QUEER TV?
THE CASE OF SHOWTIME’S QUEER AS FOLK
AND THE L WORD

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I, Magali Claudine Dominique BURNICHON, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

This work answers questions regarding the extent to which U.S. pay cable television can be thought of as queer TV, in the sense of defying (hetero)normativity and advocating for political resistance. Adopting a queer theory approach, the thesis examines how this queerness manifests at the production, textual and reception levels and how it shifts the understanding of television as a domestic medium and re/producer of mass culture. It suggests that Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are queer narratives that generate critical and political sites of resistance by offering diverse and flexible producing and viewing positions and images challenging essentialised understandings of identities and sexualities. This is possible because these texts are produced by Showtime, which offers its writers creative freedom and authorial vision unavailable on other forms of television, and its subscribers content that is not ‘regular TV’. Exploring the state of the U.S. television landscape, Chapter I demonstrates the complexity of U.S. television and argues that TV texts should be discussed in relation to the medium that produces them. Analysing Showtime’s writing process, Chapter II identifies three characteristics that make my case studies queer narratives and proposes that these narrative devices are directly connected with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand. Focussing on television reception, Chapter III discusses TV viewers as tourists visiting and discovering new places and characters and suggests that queer narrative viewers occupy viewing positions that exist betwixt and between on-screen and real-life life-worlds. Another queer narrative characteristic, liminality offers viewers a dual identification process with the characters: immersion and awareness. This thesis contributes to the body of work on my case studies by discussing them with respect to Showtime, a perspective often neglected in past studies, and to the queer television
studies literature through its discussion of queer narratives and liminal television viewers.
My research has two main contributions. First, it contributes to the body of studies on *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* from a different perspective. Although the subject of various studies, most work on *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* pays attention to whether both series manage to offer verisimilar and comprehensive representations of LGBTQ identities, discussing their contributions in terms of visibility and political recognition of minorities. With some notable exceptions, many studies discuss these series in regard to their representational practices and politics to acknowledge their potential inputs into a larger history of LGBTQ representations on television and cultural and social visibility. However, most fail to situate these texts in the context of the U.S. television landscape, with respect to Showtime and in relation to the form, content and reception of these texts, to address what these queer narratives reveal about Showtime (and pay cable television to a greater extent) and its position regarding the re/production of contemporary normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. In contrast, my work situates *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in the context of Showtime and examines how Showtime’s creative freedom and authorial vision enable writers to create queer narratives that differ from ‘regular TV’. In particular, my work identifies four narrative features directly related to the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand that make these texts queer narratives: the use of stereotypes and typical scripts, the queer temporality of these texts, their politicised narratives and their liminality.

Second, my research contributes to the growing body of literature on queer television studies. The literature review of television studies and queer television studies shows that U.S. television is often addressed as one institution regardless of its
various systems of television. Conversely, I suggest that the complexity of the television medium demands the distinction between the various forms of television of the U.S. television landscape, proposing that each form of television (and its products) be addressed with respect to the system it belongs to. As a result, my thesis emphasises how Showtime shifts the meaning of television from a domestic medium catering to the ‘traditional family’ to a cultural medium better thought of in terms of personal, interactive television and individual screen. By acknowledging the complexity of U.S. television and focussing on pay cable TV’s features, my analysis complicates the understanding of TV viewers as passively active and glancing at the screen from time to time, suggesting instead an understanding of pay cable TV viewers in terms of liminality and heteroflexibility, which gives viewers access to a dual identification process characterised by viewing positions that are situated in-between that of television (articulated in terms of the glance) and that of the cinema (articulated in terms of the gaze). Hence, my discussion proposes a new approach to television viewership that queers the viewers’ gaze and draws their attention to the constructedness of both on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds.
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INTRODUCTION
Although experts have predicted its ‘death’ for years, television remains an important part of the U.S. media landscape. To this day, the TV industry continues to be a prosperous activity that generates billions of dollars each year. Yet, TV’s rapid technological changes have undeniably altered the practice of ‘watching TV’. As I suggest throughout this work, U.S. television today is a complex medium that encompasses various systems of television, each possessing specific forms and characteristics. Thus, rapid technological changes should be understood as an evolution of the medium. Moreover, rather than its end, they identify the cultural and industrial practices established by broadcast TV as key components of television during the ‘network era’ (between the 1950s and 80s; see Lotz 2009). Therefore, discussing television as a single system fails to acknowledge its evolution as an institution, an industry and a cultural form and disregards the specific characteristics of each form of television in the post-network era. Instead, television (and its products) should be approached based on the system it belongs to. Hence, this thesis focusses exclusively on pay cable television and in particular on the premium network Showtime and two of its most popular original series, Queer as Folk (2000-2005) and The L Word (2004-2009). Importantly, this work considers a specific historical moment of U.S. pay cable TV resulting from the growing competitiveness of mass-market television since the 1980s, which has led to new ideologies and new industry needs to gain audience share. Throughout this thesis, I suggest that this historical moment has enabled Showtime (and other premium networks) to develop its own brand and position itself and its original programming against ‘regular’ broadcast TV networks and their texts, in turn defining the type of audience Showtime programmes were aimed at and further distinguishing pay cable TV subscribers from broadcast TV
viewers. Therefore, analysing Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* from a queer perspective, this thesis aims at answering a set of questions on whether, how and to what extent this form of U.S. television can be thought of as a queer object of study that can defy (hetero)normativity and advocate for political resistance to generate critical and political sites of resistance. Using the example of Showtime, it explores what these two texts reveal about pay cable television as a queer object of study. To this end, it examines how this queerness materialises at the production, textual and reception levels and how (and to what degree) it shifts the understanding of television as a domestic medium and a re/producer of mass culture. Throughout the thesis, I analyse the queer representations offered in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in relation to the form, content and reception of these texts, to discuss their significance in relation to normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. My discussion adopts a queer theory approach to pay cable television. As suggested in the literature, queer television studies produce a tension at the intersection between the articulation of the mainstream and its disruption, to generate critical and political sites of resistance that simultaneously underline the logics of television as re/producer of hegemonic norms and develop a queer logic that destabilises these norms. This tension opens a space that offers diverse and flexible non-, anti-, and contra- normative positions and pleasures to produce, consume and respond to television. From this perspective, I suggest that *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are queer narratives\(^1\) that generate sites of resistance by offering

\(^1\) Throughout this thesis, my understanding of *narrative* is based on Rick Altman’s definition of narrative text ‘as a series of individual following-units, joined by modulations and arranged in a particular manner’ (2008: 26) and Judith Roof’s definition of narrative ‘as a set of ordering presumptions by which we make sense of perceptions, events, cause/effect relations […], and life’ (1996: xv).
diverse and flexible producing and viewing (non-, anti-, and contra- normative) positions and images challenging essentialised understandings of identities and sexualities, and that this is possible because these two texts are produced and broadcast on the premium network Showtime, which offers its writing teams a creative freedom and authorial vision unavailable on other forms of television and its subscribers content that is not ‘regular TV’.

1.1. Queer theory

As many theoretical terms, queer does not carry a single finite definition but has a multitude of understandings that vary depending on the approach adopted by their readers. As Annamarie Jagose posits

In recent years “queer” has come to be used differently, sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies [...] It is not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics (1996: 1).

Jagose underlines that queer is not solely an activist movement to defend the right to be different, nor a social group for marginalised people or people who deliberately position themselves against or outside the margins of normality, nor another identity category that challenges heteronormative categories. In fact, queer is all of the above. The elusiveness of the term translates its quintessence: it is a term that deliberately avoids definition insofar as it seeks to point out the performativity and constructedness of categories of identity, sexuality and other social institutions that govern contemporary society. As Ken Plummer proposes, ‘queer is seen as partially
deconstructing our own discourses and creating a greater openness in the way we think through our categories’ (2003: 522). As a matter of fact, the word ‘queer’ existed long before its reappropriation by scholars in the late 1980s and early 90s and the birth of queer theory as an academic discipline. At the beginning of the twentieth century, queer was often used as a pejorative and homophobic insult when it was not a self-attributed title (OED 2015). It was often interchanged with the label ‘fairy’, which designated an effeminate man. However, as George Chauncey notes, in the New York gay world, queer was not solely a negative and derogatory term: ‘by the 1910s and 1920s, men who identified themselves as different from other men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves “queer”’ (1995: 101). In short, gay men used queer to separate their (homo)sexual interests from the presumption that sexual desire for another man was equivalent to identification with women. In the same way, they refused the label ‘fairy’, ‘faggot’ or ‘queen’, which all carry the idea of effeminacy. Instead, queer reaffirms their masculinity while expressing and experiencing same-sex sexual desires, a segregation between identity and same-sex sexual acts that I discuss in Chapter II. Hence, until its resurgence in social discourses around the late 1980s, queer still carried a double stance as homophobic and self-empowering. Eventually, in the late 1980s queer activists insisted on the necessity of questioning established identity categories and any other normative institutions. Queer activism criticised the approach taken by gay activism because of its compliance with normativity, in this case a ‘homonormativity’. As Lisa Duggan argues, ‘any gay politics based on the primacy of sexual identity defined as unitary and “essential”, [...] and fixing desire in a gendered
It would thus be a mistake to limit queer to a sexual identity category or to a refusal to take part in sexual normativity. Although queer involves sexuality and is often read as synonymous with homosexual, gay or lesbian, it is not reducible to it. Queer identity is too often reduced to sexuality where identity is synonymous with sexual orientation, attraction and desires, while questions of gender, race and/or class are secondary in the processes leading to the production of identity. Queer is better thought of as a self-identification that rejects normativity rather than the latest fashionable label to designate the homosexual. As Steven Epstein proposes

The invocation of the “Q-word” is an act of linguistic reclamation, in which a pejorative term is appropriated by the stigmatized group so as to negate the term’s power to wound […] In this sense, queerness is often a marker of one’s distance from conventional norms in all facets of life, not only the sexual […] [Having said that], the term also functions as a marker of generational difference within gay/lesbian/queer communities. Younger queers may speak with resentment of feeling excluded by the established “lesbian and gay” communities, while older gays and lesbians sometimes object bitterly to the use of the term queer, which they consider the language of the oppressor […] In a more mundane sense, “queer” has become convenient shorthand as various sexual minorities have claimed territory in the space once known simply, if misleadingly, as “the gay community” (1996: 153, emphasis in original).

Epstein’s argument is extremely useful in that he identifies the various facets of queer and its different ramifications as both a political statement and a theoretical concept. In addition, he emphasises the many contradictions the notion carries, demonstrating why queer is difficult to define in fixed terms. Epstein highlights personal involvement

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2 What Duggan suggests here is that by insisting on an essential unitary sexual identity common to all gay people, gay politics reproduces the same normalising pattern as heteronormativity, by positioning the ‘Western, white, gay male’ at the centre of this ‘homonormative system’ and relegating any non-Western-white-gay-male individuals to an outsider status.
in the use of the term and its position against normalising patterns. Furthermore, he suggests that although queer should not be related exclusively to homosexuality but actually embodies a challenge against heteronormativity, it is generally presented as an equivalent to homosexuality, insofar as it is reduced to the single identity category ‘homosexual’. Following these readings and in the context of television, throughout the thesis, I interpret queer as the subversion of the norm, the commonplace (in the case of television, the domestic) that is achieved through a close reading of essentialised and normalised codes and conventions to emphasise their constructedness, artificiality and instability. Put differently, I read queer as a means to generate sites of resistance against hegemonic norms. To this end, through an in-depth analysis of my case studies, I pay particular attention to the way both narratives are constructed to draw attention to identity and sexuality and their heteronormative understanding as stable and fixed dichotomised categories. Specifically, Chapter II examines three narrative devices that make these texts queer narratives, while Chapter III analyses the filming techniques used to integrate viewers as tourists into the narratives, to discuss how these narrative techniques help challenge widespread ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives.

Generally, identity is founded on the sex/gender/sexuality trichotomy, three elements that are based on binary opposites (I discuss the binary logic in Chapter III; see also Rubin 1975; Rich 1981; Wittig 1981; Cixous and Clément 1986; de Lauretis 1987; Butler 1990, 1993, 1996; Kosofsky Sedgwick 1991; Bragg 1999; Tripp 2000; Halperin 2012). Identity has become a much-used term (for an overview of the social science literature on identity see, for instance, Weigert, Teitge and Teitge 1986). It is often used in correlation with the individual and the self. Rooted in identification,
identity tries to make sense of an individual’s place within a particular society, by designating the characteristics that simultaneously inscribe a person within a universal social category (sameness), while emphasising his/her uniqueness (individuality). However, in regard to non-heterosexual individuals, identity often equates to sexual orientation and is synonymous with a person’s sexual identity and sexual practices. Surely, however, it is not conceivable that the identity man/woman designates every man/woman in the entire heteronormative system. Hence, the identity category man/woman becomes the means to render men/women invisible as individual in favour of the interest of the group, thereby reinforcing the singularity of the binary logic based on an either/or choice. To use Monique Wittig’s expression, identity categories are ‘political categories, not natural givens’ (1981: 50). Wittig argues that identity categories are inscribed within the binarism of the heterosexual matrix (see Butler 1990: 151, n. 6), so that the category ‘man’ and the category ‘woman’ are interconnected through an oppressor/oppressed relation. In short, man (political class) represents the universal and woman the specific, the other (an argument also defended by Cixous and Clément 1986). I concur with her analysis of the binary relation between man/woman: the binary logic of the heterosexual matrix always requires a pairing of binary opposites in which the first element is privileged over the second, the latter being negatively defined as the abnormal, the one that is not the other. But Wittig goes further in her rejection of identity categories by contending that it is possible to eliminate identity categories by eliminating ‘heterosexuality as a social system’; in other words, by eliminating sexuality per se (1981: 53). Wittig argues that the categories man and woman solely serve the interests of heterosexuality, therefore they do not apply to any non-heterosexual individuals.
I agree with Wittig on the constructedness of identity categories and the necessity to emphasise that they are founded on shaky premises (the false stability of systems of gender, of sex and of sexuality and the false interrelation between sex/gender/sexuality). Nevertheless, I find her reading of identity categories as solely heterosexual categories problematic. First, oppressive and regulatory practices do not only exist in the heterosexual matrix. Non-heterosexual identities, sexualities, behaviour, attitudes and bodies are also produced by and perpetuate regulatory practices. As I argue in my discussion of queer narratives in Chapter II, the cultural conformation to essentialised ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives participates in the construction of identity. Therefore, although reproducing essentialised norms about LGBTQ people perpetuates them, conforming becomes a means to be part of a larger identity group and to integrate oneself into a community. Based on a queer approach to normative regimes, I analyse how the writers of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* knowingly use stereotypes and typical scripts pertaining to LGBTQ people and queer lives in their narratives to disrupt and challenge them. As a result, I suggest that both narratives generate critical and political sites of resistance by demonstrating the performativity and constructedness of identities, sexualities and other normative concepts, even if they do not eliminate them.

Second, although she rejects the identity categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ on the principle that the existence of women is dependent on the existence of men, Wittig creates a binaristic relation between heterosexuality and homosexuality by resignifying homosexuality in relation to heterosexuality as that which is not heterosexuality. Against Wittig, I suggest that eliminating identity categories may be difficult insofar as these concepts have been continually re/produced as ‘natural’ and
are directly connected with the difference between the sexes, which is itself a system that has followed the same process of cultural and social re/production. Yet, even though eliminating identity categories may prove difficult, queer theory exposes the constructedness of norms that compose identity categories and disrupts them, by showing that it is not an either/or choice but a multiple-choice question. Put differently, queer emphasises that what constitutes the identity ‘woman’, for instance, is not related to what is not the identity ‘man’; rather identity is a set of intersecting characteristics that is best defined by its plurality, complexity and nuances. In this dual social and cultural understanding, identity is not solely determined by individuality (the characteristics that distinguish a person from another), but also by sameness (the fact that a person possesses some qualities that are similar to other people), thereby enabling them to be recognised as belonging to the same social group. For example, in *The L Word*, Bette, Carmen and Tasha are women who identify as ‘lesbian’. Thus, their identities are defined by their sex (female) and their sexual orientation (lesbian). Yet, each of their identities is not limited to these two characteristics. It is also expressed in reference to race: Bette is a multiracial woman (half-Black and half-White) who can easily pass as white, Carmen is Latina and Tasha is African-American. Although all three identify as non-white, this does not mean that their identities are similar insofar as their position in relation to their race, gender, sex and sexuality diverge. Although Bette is multiracial, she can easily pass as white and at times finds herself in the position of having to defend her multiracial origins. However, her sexual orientation is never called into question in regard to visibility (which does not mean that it is not problematic in terms of heteronormativity). In contrast, Tasha cannot hide her blackness, however because of her job in the military, she is forced to hide her
sexual orientation due to the ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ policy (DADT; see Chapter II). Furthermore, their identities are not simply intersecting with sexuality and race, they are also interrelated with gender. Carmen is identifiable as feminine in gender while Bette can be classified as ‘feminized-butch’ to borrow the expression (Farr and Degroult 2008: 428, 432), a classification that also designates Tasha’s gender display. Therefore, to disrupt identity categories limited to either ‘man’ or ‘woman’, themselves based on the assumption that there are only two possible sexes and two possible genders, queer theory demonstrates that stable sexes and genders are in fact not stable at all, that they are constructed from a heteronormative perspective and with compulsory heterosexuality in mind and that their re/production as ‘natural’ is in fact only that, a re/production.

As opposed to the popular ‘biology-is-destiny’ theory that postulates that gender, biological sex and sexuality are empirically interconnected, Butler calls into question the assumed interrelation between biological sex and gender and argues that ‘gender intersects with racial, class, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities’ and ‘is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts’ (1990: 3). Therefore, she concludes:

within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (ibid.: 24-5).

Put differently, if gender is performative, there is no original identity that precedes it and defines the type of attribute a person must express to be identified as a particular gender, but neither is there an original gender that precedes identity and gives a person his/her sense of self. Germaine Greer also argues in favour of the cultural construction
of gender and its alleged effect on the identities ‘man’ and ‘woman’. In a radio broadcast she contends that

masculinity is very different from femininity… but I […] believe that men work very hard at creating masculinisms… There’s a lot of aspects of the way they behave which are highly cultural and extremely protean, [and] could change pretty quickly… Things cannot not fit with biology… that’s obvious… the point is that culture does its own thing with biology, [and] it could have done any one number of things (Bragg 1999).

Greer differentiates gender from sex. She suggests that although she understands ‘sex’ as a fixed biological category, gender is variable and culturally constructed. This means that the way people behave and interact are more often than not the result of the culture and society in which they live rather than the result of nature. Consequently, the popular expressions ‘behaving like a man or a woman’ or ‘behaving in a masculine or feminine manner’ become behaviour and attitudes dictated and produced by a particular culture rather than a ‘natural’ order of things or a ‘natural’ instinct. As Teresa de Lauretis proposes, ‘gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings’; rather it is ‘a product and process of a number of social technologies’ (1987: 3). This means that, first, a biologically male/female individual does not necessarily identify as masculine/feminine or is obligatorily attracted to female/male partners. Second, a person whose gender is constructed as masculine/feminine does not necessarily possess a male/female body. Finally, these supposedly misaligned gender and sex are not always synonymous with non-heterosexuality. Rather, the alignment of sex, gender and sexuality is one possibility among many others. Moreover, as my discussion of television viewers in Chapter III emphasises, with the convergence of television and computer, watching television has become progressively more interactive, relying on ‘metadata protocols’ and ‘filters’
(Uricchio 2004: 176) to create a personalised television at the individual level. This interactive form of television, which is even more prominent in the case of pay cable television with its scheduling strategy based on a rotation system and an on-demand access, offers viewers betwixt and between viewing positions that exist at the threshold between on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds. Understanding this liminality (see Van Gennep 1960: 21) as a characteristic of queer narratives, I propose that these various viewing positions enable viewers, regardless of their sex, gender and sexuality, to travel within narratives and discover new places and characters, to experience new stories and pleasures, where television viewers become tourists visiting on-screen life-worlds. These liminal viewing positions temporarily allow the renegotiation of viewers’ subjectivities by queering (as a verb, in the sense of challenging and disrupting) sexed subject positions following the understanding of sexuality as fluid and flexible and the dissociation of sexual identities from sexual preferences by positioning viewers as ‘the heteroflexible’ (see Blackman 2009: 124, emphasis in original).

By emphasising the performativity of gender, itself supposedly the result of identity, queer theory demonstrates that normative identity categories are nothing more than social and cultural constructs. Nevertheless, although a construct, this does not mean that gender is not a compulsory feature and that refusing to perform gender because of its constructedness is easily achievable. In fact, taking the risk of failing to perform gender to expose its constructedness may instead inscribe oneself outside of subjectivity, therefore as not human. The example of Moira/Max and the bathroom problem discussed in Chapter II reveals that Moira’s failure to conform to female gender expectations, in addition to her physical appearance that others read as male,
inscribes her as a not-man/not-woman whose position within heteronormative identity categories is that of the monster (Kristeva 1982: 4; Creed 1986: 44). Moreover, although gender is performative, this constructedness is often limited to femininity, as masculinity is generally understood as non-performative, a bias highlighted and challenged in *Queer as Folk* with the example of Michael in drag (Halberstam 1998: 234-5; see Chapter II). As Anna Tripp proposes, ‘gender is an ongoing effect of meanings and definitions culturally produced and circulated, and crucially these definitions have very real material consequences in [people’s] lives’ (2000: 6). Furthermore, identity is not an isolated concept, it is determined through identification with and against others. As Jeffrey Weeks suggests, ‘identities are always “relational” in the general sense that they only exist in relation to other potential identities’ (1991: 85). Hence, the dual understanding of identity-as-individuality and identity-as-sameness becomes an instrument to reinforce the system of ‘natural’ binary opposites: by allowing at the same time a certain degree of resemblance and a certain degree of difference, the system of ‘natural’ binary opposites ensures the maintenance of the entire normative system. When one binary opposite is challenged, threatened or entirely eliminated, another binary takes its place to demonstrate the soundness of the whole system, the discarded binary becoming the exception that proves the rule. The complexity and intersectionality of normativity are what makes eliminating the binary logic (and any normative systems) difficult because the system protects itself by allowing enough leeway to move within the different pairs of ‘natural’ binary opposites. Hence, instead of contending that ‘the norm’ is biased, queer theory highlights that normativity is not ‘natural’ as the concept seems to imply but is being constantly reinforced and re/produced by social systems and structures that are
themselves socially re/produced in the first place. In short, queer theory emphasises that normativity is simply another construct.

1.2. Queer TV

Arguably, queer TV may seem paradoxical insofar as, as a mainstream medium, television is typically characterised as an ordinary, everyday, commonplace object that represents and shapes ordinariness, everydayness and commonplaceness. As suggested in Chapter I, television defines domesticity at the same time as it is defined by it. Conversely, queer is identified in part as the subversion of the ordinary, as the disruption of the commonplace. Queer theory is a field that subjects essentialised and normalised codes and conventions (be it sexual, social, cultural, political or historical) to a close reading, to demonstrate their constructedness, artificiality and instability. Hence, queer theory is committed to offering sites of resistance by challenging hegemonic norms. Moreover, queer television studies are situated at the intersection between the articulation of the mainstream and its disruption, generating critical and political sites of resistance that simultaneously highlight the logics of television as re/producer of hegemonic norms and develop a queer logic that seeks to destabilise these hegemonic norms. In short, the ‘queer’ of queer TV, as I understand it, is not solely limited to representations of queer characters within television texts or to the way queer viewers interpret mainstream texts. Instead, envisaged from the perspective of my case studies, queer TV is a space offering diverse and flexible non-, anti-, and contra- normative positions to produce, circulate and respond to television. Hence, based on my case studies, I demonstrate how these texts are constructed as queer texts.
using ‘quality TV’ characteristics with a queer dimension, beyond the simple fact of depicting queer content – which, as suggested by theorists, are not necessarily correlated (Chambers 2009; Joyrich 2014). Additionally, this means that the queerness of these texts is not only accessible to queer viewers. Instead, the positions, pleasures and interpretations offered by these texts is also accessible to any viewers who do not necessarily share the same sexual identities or cultural positions as the characters depicted in the texts, but who are not limited to binary understandings of sex, sexuality or gender and are thus able to take pleasure in watching. This does not invalidate viewers’ ‘real-life’ sexual identities or cultural positions, it merely undermines their relevance and demonstrates that responses to culture are more flexible, more mutable and less stable than essentialised categories of any kind. In other words, I argue that queer TV enables queer and straight viewers to take pleasure in these texts and to engage with them and their content, albeit differently.

