Portraying Gays on Reality TV
Case *Gay Army* and Its Reception

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The Nordic reality TV program *Gay Army* raised public debate in Sweden in 2005. *Gay Army*, despite the low interest among the viewers, raised public discussion of its stereotyping nature and the ethics of reality programming – a topic continuously raised by reality programs. Many concerned voices were heard of the prejudices *Gay Army* -type of programs might provoke. The organisation Homo-, Bi-, and Transsexuals in the Armed Forces (HoF) even had a meeting with the production director to request the channel not to air the program. Several gay men protested openly against the program in audience letters, newspaper columns and online discussions.[1]

By combining my own reading of the program with a reception research I studied 1) what kinds of representations of homosexuality *Gay Army* offers, 2) how the audiences respond to these representations, 3) what can be seen as the weight and impact of such representations and 4) what kinds of pleasures different audiences find from the program.

My study contributes to the discussion of reality TV and its audiences, representation of gays in the media and the

1 This report is a summary of an article I wrote in 2006 as my Master Thesis at the department of Media and Communication Studies at the Stockholm University.

Western tradition of marking the difference between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

The theoretical background in this study derives from queer theory and theoretical approaches to audiences, reality TV and representations. I will start by giving a short theoretical introduction to reality TV. I will then offer a general view of the program and then move on to discuss the reception research I conducted. At the end I will sum up the main conclusions.

Studying reality TV

Most people would say they watch reality TV only for entertainment. However, it has also been said that reality TV lays claim to reveal social, psychological, political and historical truths and to depict the rhythms and structure of everyday life (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, 3). It has been called ´infotainment´, a way of building public consent of social order and values through entertainment practises.

Even though reality TV continues to raise public concern about the cultural values and ideologies the programs seem to promote, theories of ideology and power in media representations have been challenged in some more recent

reception researches, particularly in the research by Annette Hill. Hill has shown that people have a great deal of cynicism when evaluating the realness of reality TV and the participants of the programs (2005, 9). Sonia Livingstone shares this point of view:

Research has clearly shown that audiences are plural in their decodings, that their cultural context matters and that they cannot be presumed to agree with textual analysis of television programmes. (Livingstone, 1998, 190)

I find it important to study reality TV as it is, as many say, a reflection of our times. I also believe that a great deal can be learned by listening to audiences. The discussions around reality TV are many – but it is rarely the general audience who gets its voice heard. The following words by Annette Hill set the spark for my small scale reception research:

What is often missing from the great debate about reality TV, and its impact on television and its audience, are the voices of people who watch reality programmes.

In this study I listened to a dozen of television viewers. I wanted to contrast my own textual analysis of the program with reception research in order to assure a certain level of objectivity and reflectivity in the study. This review is to be understood as a qualitative case study shedding light to the ways people can read the program, not as a generalizing account of reception at large.

Feminine men in a masculine world

*Gay Army. Nine of the gayest men in Scandinavia face the toughest challenge of their lives. Stripped of their everyday luxuries the gay guys are thrown into the world of the US drill instructor Tony Rosenbaum. Two completely opposite worlds collide. If they complete their training the gay army must face their toughest challenge: they must take on the real army in battle. For the gay recruits it is an experience packed with tears, laughter, action, warmth, surprises, twists and pride. The most feminine men ever to put on a uniform. Nothing will ever be the same again. **Gay army**, feminine men in a masculine world.*

These were the lines of the voice-over in the *Gay Army* promotion trailer. They make the idea of the program clear: *Gay Army* was about taking feminine gay men into two weeks of army training and to see if they could cope with it. It was not a competition, there was no prize included – the only goal was to get through it like a man.

During the course of the show we see the gays wrestling (One on one, man on man, as the sergeant comments), eating bugs *Fear Factory* -style, going to doctor´s appointment, telling about their life full of shopping and manicures, putting up a show for the ´real´ army guys, having emotional moments when calling home. That is: a whole lot of entertainment and little bit of army.

Qualities like vanity, coyness, a bouncy walk and a general lack of aggressiveness are conventionally considered unmasculine, as Alexander Doty points out (Doty, 1997, 63), and they are also qualities emphasised in the program. By

using stock characters and clear signs of gayness *Gay Army* gives the audience an easy access to the persons and plot and ensures that drama is more readily propelled.

