

CONTEXTUALISING DIVERSITY IN TV DRAMA. POLICIES, PRACTICES AND DISCOURSES

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the representation of social minority groups in Flemish TV drama. After a brief review of academic literature on the topic, three questions are asked. First, *'How should diversity be represented?'*, discussing broadcasting policies on diversity as well as the opinions of minori-

ty groups. Second, *'How is diversity actually represented?'* Beside quantitative data, this analysis includes a qualitative assessment of six recent TV drama productions on Flemish television. Third, *'Why is diversity represented this way?'* Here, production practices and discourses are analysed, using in-depth interviews with production staff in order to better understand their reasons and motivations. The findings show that diversity is addressed by public broadcasting policies, but that minority groups are unhappy about their portrayal. Indeed, quantitative research shows that they are generally under-represented, while qualitative research discloses a lack of diversity in these portrayals. Based on the interviews with producers, these representational patterns can be connected to a number of practical and dramatic considerations, which however do not excuse the lack of on screen diversity.

TV drama, while being fictional, is not disconnected from social reality. One of the key criteria used to judge drama, both by viewers and by critics, is exactly this connection to reality: is it realistic? While television scholars agree on the constructed nature of TV representations, they too tend to value drama that reflects current social issues. Think of *The Wire* (2002-2008), the highly praised HBO show that managed to capture the interplay of social forces in Baltimore which form the context for real-life dramas like the police shooting of Freddie Gray in April 2015 and the ensuing protests.

One crucial aspect in this comparison of fiction and reality is the representation of diversity: does drama accurately represent actual diversity in society? There is a long history of activism and academic research on this topic, starting with feminist critiques of phallogocentric media where women are not only under-represented but also stereotypically represented in a narrow range of roles. Race, ethnicity and sexuality are other hotly debated topics in relation to the media at large, including TV drama. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques are used to measure and assess the representation of social groups. One difficulty and point of debate in this research, however, is how to grasp the meanings of these representations. Merely taking into account the on-screen presence of different groups proved to be insufficient, so audience researchers started to discuss the meanings of representations for a range of audiences, including the represented groups (e.g. Bobo, 2003; Jhally & Lewis, 2003). Still, adding insights on meanings for audiences does not allow for a complete understanding of representations, which are heavily contextualised.

This article argues that it is important also to explore the contexts in which representations are constructed, including the broadcasting and production context, to assess the meanings they carry. After a theoretical discussion of the representation of diversity on TV, the issue will be further explored in relation to a number of recent dramas produced in Flanders (Belgium). On-screen representations will be contextualised by considering their production context, including the policies regulating the production of drama as well as the practices and discourses developed by producers.

01 THE REPRESENTATION OF DIVERSITY

There is wide agreement that media, including TV drama, play an important role in representing society. Whatever the concrete medium or device, media 'broadcast' images and ideas,

spreading them across society. This is particularly important in relation to aspects of society that are problematic (such as social inequalities) or not widely known (such as minorities). Representation matters, according to Richard Dyer, because it has an impact on how we see ourselves and others: 'How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation.' (Dyer, 1993: 1)

Women, while numerically not a minority, were the first to analyse and criticise their media portrayals (e.g. van Zoonen, 1994). Race and ethnicity were soon added to the agenda (e.g. Ferguson, 1998), as was homosexuality (e.g. Gross, 2001). Although my aim is not to discuss the representation of these and other groups in detail, some general tendencies can be identified. A first recurrent point of criticism concerns the numeric representation of social groups in relation to their actual proportion in the population. The key method, here, is (quantitative) content analysis, which consistently identified –and continues to identify– the *underrepresentation* of 'minority' groups, understood here as groups with less social power in comparison to 'majority' groups: women (as opposed to men), racial and ethnic-cultural minorities (as opposed to white, Western people) and LGBTs¹ (as opposed to heterosexuals) (e.g. Greenberg, 1980). According to Gerbner and Gross, such a lack of representations in a media-dominated society implies 'symbolic annihilation': 'Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.' (Gerbner & Gross, 1976: 181)

A second recurring issue concerns the quality of media representations: not 'how much', but 'how' a group is represented. One often invoked criticism here is that of *stereotyping*, where a minority group is reduced to a few, recurring and exaggerated characteristics, positioning it as abnormal and in the process confirming existing power divisions in society (Hall, 1997: 257-258). Another critique is that of *negative images*, where minorities are presented as, or associated with, a problem – recognising, however, that one-sidedly positive images are not a good alternative because they sidestep actual problems and inequalities in society (Hall, 1997: 273).

There is much more to say about the representation of diversity and minorities (see e.g. Hodkinson, 2011), but I want to take a step back and reflect on some problems and shortcomings of the literature on this issue. First, there is a tendency in

1 For Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. I use this acronym here instead of other, more inclusive labels, as this term is mostly used in Flanders nowadays (in Dutch: 'holebi's en transgenders').

media research to limit the attention to certain groups while there are many other minorities and socially marginalised groups. In this article, beside the groups mentioned above, I will also include older and disabled people, two of the multiple minorities which continue to be problematically represented. Second, there is a tendency to focus on the representation of *single groups*, considered in isolation from each-other. However, it is important also to assess how media represent different groups, addressing the diversity within these groups as well as possible overlaps and connections between them. An important concept here is that of 'intersectionality', which refers to the way in which multiple forms of social inequality are intertwined and mutually influence each-other (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Hence, in this article the representation of different groups will be analysed in conjunction, also addressing the ways in which they do –or do not– intersect.

