READING GAYS ON THE SMALL SCREEN

A RECEPTION STUDY AMONG FLEMISH VIEWERS OF QUEER RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION FICTION

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Abstract

Drawing on the insights of queer theory, this study departs from the notion that popular culture can articulate resistance to the discourse of heteronormativity, which is being reiterated and consolidated in popular culture products. In particular, this study focuses on the potential of gay representation in contemporary television fiction to resist heteronormative institutions, practices, norms, and values. In preceding qualitative textual studies on queer resistance in a selection of popular series (namely *The Wire, Family Guy, Six Feet Under, Brothers & Sisters, Torchwood* and *True Blood*), it is argued that these series represent gay characters and themes that expose the oppressive practices of heteronormativity and represent viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. As articulations of resistance only become resistant in the act of reading, this study aims to explore how television audiences negotiate the meaning of gay representation and its potential to resist. Its aim is twofold: First, it aims to study how Flemish regular television viewers of contemporary television fiction read gay representation and, in particular, how they read articulations of queer resistance. Second, it aims to inquire whether or not the television viewers assume heteronormative or resistant discursive positions in their readings. To this end, a reception analysis confronts the results of the preceding textual analyses, which have illustrated how popular series can resist the discourse of heteronormativity, with the readings of the regular television viewers.

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57 javnost–the public Vol.19 (2012), No. 4, pp. 57 - 72

Introduction

> Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y): They're not very convincing. They look like a typical gay television couple. They look straight, they act straight, they walk straight, they dress straight, they give men hugs, and they're supposed to represent a gay couple? I didn't buy that.[1]

Since gay men and women[2] on television have been represented as more rounded, diversified, and common in the first decade of the 21st century (Chambers 2009; Davis and Needham 2009), they have become increasingly the subject of critical media studies. In particular, media scholars (e.g., Dow 2001; Battles and Hilton-Morrow 2002; Chambers 2006; Avila-Saavedra 2009; Meyer 2010) who assume a queer theoretical perspective have pointed out how contemporary television series that feature gays reiterate and consolidate heteronormativity. Queer theorists (e.g., Butler 1990/1999; Warner 1999; Halberstam 2005; Sedgwick 1990/2008) interpret heteronormativity as the discursive power granted to the compulsory heterosexual matrix in Western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of biological sex, gender, and sexuality, and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning universality and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. Due to its prevailing power, heteronormativity succeeds in establishing a sociocultural hierarchy between subjects who conform to the heterosexual ideal and subjects who do not or cannot conform to the heteronormal. Hence, it also governs the representation of gay characters, resulting in representations where gay men and women participate or want to participate in heteronormative institutions and practices. However, a few scholars (e.g., Chambers 2009; Needham 2009) disagree with considering television as exclusively heteronormative and demonstrated how popular fiction programs resists heteronormativity. Drawing on Stuart Hall (2005) and John Fiske (1987), who consider television and popular culture as cultural sites that both incorporate and resist aspects of dominant ideologies, they unraveled or underscored the queerness articulated within different popular television texts. For the scope of this article, *queer articulations* refer to representations of characters that connote or imply a critique or subversion of how the heteronormal governs sexual identities and/or desires. As such, gay and heterosexual characters can be represented as queer, for instance when they embody identity positions that oppose or challenge heteronormative gender and sexualities or embrace transgressive norms and values instead of the prescribed, traditional set of norms and values. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the articulations of resistance on television only become resistant in the act of reading. Put differently, the ability of these cultural resistances to resonate in the everyday social life depends upon whether audiences interpret the articulations of resistance as resisting heteronormative institutions or practices. Hence, this article is concerned with how television audiences in contemporary Western society negotiate screened representations that set out to challenge the heteronormal of everyday social life.

To investigate how television audiences deal with queer resistance on the small screen, I depart from the results of preceding textual analyses of popular television series and confront these results in a reception analysis with the readings of Flemish regular television viewers. The textual analyses demonstrated how six contemporary television series that feature gay characters and/or gay-related themes

(namely *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008), *Family Guy* (FOX 1999-), *Six Feet Under* (HBO 2001-2005), *Brothers & Sisters* (ABC 2006-2011), *Torchwood* (BBC 2006-) and *True Blood* (HBO 2008-) challenge heteronormativity.[3] Since the preceding textual research departed from the idea that instances of queer resistance are articulated by specific representational strategies, this reception study relies on the same conceptual framework. It argues that queer resistance is represented by strategies of deconstruction and/or strategies of reconstruction. The strategies of queer deconstruction have been labelled as such, because they expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity operate. The strategies of queer reconstruction have been labelled as such, because they aim to transgress social and cultural assumptions about biological sex, gender, sexuality, and identity by providing queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. Hence, within the reception study, I analyse how television audiences read gay representation, and particularly how they read the representations of gay characters that articulate notions of queer resistance.[4] Further, it inquires whether television audiences assume a heteronormative or resistant discursive position in their readings of gay representations.