The two completely opposite worlds are highlighted in several ways. First of all, by editorial practices: comical music is added to the background whenever the gays are doing army drills (which of course makes them look foolish and helpless) but when the sergeant is in the picture, we hear dramatic sound effects. Secondly, by giving central attention to the gay guys who are the most feminine and physically the weakest. Thirdly, by producer mediation: the gays were given feminine outfits and sex toys by the producers (something that one of the gays revealed later on in an interview) and they were then told to put the toys into their bags. The next thing we see is the sergeant going through the guys´ bags and what does he find!

The presupposition in *Gay Army* is that homosexuals lack toughness and are not suitable to army. Especially the comments from sergeant Rosenbaum are digging this gap ever deeper as he gives comments like "These are the most unlikely recruits I have ever had", "You are the worst bunch of recruits I have ever seen in my life" and "This is *my* world".

Army has long been identified as an especially homophobic apparatus in which homophobia is a part of the military code (Dunphy, 2000, 112). By taking the gay issue into the army context *Gay Army* is playing with cultural codes that are highly charged with emotions and cultural values.

Readings from the Focus Audience

Let us listen to the audience members who I had a pleasure to interview for this study. I conducted three focus group interviews with four respondents in each group. In the first group I had two heterosexual and two homosexual males, in the second group two heterosexual and two lesbian females and in the third group two heterosexual males and two heterosexual females. I name these groups *guy group*, *girl group* and *control group*. In the transcripts the sexual orientation of the informant is marked by (G) gay, (L) lesbian or (S) straight. The transcript sign (.) illustrates a long pause and a comma (,) a short pause in the talk.

All my informants were between the age of 20 and 25, Nordic, middle class and living in urban areas. This intersectionality of identities should be kept in mind when analysing the responses.

In my one and a half hour discussion with each group I had four key questions: 1) Which thing or scene did you like the most in this program? 2) What did you not like? 3) Who do you think especially enjoyed watching *Gay Army*? 4) Do you think reality TV programs like this can effect the viewers´ perceptions of and attitudes towards homosexuality?

Interpreting the Feminine Stereotype

Each group I interviewed started discussing *Gay Army* by bringing up the narrow, extreme and stereotypical

representation of gays as feminine and the bipolar setting between the feminine gays and the masculine world of the army. Many suggestions were also made about the ´unmediated´ nature of reality programming and how the guys were acting the gay role for the cameras.

Femininity was further considered to be to some extent constructed: many believed that the producers were trying to make the guys look even more feminine by, for example, editorial practices and by giving central attention to the most feminine guys. What was interesting was that even though the groups discussed vividly the stereotypical nature of the program, when asked to describe the gays with three adjectives no one mentioned the word ´stereotypical´ and even when mentioning ´feminine´ it was in most cases accompanied with positive adjectives such as natural, happy, outgoing, funny, self-confident and entertaining. This goes at least for the control group and the girl group.

There was, however, a clear contrast between the guy group and the other two groups: the girl and the control group offered alternative readings, ones that recognized the good qualities in the participants – as well as gays in real life. The guy group picked up more negatively charged adjectives like sissy, anxious, attention-seeking and frustrated. Especially the gay informants, who themselves did not identify with the feminine gay type, were bothered by the representation and saw the feminine stereotype as negatively charged.

Simon (G): The bad thing about this program is that, they give a

wrong picture of the gay world, so everyone who has been looking at this program thinks that every gay is feminine, so fucking feminine

Mats (G): It's a compliment [if someone thinks that I am straight] because, it´s kind of low to be gay. It is like a compliment, when people say, oh you are very masculine, you look like a straight guy, and I´m like, oh thank you

Laughter

The contrast in the interpretations came clear also when the groups discussed the question of pleasures. Who enjoyed watching *Gay Army* the most? Who was laughing and at what? Here are some responses that illustrate the multiple interpretations the respondents gave.

Mats (G): The program is just making fun of this [gay] stuff but, I don't understand why they are doing it (.) in a reality show

Tea (L): No, we don't laugh at them, we laugh with them (.) in a way, ´cause we can put ourselves in situations, where we would do something unusual to us

Tom (S): I think that, everybody is laughing at them (.) I´m totally sure like, I´m laughing only because they are like, gay and funny and different

Sonja (S): I could kind of imagine, that even the gay people would be laughing at them (.) because, I don't see normal gay people like that, I mean they are not so extreme (.) so they kind of get that

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distance, too, I mean gay (.) men or lesbians

Laughter is a complex thing to analyse. When studying my focus audiences I noticed there were different kinds of laughter present in the discussions. If we only ask *who* was laughing, we miss essential qualities of that laugher. Understanding the tone and target of the laughter is essential when painting the picture of media reception. I here term these multiple laughing positions *at-laughter* and *with-laughter* (since the questions of whether the audience was laughing at or with the gays became so central in the discussions). I argue that we have to separate a *positive* and a *negative* type of laughter in order to understand the question of pleasures I was digging into in this study.