Television is often criticised for its inadequacy to represent diversity and for its tendency to homogenise and assimilate queer images into a heteronormative representational system. Representations of LGBTQ characters and queer lives are often articulated in relation to a politics of visibility, which lead to contradictory conclusions. On the one hand, theorists discuss the somewhat deceitful but widespread idea that the appearance of LGBTQ people on TV is a sign of political success, because it reflects a higher acceptance and greater tolerance of U.S. society, an evolution proven (or more accurately self-evidenced) by the popularisation of queer images on U.S. television. On the other hand, this popularisation of queer representations on television is viewed as a political failure because it signals the assimilation of these queer images into a mainstream medium that can usually only engender normalisation.
For instance, Susanna Danuta Walters argues that people ‘tend to believe the illusion of visibility as progress and this is nowhere more true that when we think of gays, whose lives have been so deeply constructed by denial, avoidance, invisibility, and subterfuge’ (2001: 12). However, she continues, ‘visibility does not erase stereotypes nor guarantee liberation’, therefore, it is unrealistic to expect television to offer accurate representations of LGBTQ people and their lived experiences (ibid.: 13). Ron Becker establishes a correlation between the popularisation of LGBTQ images on television in the 1990s and ‘America’s political psychographics’ (2006: 2). Focussing on gay and lesbian representations, he argues that gay content on television plays a role ‘within debates over civil rights, multiculturalism, and America’s supposed fragmentation’ as well as ‘within an emerging political ethos’ (ibid.: 3). He proposes that the emergence of gay and lesbian images on television is directly related to what he calls ‘American culture’s straight panic’, that is,

the growing anxiety of a heterosexual culture and straight individuals confronting the shifting social landscape where categories of sexual identity were repeatedly scrutinized and traditional moral hierarchies regulating sexuality were challenged […] [S]traight panic refers to the anxiety felt by mainstream America and Americans confronting a social landscape where monoculturalism seemed maligned and difference prized (ibid.: 4).

In short, Becker contends that 1990s U.S. television merely fulfilled a need to help heterosexual viewers feel at ease with the rise of LGBTQ visibility, thus ‘gay-themed programming consistently offered up narratives about gay-friendly heterosexuals adapting to an increasingly gay-inclusive world’ (ibid.: 190). In other words, the 1990s ‘gay-friendly’ television had little to do with LGBTQ inclusion but responded to the necessity for straight society to cope with the unavoidable presence of LGBTQ people in U.S. society, a topic I develop in Chapter II with examples from my case studies.
Joshua Gamson reaches a similar conclusion in his article ‘The Intersection of Gay Street and Straight Street: Shopping, Social Class, and the New Gay Visibility’ (2005), where he argues that ‘reality television has become the hotbed of a new kind of gay visibility’, a visibility that normalises gay men (ibid.: 4). Taking the example of reality TV shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo 2003-2007) and *Boy Meets Boy* (Bravo 2003) that feature gay men, Gamson proposes that this normalisation works in two ways: on the one hand, it presents gay men as ‘normal’ insofar as they are not portrayed as abnormalities of sexuality and gender. Instead, it offers a sympathetic image of gay men that diverges from the killer/child molester image of 1970s U.S. television (ibid.: 8; 15; see also Capsuto 2000). On the other hand, this normalisation aims at assimilating gay men with and as heterosexual men, which both soothes the challenges and anxieties that the growing visibility of gay men has triggered (Becker’s ‘straight panic’) but blurs the lines between gay men and heterosexual men. Indeed, if gay men are like heterosexual men, how can people tell the difference between them and, more important, what happens to hegemonic masculinity and its claim that heterosexual men are ‘real’ men? Gamson argues that television offers its own specific answers to the question in *Queer Eye’s* portrayal of gay men as ‘consumption-friendly’, using ‘gay men’s stereotyped affinity for home, leisure, and body professions’ for the benefit of heterosexual men (ibid.: 8). Gay men thus become a safe model to imitate. Hence, the mainstreaming of gay men serves everyone’s interest (commercial television, marketing companies, advertisers) but gay men’s, making television an inadequate medium for challenging norms of sexuality and gender, see my discussion of the topic in Chapter II with examples from my case studies. Ann M. Ciasullo opens a discussion on the representations of lesbians in 1990s television in
her article ‘Making her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body’ (2001), where she addresses the way in which recent mainstream representations of lesbians are ‘normalized – heterosexualized or “straightened out” – via the femme body’ (ibid.: 578). She argues that the lesbian is both sexualised and desexualised: on the one hand, she is produced as an object of desire for heterosexual audiences through her representation as the ‘embod[iement] of hegemonic femininity’ (ibid.). On the other hand, she is ‘de-homosexualized’ because her portrayal based on criteria of hegemonic femininity suppresses all possibility of representation of desire between two women (ibid.). She suggests that the heterosexualisation of the 1990s lesbian creates a representational space but only for femme lesbians, to the detriment of all other types of lesbian images. The image thus created is that of ‘the consumable lesbian’, a homogenised image grounded in commodification and consumerism that emphasises its safeness (ibid.: 584). To sum up, these different studies all agree that television, as a commercial medium, is institutionally not equipped for representing non-heterosexualities or any cultural positions that deviate from the model of the white, middle-class, straight, conventionally dichotomised sexed and gendered identities. In contrast, in Chapter II I demonstrate how my case studies, as queer narratives, offer diverse and uncensored queer representations that generate critical and political interests and problematise and challenge cultural ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives. Specifically, I suggest that both narratives renegotiate the understanding of sexuality by articulating it in relation to identity, sex, body, gender, pleasure, desire, and so on, to highlight its fluidity and flexibility as an alternative to its rigid discursive definition.
Nevertheless, although not in this precise term, the queerness of television is a topic that is addressed by John Ellis in his work on broadcast television first published in the early 1980s. Discussing the experience of watching television, Ellis proposes that watching TV is an ‘experience of confirmation’ for television viewers. It confirms their normality as well as the normality of their domestic life, insofar as the domesticity of the setting people use predominantly to watch television is assumed. The confirmation of their normalcy is directly positioned as opposite to the abnormality of the television content. Ellis suggests that whatever is brought to viewers through their small screen is understood to represent ‘the weird and wonderful, the transient and the unstable, the eccentric and the bizarre’ (1992: 166), a definition that can be equated to queer things. Therefore, the television screen represents a literal barrier between the private and the public, the normal and the abnormal, or the inside and the outside as discussed by Diana Fuss as a central binary structure of queer theory (1991: 1). Ellis concludes that broadcast television possesses the means to disrupt its viewers’ normality and to unsettle their hegemonic position by bringing inside their home, within the safety and confines of their living room, content that can destabilise their understanding of ordinariness and normalcy, but also their understanding of themselves and others and their relationship to others and to otherness. This capacity of television to bring to its viewers queer images that defy (hetero)normativity and advocate for political resistance, is one of the aspects of pay cable television that I develop in Chapter II in my study of queer narratives and in Chapter III in my discussion of television viewers using the specific examples of my case studies.

Amy Villarejo suggests that perhaps one important step in queer television studies today is to cease to claim that queer representations only started to make an
appearance on U.S. television in the 1990s after fifty years of invisibility (2014). As part of the queer revisionist approach that looks at how normative categories are ‘articulated and experienced within a terrain of social practices’ (Stein and Plummer 1994: 187), work such as Steven Capsuto’s Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television (2000) demonstrates that LGBTQ people have long been present on television, although not necessarily in an openly or overtly obvious manner that can easily be identified as queer. Alexander Doty offers a similar argument in Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture (1993), in which he argues that there are ways of reading cultural texts to identify their hidden queerness by focussing on connotative rather than denotative interpretations. In short, Doty suggests that queer viewers possess the means to identify the ‘ghosts’ that inhabit pre-1990s cultural texts, ‘ghosts’ that are unrecognisable for straight viewers – although one could argue that they simply choose not to or refuse to see – because of the homophobic and heterosexist tendencies of U.S. culture (1993: xi-xii).

The situation of LGBTQ representations on U.S. television has changed since Doty’s analysis, written when connotative images were more widespread that denotative ones. Today, LGBTQ characters appear in prime-time and nonprime-time programmes, on broadcast and cable television, and are represented in various degrees of explicitness and stereotypes. Consequently, this multiplication of queer images invites new debates regarding representational and narrative tropes, including ones that interrogate whether the proliferation of queer representations necessarily implies a multiplication of queer texts, but also ones that question how ‘queer’ these queer texts can really be when they are a part of a medium that is often defined by its mainstreamness and promotion of heteronormativity? However, I think that the defiance and breaking of
the limits of mainstream television is precisely what premium networks set out to do. It is the position they have opted to fill to attract and retain subscribers by branding themselves as not ‘regular TV’ against their broadcast counterparts. In other words, although it is overreaching to argue that everything that is written, developed, produced, broadcast and consumed on premium networks is queer or can be classified as queer TV, I suggest that their decision to break the limits at the institutional and textual levels that other forms of television tread carefully or avoid altogether, offers the possibility of thinking of and exploring this form of television and its texts queerly. For instance, rather than focussing on positive representations that detach sexuality from identity and sexual orientation from the act of sex, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* depict (mostly) young and healthy people who enjoy sex, a pleasure that is highlighted by and in the many sex sequences of each series (at least one in each episode), which do not necessarily fill a gap in the narrative, but simply represent these characters enjoying their sexuality, embracing it, and which by extension exist for the pleasure of the audience, a topic I address in detail in Chapter II.

Accordingly, the queer TV I discuss in this work is not focussed on analysing the representational efforts of my case studies in offering a varied and non-stereotypical range of queer characters that disrupt typical representational binaries of queer subjects (negative versus positive images, realistic versus unrealistic depictions of queer individuals, the queer-as-really-straight versus the eccentric-but-unthreatening subject, the asexual versus sexually predatory individual). Indeed, several queer media theorists discuss these models brilliantly and at length in their respective analysis of various television texts, including my case studies (see Introduction; see, for instance Capsuto 2000; Ciasullo 2001; Walters 2001; Creeber
2004; Gamson 2005; Becker 2006; Harris 2006; Davis 2007; Aaron 2009; Swartz 2009; Porfido 2011). Instead, I examine the extent to which the fact that my case studies are produced and broadcast on Showtime guides the types of queer images offered in my case studies in regard to their form, content and reception, in relation to contemporary normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. Indeed, beyond the above representational binaries, queer theory offers new ways of approaching television’s representational politics that instead interrogates ‘the very concepts of correctness, identity, stereotyping, visibility, and authenticity’ that ‘multiply our pleasures and our personalities’ (Hanson 1999: 12). In this sense, queer theory is more interested in understanding the social, cultural and political contexts behind these representations rather than commenting on the form they take on-screen. This approach helps emphasise how norms are themselves established and essentialised in the first place, which in turn facilitates the resistance to and dismantling of this normative system. Indeed, why do TV series need to be realistic in their representations of LGBTQ people when representations of heterosexuals are rarely questioned from that standpoint? Haven’t we reached the point where LGBTQ people have been represented in many different instances, from many different perspectives and with many different stereotypes, that LGBTQ representations no longer need to be analysed in terms of their realism and their ability to encompass any and every way to be queer (as if it were even a possibility)? It has been argued enough by now that identity is not singular but plural (see, for instance, Rubin 1975; Wittig 1981; Weigert, Teitge and Teitge 1986; Butler 1990; Weeks 1991; Halperin 2012), so why would it be any different when it comes to the representation of queer identities?
1.3. The limits of queer

Not only does queer theory disrupt the understanding of identity and the individual, but it offers a new perspective on the social, political, cultural and economic institutions that compose contemporary society. Its efficacy comes from its reworking of concepts that already exist but are called into question, destabilised and potentially rewritten. Nevertheless, queer theory has its detractors who do not see in queer an attempt to eliminate norms and eradicate the invisibility/negative visibility of non-heteronormativity, but as a closeting of queerness in discursive practices. Adam Isaiah Green, for instance, questions the validity of rejecting the central role of social institutions in the formation of the sexual being. He contends that

> despite its laudable and broad academic appeal, queer theory tends to lapse into a discursive burdened, textual idealism that glosses over the institutional character of sexual identity and the shared social roles that sexual actors occupy. The elision plagues the queer project by creating a theoretical cataract that permits only a dim view of the contribution of the ‘social’ to the sexual. As a consequence, queer theory constructs an undersocialized ‘queer’ subject with little connection to the empirical world and the sociohistorical forces that shape sexual practice and identity (2002: 522).

Green argues that ‘the social’ plays a central role in the shaping of identities, sexualities, social interactions and social movements; that is, in the shaping of individuals in the context of a particular society. Therefore, he suggests that the deconstructionist vision of queer theorists questioning the validity of social categories disrupts the organisation of social life by challenging the importance of socio-cultural elements (sexual orientation, gender) that he sees as essential in the process of self-understanding. There is no denying that the social plays a major role in the formation
of identity and subjectivity in society. However, queer theory challenges fixed identity categories based on normative qualities that differentiate people into positive and negative categories according to a biased binary system. Hence, in his fear that the ‘undersocialized “queer” subject’ may ‘underestimat[e]’ or ‘overestimat[e] straight and gay difference’ (ibid.: 522), Green forgets that the very idea of ‘straight and gay difference’ follows the same biased system of binary opposites that positions non-heterosexual sexuality as the negative opposite of heterosexual (read: natural) sexuality. Thus, the type of difference that supposedly exists between heterosexual and non-heterosexual people is founded on the notion that there is a direct oppositional rapport between non-heterosexuality and heterosexuality. In short, the difference advanced by the ethnic model of homosexuality strongly defended by Green is unfortunately very rarely envisaged from a positive perspective where ‘the “queer” subject’ represents diversity rather than threatening society. In addition, Green apprehends the ‘undersocialis[ation] of the “queer” subject’. However, the idea of a “‘queer” subject’ defined by specific characteristics goes against the displacement that queer theory strives to achieve: queer does not seek to create a new fixed identity category for people who do not fit in. Instead, it highlights the constructedness of the identities and subject positions produced and naturalised by heteronormative society, favouring plurality rather than singularity. Finally, Green founds his rejection of queer on the hypothesis that the heteronormative system and its network of oppositional binaries can be eliminated. However, as suggested earlier, the pervasiveness, complexity and self-reproduction of the heteronormative system are such that erasing the social may prove difficult. Instead, queer disrupts the idea of ‘natural’ norms (and
any ‘natural’ categories) to recast normativity as a social construct and argue in favour of diversity, plurality and nuances rather than dichotomised binaries.

In her article ‘Dis/Integrating the Gay/Queer Binary: “Reconstructed Identity Politics” for a Performative Pedagogy’ (2002), Karen Kopelson addresses another common protest against queer theory, which contends that queer is merely another means to label, categorise and fundamentally control people by regrouping marginalised groups under one single name. Instead of seeing the voluntary adoption of an outsider status as a means to draw attention to and challenge normativity, queer is understood as a pointless strategy that reinforces the perception of homosexuality as a minority. In her article Kopelson suggests that contrary to the argument that queer calls for the deconstruction of social institutions and challenges identity categories, queer produces a new identity politics that ‘create[s] a falsely unified front that itself becomes exclusionary in its disavowal of multiplicity within the group, in its failure to make spaces for differences within difference’ (ibid.: 24). In other words, the self-identification as queer, the argument goes, does not so much celebrate diversity and differences as becomes another means to homogenise individuals and assimilate them into pre-defined identity categories that queer theory claims to destabilise in the first place. Against this argument, I suggest that, first, queer defends the idea that identity is not singular but plural and is composed of a variety of intersecting elements. Hence, rather than perpetuating it, queer intrinsically calls into question homogenisation. Second, as previously mentioned, people do not live in a vacuum, thus their identity is subject to identification with and against others and to subsequent classification into established identity categories. Therefore, what queer theory seeks to challenge is the naturalness of identity categories, by demonstrating that sex and gender are social
constructs dictated by compulsory heterosexuality. Finally, I want to add that the deconstruction of identity categories is not the same as the deconstruction of individuality. The queer deconstruction of identity categories emphasises that identity is socially and culturally produced and is the result of a ‘reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names’ (Butler 1993a: 2). In short, queer does not seek to erase differences to produce a queer subject whose identity reproduces a normative discourse, but to challenge the pre-determined, pre-established and naturalised characteristics that constitute normative identity categories.

Extrapolating Green’s and Kopelson’s arguments against queer theory, one can argue that queer fails to provide the necessary weight required in a political context. As Joshua Gamson contends, ‘fixed identity categories are both the basis of oppression and the basis of political power’ (1996: 396). In short, by rejecting established identity categories in favour of an affiliation to a position on the fringe of society, queer can diminish its potential influence in political debates, insofar as it may fail to yield changes in government policy and administrative practices that would enable queers a greater power and authority in society. Although governments acknowledge the existence of minorities and their rights to have a voice and be represented by their peers, their effect is lesser compared with members of the dominant group. Moreover, the rejection of identity politics (namely, an affiliation with a discernible social group) can also be viewed as an apolitical statement, as it demonstrates a choice to place oneself outside any political debates for lack of visibility. In this case, a queer identity would represent a non-identity insofar as by rejecting any existing (read: socially and politically visible, ergo likely to be heard) identity categories and by willingly
marginalising oneself, queer forgoes the power of strength in numbers. Thus, arguably, when queer refuses to be acknowledged as a social group that can easily be identified, its representation on the political scale of a country becomes more complicated, even more so in the case of the U.S. political system with its division between federal and state laws and constitutions. Moreover, as Geraldine Harris contends, the use of queer demonstrates a generational gap between the gay and lesbian communities and the queer community. She suggests that younger generations are more likely to adopt queer to signify their ‘rejection of the strategies both of assimilationist, conservative sectors of the community and of the more radical 1970s liberation movement’ (2006: 141; see also Epstein 1996; Gamson 1996). She proposes that lesbians and gay men who participated in 1970s activism are more likely to stick with the denominations gay and lesbian rather than queer, because of what they achieved during these activist years: the acknowledgment of a public collective identity that underlines the shared oppression, the shared rejection and the shared rights claims. In short, older activists are less likely to accept a word that was used to belittle them and undermine their very rights to exist. Furthermore, because of the pejorative origin of the term ‘queer’, its adoption is seen as ‘a counter-productive gesture’ in the fight for visibility and acceptance (Jagose 1996: 106). The fear that queer will continue to be synonymous with perversion and deviance remains a strong concern. Against these arguments, I suggest that it is the point of queer to question and reject the ideologies defended by the centre. Queer derives its power from its marginal position that enables it to stand in opposition to the norm, acknowledging and performing the authority of the norm. Therefore, whether queer is used to proudly reaffirm difference from the norm, or as a socio-political affiliation that stands against the dominant ideology and ultimately
brings queers to the public eye, it definitely cannot and should not be limited to a ‘lifestyle’, a manner of speaking, walking, living, dressing and having sex, which irrevocably eliminates its social, political and economic potential.

1.4. Justification and literature review

I chose these case studies for two main reasons. First, although the subject of several studies, most work on Queer as Folk and The L Word focusses specifically on the success (or lack thereof) of the series in representing LGBTQ identities in terms of visibility and political recognition of minorities. Many studies discuss both series (and at times their writers/showrunners/producers) in terms of their representational practices and politics to acknowledge their potential contributions to a larger history of LGBTQ representations on television and cultural and/or social visibility in U.S. society. However, most studies fail to historically situate these texts in the context of the U.S. television landscape, with respect to Showtime and in relation to the form, content and reception of these texts, to address what these queer narratives reveal about Showtime (and pay cable television to a greater extent) and its position in regard to the re/production of normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. There are some notable exceptions that extend discussions beyond representational analyses. For instance, Faye Davies situates her reading of The L Word in connection with its viewers to analyse their reactions to the end of the series (2013). Acknowledging television’s interconnection with other media, especially the Internet, Martina Ladendorf discusses lesbian representations in The L Word in terms of
The commodification and the marketing of the series in cyberspace (2010). The commodification of queer identities is also extensively discussed in relation to Queer as Folk (both UK and US). For instance, Glyn Davis argues that Queer as Folk is strongly inscribed in mainstream commercial gay culture (2007). Wendy Peters examines the representations of gay men in connection with the concept of ‘pink dollar’ and its main target: white, middle-class, male viewers (2011). Finally, although Christopher Pullen discusses the series in relation to the domesticity of television (2016), he situates the series in the mainstream of broadcast television, failing to acknowledge that as a premium network text, Queer as Folk is not bound by the same rules as broadcast TV. The study perhaps closest to my argument is Deborah E. R. Hanan’s article that situates The L Word’s transgressions in the context of Showtime and its ‘established heritage as cultural provocateur’ as a means to ‘both reinforce and undermine contemporary cable network strategies centered on niche marketing models’ (2013: 153). In her article, Hanan argues that the frequent criticism against the show’s perpetuation of heteronormativity and (hetero)normalisation of lesbians (see, for instance, Chambers 2006), discounts how The L Word is increasingly transgressive mostly due to its production and broadcast on Showtime. She proposes that the transgression of the series exists on three levels: first, the way the show ‘maintained several dimorphic characters in recurring roles’; second, the way the ‘storylines delved deep into the psychology and lives of sex, sexual, and gender variants’; and third, the way Showtime developed “new” media spaces […]: the network’s official L Word site […], the show’s social networking site (OurChart.com), and its virtual properties in Second Life’ (ibid.: 164-5). Based on a similar argument, throughout the thesis I argue that both texts benefit from the characteristics of premium
network texts, such as the creative freedom and authorial vision offered to writers, the uninterrupted narrative that eliminates obligatory scheduled commercial breaks and the need to bring back viewers after these interruptions, the personal, interactive and generally solitary viewing habits offered by the on-demand access and rotation-basis schedule, and the aesthetic of the texts that applies the techniques and forms of other media to their TV texts. As a result, my discussion situates these texts and their queer content and representations in the context of Showtime and pay cable television in general. Focussing on their form, content and reception, it identifies what makes these texts queer narratives, how these characteristics are linked to Showtime (and pay cable TV to a greater extent) and how they enable the writers of the shows to tackle normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television and raise awareness of cultural ideas about queer identities, bodies, sexualities and behaviour.

Second, my choice was informed by the fact that both series centre their narrative on almost exclusively non-heterosexual characters with diverse backgrounds that take into account social differences and the heterogeneity of LGBTQ identities. As a matter of fact, *Queer as Folk* was the first U.S. TV series to adopt a non-heterosexual perspective in its narrative and to represent (mainly although not exclusively) gay men as well as genderqueer characters, following the example of the original British version *Queer as Folk UK*, and so did *The L Word* by putting lesbians and genderqueer characters in the spotlight. As I argue in Chapter I, in most cases, queer representations are portrayed for a heterosexual viewership from a heterosexual perspective, the purpose being either to help heterosexual viewers feel at ease with the growing LGBTQ visibility in U.S. society or due to the commercial interest of a
potential new lucrative market (see, for instance, Hennessy 1995; Capsuto 2000; Gamson 2005; Becker 2006; van Kessel 2016). Conversely, counting only one heterosexual (but definitely queer) protagonist among its series regulars (Debbie Novotny), *Queer as Folk* reversed the 1990s trend of integrating a single non-heterosexual character either as a series regular or as a recurring character. By comparison, in 2005 (end of *Queer as Folk*), there were ten LGBTQ characters on broadcast television and forty on cable television (basic cable and pay cable alike), seventeen of which were accounted for by the nine main characters of *Queer as Folk* and the eight main characters of *The L Word*, which started in 2004 (PinkNews 2007).

The same can be said for *The L Word* that had among its series regulars only one heterosexual female character (Kit Porter) and one heterosexual male character who changed almost every season. By comparison, in 2009 (end of *The L Word*), there were eighteen LGBTQ characters on broadcast television and twenty-five on cable (basic and pay cable) television, eleven of which were the series regulars of *The L Word* (GLAAD 2014a).

In other words, by the time *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* reached their final seasons, there was no other series that equalled the number and the diversity of queer characters represented in these two series. Arguably, this does not mean that all representations in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are flawless. It is nevertheless worth noting that since the end of both series (2005 and 2009), most queer characters have resumed their supporting roles, apart from some exceptions in which a queer character had one of the lead roles, until 2012 with *The New Normal* (NBC 3

3 Ben, Brian, Emmett, Justin, Lindsay, Mel, Michael, Ted and Vic.
4 Alice, Bette, Carmen, Dana, Helena, Jenny, Shane and Tina.
5 Tim Haspel in Season One, Mark Wayland in Season Two, Angus Partridge in Season Three and Four, Greg (Dominic Zamprogna) in Season Five and Sonny Benson/Sunset Boulevard (Roger R. Cross) in Season Six.
6 Alice, Bette, Helena, Jenny, Jodi, Moira/Max, Niki, Phyllis, Shane, Tasha and Tina.
2012-2013) that positions a gay couple at the centre of the narrative. As a result, Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* can be said to represent a historical moment of U.S. pay cable TV with respect to the social, political and culture context of the U.S. at the time of their creation. Moreover, both programmes were the first (in the U.S. at least) to acknowledge and represent the sexuality of queer characters without positioning them in the good gay/bad gay dichotomy of earlier representations (Capsuto 2000: 7; see Chapter II). Finally, because *Queer as Folk* represented mostly (although not exclusively) men and *The L Word* mostly (although not exclusively) women, studying them in parallel highlights different stereotypes, showing how LGBTQ people are understood, read and treated differently depending on their biological sex. Put differently, whether judged good or bad (academically and by viewers), both series manage to live on even after their official ends (2005 and 2009) and to contribute to queer television culture (in general and in relation to Showtime) through various examples of scholarship, new TV texts inspired by *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* and spin-offs (in the case of *The L Word* with *The Real L Word* (Showtime 2010-2012) and the reboot of the original series currently in the works at Showtime).

