used to create a comical scene. They stumble over picnics, disturb a couple lying on the ground, cause bicyclists to fall down and a golf cart to run into an information booth, but they remain unconscious of the trouble they are causing. Slapstick, which is "comedy based on deliberately clumsy actions and humorously embarrassing events" (NOAD), is often used to create entertaining scenes with Nerds. Their unawareness of what they are doing refers to the absent mindedness one can observe with 'real life Nerds'. It is also an element that lets the Nerd be identified as a stock character (an aspect discussed in more detail below), hence I suggest that movies such as *Revenge of the Nerds* can be classified as a farce. This type of comedy draws its plot out of the depiction of certain flat characters¹¹ and draws most of its humor from slapstick scenes (Best 573).

While Gordon and Lewis carry their luggage, they pass the fraternity house of their enemies. The typical antagonists of Nerds in movies of the 1980s, where the story takes place at a school or college environment, are athletes. In this case, they are spotted by Fred 'Ogre' Palowakski, a member of the rival brotherhood Alpha Beta, who immediately starts chanting "Nerds, Nerds" (07:50), labeling Gordon and Lewis as such before they have even unpacked their suitcases. Ogre's features and his behavior have an animalistic notion; he is the primal counterpart to the Nerds, whose subjects are computers and technology, both of which achieved major developments in the 20th century. In the following scene we can observe the Alpha Betas partying in their fraternity house, men trying to impress and woo women. Ogre drinks out of a goblet, spills beer and grunts like a 'caveman'. What is indicated here is that the ruling society is primeval, crude, rough – uncivilized. When the Nerds form their own fraternity we can see that their interests and activities are much more sophisticated. It depends on the point of view, which is illustrated as the 'better': in movies such as *10 Things I hate About You* (1999, directed by Gil Junger) the activities of characters, which are intended to represent Nerds, are perceived as boring and

¹⁰ E.g. *Spider-Man* (2002, directed by Sam Raimi): The main character, Peter Parker (played by Tobey Maguire), is commonly referred to as a Geek. He courts the popular girl Mary Jane Watson.

¹¹ E.M. Forster differentiates between flat and round characters. According to him, flat characters are drafted on the basis of one single idea or quality. The reader is thus able to immediately classify the figure, which remains the same, i.e. undergoes no development throughout the narrative. (qtd. in Bachorz 57)

their activities are the subject of sabotage and mockery: a “wine & cheese party [for] future MBA’s” (29:16) and exclusively invited guests only is turned into a “free beer party” (29:21). Huge amounts of people attend the event and eventually demolish the host’s house. In this scene Nerds are portrayed as elite, arrogant, bourgeois and uninteresting, clearly drawing a negative image.

Gilbert and Lewis arrive in their dorm room, the first thing they do is to put up a poster with a computer on it, which says “The sky’s the limit” (10:10). This once again supports the image of Nerds as being interested solely in technological matters. In this scene one of their main concerns is how they will manage situations when one of them brings home a woman. This is an element of the filmic stereotype: the Nerd is constantly trying to win the affection of women. But according to the definitions of self-declared Nerds, they have a different approach towards this issue: they claim that relationships are of secondary importance; also they are well aware that they have little chances with the opposite sex.

When the Alpha Betas burn down their fraternity house, the school’s football coach puts the dean under pressure to find them a new roof over their heads. This scene requires knowledge of the American culture. College sports team compete on a national level and their success is vital for the school’s reputation and finances. This is why the dean agrees to the team taking over the freshmen’s dorm. In this scene, the aggression is directed towards the freshmen, not explicitly the Nerds, which does not prevent them from getting kicked out of their house. When all the freshmen leave their dorm, however, the Alpha Betas once again start chanting “Nerds, Nerds!” (14:30).

The Nerds search for a fraternity that would accept them and provide them with accommodation, the cheerleaders and the Alpha Betas mock Gilbert and Lewis (18:15). The trick they play on them is severe and results in humiliation; even so, this does not keep Lewis to fall in love with Betty Childs, the most popular girl on campus and head of cheerleaders, which is, as mentioned above, a reoccurring plot in movies with Nerd and Geek characters.

Most of the students who do not get accepted into a fraternity can be identified as Nerds. Lori Kendall adds that the movie presents Lewis and Gilbert as

quintessential, stereotypical nerds. It portrays their compatriots [...] as a random bunch of ragtag losers with several non-nerds. [...] I read this group as mainly enhancing the loser and outcast status of the nerd and facilitating, at the end of the movie, the all-inclusiveness of the term. (“Nerd Nation” 266)

One of the 'losers', Lamar Latrell, is a black homosexual man. Also, Toshiro Takashi, an Asian student, is part of the group. His foreignness also excludes him from the dominant social group. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, the athletes of Alpha Beta represent the ruling group, the majority, because their activities represent how college is supposed to be like (in an American understanding). Nevertheless, as indicated by Kendall, the group around Lewis and Gilbert has the same social status as Nerds; this illustrates that they are confronted with the same discrimination and exclusion from the ruling society into a marginal group. In this movie, homosexuals, foreigners and Nerds form the same subculture of outsiders and are represented by characters that depict the maximum of prejudices and stereotypes there are.

When the 'Nerd Herd' is looking for a place to live they are turned down because they are Nerds (in one case, Lamar turns away frightened, because the landlord bears the potential to be homophobic). Finally, they manage to find a house that they need to renovate first. When the leader of the Alpha Beta sees the result he immediately vows: "It won't look terrific for long." (29:30)

Not long after they move in, a stone that is thrown through their window, with a note attached saying "Nerds get out!", threatens them (30:55). Toshiro, unaware of how others see him, then asks what a Nerd is. Gilbert answers him that they are, stating the obvious. Toshiro's naivety and unawareness of how he is perceived by others is another feature Nerds are often represented with. This is also true for Gilbert and Lewis. When Ogre chants "Nerds, Nerds!" at their arrival they do not realize at first that it is them who Ogre addresses (08:00).

When the group tries to form a fraternity they are turned down by all national sponsors but Lambda Lambda Lambda, which consists of exclusively Afro-American members, but they are not immediately accepted into the brotherhood. The reason for the president to turn them down at first is not the skin color of the applicants, but rather the fact that they are Nerds (33:45). Although a minority themselves, they are willing to exclude another, the thought of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend' does not apply here. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, the eponymous heroes are on the lowest social level. Nonetheless, it is one of the Nerds' attributes that allows them to at least try to become accepted by the fraternity: their love for detail. Arnold Pointdexter informs the president of Lambda Lambda Lambda that according to their bylaws they have to accept them for a 60-day trial. The candidates then emphasize that their chapter will be open to people of all races and sexual orientation. Here the

Nerds function as the social consciousness, they are the institution that represents political correctness.

The Alpha Betas and their associated sisterhood, the Pi Delta Pis, plan to sabotage the party the Nerds are planning in order to impress the president of Lambda Lambda Lambda. The girls promise to attend the party, but then they do not show up (36:35). Gilbert's date, Judy, offers to ask her sorority sisters to come. When they arrive it becomes clear that in fact they are just as nerdy as the boys. Only after the consumption of marijuana the party finally becomes a success (41:20). The message that is communicated here is that on their own Nerds are not able to throw a fun party. Once again they are represented as awkward and boring.

After their rivals sabotaged the party, the Nerds decide to "beat them at their own game" (47:10). Their plan is to win the homecoming carnival and take over the presidency of the Greek council. Before that they seek retaliation and play pranks on the Alpha Betas and Pi Delta Pis. Nonetheless, the Nerds' plan is more sophisticated: their antagonists chased pigs through their house and later presented them their bare bottoms, again a very vulgar and uncivilized manner. The Nerds use highly technical and sophisticated means to carry out their revenge. After reporting their doings to the president of Lambda Lambda Lambda, they are finally accepted into the fraternity and can hence again propose their complaint before the Greek council. The dean finds the Alpha Betas guilty, but since they still hold the presidency they manipulate the dean and thus get away without facing consequences (57:03).

At the Greek games there are two ambivalent moments that demand closer investigation: In a dark room, Lewis pretends to be Betty Child's boyfriend and sleeps with her. Afterwards he reveals his true identity. This incident could be considered as rape, but instead of being angry or reporting him to the authorities, Betty is thrilled by his sexual performance. She demands to know if all Nerds were that good in bed, whereupon Lewis answers: "All jocks think about is sports, all we ever think about is sex." (71:45) The ambivalent moment is that criminal behavior is turned into a positive attribute of Nerds; it was Lewis' wits that made it possible for him to engage in sexual intercourse. Up to this point it was their antagonists who would commit crimes (harassing, physical violence, threatening). This scene renegotiates the superior status of Nerds in this movie, i.e. the crude and animalistic behavior of the Alpha Betas versus the sophisticated intelligence of the Nerds.

However, his performance was apparently so good that Betty wants to see him again. This is why it is valid to consider the intention of the rape scene to focus on the sexual performance of the Nerds rather than the ambiguity it creates. Sexuality seems to overtop the fact that Lewis is actually the kind of person that Betty despises. Another problematic scene is when it is revealed that the Nerds sell pies that have a nude picture of Betty Childs at their bottom (01:11:00). Her public humiliation results in no consequences. Voyeuristic behavior (the Nerds were spying on the girls with hidden cameras) is not represented as anomalous and does not serve to attribute the Nerds negatively; instead it is another feature to represent them as witty and superior. According to Christine Quail, the movie is about the gaining of social power, the attempt to become “cool” (463). This attribute is “inscribed in this film [...] through a performance of masculinity” (463), which is constructed via violence. Women are subjects to these violent actions carried out by the Nerds in order to gain dominance. Another way they achieve this goal was the spying on the girls. The Nerds “want to survey and control women as sexual objects, and they use their own special strength – control of technology – to express these desires.” (Kendall, “Nerd Nation” 269). I suggest that this scene could also be read as the revolt of a socially marginalized group against the privileged group. When “one ideology subverts other competing ideologies and gains cultural dominance” we call this condition or process hegemony (Ott & Mack 131). Dominant groups have certain ideologies with particular values and beliefs, which they “seek to have [...] accepted by members of society as the universal way of thinking” (131). The subordinated classes submit to the hegemonic group’s worldview, because by doing so they commit to the promise that what is laid upon them is in their own best interest. This is why usually the minor group does not revolt against the dominating class. The jocks in *Revenge of the Nerds* represent the dominant class; they constantly force their belief that being a Nerd is unacceptable upon the protagonists of the movie. The way Gilbert tricks Betty into having sexual intercourse with him has the violent undertone of rape, equally the Nerds distributing nude pictures of her is an aggressive act, a public exposing. I argue that Betty Childs personifies the object of desire of the hegemonic group and thus also of the subordinated group since they wish for the same thing according to the concept of hegemony. By actually dominating Betty and eventually claiming her for their own social group, the Nerds conquer the Jocks.

Their final triumph at the homecoming carnival is also achieved by sophisticated technology. Each student's association is supposed to perform a song, sketch, etc. The Nerds' contribution is a musical performance, which reflects the contemporary style of music and is well received by the filmic audience. This scene is the turning point of the movie. From now on the Nerds are the dominating group. Even Betty Childs leaves her Alpha Beta boyfriend in order to be with Lewis, exclaiming: "God, I'm in love with a Nerd!" (77:30) Encouraged by the football coach, the Alpha Betas seek revenge and demolish the Nerds' house. During the final showdown Gilbert speaks to the assembled students:

I just wanted to say that I'm a nerd, and I'm here tonight to stand up for the rights of other nerds. [...] All our lives we've been laughed at and made to feel inferior. [...] Why? Cause we're smart? Cause we look different? Well, we're not. I'm a Nerd, and [...] I'm pretty proud of it (83:05).

Lewis then takes over the microphone and invites everyone who has "ever felt stepped on, left out, picked on, put down, whether you think you're a Nerd or not" (83:53) to join them, which most of the students do. This speech represents the new confidence of Geeks that started to develop in the 1980s. Additionally, it demonstrates the sympathy that the (real and filmic) audience bears for them. It also hints that there is a 'little' Geek inside of us all, a global phenomenon that affects each and everyone.

The success of the movie (a total US gross of \$ 40,874,452¹²) led to a well-perceived sequel in 1987. This indicates that not only Nerds went to watch the movie. The story told is from a universal perspective, the conquest of a bullying enemy by a weaker minority, as a consequence it appeals to a wide audience. The side effect of this is that the Nerd ideology is presented to a lot of people in a way they can identify and sympathize with, which supports the emergence of a subculture.