Thirdly, as argued in the introduction, the literature on representation is focusing mostly on the *situation on screen*, criticising misrepresentations but having little to say about the actual processes leading to their continued presence. Authors who do study production processes are able to pinpoint the multiplicity of contexts and practicalities explaining –but not justifying– problematic representations. For instance, Cottle (2000) discusses the limited access of ethnic minorities to media production, but also points out policies, financial restrictions, training, gatekeepers, and many other elements causing unbalanced media representations.² Hence, in this article the analysis of representations will be contextualised, focusing in particular on production practices and discourses.

02 METHODOLOGY

As suggested above, this article wants to move beyond an analysis of representations on screen, expanding the scope to the situation 'behind the screen' (the production context) and its multiple contexts. To do this, a three step approach will be taken. First, the analysis will address the question '*How should diversity be represented?*', sketching the institutional context of Flemish television and the regulations determining the duties of broadcasters in relation to the representation of social diversity. Beside broadcasting policies, this will also include a short discussion of stakeholder opinions, in partic-

² There is no space here to delve into studies on production cultures, but for an elaborate discussion see Caldwell 2008 and 2013.

ular those of the groups under discussion. Second, the question is asked: '*How is diversity actually represented?*' Beside quantitative data, this part includes a qualitative assessment of recent TV drama productions on Flemish television, also taking into account their generic contexts and constraints. Third, the question is asked: '*Why is diversity represented this way?*' Here, production practices and discourses are analysed, trying to understand the reasons and motivations for representing social diversity in a particular way.

To do this, a multi-method approach is used, combining quantitative and (mostly) qualitative sources and methods. In relation to the first question, '*How should diversity be represented?*', two sources are used. On the one hand, broadcasting policies are outlined on the basis of official documents as well as personal communication with the diversity manager of the Flemish Public Service Broadcaster VRT, Geertje De Ceuleneer. On the other hand, stakeholder opinions are discussed on the basis of a taped and transcribed panel debate with representatives and spokespeople of five 'minority' groups in Flanders: Katrien Bruggeman of the Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad, the umbrella organisation of women's associations; Johan De Crom of the Minderhedenforum, an umbrella organisation of ethnic-cultural minority associations; Jeroen Borghs of çavaria, the LGBT umbrella organisation; Mie Moerenhout of the Ouderenraad, the umbrella of organisations for older people; and Nancy Lievyns of GRIP, an organisation for disabled people.

To answer the second question, '*How is diversity actually represented?*', existing quantitative findings based on content analysis are combined with the qualitative analysis of six recent Flemish shows. These were not randomly chosen but purposively selected to add different variables to the equation. First, different genres were chosen, each with their different possibilities and constraints: soaps, crime drama, and 'dramedy' (combining drama and comedy). Soaps and crime dramas were included because these are important, popular and long-running prime time genres on Flemish TV. Dramedies were selected from the wider range of drama and comedy genres because they explore new possibilities in relation to the representation of minorities, as will be discussed below.

Second, for each genre an example from public channel één and commercial channel vtm was selected. This leads to the following sample: the soaps *Thuis* (één, 1995-) and *Familie* (vtm, 1991-); the crime dramas *De Ridder* (één, 2013-) and *Aspe* (vtm, 2004-2014); and dramedies *Marsman* (één, 2014) and *Amateurs* (vtm, 2014). The two soaps were chosen because they are the only ones on Flemish TV; the crime shows were

randomly selected as the most recent and important examples in Flanders; and the two dramedies were purposefully selected because they contain interesting representations of certain minority groups. As a consequence, this sample is not random nor representative, so the findings, while indicative of broader tendencies, should not be generalised to all drama on Flemish television. For the soaps and crime dramas, ten random episodes of the 2014 season were analysed. Both dramedies were entirely analysed, 8 episodes of *Marsman* and 9 of *Amateurs*. These episodes were analysed using qualitative content analysis, using a topic list of themes and issues discussed in the literature on the representation of social minorities (Larsen 1993; Wester & Pleijter, 2006).

To answer the third question, 'Why is diversity represented this way?', the analysis is based on in-depth interviews with people involved in the production of these dramas, aiming to understand their views on diversity and their reasons for (not) representing minorities. These interviewees were: *Thuis* head writer Stef Wouters and producer Wim Janssen; *Familie* executive producer and casting director Steven Pauwels; *De Ridder* writer Rik D'hiet and producer Marina Willems; *Aspe* writer Paul Piedfort and director Kurt Vervaeren; *Marsman* writer and director Mathias Sercu, and director Eshref Reybrouck; *Amateurs* director and producer Frank Van Passel.³ These interviews were fully transcribed verbatim and analysed using the NVivo software for qualitative analysis.