In doing so, the article aims to offer a nuanced perspective to the debate on audience readings of popular culture. First, it draws on cultural studies to consider audiences as plural entities whose negotiation of meaning is understood as a complex process where the socio-cultural contexts of audiences intervene in the reading process, resulting in multiple readings (Jensen 2002, 162; Seiter 2004, 456). I agree with Fiske (1987) who underscores the power of television viewers to become active readers who, through negotiation and renegotiation of the text, may subvert and resist the dominant ideology. Nonetheless, Ien Ang (1996, 9-14) asserts that active audiences are not by definition critical and resistant audiences. Audiences are forced to be active in a media-saturated culture, whereas their range of choices and making meaning can be manipulated into a media consumption that "sustains the reproduction of the system" (ibid., 12). On the other hand, she argues that the "right choices" cannot be imposed, which leaves room for subversion (ibid., 12). As such, she evokes David Morley (1992) who stresses to consider the limits to polysemy. He argues that resistant readings may occur, but they should be interpreted in relation to the socio-cultural context of the audiences. To this end, the article takes into account the discursive position television viewers rely on to read critical representations. For this study in particular, participants may stress a heteronormative subject position when dismissing or critiquing gay characters who refuse to conform. Similarly, audiences who assume a queer subject position may laud the characters for refusing to participate in the heteronormal. Second, this study refuses to focus on popular texts that confirm to heteronormativity but instead confronts regular television viewers with texts that critique or subvert hegemonic ideologies. In other words, it is interested in texts that represent notions and characters that are already counter-hegemonic. In contrast to cultural studies looking into audiences who offer counter-hegemonic or oppositional readings of texts that conform to dominant ideologies (see Hall 1980), it investigates what audiences make of cultural texts that represent "queer counterpublics" (Berlant and Warner 1998, 558-559) – publics that are excluded from the mainstream heteronormative public sphere because of being populated by men and women who embody non-normative identities and/or engage in non-normative practices.

Method

This reception study aims to address the assumption that audiences are able to pick up on resistance articulated on the small screen and it aims to provide empirical accounts of resistant reading practices. To demarcate the notion of audiences, this study focuses on regular television viewers. For the purpose of this study, a regular television viewer is someone who expresses an enthusiastic and active engagement with a specific television text, and who considers him- or herself a "fan" of television fiction in general. However, since a fan is generally understood in cultural studies as someone who participates in the reproduction and redistribution of the text's meaning as well as the critiquing and rewriting of it (see Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992; Staiger 2005), I acknowledge that not everyone who considers him- or herself a fan engages in such fan practices. They do share a heightened interest in television fiction and often watch television series. Hence, this audience will be referred to as regular television viewers. Further, this study takes into account that fans and regular television viewers make clear distinctions between the series they like and the ones they dislike (Fiske 1989, 147). For that reason, the audience on which this study focuses may articulate different relationships with specific series.

The setup of this study's methodology began from a selection of preceding textual analyses on queer resistance in popular television series: *The Wire, Family Guy, Six Feet Under, Brothers & Sisters, Torchwood,* and *True Blood* (Dhaenens 2012; Dhaenens in press; Dhaenens and Van Bauwel 2012a; Dhaenens and Van Bauwel 2012b). These series were chosen because of both their international appeal and popularity among Flemish television viewers, their representation of gay characters and themes, and their potential to illustrate strategies of queer resistance. For the reception study, a selection of sequences was made based on the intention to create a diverse yet comprehensible overview of the strategies television can employ to articulate queer resistance. The discerning, interpreting, and naming of these strategies has been the result of interpreting queer theory in relation to television's politics of representation. Summarised, queer resistance can be articulated by strategies of queer deconstruction and strategies of queer reconstruction (cf. supra), which can be further differentiated in subtypes of strategies. The selection of sequences with instances of queer resistance was shown and discussed during focus group interviews. The focus group method was chosen since it is a qualitative method allowing the thorough exploration and comparison of how groups articulate opinions and experiences (Morgan and Krueger 1998). The focus group participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Because of pragmatic reasons, this study only recruited Flemish television viewers.[5] They were invited to participate in research on the representation of gays.[6] To participate they had to be between 18 and 35 years of age, be a "fan" of at least two of the preselected series, willing to talk about issues related to gay sexuality, and able to participate twice.[7]

Each participant was designated to two focus group sessions, which took place between 25th October and 9th November, 2010. Each conversation lasted two hours, and each group consisted of eight participants. In the first session, two groups of heterosexual and two groups of gay participants were formed. Each group consisted of female and male participants. The creation of different homogenous groups in terms of sexual orientation allowed the comparison of groups that may differ in

opinion and interpretation on the subject matter (Morgan and Krueger 1998). In the second session, the same participants were rearranged into four new focus groups. This time, each group consisted of both heterosexual and gay participants, which allowed for interaction. This could possibly produce new opinions and interpretations (Dhaenens 2009b).[8]

The interviews were semi-structured, where open questions were used to instigate discussions. The concepts of heteronormativity and resistance were not introduced into any of the focus group interviews. Yet, since the participants were asked to "read" the scenes, they engaged in active reading. Because of this, the study could not inquire how the participants negotiated the series and its gay representation in an everyday context.