With a television show centred on the lives of (mostly) lesbians and portraying their relationships, careers and struggles, a rich debate addresses the question of lesbian representation. *Reading the L Word: Outing Contemporary Television* (Akass and McCabe 2009), a collection of essays focussing exclusively on *The L Word* Season One and Two, discusses a range of topics related to the series from cultural reception,
the lesbian look, questions of sex and sexuality to gendered representations and lesbian visibility. A sequel to the book follows in 2013, *Loving The L Word: The Complete Series in Focus* edited by Dana Heller, which picks up where the previous volume left off and discusses the series in its entirety. In her essay ‘New Queer Cable? The L Word, the Small Screen and the Bigger Picture’ (2009a), Michele Aaron interrogates the position of *The L Word* in relation to the ‘new queer cinema’ heralded by B. Ruby Rich in 1992. She questions whether *The L Word* ‘represent[s] a high point in the mainstream’s toleration-cum-group hug of gay lives, or a familiar exploitation of girl-on-girl action to no-less titillated straights?’ (ibid.: 34). With a focus on the way lesbians are represented in the series, she concludes that the series manages at least, if it does nothing else, to ‘queer’ the family with the example of Bette and Tina as the mothers of a new born, mixed race baby. In ‘Straight-up Sex in *The L Word’* (2009), authors Lorna Wheeler and Lara Raven Wheeler discuss how lesbian sex is depicted in the series. They remark that sex radically changes from Season One to Season Two, arguing that sex in Season One is more frequent yet more prudish, while sex in Season Two, although less frequent, depicts more ‘so-called radical practices’ (power play, role playing, sex toys; ibid.: 99). They conclude that sex in Season One is made ‘obscure’ and ‘reassuring’ for heterosexual viewers in an attempt to assimilate lesbians in heterosexual culture (ibid.: 101), while sex in Season Two becomes ‘queer’ and embodies ‘danger, power and play’ (ibid.: 102). Shauna Swartz addresses the issues of representing a Latina lesbian in ‘The Other L Word: Representing a Latina Identity’ (2009). She analyses whether by including a Latina lesbian in its second Season, *The L Word* takes a step forward ‘toward a more accurate portrayal of the diversity of lesbian identities – particularly in terms of race and ethnicity’ (ibid.: 177). According
to Swartz, the answer is no. Because of the rarity of Latina roles on television, she deplores that the character of Carmen is initially presented as a ‘mild-mannered’, ‘anything shy of a perfect role model’ (ibid.) and ends up being reduced to a ‘decorative flourish’ that non-Latina viewers may identify as ‘signalling authenticity’ (ibid.: 179). From a more positive perspective, in ‘Queering The L Word’ (2013), Sal Renshaw reflects on The L Word’s ‘blatant normative assumptions about sex and gender’ and argues that although the criticism holds true for most of its representations

The L Word is nowhere more politically edgy, more progressive and […] more subversively feminist, than when it attempt[s] to tackle the issue of sexual identity through the overtly gender non-normative characters, Lisa, the lesbian man, Ivan, the drag king, Billie Blaikie, the very genderqueer manager of The Planet, and most especially through Moira/Max, the character who, over four seasons, transitioned from female to male (ibid.: 57).

Renshaw concludes that The L Word is fundamentally progressive, if nowhere else, in its representations of subversive identities that ask complex questions about sexual identity, especially in relation to the more normative depictions of lesbians in the show.

Another topic that raises debates on The L Word is what Ciasullo calls ‘the consumable lesbian’ (2001: 584). Alluding to producers’ growing attention to viewers, in her article ‘Commercialization of Lesbian Identities in Showtime’s The L Word’ (2010), Martina Ladendorf discusses how lesbians have become a demographically desirable group and the extent to which The L Word participates in the commercialisation of the lesbian. She argues that The L Word’s construction of lesbians as ‘fashionable’ contributes to the commercial branding of the lesbian as attractive, that is, financially marketable. Taking the example of the merchandising associated with the series that enables viewers to purchase not only DVD boxes and CDs, but also mugs, candles, clothes and ‘lipsticks in four different shades, […]' named
after the most popular characters’ of the show (ibid.: 273), she acknowledges that the commodification of the lesbian can be ‘constricting for the identity work of queer women in the future’. Yet, Ladendorf suggests that by ‘hi-jacking’ lesbian identities, *The L Word* creates a space for queer women in culture and the media industry, a visibility that nevertheless comes at a price (ibid.: 279). Aviva Dove-Viebahn conducts a similar discussion in her article ‘Fashionably Femme: Lesbian Visibility, Style, and Politics in *The L Word*’ (2011). Like Ladendorf and Ciasullo, Dove-Viebahn addresses the mostly femme image of the lesbian in *The L Word* where she suggests that ‘femmeness both complicates a popular rendering of lesbian visibility and nuances the way lesbian fashion is articulated within the lesbian community itself’ (ibid.: 77). She argues that although the show offers an overall heteronormative femininity, the characters are never concerned with ‘looking like lesbians’ and/or with lesbian fashion. Instead, they all embody their own personal style. The show manages to ‘continually render its characters as visible lesbians in spite of their fashionably feminine and, therefore, culturally ambiguous attire’ (ibid.: 79), thereby calling into question the concept of lesbian fashion and lesbian chic. She proposes that regardless of their sexual orientations, all characters in the series exist within a heterogeneous lesbian community that acknowledges sexual and gender diversity as well as most differences. Margaret T. McFadden offers a related argument in her article “L” is for Looking Again: Art and Representation on *The L Word*, in which she argues that through its use of contemporary art and artists challenging normative ideas about gender and sexuality, *The L Word* draws attention to these ideas and invites viewers to

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8 My discussion of Dana and Jenny in Chapter II disagrees with this argument.
understand them as constructed and performed (2013). Discussing female masculinity in *The L Word*, Candace Moore and Kristen Schilt compare the two representations of female masculinity (the ‘soft butch/inbetweener’ Shane and the drag king Ivan) and address how they relate to current debates on gender identity and expression (2009: 160). Moore and Schilt propose that Shane is an example of gender fluidity and refer to her as an ‘inbetweener’, in other words, ‘someone who […] adopts […] a postmodern dyke identity that takes from both femme and butch styles, presentations and roles at will’ (ibid.: 162). They argue that Shane’s masculinity, which is represented by a ‘player’ attitude and promiscuity, is tempered by her femininity represented by her capacity to be in ‘touch with her feelings’ (ibid.: 164). Therefore, Shane is enabled to become more masculine because she is also able to access her feminine side. By comparison, Ivan’s representation of female masculinity is first presented as a performance of masculinity as a drag king. However, they suggest that Ivan’s fluidity, which at first exists beyond the male/female binary, becomes more ‘male’ when the latter takes his on-stage performance into his everyday life and his performed masculine identity plays out ‘via sexually predatory and deceptive tactics’ (ibid.: 168). Therefore, while Shane’s gender fluidity functions due to a balance between masculinity and femininity, Ivan’s (overly male) masculine identity moves him into unforgivable territory and pushes the character out of the show.

*Queer as Folk* also provokes debates and discussions. Nevertheless, two things are worth noting. First, several studies conducted on *Queer as Folk* focus mainly on the original British version, *Queer as Folk UK* (Channel 4 1999-2000) and discuss its merits and failures in regard to representations of (mostly) gay men and the politics of gay visibility (see, for instance, Creeber 2004; Harris 2006; Davis 2007; Porfido 2011).
Second, *Queer as Folk* is often cited as an example of gay visibility on television, which inscribes the show in a gay/queer cultural landscape, but without being further discussed (see, for instance, Becker 2006; Sanders III 2007; Baker Netzley 2010; Gomillion and Giuliano 2011; Royster 2011; Villarejo 2014). Nevertheless, the U.S. series also attracts attention. Although he devotes most of his volume to *Queer as Folk UK*, Glyn Davis discusses *Queer as Folk* in comparison with the original. Despite several similarities with the British version (character templates although different names, specific locations, storylines particularly in Season One), Davis suggests that one main difference is that the U.S. version is highly invested in inscribing *Queer as Folk* in mainstream commercial gay culture. This is represented with the recurring use of the rainbow flag, ‘a symbol of queer community’ that is also ‘ruthlessly exploited by makers of queer consumer goods’, as well as the construction of the gay male body as a reflection of ‘the manufactured tastes of a mainstreamed gay identity’ (a thin, hairless and muscular body with sculpted torso; 2007: 114-5). Davis argues that one of the purposes of the series is to emphasise the visual pleasures of the gay club scene. This hedonistic goal can also be seen in the frequency of the sex scenes (at least one in each episode), which ‘produces a significantly more diverse and complex picture of human sexuality than the small number of (mostly vanilla) sequences in the original’ (ibid.: 120). In addition, although some political issues are addressed in the original (same-sex parenting, homophobia), *Queer as folk* introduces a more diverse range of political issues in its narrative, thereby situating the series in contemporary LGBTQ politics. In her article ‘Pink Dollars, White Collars: *Queer as Folk*, Valuable Viewers, and the Price of Gay TV’ (2011), Wendy Peters discusses the connection between the emergence of the concept of the ‘pink dollar’ and the supposedly growing acceptance
of LGBTQ people by mainstream U.S. media. Based on representations available in
*Queer as Folk*, Peters suggests that the ‘pink dollar’ presents an idealised demographic
that privileges the white, middle-class, male viewer. She argues that this privileged
position ‘leads to whitewashed images of middle-class, primarily gender normative,
gays and lesbians’ to the detriment of all other non-normative LGBTQ sexualities and
identities (ibid.: 194). Davis and Peters’ discussion of consumerism in *Queer as Folk*
is reminiscent of Michael Warner’s in *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), in which he
responds to criticisms against the white, middle-class dominance of the queer
movement. In this seminal work, Warner suggests that

> the institutions of culture-building have been market-mediated: bars, discos,
special service, newspapers, magazines, phone lines, resorts, urban commercial
districts. Nonmarket forms of association that have been central to other
movements – churches, kinship, traditional residence – have been less available
for queers. This structural environment has meant that the institutions of queer
culture have been dominated by those with capital: typically, middle-class white
men (ibid.: xvi-xvii).

In short, *Queer as Folk* reflects how LGBTQ visibility in U.S. society is closely linked
to consumerism, especially in a competitive market like television. Focussing on one
of the many LGBTQ issues addressed in *Queer as Folk* throughout its five Seasons,
Gael Sweeney draws attention to the issue of gay marriage in her article ‘Beyond
Golden Gardenias: Versions of Same-sex Marriage in *Queer as Folk*’ (2016).
Examining how the three main couples in the series (Lindsay and Mel, Michael and
Ben and Brian and Justin) deal with the issue and its consequences, she concludes that
they all represent a different philosophy of marriage, offering three perspectives that
reflect ‘the swiftly changing views toward same-sex marriage, both within the gay
community itself and also in straight-media discourse of the same period’ (ibid.: 42).
In *Straight Girls and Queer Guys: The Hetero Media Gaze in Film and Television* (2016), Christopher Pullen devotes a chapter to ‘Television and Domesticity’ in which he uses the understanding of television as a domestic medium to discuss *Queer as Folk*. He argues that in a domestic context, the presence of a ‘straight girl’ character in *Queer as Folk*, who represents ‘a minority reference within diverse gender-oriented texts’ (ibid.: 102), facilitates viewers’ identification with the text.² He suggests that contrary to the queer guy in a female-focussed text, such as *Sex and The City* (HBO 1998-2004), the representation of the ‘straight girl’ in *Queer as Folk* is ‘related to agency’ and portrays the other in ‘a coherent, political and social form’ (ibid.: 109) that offers a more comprehensive identity ‘involving political and/or emotional strength’ (ibid.: 110). In ‘Queer as Box: Boi Spectators and Boy Culture on Showtime’s *Queer as Folk*’ (2007), Bobbi Noble discusses how *Queer as Folk* consolidates the representation of lesbian identity and desires as stable and conservative as opposed to the representation of gay male identity and desires as groundbreaking. The article analyses an example in Season Four when Mel is pregnant with their second child and Lindsay is longing for heterosexual sex with artist Sam Auerbach. Noble argues that throughout the series, the lesbian couple is depicted as a symbol of stability, monogamy and commitment, which results in the representation of ‘boring’, uncreative lesbian sex. Therefore, he suggests that Lindsay’s desire for heterosexual sex in Season Four demonstrates ‘either a backlash logic of reversal (straights as the new marginalized sexuality) or else the queering of queer culture (straight as the new queer)’ (ibid.: 149). Despite giving in to her ‘straight’ desires, Lindsay decides to

² In contrast to Pullen, my work calls into question the domesticity of television and argues that both narratives are constructed to guide viewers via a dual identification (immersion and awareness), which enables viewers to identify with various characters and adopt their perspectives, while being aware of their status as viewers (see Chapter III).
forget her affair with Sam and to remain in her current lesbian life. Noble argues that Lindsay’s decision illustrates how *Queer as Folk* ‘codes “lesbian” as domestic and thus traditionally feminine’ and ‘constructs lesbian desire in epistemologically predictable ways: as non-phallic, anti-penetration, morally self-righteous, and remarkably un- and even anti-queer’ (ibid.: 151). Linsday and Mel are also the subject of ‘Understanding the Queer World of the Lesbian Body: Using *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* to Address the Construction of the Lesbian Body’ (2008). In their article, Daniel Farr and Nathalie Degroult discuss the representation of the lesbian body in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. They argue that in both series the lesbian body is mainly represented as a slender, well groomed, feminine body that reflects social norms of heteronormative femininity. Establishing a parallel between Lindsay and Mel (*Queer as Folk*) and Tina and Bette (*The L Word*) whose long-term committed lesbian relationships ‘emulate the heterosexual ideals of “marriage”’ (ibid.: 427), they suggest that both couples consist of a social ‘man’ (Mel and Bette) and a social ‘woman’ (Lindsay and Tina), a clear signposting that serves as a ‘readable reflection of a stable, “normal”, heterosexual relationship’ for straight viewers, but one which can be read differently by queer viewers (ibid.: 428). Specifically, they propose that both Mel and Bette ‘befit appropriate social expectations of womanhood while simultaneously embodying butch ideology’, although a butch ideology that still fits in the standards of mainstreamed lesbian representations (ibid.). Indeed, Mel is constructed as ‘quasi-butch’ in comparison with Lindsay, as the strong, assertive woman with boyish build, yet remains remarkably feminine in comparison with other butch lesbians, while Bette is constructed as a ‘feminized-butch’, that is, the bread-winner but whose body carries the traditional ideals of femininity and beauty (ibid.: 428; 432).
1.5. Thesis outline

In light of this literature review, my work does not seek to analyse *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in terms of representational politics to discuss the verisimilitude of their images. Instead, my analysis discusses these texts in the context of Showtime (and extends to pay cable television in general), to determine whether, how and to what extent this form of U.S. television can be thought of as a queer object of study, in the sense of defying (hetero)normativity and advocating for political resistance. To this end, the thesis is divided into three chapters, each broaching a topic linked to the production and broadcast of my case studies on Showtime (but can also be extrapolated to other texts produced on pay cable TV). Chapter I focusses on the U.S. television landscape. It outlines how and the extent to which pay cable television differs from broadcast television and basic cable television, to analyse how pay cable television can offer services to its subscribers that other forms of TV cannot. Specifically, it argues that being a service purchased individually, pay cable television radically changes the approach to ‘television’ as an object of study. As a result, it raises questions regarding the limits of subscription television (what they are and who decides these limits), paying particular attention to its subscription model, its programming strategies and its rating method. In addition, following my discussion of the U.S. television landscape, Chapter I contends that U.S. television is a complex medium that encompasses several forms of television, each with its own set of characteristics and regulations. As a result, Chapter I argues that television (and its products) should be addressed with respect to the form of television that produces it, and presents the research questions on the queerness of U.S. television addressed in the thesis.
Chapter II focusses on pay cable TV texts. It explores the various elements that make these texts queer narratives beyond the fact that they portray LGBTQ characters and queer lives. Discussing the writing process on Showtime from a queer perspective, it proposes that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand is characterised by creative freedom and authorial vision, which confer a greater latitude and autonomy over content, language and form on the writing teams for Showtime, to produce stories and texts that deviate from ‘regular TV’. Chapter II analyses how *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* offer uncensored queer representations that problematise and challenge cultural ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives. Moreover, regarding my argument that queer narratives can queer identity and sexuality and their heteronormative understanding as stable and fixed dichotomised categories, Chapter II shows that both narratives complicate the understanding of sexuality by articulating it in relation to identity itself connected with other constructs (sex, body, gender, pleasure and desire), to highlight its fluidity and flexibility as opposed to its rigid definition in discourses of sexuality. To this end, it draws attention to three main narrative devices that make *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* queer narratives and are directly connected with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand and its creative freedom and authorial vision offered to writing teams: the use of stereotypes and typical scripts, the queer temporality of these texts and their politicised narratives.

Finally, Chapter III focusses on the reception side of pay cable television. It discusses television viewers in the specific context of U.S. pay cable TV. Questioning the assumption that like broadcast TV, pay cable television solely caters to the ‘traditional family’, Chapter III examines what viewing positions Showtime offers to its subscribers and how they are reflected in the narrative. Specifically, it suggests that
Showtime’s viewers occupy liminal positions that exist betwixt and between the on-screen life-world and the viewers’ social life-worlds. I propose that liminality depends on the construction of the narrative that is unconstrained by temporal and commercial imperatives, which modifies both the pace (cutting to another scene/storyline/ad break) and the flow (rhythm of the whole episode) of the narrative. As a result, writers can take their time to introduce the characters and let the different storylines unfold by creating moments with no dramatic function (by introducing longer silences and a slower release of information, for instance), which in turn give viewers more time to integrate information and enjoy the on-screen life-world and the various stories without the urgency and abruptness of network texts. In addition, Chapter III argues that viewers of my case studies are integrated into the narrative following a dual identification process with the characters: immersion and awareness. Understood as tourists visiting and discovering new places and characters, television viewers have access to various viewing positions to experience a plurality of subjectivities that are not restricted to heteronormative categories. Discussing in detail this virtual tourism, Chapter III demonstrates how viewers of Queer as Folk and The L Word are guided through the narratives by protagonists who occupy similar viewing positions at first, while being made aware of their status as viewers. On the one hand, identification with their guides enables viewers to navigate the narratives, meet the locals, discover new places and take pleasure in the experience. On the other hand, being aware of their viewer status, viewers are distanced from the narratives, which allows them to emit judgements about characters based on their perceptions of the characters and of themselves and to develop parasocial relationships with consequences that last beyond the viewing situation.
CHAPTER I
1. U.S. television landscape

This work considers a historical moment of U.S. pay cable television by focussing on the premium network Showtime through the analysis of two of its most popular original series *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. It seeks to answer a series of questions regarding whether, how and to what extent this form of U.S. television can be thought of as a queer object of study, in the sense of defying (hetero)normativity and advocating for political resistance, and how this queerness is reflected at the production, textual and reception levels. It examines how and to what degree this queerness renegotiates the understanding of television as a domestic medium established during the network era, and how this renegotiation creates new producing and viewing (non-, anti-, and contra- normative) positions and images that do not comply with essentialised and (hetero)normative understandings of identities and sexualities in the post-network era. To this end, this chapter sets out the framework of the thesis. The first part of the chapter retraces the evolution of U.S. television since the late 1940s and early 50s to outline the current television landscape in the U.S. From the birth of broadcast television to the development of cable television and its expansion into basic and pay cable, it demonstrates how U.S. television has become a complex medium formed of a set of different systems that complicates the meanings and implications of what used to be simply ‘television’. The latter section of the chapter discusses television from a queer perspective. It demonstrates how and to what extent the content of premium channels differs from that of other forms of television in terms of production, texts and reception, and outlines the elements constituting the queerness of pay television discussed in the following chapters.
Visual culture is omnipresent as visual images ranging ‘from corporate logos to building-sized billboards to Internet Web sites’ have invaded everyday life (Semali 2003: 271). The takeover can be traced back to the boom of technology that occurred in the late 1950s and early 60s. With the democratisation of the television set in the 1960s (in U.S. society, in the first place) and later the public emergence of the Internet that went live on Christmas day in 1991, the media industry has become one of the most influential institutions in U.S. society. Joseph Foy, for instance, argues that the media facilitate the access to common cultural references. Discussing the U.S. political system, Foy suggests that

Many people first learn about important governmental offices, such as the presidency, Congress, the courts, and the public bureaucracy, and organizations such as interest groups and political parties not from a textbook or political science class, but from a TV show, a movie, or a song. Likewise, exposure to concepts such as civil rights and liberties, terrorism and torture, domestic and foreign policy, and even political philosophy and culture is often delivered through entertainment and that which is “pop” (2008: 3).

In other words, television (and other forms of popular culture) has become as relevant a form of education and information as those provided by school, the Church and any other types of public discourses. As an example, a study conducted in 1973 by Katz, Haas and Gurevitch, which looks at the importance of mass media in contributing to the satisfaction of people’s needs, concludes that mass media (referring here to television, radio, books, newspapers and cinema) ‘are thought to satisfy a variety of needs arising from social roles and psychological dispositions’ (1973: 179). Among the needs met by mass media figure self-empowerment and the development of a connection with either oneself, friends or family, or with social and political institutions. In addition, among their findings regarding television, Katz, Haas and
Gurevitch argue that television is the ‘most diffuse medium’. In short, it manages to satisfy various sets of needs, not simply entertainment, but also education, self-gratification and ‘killing time’. As this study shows, as early as 1973 television already occupied an important role in people’s everyday life.

Ever since the introduction of the television set in post-war America and its generalised accessibility in the 1960s, television has acquired a prominent position in daily activities. Today, it seems difficult to imagine a household without at least one TV set or a means through which people have access to television programmes. According to a 2009 Nielsen report, only 1% of U.S. households do not own a TV set, while over 50% own more than three TV sets (Nielsen Media Research 2009). Additionally, according to a 2010-2014 study surveying the average time spent daily in front of the small screen, U.S. citizens spend on average five hours a day in front of the TV (299.6 minutes precisely; statista.com 2015). Considering that people are awake sixteen to eighteen hours each day and spend on average eight hours at work/school, this means that television takes up about half of their free time. In other words, apart from work, sleep and other personal or domestic activities, watching television has become the number one leisure occupation. One can argue that television has become an extracurricular activity: people schedule catching the latest episodes of their favourite programmes the same way they plan visits to the gym or nights out with friends. Television has turned into one of the agents that constructs and structures social and cultural lives. As an example, Paul Adams talks about television as a ‘gathering place’, not as a geographical location but in relation to television’s

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10 Between 1948 and 1955, two thirds of U.S. households acquired a TV set, and by 1960, almost 90% of U.S. households had a TV set (Spigel 1992: 1).
11 Regardless of the distinction between broadcast television, basic cable and pay cable television.
socio-cultural implications. He proposes that television fulfils the dual function of ‘social context’, as it involves viewers in national elections and national and international competitions for instance, and ‘center of meaning’, as it influences and often defines people’s attitudes, values and fashion (1992: 118). Put differently, the understanding of television as a domestic medium that brings the outside world into the home established during the network era has shifted in the post-network era (McCarthy 2001; Lotz 2009). Television does not simply refer to the telecommunication system that stands in the living room, but which, once switched off, pushes back and blocks out any unwanted outside information, as it is not a one-way communication system. Instead, it involves a relation of exchange insofar as it influences and is influenced by culture and society, an influence that cannot be suppressed by the flick of a switch.

Moreover, the previous figures only account for the time spent per day in front of the TV set, the study does not consider other means of access to TV programmes through mobile technology. As a reference, the 2010-2012 On-demand TV revenues in the U.S. was estimated at $1535 million with an average of 95 million U.S. consumers of online TV (statista.com 2015). The advantage (or inconvenience, depending on one’s point of view) of online access to TV via computers, tablets or smartphones, is that a person can access TV programmes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, from almost anywhere with a Wi-Fi connection.\footnote{In fact, Amazon TV and Netflix, for instance, offer the possibility to download films or TV programmes on smartphones, laptops or tablets to watch during commute time without an internet access. Similarly, Showtime Anytime and the Showtime streaming service offer access to Showtime content offline (Showtime 2017).} Television programmes are now accessible and available at any time so that people can watch
some of their favourite shows on their way to and/or from work/school every day. With the convergence of television and the Internet, streaming media providers now enable viewers to adapt their own timetable to their watching habits, thereby facilitating a continuous consumption of media content. In short, television is even more omnipresent in daily life than it was before the rise of mobile and digital technologies.

Despite being a familiar, everyday object, ‘television’ is a hybrid, ever evolving object of study that warrants attention both at a textual and institutional level. ‘Television’ is a loaded term that refers both to the television medium (the telecommunication system used to transmit moving images and sounds) and to the television set (the means through which these moving images and sounds can be accessed). On the one hand, discussions of ‘television’ as a medium engage with actual programming: definition of the television text, questions of genres and narratives, analyses of specific texts and the representations of the social world within these texts, for instance. They also address questions of production, circulation and reception, and how they have changed since the first TV broadcast in the U.S. in the late 1940s: concepts of television ownership, authorship and audience, re/production of hegemonic structures, regulation of images, to name but a few. On the other hand, discussions of the TV set focus on how the technological evolution from black-and-white TV to flat screens and high-definition (HD) displays (without forgetting the means of access to television programmes via computer and mobile technology) has changed the experience of ‘watching television’: better image quality and definition, better sound, bigger screen, remote access to programmes, all contributing to enhance the viewer experience. Additionally, these discussions question how the evolution of
technology (introduction of the VCR and digital recorders, the convergence of television and the Internet, cable and satellite receptions) has transformed the viewer-programme relation: time shift that eliminates the time-related limits of scheduling, questions of liveness and synchronicity, ability to fast forward/zap ads, access to thousands of different programmes via cable and satellite reception, all creating new understandings of time, space and community. Put differently, discussions of ‘television’ are affected by questions of time and place as well as the social, economic, political, cultural, technological and legislative conditions of the institution that produces it.