03 HOW SHOULD DIVERSITY BE REPRESENTED?

As a first step, it is important to understand the *institutional and regulatory landscape* of Flemish television. Flanders is the northern, Dutch-language region of Belgium with a population of about 6.5 million inhabitants. Television in Belgium is completely divided across the language border, so Flemish viewers mostly watch Dutch-language Flemish television. On the one hand, there is a strong public broadcaster, VRT, whose first TV channel één had a market share of 28.69% in 2014 (CIM, 2015a). On the other hand, there are a number of commercial channels, among which vtm is the largest with a market share of 19.81% in 2014 (CIM, 2015a). VRT is the dominant player in Flemish television, with a market share to-

talling 37.6% if we include its second channel Canvas. Hence, it is a force to be reckoned with, its programs occupying the top of the ratings (e.g. 18 of the 20 most watched programs in 2014; CIM 2015b).

VRT is not only the market leader, it also has a 'guiding' role in the audio-visual landscape. It is regulated by five year management contracts with Flemish government and the current contract, for the 2012-2016 period, stresses its importance in addressing and representing Flanders in its totality. The first of its six key tasks is 'Attention to all people in Flanders', which includes not only reaching them as audiences (including senior citizens and disabled people), but also representing them in a balanced way (VRT, 2011: 10). In its programming, the VRT has to 'have an eye for diversity in society' (ibid.: 12). A number of measurable objectives are listed, such as the presence of 33% of women and 5% of 'new Flemings'⁴ across all programming (ibid.: 15). Moreover, the balanced representation of women, 'new Flemings', disabled people and senior citizens is quantitatively monitored through annual research. The presence of other groups, like sexual minorities, is not measured but they should be portrayed in a balanced way. All these issues are discussed in an advisory board with representatives of these and other minority groups (ibid.: 15).⁵

A number of instruments are used to operationalize these duties. First, there is a 'Diversity Cell', coordinating all actions and managed by Geertje De Ceuleneer. Second, there is a 'Diversity Charter' (VRT, s.d.) which lays down the basic principles for the representation of diversity. Rather than enumerating groups, it stresses the need to embrace differences and to offer equal opportunities.⁶ Third, there is the annual 'Diversity Monitor', a quantitative content analysis of diversity in programming which will be discussed below.

Geertje De Ceuleneer (2015) stresses the importance of showing diversity on screen, for diverse audiences to recognise themselves, to connect and to feel welcome. In terms of ethnic-cultural diversity, the model is not that of 'multi-

3 These interviews were conducted by students of the MA in Communication Sciences - Media Studies at the University of Antwerp, as part of the 2014 Seminar on Audiovisual Media.

4 This term refers to ethnic-cultural minorities, defined here as people with a nationality from outside the EU15, or who have at least one parent or two grandparents in that situation.

5 At the time of writing, the advisory board was further elaborated to also include representatives of the transgender community, as well as people working on poverty, class and socio-economic inequality not having been sufficiently addressed in diversity policies to date.

6 The Diversity Charter and all VRT policies and actions in relation to diversity can be consulted online on <http://www.vrt.be/wie-zijn-we/werkingsprincipes/diversiteit> (last accessed 4 June 2015).

culturalism' (where people tolerate each-other) but of 'inter-culturalism', promoting a society where people live together and cultural exchanges take place. Moreover, people are not considered to be part of single groups, but to have multiple, hybrid and fluid identities. As De Ceuleneer explains, institutionally these diversity policies have been supported by annual action plans since 2011. First, policies were introduced 'top down', but based on recent assessments a more bottom up approach was developed, aiming to stimulate producers rather than managers.

Overall, there clearly is a genuine interest in diversity within the public broadcasting organisation, which has devised a number of policies, the results of which, however, are rather limited to date. The focus on particular groups has the side effect of obscuring diversity within and overlap between those groups, while some groups and issues (such as poverty) are not named hence not focused upon.⁷

Switching from public service to commercial broadcasting, the contrast could not be larger as there are no legal obligations to represent diversity, nor are there internal policies in relation to diversity on screen. In a personal message, vtm drama manager Jan Creuwels (2015) confirms that there are no specific policies but he states that fiction does aim to 'mirror society' and that diversity is necessary to give a realistic image of contemporary society, which includes a good range of characters in terms of gender and age. Rather than policies, there are commercial reasons to do so: the target audience are those responsible for purchases aged 18-54, so programs will not target –nor solely represent– only a single and uniform group of viewers. Diversity is clearly viewed from a commercial point of view here, and it is only a purpose to the degree that it contributes to market appeal.

Having considered the regulations and policies on the representation of diversity, it is important to also hear out the *key stakeholders* in relation to this issue, the represented groups themselves. As discussed above, this article focuses on five groups, the representatives of which are all part of the abovementioned VRT advisory board on diversity and have been interviewed in a panel debate in Antwerp (12 March 2015). Overall, what all speakers agreed on, is the lack of diversity in Flemish media, including television. Some issues, in particular the representation of women, have been discussed for a long time but are still problematic; other issues have remained underexplored, such as the representation of older and disabled people. As a consequence, all these groups see

it as their duty to continue raising awareness.