A positive at-laughter, which for example Tom in the control group openly admitted of having, is about laughing at the minority, but in a positive, celebrating and sympathetic way, yet not identifying with the group; a negative at-laughter places the one laughing on a superior position and thus aims at reinforcing negative attitudes towards minorities (this is how the gay informants felt the general audience was laughing); a positive with-laughter is about laughing with the minority in a familiarizing and identifying way; and a negative with-laughter is where a member of the minority partly identifies with the representations but yet finds the generalizing nature of stereotypes to be harmful. The last category represents how I see the gay informants in my study were laughing. As members of the gay community they were laughing with the gays, but still distancing themselves from the feminine gay type and

remaining strongly negative towards the representations, worrying that they label the whole gay community.

It was clear that there was a misunderstanding of the way other people are laughing. The gays felt it was the other audiences, mainly the heterosexual male audience, laughing at them in a ridiculing tone. However, despite laughing at the program, informants in other groups, when commenting on the good sides of the program, focused on scenes where the gays were being celebrated and encouraged or where they were showing courage.

Evaluating Media Effects

When talking about media effects, all groups mentioned that some people do think the stereotype is the whole picture and thus they get a twisted picture of reality. Especially the gays had a strong feeling that people take stereotypes from the programs and generalize their understanding of particular groups based on those representations.

There was obviously two ways of thinking about stereotypes: the ones being stereotyped were clearly the most concerned of the generalising nature, whereas many others – even though acknowledging this side, too – thought stereotypes are entertaining just because they are simplifying and people know it is not the whole picture. These respondents also stressed that there are stereotypes of everything: *Gay Army* was a stereotype not only of gays but also of drill sergeants, the army and the whole masculine/feminine polarisation. Interestingly, in the girl group

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some of the girls found the stereotypical representation of the masculine sergeant to be even more ridiculous than that of the gays.

David Gauntlett (2005, 256) has argued that popular media has a significant but not entirely straightforward relationship with people`s sense of gender and identity and that ideas about lifestyle and identity that appear in the media are resources which individuals use to think through their sense of self and modes of expression. As reality TV is based on ´real´ people, people are often looking for recourses of identification. If, for gay viewers the only (or at least the most common) image available in the media is the feminine gay type, this might cause anxieties, as comes clear from Mats´ comment.

*Mats (G): In the beginning when I thought I was gay, I was a bit scared, like, no I´m not gay, I´m not like that [feminine] So it´s kind of influencing gay guys too that they start to feel that, maybe I`m not that gay, I´m not like **that**.*

But who, then, are these people that all the focus groups were referring to? The ones that are influenced by the stereotypes and don't see the big picture? It was mentioned that it is the older generations who have not lived in such an open society; it is the teenagers who are themselves confused about their (sexual) identities; it is the people who don't have any personal contact with gays; and it is the people who are against gays anyway and want to have their negative attitude confirmed.

It seems that people have a rather idealized picture of

themselves as critical media consumers. It is often the obscurely referred people who are said to lack criticism and analytical skills when reading media texts.

Conclusions

The three focus group discussions I conducted proved the multiple reading positions a program can offer. The overall picture I got of my focus groups confirms what Annette Hill has written about reality TV audiences: informants in this study were critical, motivated and sceptical when reading *Gay Army*. Many comments were made about the forms of editing, reconstructions and scripts behind the seemingly spontaneous events on screen. Even though almost everyone was laughing when watching the show, they yet contributed to a critical discussion of socio-cultural values.

With this study I hope to have shown that it is not sufficient to keep up the critical discussion about media effects without the voices of the viewers. My study alongside with many others testifies to the critical and analytical viewing practises the media audiences are engaged in today. This is not a new perspective but obviously it is easily forgotten in the context of reality TV. If we are concerned about how media influences people we need to identify the audience segments that are most probable to be influenced in an undesirable way.

This study opened up an interesting place for further studies: How valid is the interpretation the twenty-something

generation gives? Are there really generational gaps in the media reading skills or do my informants have a misconception that they know more than the other media consumers? Further studies would also be needed on the differences between audiences from urban and rural areas. It can be assumed that in the urban areas attitudes are more open and tolerant than in the rural areas (see for example Herdth, Gilbert H. 1997, 173-174).

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