Finally, each focus group conversation was transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were thematically analysed. First, each quote in the transcripts was given thematic labels (e.g., heteronormativity, credible representation, atypical representation, stereotypes). These quotes were rearranged as either general opinions on gay representation or opinions that reflect the queerness and/or heteronormativity represented in the preselected sequences. Last, the quotes reflecting a heteronormative or resistant discursive position were grouped together.

Reading Gay Representation

Before elaborating on how the participants read queer resistance, I would like to stress four conclusions which could be drawn concerning the way they spoke about gay representations in general. First, most gay and heterosexual participants tended to talk about gay characters in terms of gender characteristics and stereotypes. These aspects were often discussed together, as they considered the effeminate gay man to be one of the most typical gay male stereotypes and the butch lesbian one of the most common female gay stereotypes. This was illustrated in the way participants tended to compare all gay characters to these two iconic gay stereotypes. As such, a gay character that diverted from these clichés was considered non-stereotypical. For instance, Joke thought of detective Kima Greggs from the drama series *The Wire* as "good advertisement," because "… she shows that we're not all either black or white, that when we're lesbians we're not by definition butches … it's not that we're playing with it, but we're all a bit feminine and masculine" (Joke, FG4, F, 32y). This quote also illustrates that for a gay character not to be stereotypical, diverging from the gendered stereotype is not sufficient. For many participants, non-stereotypical gay characters are characters whose identity is not solely defined by his or her sexuality, whose gender expressions vary between masculinity and femininity, and who are represented as round and nuanced. In general, the participants found that most of the gay men and women on television meet these requirements.

Some participants did point out the reiteration of certain gay clichés, such as the representations of the effeminate gay man and the lesbian butch. Also, a few considered the representations of gay male promiscuity and the cocooning of lesbian women stereotypical. However, many participants stressed that most of the gay stereotypes are not intended to be harmful. Especially when applied in comedy, they were considered by almost all participants as funny instead of homophobic. The participants argued that comedy series laugh at anybody rather than a specific minority group in particular. They referred to gays in sitcoms and in animated

series. The latter genre was discussed more thoroughly since the participants were shown some clips of *Family Guy*. One of these clips featured the main character, Peter Griffin – the all-American family guy – turning into a flamboyant, swishy gay man all of a sudden (season 7, episode 8). None of the participants found the use of gay stereotypes in the sequences nor in the series offensive or inappropriate. Instead, the participants argued that stereotypes are inherent to the way the animated sitcom genre functions. Also, some participants pointed out that stereotypes may even embed the critical potential to mock the process of stereotyping (cf. infra).

Second, both gay and heterosexual participants agreed that most of the gay representations in contemporary television fiction are realistic. They based their opinions on the sequences shown during the focus group conversations and on their own television viewing experiences. Even though gay participants could rely on a more personal perspective to negotiate the realism of gay representations, all the participants came to similar conclusions. They found the gay diversity they know or witness in their daily realities to be reflected on the small screen. Nevertheless, a few pointed out the lack of certain gay identities. Foremost, nuanced representations of lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters were missed. Hasan also highlighted how television series have not yet introduced a nuanced gay migrant character:

> Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y): [What is not yet represented is…] [t]he migrant gay character, without linking the character to some bigger story that features Bin Laden or terrorists. Just a character like any other gay character without over-dramatization. It exists in a few series but always linked to religion.

Third, the participants often contextualised the representations of gayness, particularly by formulating opinions on the production and consumption of television series that feature gay characters and themes. Some participants pointed out that most of the contemporary popular television series are produced in the USA and argued that this cultural context interferes with the choices made by the producers and in the way audiences deal with gays and gay themes. Related to this is the widely-shared opinion among the participants that series aim to target a broad audience. Since this is by definition a heterosexual audience, they assumed that producers prefer heterosexual characters to ease identification.

The participants further argued that they are aware that audiences are mutually different and showed that they acknowledge that audiences may read television series differently. For instance, Steven assumed that he and his peers are able to sidestep stereotypes but doubted if other viewers can do the same:

> Steven (FG5, G, M, 28y): I wonder when teenagers see these stereotypes, and I mean in particular heterosexual teenage boys, if they get it, or if they just laugh with [it]… I consider this somehow a shame since it takes a practiced television viewer to see that those are clichés, that they are used for humour – the way we see it. I know how to laugh with that, because I know that in fifty percent of the cases gays are not like that and I know to laugh with that because of other reasons, but not everyone will, and in a way I find that a shame. But it'll probably always be like that.