According to Bruggeman (2015), a key issue in the representation of women is the on-going use of stereotypes and cliché images, betraying old-fashioned norms about women associated with the domestic sphere and/or considered as sexual objects. De Crom (2015) criticises the negativity of media portrayals of ethnic-cultural minorities, mostly in journalism and particularly in relation to Muslims, who are strongly associated with extremism and terrorism. He pleads for representations of ethnic-cultural minorities which are not *about* their cultural background: 'It can also deal with other things for a change. People with a migration background are often asked questions about their origins or religion. Of course, that's not an identity we have to hide. But a person is more than his origins.' (De Crom, 2015) Talking about LGBTs, Borghe (2015) discerns four partly overlapping periods and problems: first the complete invisibility of homosexuality in the media; second the appearance of stereotypical representations, particularly of gay men as effeminate; third the discussion of homosexuality mostly in relation to problems such as coming out and discrimination. Here, he refers for instance to the soap *Thuis*, where a young character, Franky, came out and his father reacted rather negatively. On the one hand, Borghe considers this as real to life so worth representing; on the other hand, he states that it would be problematic if only such situations were portrayed on screen. Thus, in a fourth stage he pleads for non-problematised representations of LGBTs: showing them without paying particular attention to their sexual orientation or gender identity. Again, he refers to *Thuis* where Franky continued to have many storylines not dealing with his sexuality, and he adds: 'So different representations can exist next to each other and that's actually ideal, particularly if inclusion is also taken into account.' By 'inclusion', he refers to representations of the diversity within the LGBT community, including people not belonging to the white middle class, transgendered people, people with a disability, bisexuals, older LGBTs etc.

Talking about older people, Moerenhout (2015) criticises their strong numeric under-representation as well as the predominance of two recurring images of older people in the media: on the one hand smiling, healthy people with hardly any wrinkles; and on the other hand people with health problems who need a lot of care. There is no in-between, although people over 60 have a wide range of ages, levels of education and income, health situations, needs, etc. Therefore, Moerenhout pleads for a broader range of representations, avoiding clichés. Lievyns (2015) tells a similar story about disabled people.

7 For a further discussion of VRT diversity policies and their results, see Dhoest (2014).

First, she echoes Richard Dyer's statement on the importance of media: 'It's important that media reach a broad audience. The image you get from people actually determines how you deal with people.' Second, she comments on the near invisibility of disability. Third, she laments media portrayals of disabled people as suffering and like Moerenhout, she pleads for more diverse representations: 'For us, it's important that people with a disability are seen as complete citizens. They take on a role as employee, as father, mother, brother, sister, they do voluntary work, they are a partner... People with a disability, even a severe one, also take on these roles, so it's important that they're seen in all these roles.' Furthermore, Lievyns (2015) points out that more physical than mental disabilities are represented in the media, and that these roles, in drama, are seldomly played by disabled actors. Overall, her comments and those of other stakeholders clearly echo the problems identified in the literature review: underrepresentation, stereotyping, negative images, and a lack of diversity within representations of each 'group'.

04 HOW IS DIVERSITY ACTUALLY REPRESENTED?

Assessing the situation on screen, a first tool to use is the Diversity Monitor mentioned above. Annually, a large sample of VRT programmes are analysed using *quantitative content analysis*, focusing on the categories mentioned in the management contract. The 2014 Diversity Monitor (De Swert et al., 2015) shows that channel één reaches the two benchmarks mentioned in its contract. Across all genres, women represent 34.4% of all people on screen, which is more than the 33% mentioned in the contract; drama, with 48%, does (much) better. 'New Flemings' represent 7.6% of all people on screen, again better than the 5% mentioned in the contract; in drama, however, één does not reach the benchmark, with only 4% of 'new Flemings'. For older and disabled people only numbers for all VRT channels combined are available. People over 65 represent 4.2% of all people across all VRT channels, while people with a disability represent 1.1%.

Overall, while the VRT does reach the two benchmarks mentioned in the management agreement, it should be said that these benchmarks are not very high. In comparison to the (estimated) proportion of these groups in the actual population, across all groups we can still see under-representation. For instance, based on a more in-depth study on 2013, Jacobs and Hooghe (2014) state that women constitute 50.6% of the

Flemish population, against less than 34.8% on public channel één and 39.5% on commercial channel vtm. Soaps perform best, with 46.7% across all channels, while other drama averages on 42.2% (ibid.: 21). Ethnic cultural minorities are harder to measure, as only nationality is included in official statistics. About 7% of the people living in Flanders have a foreign nationality, but the actual number of people with foreign roots is estimated at about 15% (ibid.: 27). On één, however, they constitute 4.4% in 2013, and on vtm 3.1%. Fiction, across all channels, scores even lower with 0.9%. For the other groups discussed here there are no comparable numbers, but it is clear: underrepresentation is still an issue.