5.1.2. Family Matters – The Urkel Phenomenon

The sitcom *Family Matters* (created by William Bickley and Michael Warren) ran for nine Seasons from 1989 to 1998 on the American broadcasting channels ABC and CBS. The plots of its Episodes evolve around an Afro-American family. Starting

¹² Number taken from <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/series/RevengeOfTheNerds.php>; 25 Oct. 2012)

out as a “moderately successful Friday-night bridge between two established ABC programs, ‘Full House’ and ‘Perfect Strangers’” (Haithman), it was the introduction of the character Steve Urkel that turned the show into a “hit that ranks frequently among the top five shows in prime time” (Horowitz).

Originally intended as part of the supporting cast for occasional appearances, the producers soon realized the potential the character bore, and from the second season on Steve Urkel was part of the main cast: “As the ratings increased, so did Urkel's screen time; now, by producer's mandate, every script must contain at least a little Urkel.” (Haithman)

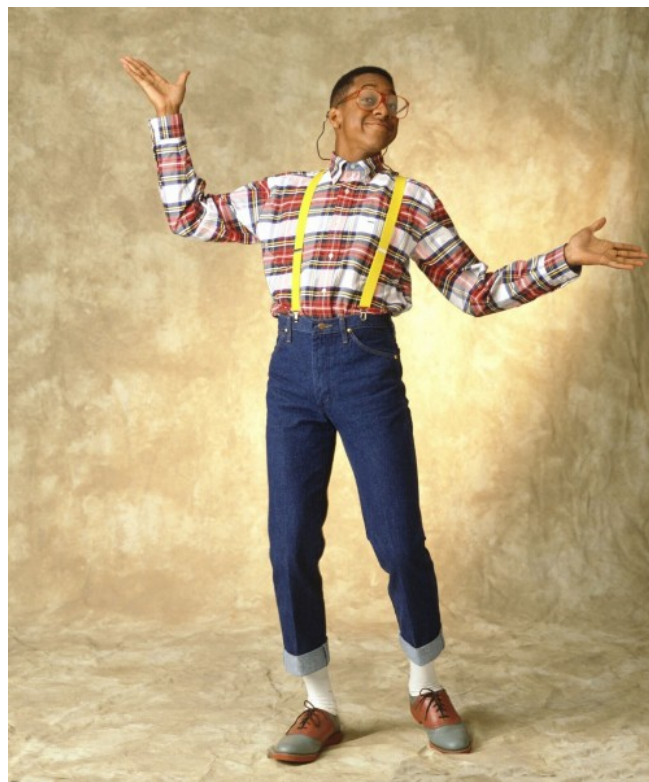


Fig. 6: Steve Urkel. n.P. <http://www.promiflash.de/was-wurde-eigentlich-aus-steve-urkel-09121615.html>. 9 November 2012

The visual representation of Steve Urkel contains every stereotypical element about Nerds there is: he wears thick, oversized glasses, highwater pants, suspenders, white socks, always a button-down shirt with loud colors (see Figure 6) and additionally he talks with a high-pitched nasal voice. This representation often occurs in audiovisual media in the 1980s, allowing the audience to immediately grasp what the character is supposed to depict. Steve himself is unaware of the way others perceive him. In “Have Yourself a Merry Winslow Christmas” he confesses: “There is even an ugly rumor floating around that I’m a Nerd!” (6:00). The combination of this ut-

terance and his body language imply that he considers this as an absurdity. Another key element of the representation of Nerds in the 1980s is realized in his character: the desire to become part of a dominant social group. In *Family Matters*, this group is represented by the Winslow family, who mark the contrasting Other. The contrasting Others of Lewis and Gilbert in *Revenge of the Nerds* were crude, functioning as both antagonists and representation of the dominant social group. Since they are antagonists, Lewis and Gilbert have no desire to become part of this group; instead, they seek to conquer them and establish their own social group as the dominant one. This aspect of the Nerd's desire to belong to a dominating social group, as it is the case in *Family Matters*, is discussed in more detail below. Yet, Steve Urkel as an Afro-American Nerd "made this show and this character seem novel." (Quail 463) But rather than being represented as part of a minority group, he is further singled out, as he is additionally "excluded from the black community based on the stereotype of 'African American cool'" (464).

I have mentioned above that Nerds and Geeks function as stock characters in audiovisual media of that decade. Lori Kendall suggests:

Dating at least from the mid-1970s, the nerd appears as a stock figure in movies and TV shows about teens. These usually portray nerds as intelligent but socially inept and, beginning in the 1980s, as people overly involved with, and skilled in the use of, computers ("Nerd Nation" 262).

Providing a character with easily recognizable visual attributes is one of the elements that allow the construction of such a figure. A stock character is a character without individuality, that often functions as the embodiment of a certain group or genre. The attributes defining the character are based on one perspective, which often results that it is perceived as a caricature (Best 573). *Family Matters* draws most of its humor from slapstick scenes where the Nerd is involved, a plot device that had also been used in *Revenge of the Nerds*. Steve Urkel is portrayed as being unbelievably clumsy (e.g. "The Show Must Go On"), which on the one hand ridicules the character, but on the other allows the introduction of 'catchphrases' such as "Did I do that?" and "I fell and I can't get up!" The way they are pronounced and intoned by the actor aims to function as easily recognizable and imitable. The 'catchphrases' guarantee that the audience remembers the character, and even occasionally use his signature lines themselves, which further promotes the show outside of the Television medium itself.

Another feature that has been used in *Revenge of the Nerds* to represent the latter was their obsession with women, an element that is also used in *Family Matters*. Albeit Steve Urkel is not as fixated on intercourse and women in general, he is madly in love with his neighbor's daughter Laura Winslow. She continuously tells him that she is not interested in him, but that does not keep the Nerd from stalking her and permanently confessing his love. Even when he has a girlfriend (starting from season 4 to season 9) he still has feelings for Laura, which he openly admits. It is only after Steve's self-motivated makeover ("Out With the Old"), when he changes his outer appearance, attempts to speak in a lower voice and alters his behavior, that Laura realizes she has feelings for him. Towards the end of the final Season ("Pop Goes The Question") Steve proposes to Laura, and in the final Episode ("Lost in Space (Part 2)") it is hinted that they will get married in the future.

Steve Urkel is furthermore portrayed as a genius, inventing things like a transformer machine that allows him to turn into a charming alter ego Stefan Urquelle ("Stefan Returns"). He also possesses an encyclopedic knowledge, providing endless 'fun facts' and anecdotes throughout the series. In several episodes Steve is confronted with hostility, mobbing, even physical violence, but he is always able to settle the conflicts by outsmarting his opponents; often he aids himself with technical devices (e.g. "Brain Over Brawn").

A major element of each Episode's plot is the catharsis at the end (cf. Wenzel). In every Episode there is a conflict that is resolved, resulting in a relief moment comparable to the concept of catharsis. Steve Urkel often functions as the virtuous element of the storyline.¹³ Since the 'moral lesson' is an essential part of the plots in general, it is not only Steve who functions as the carrier of the communicated message; other characters too obtain this role. This is why being the virtuous instance cannot be considered to be a distinctive feature of the Nerd character in this TV show.

Summarizing the representation of Nerds in audiovisual media of the 1980s we can say that

- Nerds are flat characters.

¹³ E.g. "Requiem for an Urkel": A boy she refused to go to a school dance with bullies Laura. No one dares to stand up for Laura and defend her except Steve. He agrees to fight the bully in the ring. In the final scene the audience at the boxing site

- Their visual depiction is essentially the same: highwater pants, glasses, button down shirts.
- They are oblivious to the fact that others consider them as Nerds.
- Their main interest lies within computer and natural science.
- Their main goal, however, is to engage in sexual intercourse or to win the heart of the women of their dreams.
- Their intellect is superior to those of other characters of the narrative, but it is arguable whether or not it marks them as more sophisticated; often their intelligence is used to create humor.
- Nerds are stock characters.

Labeling someone is ‘to judge a book by its cover’. In my opinion this is precisely what a stock character is – a label put on a character to immediately let the audience grasp what it is intended to represent. In this chapter I have referred to audiovisual media that are more recent than *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Family Matters* in which there are characters that can be identified as Nerds, so the stereotype still exists and is used in contemporary cinematic and television productions. My argument is that in the last two decades the representation of what was considered synonymously in the 1980s (Nerds and Geeks with the same stereotypical features) has now split into the depiction of the Nerd label as something negative and the representation of the Geek subculture as something either neutral or positive. The latter discarded most of the elements listed above. In the following chapters I will investigate whether or not this argument is valid.

5.2. 1990s – The Era of Emancipation

The 1990s mark the shift in the representation of Geeks in audiovisual media as a synonymous stock character towards depicting a social group. As I will demonstrate, in this period the attention lies more on illustrating the distinctive features of this subculture than on using the Nerd/Geek characters to create comical scenes. The characters I am introducing in this chapter are no longer stock characters with typical visual traits and attributes associated with Nerdiness; they are represented as complex round characters. The plots of the movies and series they appear in are atypical, i.e. they are no longer about the conflict with a ruling social group and the Geek getting the girl of his dreams.

5.2.1. Wayne's World – The First 'Pure' Geeks

Wayne's World, directed by Penelope Spheeris, is a successful comedy, which was released in 1992. As I will argue, the main characters, especially Damien 'Garth' Algar (played by Dana Carvey), are one of the first representations of a 'pure' Geek. By analyzing the characters I will demonstrate that in this movie the ongoing process of differentiation between Nerds and Geeks is reflected.

Garth and his friend Wayne Campbell (portrayed by Mike Myers) host a popular weekly local show called *Wayne's World*, which they produce Wayne's basement. One day they attract the attention of a TV station executive, Benjamin Kane, who sends one of his producers, Russell Finley, to contact the protagonists. Benjamin offers to buy the rights of the show and hires Wayne and Garth as presenters. They agree to the contract, because it has been their dream to live off *Wayne's World*. The catch is that the concept of the show is changed and the new sponsor demands to appear on it too.

The subplot is about Wayne's relationship with Cassandra, who is the singer of a rock band. Benjamin offers to produce her band's first music video, which leads to an argument between the lovers: Wayne, being disillusioned by the adhesion contract put upon them, suspects that Benjamin has dubious intentions. This is why he sabotages the shoot; consequently Cassandra ends their relationship.

During the first live show of *Wayne's World* Wayne walks out on Garth, leaving him to host the show all by himself, which he is not able to do because of his shyness and stage fright. This results in an argument between the friends, which is soon settled. Garth helps Wayne to win Cassandra back.

Wayne and Garth are in their mid-twenties, with no mentionable education and job perspectives; they both still live with their parents. In one scene Wayne mentions that he has an extensive collection of nametags, which hints that he frequently drops out of work. During the narrated time there is no indication of them being in employment. They spend their days with obsessing over music and their TV show, obsession being a typical feature of Geeks. When Wayne falls in love with Cassandra, he learns Cantonese in a short amount of time in order to impress her. This aspect is another representation of the passionate nature of Geeks, their will to put great effort into a subject in order to achieve detailed knowledge and skills. Contradictory to this impressive display of abilities is the fact that Benjamin is able to trick them

into the contract. Wayne pretends to read it before he signs, but does not possess the foresight to discuss it with a lawyer, or understands what he and Garth are getting into. If they were represented as Nerds, one of them would surely possess the legal knowledge allowing them to change or get out of the contract without losing the rights to the show. Garth expresses his doubts to the camera, but his suspicion is based upon an Episode of *Twilight Zone* “where this guy signed a contract and they cut out his tongue [...]. Pretty cool, huh?” (26:15).¹⁴ He obviously has an affinity for TV, and applies the information he gathered there in ‘real life’ (although it is of little help). What I argue here is that excessive knowledge of a subject, in this case the TV show *Twilight Zone*, is another feature that Geeks perform in their identity and is represented here.