A few participants also underscored the necessity to make a distinction between reality and televised reality, as the latter not necessarily reflects the first. Similarly, a few assumed that audiences will take into account that gay characters on television differ from gay men and women in reality.

Fourth, the opinions were divided on the role gay representation could play. On the one hand, some heterosexual and gay participants remarked that they question whether television series are intended to change anything. They all stressed that television series are primarily a source of entertainment. For instance, Cindy (FG8, H, F, 25y) doubted that one can learn anything from television, and Pieter (FG6, H, M, 26y) argued that he watches television series because he wants to be entertained instead of being confronted with a message. On the other hand, some participants ascribed a social and emancipating role to gay representation. Based on the expressed opinions throughout the sessions, five different social and emancipating roles could be discerned. First, gay representation can raise awareness of gays and gay themes. Second, it has the potential to emancipate gays and change the situation for gays in contemporary society. Next, it can connote social criticism, for instance by exposing how gays and other social and cultural minorities are being treated in contemporary society. As a fourth role, the participants referred to its potential in either confirming or breaking gay stereotypes. The last role was only discussed by gay participants. They underscored the potential of gay representation to function as a means of identification. Sven illustrated why gay characters in teen series *Degrassi: The Next Generation* (CTV 2001-) and *Dawson's Creek* (The WB 1998-2003) were important for him:

> Sven (FG2, G, M, 22y): In my teenage years, Degrassi: The Next Generation was being broadcast, and that show featured a young gay boy. And I wanted to watch every evening to see what happened next and to compare it with my own life. And if I ask peers if they saw that too, they say "Yeah, me too!" The same with Dawson's Creek, and only because it featured a gay guy.

Even though both gay and heterosexual participants seemed to agree and disagree in similar ways, some opinions, however, accentuated a distinction between the gay and heterosexual participants. Concerning the gay participants, it is self-evident that their own gay identity informed their readings of gay representations on television. This became apparent in the way they described gay characters. In contrast to the heterosexual participants who emphasised the gendered characteristics of the gay characters, the gay participants referred more to the identity development of the characters. For instance, they elaborated more on how the gay characters came out of the closet in the series or how they experienced their same-sex desires. Also, they read less stereotypes or a lack of nuance in characters described by heterosexual participants as stereotypical and one-dimensional. For instance, Kima from *The Wire* was hailed by some gay participants as a nuanced representation of a lesbian, whereas some heterosexual participants described her as a stereotypical butch lesbian who on top of that practices a stereotypical masculine profession. Further, gay participants considered the representations of stereotypical gay characters to be realistic representations of gays who embody these stereotypical traits. Their own gay identity was mostly stretched in the opinions in which they relate to their own experiences. This is illustrated in the way some participants considered the representations of same-sex kisses in *The Wire* and *Brothers & Sisters* to be unconvincing. Another example is the way many gay participants stressed the necessity of identification with gay characters or at least the fun of assuming a character to be gay. Sien reported that she often reads spe-

cific identity traits as signifying a gay identity as for instance in *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi Channel 2004-2009) and *Dexter* (Showtime 2006-):

> Sien (FG2, G, F, 26y): When I'm watching television series and I see characters with certain traits - like Starbuck in Battlestar Galactica, or Debra in Dexter - I have a difficult time in letting go the idea that they might be gay. Because, if they would turn out gay, that would be awesome, since I love Starbuck and I love Debra, and then you want them the way you would like them best.

In contrast, the heterosexual participants often stressed their non-gay perspective in discussing representations of gays by comparing them to heterosexuals. This perspective is also implied when participants said that they had not given the way gays are represented on the small screen a moment's thought. Last, I would like to point out that mostly heterosexual participants argued that television fiction does reiterate and consolidate certain gay stereotypes, where gay participants hurried to stress the validity of these stereotypes as pretty fair representations of certain gay men and women.

Reading Queer Resistance

The preceding discussion revealed that both gay and heterosexual participants considered gay representations in general to be diversified, round, and nuanced. Their opinions thus seem to agree with those of the media and cultural scholars who value the diversification of contemporary gay representations (cf. supra). The question that is prompted is how regular television viewers have read the televised representations that articulate queer resistance.