Moving on to a more *qualitative* assessment of representations, and focusing in particular on drama, a first point to make concerns the genres studied here. *Soaps* are usually daily serials, running over a number of years with a large cast of characters and a lot of intertwined storylines. The social realist style they tend to adopt in Flanders makes it possible and even necessary to refer to social reality 'as it is'. As a consequence, soaps allow for the introduction of minority characters, who however have to be integrated in the soap community. Flemish *crime dramas*, on the other hand, have a much smaller cast of regular characters, which narrows the opportunities to include different minorities in the main cast. However, they do allow for the introduction of secondary characters, so in this sense the genre is more flexible than the soap opera with its fixed cast of characters. Still, crime dramas tend to run over a number of seasons with the same core cast, so they are less flexible than *dramedy*, which –in this study– is constituted of single season drama serials. As such, these allow for the introduction of as many minority characters as the producers and writers want. As to thematic focus, they also offer more freedom than the soaps which tend to focus on domestic life, and particularly the crime dramas where criminality limits the contexts in which characters can be introduced.⁸

It is impossible within the confines of this article to discuss all the characters in the six analysed programs, so instead the five minority groups will be focused upon, sketching the broader patterns of representation and illustrating them with some examples. First, *women* are rather well-represented in Flemish drama fiction according to the diversity monitor, and this is confirmed by these six programs. In both soaps, *Thuis* and *Familie*, female characters constitute about half of the

8 For a more extensive discussion of these genres and their conventions, see Creeber (2015).

cast, and they are portrayed in a great variety of roles and professions, contradicting the stereotype of the 'housewife' and in line with the strongly feminine profile of the soap genre (Geraghty, 1991). The crime dramas are more variable: while *De Ridder* has a female protagonist, substitute public prosecutor Helena De Ridder, *Aspe* has a male protagonist, chief inspector Pieter Van In. Helena also has a female boss and sidekick, so the core team in *De Ridder* is female-dominated while *Aspe* mostly has a male team, although Pieter's boss (and partner) is a woman too, Hannelore Martens. Overall, the women in crime drama are represented as 'strong women', again contradicting older stereotypes. In the two comedies, these stereotypes are more prominent, in line with the greater reliance of comedy on comic types. Thus, *Marsman* focuses on a group of male characters, Nico Marsman and his friends, who form an amateur rock band. They are surrounded by a range of female characters, including his rather hysterical wife Vera and a number of secretaries, who are represented as either housewives or sexy, in line with the patterns sketched by Bruggeman (2015). *Amateurs*, which deals with an amateur theatre company, has a similar range of female characters. While all characters are comical exaggerations, again we note a number of rather old-fashioned and passive housewives, as opposed to the mostly active and professional men. Overall, however, we have to note that women are well-represented in Flemish drama, both quantitatively and qualitatively, occupying a broad range of roles.

For *ethnic-cultural minorities*, the situation is less rosy. Mirroring their under-representation on Flemish TV in general, in TV drama they are mostly absent. *Thuis*, the public service soap, does have a history of ethnic-cultural minority characters and at the time of writing it includes characters of Moroccan, Polish and Cape Verdean origin. While the origins of the Polish Waldek and the Cape Verdean Mayra are completely unmarked, Adil is presented as Moroccan and Muslim. However, he is represented in a very neutral or even positive light, and overall, not much is made of his background, in line with the wishes of the minority group representatives discussed above. In *Familie*, there are two ethnic-cultural minority characters at the time of writing. Faroud is a Muslim police officer of Albanian origin, represented again in a very neutral or even positive light, definitely against stereotype. Bodé is a refugee from the Ivory coast, and his storyline is entirely dedicated to his status as an undocumented migrant, echoing the pattern discussed above, where ethnic-cultural minorities are mostly associated with problems.

In the crime dramas, the public service *De Ridder* again

performs best. Helena's sidekick is chief inspector Zohra, who is of Moroccan descent but whose background is seldom focused upon and who does not correspond to stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive. One problem, however, is that she is the only core minority character, so she carries a heavy 'burden of representation', having to represent an entire community (see Hodkinson 2011: 208). Geraghty (1991: 142) refers to this type of characters as 'singletons', single characters who disappear under the responsibility of carrying the race issue. In *De Ridder*, however, Zohra's race and ethnicity are rather unmarked, which is more like the situation Geraghty (ibid.: 144) describes as 'incorporation', where minority characters are represented as part of the community. In contrast, occasional storylines in *De Ridder* do focus on ethnic-cultural minorities and their problems. In *Aspe*, this is actually the only way ethnic-cultural minorities are (rarely) introduced, confirming their overall association with problems and crime in media. Finally, both *Marsman* and *Amateurs* are virtually all-white and all-Western, both portraying very 'Flemish' milieus and confirming the general pattern of under-representation on Flemish TV. Overall, then, ethnic-cultural minorities are rarely represented in the dramas analysed here, but their portrayals tend to be neutral or even positive rather than stereotypical.

Turning to *LGBTs*, again the soaps are rather inclusive. In the past, *Thuis* figured a very prominent gay storyline, first around the coming out of Franky, the son of two key characters, and subsequently his marriage to Tibo which provided the 'season finale'. As a rather masculine plumber, Franky was represented in a resolutely non-stereotypical way.⁹ Similarly, the current lesbian couple in *Thuis*, Ann and Mayra, is constituted of central characters whose sexuality is not focused upon and who are represented in a very feminine way, so again going against 'old' stereotypes of *LGBTs* as effeminate men and butch women. In *Familie*, the gay couple Rudi and Zjef is similarly represented in a rather neutral way; although the problem of coming out and (non-)acceptance are touched upon, both characters are represented as part of the soap community in a non-stereotypical way. The crime dramas are less inclusive. *De Ridder* has no *LGBT* characters in the central cast, although homosexuality is occasionally the theme of a weekly storyline. In *Aspe*, the central character's sidekick used to be the gay inspector Guido, whose sexuality was por-