Paramount in the context of this work is the case of the U.S. television landscape. In the U.S., television can be accessed via three main technologies: over-the-air broadcast (referred to as free TV), cable and DBS – Direct Broadcast Satellite, introduced in 1994 – (referred to as pay-TV). Viewers can watch television channels that are either broadcast channels (which include broadcast networks and independent local channels) or subscription channels (cable television, which includes both basic cable and pay cable; Uri 2006: 205-6). The distinction between these three technologies of television is important to acknowledge because they redefine and complicate what was previously understood simply as ‘television’. Alternative carriers to broadcasting (cable and satellite) have modified the formal rules and conventions of programming, thereby loosening the notion of television ‘flow’ that Raymond Williams identifies as ‘the defining characteristic of broadcasting’ (1990: 86; I discuss the ‘flow’ of television in more detail later). These changes to programming have shifted what audience members may expect from television, in turn also modifying how viewers are anticipated to behave and react. Each technology has (initially at
least) claimed to offer a type of television that would serve the interest of its intended viewers and remedy the perceived problems of its competitors. Changes to both programming and audiences are in part due to the fact that each technology is subject to its own regulatory framework. The relaxed regulatory conditions of subscription television (basic and pay cable alike), that is spared the public-interest requirement and obligations pertaining to broadcast television, grant a greater freedom in what cable networks are allowed to represent. Contrary to broadcast television, which is a public service and must thus address the nation as a whole, subscription TV is a private service that viewers/consumers choose to pay for. In short, it is a product purchased individually and as such, it is subject to the capitalist ideals and economic rules of the free market. Thus, it radically shifts the approach to ‘television’ as an object of study, raising the questions of what its foundational characteristics are, insofar as its diverse processes at the production, textual and reception levels rest on financial and competitive concerns. This invites further questions regarding how far subscription television can push, what are its limits and who decides these limits. Additionally, subscription TV being a general term that refers to both basic cable and pay cable, other questions can be asked regarding the differences between basic cable and pay cable, how these constitutional differences are reflected in their programming, in their content, mode of address and mode of consumption.

The analysis in this work is focussed on pay cable television, a subscription-based form of television, and specifically discusses *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, two programmes developed by and broadcast on the satellite-carried premium network Showtime. Showtime initially launched as a group of cable systems in California in July 1976 before uplinking to satellite and going national in March 1978. It was one
of the three earliest pay-cable networks, alongside HBO and The Movie Channel, which was subsequently acquired by Showtime in 1983 (Shapiro 2012: 168; Showtime 2017). At first, Showtime’s programming mainly featured extended versions of theatrical movies, concerts and stand-up comedy specials. In the early 1980s, Showtime was the first network to produce new episodes of a cancelled broadcast network series, The Paper Chase (CBS 1978-1979; Showtime 1983-1986). By the late 1980s, it started producing its own original series, which contributed to the Showtime brand (a concept I develop further in my later discussion of ‘quality TV’) as not ‘regular TV’, intensifying the distinction between broadcast TV and pay cable TV. In recent years, Showtime has been critically acclaimed for its original television programmes, whose content and themes align with the network’s latest slogan: ‘Brace Yourself’.

As the following discussion emphasises, subscription cable networks differ from both broadcast networks and basic cable networks in some key aspects. They are a good example of how the definition of ‘television’ as a domestic medium has evolved. Unlike broadcast television, they are not bound by the requirement to serve the ‘public interest’, a concept never precisely defined but which has nevertheless limited the production, regulation and distribution of its content (Communications Act of 1934 1992). In that sense, basic cable and pay cable are similar insofar as neither are subject to strict governmental regulations the way broadcast TV is. In addition, premium networks do not air advertising material during their programming, except self-promotional ones, unlike both broadcast TV and basic cable. This means that their content is neither tied to censors’ regulatory power nor advertisers’ values and expectations. This is not to say that premium networks do not market their
programming content. Instead, they simply bypass advertisers and directly sell to viewers. This direct sale process results in very little regulation and a greater creative freedom in the approach to writing, developing and promoting content to subscribers. In that respect, subscription-only cable networks are set apart from both broadcast and basic cable networks. This is reflected in various aspects of premium networks’ texts, from their content, audience target to their format, length and scheduling (or lack thereof). As a matter of fact, offering ‘no limits’ is one of their selling points. What premium networks sell is unprecedented, controversial content to informed viewers who are looking for something that, to borrow HBO’s slogan, is ‘not TV’.

Taking the example of Showtime and two of its most popular texts, this work seeks to answer a set of questions regarding U.S. pay cable television. Specifically, it considers whether this form of U.S. television can be theorised as a queer object of study, how this queerness transpires at the production, textual and reception levels of pay cable television, and what this putative queer TV reveals about the experience of television (at the institutional and textual levels) as a re/producer of mass culture. Consequently, it interrogates the idea that television is merely a domestic medium whose mainstreamness prevents it from offering diverse and flexible producing and viewing (non-, anti-, and contra-normative) positions and images that challenge essentialised understandings of identities and sexualities. To this end, it analyses the queer representations offered in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in relation to the form, content and reception of these texts to discuss their significance in relation to contemporary normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. Nevertheless, to understand whether and the extent to which Showtime in particular, and pay cable
networks in general, can offer services to its subscribers that other forms of television cannot, it is important to outline how and to what extent pay cable networks differ from basic cable and broadcast television, what distinguish them from other networks and how the evolution of the television medium enabled them to reach that status. Therefore, to grasp the current U.S. television landscape, it is necessary to retrace the different stages of U.S. television and to acknowledge how these different forms of TV are fundamentally interrelated and dependent on one another.

1.1. Broadcast television

Broadcast television was the first form of television to emerge in the late 1940s and early 50s in the U.S. A type of over-the-air broadcast programming, it transmits its signals within a specific geographic region through radio waves and can therefore be accessed by any household with a TV set and an adequate antenna. As previously mentioned, broadcast television (like its predecessor broadcast radio) is required to ‘promote public convenience or interest, or [...] serve public necessity’ under the various Communications Acts published by Congress (the 1927 Radio Act, the 1934 Communications Act and the 1996 Communications Act, the most recent to date), which consider public airways as a trusteeship (Communications Act of 1934 1992). Broadcasting (radio and television alike) is entrusted with serving the interest of the public by maintaining competitive markets, presenting opposite views on public news and affairs and preventing the use of ‘obscene, indecent or profane language’ and images in their programmes (ibid.). Although the defence of the public interest is
repeated throughout each Act, the notion itself remains vague.\textsuperscript{13} The expression ‘public interest’ brings attention to the paradoxical agreement that television should address both potentially lucrative audiences and the nation as a whole. This simultaneously labels television as a democratic medium and a capitalist one, acknowledging viewers as both consumers and citizens. Moreover, the loose notion of ‘public interest’ offers a greater latitude to private corporate interests and institutionalised ‘corporate liberalism’, in short, regulatory agreements that enable ‘large-scale businesses and complex markets’ (Aufderheide 1999: 13; Communications Act of 1934 1992; Gripsrud 1998: 24; Banet-Weiser, Chris and Freitas 2007: 5; Holt 2011: 54).

Nevertheless, as a ‘public’ medium, broadcast television is often discussed in terms of domesticity, whose audience is the family unit presumed to take the form of the heterosexual family. Instituted during the network era, this assumption was and still is reflected in many advertising materials and representations in television fictional works (Altman 1986; Williams 1990; Adams 1992; Ellis 1992, 2000; Spigel and Mann 1992; Fiske 1997; Capsuto 2000; Caughie 2000; Marc 2000; Newcomb 2000; McCarthy 2001; Morley 2004; Bignell and Orlebar 2005; Davis and Needham 2009; Lotz 2009; Medhurst 2009; Gray and Lotz 2012; Joyrich 2014; Pullen 2016). In fact, the domesticity of television constitutes a key characteristic of television that is

\textsuperscript{13} As a matter of fact, because of the unclear obligations surrounding the notion of ‘public interest’, Bill Clinton established the Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters in March 1997. The Committee’s aim was to determine the obligations of digital television broadcasters regarding the public interest in the wake of the replacement of analogue transmission technology by digital transmission technology. For the first time, the Committee made a series of recommendations that digital broadcasters were to follow in the public interest without clearly defining what this said ‘public interest’ entailed, such as demonstrating how programming and activities offered by digital broadcasters were in the public interest, drafting a Code of Conduct or enhancing diversity (in programming, discourses, hiring policy, and so on; Brotman 2017).
reflected in its industrial practices and its forms, content and cultural role in U.S. society. As Amanda Lotz argues, ‘the networks’ perception of their target as a family audience led to reliance on content featuring broad and universal themes, and competition pushed them toward homogeneous content likely to be accepted by a heterogeneous audience’ (2009: 52). This domesticity pertains to both the advertisement of broadcast television and the marketing of the TV set as a ‘free’ popular medium, a medium of the people meant to be used in the privacy of the home and which rapidly saturated the country. As Lynn Spigel considers:

As [home] magazine continued to depict the [TV] set in the center of family activity, television seemed to become a natural part of the domestic space... In its capacity as a unifying agent, television fit well with the more general hopes of a return to family values. It was seen as a kind of household cement that promised to reassemble the splintered lives of families who had been separated during the war. It was also meant to reinforce the new suburban family unity, which had left most of its extended family and friend behind in the city (1992: 39).

Situating television within family life in U.S. society, Spigel draws attention to the way television and its content, which is focussed on the social and the cultural, are oriented towards family and the everyday. Similarly, Jostein Gripsrud proposes that broadcast television functions both as a mirror and a window on the world (1998). On the one hand, television brings the outside world into the domestic space of the viewers’ living room. It offers them access to various sources of information, entertainment and culture in the casual, supposedly safe setting of the living room. On the other hand, it mirrors the said domestic space, representing what is considered ordinary family life and ultimately shaping it. However, this ‘ordinary family life’ that is represented is, first, often the contemporary understanding of the ‘traditional family’ that circulates in a given culture, and second, a constructed ideal of what the
‘traditional family’ in the U.S. supposedly looks like. As various scholars argue, the concept of ‘traditional family’ formed of a monogamous couple with a working father, a stay-at-home mother and a couple of children was never a typical model among U.S. citizens (see, for instance, Coontz 1992; Ellis 1992: 113-4). Moreover, as Davis and Needham point out, ‘all queers have families, and all are raised within domestic environs’, which challenges the institutional definition of domesticity that broadcast television elects to represent and effectively complicates it (2009: 6). Indeed, in its dual function of mirror and window that supposedly creates a closeness, an intimacy with viewers in its mode of address and consumption, television limits the ‘public’ it addresses and the interests it serves in its vow to serve the ‘public interest’. Additionally, the notion of ‘public interest’ that seems to equate viewers with citizens is still strongly imbued with financial interests, which equates viewers with consumers. Therefore, one can ask how broadcast television manages to balance this contradictory task of addressing viewers as both citizens and consumers and how broadcast networks deal with this paradox. Besides, it calls for the further questions of whether there exists a space/position/perspective for the viewers who do not fit in with this idea of ‘traditional family’ or do not recognise themselves in the television representations that are supposed to evoke a sense of familiarity in them? Can these ‘unfitting’ viewers still take pleasure in watching these representations or are they simply forgotten? Or is this space/position/perspective instead made available by pay cable television networks as they are not required to serve the ‘public interest’ and benefit from a higher degree of deregulation and freedom?

In the U.S., broadcast television, like broadcast radio, is a commercial system funded entirely by advertisers in the form of ads (local, regional and national).
Therefore, viewers pay no subscription fees to access the programmes broadcast in a specific geographic location, making broadcast television a type of ‘free TV’. However, the perceived (for there is no such thing as a ‘free TV’) freeness of broadcast television is paid for by viewers in the form of advertising and marketing, where viewers are addressed primarily as consumers. Although viewers pay no direct cost to watch broadcast television except the initial cost of the TV set, the regular scheduled interruptions of broadcast programmes with commercials serve to ensure that viewers are present during these breaks, effectively delivering viewers to advertisers. These scheduled interruptions define the narrative structure of broadcast television texts, insofar as commercial breaks are an integral part of U.S. broadcast television.

Analysing U.S. commercial broadcast television, Raymond Williams suggests that advertising ‘became the feature around which radio and television were organised, as well as the main source by which they were financed’ (1990: 68). Instead of discussing specific programmes or forms of programme, Williams focusses his analysis on the experience of watching television. He contends that the experience of television is that of ‘a planned flow’, where the ‘flow’ is a combination of sequences – television text, commercials and self-promotional material – that forms the ‘real “broadcasting”’ (ibid.: 90). For Williams, U.S. broadcast television is an uninterrupted, never-ending flow that enables channels to attract and retain viewers for a specific period of time, or at least, it ensures that the TV is switched on even if nobody is watching. Although the concept of flow has been central in the development of later studies, Williams’s definition of flow as the ‘characteristic organisation’ of broadcast television has been challenged by many (ibid.: 86). Rick Altman, for instance, does not attack the notion of flow itself, however he criticises Williams’
extrapolation of his experience of U.S. commercial broadcast television as the model for all television experiences (1986: 40). He denounces Williams’ generalisation of the operation of television technology in the U.S. as a cross-cultural and cross-industrial phenomenon. Instead, Altman proposes that television flow is a cultural practice that mainly depends on the ‘commodification of the spectator in a capitalist, free enterprise system’ (ibid.: 40). In short, Altman suggests that television flow is contingent on the degree of regulation of television programming. In countries heavily controlled by their governments, the level of flow is lower than in countries that have opted for commercialism, such as the U.S. Additionally, Altman argues that Williams’ reading of flow undermines the importance of the television texts that constitute this continuous flow, simultaneously forgetting about audience members and how they interpret and react to these specific texts. Altman suggests that the ‘programming flow’ proposed by Williams competes for viewers’ attention with what he calls the ‘household flow’, that is, the different tasks viewers undertake while watching television or while the TV is switched on. John Ellis also expands on Williams’ understanding of television flow. Instead of a continuous, planned flow, Ellis suggests that broadcast television is a combination of ‘small sequential unities of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five minutes’, that he calls ‘segments’ (1992: 112). For him, a television text is formed by the repetition of narrative segments with the juxtaposition of advertising segments in a smaller or larger number. Drawing a parallel between the viewers’ mode of attention in cinema and television, Ellis proposes that contrary to the cinema where viewers are placed in ideal conditions to focus their attention on the film, with television viewers’ attention is intermittent at best. Hence, programmes are able to retain viewers’ attention because
of the short length of each segment. Jane Feuer reconciles both concepts of flow and segment, by proposing that television is ‘constituted by a dialectic of segmentation and flow’ (1983: 15). She argues that contrary to cinema where the text is an uninterrupted, coherent unit with a set end, the television text is sequential with no closure, because segmentation is a fundamental characteristic of the television text. Therefore, what Williams refers to as a never-ending flow is the result of this ‘segmentation without closure’, which contributes to TV’s impression of liveness and immediacy, even though most television broadcasts are in fact recorded (ibid.: 16). In short, complicating the concept of flow by pointing out the shortcomings of Williams’ analysis, the different interpretations of, and approaches to, television flow and the experience of television highlight the complexity of the television medium, demonstrating its contradictory nature as a combination of segmentation and discontinuous texts that forms a continuous flow. In addition, they need to be situated within a given cultural, technological and regulatory context, a specific televisual temporality. Moreover, they invite further questions regarding the characteristics of the television text, the viewer experience or the various steps that led to specific programming decisions, for example. As I discuss later in this work with the example of Showtime’s texts, pay television re-articulates the notion of television flow because of the absence of commercial breaks and temporal imperatives that modify the pace of television narratives.

Whether discussed as a never-ending flow or a cluster of segments, the format of the commercial broadcast series is set in inflexible narrative times (generally twenty-three or forty-four minutes) with imposed commercial breaks that structure the development of the narrative. Writers for broadcast television (and basic cable
television) must thus consider these scheduled interruptions when developing their scripts, ensuring that the various narrative acts do not run longer than the five or so minutes available between commercial breaks.\textsuperscript{14} Additionally, they must ensure that they are able to bring back viewers after each break by offering them scenes (through events, dialogues and/or sounds) that pull their attention back to the programme. The narrative plotlines of series on broadcast TV (and on basic cable TV) must thus be planned and written with all these constraints in mind, contrary to the pay cable television’s series, as I illustrate in Chapter II.

These various interpretations of television flow and the experience of television bring forth an important process in U.S. television, especially for broadcast and basic cable television (less so with pay cable), that of programming. Programming is an ensemble of processes that consists in ‘selecting, scheduling, promoting and evaluating programs’ (Eastman and Ferguson 2013b: 4). Broadcast television being an advertiser-supported system, the main objective of programming is to deliver as large an audience to advertisers, despite broadcast television’s many limitations.\textsuperscript{15} Broadcast TV’s primary focus is thus not on developing and producing original programmes, but on delivering audiences that advertisers want to reach. Broadcast programming can be divided into two categories: prime-time and nonprime-time programming. Prime-time programming encompasses twenty-two hours – from 8pm to 11pm six days a week, and from 7pm to 11pm on Sundays – during which audience ratings are the most valued (Adams and Eastman 2013: 47). Therefore, programmes

\textsuperscript{14} And that each act is divided into two-minute ‘beat’ units packed with information, either action or characters’ reactions to events (Newman 2006: 17-8; see Chapter II).

\textsuperscript{15} For instance, there is the ‘public interest’ clause that imposes limits on content; there is the limited time that audiences are available to consume media content in a day; there is also a financial limit, as rights for shows (good or bad) cost a lot of money.
scheduled during prime-time hours are the most heavily promoted and the most talked about. Another difference with nonprime-time hours is the target audience. Prime-time broadcast programming often privileges young, urban viewers at the detriment of other segments of the population and proposes programmes with themes and content that are more likely to interest this specific segment (Lotz 2007: 89; Adams and Eastman 2013: 55-7). The success of a programme is often determined by ratings, that is, the estimated audience size of a specific programme, thus broadcast channels are also attentive to scheduling, in addition to paying attention to the type of programmes offered. Indeed, the number of viewers who tune in at a scheduled time to watch an episode determines whether a programme is a success or not, which in turn affects its allocated time-slot (the day and time a programme is broadcast during the week). This time-slot is decided after careful and informed considerations based on audience research (for instance, when people are more likely to be home to watch television and to privilege staying in to watch TV rather than going out with friends) and ratings analysis (the analysis of the composition and the size of an audience for a specific TV series, usually conducted by audience measurement firms; see Turner 2001a: 6). In addition, programmes are scheduled following a strategy that aims at encouraging viewers to stay tuned in and discouraging them to tune out/switch channel. To this end, programmers try to schedule shows with similar storylines or similar genres that may facilitate a flow-through of viewers from one prime-time programme to the next. Moreover, broadcast TV networks regularise their schedule in connection with competing networks to air their respective programmes and scheduled commercial breaks at the same time (Lotz 2009: 51). Hence, viewers are less likely to zap during commercial messages as other channels also air commercials.
Although prime-time programming is more readily acknowledged in reviews and ratings, this does not mean that nonprime-time programming is negligible. As a matter of fact, nonprime-time programming is often broadcast television’s most provocative segment (with talk shows or reality TV programmes, for instance) and its most profitable (Bellamy and Walker 2013: 246; Gamson 2014). For instance, discussing 1990s talk shows, Gamson argues that although these shows are ‘widely denigrated programming slice’, they represent ‘one of the only cultural spots where sexually stigmatized people could […] come close to self-representation’ (2014: 228). In short, nonprime-time programmes like talk shows offer a site for generally stigmatised and marginalised social groups to confess their difference, express themselves and/or be visible in a society that often seeks to erase any differences. Yet, as Gamson points out, although twenty-first century reality TV and talk shows celebrate diversity, the popularisation of non-normative representations comes at a cost, that of assimilation (ibid.: 228-9; 2005). As daytime programmes and late-night shows are generally less expensive to produce and carry more commercials than prime-time slots, they generate greater profits for broadcast networks. Additionally, the audience targets of the different types of programmes broadcast during daytime or late night are less demographically diverse than prime-time’s (although less large in number), making it easier for advertisers to limit ‘advertising waste’ (ads aimed at the wrong viewers) by directing adverts at the ‘right type’ of consumers (ibid.). In short, the profits generated by nonprime-time programming contribute to a network’s continued programming of critically acclaimed prime-time texts.

Although programming is a strategy that was first used for broadcast television, the programming strategies used by most basic cable networks are in fact similar. This
is hardly surprising considering that most basic cable owners are multiple system operators (MSOs) that also own broadcast networks. Nevertheless, basic cable uses some different programming strategies (especially marathons and blocking), in their attempt to increase ratings and lure audiences away from major broadcast events that attract a high number of viewers, like the Super Bowl for instance. In contrast, programming holds very little importance for pay cable networks whose scheduling strategy is generally based on a rotation system.

1.2. Cable television

Cable television, as it came to be known from 1968 onwards, first emerged in the late 1940s and early 50s, only a few years after the development of broadcast television.\(^\text{16}\) At that time, this early cable system was originally called Community Antenna Television, or CATV, and was nothing more than an extension and amplification of broadcast television signals in rural and mountainous regions (Mullen 2003: 33). It was developed by small-town entrepreneurs in regions that could not get a clear signal (or any signal at all) and could therefore not receive broadcast television. Like broadcast television, CATV was not a paid service but a service offered to viewers who were unable to receive broadcast signals. After pay-TV was finally approved by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) in 1970 and with the subsequent launch of satellite-carried networks in the mid-1970s, basic cable television eventually

\(^{16}\) 1968 marks the date of the final ruling in *Fortnightly v. United States* that ruled that the CATV industry could legally use any broadcast signals without permission and/or without paying any copyright fees to broadcast stations. This ruling was made possible due to the inadequacy of the most recent piece of legislation on copyright issues, the 1909 Copyright Act, to deal with electronic media. This important decision gave the opportunity to the CATV industry to start promoting itself as a television programming system rather than an antenna relay system (Horwitz 1989; Mullen 2003).
became a paid service in the late 1970s. With the perfection of the technology and the high expectations for its potential growth as a distinct industry, the CATV system rapidly forged its own path and became an alternative to broadcast TV. This evolution was made possible by offering more channels to its viewers, first by amplifying weaker broadcast signals and later by using microwave relays to import signals over greater distances. CATV was then able to offer a ‘complete package of broadcast networks’ comprised of both local and ‘major-market independent channels’ (ibid.: 34-6). This technological evolution, in addition to new regulation rules and changes in viewer behaviour, gradually affected the number and content of programmes available on U.S. television. The development of microwave technology represented the beginning of the second phase of cable television (the Blue Sky years, 1968-1975, time of the rise of satellite cable), a phase marked by its promotion as an alternative to broadcast television and its change of name from CATV to cable television. While CATV was initially an antenna system with a limited channel capacity, this new cable television industry promised to bring an abundance of channels and a variety of programmes to its viewers. The once independently owned CATV was, by that time, dominated by most of the major multimedia conglomerates that were also involved in broadcast television and other entertainment industries. The involvement of these MSOs changed the face of cable programming: what was originally envisaged as a potential educational and narrowcast medium, became dependent on corporate-controlled, well-funded groups with no economic incentives to promote such content. In short, the informational role and service to the public of broadcast television were increasingly eclipsed by the commercial goals of CATV owners. This second phase also marked the beginning of cable TV’s regulation.
Although at first broadcasters were satisfied with CATV’s ability to extend the reach of their broadcast signals, some saw in the use of microwave relays a danger to their economic success. Complaints to the FCC focussed on issues of copyright, issues of programme exclusivity rights but, more importantly, they denounced how microwave relays created an unfair competition for local stations as they enabled the bypass of local signals in favour of that of better-funded stations. Consequently, after five years of failed attempts at policy initiatives, the FCC passed its *First Report and Order on Cable Television* in 1965. The regulatory policies implemented a ‘must-carry’ clause (a requirement for any microwave-relayed CATV systems to carry local signals) and a ‘nonduplication’ protection clause (which limited microwave-relayed CATV systems in their importation of programmes that duplicated anything available on local broadcast). A year later the *Second Report* extended these limitations to all CATV systems; in addition, it banned distant signal importations to the top 100 markets, thereby preventing CATV from entering the said markets.

Ironically, one of the consequences of the regulations implemented by the FCC was the increasing attention CATV started to attract. Both regulatory bodies and the general public recognised cable TV’s potential to offer a broad variety of programmes delivered on a large number of channels and called for an end to strict regulatory policies (although not an end to all regulations) in the form of government reports, press articles and privately commissioned studies. For instance, the 1971 Sloan Commission on Cable and Communications, a privately commissioned study assessing the potential technological evolution of cable television and foreseeing its rapid growth, held high expectations for cable programming in the U.S. The report advocated for a radical change in cable policy that would allow cable TV to provide
services that broadcast television was unable to provide (for example, coverage of local politics or addressing the needs of specific audiences and minorities), effectively ending broadcast TV’s monopoly on the broadcast market (Sloan Commission on Cable Communications 1971). The Sloan Commission (among others) proposed that cable television could offer a ‘less “lowest-common-denominator”, and crassly commercialized television, less intrusive advertising, and more interactivity on the part of the viewer’ (Banet-Weiser, Chris and Freitas 2007: 4). In other words, it suggested that cable TV could empower its viewers by offering them a more active role in their choice among a wide variety of educational and diversified programmes, that would also heighten their pleasure in the experience of watching television, as their programmes would not be subject to the same regulations as broadcast television, whose programming content was (and still is) overseen by advertisers and content regulators.