There is a further detail to their intelligence that requires closer investigation. When Wayne and Garth are in Chicago to record the first show in the studio, Russell demonstrates the cue which signals that the camera is on. (35:38) What he does is conventional in filming: he counts down from five, showing each number with the fingers of one of his hands, but the last two numbers he does not utter, he only signs. One of the crewmembers, which are friends Wayne and Garth were allowed to bring along, then asks why two and one are not spoken out loud. Russell replies that they are just not, whereupon Garth wonders: “Why not?” (36:14). Garth is not questioning authority or similar, his intention is in fact to get information. His facial expression and the way he asks create the impression that he is not capable of understanding. Wayne stands next to him and nods in agreement with Garth’s question, thus implying that he too is not able understand. At the same time Wayne and Garth show sophisticated knowledge. Looking down from the control room to the set, Garth wonders: “We’re looking down on Wayne’s basement, only that’s not Wayne’s basement. Isn’t that weird?” (36:48). In response, Wayne exclaims: “Garth! That was a Haiku¹⁵!” Although it is not entirely true (the amount of syllables is not correspondent to the formal requirements of a Haiku), it is a demonstration of advanced knowledge and contradicts the lack of intelligence in the scene described before. I argue that in order to distinguish the characters of *Wayne’s World* from the stereotypical representation of Nerds, the writers of the screenplay (Mike Myers, Bonnie and Terry Turner) decided not to adapt the über-intelligence that Nerds are usually asso-

¹⁴ There actually never was an Episode of *Twilight Zone* with this plot.
(<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0105793/trivia>. 1 Nov 2012)

¹⁵ A Haiku is a Japanese form poem, usually consisting of 17 syllables in three lines (5-7-5 syllables).

ciated with: Steve Urkel often demonstrated his encyclopedic knowledge, providing ‘fun facts’ whenever possible throughout the Seasons of *Family Matters*, this wide range of ‘bookish’ knowledge being a typical element of representation of Nerds. Geeks, on the other hand, do not necessarily possess this kind of erudition, and since both Garth and Wayne are depicted true to this assumption, this is another argument that supports my claim that they should be identified as Geeks.

The protagonists are friendly with police officers as well as doormen of the local clubs, which is due to their appearance on *Wayne’s World*. Everybody seems to like them; there is no discrimination or bullying against them. The way they are represented in this movie indicates that Geeks do not have to face the same oppression as Nerds: they are socially more accepted and popular.

The figure of Benjamin serves as their antagonist and represents their binary opposite that allows the establishment of an identity for the protagonists. He is successful, lying, unscrupulous and manipulative. Even his dress mirrors the exact opposite of Wayne and Garth’s clothing. Garth and Wayne, however, are portrayed as genuinely good men; there is no ambivalence to their characters as it was the case in *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Family Matters*. They are not constantly trying to gain the attention of women or one girl in particular. Also, there is no mentioning of them being as obsessed with women and intercourse as Lewis and Gilbert are.¹⁶ When Wayne sees Cassandra for the first time, he swears that he will be her boyfriend and stays true to this promise. The love story occupies only a small amount of the narrative and narrated time and is not a foregrounded element of the plot. Nevertheless, the fact that he and Cassandra have a relationship is coherent to the performed identity of Geeks. Garth, on the other hand, is deeply in love with the waitress at the doughnut shop they frequent, but he is too shy to talk to her. He says that he has to be comfortable with himself first before he is able to talk to her (50:50). Yet, this does not result in an obsession or mission: throughout the movie Garth and Wayne break the frame. A theatrical frame

asks audiences and performers to make a number of assumptions: The things we see and hear are real, but not ‘for real’, in that they are carefully scripted, choreographed, and planned. These theatrical events are bounded by the fourth wall (Bell 37).

¹⁶ This aspect of sex-obsession is rather an attribute of their antagonist, Benjamin. At his apartment Garth finds various books with titles such as „How to Pick-Up Chicks”. (56:04)

The audience performs the role of the observer in consent with the actors who perform their scripted roles. There is a mutual understanding that what happens on stage is ‘real’. When the frame is broken, the actors ‘admit’ that they are on stage, for example, they might directly address the audience or comment on the way the story advances, as it is the case in *Wayne’s World*. The main characters are aware that they are being filmed and are able to influence the way the story precedes, resulting in unexpected turns. This is the reason why there is no need for Garth to obsess over his object of desire; since he and Wayne are in control of the action he eventually gets the girl: Wayne and Garth are not satisfied with how the movie ends so they ‘try’ different variations of the last scene, until at last the “mega happy ending” (1:29:06) finalizes the movie. The narration of the two main characters also invites the viewers to identify with them (Ott & Mack 114).

When Garth tries to get in front of a significantly taller man during a concert, the man pushes him and causes him to fall down. The Geek he is, Garth is not unprepared. He walks back to his car and gets a belt from his trunk, then approaches the man again and shocks him with the self-made taser that is attached to the belt. The man falls down and the crowd applauds to Garth (13:40). This scene exemplifies an attribute that is often associated with Geeks: they are ‘masters of gadgets’, i.e. devices, which are usually crucial to the plot, sometimes even made by themselves. In most cases they serve to compensate for eventual disadvantages that may be due to the Geeks’ inferior physical properties. Another example for this feature can be found in *The Goonies* (1985, directed by Richard Donner). Richard ‘Data’ Wang, played by Ke Huy Quan, is the character that can be identified as the film’s Geek. He and his group of friends go on a treasure hunt and it is him who continuously saves them with his countless inventions. Although there is no mentioning of any adequate education, Garth seems to possess elaborate engineering and computing skills. In one scene (see Figure 7) Garth wears a helmet with a camera and antennas on it and works on a mechanical device. Later in the movie, when Wayne tries to win back Cassandra, it is again him who provides the skills necessary to access a secret military spy satellite and transmit Cassandra’s music video – a task that is “almost too easy” (1:26:25).

Benjamin and Russell try to convince a sponsor to finance the show. Russell explains: “Kids can relate to this show. These guys aren’t phonies. Kids can spot phonies, they’re very smart” (18:29). What Russell claims here is that Wayne and

Garth are authentic, they do not pretend in order to impress someone, because they are comfortable with themselves. This illustrates the zeitgeist of Geeks in the early 1990s, when they started to gain confidence in whom and what they are, a development that culminates in the contemporary ‘geek chic’, which will be discussed in more detail below. *Wayne’s World* represents Geekiness as something to be proud of and not something that excludes or functions as means for amusement, as it did in *Revenge of the Nerds* or *Family Matters*.



Fig. 7: A screenshot of *Wayne’s World*, showing Garth and his gadgets. (43:06)

Throughout the movie both Garth and Wayne display immature behavior. One example for this is the scene after they sign the contract with Benjamin. They jump out of their car singing “We got 5000 Dollars”, dancing and jumping like one would expect a 5-year-old to do. (26:42). It is not only their behavior that compose an infantile notion of Geeks, also the tendency to collect toys and games underlines this assumption. In the movie *17 Again* (2009, directed by Burr Steers), Ned Gold (portrayed by Thomas Lennon) functions as the archetype of Geekiness: He is a successful computer programmer and his house is stuffed with collectibles and gadgets from Geek-related media works. Their love for comic heroes and characters (of graphic novels, comic strips and film adaptations) is another key feature for Geeks, as I have mentioned above. Garth also fulfills this feature, when he reads a comic book in one scene. Taking up the aspect of immaturity, Garth and Wayne’s naivety when they

sign the contract creates a childlike notion. This feature of representation is a newer phenomenon, as in the 1980s their social awkwardness, extensive skills and obsession with love was foregrounded in the depiction of Nerds and Geeks in order to create a comic moment. I suggest that the infantile behavior has come to replace this function, especially since the slapstick humor of a stock character is not resumed in the representation of Geeks in the 1990s.

After a concert, Garth and Wayne lie on their car's windshield and gaze at the stars. Garth whistles a song – not any song, but the theme of *Star Trek* (33:50). He even says: “Sometimes I wish I could boldly go where no man's gone before.” (34:21) *Star Trek* is so continuously used as a reference for Geekiness so that it almost functions as an epitome. Garth could have whistled any other song, even if the two looked at the stars there was no need for the author of the screenplay to specifically use this melody, unless Garth should be presented as a Geek. There is another scene in which *Star Trek* is involved: Benjamin invites Wayne, Garth and Cassandra to his apartment and serves them Champaign. He informs his guests that this beverage is genuine French and not just “sparkling white wine” (55:41) and that most Americans are not aware of the difference. Wayne answers: “Oh yes, it's a lot like *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In many ways it's superior but will never be as recognized as the original” (55:50). Again, out of any comparisons or references that could have been made, Wayne refers to *Star Trek*. This is another feature that supports my argument that the protagonists of *Wayne's World* represent Geeks.

Slapstick humor is no longer used to picture Geeks in the 1990s, but there still is a hint of oddness to the characters that represent them. I have mentioned their infantile behavior as an element of comedy, but there are other elements that mark them as abnormal or eccentric: Garth asks Wayne if he found the comic figure Bugs Bunny attractive when he put on a dress and pretended to be a “girl bunny” (35:02). Wayne starts laughing and answers that he has not. Garth replies then: “Well, neither did I!” (35:14), but from his facial expression it becomes clear that he means the exact opposite (35:17). Being attracted to a cross-dressing comic bunny is not something the average person would consider as being normal, but Garth's strange preference creates a comical moment. This too is evidence that Geeks are still a humorous element in media representation.

One of the key features of Geeks is their tendency to collect items such as toys and gadgets. There are scenes that legitimate the claim to identify Garth as a Geek

due to his collective behavior: he wakes up in his room, which is full of posters with pictures and logos of musicians and bands (40:56). On the shelves around his bed there is an arrangement of different collectibles. Also, we see busts and other requisites from characters that appear in horror movies, an obscure, obviously self-made device with wheels, a miniature toilet with a puppet in it and various other items. When he accesses the satellite we again see several horror film requisites and action figures on his desk (01:21:15). Garth's bedroom once again allows identifying him as a representation of Geeks.

Wayne's World is one of the first movies to represent Geeks, determining their separation from Nerds and pointing out the distinctive features of the new subculture, which are further defined in the popular TV series *Freaks and Geeks*.

5.2.2. Freaks and Geeks – Renegotiating the Nerd Stereotype

On 25 September 1999, the first Episode of *Freaks and Geeks*, a television series created by Paul Feig, aired on the American broadcasting channel NBC. Regrettably, the series was cancelled after only 12 Episodes had aired, to the great displeasure of roughly 7 million loyal viewers (Ross). The plot of each Episode evolves around the main characters, the siblings Sam (played by John Francis Daley) and Lindsay Weir and their lives as teenagers in a 1980 high school environment. In this series, Geeks are represented by Sam and his friends Neal Schweiber (portrayed by Samm Levine) and Bill Haverchuck (played by Martin Starr) (Figure 8).

As it was the case with Garth and Wayne, the visual depiction of the Geeks indicates nothing nerdy: the characters wear contemporary fashion, only Bill's glasses are a leftover element of the manner Nerds were visually portrayed within the 1980s. Hence their costume does not function to represent a stereotype, firstly because there is no intention to let the audience immediately grasp the attributes of the characters, as it was the intention in *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Family Matters*, and secondly, the stereotypical visual appearance is not resumed, which reflects the ongoing process of distinction between the terms and underlines that it is solely the Geek subculture that is represented here. There is also no indication of awkwardness in the way they move. Steve Urkel had a specific way to walk: his knees were slightly bent; his steps were wide with his feet turned outwards. As mentioned above, his clumsiness constantly served as a source for humorous slapstick scenes. This is not true for *Freaks and Geeks*, albeit the fact that Bill's movements seem uncoordinated and uneasy,

they are so rather to illustrate the insecurity one experiences when the body grows significantly in a short amount of time, an experience many had to make in puberty.

However, there is a scene where Bill's awkward way to move is used for creating a humorous moment. In "Noshing and Moshing", Bill shows off his 'funky dance moves' to his friends (00:24). In his opinion his dancing will impress girls, although there is no indication that the boys will engage in this kind of social interaction in the near future. Neal and Sam immediately declare that they do not think that any girl would consider Bill's dancing as "sexy" (00:43). Although this scene clearly intends to function as humoristic and entertaining, I argue that the intention is not to ridicule the character. Steve Urkel danced for his beloved Laura on countless occasions, which, due to his specific way of moving, was regarded as being highly entertaining as the 'canned laughter'¹⁷, which is typical for sitcoms, implied. The way the charac-



Fig. 8: The Geeks – Neal Schweiber, Sam Weir and Bill Haverchuck (from left to right). http://images.fanpop.com/images/image_uploads/Freaks-and-Geeks-freaks-and-geeks-708307_1024_768.jpg. (09 November 2012).