9 There is no room here to extensively discuss each representation, but upon closer reading this character could be criticised for being heteronormative in his wish to blend in and marry (see e.g. Avila-Saavedra 2009).

trayed in a very subtle way, very much in accordance with the non-problematized representation preferred by Borghs (2015). However, in the last season (which was analysed for this paper), no LGBT characters were included. Both dramedies are more inclusive, with mixed results. In *Marsman*, the protagonist's daughter Femke and her girlfriend Dominique play a prominent role, and they are represented in a very non-stereotypical and non-problematized way. In *Amateurs*, only two secondary characters are gay, and they are presented in a very marked and effeminate way, in line with older stereotypes but also in accordance with the more comic tone of this show. Overall, however, lesbian and gay characters are included in many programs in a rather neutral or even positive way; at the same time, there's always only a couple of them, illustrating the persistent problem of 'tokenism' where single characters represent entire groups of the population (see Hodkinson, 2001: 208). Transgender characters, to date, have been absent in Flemish fiction, although after the period analysed here Franky, the gay character in *Thuis*, came out as transgender, a storyline that is developing at the time of writing.

Older people (over 60) are strongly under-represented on Flemish TV in general, and the same is true in the drama analysed here. In *Thuis*, only a few characters are (just) over 60, and they are mostly represented as dynamic and healthy, in line with the first type of representations discussed by Moerenhout (2015). *Familie* has a similar number of older characters, two of which are very old and live in a retirement home, but they only play a secondary role. Overall, the soaps mostly figure adults between 20 and 45. The same is true for the crime dramas, where the average age is a little higher but where older people over 60 hardly figure, apart from secondary roles. In the dramedies, the situation differs. *Marsman* has a rather young cast, although there are two interesting older women: Yvonne, the protagonist's deceased mother, who occasionally appears to reprimand her son; and Rosa, a secondary character who is represented as very motherly and warm. Both are quirky and original, not conforming to established representations of older people. *Amateurs* has a larger cast and also figures more older characters. Jos, the chairman of the theatre company, is a very round and gentle character, who is contrasted with a number of secondary, more two-dimensional older characters: Frank, his nemesis, who is more energetic; Philomena, who is old-fashioned and intolerant; and Leonard, a former actor who is now demented. Despite the quite sharp and rather stereotypical representation of some characters, of all the shows discussed here *Amateurs*

actually shows the widest range of older people, who tend to be quite invisible in Flemish drama overall.

Finally, of all the groups discussed here, *disabled people* are certainly the least visible on TV. At the time of writing, two main characters in *Thuis* have a temporary physical disability (blindness and paralysis), which is the focus of their storyline. Similarly, in *Familie* two characters are injured, but neither permanent nor mental disabilities are represented. In *De Ridder*, only one (secondary) character is disabled, but he is interesting as he's a lawyer, going against the stereotype of disabled people as needy and dependent. In *Aspe*, no characters are disabled, but some are injured and one dies because of an accident. In contrast, both dramedies prominently feature disabled characters, which is rare on Flemish television and which is why both shows were selected. In *Marsman*, the protagonist's brother Rudy is autistic, a rare example of mental disability on television. Moreover, he is treated in a very balanced way and presented as 'different', not abnormal. Two other characters are also disabled: Mark, one of the core characters, lost an arm in an accident, while Lander, a secondary character, has a lighter form of autism. Thus, *Marsman* presents a range of portrayals which is unique on Flemish TV and which earned the serial several prizes, including the VRT Diversity Trophy. *Amateurs*, which on the whole tends to portray its characters in a more exaggerated and sometimes stereotypical way, also figures a character with a mental disability, Pierre, who is represented in a very sympathetic way. While he is rather childish, his girlfriend Laura is a highly intelligent autistic person, so this serial too presents an unusually diverse image of disability while overall, this theme is hardly touched upon on Flemish television.

This overview of minority characters in six Flemish serial dramas is necessarily sketchy, but some patterns emerge. First, numerically, most groups tend to be under-represented, with the possible exception of women. Second, most portrayals of minorities are rather neutral or even positive, very much in line with the wishes of the stakeholders. Thirdly, however, because of the limited number of minority characters, these do not manage to capture the diversity of any group. Hardly ever are intersections between different minority positions explored: ethnic-cultural minority characters tend to be young, straight and able-bodied; LGBTs tend to be young, white and able-bodied; older people tend to be white, straight and able-bodied; and the few disabled characters are young, white and straight. Only female characters are represented in a range of roles, although the interplay between different positions is hardly explored.

05 WHY IS DIVERSITY REPRESENTED THIS WAY?

To sum up, what we have so far is a regulatory and policy context stimulating diversity on public service but not on commercial television; stakeholders who are critical of the representation of women, ethnic-cultural minorities, LGBTs, older and disabled people in the media; and six dramas which do include a rather large and varied range of female characters, but only token –if rather neutral– characters belonging to other minority groups. In some genres and for some groups, public service drama performs better, but overall, there are many similarities between each pair of dramas belonging to the same genre. So how can we explain this? A good start, I would argue, is to talk to the writers, producers and directors who have created this drama. Doing this, however, we need to be aware that these accounts are ‘cultural’ and constitute yet another set of texts and discourses to be interpreted, rather than a transparent account of decision-making processes (Caldwell, 2013).