The optimistic vision of the 1971 report has, at best, only partially been realised. First, as mentioned earlier, although cable TV was initially commended for its educational and/or diversity potential, as it became the property of major MSOs, capitalist interests took precedence. Moreover, when pay-TV emerged in the late 1970s, cable television developed into basic cable and pay cable, among which only the latter is a subscription-based only service. Thus, although basic cable is not entirely funded by advertisers the way broadcast TV is, a part of its funding is provided by advertisers, the other being provided by subscription fees. Therefore, basic cable, like broadcast TV or any advertiser-supported media, must cater to as many viewers as possible, by offering programmes that are as inclusive as possible while simultaneously persuading viewers of the originality and specialisation of its
programmes (Mullen 2003: 28). Consequently, the content of these programmes must align with the ideas and ideologies defended by the advertisers financing them or they risk losing their funding.

With the growing popularity of cable television, policymakers attempted to implement new regulatory rules that would ensure the protection of broadcast TV and the prosperity of cable TV. Several FCC reports were published, the most important being the 1972 *Cable Television Report and Order* that emphasised two main points: signal importation and public access. The FCC proposed to relax its restrictions on signal importation, effectively granting cable TV owners the rights to rely even more on broadcast signals. Although the 1972 *Report and Order* did not grant cable television unrestricted signal importations, the subsequent 1974 and 1976 revisions to the 1972 *Report and Order* did. Put differently, the publication of the 1972 *Report and Order* marked the first step into a phase of deregulation that would eventually allow cable TV to expand into major markets.

By the mid-1970s, both broadcast and cable television started to contemplate the use of satellites for programme delivery. The interest in communications satellite technologies arose in the late 1950s and early 60s when the first satellites were launched (first, in the Soviet Union in 1957 and in the U.S. in 1960). Since the mid-1960s, communications satellites have been used to transmit public television broadcast. However, it was the implementation of the ‘Open Skies’ policy during the Nixon administration that the use of domestic communications satellites by cable owners and other private parties was permitted. Announced in 1970 and approved by the FCC in 1972, the policy ‘ruled that essentially any company was free to establish
a satellite communications network’ (Horwitz 1989: 229). In other words, ‘Open Skies’ privatised the satellite industry. Both ‘Open Skies’ and the FCC’s deregulations favoured the domination of the cable television industry by wealthy conglomerates.

Parallel to the adoption of satellite transmission came the birth of pay-TV. Until the late 1970s, both broadcast and cable TV (and its predecessor, CATV) could be accessed for ‘free’. However, with the development of satellite technology and the ‘Open Skies’ policy, pay-TV (divided into basic cable and pay cable channels) emerged. In fact, talks about the possibility and potential of a pay-TV system were contemporary to the development of CATV. The first tests for a pay-TV system were conducted in 1950 by three pay-TV companies in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles and were a technical success. However, the idea of having to pay for watching television was not supported unanimously. Pay-TV advocates, including television critics, electronics manufacturers or educators, accused broadcast television of lowering U.S. cultural standards by offering only mind-numbing, culturally vapid programmes that only met the tastes of a mass audience. In addition, they defended ‘the capitalist ideals of “customer choice”’ and “deregulated free markets”’. Conversely, pay-TV critics, which included broadcast television professionals, cinema owners and members of the public, denounced the system as both a means to privatise the public airways and another unfair way to segregate low-class incomes from the rest of U.S. society. Additionally, cinema owners argued that pay-TV would affect the already declining attendance of movie goers (McMurria 2007: 44-5; 2017: 91-2; Mullen 2003: 48-9). Because of the strong opposite reactions to pay-TV, Congress conducted four public hearings between 1956 and 1969 to consider the issue. It eventually decided on authorising pay-TV, provided it met certain conditions set by
the FCC that guaranteed the interests of broadcast television. In the meantime, other pay-TV trials took place, several of which failed. Starting in the 1950s and continuing throughout the 60s and early 70s, the ‘Phonevision’ and ‘Skiatron’ systems, ‘Telemovies’, ‘International Telemeter’ and other pay operations proved unsuccessful, either because they were denied permits by the FCC or because their subscribers were dissatisfied with the content, price, methods of payment, and so on (Gunzerath 2000: 657-8; Mullen 2003: 47-58). However, from the moment CATV and cable television became the property of MSOs and were no longer independently owned by small-town entrepreneurs, in addition to the U.S. capitalist ideals and the FCC’s deregulations, pay-TV was the logical next step.

1.3. Pay cable versus basic cable

Although both basic cable and pay cable are classified as cable television, they present fundamental differences. Among these differences that are of particular interest to this work, are their subscription model (advertiser-supported versus subscriber-based) and how this affects the narrative structure of the television text, their programming strategies and the type of programmes they provide and how this affects subscribers’ expectations, and finally, how they rate their success and what it means for regulations and censorship. Basic cable provides three main types of service that are sold as a package (or bundle): broadcast channels, PEG (Public, Educational and Government) access and other local programming and satellite-carried cable-specific networks that emerged during the introduction of satellites to the industry in the late 1970s (for instance, CNN) and allowed rural areas where cable service was not provided to access
the cable system (Uri 2006: 207; Mullen 2003: 104). Unlike basic cable, pay cable is generally subscribed to on an à la carte basis. Viewers can subscribe to pay cable channels without subscribing to basic cable and they can also choose to subscribe to one premium network without subscribing to any of the other premium networks. Premium channels are also often made available in a bundle that offers access to two or three premium networks’ packages, which is often cheaper than subscribing to the different premium networks individually. A subscription gives viewers access to the multiplex package available, in most cases eight to twelve channels. In the case of Showtime, subscribers receive Showtime, Sho 2, Showcase, Showtime On Demand, Showtime Extreme, Sho Beyond, Sho Next, Sho Women, Showtime Family Zone, The Movie Channel, The Movie Channel Xtra and Flix (Showtime 2017). The principle behind multiplexing is to give viewers the impression that their subscription is worth paying for, as opposed to or in addition to paying for basic cable, while it does not add extra cost to the network because the content of additional channels is generally either reruns of the main channel or belongs to the network’s library.

The difference in subscription models between basic cable and pay cable plays an important part in the programming choices of a network. As previously mentioned, basic cable is funded by advertising and a per-subscriber (per-sub) fee, a monthly fee based on the total number of subscribers that cable channels charge cable providers to carry their content.17 For its part, pay cable is financed only by subscription fees, therefore it does not sell commercials, nor does it earn any ad revenue. Consequently, it does not deliver its audience to advertisers. The absence of advertising on premium

17 Depending on the popularity of a cable channel, a higher per-sub fee is carried. Similarly, if a channel is included in a package with other channels, the per-sub fee will vary (Molla 2014).
networks radically changes the programming content by focussing more on viewers’ expectations (or at least on what networks expect their subscribers would want to see) and less on advertisers’ wishes. As mentioned earlier, the potential of cable television (and its predecessor CATV) to cater to social and cultural minorities was one of the selling points of CATV/cable television in the late 1960s and early 70s. Nevertheless, from the moment CATV/cable networks became the property of MSOs, this argument was pushed back in favour of developing programmes that would attract a broad and heterogeneous audience. The programmes thus produced generally avoided content that might be deemed controversial and might provoke advertisers to pull their financial support or to give it in the first place. Even with the development and launch of many new networks in the 1980s, which has changed the expectations of attracting a large audience, in addition to the evolution of mores in U.S society, networks are still careful to develop programmes whose content flirts with the limits of what is considered acceptable yet remains within these limits. Basic cable networks must thus ensure the respect of this delicate balance at the risk of losing their advertising sponsorship. Conversely, pay cable networks can cross the line, in fact they are expected to do so. For instance, in terms of queer content (as is explicitly depicted in my case studies), what basic cable channels can do is hint at a same-sex relationship between two clearly-identified LGBTQ characters and suggest sexual contact. They can even represent the beginning of such contact on screen, however the camera must cut away from any further actions beyond a kiss, which in itself is a definite evolution since the 1990s ‘no-kiss rule’ that I discuss in Chapter III. In other words, basic cable channels can represent LGBTQ characters, but cannot explicitly depict sexual acts.
Conversely, pay cable channels offer their viewers graphic and explicit representations of same-sex relationships, including depictions of sexual acts.

In terms of programming strategies, scheduling holds little importance for premium networks, contrary to basic cable networks. Indeed, scheduling patterns on basic cable networks (like broadcast networks) typically programme a movie or a TV series only once, at a specific time and date, seeking to gather as large an audience for that one-time opportunity showing. Premium networks do not follow the same pattern, instead they offer repeating and rotating scheduling patterns, allowing viewers to watch a movie or a TV series at their convenience or several times if they want, effectively attracting cumulative audiences for each showing. Because of these irregular scheduling patterns, it is almost impossible to accurately evaluate the number of viewers who watched a specific programme. Therefore, although Nielsen publishes a quarterly report that helps premium networks make sense of reported viewing (Ferguson, Meyer and Eastman 2013: 191), generally the success of a network is evaluated by its number of paying subscribers.

Because pay cable is an à la carte service, it is paramount for premium networks to be able to entice subscribers to pay for their services. Although ultimately it is more expensive to pay for basic cable than pay cable, in terms of value for money, basic cable is more profitable as subscribers receive a higher number of channels to choose from. Yet, according to a recent Nielsen report, on average U.S. homes

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18 The average monthly price for basic cable ranges from $23.79 for a basic service to $69.03 for an expanded service (as of end of 2017). However, these average prices vary substantially from one provider to another and do not consider the local taxes, as each state has its own tax rates, or other additional costs (rental of a digital or HD receiver, for instance) that are added to the monthly bill. As an example, Comcast offers a limited basic service for $15.99 a month for 10+ channels and an expanded service for $69.99 for 260+ channels, while Cox’s basic service starts at $30.49 per month for 155+ channels with its expanded service costing $137.99 a month for 380+ channels (Federal
receive one-hundred-and-eighty-nine basic cable TV channels, however viewers tune in to an average of seventeen channels (Nielsen 2014). This report emphasises two things. First, all these available cable channels compete for viewers’ attention. Second, more content is not synonymous with more consumption. Despite having access to a high number of channels, viewers have a limited number of hours available to spend watching television (in whatever form). In addition, viewers have preferred genres and narratives they want to watch in their free time. Therefore, basic cable channels must find means to entice viewers into watching their programmes rather than their competitors’ programmes. The likely motivation for viewers’ choice is the quality of the channel they select based on their personal preferences and taste. Hence, what matters for a channel is to be able to offer its viewers something they want to watch and take time away from other (professional, domestic, social, personal) activities to do so. In this sense, both basic cable and pay cable channels face the same challenge in relation to viewers: they both need to be able to entice viewers into watching their programmes/subscribing to their channels.

Nevertheless, even if subscribers only watch a limited number of channels, they still receive the entire package. The possibility exists for them to watch any of these available channels. Therefore, to distinguish themselves from basic cable networks, premium networks privilege controversial content within programmes that either tell stories that are unavailable on other networks or are depicted in a manner that may be classified as ‘indecent’ because of various amounts of profanity, sexual activity, nudity, graphic violence or any other adult content. Pay cable channels

Communications Commission 2017: 29; 20). By comparison, Showtime costs $10.99 per month ($8.99 when subscribed through TV or Internet providers; Showtime 2017).
address topics that are usually avoided or treated carefully, which often results in the superficial and thus incomplete portrayal of an issue that privileges political correctness to accuracy and messiness. For example, among Showtime’s most popular original series figure the crime drama *Dexter* (2006-2013) that tells the story of a forensic technician by day and vigilante serial killer by night, the dark humour comedies *Weeds* (2005-2012) about a suburban mother selling marijuana to pay the bills, and *Nurse Jackie* (2009-2015), a New York City nurse who relies on Vicodin, Percocet and Xanax to get through the days, the crime thriller *Homeland* (2011-present) about a bipolar CIA agent who strongly believes that a former prisoner of war poses a threat to the U.S., and my case studies, the LGBTQ drama *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005) and *The L Word* (2004-2009). All these series have common characteristics, including the use of various narrative devices and the work of the camera that encourages the development of character-viewer connections that call on viewers’ empathy and sympathy to render these unconventional, often criminal, characters sympathetic. For instance, in series involving morally reprehensible characters like *Dexter* or *Weeds*, this is carried out by the way the narrative manages to render these antiheroes (*Dexter* Morgan (Michael C. Hall) and Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker), respectively) human, by representing them as regular people who face the everyday pressures and responsibilities of any ordinary person. For instance, by invoking Dexter and Nancy’s human weaknesses and positive character traits and giving viewers access to what they are thinking and feeling, the narrative

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19 For instance, Dexter is often shown struggling with his compulsion to kill and trying to abide by the code of conduct his adoptive father taught him (which allows him to kill only criminals). In addition, although he distances himself from other people that he calls ‘humans’ and claims to have no feelings, Dexter gradually becomes attached to his girlfriend and then wife Rita (Julie Benz) and her children and shows a profound loyalty to his family. Meanwhile, Nancy decides to sell drugs to maintain her upper-middle class lifestyle after her husband’s death and is constantly shown trying to keep her secret
makes them likable characters, enabling viewers to care for them while real-life people displaying this type of behaviour would not necessarily trigger the same reaction. Murray Smith makes a similar argument in his discussion of Tony Soprano, suggesting that despite being ‘a vicious thug’, Tony Soprano ‘commands the loyalty, affection and sympathy of most viewers’ (2011: 66). Smith proposes that this contradictory appeal is due to the various ways fictions engage viewers morally, in addition to the way viewers feel a combination of attraction and repulsion for Soprano’s actions. Similarly, although it does not fit in with a broader idea of morality, both Dexter and Nancy have their own moral framework. In short, by balancing regular moments showing these characters as ordinary people with less moral ones (committing murders or selling drugs), characters like Dexter or Nancy appeal to viewers and attract their sympathy. As Chapter III suggests, the text-viewer connection (and character-viewer connection) is made possible through a liminal viewing space envisaged as a site of connection between viewers and TV texts, in which the camera work and the construction of the narrative both help viewers participate in the events of the narrative and meet and follow the protagonists who inhabit this on-screen life-world via the TV screen (or other watching devices), while being aware of their status of viewers. As a way of watching pay cable television that offers various and varying viewing positions that can be adopted and discarded as the narrative progresses, liminality allows viewers to travel within the narrative and discover new places, meet the locals and learn their stories, offering a dual distance and proximity to the narrative and its protagonists. In short, the liminal space enables viewers to experience ‘being there’ without physically

from her sons (although they find out at different points in the series) and protect them from the dangers of the drug trade. She is often depicted juggling between her responsibilities as a mother and as a drug dealer.
being there, effectively turning television viewers into tourists visiting the on-screen life-world. As I discuss in detail in Chapter III, the liminal space is contingent on the characteristics of premium channel texts, including the creative freedom and authorial vision offered to writers, the uninterrupted narrative, the personal, interactive and generally solitary viewing habits of the on-demand access and rotation-basis schedule and the aesthetic of queer narrative texts (which I discuss in Chapter II).

Because the success of premium networks is measured by their number of subscribers, they are less concerned with which programmes attract what demographic groups or how many viewers tuned in to a specific programme. What matters is that viewers keep paying their subscription, regardless of whether they watch or not. Hence, they can afford to develop various programmes that are aimed at smaller, circumscribed audiences, the goal being to ensure that subscribers find enough value in the many different programmes to keep paying for premium services. Instead of relying on typical scripts aimed at a broad audience, premium networks privilege the creation of several programmes, narrower in interest, that are tailored for a specific audience. To some extent, premium networks realise what CATV/cable television proposed to do: cater to cultural and social minorities, address issues and topics that broadcast television could not because of its regulation and represent edgy/controversial content, for instance. This does not mean that premium networks are not commercial networks or that they are not financially motivated. Rather it means that they have adopted a different approach to their own commercial success by relying on formats and formulas that have proven successful in the past, just not the same formats and formulas used by broadcast and cable television.
As mentioned earlier, basic cable programming strategies are comparable to that of broadcast television. Nevertheless, there are certain differences that are implemented to lure audiences away from broadcast networks during times where viewers are highly likely to lounge in front of the small screen (national events, bank holidays, lengthy bad weather periods, for example). In particular, two main strategies prove successful in their endeavour: marathons and blocking. Marathons are continuous (all-day, all-night, weekend-long) scheduling of the same series, which generally appeal to and gather many viewers. Blocking consists in scheduling either multiple episodes of a single series in one block or reruns of diverse popular series that used to be exclusively programmed on broadcast TV and are now available on basic cable networks (and often no longer on broadcast networks). For their part, premium networks do not rely on scheduling strategies. Instead, they offer their content on a rotation basis, where a programme is scheduled at three to eight different times during a month. This enables viewers to watch a programme on several occasions, but more importantly, it maximises the potential audience for each programme. Additionally, most premium networks include On-demand services in their subscription, offering an even greater scheduling freedom to their subscribers.

The advertising-free subscriber-based model grants premium networks more freedom, insofar as they do not need to schedule commercial breaks between and within their programmes. Instead of being interrupted by commercials every five or so minutes like basic cable (or broadcast television) networks, programmes run their full length (Lotz 2007: 92-3; Eastman and Ferguson 2013a: 325). The only advertising material aired on premium networks is the self-promotional material presenting other programmes available on said networks. In terms of original programming, this means
that the narrative structure of texts is altered. Without the prescribed commercial breaks that segment the narratives of commercial networks’ programming, writing teams for shows on premium networks benefit from a certain flexibility and freedom (see my discussion of creative freedom and authorial vision in Chapter II). Instead of having five or so minute acts during which conversations must come to an end or during which events unfold and reach their climax, writers can follow their own pace to develop storylines. Thus, they can spend as much time as the story requires on a specific event or on the development of a character until the way the story is told satisfies writers, showrunners and directors involved in the development of the show. This flexibility also affects the length of the episode. With advertising-supported networks, episodes are strictly limited to twenty-three and forty-four-minute formats. However, on premium networks, some episodes run past these inflexible narrative times, while others run shorter depending on the requirements of the narrative.

1.4. ‘Quality TV’

Recent discussions of contemporary U.S. television often address the state of current U.S. television in terms of ‘quality’, following Robert J. Thompson’s description of ‘quality TV’, whose first phase emerged in the 1980s and second boomed in the 90s. According to Thompson, in the early 1980s U.S. television entered a ‘second golden age’ with the production of ‘quality TV’ series like *Hill Street Blues* (NBC 1981-1987) and *Cagney and Lacey* (CBS 1981-1988), a new form of television series that breaks the rules of genre, either by transforming a traditional genre or by representing an
unexplored narrative territory on television (1997; see also Caldwell 1995: 4-5). ‘Quality TV’ thus refers to a new genre, which he calls a ‘super-genre’, of television series whose purpose is to elicit a response and to provoke thought in viewers, thereby challenging the 1970s audience theory model that promoted viewers as passive watchers (Thompson 2011: xvii). ‘Quality TV’ reached its peak in the early 1990s starting the second phase of ‘quality TV’, with several instances including Twin Peaks (ABC 1990-1991; Showtime 2017), The X-Files (FOX 1993-2002; 2016-present) and Ally McBeal (FOX 1997-2002). Although the first phase of ‘quality TV’ mainly took place on broadcast television in the 1980s, the second phase offered cable television (basic cable and pay cable alike) a ground to develop their own ‘quality TV’ series. The main differences between the ‘quality TV’ of basic cable and that of pay cable is that basic cable’s was (and still is) generally limited content-wise because of censorship, as previously mentioned. It is worth noting that the emergence of the concept of ‘quality’ on U.S. television was not only a question of style. Rather, as John Caldwell argues

the stylistic emphasis that emerged during this period [late 1980s and early 90s] resulted from a number of interrelated tendencies and changes: in the industry’s mode of production, in programming practice, in the audience and its expectations, and in an economic crisis in network television (1995: 5).

In short, the emergence of the second phase of ‘quality TV’ in the 1990s was a historical phenomenon directly related to new ideologies and new industry needs. Indeed, faced with the growing competitiveness of mass-market television since the 1980s, U.S. television in its various forms had to adapt to gain audience share. In the

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20 The first golden age of television is traditionally identified as a time stretching between 1947 and 1960, a time when television was meant to address serious people who took television seriously (Thompson 1997: 11).
case of Showtime (and other premium networks), this adaptation process manifested in the branding of its original programming for product differentiation by advertising it as not ‘regular TV’, thereby positioning the premium network against its broadcast counterparts (Jaramillo 2002; Santo 2008). Indeed, ‘quality TV’ series are sometimes referred to as “‘HBO-style series” […] as a description of high artistic achievement in the medium’ (Thompson 2011: xviii).

Branding is a marketing strategy that involves ‘the development and maintenance of sets of product attributes and values which are coherent, appropriate, distinctive, protectable, and appealing to consumers’ (Murphy 1987: 3). As previously mentioned, the branding of Showtime (and other pay cable TV networks) as not ‘regular TV’ contributed in the 1990s to its distinction from broadcast TV, a distinction that continues today, based on the elusive factors that constitute ‘quality TV’. Theorists contend that the expression ‘quality TV’ is ambitious and ambiguous, insofar as ‘quality’ often implies personal taste and value judgement, for what makes the ‘quality’ of a TV series? (see, for instance, Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi 1984: ix-x; Brunsdon 1990; Caldwell 1995: 5; Nelson 1997: 9; McCabe and Akass 2011: 2). For instance, in MTM: Quality Television, Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi argue that the definition of ‘quality’ in ‘quality TV’ differs greatly from person to person. They note that television critics generally discuss ‘quality’ in terms of visual style, creative innovation and production values. Conversely, television industry people often envisage ‘quality’ in terms of demographics, ‘quality’ programmes referring to those that attract young, urban adults aged 18 to 34 (1984: 3). Nevertheless, I argue that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand does both: by advertising its content as not ‘regular TV’, it differentiates itself and its programmes from broadcast TV, while
distinguishing the type of audience it appeals to. As Deborah L. Jaramillo contends, ‘The pay cable chauvinism not only holds broadcast TV to a different standard but also implies that pay cable consumers can handle graphic language, sex, and violence in a more thoughtful and productive way than broadcast viewers’ (2002: 66).

Nevertheless, although what makes ‘quality TV’ proves difficult to pinpoint, Thompson draws a list of twelve characteristics, the main one being that ‘quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not “regular” TV’ (1997: 13). In short, ‘quality TV’ challenges the assumption that because of its popularity, television can only play a role in the stupefaction of its public, thereby calling into question the usual classification of television as low-brow culture (see, for instance, Adorno 1954; Mellencamp 1990; Fiske 1997; Bourdieu 1998; Feuer 2011; McCabe and Akass 2011; Nelson 2011). Indeed, the notion of ‘quality’ in visual media is often associated with the cinema, a ‘higher brow entertainment medium than television’, in which case ‘quality’ is called ‘art’ (Jaramillo 2002: 67). For instance, Patricia Mellencamp contends that liberal, culturally informed humanist scholars still treat television as an object of intellectual analysis with contempt because of its “low brow” wares’ (1990: 6-7; 12), a criticism that finds support twenty years later as shown by McCabe and Akass who note that the expression ‘quality TV’ is often mocked as an ‘oxymoron’

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21 The twelve characteristics of ‘quality TV’ listed by Thompson: (1) Quality TV […] is not “regular TV”; (2) Quality TV has a quality pedigree [where] shows [are] made by artists whose reputations were made in other, classier media, like film; (3) Quality TV attracts blue chip demographics; (4) Desirable demographics notwithstanding, quality shows must often undergo a noble struggle against profit-mongering networks and nonappreciative audiences; (5) Quality TV tends to have a large ensemble cast; (6) Quality TV has a memory [where] shows tend to refer back to previous episodes; (7) Quality TV creates a new genre by mixing old ones; (8) Quality TV tends to be literary and writer-based; (9) Quality is self-conscious [with] oblique allusions made to both high and low popular culture, but mostly to TV itself; (10) The subject matter of quality TV tends toward the controversial; (11) Quality TV aspires toward “realism”; (12) Series which exhibit the eleven characteristics listed above are usually enthusiastically showered with awards and critical acclaim (Thompson 1997: 13-5).
(2011: 1). Pierre Bourdieu goes even further by insisting on the dangers that television represents for culture. He writes that

> television poses a serious danger to all the various areas of cultural production— for art, for literature, for science, for philosophy, and for law. What’s more [...] I think that television poses no less of a threat to political life and to democracy itself (1998: 10).

His criticism specifically addresses how television has become ‘the sole source’ of information for ‘a significant part of the population’, emphasising how this quasi-monopoly allows television producers to easily manipulate viewers into seeing and believing what they want them to see and believe (ibid.: 18).