I start by discussing the responses that touched upon articulations of queer resistance. Particularly, I depart from the specific strategies of queer resistance ascribed to the preselected sequences and series (cf. supra) and inquire to what extent the participants interpreted these sequences as resistant. First, the regular television viewers seemed to be aware of the strategies of queer deconstruction. This type of resistant strategies targets two heteronormative mainstays: First, it subverts the privileging of the compulsory heterosexual matrix. It does so with representations that resist the fixing of biological sex, gender, and sexuality into causal, hierarchical, and exclusive identities and identity relations. Second, it helps to unsettle the reiteration and consolidation of compulsory heterosexuality by targeting the rigid set of heteronormative institutions, practices, norms, and values that preserve the matrix. Gays and gay themes represented by strategies of queer deconstruction are however often small, temporarily, or ambiguous interventions, which are predominantly occupied with exposing the mainstays of heteronormativity. For instance, they will not change genre conventions dramatically but rather alter some elements for parody, they will most likely preserve typical narrative and cinematographic strategies, and the heteronormal is most likely restored after being exposed or challenged. But the crucial element here is that the heteronormal will not have been spared either.

First, strategies of queer deconstruction can be used to expose the discursive practices of heteronormativity. For instance, queer deconstructions can be discerned in narrative plotlines exposing the frustrations and frictions that are brought about by heteronormative values. The sequences shown to the participants from *Broth-*

ers & Sisters, The Wire, and *Six Feet Under* illustrate this specific strategy. All these sequences were read by some of the participants accordingly; however, it was one of the sequences from *Six Feet Under* that most participants noticed and discussed. The sequence precedes the visit of a social worker who has to decide whether the series' main couple, David and Keith, can be suitable legal guardians of Keith's little niece (season 2, episode 12). The fragment shows Keith busy de-gaying their home to prevent the social worker noticing elements that could be interpreted as gay or too gay. Many participants (both gay and heterosexual) suggested that both the clips and the series expose how our society tries to mainstream and normalise gays. Ulrike (FG5, H, F, 32y), for instance, read into the scene a criticism of depicting gays as desexualised. Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y) agreed with this opinion, arguing that this series reacts against a society that accepts gays as long as they act like heterosexual people. In addition, strategies of exposure can also rely on subtext to articulate criticism of heteronormativity. In the focus group conversations, this was noticed during a discussion of the fantasy series *True Blood*. Particularly, participants argued or agreed that the main theme of this series, which is the integration of vampires into mainstream society, parallels the integration of gays. Joke (FG7, G, F, 32y), for instance, saw the debate in the vampire community between those who want to mainstream and those who want to remain vampire as reflecting the debate in the gay movements between those who want to be discreet to find acceptance and those who want to "flaunt and get on a parade wagon."

Second, strategies of queer deconstruction can be used to create contradictions within discursive practices of heteronormativity. They are occupied with representing characters and themes that challenge the fixity of gender and sexual identities by, for instance, situating a character on a continuum between homosexuality and heterosexuality or by letting a character perform gender articulations that challenge normative and traditional gender roles. Even though the participants described several gay characters accordingly, most agreed on *True Blood*'s outspoken gay character Lafayette Reynolds embodying these traits, and even hinted at the character's potential to deconstruct dominant ideas on gender, sexuality, and identity in contemporary Western society. Lafayette assumes the role of close friend and colleague of Sookie Stackhouse, the series' heroine. Both gay and heterosexual participants noticed Lafayette's play with gender. The participants pointed out his flamboyant outfits, his use of make-up and confronted these with his strength, anger, and his ability to easily win a fight with hillbillies. His strength was also put in relation to his ability to care of his family and people, aspects considered by the participants as being opposed to one another. Many participants clarified Lafayette's likeability by his ability to surprise and to unite seemingly contradictory identity traits. Another way to create contradictions in a television text is by exposing the omnipresence of heteronormativity in certain texts. This may be discussed in relation to genre conventions. *True Blood*, as well as the science fiction series *Torchwood*, are good examples, since they represent gay main characters, a practice that contradicts the genre's tradition of lacking significant gay representations (see Jenkins 1995; Roberts 1999). A few participants picked up on this contradiction. Most explained this by referring to these fantasy genres and to the action genre as masculine genres. For that reason, both gay and heterosexual participants concluded that these genres include few gay representations. Nonetheless, two heterosexual participants underscored

that this may not form an obstacle to include gay characters. Benjamin (FG3, H, M, 20y), for instance, said he is convinced that the image of the gay superhero like Captain Jack Harkness in *Torchwood* can challenge the stereotype of a hero being per definition heterosexual.