Talking to the production staff, a first finding concerns the *limited direct impact of policies* on the everyday production of public service drama. For instance, *De Ridder* has a prominent ethnic-cultural minority female character but according to writer D’hiet, this is not because of diversity policies: ‘Actually that’s not your first preoccupation as the writer or author of a series, to conform to certain ideas about diversity. That’s not the way an idea comes to life.’ He does acknowledge the importance of diversity and presenting a representative image of society, but policies are not his key preoccupation. While *De Ridder* is produced for the VRT by external production company Eyeworks, the soap *Thuis* is produced ‘in house’ which explains why it is more directly influenced by diversity policies. For instance, head writer Wouters acknowledges that the first ethnic-cultural minority in the soap, Mo, was deliberately introduced because of diversity policies. Producer Janssen adds that no quota are imposed on individual programs, but that there is a strong public service ethos: ‘I have the impression that the people working on *Thuis*, and many people working for the VRT, naturally have a kind of public service character in which you realise you play a role in society.’

While diversity policies are not directly nor strongly imposed on producers working for the VRT, for vtm the same is true about *commercial considerations*: they do play a role in the background, but there is no direct commercial interference in the production process. For instance, the soap *Familie* is mostly preoccupied with reaching the right profile of view-

ers. Traditionally, it reached a rather old audience, many of whom fell outside of the commercially interesting 18-54 age range. As a consequence, *Family* was rejuvenated, which explains the rather limited presence of older characters, as confirmed by producer and casting director Pauwels. Talking about the long-running crime drama *Aspe*, director Vervaeren also stresses the importance of reaching the right audience: ‘That’s primordial. The first thing a channel checks is its target audience.’ Diversity, in that respect, is merely a side-thought, as writer Piedfort confirms: ‘We never got information on that, certainly never instructions. But thinking purely commercially, I think: the broader the audience the better. The ethnic-cultural minority audience is a big market, so I would say: Who gives a damn?’

If policies and commercial preoccupations are not a key rationale for including more diversity, then what is? Talking to the production staff, it seems that diversity is something they do care about. The interviewees are generally aware of the fact that diversity is underrepresented and that drama does not accurately represent the actual diversity in society. For instance, *Amateurs* producer Van Passel says: ‘If diversity means that TV serials are a reflection of society, then I think that’s not the case. I think the majority of TV fiction is behind reality in that sense.’ *Familie* producer Pauwels shares this opinion, but he is quick to add practical reasons: ‘There’s not all that much colour on TV, here. But that’s maybe because we don’t find the right people who are schooled actors. Acting is a profession and you can’t just get someone from the street to play that.’ Such practical considerations related to *casting* are actually among the strongest recurring elements in the interviews: finding good actors, with diverse backgrounds. As a response to this problem, in the past training sessions for minority actors were organised, and more recently some Belgians of Moroccan origin started their own casting agency.¹⁰

This is certainly the case for ethnic-cultural minority actors. For instance, *De Ridder* producer Willems says: ‘Actually the biggest problem in relation to allochthonous people, is that we have very few actors and actresses of allochthonous origin.’¹¹ While she stresses how important diversity is to her, she also states that this should not be forced and that introducing bad actors to reach quota would hurt a production. This is also the case for older people, as Van Passel stresses: ‘There are very few older actors. So you try to avoid that as

10 See www.hakunacasting.com/en (last accessed 4 November 2015).

11 Allochthonous is a term used to refer to people with a non-European migration background in Flanders.

much as possible, because it often doesn't work.' Like others, he says that the lack of diversity is not a matter of bad faith: 'The practical consequences are just much bigger than people who don't produce fiction can imagine. Because if diversity implies that you represent people in fiction who don't belong to the standard group of actors, then you have to find them, one way or the other.' Similarly, there are hardly any disabled actors, which explains why most roles of people with a disability are played by able-bodied actors.

Finding good actors is so important because producers aim for *credibility*: they want to get it right. For instance, talking about the central character with autism in *Marsman*, director Reybrouck says: 'If you do it, you have to do it right. It has to be credible. So if it works, it's beautiful, but on the other side we had a bit of fear for a negative response.' They also want to get it right because diversity is a very *sensitive topic*. For instance, commenting on the strong connection between diversity and religion post 9/11, *Thuis* writer Wouters says: 'To tackle that kind of diversity, it's a very charged topic.' Producer Janssen adds: 'Yes, you really have to approach that in a very conspicuous manner.' Most interviewees also talk about realistically *reflecting society*. For instance, *Familie* producer Pauwels says: 'Diversity is actually when you want to reflect society, when you show all aspects of reality. That you don't limit yourself to average typical families, but that you also show extremes or minorities.'