Against the classification of television as a low form of culture, ‘quality TV’ transforms the meaning of television from a domestic medium, where television is ‘literally a piece of furniture in [the] home’, to a model of television as a cultural medium (Spigel and Mann 1992: vii). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that ‘quality TV’ is not necessarily synonymous with good television in the sense that ‘quality’ here designates an ensemble of characteristics relating to aesthetics, form, audience and content. Therefore, a television series can be classified as ‘quality TV’ in reference to its form and content, yet ultimately not be seen as ‘good’; conversely, other series can be innovative and spectacular in different ways but still resist the category ‘quality TV’. As previously argued, different forms of television are dependent on the different institutions that produce them as well as questions of time, place, culture, economy, technology and legislation. As a result, I do not venture to argue that my reading of ‘quality TV’ here applies to all TV series that belong to the ‘quality TV’ genre. Instead, as mentioned earlier, I argue that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand developed in the 1990s collapses different understandings of ‘quality’ to reconceptualise its own
definition of ‘quality TV’ that is related to the new ideologies and industrial needs created by the growing competitiveness of mass-market television to gain its own audience share. Therefore, in relation to *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, I propose that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand uses different ‘quality TV’ characteristics related to material practices and institutional needs with a queer dimension to produce texts that can be read as queer narratives, which I discuss in Chapter II.

1.5. Research questions

All the characteristics of premium networks discussed above differentiate pay cable from other forms of television. The differences and similarities between broadcast, basic cable and pay cable demonstrate that television is a complex medium that evolved and grew from a single system of television into a complex of different systems of television. Therefore, when discussing ‘television’, it is important to distinguish between the different forms of the medium to not only emphasise the complexity of ‘television’, but also to understand what this complexity engenders for the medium, in regard to its commercial, technological, production, circulation, programming, reception or textual strategies. In her essay ‘What is the “Television” of Television Studies?’, Charlotte Brunsdon pre-empts this complexity (1998). Retracing the historical emergence of television studies, she argues that since its inception television studies have developed into an interdisciplinary field, where each field has established its own strategies and conventions, which in turn has helped construct the various approaches to ‘television’. Therefore, she concludes, ‘whatever we thought the television of television studies was when it was being invented in the 1970s, what is
becoming increasingly clear is that what it is now is history’ (ibid.: 110). In other words, the characteristics that qualified ‘television’ when ‘television’ simply meant broadcast television, are no longer the foundational characteristics of the television systems of the twenty-first century, not since the technological development of cable television, its reception via cable, satellite or over the Internet, its deregulation, the establishment of pay television or the changes in economic and political policies.

As this chapter demonstrates, ‘television’ in the U.S. has evolved into different forms, complex systems that challenge the exclusive understanding of the object of study, ‘television’, as a domestic medium that represents and shapes ordinary family life. This understanding of television as a domestic medium is a central concern of television studies, as television is one, if not the most, mainstream media in U.S. society, admittedly one that can be accessed today on different screens and from different locations. Inherently political, the mainstreamness of television engenders discussions and debates on its tendencies, and consequently its potential dangers, to reproduce dominant ideologies, to influence social and cultural values and to affect people’s everyday lives and personal relationships (see Ellis 1992; Fiske 1997; Bourdieu 1998; Brunsdon 1998, 2008; D’Acci 2004; Gray and Lotz 2012). In its most mainstreamed form, that of broadcast television, television can indeed be thought of as a conventional medium that takes few risks and privileges normative and normalising content that supposedly appeals to the largest possible audience. However, the reduction of ‘television’ to a globalised mainstream model ignores that television is first and foremost a cultural practice with temporal, technological and regulatory aspects that are culture-specific. Moreover, in the case of U.S. television, it
undermines the complexity of the medium and overlooks the individual characteristics that distinguish one form of television from another.

Furthermore, circumscribing the presence in people’s lives of television as a mere background noise, an object that is switched on but never really watched, fails to recognise that television is a medium that brings pleasure to its viewers. It is indeed underestimating the entertainment quality of television to discuss it as solely an alternative faute de mieux, because it equates to arguing that people do not consciously choose to watch television, but instead switch it on and glance at it from time to time for want of a better option. People watch television for various reasons, one of them being the simple pleasure of enjoying texts that enable them to escape everyday reality for a short time before going on with their lives, as suggested by Ien Ang in her analysis of the politics of pleasure in women’s readings of Dallas, for example (1985). The recent emergence of interactive television brought on by the Internet-television convergence, adds to the enhancement of viewers’ pleasure by facilitating the creation of a viewer-programme relation, in what Lisa Parks calls a move towards ‘the programming of the self’ (2004: 135). Parks identifies twenty-first century U.S. TV as the ‘era of personal television’, where television is now ‘tailor[ed] […] to individual choice’ (ibid.). This new ‘personal television’ is built to store viewers’ previous selections and learn from them, to be able to push new content suggestions that correspond to an individual’s preferences. Therefore, the supply and demand system of broadcast television has shifted from a flow of television content only available at one specific time to a programming at the individual level in which content can be arranged, stored and re-watched at will. Although it remains within a consumption-oriented system, ‘personal television’ represents a fundamental shift in the viewer-
television interaction. Instead of targeting a specific demographic, class or sex, this ‘personal television’ customises programming at the individual level, thereby offering each viewer an enhanced experience of watching television that is based on personal taste, desire, preferences or habit. In short, ‘personal television’ offers a form of connectivity between viewers and television that complicates previous understandings of television flow as dependent on either viewers or programmers. Now television flow is also dependent on ‘metadata protocols (which code the program within certain limited parameters) and filters (search engines or adaptive agent systems that selectively respond to the metadata)’, whose settings initially stem from viewers themselves (Uricchio 2004: 176).

In short, pleasure is part of the experience of watching television. If television really were a non-choice but an alternative by default, surely the U.S. television industry would have collapsed long ago and been replaced by another means of distraction. Yet, television has survived all these years, it remains the number one leisure activity in the U.S. and generates revenues estimated in billions of dollars each year. Therefore, the (cultural) dullness of television may have been a central argument in the debate opposing the supporters of CATV to those of broadcast television in the 1970s – although arguments have been made to defend the entertaining quality of 1970s broadcast television –, late twentieth and early twenty-first century U.S. television, however, has reinvented itself in ways that transform the practice of watching television. As Lynne Joyrich argues, ‘today, television is much more interesting (or, maybe more accurately, publicly acknowledged as interesting) – more intriguing in its concepts and politics, complex in its story structure and visuals, multiple in its address and mediations’ (2014: 135; see also Spigel 2004; Mittell 2015).
Television has indeed remade its own rules and conventions, it has disrupted its own limits and adapted its censorship to the loosened mores of U.S. contemporary society – admittedly to recreate other limitations, however there is no transgression possible without limits to transgress –, it has created new and varied modes of address and modes of consumption, developed new programming and scheduling strategies and modified the rules and conventions of television texts. In short, television today has undergone fundamental transformations, both at the institutional and textual levels, that make television queerer than it used to be and offer new ways of approaching television studies.

As a result, this work adopts a queer perspective to study how, and in which ways, television can be thought of and theorise queerly. Nevertheless, because of the complexity of television systems in the U.S., it seems rather counterproductive (and often too simplistic) to attempt to reach a general conclusion about what television as a medium does that would encompass every aspect of this complex institution. More specifically then, I interrogate whether there are aspects of Showtime in particular, and pay cable television to a greater extent, that can be thought of in queer ways and that help position this form of television not solely as a domestic, familiar object but also as a queer object of study. As suggested earlier, although they belong to the same television universe as broadcast television and basic cable television, the institutional and technological strategies used by subscription-based cable networks clearly distinguish them from other forms of television in the U.S. Their subscription model and loosened regulations grant them a greater freedom in their approach to programming, to writing, to programme content or other features that characterise premium networks. What I am interested in then, is to study whether, how and to what
extent, different features of the production, texts and reception of premium channels’ content, and in particular my case studies, can be considered queer, in the sense of defying (hetero)normativity and advocating for political resistance, and how (if at all) this queerness can break apart the conventional understanding of television as domestic and challenge its perception as (solely) a heteronormative medium.

To this end, Chapter II pays attention to the texts themselves. It analyses the different aspects of my case studies that can be defined as queer. At the level of the texts and in terms of form and content, for instance, what makes these texts ‘queer narratives’ beyond the fact that they depict queer lives? What are the various elements and narrative devices that make these texts identifiable as ‘queer narratives’? In relation to the notion of ‘flow’, how does the absence of commercial breaks affect the construction of the narrative? Finally, in terms of creative freedom and authorial vision, how does the writing process of Showtime contribute to their reading as ‘queer narratives’? Using narrative’s connection to culture, I propose that Queer as Folk and The L Word offer varied and mostly unregulated queer representations that produce critical and political interests and complicate and disrupt cultural ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives. Specifically, I demonstrate that both narratives problematise the concept of sexuality by contextualising its understanding in relation to identity, sex, body, gender, pleasure, desire, and so on, to highlight its fluidity and flexibility as opposed to its rigid discursive definition.

Chapter III focusses on the reception side of these queer texts, analysing how viewers are integrated into the narratives, what narrative strategies are used to construct the storylines, what positions viewers are offered in relation to these texts,
and how all these can be articulated queerly. Additionally, interrogating the viewing position offered to viewers in these texts and following Ellis’ argument that television ‘engages the look and the glance rather than the gaze’ of cinema (1992: 128), I suggest that the format of these queer texts negotiates a viewing position that is neither the voyeurism of cinema nor the glance of television, but a liminal one that is supported by the construction of the narrative. This calls for the re-articulation of the dichotomy between the private and the public, signalling the possibility of a queer liminal space that never creates knowledges, never creates definite endings, is always shifting, always moving and never stable (see Edelman 1995; Foucault 1998a). Moreover, in relation to the politics of pleasure, I discuss how the viewers’ pleasure is articulated without being relegated to a politics of identification based on binary, singular (and over-simplistic) understandings of identity (be it social, cultural, sexual, political, religious…), where identification is only possible when what is represented on screen mirrors (at least some aspects of) viewers’ reality. All these interrogations seek to establish how and to what extent Showtime can be theorised as a queer television model, one that exists alongside and within the same television universe as the mainstream television model of broadcast television but offers alternative critical positions on U.S. television.
CHAPTER II
1. *Queer television narratives*

As argued in the previous chapter, U.S. television is a complex medium that encompasses various systems of television, each possessing specific forms and characteristics. Focussing on pay cable television, this work proposes that U.S. pay cable TV can be thought of as a queer object of study that defies (hetero)normativity and advocates for political resistance. Adopting a queer theory perspective, I suggest that both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* generate critical and political sites of resistance by offering diverse and flexible producing and viewing positions and images by using various ‘quality TV’ narrative devices with a queer dimension that draw attention to cultural constructs, hegemonic norms and conventions about LGBTQ characters and queer lives to destabilise and deconstruct them. As previously suggested, the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand emerged in the 1990s as a result of the growing competitiveness of mass-market television and the need to gain audience share. Based on various examples from my case studies, this chapter analyses how and to what extent *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* can be theorised as queer narratives beyond the fact that they represent queer lives and characters. Specifically, I examine the various elements that make these texts queer narratives and how they are related to Showtime.

Generally, the representational field of television delimits how subjects are articulated and identified in terms of gender and sexuality. Since the 1990s, the popularisation of queer images on U.S. TV has established common narrative stories that identify a subject as LGBTQ and delimit his/her identity in terms of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of body, attitude and developmental experiences. These familiar narratives create rites of passage that the said subject must go through to
establish his/her queerness as opposed to the straightness of other subjects, be it the coming-out story of the confused teenager or the marriage-and-pregnancy storyline of lesbian couples (see, for instance, Roof 1996: 104; Sedgwick 2009: xxi; Warn 2009a: 5). Yet, by building a parallel between LGBTQ and straight subjects, these familiar narratives often work to de-sexualise LGBTQ people and assimilate them with their straight counterparts, by demonstrating that they are ‘regular people’ with a different sexuality. The disarticulation of sexuality and identity is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it contradicts the reduction of identity to sexuality that overlaps in discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century addressing the emergence of a model of homosexual identity (first a male homosexual identity and later a female homosexual identity). By classifying people as homosexual according to their homoerotic feelings and desires, the newly founded sociology of sexuality creates ‘the homosexual species’, as Foucault argues (1998b: 43). Hence, the expression of homoerotic desires becomes the primary characteristic of homosexuality and, conversely, whoever expresses these types of desires is ineluctably constructed as homosexual. On the other hand, the disarticulation of identity and sexuality can de-sexualise and normalise LGBTQ people by assimilating them with and as straight people. This assimilation can itself be read as both a political success (signalling an increased social and political equality) and a political failure (where assimilation has only normalising effects; see Marshall 2016: 86).

The correlation between homosexuality and identity is broached several times in Queer as Folk and The L Word where the different characters’ position in relation to their sexuality varies. For instance, in Season Two, Jenny’s (The L Word) current male partner, Gene (Tygh Runyan), who deplores the absence of sexual intercourse in
their relationship, claims that Jenny is a lesbian because of her previous affair with Marina (‘Life, Loss, Leaving’ 2.01). By assigning Jenny the label ‘lesbian’, Gene can explain that their relationship is dysfunctional because of her sexuality, not his. Through his allocation of sexuality, Gene positions and reduces her to a sexual category with its established and normalised system of desires, pleasures and acts that complies with the discursive forces of power as defined by Foucault as the network of force relations that re/produces social hegemonies (1998b: 92-3). In addition, the fact that Gene is the one defining Jenny’s sexuality points out how discourses of sexuality inform people’s understanding of identity. Conversely, Brian (Queer as Folk) offers a different take on the identity/sexuality interrelation by refusing to discuss his sexuality unless it is relevant to the person who asks. In episode 2.17 (‘You Can Leda Girl to Pussy’), Brian interviews with the new company director, Gardner Vance (Carlo Rota), who asks him whether the rumour about his sexuality is true. To which Brian answers, ‘The rumour’s right. But unless I’m fucking you, it’s none of your business’. Brian’s refusal to discuss his sexuality with Vance is not synonymous with denying or hiding it. Instead, Brian detaches his identity from his sexuality that he positions in relation to the event of sex. In short, his sexuality becomes relevant solely in connection with the act of sex itself. Therefore, through Brian, the narrative adopts a queer perspective in regard to sexual identity categories by rejecting the idea that sexuality, more specifically homosexuality, necessarily equates to identity and vice versa. Following queer theory’s resistance to normalisation, the narrative points out how Brian rejects the idea that sexuality plays a role in the formation of identity and that it informs the way people have sex and what pleasure ought to be.
As suggested in Chapter I, the queer television and queer narratives I refer to in this work are not solely articulated in terms of representational politics to consider the realism and/or verisimilitude of the queer images produced in my case studies. Envisaged from this perspective, queer narratives would be ‘relying on the fiction of a coherent identity of audience members who respond to or “receive” (or “learn”) the stereotypes as social performances’ (Cover 2000: 77). The visibility offered by television’s queer representations is arguably important insofar as it can reach members of various communities, cultures, socio-political and economic backgrounds. It can ‘convey a social sense of alternatives to heterosexual sexual arrangements’ and either offer viewers a sense of recognition or acknowledge differences (ibid.: 72). Yet, this visibility is connected to both the person (or group of individuals) and the institution(s) that articulate it. This raises questions about the source(s) of the information provided, the effects of said information and the agenda behind it. Therefore, what I am interested in is the significance of these queer representations, first in relation to normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and second in relation to other queer images on U.S. television. As a result, I suggest that Queer as Folk and The L Word offer various and mostly uncensored queer representations that are generative of critical and political interests and problematise and challenge cultural ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives. In particular, situated in a historical moment of U.S. pay cable television marked by a shift in material practices and institutional needs, I propose that both narratives complicate the understanding of sexuality by articulating it in relation to identity, sex, body, gender, pleasure, desire, and so on, to highlight its fluidity and flexibility as opposed to its rigid discursive
definition. Following narrative’s function as ‘an engagement with our concepts of culture’ (Roof 1996: xv), Queer as Folk and The L Word entertain and give pleasure, inform and educate and push the limits of queer representations on television.

1.1. Creative freedom and authorial vision

Since the mid-1980s and the (start of the) end of the segregation between cinema and television authorship, television has ceased to be anonymous (Caldwell 1995; Jaramillo 2002). Today, television is an authored medium, and as any authored media, its representations are articulated from someone’s perspective and with a specific agenda, generally the executive producers of a show (Meyers 2010: 16). TV representations are thus not neutral as they are the outcomes of well-thought through themes and well-thought out scenarios put together in The Writers’ Room. Writing for a television show is a process that requires a deep understanding of the ‘hallmarks’ of a series, that is, ‘the style and use of storytelling devices, integral from week-to-week’ (Duncan 2014: 282), but also the characteristics of the form of television that broadcasts the show. When gathered in The Writers’ Room, writers ‘break story’: they map out the storylines, discuss various scene ideas and characters’ goals and attitudes to create a logical and interesting succession of events that carry out the showrunner(s) and executive producers’ vision and comply with the atmosphere of the entire series (Newman 2006: 18; Meyers 2010: 36; Wells 1996). Thus, the creative freedom offered to writers highly depends on the showrunner(s) and the leeway s/he(they) give(s) to writers. Some establish a clear hierarchy in The Room or put pressure on their staff, which can result in a lack of ideas and lead to the showrunner(s)’s ‘own demise’
(Meyers 2010: 36; Wells 1996: 196). Conversely, others welcome ideas from the writing team, leading to a more fruitful environment in terms of creativity. Generally, for series broadcast on broadcast/basic cable networks, each episode is guided by a central theme that unfolds over the length of the episode. Following the Act Break, each episode is divided into acts (generally four or five, plus teaser) that structure and regulate the pacing of the storyline, until it reaches its climax in the final act that solves or removes a particular predicament from the story (Duncan 2014: 286; Smith 2011: 40; Newman 2006: 18). Each act requires a climax, a resolution and a cliffhanger that connects two consecutive acts and ‘hooks’ viewers to come back after a commercial break and follow the story to its end. As broadcast and most basic cable television are advertising-based television networks, the structure of the storyline must take into account commercial breaks, thus writers must plan acts accordingly. This commercial imperative leaves little time to deepen the plots or develop its effects on the various characters as acts are time-sensitive.\(^{22}\) In contrast, as advertising-free networks, premium networks neither need to account for scheduled commercial interruptions nor follow a rigorous Act Break template. It does not mean that pay-TV episodes are not divided into scenes, rather writing teams establish a different pace that allows stories to unfold at a slower pace, releasing information unhurriedly (compared with the two-minute ‘beat’ unit (Newman 2006: 17)) and arranging for longer silences that create narrative moments to let information sink in (Smith 2011: 39-40). In short, instead of

\(^{22}\) In the usual four-act format, a ‘one-hour episode’ on broadcast/basic cable networks typically runs forty-four minutes, with each act developing in eleven minutes. During these eleven minutes, each act consists of five or six important events in the plot (what viewers call scenes and writers call ‘beats’) that move the story a little further towards its ‘resolution’ (Duncan 2014: 284; Newman 2006: 18). In addition to recapping previous events, each beat offers a small piece of narrative information (even if it is simply a character’s reaction to a situation) that is meant to titillate the interest of viewers and encourage them to keep watching.
dividing the plot into time-limited segments, the various storylines can unfold through the entire length of the episode, enabling the narrative to weave its threads into a unified whole, which modifies the flow of the episode (DeFino 2014). This strategy allows for more complex plots that complicate and enrich the series instead of simply moving the stories from point A to point B. In addition, it enables writers to develop multilayered characters and to present them from a variety of perspectives, each emphasising their complex personality.

Like most TV images, the queer representations in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* emerge from the imagination and collaboration of various members of a writing team, who convene in The Writers’ Room and decide on the storylines, how to approach them, which character(s) they will affect and in what ways, and so on. Yet, as they are neither constrained by structural imperatives nor time (and content) limitations and respond to different subscribers’ expectations, the creative freedom and authorial vision offered to writers on premium channels are distinctive qualities that differentiate pay TV series from broadcast/basic cable series. For instance, talking about the preparatory work before *Queer as Folk* was even picked up, Ron Cowen and Daniel Lipman, co-creators of the U.S. show, emphasise the ‘inherent difference in writing for network TV and Showtime’, which they attribute only in part to the lack of censorship on pay channels (Duca 2017). Recalling how Showtime offered to turn *Queer as Folk* into a series after HBO showed interest in adapting it into a mini-series (ibid.; Goldberg 2015), Lipman suggests that an important part of how premium networks entered into new realms of television content was their desire to distinguish themselves from broadcast/basic cable networks by offering something that viewers would not find elsewhere, thereby establishing their own brand name. Peter Paige, who
played Emmett Honeycutt on *Queer as Folk* and is the co-creator of *The Fosters* (Freeform 2013–present), further states that proposing what network TV channels were already doing and doing well was pointless. Instead, premium networks sought to offer content and forms that were not previously available on television, participating in the second phase of ‘quality TV’ in the 1990s (see my discussion of ‘quality TV’ in Chapter I). This came in the form of relying on creatives and the stories they wanted to tell (ibid.). In short, to stand out and distinguish themselves from broadcast/basic cable networks, premium networks’ executive producers grant creative teams more latitude and autonomy over content, language and form to produce stories with unique visual styles that differ from ‘regular TV’ (i.e. regulated broadcast/basic cable TV).

For *Queer as Folk*, for instance, the writing team generally convened in The Writers’ Room early before the beginning of a new season to share ideas and possible stories for the characters. Keeping in mind what happened to the characters in previous seasons, the creative process started with Cowen and Lipman meeting the writing team and going over ideas/themes they wanted to explore in the new season in relation to contemporary LGBTQ socio-political issues, before letting writers elaborate on these ideas to create stories. Once the framework for a season was created, writers worked on each episode. This creative process was ‘a free-flowing brainstorming session’ that involved many ideas and changes until some basic ideas/themes appeared and the beginning of a plot emerged (Ruditis 2003: 43). In short, instead of worrying about the limited time they had to develop a plot and how to break it into four acts towards a resolution, the writing team focussed on developing ideas into storylines for specific characters. This allowed them to deepen the plots and develop subplots, resulting in more plots and subplots explored in a single season of ten to twelve episodes than in a
twenty-two to twenty-four-episode season of a broadcast/basic cable series.\textsuperscript{23} Similarly, The Writers’ Room for \textit{The L Word} was a dynamic group process that created stories through collaboration among writers. Describing herself as ‘an inclusive showrunner’, Ilene Chaiken, creator of \textit{The L Word}, explains that when developing the series, she relied on real-life experiences and encouraged her writing team to share stories about what ‘being a lesbian in Hollywood’ entailed at the time, before discussing if and how these stories could be used for the various characters in the show (Swinson 2017). In short, in addition to similar writing processes, both writing teams were strongly aware of the significance of the creation of these shows and used the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand to develop narratives that draw attention to and disrupt normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. Therefore, although the pressure to produce content that attracts viewers is undoubtedly present, writers face a different type of pressure compared with the pressure on broadcast/basic cable TV. In addition to the absence of censorship and advertising content scheduled to cut the narrative into acts, creatives generally have higher budgets, longer schedules to deliver often shorter seasons (on average ten to twelve episodes per season versus twenty-two to twenty-four for broadcast/basic cable TV, although as the example of \textit{Queer as Folk} shows, the length of a season is not set in stone) and less interference from the networks (Weinraub 2000; Kelso 2008). All these different aspects contribute to the

\textsuperscript{23} Although \textit{Queer as Folk} Season One and Two actually consist of twenty-two and twenty episodes respectively, while Season Three and Four consist of fourteen episodes and Season Five of thirteen episodes. Nevertheless, the argument stands. For its part, \textit{The L Word} Season One and Two consist of fourteen episodes, Season Three, Four and Five of twelve episodes and Season Six of six episodes.
freedom offered to writers, producers, editors and anyone involved in the creation/production/formatting of pay cable TV narratives.\textsuperscript{24}

As Showtime’s original programming, both \textit{Queer as Folk} and \textit{The L Word} benefit from this freedom in their approach to narrative and visual representations. Jerry Offsay, then Showtime’s programming president (1994-2004), claims that the narrative limits of premium networks, such as Showtime and HBO, ‘are what we think is in good taste, what we think is responsible’ (Weinraub 2000). In other words, narrative limits are not defined and fixed by the rules and conventions of the medium and/or by third parties, but by premium networks themselves based on what they believe is appropriate according to the specificities of each show and their promises to subscribers. Hence, one of the advantages of premium networks is their ability to candidly represent an idea without having to regulate and/or sanitise it and push it to (or beyond) its limits without justifying their choice. As a result, writers can develop representations that are daring without necessarily being sensationalist or they can push the limits of previous representations. As Chris Albrecht, former HBO’s president for original programming, declares, ‘We don’t say, “Let’s be shocking.” [Instead,] we use our judgment about what’s appropriate and not appropriate for a show’ (ibid.). In short, creative teams on premium channels are not policed and censored the way they generally are on broadcast/basic cable channels regarding their approach to narrative and controversial representations. They not only benefit from more relaxed standards on content, language and sexuality, but also on the way they tell stories. Instead of ‘spoon feeding information about the characters’ to viewers,

\textsuperscript{24} Although ultimately executive producers retain some creative control, which can sometimes extend to the ‘approval of writers, directors, the cast and scripts’ (Weinraub 2000).
creative teams discard formulaic representational tropes and adopt a subtler approach to characterisation that steers clear from explicit and definite articulations and leaves space for subtext and complexity (ibid.). This approach to stories and storytelling not only grants freedom to creative teams, but also offers viewers a more active interpretative role, for instance, by letting them reach their own conclusions, as I argue in my discussion of queer temporality later in this chapter.