Last, some strategies of queer deconstruction contribute to the exposure and questioning of heteronormativity, but rely on parody to do so. According to Linda Hutcheon (2002), parody should be seen in a context of postmodern culture, which articulates complicity to and critique of dominant ideologies and conventions at once. She argues that parody is about showing how current representations derive from past ones. On the one hand, by stressing its complicity to the past by continuing representational conventions and, on the other, by stressing its critique to the past by subverting these conventions. To parody heteronormativity, postmodern strategies of representation (i.e., intertextuality, exaggeration, and literalisation) are used. Although these textual devices are also present to a certain extent in the strategies of exposure and strategies of contradiction, they are articulated here in a way in which they can be interpreted as both complicit to and critical of heteronormativity. Many participants touched upon the strategies albeit without calling them by name. For instance, *Torchwood* features a scene in which Captain Jack, hero of the series, confronts his nemesis Captain John in a bar. What begins as a pastiche of a western duel is temporarily interrupted by a passionate kiss between the men, as they used to be lovers (season 2, episode 1). The intertextual strategy was interpreted by four participants as a parody of the traditional western. Some also referred to studies that have theorised that the traditional western has a gay subtext (e.g., Verstraten 1999). They argued that this scene makes that subtext explicit and defies the notion that in a macho and masculine milieu same-sex desires need to be suppressed.

The series most discussed in terms of parody however is *Family Guy*. Particularly, many respondents referred to the textual device I refer to as hyperstereotyping (Gray 2006). It uses stereotypes to mock the process of stereotyping rather than mock social minorities. The respondents argued that the gay clichés and stereotypes used in the series are part of the genre conventions, humoristic, and anything but homophobic. Hendrik (FG5, H, M, 27y), for instance, implied that gay stereotypes may help audiences to confront their own clichéd images. Yet, he and other participants also underscored the ambivalent position of this sort of representation. He assumed that one may find the stereotypes merely funny while another may read them as criticisms of American society. Sandrine (FG6, G, F, 22y) then again wondered whether the use of piling up stereotypes helps to defy gay stereotypes or rather reiterates them.

Queer resistance can also be articulated on the small screen by strategies of queer reconstruction. These strategies go beyond exposing, contradicting, or parodying the way heteronormativity governs people by offering queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. These strategies nonetheless depend upon and evoke queer deconstructions since the alternatives are reconstructions or rearticulations of the questioned heteronormative institutions, practices, norms, and values. In a way, these representations rely on similar representational strategies that deconstruct the heterosexual matrix and its practices, but they transcend the level of deconstruction by representing these articulations in a more constant and

solid way. In the focus groups, some participants noticed that certain characters who diverged from the heteronormal were represented as round and thought-out, particularly Omar Little (*The Wire*), Kima Greggs (*The Wire*), Jack Harkness (*Torchwood*), and Lafayette Reynolds (*True Blood*). As an illustration, I will focus on Omar. The participants read Omar as being more than a character that plays with masculinity and femininity. Some heterosexual participants in particular were surprised about Omar being a black gay criminal, but they liked that aspect. Most of the gay and heterosexual respondents pointed out how Omar differed from stereotypical or dominant gay representations because of his strength, physical masculinity, and his refusal to be a victim. Ulrike formulated her reading of Omar as follows:

> Ulrike (FG3, H, F, 32y): For me, it was a revelation when I found out Omar was gay. Finally a character that isn't a victim, which I liked very much. That guy is so strong, I have lots of respect for him.

As such, Omar was approached as someone whose gay identity diverges from the normative representation of a gay man as a white, middle class, sensitive man.

Yet, most of the gay characters on the television screen remain white, middle class characters. This however does not exclude the possibility of representing them in a narrative arc in which marriage, family, reproduction, monogamy or longevity are rearticulated. Queer appropriations of these heteronormative aspects were foremost noticed in another sequence from *Six Feet Under* shown during the focus group interviews. In the first scene of this sequence, Keith and David discuss whether or not to have sex with an acquaintance named Sarge. The subsequent scene shows the three men having breakfast the morning after the three-way (season 4, episode 9). A few heterosexual and some gay participants interpreted this sequence as a reflection of the fact that gays are more in touch with their sexuality because their sexual identity has made them more conscious about sexuality. Alexander (FG4, G, M, 27y) read this representation as "a slice of life" representing the sexual curiosity of gay men. Likewise, the representation of the same-sex wedding of Kevin Walker and Scotty Wandell in *Brothers & Sisters* has, according to at least one heterosexual participant, queer potential (season 2, episode 16). Hasan (FG7, H, M, 31y) stressed that the represented ritual did diverge from a traditional normative wedding.