¹⁷ Sitcoms usually pretend (or indeed are) to be filmed in front of a studio audience. This audience communicates various emotions by laughing, clapping, etc. Its intention is to guide the viewer of the recorded show when to feel which kind of emotion: laughter marks a funny scene; the collective uttering of "Aaaaw" indicates that the action on stage is supposed to be endearing or touching, etc.

ter was generally represented indicates that his dancing does not function as a narrative element, but rather as an ‘empty’ (i.e. with no narrative intention) performance of slapstick humor by a stock character. Another interesting fact is that the character of Steve Urkel is completely oblivious to the ridiculousness of his dancing, as he is generally unaware of his Nerdiness and how the other characters of the show perceive him. This is the ignorance of Nerds that I have mentioned above, an element of representation that is not adopted in *Freaks and Geeks*. Sam, Neal and Bill are not socially awkward; they understand how others see them, another feature that distinguishes them from the representation of Nerds.

In the 1980s Nerds were represented with one main concern, namely to win the affection of women. In both *Wayne’s World* and *Freaks and Geeks* this is merely a subplot and not essential for the overall development of the story. Furthermore, the action evolving about the characters’ love life never functions as a humorous element. It is noteworthy though, that one of the Geeks in *Freaks and Geeks* develops romantic feelings for a cheerleader, Cindy Sanders. It is not mentioned that she is the most popular girl in school, but her being a cheerleader implies that she does enjoy a certain amount of popularity. The majority of audiovisual media represent Nerds in a school or college environment, where they are disliked and avoided by their fellow students. The plots can then easily be summarized as ‘outsider gets the most popular girl in school’. Geeks do not feel like outsiders, they see themselves as members of an own social group and their medial representation is coherent to this self-image. Sam, Neal and Bill are not mocked or singled out by their fellow students. Albeit the fact that Cindy has no interest in a romantic relationship with Sam at first, this is not due to his status as a Geek, but rather her affection for another boy, Todd, that has been there before Sam started advances towards her. In fact, the two get along well, but the girl sees him as a friend and not as a lover.

Inevitably, the subject of Cindy’s desire is a ‘jock’ (i.e. athlete); his kind is usually referred to as the ‘natural’ enemy of the Nerd. Sam is jealous of Cindy’s boyfriend (“We’ve Got Spirit”), claiming he is a “jerk” (17:59), although there is never any indication that Todd is rude or in any other way behaving unkindly. Rather, after Sam tried out to become the new school mascot, he supports him (17:28); there is no reason for Sam to dislike him but his jealousy. With scenes like this one *Freaks and Geeks* plays with the invariable plots that are used to portray Nerds. Usually it was

always the mean and bullying jocks that threatened the physically inferior Nerds, only to be defeated by them in the end.

Yet another issue that has kept audiences wondering is addressed in the series: what happens after the Geek gets the popular girl? Uncountable movie plots have evolved around the outsider yearning for the unreachable girl's affection. In most cases, the motivation was a girl's beauty, and not the sharing common interests; in fact, it is disregarded that they are living in two separate worlds. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, Lewis falls in love with Betty at first sight. Of course she is the head cheerleader and despises and insults him. Nevertheless he still wants to be with her. The strong feelings of Steve Urkel for Laura Winslow in *Family Matters* are also rather incomprehensible: she constantly mocks him and treats him disrespectfully and tells him more than once that she has no romantic feelings for him. His affection remains unexplained; it is her sheer existence that provokes his affection. The question is what they will do once they are in a relationship? In "Smooching and Mooching" Cindy reveals that she would like to be Sam's girlfriend. The boy is, of course, thrilled, since he and his friends consider her to be the prettiest girl in school. They start going out together, but Sam soon realizes that Cindy and he have nothing in common. His sister tells him that "just because a girl is good looking doesn't mean she's right for you" ("Discos and Dragons" 29:50) and he ends his relationship with her.

Another one of these stereotypical plots *Freaks and Geeks* neglects is the common depiction of Nerds as being non-athletic and generally not interested in sports. In "The Diary" Bill complains that he and his friends are always picked last for the teams in physical education: "I hate this. This is so unfair. Maybe I'm good" (7:14). He convinces the coach to let him be team captain when the class plays baseball, giving them the chance to prove their abilities. Despite the fact that they do not perform well, this Episode is not coherent with the common stereotype of Nerds being uninterested in sports or despising physical activities and thus supports the claim that it is the Geeks subculture that is depicted here.

Sam, Neal and Bill are never represented as the school's outsiders and underdogs; instead they are simply a group of friends in a high school environment. They do not suffer under their social status. Be that as it may, there are Episodes that address the issue of bullying. In "Kim Kelly Is My Friend" an older girl, Karen, daunts

Sam. She threatens the boy and smears “PYGMY GEEK” (10:19) on his locker.¹⁸ Alan White is another bully that harasses the Geeks. As it turns out he does so because he secretly wants to be part of their group (“Chokin’ and Tokin” 28:00). However, the Geeks are not mocked by all of their peers. A significantly older student accidentally hits Sam in the stomach as he walks by (“Kim Kelly Is My Friend” 01:08). He sincerely apologizes and reassures that Sam is not injured. This scene underlines that it is not the entire school, which mob the Geeks, as it is often portrayed in other audiovisual media, especially in the 1980s.

As mentioned above, there is no indication of Garth and Wayne, the protagonists of *Wayne’s World*, performing well academically. Grades are also not an issue addressed prominently in *Freaks and Geeks*. Another typical element of Nerd stereotypes that is left out is the pursuit of scientific and technological interests. Sam, Neal and Bill are rather interested in playing video games than programming a computer.¹⁹ The fact that the boys are visiting a science fiction convention dressed as Dr. Who, Luke Skywalker and Yoda (“Chokin’ and Tokin” 42:48) underlines that it is indeed Geeks that are represented in this TV series. Cosplay, as discussed above, is one of the activities Geeks often engage in.

Summarizing, the play with stereotypes is one of the features that characterize *Freaks and Geeks* and *Wayne’s World* as cultural artifacts for the representation of Geeks in the 1990s. The key features of the Nerd label are abandoned for the purpose of emphasizing the distinctiveness towards Geeks. In addition to that they do not depict Geeks as outsiders, who are suppressed by a ruling social group. Further, the construction of their characters become more complex, marking the shift from stock characters towards the representation of a subculture. However, the self-confidence of the subculture is not yet communicated. Garth and Wayne are never referred to as Geeks; as a consequence it is left open to interpretation whether or not they can be identified as such. Sam, Neal and Bill often struggle with others considering and addressing them as Geeks (e.g. “Discos and Dragons” 2:50), but they never seriously try to change. They accept their Geekiness as it is and receive acknowledgement: Daniel, an older student the Geeks consider as ‘cool’, joins them in a game of *Dun-*

¹⁸ An interesting observation is the fact that Karen refers to Sam as “Bilbo Baggins” (7:20). The show is set in 1980, when *Lord of the Rings* was still a book read mainly by people who would be classified as Geeks. This reveals her knowledge about the characters and could be interpreted as a hint that she herself is a Geek.

¹⁹ In “The Garage Door” Sam asks his parents for an ‘Atari’ game console; in the same episode Neal is given one by his father. The boys are excited and eager to play with it.

geons & Dragons (“Discos and Dragons” 39:34), clearly enjoying himself and thus reassuring the Geeks in their pursuits and significance. The various social groups exchange meanings amongst each other, rather than occupy their everlasting battles as the plots of the 1980s suggested.

5.3. 2000s – The Representation of a Subculture

In the first decade of the 21st century the shift in meaning and the establishment of a Nerd and Geek identity was still an ongoing process, but the boundaries between the terms became less fuzzy – when referring to oneself as a Geek people would no longer see a picture of a socially awkward person wearing highwater pants before their inner eye.

5.3.1. Role Models – A Self-Confident Statement

The movie I want to investigate in this part of the thesis is *Role Models*, which was released in 2008 and directed by David Wain.

Danny Donahue and Anson Wheeler have to perform community service as punishment for a minor crime they committed. They work off their hours with an organization called ‘Sturdy Wings’. This organization pairs children with adults, which are supposed to function as their role models. Due to their personalities Danny and Wheeler are not suitable for this, but they agree to it because they do not want to go to prison. As a result they are not happy with their duty, especially when they meet the children they are supposed to spend time with. Wheeler is assigned to function as the mentor, or ‘Big’ as they are called within the organization, for Ronnie Shields, a rude and vulgar boy. Danny is paired with Augie Farcques (played by Christopher Mintz-Plasse), who is, as I will argue, the Geek of this movie.

Augie’s first appearance in the movie lets the audience immediately grasp what type of character he is supposed to represent: he is dressed in a cape and wears a medieval looking belt around his waist (see Figure 9); he is a cosplayer, an activity associated with Geeks and explained above. The scene Augie first appears in starts with a full, low-angle shot. The camera circles the character, who carries sword made out of “soft foam and duct tape” (20:00), with which he pretends to fight an invisible enemy. The soundtrack consists of classical upbeat music, which targets at evoking the notion of an epic battle one would find in a fantasy movie. We also hear a horse

neigh, and the sounds of clashing steel, as if there was sword fighting. The camera movement, frame and sound aim at reflecting what the character feels in this moment: he is bigger than life, the center of a medieval or fantastic battle where he is the hero. As soon as the adults enter the scene the camera perspective changes to a medium long shot from a high-angle perspective. The soundtrack is reduced to a sound that comes out of a small music box (whether this is a CD player or similar cannot be seen clearly). The aesthetics again mirror what the character feels in this moment. He is back in reality where others look down at him. Augie's introduction to the movie, however, marks him as 'odd'. In the 1980s, his character would function as the humorous element, a laughable Geek used for slapstick moments. But when Danny walks in on Augie during his 'fight', the boy feels caught, but not in the sense of doing something wrong or awkward, but rather that his performance was not "really a hundred per cent yet" (19:54). He continues to be shy; Danny complains afterwards that the boy sparsely said a word. It is notable though that the adult is familiar with the 'Geek culture': "I bet if I'd suggested a game of Quidditch he'd come in his pants!" (22:02) This is a key moment: *Harry Potter* is an incredibly successful franchise, the movies and books have been consumed by millions of people. Only *Harry Potter*-Geeks would really attempt to play a game of Quidditch (because they would know the rules) or perform other related activities such as spell practice. The interesting part here is that the majority of people are able to understand that reference, because they are familiar with the story. Geek interests and mainstream culture overlap more and more. The distinction is still the tendency of Geeks to passionately perform all aspects of the subject they chose as their particular interest. Danny is aware of that, but ridicules it at first. If that movie represented the Nerd stereotype, this element could function as the starting point for jokes, but the contemporary depiction of Geeks does not correspond with that. The point that I am making here is that Augie, as a Geek, is still a social outsider, but the subculture he belongs to is not a mysterious field for the mainstream culture and this is why Geeks no longer function as the ridiculed feature in media representations.

When Wheeler asks Augie whether or not he is "rollin' with the ladies in school" (23:30), he smugly replies that he is friendly with the nurse. He says that without anger, remorse or cynicism, indicating that not being in a relationship does not really bother him. Danny, too, asks Augie whether or not he has a girlfriend (47:52). The boy admits that there is a girl in his LARP-group that he likes, but he is

not as obsessive over sexual intercourse or this girl in particular as the Nerd characters in audiovisual media of the 1980s were. In *Role Models* the sexual component is attributed to other characters than the Geek: Wheeler and Ronny constantly talk about female breasts and how to win the affection of women. Augie's stepfather states that the boy is not a normal child, comparing him to himself – when he was the boy's age he had several girlfriends at once (01:05:34). He also considers Augie's sexual orientation as an issue: when it is mentioned that there is a girl the boy likes he exclaims that this is a surprise for him that Augie prefers the opposite sex (01:04:51).



Fig. 9: Augie wearing his 'sword' and cape. N.p.
<http://www.zap2it.com/media/photo/2008-10/42991777.jpg>. 8 December 2012

There is no indication of any preoccupation with women; the traditional 'Nerd goes after popular girl'-plot does not apply here. Also, the fact that his object of desire is part of his own subculture renegotiates the understanding of a dominated group desiring the same things as the hegemonic group. I do not intend to argue that the Geek culture is the dominant social group in this movie, the roles are not reversed, but rather the subculture, represented by Augie has the same status as the mainstream culture.

Danny conversationally wants to know about Augie's cape, at which point Ronnie interrupts and asks whether or not he is a super hero (23:42). Augie is well aware that he is not, and explains that his garment is for later when he meets with his 'battle group'. Instead of carrying it in a bag he wears it in public, distinguishing

himself from the mainstream, but also singling himself out, a fact that seems not to bother him.

Augie's favorite spare time activity is to participate in LARP-group. He describes it as

this fantasy world where anything is possible. One minute you can be sparring with an elf and the next you can be [...] battling against a troll who wants nothing more than just steal your gold and leave you penniless (23:49).