One way in which this subtler and more complex characterisation is reflected in my case studies is their approach to queer identities that challenges and re-articulates contemporary normative theories of identity categories. Using narratives to make sense of things and inform viewers’ understanding of the significant categories of life through continuous re/productions and repetitions (see footnote 1; see also Roof 1996: xv), both texts highlight and challenge this constructed knowledge of identities. Through their representations of bodies, sexualities and behaviour, both narratives demonstrate the performativity of identities, at the same time showing that narrative agency can contribute to raise awareness of cultural ideas about queer identities, bodies, sexualities and behaviour. On this point, I want to address one of Villarejo’s central claims in *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (2014) where she disputes the idea that as a popular medium that ‘reflects its viewers’, television is under the obligation to represent diversity and can lead to political change (ibid.: 3). For Villarejo, one problem with this claim is that it can easily lead to the overarching assumption that television can influence society and that its role is to represent society at large in all its diversity. In other words, that there is an intercorrelation between the growing number of queer protagonists on television (in its various forms) and a greater
openness to LGBTQ people and LGBTQ socio-political issues in U.S. society, as suggested by a GLAAD press release in 2014:25

[M]edia coverage of gay and lesbian issues (and increasingly bisexual and transgender issues) has moved beyond simplistic political dichotomies and toward more fully realized representations, not only of the diversity of our community, but also of our lives, families, and our fundamental inclusion in the fabric of American society. Today our stories are more likely to be told in the same way as others – with fairness, integrity, and respect (2014b).

The overall idea in this statement is the notion of representational justice that suggests that television is the means through which justice can be achieved (in this case, the end of stereotypical and biased representations of LGBTQ people on U.S. television as a sign of LGBTQ inclusion), which also implies that other types of representations on television are always verisimilar, fair and respectful. In short, GLAAD contends that through unbiased representations, television has the power to change the world because television is ‘a cultural practice that produces and reproduces the norms […] that are our lived reality (both political and social)’ (Chambers 2009: 85, emphasis in original). I agree with Villarejo that it is indeed idealistic to expect a mainstream medium like broadcast television that is subject to strict regulations to make waves and disrupt the ‘natural’ order of things, which in this case corresponds to offering innovative and controversial representations of sexual lives and sexual identities. Nevertheless, as previously argued, as opposed to broadcast TV networks (and basic cable networks), premium networks are not subject to the same regulations, which is

25 GLAAD (which formerly stood for Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) is an American non-governmental media-monitoring organisation founded in 1985 by Vito Russo, Jewelle Gomez and Lauren Hinds. They advocate to ‘rewrite the scripts for LGBT equality’ by tackling ‘tough issues to shape the narrative and provoke dialogue that leads to positive change’. They accomplish their mission by encouraging people to share their stories, by holding media liable for their representations of the LGBT community and by providing diverse stories and sources of information that favour equality for all (GLAAD 2014a).
reflected in their content, in their form and in their approach to writing, for instance. Moreover, unlike broadcast/basic cable networks, through the branding of its original programming for product differentiation, Showtime (and other premium networks) strives to offer content that differs from ‘regular TV’ and cannot be found elsewhere, a ‘quality’ content that is expected by its subscribers. Consequently, pay cable TV texts differ from other TV texts in the way their queer characters are made intelligible to viewers (see my discussion of television viewers in Chapter III). Therefore, reading between the optimistic lines of GLAAD and pessimistic lines of Villarejo, I suggest that narratives like *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are able to address controversial topics and offer more daring representations that draw attention to cultural ideas about identities, bodies, sexualities and behaviour by drawing attention to social and cultural bias against LGBTQ people and queer lives, for instance, because of Showtime’s lack of limitations and greater freedom offered to its writers.

The portrayal of Dana Fairbanks in *The L Word* offers a noteworthy example. At the beginning of the series Dana personifies the epitome of the desire to ‘pass as straight’: she is a professional tennis player who pretends to be in a relationship with her doubles partner Harrison (Landy Cannon), himself gay, to avoid being outed.26 Dana is neither ashamed of her identity nor doubts her sense of self, sexuality and sexual desires. She never expresses such concerns. Nevertheless, Dana believes (and is made to believe) that she must hide her sexual orientation to her sponsors and her fans if she wishes to pursue her career, because her being in a relationship with a man ‘it’s what people want to see’ (Conrad, ‘Lawfully’ 1.06). Dana’s storyline clearly

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26 The sportswoman being itself a lesbian stereotype.
illustrates the desire and anxiety to ‘pass as straight’ because of the stigma associated with coming out publicly, not because of any inner doubts. The narrative thus highlights that Dana’s relation to her public identity as a lesbian (as opposed to her personal identification as such) is informed by heteronormative discourses of lesbian identity.

The notion of lesbian identity has emerged with the rise of second-wave feminism in the early 1960s. Prior to the 1960s, in early discourses of sexuality, female homosexuality was encompassed in the discussion as the ‘natural’ corollary of male homosexuality, its negative opposite. For instance, Ulrichs deduces that because there is a third sex, there must be a fourth sex, a woman with a male psyche and who is attracted to other women, which he refers to as ‘Uranian’ (Kennedy 1997: 7). In the same way, most cases presented by Krafft-Ebing theorise deviance in male patients, the recurrence in female patients being generally subsumed. Krafft-Ebing suggests that ‘Lesbian love does not […] approach urningism in frequency. The majority of female urnings do not act in obedience to an innate impulse, but they are developed under conditions analogous to those which produce the urning by cultivation’ (1894: 428).

In addition to postulating that male homosexuality is more frequent than female homosexuality, Krafft-Ebing attributes female homosexuality to social environment. Although he believes that there are ‘true’ female Urnings, he argues that most women who turn to female homosexuality do so either because of an absence of men, as a temporary ‘means of sexual satisfaction faute de mieux’ (ibid.: 414, emphasis in original), or in the case of prostitutes, because they are driven to ‘Lesbian love’ as the result of their ‘repugnance for the most disgusting and perverse acts’ that men perform on women (ibid.: 429). In other words, while male homosexuality has a medical origin,
female homosexuality exists only in relation, and in reaction, to men. This means that female homosexuality can be erased or reversed if men change their attitude towards women, which may be one of the reasons why lesbianism was never outlawed in U.S. society as it never presented any immediate threat to society (Castle 1993: 6; Person 1999: 31; Mays 2004: 232). With the emergence of lesbian identity during the early 1960s, although lesbian sexuality remained encompassed in heteronormativity, it was articulated in relation to the heterosexist roles of dominant/active man and submissive/passive woman, where lesbian desire called into question the subordinate position of woman as solely the object of male desire, never the desiring subject (see, for instance, Rich 1981; Wittig 1981; Cixous and Clément 1986; Butler 1990; Castle 1993; Hoogland 1997; Stein 1997; Ciasullo 2001).

From the first episode, the narrative clearly distinguishes between socio-cultural discourses and personal identification. In the Pilot (1.01), when sitting with Alice and Tina at The Planet, a coffee shop in West Hollywood, Dana interrupts the conversation and vehemently rebukes Shane when the latter walks in and joins them:
Figure 1 (a and b) Shane’s Entrance at The Planet (Pilot 1.01)

Dana: You know, do you have to dress like that all the time?
Shane: Like what?
Dana: Well, I wouldn’t be seen on the street with you.
Shane: Yeah?
Dana: I mean, every single thing about the way you’re dressed, like, screams “dyke”.
Alice: God, Dana…
Shane: Sorry, man.
Dana: Well, look, if I’mouted, I’m screwed Alice, all right? Sponsors aren’t exactly clamoring to have their stuff repped by big old lezzie tennis players.
Shane: No, no, no, look, it’s cool. I totally dig the need to make a living. I’m meeting a client anyway.

In this scene, the narrative points out how clothing is often seen as a cue to one’s non-heterosexuality and can help disclose one’s queer sexuality. Dana immediately reads Shane as ‘dyke’ because of the image Shane projects on and for others, the image of androgyny with her Bowie-like glam-rock styling (white sleeveless shirt, leather
trousers, no bra), highly styled short hair, eye make-up, in addition to her masculine name (fig. 1). Conversely, the image Dana chooses to project on and for others, prior to coming out publicly, is first and foremost her identity as a tennis player (fig. 2).

Until she comes out professionally and becomes the new face of Subaru as the ‘Gay Anna Kournikova’ (‘L’Ennui’ 1.08), Dana is generally seen wearing tennis wear or casual sport clothing, she seldom wears jewellery, very little make-up, her hair is rarely styled and either simply let loose or tied up for tennis practice. In other words, Dana’s appearance is constructed with signifiers that reflect her professional career and are thus less likely to draw attention to the fact that she is a woman with a sexuality.
Because Dana is a professional tennis player, her wearing sport clothing and not committing to aesthetic standards for women set by society, does not raise concerns about her femininity (or lack thereof), thus does not invite the potential question of her sexual orientation. In contrast, post-coming-out Dana appears transformed (fig. 3): she highlights her hair, wears eye make-up and lipstick and dresses in a manner that calls attention to her female and feminine body rather than solely to her athletic physique (more colours, shows cleavage).

![Figure 3 Dana’s Image Post-coming-out (‘Liberally’ 1.11)](image)

Through Dana’s story, the narrative draws attention to the constructedness of the body, showing how the body can disclose one’s sexuality, but also how it can be constructed to conceal it. Dana clearly expresses her anxiety of being outed, which she believes
would result in the end of her career. However, as her reaction demonstrates, she is confident enough in her capacity to pass to not be worried to be identified as a lesbian because of the way she is perceived by society (in regard to her body, body type, mannerism, clothing) or because of something she would do, but she is concerned with being seen with someone she clearly reads as ‘dyke’ and, as a consequence, of being associated with her and being herself read as a lesbian. In other words, Dana is positive that without disclosing her sexual orientation publicly, her body cannot be read as a lesbian body, the way she reads Shane’s body as such. Therefore, Dana does not criticise Shane for being out, for assuming her lesbian desires and publicly identifying as a lesbian. Instead, she reproaches Shane to be too visibly ‘dyke’, in short, too easily identifiable as a lesbian. More importantly then, this scene calls attention to the notion of lesbian body and asks what a lesbian body entails in relation to lesbian identity and lesbian subjectivity. Through Dana’s storyline, the narrative interrogates what are the signs that mark the presence of a lesbian body. Is it a question of sexual practice, of sexual desire for another woman, is it an act of self-proclamation, is it connected to others’ perception of it, is a female body already a lesbian body prior to the event of sex or does it become a lesbian body as the result of the act of sex?

Dana’s storyline suggests that the lesbian body is as much a construct as the sexed body, as the identification ‘lesbian’ (as sexuality and as identity category) is itself constructed through discourses. When Dana pronounces Shane’s body as a lesbian body because of her clothing, she reproduces a normative discourse of the lesbian body that is often associated with a sexual act, because the category ‘lesbian’ is defined by sexuality. However, sexuality does not derive from biological sex and its gendered manifestation on the body but is instead a constructed concept that
establishes the ‘natural’ characteristics of a body (expected sex, gender, desire, behaviour) and categorises individuals into a straight/non-straight binary (see, for instance, Butler 1990: 90; Dimen 1992: 38; Grosz 1994: xi; Foucault 1998b: 154-5). Furthermore, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, ‘human subjects never simply have a body; rather, the body is always necessarily the object and subject of attitudes and judgments’ (1994: 81, emphasis in original). A body becomes a sexed and gendered body after being discursively constructed as such, that is, after it has been determined as fitting in (or challenging) what is socially, culturally and historically defined as a body. Thus, a body is acknowledged as such only when it has been labelled as an ab/normal body in relation to a norm or a set of norms, a judgement that is rarely pronounced by the subject of this determination but often by others first. In short, the body never simply belongs solely to oneself, to claim a body as one’s own, the body must first be given over to others.

In the scene discussed above, using Dana’s reproduction of lesbian cultural discourses, the narrative challenges the naturalness of these discourses by pointing out the performativity of material bodies. Instead of being stable, inexorable and docile, the material body is a cultural performance: Shane’s lesbian body is identified as such through its conformity to a system of codes, while Dana’s is concealed through its policing and careful construction. The notion of a lesbian system of codes is revisited later in the series in ‘Let’s Do It’ (1.03) with the concept of gaydar when Dana is interested in a sous-chef and wonders whether ‘she plays for [her] team’. This revisiting shows how Showtime’s approach to writing differs from the process on broadcast/basic cable networks. As previously mentioned, instead of dividing the plot into four acts that resolve/remove the predicament at the end of an episode, the writing
team can deepen and complicate a plot/subplot or analyse its effects on the characters. For instance, through the explanation of gaydar, in addition to revisiting the notion of a lesbian system of codes and educating viewers not familiar with the term or practice, the narrative challenges the fixity of sexualities and by extension of identities. The conversation between Shane, Alice and Dana emphasises the shifting nature of sexual desires, suggesting that sexual desires are not defined and/or delimited by sexuality, instead sexual desires inform sexuality rather than the other way around:

Alice: Dana, most girls are straight … Until they’re not, and then sometimes they’re gay ‘till they’re not.
Shane: True, but then there are also the ones that never look back. Right? And you can spot them coming a mile away.
Dana: How can you tell?
Alice: You read the signals.
Dana: That’s my problem.
Shane: Dana, it’s not a problem.
Dana: [rolls her eyes].
Shane: All right. No, sexuality is fluid. Whether you’re gay or you’re straight, or you’re bisexual, you just go with the flow.
Dana: No, no, no, no. That is my problem, okay? I can’t feel the flow. That thing… whatever it is, I don’t got it.
Alice: You don’t have gaydar.
Dana: No.
Alice: You’re so right. You don’t have it.
Dana: No.
Shane: No, everyone’s got it. You just have to tune in. Yes.
Alice: I’m going to prove it. See that girl who just came in?
Dana: Okay.
Alice: What is she?
Dana: A customer?
Shane [shakes head]
Dana: I don’t know.
Shane: Dana, look at her fingernails, are they long or short?
Alice: Are they polished or natural?
Dana: They’re long and polished. So she’s…
Shane: Leaning to straight but you still need more info.
Alice: Look at the shoes.
Dana: High-heeled sandals.
Alice: With tapered jeans. Would you wear high heels sandals with tapered jeans?
Dana: Yes?
Alice: No.
Dana: Oh, God.

As Shane and Alice explain to Dana, gaydar is based on an ensemble of codes of identification that subtly convey signs of sex, gender and sexuality on the body. These codes are visual cues (such as fingernails, shoes, clothing, hairstyle, mannerisms) displayed by an individual on his/her body, which can indicate that a person may be non-heterosexual. Through the humorous scene where Dana suggests that her gaydar may be missing and/or defective because of her inability to read other women’s bodies and identify them as lesbians, the narrative points out that these visual codes of identification are in fact learnt and reproduced, as ‘coming out is as much a practical creation of the self, a “be-coming out”, as a matter of revealing or discovering one’s sexuality’ (Stein 1997: 67). In fact, this position is revisited once more with the arrival of Moira/Max in Season Three (‘Lobsters’), where Bette reflects on Moira’s masculine appearance as being ‘probably just the only language that she has to describe herself’ because she comes from a place where ‘you have to define yourself as either/or’. By geographically situating Moira’s physical production of her sexuality, the narrative underlines that the ‘practical creation of the self’ is also culturally imbued because what the lesbian look is understood to look like in West Hollywood greatly differs from other places, other cultures and, as a matter of fact, other times.27 Therefore, Dana’s inability to read the signals comes from the fact that she never learnt the codes.

Gaydar’s learnt process and its fallibility are later put to the test when Shane and Alice propose to help Dana figure out Lara’s sexuality. Shane and Alice,

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accompanied by Bette and Tina, conduct an experiment. They take notes on Lara’s clothing, earrings, attitude, reaching the conclusion that she is ‘way femmy on the coiffure tip’ (Shane, 1.03) but ‘got some good lezzie points for her walk, and the way she wields that chopping knife’ (Bette, 1.03). However, because the verdict is still unclear (‘she got nine in the lez column and she has only seven in the straight’, Tina, 1.03), they decide to try one last test and send Shane to flirt with her and gauge her reaction, because ‘the Shane test pretty much works on everyone’ (Tina, 1.03). Nevertheless, Lara does not respond to Shane’s seduction technique, which leads them to conclude that Lara is not a lesbian. However, the next day, after Dana has finished her training session and Lara is on her way home, the latter stops in the locker room and, upon seeing Dana, kisses her ‘just in case [she was] still wondering’ (Lara, 1.03). Therefore, as the scene illustrates, reading visual cues on the body to identify sexuality is not always reliable in the sense that, first, it requires a person to have a knowledge of the codes prior to the interpretation, as demonstrated by Dana; second, it also depends on a person’s acceptance and adoption of these codes of identification, as exemplified by Lara.

The gaydar discussion in The L Word questions to what degree the lesbian body is constructed to fit in with lesbian codes of identification. In short, to what extent is the identity ‘lesbian’ performed for the body to reflect the identification ‘lesbian’? In her discussion of lesbian representations in the media in the 1990s, Ann M. Ciasullo recounts her ‘coming out’ and how she stopped wearing dresses and eyeliner at the beginning of her first lesbian relationship because ‘[her] biggest anxiety was not whether [her] friends and family could accept [her] lesbianism, but whether [she] could ever “look the part”’ (2001: 580). Ciasullo argues that being a lesbian is not solely a
question of sexuality, it is an act of self-identification but also of recognition by others. To be able to fully embrace her lesbian identity (not solely her sexual attraction and desires for another woman), Ciasullo also needed to be viewed and recognised as a lesbian, and not only when she was accompanied by her girlfriend. Put differently, she needed for people who looked at her to be able to read her as a lesbian and to gauge her sexuality through the construction of her body as a lesbian body, a situation experienced by Jenny in ‘Lynch Pin’ (2.04). Jenny is introduced as a heterosexual character who, upon meeting Marina, starts questioning her own sexuality and ends up cheating on her fiancé. Throughout Season One, Jenny struggles to decide whether she wants to stay with Tim and marry him or break off her engagement and explore further her attraction to Marina. Until she is able (or forced) to choose, she does both. Tim eventually finds out about Jenny’s affair (‘Lawfully’ 1.06). He is ready to break off the engagement, but she promises him it was just a mistake and would never happen again. Thus, he demands she proves it by publicly rejecting Marina and eloping. However, after they wed, Tim drives back to Los Angeles, leaving both Jenny and his wedding band behind. They eventually get a divorce at the end of Season One.

In the sequence below, Shane, Alice and some of their friends are swimming in Bette and Tina’s pool at night, when Mark, Jenny’s and Shane’s roommate, comes home and joins Jenny in the garden:
Mark: Can I ask you a question?
Jenny: Yeah.
Mark: Smoke?
Jenny: Yeah.
Mark: That wasn’t the question.
Jenny: What?
Mark: Those girls… they’re all gay, right?
Jenny: Yeah. They pretty much are.
Mark: What about you?
Jenny: What about me?
Mark: Are you gay?
Jenny: I don’t know. I don’t know. What do you think?
Mark: If I saw you at a bar, I would assume you were straight.
Jenny: Mm-hm.
Mark: But that doesn’t really mean anything.
Jenny: No, it doesn’t.
Mark: You never know these days, do you?
Jenny: No, you don’t… Except you knew they were, right?
Mark: That’s true.
Jenny: So, what do you think it is?
Mark: I don’t know. I’d say it has something to do with their attitude. It’s not that they’re masculine or anything, because, actually, some of them are pretty feminine, you know? It’s… They have these haircuts, these very cool haircuts – okay don’t get me wrong. It’s obviously more than a haircut, but it’s, no, it’s
true. It’s this – it’s something that they exude that’s… I’m going to try to put my finger on it.
Jenny: Good. Tell me when you do, Mark.
Mark: I will. I will tell you when I do.

In this scene, Jenny occupies the position of the former heterosexual woman attempting to construct her new identity as a lesbian described by Ciasullo. In comparison, Mark embodies the counterpart of this argument, demonstrating how others must also acknowledge one’s identity to validate it, which requires a conformation to codes of identification usually articulated through the body. At the same time, this scene corroborates the idea advanced by Grosz that the body is never simply one’s own but must first be given over to others. Instead of relying on Jenny’s self-identification (or lack thereof, which in itself is also an identification), Mark attempts to read her sexuality in relation to others by comparing her appearance to other women whom he clearly reads as lesbians. By using Mark who occupies the dominant position of the white, middle-class, heterosexual male, the narrative highlights how in heterosexual culture, heteronormativity establishes, informs and re/produces a network of norms that organise and privilege explicit understandings of identities, bodies and sexualities and produce them as coherent and natural without seeming to (see, for instance, Berlant and Warner 1998; Jakobsen 1998). In other words, the narrative calls attention to the constructedness of the body and the performativity of identity, illustrating how conforming is part of the process of identity construction as well as the formative role of cultural frameworks in the construction of modern subjectivity. Hence, when later that evening, Jenny asks Shane to cut her hair short (fig. 6), feeling ‘she needs to change’, she does not seek to prove that Mark is right when he tries to establish a relation between ‘cool haircuts’ and sexual
orientation. Instead, Jenny purposely adopts what she is told is a symbol of her friends’ sexuality to assert her lesbian identity for both herself and others, because her former appearance did not conform to culturally accepted criteria of lesbianism. In short, her personal identification as a lesbian is weakened by the inability of others to identify her as such.

![Figure 6 Jenny Post-Haircut (‘Loyal’ 2.08)](Image)

As Stein argues

Becoming a lesbian always entails participating in particular communities and discourses, conforming to historical and localized norms for ‘being’ a lesbian. A lesbian identity is learned and performed in many different ways (1997: 68).

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28 Jenny not only changes her haircut from a long, dishevelled hairstyle (fig. 5) to a slick pixie cut (fig. 6), she also changes her entire fashion style: she gives up her student dress code with her usual jeans/jean skirt, t-shirt and sneakers of Season One for a more affirmed (and more conventionally) feminine style (dress, high heels, and jewellery).
Following the above argument, *The L Word*’s narrative emphasises that to be a lesbian one must first become a lesbian by conforming to the cultural norms of lesbian identity. The lesbian body thus becomes a cultural body in the sense that its characteristics and essential features are dictated by culture. Therefore, through Jenny’s conformation to cultural norms of lesbianism, the narrative points out the pervasiveness of normativity, but also that conformity is not always synonymous with assimilation. Conforming can also be used to highlight constructedness as opposed to acknowledging naturalness, even if using cultural norms undoubtedly perpetuates them. Despite this limitation, I suggest that *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* deliberately use stereotypes of non-heterosexual identities to subvert them, by clearly emphasising the deceitful although widespread bases of hegemonic normalising systems, as I discuss in the following section.

1.2. Subverting stereotypes

In addition to allowing for a subtler approach to characterisation, the queer images produced by the Showtime’s writing process are influenced by viewers who express their desires to see a (their) story told. For instance, in an interview, Chaiken explains that the character of Tasha Williams, soldier in the U.S. military, was developed after meeting several viewers during numerous *L Word* events who asked them to do a story about a gay soldier (among many other stories). Tasha’s story was picked up because the writing team thought it was an ‘important and […] rich’ story for *The L Word* to tell (Showtime 2009). Not only was the story requested by many viewers, which vouched for their interest in watching a character navigate this specific storyline, but
it also demonstrated its potential to respond to contemporary social, cultural and political events relevant at the time of production. As I illustrate later in this chapter, both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* politicise their narratives in response to contemporary social, cultural and political events affecting LGBTQ lives, politics and rights. As Chaiken declares, writers involved in the series mainly tell stories about the issues that affect the lives of gay people [because] the only way we’ll ever get our stories told is by writing them and by having someone see what you’ve written and say “Oh, well, actually I think that a lot of people would want to see that story, it’s not a gay story…” It’s really essential [and] it’s the only way we’re ever going to move that forward (Halterman 2009).