Capturing this sense of reality, however, is a matter of balance. On the one hand, the interviewees want to *avoid stereotypes*. For instance, *De Ridder* writer D'hiet says: 'I don't think Zohra is a self-evident cliché. She has certain things that completely fit the culture she comes from, but on the other side she surprises us.' On the other hand, the interviewees do not consider *positive images* as a good alternative either, in line with the literature discussed above. For instance, when asked if they want to strive towards more positive images, *Familie* producer Pauwels says: 'Yes, sometimes we do. Sometimes we don't. We should not avoid problems that are there.' *Thuis* producer Janssen agrees, stating that it's important to draw characters as full human beings. Looking back upon the first ethnic-cultural minority character introduced in *Thuis*, he says: 'Laughingly, I sometimes say "Mo, the perfect Moroccan". He was actually how we wanted Moroccans to be. That's something we wouldn't do anymore.' Instead of positive images, *neutral and non-conspicuous portrayals* are what many producers aim for. For instance, talking about the gay police inspector in *Aspe*, director Vervaeren says: 'His being gay could not be a problem. It could not be an issue in the sense of

"Oh, he's gay, be careful". No positive discrimination, no negative discrimination. We took enormous care to do neither.' Discussing the lesbian and disabled characters in *Marsman*, writer Sercu states that the strategy was the same: they had to be 'ordinary'. In a similar vein, *Thuis* writer Wouters states that you don't have to always treat diversity as different: 'When Adil came into the serial, for a long time we didn't do anything with the fact that he was coloured. He was just a worker like others, and we treated him in a very normal way.'

Talking about the best way to introduce minority characters and storylines, most of the interviewees agree that diversity should not be forced upon the viewers. For instance, *Thuis* producer Janssen says that contemporary drama viewers do not like to have themes or opinions imposed on them: 'So you don't have to treat them like: "We're from television, we know how things are and we are going to tell you".' Writer Wouters adds that storylines have to grow from characters: 'We get a lot of questions to discuss certain social themes, but if it can't organically grow out of the characters and the things they want, we can't tell it because we think then you'll make bad stories.'

This brings us to the essence of the interviews: what it all boils down to in the eyes of the production staff, are dramatic considerations. Wouters: 'We want to tell good stories. And if these are good and connect to society, this means that society recognises itself in the stories we tell.' Diversity is subordinate to that, but it can help to tell good and dramatic stories. For instance, *Amateurs* director Van Passel explains how the disabled character Pierre was primarily a way to create a dramatic storyline for his struggling single mother. Similarly, *De Ridder* writer D'hiet states how it is important to have a diverse cast to create tensions and conflicts: 'So it's partly out of self-interest that you create a cast that's as diverse as possible.' In that sense, he feels more responsible to give viewers a good storyline than a politically correct picture of reality. Similarly, *Marsman* director Reybrouck does not think fiction should necessarily focus on diversity: 'It's an added value if it's there, but as a director you always focus on your story. (...) In *Marsman* it was different, because in *Marsman* it was really about autism, to a large degree. But if you tell a rather general story, why would you add diversity?'

06 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

So, why add diversity? Reviewing the different sources consulted for this research, there seems to be general agreement

that the representation of diversity matters. Academic literature as well as stakeholders stress the importance of minority representation for the way these are viewed and treated in real life. Flemish government and public broadcasting officials concur, aiming for an increased and balanced representation of diversity through a number of regulations and policies. Quantitative findings, however, highlight the continued under-representation of certain groups. Qualitative research shows how minority portrayals in Flemish drama tend to be rather non-stereotypical and neutral, but that there is a lack of diversity within and intersections between the portrayals of minority groups.

Talking to production staff is a good way to better understand this situation. While all the interviewees are aware of the limited diversity on screen, and are sympathetic to the cause (which is unsurprising, as it is a socially desirable one), they do not feel responsible. First off, they are not directly obliged to represent more diversity, not in public service broadcasting where policies are not strongly enforced, and certainly not in commercial broadcasting where reaching the target audience is primordial. Secondly, producers point at practical reasons for the lack of diversity, primarily the shortage of (good) actors belonging to a number of groups, in particular ethnic-cultural minorities, older and disabled people. Thirdly, representing minorities is a sensitive topic and there seems to be a certain fear to tackle minority issues as there is a risk of not getting it right. Fourthly, the interviewees consistently point at the priority of good storylines, which however may also lead to the inclusion of a diverse cast for increased dramatic potential. Fifth, the production staff does generally have a clear sense of the best way to introduce minority characters: not stereotypical nor overly positive, but balanced and rather neutral. This is in line with the positions taken in academic literature and by stakeholders, but it does lead to the erasure of certain social problems, such as the disadvantaged socio-economic position of ethnic-cultural minorities and the marginalisation of older and disabled people. It also leads to the presence of a few rather neutral token characters, who do not manage to evoke the actual diversity in society.

What we need in drama is a much wider range of representations, not necessarily focusing on problems but also not avoiding them; not drawing particular attention to the minority status of characters, nor treating them as representatives of a single group, but treating each as individuals, taking up different positions in society and carrying a range of storylines. To accomplish this, it seems that more extensive consciousness-raising (by stakeholders) and more strongly

imposed policies (by government and broadcasters) are necessary, because after years of diversity actions, Flemish TV drama remains predominantly populated by young, white, straight and able-bodied characters.

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