Danny and Ronnie exclaim that what Augie explained "sounds gay" (24:00). The boy counters that if he refers to the word as the synonym of cheerful, they would be right. Again, Augie provides a witty answer, demonstrating the pride he feels for his hobby. The way he responds reflects the contemporary notion of Geeks as being proud of who they are and what they do. In addition, his answer shows that he possesses detailed knowledge of the etymology of the term 'gay'. Yet, there is no mentioning of him performing well in school or any other academic pursuits. This feature of the representation of Nerds does not only occur in the 1980s, but also in contemporary movies. It serves as a distinctive feature between Nerds and Geeks, that the former perform well at school, as compared to the latter, who do not necessarily have to have good grades. Augie, being enthusiastic about something and acquiring deeper knowledge about the subject, is intended to represent a Geek. If we compare him to a contemporary depiction of a Nerd, as for example Hermione Granger of the *Harry Potter*-series, we can see that Hermione is very studious. She possesses detailed knowledge not only on a single, but on every subject mentioned in J.K. Rowling's books and shown in all the *Harry Potter* movies.

Augie invites Danny to join him and experience the fun for himself. The role model agrees, since it is his task to spend time with Augie, despite clearly being unhappy with his decision. When they arrive at the site the LARP-group meets (24:17), it becomes clear that this is not just a pastime practiced by a few eccentrics. The camera takes a long shot from a high-angle perspective, captioning people and cars that demonstrate that this is an activity for everybody: there are various cuts illustrating the diversity of people who participate; we see young and old, well equipped fighters and women in beautiful costumes, different ethnicities etc. (35:57) Still, Danny remains skeptical, functioning as the critical eye of the audience. Media have their means to influence the viewer's point of view and perception. The suspicious tendency of Danny would usually intend to seduce the audience to perceive the situa-

tion in the same way he does: he has no desire to be there in the first place, he is full of doubt and considers this scenery and what the people do there as ridiculous. Yet, Danny is not a reliable character: throughout the story it becomes clear that he is generally never satisfied and can no longer enjoy life. His attitude is pessimistic and therefore he finds no joy in anything he does. We see him with a disgusted look on his face when he eyes the dressed-up people at the site. Since we know that Danny's negative perspective is the reason why he does not like being there we tend to not feel the same way immediately. The movie thus does not necessarily intend to present the LARP-group as something that is odd or strange. As the movie proceeds, Danny starts to enjoy the time he spends 'fighting' at Augie's side, which will become essential for the further process of the story. Danny participates in one of the 'battles' and his behavior causes them both to be banned from the LARP-group. Naturally, the boy is devastated. When his mentor arrives at his house to apologize (01:02:26), the mother, Lynette, pushes him into joining them for dinner.

I have argued that the antagonists, or Others, of Geeks in media representation have changed in the last three decades. This is also true for *Role Models*. Augie's opponent is one of his own 'kind', the reigning king of his fantasy LARP-world. However, more importantly, it is his parents who serve as the Other. In *Revenge of the Nerds*, it was clearly stated that the parents were proud of their children, albeit their Nerdiness. Earlier in the movie, Danny meets Augie's stepfather, Jim, who immediately raises the issue of the boy's interests, which he understands as being abnormal: "I don't get it, he's into dragons and fairies" (33:46). Lynette also claims that she is happy that Danny will get him "out of his little world" (34:33). At that point Danny has not yet shown any intention of 'socializing' Augie. Also, before this scene there was no clear statement by one of the characters that what the boy does is in fact out of the norm. When Lynette states that there is something wrong with her son, his role model immediately questions what that would be. The mother is embarrassed for Augie; she wants him to be something that he is not and cannot accept his lifestyle and interests, which do not correspond to her own social norms.

Another scene I want to take a close look at is when Danny and Augie are once more at the site where the LARP-group meets. At first Danny asks about the cape again, telling his charge to consider "losing [it] – at least in public. People tend to avoid people in capes." (35:36) He then points at the people on site that prepare for the 'battle' and utters a deprecatory remark. This is the first time Danny attempts to

seduce the boy to abandon his values and commit to the conventions of the social group he himself is part of. Nonetheless, Augie's response is very confident on the one hand, but on the other it demonstrates his own insecurity: "I like these people. [...] In this world I don't have to be me." (36:03) Since this thesis is not a psychoanalytical investigation of Augie's character I propose the simple solution that puberty would provide to explain his instable personality in this form. As a teenager, being oneself is always a hard task. Danny then asks about the boy's parents, provoking an emotional response of dislike. He realizes the ambivalent relationship Augie has with Lynette and Jim. At this point Danny starts to commit to Augie, i.e. he changes his attitude towards roleplaying and shows more interest and engagement in his charge.

In the dinner scene the 'Big' realizes that the parents bully their son and treat his hobby as abnormal and annoying, a taboo that should not be addressed. "It's all [...] fairyland with him, we're trying [...] to keep it real." (01:04:45) They are the ones who tell Augie that there is something wrong with him; that he has to change his behavior in order to fit into society. There is no indication that they would try to understand and engage in their son's interest. In this movie, it is not the popular girl or the high school jock who function as the Other, it is within the family, the supposed 'safe haven' that becomes a threat to Augie's identity. When the boy tells them that he got banned from his LARP-group, they decide that this is a good thing and immediately plan to burn his equipment and clothing in order to celebrate their son "joining the rest of the world" (01:05:26). Danny asks if they don't want their son to wear what makes him happy, whereupon Lynette answers that he is allowed to do so on Halloween (01:04:08). The parents are represented as the hegemonic social group, embodying what is considered to be 'normal' and forcing their beliefs and values upon Augie, thus suppressing the individuality of the Geek. Danny exclaims that with parents like that, life is indeed tough for Augie. He tells him: "I thought my life sucked, Jesus Christ! I really feel for you! [...] Don't listen to them! Do what makes you happy! [...]" To the parents he adds: "I'd be psyched if he was my kid." (01:06:07)

In most cases, the plots of movies that feature characters with the Nerd label is about them trying to or being made to 'fit in' with the mainstream, their struggle to behave socially acceptable and their failure or success in that attempt. The dominating group mobs and threatens the Nerds. One example for this kind of movie would be *Never Been Kissed* (1999; directed by Raja Gosnell). The protagonist, Josie Geller

(portrayed by Drew Barrymore), works for a newspaper and has to go back to high school for an article on popular kids she is supposed to write. As she is depicted as a Nerd, she struggles to socialize with the dominant social group, a task that she eventually fails to accomplish (but she still gets the boy in the end). *Can't Buy Me Love* (1987; directed by Steve Rash) is yet another example for the Nerd (played by Patrick Dempsey) who tries to be part of the mainstream culture: The protagonist pays the most popular girl in school to pretend to go out with him. He thinks that this sham will encourage the others to accept and include him in their ruling social group. As mentioned above this is also true for Steve Urkel in *Family Matters*. The Winslow family stands for the mainstream culture, the 'normal' people, which Steve, as the Nerd, wants to be part of. The interesting aspect here is both protagonists of the mentioned movies are aware of their social status; they are aware of the fact that others label them as Nerds and that there is a dominant social group, which they are excluded from. They do not feel as part of a different subculture, but see themselves as outsiders who do not belong anywhere. Steve, on the other hand, is not aware of the way he is perceived by others, and in addition to that he is not able to empathize: Laura despises him, but he keeps on courting her.²⁰ What I want to emphasize here is the desire of Nerds to change their social environment, that is, their social group. This plot device is not adapted in movies that feature characters which represent the subculture of Geeks.

The final showdown of *Role Models* takes place at the 'Battle Royale' of Augie's LARP-group.²¹ Danny has managed to get his 'Little' back in, and surprises him with the good news. In order to participate, Danny and Augie have to form their own 'country', for which they recruit Ronny and Wheeler. Convincing them to join the 'battle', i.e. to engage in an activity the others have bluntly regarded as weird and stupid in the beginning of the movie, is no hard task for Danny and Augie. The latter gives a motivational speech that much resembles Gilbert's in *Revenge of the Nerds*:

"For time eternal I have let the Nay-sayers of this world bring me down. They used to say, you shouldn't fight, you should be embarrassed of yourself. [...] You know what I say to those Nay-sayers? I say Nay! [...] In this moment, doing what I love I know I have already won." (1:20:44)

²⁰ This is also true for other relationships Steve engages in; he basically annoys the whole family and they let him know what they think of him on various occasions. However, this does not stop him to constantly drop by their house and act as if he was a family member.

²¹ The LARP-group is structured like a kingdom, with various countries 'ruled' by one king. Whomever 'kills' him in battle gets to be the new ruler.

The aesthetics of the scene resemble the ones that could be observed in the first scene Augie appeared in. He stands on a rock, consequently he is positioned above the other characters and they look up to him as the audience did before. The soundtrack again reminds of a fantasy movie. In this scene there are several cuts to close ups of the filmic audience Augie talks to. Their facial expressions indicate appreciation, admiration and understanding. I read this scene as an emphasis on the feature of pride in being a Geek.

As the battle is going on, Augie's parents arrive at the site. When their son faces the king as the last man standing, Lynette suddenly starts cheering and gets absorbed in the action before her (1:29:34). After her son wins, Jim admits that the game is not as "gay" (1:32:34) as he had assumed, whereas Lynette exclaims: "You were incredible! Second place! That's like a silver medal! [...] We are very, very proud of you." (1:32:36) This is the final Catharsis, the resolution we were also able to observe at the end of *Revenge of the Nerds*. However, *Role Models* is not about a suppressed group that tries to conquer a hegemonic one. In the end Augie's parents are finally able to accept and understand their son's interest and his being outside of their social norm.

Additionally, the plot of *Role Models* is never about Augie trying to be accepted, it is rather the story of two opposite individuals and how they find to each other. The parents neglecting Augie the way he is gives Danny the opportunity to take his side. The interesting aspect for this thesis is that Augie never makes excuses for his hobby or tries to hide his curiosity; whenever an outsider doubts it, he clearly states his position as a matter of fact. A plot evolving around a Nerd character would have developed towards the Nerd abandoning his friends and interests in order to 'fit in' and become popular, or the attempt to gain acknowledgement from a ruling social group, as it is the case with the Nerds in *Can't Buy Me Love* or *Never Been Kissed*.

At one point in time the audience learns that the boy is, like Danny and Wheeler, not participating in 'Sturdy Wings' out of free will either: his guidance counselor thought that "anyone who wears a cape and has a sword should have more friends" (47:39). The way Augie says this implies that he, of course, does not understand his counselor's decision. He sees nothing wrong with him and his social life – and as the audience has learned, he does not lack social contacts at all, since he is quite popular among the members of his LARP-group. Also, the movie does not communicate any notion of 'ivory tower', i.e. Augie being completely oblivious to

the fact that his appearance and interests may seem bizarre to others. I suggest it is once again emphasizing his confidence in, respectively awareness of who he is, the pride, self-awareness and –notion of being a Geek.

5.3.2. The Big Bang Theory – The Peak of Geekiness

Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady created the highly successful sitcom²², which premiered on the American broadcasting channel CBS on 24 September 2007. As of November 2012 it is in its sixth Season. The story line of each Episode is centered on the five main characters: the roommates Dr. Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) and Dr. Leonard Hofstadter (Johnny Galecki), their neighbor Penny (Kaley Cuoco), as well as their friends and colleagues, Dr. Rajesh ‘Raj’ Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar) and Mr. Howard Wolowitz (Simon Helberg) (Figure 10). All men are either scientists or engineers, highly intelligent and “the kind of ‘beautiful minds’ that understand how the universe works.” (Hu 1186) They are deeply devoted to their activities that evolve around computers, movies, board/card/video games and comic books. Penny, on the other hand, is an unsuccessful actress, who works as a waitress to support her living.



Fig. 10: The main cast of *The Big Bang Theory*. Howard, Sheldon, Leonard, Penny, Raj (from left to right). N.p. <http://www.superbwallpapers.com/movies/the-big-bang-theory-10454/>. (8 December 2012)

²² According to the show's Wikipedia article it has won several awards (e.g. Golden Globe, Emmy, People's Choice). Also, the sixth Season reached an average of 15,82 million viewers in the US. TV stations all over the world include the series in their program.