Even though I focus in this article on how audiences read queer resistance, I do want to discuss briefly those reactions of gay and heterosexual participants who read the represented sequences as heteronormative instead of resistant. First, some gay and heterosexual participants implied a reiteration of heteronormativity in a couple of scenes. They referred to gay representations in which the gay characters are represented as asexual and/or inferior to the heterosexual characters and where gayness is treated as an issue. For instance, the scene in *Six Feet Under* in which Keith is busy de-gaying the home was read by some as a consolidation of heteronormativity instead of an exposure of its mechanisms. Second, some participants touched upon the representations of homonormativity, which refers to an accurate appropriation of heteronormative norms and values by gays (see Duggan 2002). Even though few participants refer to these practices as *homonormative* or *heteronormative*, some touched on it by arguing that gays are organising their lives as heterosexuals. For instance, in *Brothers & Sisters* Kevin and Scotty were considering having a three-way with Kevin's ex, Chad. But after a series of

events, not Chad but Kevin's sister Sarah barged into their apartment (season 3, episode 21). Michaël (FG6, G, M, 26y) stressed with an ironical undertone that this scene chooses to refrain from representing "promiscuous sex," and instead brings in the family as a way to cleanse the deviant desires. Also, the same characters' wedding was described by both gay and heterosexual participants as traditional in a way that it downplayed the characters' gayness by living up to the demands of a heteronormative wedding. Alexander even implies the wedding is a synecdoche for heteronormativity:

> Alexander (FG7, G, M, 27y): What is intended in these scenes is that it's OK to be gay as long as you act like straight people and that is why they also deserve a wedding like straight people.

The preceding opinions reveal how some gay and heterosexual participants were able to read queer resistance and heteronormativity into the representations, while most of the participants were at least able to touch upon notions of it. Also, it needs to be noted that not all gay and heterosexual participants picked up on the articulations of resistance. Some participants refrained from reading into gay representations. Some of them stressed that they did not have a specific opinion about gay representation, while some others stated that television fiction is chiefly entertainment for them, and does not need to be inserted with specific messages. Yet, what was also apparent in the focus group conversations is that the participants expressed queer and heteronormative opinions. To study this aspect, I focused on the arguments that supported or disapproved of gay representations which may be considered resistant or heteronormative. The opinions that approved of resistant representations were expressed by both gay and heterosexual participants. First, they appreciated the series that exposed the working of heteronormativity, especially the scenes that exposed how gays are being forced back into the closet. Second, they liked certain gay characters for their queer identities, especially Omar (*The Wire*), Lafayette (*True Blood*) and, to a lesser extent, Kima (*The Wire*) and Jack (*Torchwood*). Omar, for instance, was argued to be more than just a gay character. Since the series also developed his identity in terms of ethnicity, social class, and gender, Omar was considered a positive and ground-breaking representation of a gay man. Last, some participants expressed support for the subversion of certain heteronormative practices (e.g., the three-way in *Six Feet Under*). However, queerness was equally present in the reactions by some participants who disapproved or reacted against heteronormative representations. For instance, the representation of the same-sex wedding in *Brothers & Sisters* was rebuked by both gay and heterosexual participants. In particular, they questioned the use of the same traditional ritual, the de-sexualised representation of the gay men, and the downplaying of the event so it would meet the expectations of a mainstream audience. Joris agreed with these opinions, but also took the role of the network that produces the series into account:

> Joris (FG8, H, M, 22y): It's so tame. ABC is so much friendlier for normal television viewers, never anything extravagant. I've been to a gay wedding and it's nothing like how they represent it here. It's much more spectacular and yet the channel represents it here as such a stereotypical wedding, with gay men who want to be treated as normal as possible and avoid being thought of as gay men. I think that's boring.

On the other hand, the content that was interpreted as heteronormative was also liked by some gay and heterosexual participants who underscore their longing for a "heteronormative" normalcy. Foremost, the same-sex marriage in *Brothers & Sisters* was discussed by some participants for these reasons. Some gay and heterosexual participants were positive about including gays into traditions that otherwise have been considered exclusive for heterosexuals. They applauded that the series has not represented the same-sex wedding as being different from a heterosexual wedding. In addition, they stressed that the gay men were not stereotyped but instead represented as normal. Similarly, these respondents reacted against representations that articulate queer resistance. For instance, one of the queer practices that endured much criticism is the three-way, especially in the way it is represented in *Six Feet Under*. Some participants read into this sequence a violation of the stability within the gay men's relationship. Marieke emphasised that she did not consider this normal as it disrupts the bounds of monogamy:

> Marieke (FG1, H, F, 24y): I consider this a negative depiction. Because you know, they live together. First, you see a domestic scene, in which both of them are lying in bed at night. And that is suddenly disrupted. I can't imagine that any couple would do the same when a man shows up at their bedroom door, to whom they would say: "Join us." That's not normal to me.