Penny is the only person who Rajesh, Sheldon, Leonard and Howard communicate with regularly that is not part of their social group. All other peers are either colleagues from their workplace (thus equally engaged in the scientific and academic field) or share the same leisure interests (in Season 6 the men befriend the owner of the comic book store they frequent). When Penny moves in the apartment next to Sheldon and Leonard in the very first episode of the series, they start to interact with her on a daily basis; she becomes part of their circle of friends, but not wholly part of their subculture, an aspect that I will address again in this chapter. This is what the show draws most of its humor from: the colliding of two worlds (Bednarek 202). “Leonard and Sheldon are kind of rock stars in their world of science, but God knows they have a lot of growing to do when it comes to social graces” (Johnny Galecki, qtd. in Strauss). As I will illustrate in detail below, there is much more complexity to the characters than indicated here. The show does not exaggerate the stereotype of Nerds the way *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Family Matters* did, or reduces it to the representation of the socially awkward individual as Johnny Galecki implies. As argued above the audiovisual media of the 1980s represented the Nerd label to its maximum, exhausting all available characteristics of the stereotype for the depiction. This resulted in a singling out and ridiculing of the Nerd figure. The label was used to mark an outsider, a contrasting Other to a hegemony – they were represented as the subordinated social class. I suggest that in *The Big Bang Theory*, every stereotype about Nerds and Geeks is represented, but, more importantly, also renegotiated in order to represent not the stereotype but the subculture.

Geeks love the show because they can identify with the characters; others watch the show because it is funny. Either way, the intention of *The Big Bang Theory* (*BBT*) is clearly not to ridicule Geeks – it is rather the culmination of Geek pride. There are inside jokes and references specifically for Geeks, since it is only them who would actually understand the hints (*Révanché*, 38:42). The key to *BBT*’s success lies in the fact that this is not the only source of humor. The interpersonal relationships are also used to create elements of entertainment that can be ‘understood’ by a mass audience (Ott & Mack 223). The Nerds of the 1980s were always marked as out of the ordinary, as different, unacceptable, wrong etc. by other characters of the movies or series. This is not valid for *BBT*; it is true that the complex world and variations of Geeks are portrayed in a humorous way, but it is their subculture that is represented as ‘normal’ and not as something that is ridiculed and used for comic

effect. In addition, the settings of the show (the action takes place mainly at Leonard and Sheldon's apartment and their workplace) are mostly geeky domains; and since there is only character in the main cast, who is not considered to be a Geek, this also contribute to that assumption.

In the following part I will analyze the four male main characters in more detail and investigate the aspects that let us identify each character as a representation of members of the subculture of Geeks rather than putting the Nerd label upon them.

Dr. Sheldon Cooper is a theoretical physicist at the Californian Institute of Technology. He is highly gifted and very well aware of his intellect. Monika Bednarek analyzed three electronic corpora, which allowed her to "compare Sheldon's dialogue with dialogue from all the other characters while also permitting the analysis of features in the series as a whole." (205) She concludes that Sheldon's "belief in his superiority" (207) is implied via his utterances. One example for this claim is his reference to others as "ordinary people" (e.g. "The Luminous Fish Effect" 6:53), which in addition illustrates his lack of social skills and inability to take part in conventional social relationships. Bednarek summarizes her character analysis of Sheldon as follows:

According to information gained from Sheldon's dialogue [...] he is highly intelligent (a child prodigy) and believes in his own intellectual superiority, showing arrogance, and is different from others in terms of not driving and/or enjoying social activities as well as struggling with social skills. He is also slightly health obsessed and has issues with food/general health. We can also see that he likes computer-related activities and is an expert in the area. In fact, utterances that indicate Sheldon's expertise concerning computers and gaming show that while he may struggle with social skills as far as interactions with 'non-nerds' (especially Penny) are concerned, he is clearly positioned as someone who has certain skills in the 'nerd' community. At other times, however, he also struggles in his interactions with his 'nerdy' friends (210).

The way Sheldon's character is represented indicates that, if he was a real person, he could be diagnosed with the "The Geek Syndrome" (Bund). The scientific name of this condition is 'Asperger's Syndrome', a mild form of Autism. Some of the symptoms are for instance the ability to completely focus on a subject, the will to know everything about it. Patients have trouble forming relationships, their physical behavior is unusual and their development in this area is often delayed. People with Asperger's syndrome usually present higher than average intellectual abilities ("As-

perger”). According to Anderegg, Asperger “is the first diagnostic star of the twenty-first century. It seems everyone has it, or everyone knows someone who has it” (*Who They Are* 88). The author claims that the syndrome has been diagnosed with patients very often over the last decade. This is due to the fact that, like other ‘superstars’ such as attention-deficit disorders, the syndrome shows various degrees of manifestations; “it’s a little-or-a-lot thing” (88). The mentioned symptoms are often negatively associated with the Nerd label.²³ In *BBT* these specific features of Sheldon’s character are the source for most of the show’s humorous scenes. Sheldon is aware of the others perceiving him as different, but this only confirms his feeling of superiority.

Nevertheless, there are a number of aspects that do not allow us to categorize the character of Sheldon as a representation of the Nerd label. It is true that the social ineptness and scientific interest are both coherent to the definition of Nerds I proposed above and the specific representation of the Nerd label in the 1980s, but unlike the Nerds featured in *Family Matters* and *Revenge of the Nerds*, Sheldon is conscious about his difference in terms of intelligence. What he does not understand is how his behavior, his utterances and doings affect others because he is not able to empathize:

Leonard: What's that?

Sheldon: Tea. When people are upset, the cultural convention is to bring them hot beverages. There, there. You wanna talk about it?

Leonard: No.

Sheldon: Good! 'There there' was really all I had.

(“The Middle-Earth Paradigm” 18:18)

The key point here is that while Sheldon does not possess the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, yet react appropriately out of instinct, he is aware of his lack of social skills. Albeit “Sheldon is shown a willing to learn [...] unfamiliar conventions” (Bednarek 211), he never intends to ‘fit in’, i.e. there is no actual desire of him to belong to any other social group than his own (however, it is arguably whether or not he sees himself as belonging to any social group at all). He relies on a catalogue of (social) customs that supplies him with details at what time which kind of practice is appropriate. It is also his roommate Leonard who provides him with this information.

²³ Calling Asperger’s “The Geek Syndrome” points at the still existing unawareness outside the Anglophone culture (Kerstin Bund writes for the German newspaper *Die Zeit*) that ‘Nerd’ and ‘Geek’ are two different terms and should no longer be used as synonyms,

Leonard: Tonight no one needs to know that my middle name is Leaky.
 Sheldon: There is nothing embarrassing about that! Your father worked with Lewis Leaky, a great anthropologist. That had nothing to do with your bedwetting.
 (“The Middle-Earth Paradigm” 05:18)

This is another example to illustrate how the fictional mind of Sheldon works. The way his character is portrayed is coherent to the “systemic thinking” and the lack of “empathic thinking, which is the kind you need to interpret nonverbal social cues” (Nugent, qtd. in Loeb). In the documentary *Triumph of the Nerds*, Robert X. Cringley states that Nerds prefer the company of machines (computers) because their logic is easier to understand than humans’ (“Triumph, Impressing”; 09:13). Benjamin Nugent confirms this statement: he claims that Nerds work with, play with and enjoy machines more than most people (*American Nerd* 10). In addition to that the author suggests that Nerds themselves tend to remind others of machines. They are passionate about “some technically sophisticated activity that doesn’t revolve around emotional confrontation, physical confrontation, sex, food, or beauty” (6). Furthermore, their language is unusually close to written Standard English. They avoid physical and emotional confrontation and favor “logic and rational communication over nonverbal, nonrational [sic] forms of communication or thoughts that don’t involve reason” (6). These descriptions capture the way Sheldon’s character is presented: the scientist feels more at ease in the world of theoretical physics than in the company of people in general, because their behavior, logic and conventions irritate him. His friends know how to treat him; this is why he can be around them in the first place. What the character represents here is an extreme form of Nerdiness close to Asperger’s, but Sheldon is not depicted as the stereotype of a clumsy, annoying Nerd with oversized glasses of the 1980s. His character description is more coherent to the definitions I provided in chapter 2. However, I will discuss in more detail below why Sheldon cannot be considered as a representation of a Nerd per definitionem too, but rather represents the subculture of Geeks.

Jörg Zittlau describes Nerds as asexual individuals. By this he means that they have a “weak libido” (49; my translation), and in addition to that their interests and outer appearance do not allow them to engage in romantic relationships. So far we have learned that Nerds in audiovisual media of the 1980s pursue quite different goals, i.e. the plots of the movies and series evolve around the Nerd trying to get the girl, which in turn added to the development of a filmic stereotype/stock character.

Sheldon's character is the representation of the asexual Nerds described by Zittlau – he pictures a feature of the definitions I have provided in chapter 2, but not of the stereotype, which I have identified in the analysis of audiovisual media of the 1980s. However, it is not his outer appearance that repulses women and hence results in him not engaging in sexual and romantic relationships, but rather his complete lack of interest in physical contact with both men and women. As mentioned above, Kendall states that *Revenge of the Nerds* demonstrates “that the nerds have the same relationship to women as ‘normal’ men, and that they possess the same presumed drives of masculinity” (“Nerd Nation” 268). This is another argument why Sheldon cannot be considered as the representation of the Nerd label, because he is not as obsessive over the opposite sex as the Nerd characters in *Revenge of the Nerds* and *Family Matters*. In “The Jiminy Conjecture” the character of Amy Farrah Fowler is introduced, with whom Sheldon files a girlfriend agreement. Amy is basically the female counterpart to Sheldon, the way she is represented mirrors his character's attributes: she too does not like physical contact, she is a scientist whose mind works on the similar basis of cause and effect, providing equally comical scenes like the character of Sheldon does. The fact that Amy and Sheldon form a relationship, even calling themselves girl- and boyfriend does not confirm the statement of Kendall above. Their relationship cannot be considered as ‘normal’; it is rather a parody of romance itself. It is Amy who proposes that they consider themselves as dating (although they sparsely engage in physical contact, yet sexual activities) because she wants to satisfy her mother, who constantly urges her to meet men, go on dates etc. Sheldon agrees to the proposal because he enjoys exchanging information with an individual that resembles himself and is equally intelligent and rational. Her being a woman is of no importance to him because he has no sexual desire or romantic feelings towards her.

Sheldon does not intend to be accepted by a dominant social group, which is coherent to the performance and representation of Geeks that has been discussed in the previous chapters of this thesis: Geeks aim at establishing their group standards rather than belonging to a given social group. The aspects (Sheldon being a scientist and socially awkward) would legitimize to identify him as a depiction of the Nerd stereotype, but the label is renegotiated by adding further attributes that allow a reconsideration of the latter. This leads to the conclusion that the claim that Sheldon represents the label ‘Nerd’ is not justifiable. The key aspect that led me to the conclusion that it is the Geek subculture that Sheldon represents is investigated below.

Leonard Hofstadter's family consists of highly intelligent scientists; he himself is equally gifted and works as an experimental physicist. Although he enjoys the company of his Geek friends and the activities they undertake together, he attempts to interact with other individuals that do not belong to the same social group on various occasions, but he never intends to abandon his original social group in favor of the other. Compared to Sheldon (or in any case Howard and Raj, as discussed below) he is the most successful in socializing. He knows the conventions and rules that allow him to 'switch' groups, albeit he is not always accepted by the others. His knowledge and capability, his 'normalness' constitutes a sharp contrast to the eccentric behavior of Sheldon. Leonard constantly reminds his roommate of what it is that society expects of the 'mad scientist'; not in the way that he encourages Sheldon's oddness but trying to teach his roommate about the social conventions that he himself is 'fluent' in. He functions as the middleman between Sheldon and those characters who do not serve as representations of their subculture, which is in most cases it their neighbor Penny, who, as I suggested above, functions as the Other and thus as a contrast to the Geek characters.

Leonard and Penny eventually start dating, with the result of their love affair being an essential part of the story development. Penny is indeed the popular girl, the "prom queen" ("The Gorilla Experiment" 08:24) who is the object of the Nerd's desire in most audiovisual media that depict the stereotype. Usually the story ends when the Nerd gets the girl, but like *Freaks and Geeks*, *BBT* explores what happens after they form a romantic relationship. The last Episode of *Family Matters* hints that Laura and Steve (whom Laura wants to be with after he attempts to change his behavior and outer appearance) might marry in the future, but the story remains untold. Leonard does not intend to alter his character or style in order to impress or seduce Penny or become part of her social group. The remarkable novelty in *BBT* is that Penny, as the popular girl that is part of the mainstream culture, asks Sheldon to teach her "a little physics" ("The Gorilla Experiment" 5:28) because she fears that her lack of knowledge might exclude her from the social group of her boyfriend.