Conclusion

Media and cultural scholars may be able to reveal how popular television fiction articulates queer resistance, but how do audiences negotiate these representations that have been postulated to resist heteronormativity and/or to represent queer identities and desires? This question motivated me to set up a reception study into the way regular television viewers read the articulations of resistance in their favourite television series. Drawing on a cultural studies' perspective, which ascribes to audiences the ability to produce their own critical reading of what is being represented on the small screen, this study assumed that audiences would be able to discern between gay representations that challenge traditional and dominant norms regarding gender and sexuality and gay representations that inscribe themselves into the heteronormative way of living. Further, it took into account that audiences negotiate cultural representations with the discourse of heteronormativity that governs their everyday social life. Even though the notions of (queer) resistance and heteronormativity were not introduced in the focus group interviews, the study confirmed the assumption that audiences are able to touch upon or hint at queer resistance. Many opinions expressed by the participants demonstrated that audiences not only focus on what is represented but also on how it is being represented. Some of the gay and heterosexual regular television viewers noticed when a gay character was represented as queer or when a series wanted to expose homophobic and heteronormative practices. Furthermore, support was expressed for these gay representations because they are used to reflect reality but also to criticise the way gays are treated in contemporary society. Although aware that these series are part of a culture industry, many participants stressed the social and emancipating role of gay representations on television. As such, many participants were able to read into these representations and uncover its critical connotations. Some heterosexual and gay participants connected these connotations to a broader criticism against

heteronormativity (Butler 1990/1999; Warner 1999; Halberstam 2005; Sedgwick 1990/2008), although only two gay participants named the hegemonic discourse on gender, sexuality, and identity as such.

Interestingly, no major differences were noticed between the group of gay participants and the group of heterosexual participants. Even though the gay television viewers were more informed about gay issues and took the importance of gay representation more personally, both gay and heterosexual participants discussed and agreed/disagreed in similar ways, irrespective of their own sexuality. However, what did play a significant role in the focus group discussions was the way the participants negotiated heteronormativity in their opinions. Some gay and heterosexual participants agreed with heteronormative norms and values, whereas some others (strongly) disagreed and resisted the way heteronormativity governs everyday social life. Hence, the participants' support for or resistance to the heteronormal informed some of their opinions on gay representation.

This study set out to provide an empirical study into the way audiences negotiate gay representations in contemporary television fiction. Even though it indicated that regular television viewers read gay representations in different ways – ranging from a strict heteronormative to a strict queer interpretation – it acknowledges that the research setting may have enticed active readings as well as socially acceptable responses about gay issues. Also, the fact that the participants were highly-educated and media literate may have shaped the way they read television series and television characters. In further research these concerns could be resolved by, for instance, a research setup in which the audiences are made less aware that gay representations are the focal point of the study. Nonetheless, this study revealed that audiences –who live their lives in public spheres governed by heteronormativity- are able to question the heteronormal and support the queerness on the small screen. The key question for future research will be whether this support for cultural resistance translates into the everyday social life of both gay and heterosexual individuals.

Notes:

1. Alexander is one of the 32 participants in the focus group research. Each participant was selected according to specific characteristics – with gender and sexual orientation as predominant characteristics – and were each given a pseudonym. FG7 refers to which focus group the quote comes from, while G refers to the group of participants who consider themselves more gay (or bisexual) rather than heterosexual, and H refers to the group who consider themselves more heterosexual than gay (or bisexual). M refers to the group of male participants, F to the group of female participants. Their age is also included. Finally, each quote has been translated from Dutch.

2. Gay is used as a general term that refers to those who are generally identified and/or self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

3. These textual analyses were conducted within the scope of the research project "Out on Screen: A Research into the Social and Emancipating Role of Gay Representations in Contemporary Screen Culture, Using a Queer Theory Perspective," funded by the Research Foundation-Flanders (FWO 2008-2011). All four studies have been published or accepted for publication (author 2009; author 2012a; author 2012b; author in press).

4. It needs to be stressed that queer resistance is not exclusively reserved for gays. Heterosexual characters can as well subvert heteronormative practices. However, since the scope of this research is limited to gay representation, heterosexual representation will not be studied in terms of queer resistance.

5. Flanders is the Dutch-speaking region in the Northern part of Belgium.

6. In a Flemish context, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are often referred to as *holebis*.

7. 32 candidates were selected. Since sexual orientation was considered a crucial identity axis, 16 candidates were selected who described their sexual identity as gay and 16 who identified themselves as heterosexual. Gender was also taken into account, even though the final selection had a higher proportion of male participants. Out of 17 male participants, seven self-defined as heterosexual, and ten defined themselves as gay. Out of the 15 female participants, nine self-defined as heterosexual, and six as gay.

8. As already noted, each participant lives in Flanders, Belgium, which makes them part of an international audience whose social and cultural background differs from audiences in the countries of production, which are in each case – except for British series *Torchwood* – American audiences. A major difference between American and Belgian audiences is the way gay issues and gay civil rights are being handled in the countries of both audiences. Whereas the USA is momentarily struggling with issues of same-sex marriage and adoption, most of the battles with regard to gay rights have already been fought in Belgium. The country has made it possible for same-sex couples to marry, to adopt children, and has banned all discrimination based on sexual orientation. These elements of political emancipation are possibly reflected in the focus group conversations.

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