All characters often contribute 'fun facts' that demonstrate their encyclopedic knowledge, a feature of Nerd characters such as Steve Urkel. Hu identifies this providing of "much more information than enough to be socially appropriate" (1187) as one of the key elements that produce a comic effect. In addition to that, Leonard's desire to interact with another social group, personified by the character Penny, is an

attribute of Nerd representations in the 1980s, albeit Leonard never intends to leave his original social group in favor of the other. Ronald Miller, the Nerd character of *Can't Buy Me Love* abandons his friends, the peers of this social group, once he is accepted by the dominating subculture of his high school environment. Since Leonard does not abandon his group to become accepted by the other it is not valid to consider him as a character that portrays the Nerd label, but it is more accurate to think of him as a representation of a socially competent Geek.

The fact that all four main characters are scientists and engineers would support the claim that per definition they should be considered as Nerds. The producers even put great care in securing the show's authenticity: the scripts are checked by a professor of physics and astronomy, David Saltzberg, who also suggests dialogues the characters could have (Strauss), in order to assure the accuracy and authenticity of the show. But as argued above, and additionally stated by Anderegg (*Save America* 32), a specific element of Geekiness lies in the consumption of comic books. Leonard, Howard, Raj and Sheldon regularly visit their favorite comic book store; all have an extensive collection of books and action figures and often refer to different comics. It is valid to say that this type of literature plays an important role in the series and therefore favor my claim that it is Geeks that are represented. Another factor that supports the idea is that in this show the main characters engage in Cosplay. They do not only dress up as their heroes for Halloween. When they discover that they are in possession of 'The One Ring' (a ring that was made as a prop for the filming of *The Lord of the Rings*-trilogy). Sheldon suggests that they keep the ring and "only take it out occasionally when [they] go to the park and reenact [their] favorite scenes from the movie" ("The Precious Fragmentation" 7:04). The suggestion to reenact scenes implies that they would also dress up as the characters from the movies. These two aspects further support the claim that when referring to the definitions of Nerds and Geeks in the first chapter of this thesis, but also when looking at other representations of Geeks in audiovisual media, it is true to consider Raj, Sheldon, Howard and Leonard as Geeks and thus as a representation of the subculture.

Rajesh Koothrappali, Ph.D. (astrophysics) was born in India. He suffers from selective mutism²⁴, which prevents him from talking to women unless he is drunk. His condition does not result in him developing any kind of obsession over the oppo-

²⁴ Selective mutism is a disorder, which causes people to temporarily become mute in specific situations (Bernstein, "Mutism").

site sex, on the contrary, not being able to speak to women helps him to get involved with them (e.g. “The Middle-Earth Paradigm”).

In his essay “Race, Sex and Nerds. From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters” Ron Eglash states that

[i]n the cultural logic of late-twentieth-century America, masculinity bears a particular relation to technology. Being a ‘real man’ is to claim one’s physiology in muscle and testosterone; male-associated technologies tend to involve physical labor [...]. The more abstract artifice of science does not seem nearly so testosterone-drenched; it is easy to see how the artificial spaces of mathematics and computing can be framed in opposition to manly identity (51-52).

When analyzing the character of Raj, this approach is of particular interest. Over time, the astrophysicist has been depicted as increasingly feminine, as to prove Eglash’ statement: “Nerd identity will come at a price, threatening the masculinity of its male participants.” (51) Indeed, there are various features that draw an ambiguous picture of Raj’ sexual orientation, respectively identity:

Leonard’s mother, who has several degrees (amongst others in psychology and neurobiology) diagnoses that Howard and Raj have created an “ersatz homosexual marriage” (“The Maternal Capacitance” 10:20), stating that Raj’ selective mutism results from a “pathological fear of women” (10:18). Leonard is highly amused by the bewilderment of his friends and exclaims: “Why don’t you tell them more about their secret love for each other?” (10:53) Right after that conversation we see Howard and Raj arguing in a way that is aimed at reminding the audience of a married couple. In the show the relationship between these two characters often hints that they are more than just friends, there are aspects that are usually connoted with (married) couples (e.g. they often arrive together at Sheldon and Leonard’s apartment and refer to activities and events they both attended together²⁵). Also, whenever there are women present, Raj whispers in Howard’s ear, either to express his opinion or to get his friend to ‘translate’ for him. As a consequence the notion is created that the two characters form a unity, that they ‘belong’ together, either as best friends or, as it is implied, as a couple.

There are other scenes that add aspects to the character that are commonly considered as feminine or are part of the stereotype connected to homosexual men²⁶: In

²⁵ For instance, in “Pilot”, they visit Leonard and Sheldon, showing them a tape of a Stephen Hawking lecture they have found – obviously they discovered it together before (13:41).

²⁶ For a detailed investigation of male homosexual stereotypes see Madon 667f.

“The Transporter Malfunction” Raj asks his parents to choose a woman for him because he has difficulties finding one himself. The potential partner they have selected is Lakshmi. Raj invites her to his apartment for dinner. The reason for her to agree to an arranged marriage is to hide her own homosexuality from her parents:

Lakshmi: I’m under a lot of pressure from my parents to get married and settle down [...] and I’m going to do it so they don’t find out I’m gay. [...] I know a fake marriage is not an honest way to live, but you of all people should know. [...]

Raj: Why me of all people? [...] I’m not gay!

Lakshmi: Really? The chocolate lava cake, the little soaps in the bath room and, I’m sorry, but you’re wearing more perfume than I am.

Raj: That’s ‘Unbreakable’ by Joey and Lamar. And for your information: it’s unisex!

Lakshmi: Fill in the blank: I love the nightlife....

Raj: I like to boogie!

Lakshmi: Got you!

(“The Transporter Malfunction 11:00)

The character further performs his implied homosexuality by liking TV series such as *Sex and the City* or *Grey’s Anatomy*, movies such as *Eat Pray Love* or *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, all of which are commonly considered as favored by women; he also takes Pilates classes in order to have well defined abs (“Rajesh”). In addition to that it is revealed that even his parents secretly assume that their son is homosexual; whereupon he replies, “I’m not gay! If anything, I’m metrosexual. [...] It means I like women as well as their skin care products.” (“The Transporter Malfunction” 2:48)

The implications about Raj’ sexual orientation are used to create humor, but it is also a play with the “racist stereotype of [...] Asians as undersexual, with ‘whiteness’ portrayed as the perfect balance” (Eglash 52) and the Nerd domains as “opposition to manly identity” (52). The character of Raj takes the latter assumption to its extreme, turning it into a literal opposite of femininity versus masculinity, having the straight man performing a feminine identity. In addition to that, his inability to speak to women emphasizes his Asian asexuality, albeit the fact that he does get involved with women occasionally. Lori Kendall states that

the nerd stereotype includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of ‘feminine’ social and relational skills) and feminization (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women). [...] The reconfiguration of ‘nerd’ from the early 1980s through

the present results in certain aspects of the nerd identity attaining greater acceptance either as possible components of hegemonic masculinity itself, or at least as being more fully complicit with it. (“Nerd Nation” 264)

I suggest that the masculinity of Raj’ character is not threatened by his Nerd identity, but more or less renegotiated by his cross-gender performance; this performance can be seen as a new kind of representation and not at all coherent to the Nerd stereotype. The exaggeration of feminization within the character’s traits adds to this conclusion. Furthermore, the portrayal of Raj rejects the claim that “nerds are assumed and shown to be white and male, [...] and firmly heterosexual” (Quail 460), thus again illustrating that Raj should not be considered as a the depiction of a Nerd stereotype, but as the portrayal of a Geek. In the 1980s, the emphasis on the male authority, especially Nerds “possessing the same sexual drives and desires as their opponents” (Kendall, “Nerd Nation” 269) was communicated via ambiguity, such as in the above mentioned scenes in *Revenge of the Nerds*. The character of Raj does not claim masculinity; he abandons the concept in favor of reinventing a new type of Nerd – or as I argue, the term ‘Geek’ is more accurate here, because it refers to a global subculture and not a label. Geeks can be metrosexual or gay, they do not have to be white etc. Since they constitute a subculture, they are more diverse and not as restricted as the Nerd label indicates.

Howard Wolowitz works as an engineer and is the only male protagonist who has no doctoral degree. Sheldon often mentions this in order to single him out or point at his (as he sees it) lack of intelligence (e.g. “The Hawking Excitation” 01:45). Howard still lives with his mother, the relationship they have can be considered as ‘unhealthy’, because it exceeds the usual closeness between mother and son. Despite being a ‘mama’s boy’, Howard considers himself as irresistible to women, but they rather resent him due to his often sexist and crude conversation openers. The Internet community has creatively adopted these ‘pick-up lines’: users create so-called ‘memes’, which usually consist of a certain picture frame with text added to the capture. The memes showing Howard contain puns and wordplays connected to science and technology (see Figure 11). The reason why I included this phenomenon is to underline my claim that Geeks perform their subculture on the Internet: Howard, as a character of *BBT*, a show that concentrates on the representation of Geeks, is adopted by Geeks to perform their identity in the domain they have claimed for themselves.

This aspect of failure and his discrepant self-image is emphasized by Penny's feelings of revulsion towards him (e.g. in "The Killer Robot Instability" she refers to his life as "creepy and pathetic"; 04:32). However, on various occasions she overcomes her feelings and reveals that she actually likes Howard (e.g. "The Killer Robot Instability" 12:00). But since it is one of the characteristics of sitcoms that the "[p]rogram creator and director will reset the characters, locations and time of every new Episode of each week" (Hu 1185), their friendly relationship does not last too long.

His obsessive and aggressive behavior towards women is an element of the stereotypical Nerd representation. Howard's oversexed attitude stands in sharp contrast to his dependency on his mother and, after he starts dating Bernadette and eventually marries her, his wife. The resemblance between Bernadette and Mrs. Wolowitz (his mother's first name is never mentioned in the show) is highly visible and used for creating humor (e.g. "The Habitation Configuration" 18:21). Nevertheless, this aspect alters the assumption that it is the Nerd stereotype that is realized by Howard's character.

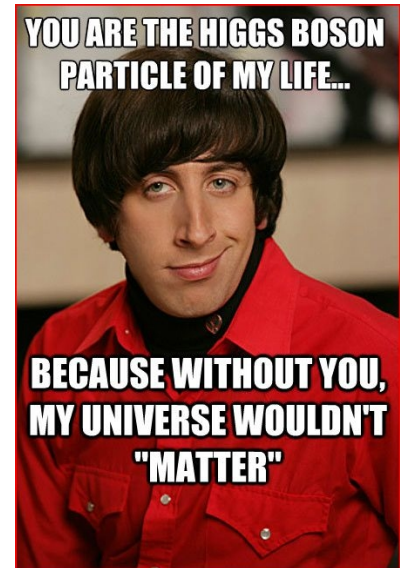


Fig. 11: Example of a Howard-meme. N. p. http://img3.ranker.com/user_node_img/50008/1000145466/full/pickup-line-scientist-knows-what-s-important-photo-u2.jpg 25 November 2012

Howard develops and constructs tools for space travel. Engineering was a typical feature of Nerds in the 1980s; Lewis and Gilbert built a multifunctional robot, Steve Urkel also invented various technical gadgets, an element that has been overtaken in the depiction of Garth. The difference to Howard is that inventing technical devices is his profession, not a hobby; it is not as foregrounded and thus marked as extraordinary than it was in the 1980s.

So far I have provided different arguments that led to the conclusion that Raj, Leonard, Sheldon and Howard do not represent the stereotype of Nerds. Another aspect to underline my suggestions is the fact that all four characters are enthusiastic consumers of computers, but do not code or program. This is a crucial detail, since the Nerd stereotype has always been associated with computer science, whereas Geeks are generally considered to be, if at all, computer affined or so-called 'heavy-users'.

The visual representation of Nerds has been extensively discussed in this thesis. Since it is part of the stock character concept it serves to let the audience immediately grasp what the figure is supposed to illustrate. As Figure 12 shows, the protagonists of *BBT* are each endowed with a significant style of clothing that makes them easily recognizable as well, but they never resemble the visual representation of Nerds in the 1980s. Leonard usually wears a jacket with a print t-shirt below. Raj wears different kinds of slipovers that are combined and matched with different button-down shirts underneath and vests above. Sheldon combines long-sleeved shirts, over which he puts on a t-shirt with a print that is connected to comics. Howard always wears turtlenecks under a button-down shirt in bright colors that are matched by his pants. His outfits remind very much of the uniforms worn in *Star Trek*. Remarkable is the extensive collection of belt buckles, each a reference to computer games or other audiovisual media.



Fig. 12: A picture of costumes that are typical for each character of *The Big Bang Theory*. From left to right: Leonard, Penny, Raj, Howard, Sheldon. N.p. <http://img0.joyreactor.com/pics/post/auto-the-big-bang-theory-costume-268840.jpeg>. 8 December 2012.

I argue that the costumes of Howard and Sheldon were chosen to emphasize those ‘geeky’ aspects, which are not implemented within the character’s personality that allow to identify them as Geeks. Sheldon is represented as a genius with a machine-like mind, closer to a cyborg than an actual human being. The playfulness of his clothing, by which I mean the references to comic books and superheroes, points

at his interests that are coherent to those of the Geek subculture. Howard's attitude towards women and his behavior put him in the context of the Nerd stereotype. It is his fashion sense (i.e. the matching of his clothing, the careful coordination of belt buckles) that draws his character away; Nerds are known not to pay any attention to what they wear and how they look. The costumes, which refer to audiovisual media connoted to Geeks, emphasizes the representation of the very same, because it is the connoted cultural artifacts that are one main feature of distinction between Nerds and Geeks. In addition to that, the sitcom has influenced contemporary fashion. The outfits the characters wear on the show inspire the concept of 'Geek chic'. Notably it is not only men who aim to imitate the clothing style, but also women adapt the specific way of dressing like the male characters of *BBT* (cf. Shannon).

The main characters of *BBT* are no longer eccentric outsiders; they are well-educated individuals with academic degrees and an indisputably good reputation within their field of experience. As it is the case in *Role Models*, their contrasting other is not at the same time their antagonists. Augie's parents are not consequently his opponents, and Penny, although she personifies the mainstream culture, too does not function as the enemy. The characters' purpose is to contrast the Geeks, to emphasize their difference, but they also underline their distinctive subcultural features.

Still, in her article "'White and Nerdy': Computers, Race, and the Nerd Stereotype" Lori Kendall wonders why the Nerd stereotype has not yet faded since the "information technologies are increasingly part of most people's lives." (506) In her opinion the frequent mentioning of the term in newspaper articles and the increasing presence of Nerds in other media such as music videos, songs etc. contribute to the prevalence of the stereotype (506). I suggest that the persistence of the Nerd stereotype results in a renegotiation of the very same as it is the case in *The Big Bang Theory*. I have illustrated how this process is realized within by conceptualization of the main characters as Geeks. Raj, Howard, Sheldon and Leonard certainly draw from the stereotypical images of Nerds, but at the same time they neglect specific features and add a wider spectrum of attributes which allows the conclusion that they indeed represent the multitude of the Geek subculture.

Both, *Role Models* and *The Big Bang Theory* mark the endpoint of the process from a synonymous usage of 'Nerd' and 'Geek' as the term for the same stock character in the 1980s towards the Nerd as a label and Geeks as a subculture in the 2000s.

6. Conclusion

In the beginning there were Nerds and Geeks, the ‘uncool’ people, pale eccentrics who would rather sit at home and study than go to parties. And why should they, there is no need to socialize with those who would not understand or appreciate the wondrous world of science and technology anyways. This had been the picture of Nerds and Geeks that was communicated in the 1970s and 1980s, when the filmic stereotype I have introduced in this thesis developed.

The dawn of the digital age brought with it that the former outcasts became the center of attention. It was them who invented devices that would change the lives of everyone. Ever since computers became part of our daily routine, the Nerds and Geeks experienced a Renaissance; society recognized the value of the people who conceptualized and realized those little technical miracles, which in turn led to a newfound self-confidence of the ones who were formerly avoided and excluded. This is starting point of the thesis at hand: the social revolution of Nerds and Geeks brought with it a shift in meaning of the latter word.

Over the last three decades the synonyms ‘Nerd’ and ‘Geek’ became distinguishable in meaning. In sum the latter is nowadays considered to be an enthusiast. There are various cultural artifacts that are associated with Geekiness. It is these shared interests, which was one of the arguments that allowed the conclusion that Geeks indeed form a subculture. Another finding from my analysis is that today we should think of ‘Nerd’ as a pejorative label, which is used in audiovisual media to depict flat characters with stereotypical attributes. At the same time, Geeks are more and more represented distinctively as members of a subculture. The Geek characters I have investigated reflect this development insofar as they became increasingly complex and more coherent to the definitions I provided.

I argued in chapter 2 that the term ‘Geek’ is no longer synonymously with ‘Nerd’; by now, a Geek is a person who passionately pursues its interests. The major aspects are the cultural self-awareness they possess, the pride in who they are and what they do. They are not as studious and socially awkward as Nerds, they do form social and romantic relationships and engage in a wider range of activities, which need not be necessarily connected to science and technology. Another key feature is the way they perceive themselves: being a Geek is an identity that a person actively performs. This also results in a cultural self-awareness.

The third chapter of this thesis explored the concepts of identity, representation and performance in order to provide the theoretical basis for the questions that were addressed in the analytical part. Identification is basically the process of defining who we are. By doing so we contrast ourselves to each other, exclusion being a key element of establishing our own individuality, but also the collective identity of a group. As we have learned, this collective identity of Geeks was able to form because of Globalization. The accessibility of ‘Geek Matter’ all over the world and the exchange of meanings between the individuals regardless to time and space allowed the formation of a subculture. The theory and definition of the latter was also provided in this chapter. All this is intertwined with the concept of performance: the way we perform our identity affects the performance of a social group and vice versa. In addition to that I considered the influence of mass media on this process, the way meanings are conveyed over the different media channels and thus how it influences the individual, especially in regards of representation. The way something is depicted evokes different connotations and denotations within each consumer of media. The choices that are made by the producers of media influence the perception of the audience. This aspect was addressed because it is vital for the analysis of Geeks in audiovisual media.

Chapter four included an investigation of how Geeks perform their identity on the Internet; the questions I aimed to answer were whether or not this identity is coherent to the definition I provided in the second chapter of this thesis and if it is valid to argue that they form a subculture. The conclusions I drew allowed me to answer both questions positively: the performance of Geeks on the Internet corresponds with my definition; additionally it is indeed true to consider Geeks as an own subculture.

The fifth chapter concentrated on the audiovisual representation of Nerds and Geeks. The analysis of the movie *Revenge of the Nerds* and the sitcom *Family Matters* led me to the following result: In the 1980s Nerds were pictured as stock characters. Their visual representations as well as their character traits were basically the same in the various portrayals. Furthermore, the plots of audiovisual media that featured Nerd characters strongly resembled each other too. I suggested to consider the negatively associated depiction as a label, respectively stereotype, therefore characters with the above mentioned features should be considered as figures with a Nerd label, whereas the representation of Geeks aims at communicating a different picture, namely the one of the subculture, whose portrayal is more complex and diverse.

I argued that one of the first representations of a ‘true’ Geek are the characters Wayne and Garth that appear in *Wayne’s World*. This suggestion was supported by the analysis of relevant scenes of the film, which led me to the assumption that in the 1990s most of the specific features of the Nerd stereotype were not continued in order to distinguish Geeks from Nerds. The TV series *Freaks and Geeks* was another example that provided representations of Geeks, which can be clearly differentiated from the portrayal of Nerds.

The cultural artifacts of the 2000s investigated in the last part of this thesis illustrated, that the representation of Geeks in this decade was very accurate to the definition I proposed. An important aspect was that the storyline is no longer about the Geek trying to be accepted by a dominating social group, and also the Geek characters being aware of their subcultural identity. The TV series I investigated, *The Big Bang Theory*, additionally demonstrates the renegotiation of the Nerd label.

Summarizing I can conclude that my proposal, stating that the depiction of Nerds as stock characters has shifted towards the representation of the subculture of Geeks, which covers a wider spectrum of attributes and traits the characters are presented with, is confirmed. The audiovisual media of the 1980s, which featured the negatively connoted Nerd stereotype, can be considered as farces, whereas more recent examples, albeit they too are comedies, provide a more complex plot the represented Geeks are involved in.

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8. Appendix

8.1. Lyrics “Revenge of the Nerds”

“Revenge of the Nerds”, performed by The Rubinoos; taken from
http://www.lyricsmania.com/revenge_of_the_nerds_lyrics_rubinoos_the.html (30
 November 2012)

Mom packs us a lunch and we're off to the school,
 They call us nerds 'cause we're so uncool.
 They laugh at our clothes, they laugh at our hair
 The girls walk by with the nose in the air.

So go ahead, put us down
 One of these days we will turn it around
 Won't be long, mark my words
 Time has come for Revenge of the nerds!
 Revenge of the nerds Revenge of the nerds
 So if they call you a dork, a spazz or a geek
 Stand up and be proud, don't be meek
 Beautiful people, haven't you heard?
 The joke's on you, it's revenge of the nerds

We wear horn-rimmed glasses with a heavy duty lens
 Button down shirts and a pocket full of pens
 Straight A students, teachers' pets
 They call us nerds but with no regrets

While the jocks work out with the football team
 We're trying to score with the girl of our dream
 You know we ain't good looking but here's a surprise:
 Nerds are great lovers in disguise

8.2. Curriculum Vitae

Persönliche Daten

Name: Doris Christina Dier
Geburtsdatum: 24. Juli 1985
Geburtsort: Wien

Studium an der Universität Wien

10/ 2005 Beginn des Diplomstudiums Deutsche Philologie
10/ 2006 Beginn des Diplomstudiums Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Schulbildung

09/1999-06/2004 Höhere Lehranstalt für Wirtschaft mit Schwerpunkt
Fremdsprachen Tulln
Matura am 25. Juni mit gutem Erfolg bestanden
09/1995-06/1999 Musikhauptschule Tulln

8.3. Abstract

In den 1980er Jahren wurden die Begriffe „Geek“ und „Nerd“ synonym verwendet, um technologie- und wissenschaftsaffine Menschen negativ behaftet zu bezeichnen. In den letzten dreißig Jahren hat sich jedoch die Bedeutung der beiden Wörter verändert, was den Ausgangspunkt der vorliegenden Arbeit darstellt. Heutzutage gilt es als modern, sich selbst als Geek zu bezeichnen und Serien, wie *The Big Bang Theory*, deren Protagonisten hauptsächlich Charaktere sind, welche als solches identifiziert werden können, erreichen hohe Zuschauerquoten und werden weltweit ausgestrahlt. Somit wird zunächst untersucht, wie sich die Begriffe zum Forschungszeitpunkt definieren. Da viele Begriffserklärungen von Wissenschaftlern und Autoren stammen, die sich selbst als Geeks bezeichnen, wird der Frage nachgegangen, ob die selbigen eine Subkultur darstellen. Die Paradigmen, die dafür herangezogen werden, sind jene der Identität und Performance. Der theoretische Hintergrund wird dann auf Internet-auftritte von selbsterklärten Geeks angewandt, um zu eruieren, ob die Annahme, dass Geeks eine Subkultur konstituieren, legitim ist. Die Erkenntnisse dieses Abschnittes dienen als Grundlage für die Analyse von audiovisuellen Medien der 1980er, 1990er und 2000er Jahren. Hier wird untersucht, wie sich der Bedeutungswandel der Begriffe „Nerd“ und „Geek“ in Filmen und Serien der jeweiligen Dekade widerspiegelt. Der theoretische Ansatz für diese Analyse ist jener der Repräsentation. Die frühen Beispiele zeigen, dass die Begriffe synonym verwendet wurden und einen Charakter beschreiben, der einen Stereotypen repräsentiert. Oft sind diese Figuren negativ bzw. ambivalent dargestellt. In den 1990er Jahren sind Charaktere zu beobachten, die der in der vorliegenden Arbeit eruierten Definition von „Geek“ entsprechen. Diese wurden als die ersten Repräsentationen von Geeks identifiziert. Die negative Konnotation bzw. Repräsentation, die dem synonymen Gebrauch zugrunde liegt, verblasst immer mehr. Die letzte untersuchte Dekade weist Charaktere auf, die als Repräsentation der Subkultur identifiziert werden können. Die Wandlung von flachen Charakteren, die einen Typus darstellen, hin zu komplexen Figurenkonstruktionen, welche die Vielschichtigkeit der Subkultur widerspiegeln, konnte beobachtet werden.

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Bill, Iris, Elke – it's the intention that counts!

Philipp – ready for the world out there? Thank you for being you.

My friends – without you I'm nothing. Without water, there's no blood.

Mama, Papa – This is to you. Everything I am I owe to you. You made this all possible...there are no words.