In short, the motivation of the writing team for *The L Word* first stems from the desire to give visibility to as many queer lives as possible and represent a wide range of LGBTQ characters in all their complexity. Second, writers highlight the generalisability of these stories, demonstrating that narrative is ‘international, transhistorical, transcultural’ (Barthes 1977: 79). As Barthes suggests, in its connection with culture, narrative can be understood, appreciated and internalised by people with different cultural backgrounds. In relation to my cases studies, this understanding of narrative implies that these texts do not specifically target LGBTQ viewers. In fact, Chaiken explains that her initial objective for *The L Word* was to reach a mainstream audience to ‘break through the niche that LGBT programming has always been relegated to’ (Showtime 2009).29 Acknowledging that she wanted to ‘move people on some deep level’ but was not ready to ‘take on the mantle of social responsibility’ (Glock 2005), the show nevertheless managed to gather ‘a dedicated

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29 Which has been interpreted as a dismissal of lesbian viewers in favour of straight viewers by some viewers, who expressed their anger for this lack of consideration on the forum dedicated to *The L Word* on the Showtime website when Chaiken’s interview aired (Davies 2013: 54; see also Ficera 2013; see my discussion of politicised narrative later in this chapter).
fanbase composed of women and men, gays and straights’ (Heller 2013: 3). Correspondingly, when first broadcast, Cowen and Lipman recall that in addition to its young queer audience, a large female audience tuned in to *Queer as Folk*, among which many were heterosexual married women (Goldberg 2015; Kevyn 2006). Narrative is thus a means to share and transmit beliefs, perceptions, events, knowledge and any organisational cultural systems informing lives and experiences. But it is also a means to establish, promote and disseminate these cultural systems and naturalise them. Like any cultural system, as an organising structure with naturalised process and political agency, narrative plays an important role in the re/production of hegemonic, normative regimes. Yet, based on the understanding of queer as a resistance to normalisation that rejects any minoritising process (see Warner 1993), I suggest that *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* as queer narratives are used to highlight and challenge these normative regimes, especially because of the re/productive and disseminating aspects of narrative. Therefore, instead of resorting to produce similar texts as the ones created on other networks using what Tony Kelso refers to as ‘copycat formulas’ (2008: 51), relying on the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand, creatives on my case studies use both narrative’s pervasiveness and the approach to queer as a resistance to normative regimes to inform the storytelling and visual styles of these texts. The queer narratives thus produced in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* prefer inventiveness and innovation as ways to surprise and entertain viewers as well as generate critical and political sites of resistance through various producing and viewing positions and

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30 Unlike Chaiken who did not feel up to the task (which is not to say that viewers did not attribute to the show this responsibility, see footnote 29), Cowen and Lipman admit that they felt a sense of social responsibility when working on *Queer as Folk* because of its privileged position (in terms of culture and television) to represent LGBTQ people and queer lives (see my discussion of politicised narrative later in this chapter).
images, by simultaneously using stereotypes about LGBTQ characters and queer lives and destabilising and deconstructing them. I suggest that the narrative use of stereotypes manifests mainly in two forms: in the content and in the form of the texts. However, before analysing how both Queer as Folk and The L Word use stereotypes, first I discuss how queer representations in Queer as Folk and The L Word differ from previous queer representations on TV.

1.2.1. Traditional queer representations on television

As previously suggested, discussions considering representations of LGBTQ characters and queer lives on television are often contextualised in relation to a politics of visibility and articulated either in terms of acceptance or assimilation. Visibility is indeed a complex and delicate notion whose definition cannot be limited to that which can be seen, that which is visible. Visibility also entails ‘the degree to which something impinges upon public awareness’ (OED 2015). This second sense of the word informs most debates on queer representations, as they often interrogate how these representations affect and are inscribed within culture (see Chapter I). This is mainly due to the fact that societies are generally assumed to be heteronormative. Therefore, any representations that do not perpetuate heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix attract attention.

Regarding cable television (basic and pay) at the time of writing, most characters in TV series are generally heterosexuals, with less than 5% of all characters
being LGBTQ (the same can also be said for broadcast TV; GLAAD 2016).31 Even within these 5%, diversity (racial, ethnic, sexual) is still an issue with, for instance, 72% of LGBTQ characters on basic and pay cable being white (one-hundred-and-two characters), against 11% of black characters (fifteen), 6% of Latinx characters (eight), 5% of API characters (Asian Pacific Islanders; seven) and 4% of multiracial characters (five). Moreover, in terms of sexual diversity, the majority (46%) of LGBTQ characters are gay men (six-five characters), against 7% of bisexual men (ten characters), 20% of lesbians (twenty-nine characters), 25% of bisexual women (thirty-five characters) and 4% of transgender characters (six).32 Therefore, as mentioned in the Introduction, although their first broadcast ended twelve and eight years ago respectively, both Queer as Folk and The L Word remain innovative in their representations of LGBTQ characters and can be considered a historical moment of queer representations. First, because both series centre on the lives of a group of mostly gay men and lesbians. Within these groups of people, Queer as Folk counts only one female heterosexual character (but definitely queer) among its series regulars, while The L Word counts two (one female and one male). In fact, since the end of both series, most queer characters have resumed their supporting roles, with some notable exceptions in which queer characters occupy lead roles.33 Second, another major

31 These less than 5% represent a total of one-hundred-and-forty-two characters on both basic and pay cable (ninety-two regular and fifty recurring characters). As for streaming media, the total number of LGBTQ characters amount to sixty-five (forty-five regular and twenty recurring). In comparison, there are forty-three regular LGBTQ characters and twenty-eight recurring on broadcast TV, reaching a total of seventy-one LGBTQ characters (GLAAD 2016).

32 The figures for streaming media are the following. For racial and ethnic diversity, there are 71% of white characters (forty-six), 15% of black characters (ten), 11% of API characters (seven) and 3% of multiracial characters (two). In terms of sexual diversity, most LGBTQ characters are lesbians (43% or twenty-eight characters), gay men represent 23% (fifteen characters), bisexual women make up for 20% (thirteen characters), bisexual men amount to 6% (four characters) and transgender characters represent 11% (seven characters; GLAAD 2016).

33 These exceptions include The New Normal (NBC 2012-2013), Orange is the New Black (Netflix 2013-present), The Fosters (Freeform 2013-present), Looking (HBO 2014-2015; 2016) or Sense8 (Netflix 2015-2018).
difference with other TV dramas at the time of their first broadcast, is the fact that both programmes were the first (in the U.S. at least) to make queer sexuality visible by depicting these characters as sexual beings with a sex drive and the desire to satisfy it, without nevertheless being encompassed in the good gay/bad gay dichotomy of earlier representations (Capsuto 2000: 7). Capsuto argues that in the 1970s and 80s, LGBTQ representations on U.S. broadcast television were limited to two opposite roles, ‘violent sociopaths and saintly victims’, roles which were easily identifiable by their behaviour:

The “bad gays” were easy to spot: they were the one with a sex drive. “Good gays” were almost asexual. Except for a few recurring roles, they usually did not date anyone of their own sex, form a relationship, or seem to even know other gay people. Gay villains, on the other hand, were seen leering at people of the same sex, could have long-term relationships, and were physically affectionate with their partners on-screen (2000: 7, emphasis in original).

In short, representations of sexuality on television often varied (and sometimes still do) based on the type of sexuality depicted. Generally, representations of heterosexuality engaged in a story about people, in which heterosexuals were portrayed as sensitive, complex beings. In contrast, representations of queer sexuality either equated queer characters with asexuality or reduced them to their sexual urges, making the story not about complex individuals but about ‘monsters’ controlled by their sex drive. Moreover, in the good gay/bad gay dichotomy, only the non-threatening character was generally allowed to survive, so long as he (for there were few lesbian representations) did not threaten the status quo of heterosexuality. However, in most cases gay characters as villains faced an untimely death, either shot by the police before being arrested for their crimes or by their own hand because of their self-hatred.
Since the 1980s, LGBTQ representations on television (broadcast, basic and pay cable) have evolved and reached a peak in the 1990s, with what constituted an unprecedented high number of LGBTQ characters at the time. Among the examples cited, most queer characters were not automatically portrayed as psychotic killers or social misfits. Instead, these protagonists became human beings, insofar as they formed relationships, were allowed some display of affection, if only rare and moderate in most cases, and were at times part of a larger LGBTQ community. Yet, until *Queer as Folk* (which paved the way for other texts), their characterisation stopped there. What differentiated these queer characters from their heterosexual counterparts (and what differentiate them from some post-*Queer as Folk* representations) was the fact that they were defined as the ‘gay/lesbian character’ in a specific show, thus his/her storyline revolved mostly around the fact that s/he was gay/lesbian. This is what Walters calls ‘the price of tokenism’ (2001: 66). In her example, Walters discusses the case of Matt Fielding (Doug Savant) in *Melrose Place* and argues that because Matt is the only ongoing gay character of the series, his storyline must necessarily be taken outside the world of *Melrose Place* because this world ‘is predicated on endless mate-swapping’. In short, Matt is visible insofar as he is one of the main characters and his sexual orientation is acknowledged. Yet, he

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remains a ‘token gay’ character because compared with heterosexual characters in the series, his storyline is perfunctory with his sexuality present but never visible.

Furthermore, as illustrated in *The L Word 5.07* ‘Lesbians Gone Wild’, in which Alice interviews for a co-host job on a daytime talk show called *The Look*, the narrative draws attention to the fact that not all queer images are welcome. In the episode, during a commercial break after the first segment of the recording, the show host (Saundra Houston played by Jacqueline Samuda) and the show producer (Irene Karas) both tell Alice why they invited her to interview for the position on *The Look*:

Show Producer: We’re not necessarily looking for controversy. Alice: Was I too controversial? Because I thought…
Saundra Houston: No, no, we just don’t need another loose cannon. Now, your lifestyle, it’s your lifestyle, and that’s fine.
Alice: Are you saying you don’t want me to be out? Just because I think at this stage in my life, it’s a little hard to…
Show Producer: No, no, no, that’s not what we are saying.
Saundra Houston: No, we definitely want gay. No, gay is good.
Alice: Gay is good.
Saundra Houston: Gay brings ratings in daytime.
Show Producer: No, we just want the right kind of gay.
Alice: Oh.
Saundra Houston: Like fun gay, not angry gay.
Alice: Fun gay.
Saundra Houston: Gay gossip, gay lifestyle. You know, fun!
Show Producer: We loved that Daryl Brewer stunt that you pulled. Seriously that was some of your best work. We’re looking for things like that. Little insider tidbits about famous people who are in the closet. We kind of figured you would have one of those on every episode.
Alice: Oh, so you want me to out people?
Show Producer: [she nods]
Alice: On every episode?
Saundra Houston: That would be sensational.
Show Producer: That is, only if you want the job.

As Alice is informed, the 2000s are open to gay-related issues. Television has indeed found an audience interested in anything gay-related, or perhaps more accurately
television has created that audience based on the idea that viewers were ‘ready’ to see and hear about gay-related issues: ‘gay brings ratings’, hence ‘gay is good’. In short, the narrative emphasises the fact that gay-related issues have reached an unprecedented level of popularity (and a strong demand) among viewers and have therefore frequently been integrated in TV programmes. Yet, the ‘right kind of gay’ comment qualifies the type of popularity the television crew is referring to in this example. It demonstrates that so long as it is ‘fun gay’, thus entertaining and light, gay is welcome. However, as soon as it becomes ‘angry gay’, which equates to political (thus potentially controversial) and has the potential to trigger a debate on more serious issues (such as equal civil rights or gay marriage), gay becomes problematic and thus unwelcome, which is reminiscent of Villarejo’s argument. This example points out that queer images on television, although greatly improved since the late 1960s, are still dependent on socio-political context and that television is in fact highly influenced by society. The reverse is also true as there is no denying that television influences society. Television can trigger discussions and inform viewers on topics and issues they may not be familiar with. Yet, this does not mean that representations on television constitute civil rights and equality, especially when these representations are biased and privilege only one type of representation that advocates for a single acceptable and accepted image/identity/behaviour, as I illustrate in the next sections.

As previously mentioned, although based on different economic models (advertiser-supported versus subscriber-supported model), all forms of television largely fulfil two distinct aims, a commercial and an entertaining one, the purpose being to entertain viewers while making profit. Yet, with an offer of content unavailable on other forms of television as one of its main selling points, pay cable TV proposes content that
pushes the limits of queer representations. In contrast, to satisfy censors, most queer images offered on broadcast and basic cable television are dictated by two conditions: either they are socially and/or politically relevant (for example, when a specific LGBTQ-related issue dominates the news) or they are commercially appealing (for instance, if there is a high demand for LGBTQ-related content, which offers a new market for television entertainers), or both.

Contrary to writers for pay cable networks, writers for broadcast and basic cable TV do not benefit from the same freedom in their portrayals (Wells 1996; Newman 2006; Meyers 2010; Smith 2011; Duncan 2014). Although from the 1990s onwards new queer characters ceased to be portrayed following the good gay/bad gay dichotomy, they were, and still are at times, limited in their freedom to express feelings or desires to off-camera actions, where scenes are strategically cut at the crucial moment to suggest the act but never to make it visible. As mentioned above, this does not mean that queer characters on broadcast and basic cable TV today are not allowed a social and sexual life. On the contrary, there has been progress in this regard in the sense that these queer characters develop relationships and are acknowledged as sexual beings. However, most sexual contact is suggested and not permitted to be as visible as that of heterosexual characters, the way my case studies do for instance. Going back to Walter’s discussion of Melrose Place, Matt offers one of the most striking examples of what is commonly referred to as the ‘no-kiss rule’. This example is significant because of the obvious double standard used for his representation and storyline in comparison with the other characters of the show. Indeed, Melrose Place largely focusses on the depiction of the romantic entanglements of the various characters. Nevertheless, Matt is the only character on the show who is rarely allowed a romantic
life. While all the other protagonists have engaged in intercourse with one another, Matt’s love life is generally only mentioned in passing. In his article ‘Gays on TV: A New Image is Coming Out’, Stephen Seplow reports that Matt was in fact scheduled to kiss another man on screen and that the scene was shot but was edited from the final cut because ‘Fox feared that it could lose up to $1 million because sponsors were threatening to pull out of the show’ (1994). As the threat from sponsors indicates, the visible presence of a gay character in *Melrose Place* is welcome because it emphasises the open-mindedness of the Fox network in addition to participating in the 1990s demand for diversified representations on TV. However, Matt cannot be subject to the same codes of representation as the ones used for his heterosexual counterparts, because such a depiction would result in an important financial loss, which is arguably not in the best interest of a broadcast television network such as FOX. Even though the demand for diversified representations of sexual orientations is growing, there is still a restraint in what can be shown on broadcast TV (and often on basic cable TV). Furthermore, when asked about Matt’s physicality with his lovers, the creator of the show Darren Star answers that it is ‘not necessarily on [his] agenda to show two men kissing’ because the series is more ‘interested in showing interesting stories and emotional stories’ (ibid.). In other words, by focussing on the ‘emotional’ nature of Matt’s relationships, Star indicates that Matt’s love life does not need to be physically represented on screen to transmit its passionate nature to television viewers. Even without seeing it, Matt’s attachment to his partner is made sufficiently explicit for viewers to understand. In that case, one can wonder why all heterosexual characters in *Melrose Place* need to have on-screen physical contact with their love interests for viewers to understand the nature of their relationships. Are viewers meant to conclude
that the relationships of heterosexual characters in *Melrose Place* are less emotionally invested and of a more casual nature than Matt’s relationships, which explains their physical nature?

Arguably, suggesting a sexual act without representing it and letting viewers imagine the scene is a narrative device used in many TV series. First, in the cases of broadcast and basic cable TV, it often helps avoid censorship of explicit content. Second, this technique can also increase the appeal of a scene, as suggesting opens many possibilities for how the scene happens instead of a single possibility, possibilities that are left to the viewers’ imagination. Consequently, suggesting simultaneously integrates viewers into the narrative as the ones being privy to this moment (which can also be an unlimited source for fans’ interpretations and productions). However, this narrative device loses its effect when it clearly establishes a distinction between straight sex and queer sex. Therefore, as opposed to the typical scripts of the good gay/bad gay dichotomy, the emphasis on the deep emotional attachment of Matt to his lovers in contrast to the casualness of his heterosexual counterparts, creates a new typical script in which the gay protagonist assumes a token positive representation. This new positive gay character is no longer asexual as the good gay of the 1970s, because he engages in sexual intercourse even though it takes place off-screen. However, contrary to the bad gay, he is not controlled by his sex drive because what he is looking for in a relationship is not the act of sex itself (and/or its pleasures), but an emotional connection with another man, which ultimately eliminates the idea of gay men as promiscuous and predatory and removes any sexual component in gay relationships. What this new positive gay representation creates is a new stereotype, a positive one but a stereotype nonetheless, that (hetero)normalises
desires by promoting the idea that what gay male characters seek to recreate is a monogamous, heterosexual-like relationship in which gay sex acts are secondary or inexistent. As the following discussion of *Gay as Blazes* illustrates, this segregation not only perpetuates prejudice and discrimination against gay people but is also a political threat as it enables the creation of oppressive policies that punish gay people for their acts if not for their identities.

1.2.2. **Stereotypes and textual content: Conforming to deconstruct**

In *Queer as Folk* ‘Queer, There and Everywhere’ (1.02), Michael who pretends to be straight at work to avoid discrimination, finds himself forced to accept a date with Tracy (Lindsey Connell), a female colleague, when one of his co-workers decides to play Cupid. When Michael complains about his situation to Ted and Emmett, Emmett tells him that it is his own fault as he is the one pretending to be heterosexual. At which point Ted intervenes:

Ted: Look, he’s not like you, okay?
Emmett: What is that supposed to mean?
Ted: Meaning he’s not an obviously gay man.
Emmett: Are you accusing me of being obvious?
Ted: If the fuck-me pump fits…
Emmett: Well, I could be a real man if I wanted to. You know, just lower my voice. Stop gesturing with my hands. Make sure my face is expressionless. Never, never use words like ‘fabulous’ or ‘divine’. Talk about, I don’t know, nailing bitches and RBIs. But I’d rather my flame burns bright than be some puny little pilot light.
Ted: And a fabulous flame it is.
Emmett: Thank you.
Ted: But Michael is out there in the straight world. Believe me it isn’t easy. You do what you have to do.
Michael: I’d better go change.
Emmett: For your big date? Here’s a sports mag. Better bone up. Just in case the conversation veers away from Liza’s weight problem.
This scene offers an interesting take on the cultural re/production of stereotypes. The narrative uses the typical script of the gay man who attempts to ‘pass as straight’ at work and who finds himself in an inextricable situation because of his undisclosed sexuality. In addition, it perpetuates the stereotype of the gay man who knows nothing about sports but everything about gossip. Yet, instead of adopting the heteronormative perspective in which sexuality necessarily means heterosexuality and identity is informed by this coherent and therefore undiscussed ‘natural’ state of things, Emmett reverses the perspective by illustrating how he can heterosexualise his body to pass. Unlike the example of Dana in *The L Word* who positions the lesbian body against the ‘natural’ heterosexual female body, Emmett adopts a queer perspective by postulating the naturalness of the gay male body against the heterosexual male body. As a result, Emmett openly discusses how his queer body can become a heterosexual male body by adopting heterosexual codes of identification. Rather than assuming the tacit and coherent state of the heterosexual sexual culture, the narrative thus tackles its naturalness by highlighting its conformity to a system of codes. It demonstrates that if LGBTQ identities are constructed and performed through bodies, so are heterosexual identities and bodies. In other words, the narrative calls into question the naturalness of heterosexuality and challenges the sanitised sexual culture in which queer bodies and identities must be policed to fit in by conforming to heterosexual standards, a conformity that is reflected in many television texts in the way ‘queer characters [are] made intelligible to a [straight] audience that needs to relate to what is represented on-screen’ (van Kessel 2016: 116).
This policing of bodies and identities is addressed later in the series, emphasising how the writing team does not rely on the same time-sensitive structure and Act Break as broadcast/basic cable series. As previously mentioned, a plot/subplot can be revisited later in the show to deepen and complicate its meaning or to analyse how it affects/has affected the characters. For instance, the following example shows how this policing of bodies and identities affects other characters but also its motive and what it entails when it is not self-imposed (like Michael or Dana). In ‘Home is Where the Ass Is’ (2.01), Lindsay asks Emmett and Ted to pretend to be hers and Mel’s date for her sister’s wedding following Lynnette’s insistence that Mel and Lindsay not draw attention to themselves, as she does not ‘see any reason for people to be subjected to [the] undignified display of [Lindsay’s] private life’ (2.01). Contrary to Michael who hides his sexuality to avoid discrimination at work (or Dana who pretends to be straight to protect her career in The L Word), Lindsay and Mel are forced to comply with Lynnette’s demand as an adherence to heteronormative codes and standards of gender identity. Lynnette insists on Lindsay and Mel denying their sexuality and relationship and pretending to be straight by attending the ceremony with male dates, because according to Lynnette, two women attending a wedding without being accompanied by men would immediately be interpreted as a sexual difference. Thus, Lindsay and Mel are asked to ‘follow etiquette’ and observe a heteronormative customary code of behaviour, at least during her wedding. Lynnette makes every effort to ensure that nothing will perturb her guests, especially not her sister’s ‘undignified’ relationship with a woman or interfere with the sacrosanct nature of her wedding. Nevertheless, the fact that it is her third wedding in five years, as mentioned several times during the reception by both her parents and Lindsay and which emphasises the
contrast between Lindsay who cannot legally marry a woman and Lynnette who can freely marry and divorce because it is legal, does not seem to affect the sacrosanctity of marriage. As a result, Lindsay and Mel are expected to behave as heterosexual women, to embody femininity and produce feminine gender displays in accordance with their female sexual nature. Thus, Lindsay and Mel are required to wear dresses, to bring dates (men, it goes without saying) and to avoid any ‘inappropriate’ expression of their affection so as not to ‘embarrass’ Lindsay’s family in front of their guests (fig. 7).

Figure 7 Heterosexualisation of the Lesbian Body (‘Home is Where the Ass Is’ 2.01)

Nevertheless, although both Lindsay and Mel must conform to a heteronormative transformation of their bodies, it is the butch lesbian in particular that is forsaken to the benefit of a standardised embodiment of femininity and womanhood.
Indeed, throughout the series Lindsay’s conventional femininity is highlighted, emphasising her curvaceous body and longer blond hair. She often wears dresses and light-coloured feminine clothing that call attention to her breasts and feminine curves, as well as jewellery and make-up (fig. 8). By comparison, Mel is portrayed as the butch, with her short-cropped hair, generally not styled, slender boyish body type, darker masculine clothing and no make-up (fig. 8). In fact, the image of Lindsay in fig. 7 and fig. 8 is quite similar: similar hairstyling, similar clothing style, light-coloured dress, emphasis on her cleavage and slender figure and similar make-up style. In contrast, Mel looks more groomed, less au naturel: styled hair, make-up and she is wearing a dress with high heels. The same observation applies to the heterosexualisation of the gay male body with the examples of Emmett and Ted. The dress code Lindsay and Mel are forced to adopt during the wedding is by extension enforced on Ted and Emmett.
As with Mel and her forsaken butch lesbianism, it is the flamboyant style of Emmett that is forced into invisibility. Like Lindsay who looks similar to her everyday-self if perhaps dressed-up for the occasion, Ted does not differ much from his everyday-self
apart from the fact that he wears a suit. In contrast, Emmett is forced to replace his colourful dress style that emphasises his toned body with a grey suit, blue shirt and tie that matches the style of every male guest at the wedding (fig. 9).

In this discrimination within discrimination, the narrative highlights the normalising effects of assimilation and how assimilation generally works against differences. The increased popularisation of LGBTQ images both on television and in society (especially from the 1990s onwards) is often interpreted as signalling the evolution (and achievement) of mainstream recognition of LGBTQ people. Although the increased presence of LGBTQ images and the greater openness to LGBTQ socio-political issues in U.S society can indicate an evolution, equating it to achieving equal recognition is problematic. As the example above illustrates, the acceptance of LGBTQ identities and queer lives can be conditional on their invisibility in heterosexual settings and/or their adherence and reproduction of heteronormative customary codes of identity, body and behaviour that erase ‘problematic’ identities, bodies and behaviour.\textsuperscript{35} To emphasise this, the narrative uses stereotypes and typical scripts as a narrative device to offer a counter discourse to hegemonic normative regimes that pervade social relations and an alternative way to consume the text. Instead of offering literal interpretations of stereotypes, the text is supplemented by references to social and cultural issues and theories, a layering of the narrative that complicates over-simplistic interpretations and calls for critical and political engagements with these images in relation to past and current queer representations on television and in society. Furthermore, the narrative uses stereotypes and typical

\textsuperscript{35} ‘Problematic’ in the sense that they do not comply with ‘appropriate’ gender displays, ‘appropriate’ bodies and ‘appropriate’ identities.
scripts that are familiar to queer and non-queer viewers from previous televisual representations and/or personal experiences and subverts them to propose content that diverges from ‘regular TV’. This narrative device contributes to the qualification of the text, and by extension of Showtime, as ‘quality TV’ aimed at subscribers who seek ‘a higher form’ of television as opposed to ‘the masses who must settle for “Must See TV”’ (Santo 2008: 32; see my discussion of ‘quality TV’ in Chapter I). This production of content that differs from mainstream/basic cable TV content is a reminder of Showtime and pay TV networks’ capacity to offer programmes that are not available elsewhere.

1.2.3. Stereotypes and textual form: The example of Gay as Blazes

As mentioned earlier, my case studies use stereotypes and typical scripts in two forms: in the content and the form of the texts. The previous section discusses the use of stereotypes and typical scripts in textual content as a form of critical and political engagement as well as a reminder of pay cable’s status as not ‘regular TV’. The following section examines how stereotypes and typical scripts are integrated into the texts and how writers use them to promote a more honest portrayal of gay men and, by extension, LGBTQ people, in addition to addressing the position of my case studies in relation to previous queer representations on television. One example is the way the narrative establishes a parallel with other forms of television content through the parody of respectability and political correctness embodied by the example of Gay as Blazes, a show within a show in Queer as Folk that appears in the episode ‘Hypocrisy!'
Don’t Do It’ (2.03). Gay as Blazes is built on the same formula as Queer as Folk in the sense that it follows the everyday lives of a group of gay friends. However, its genre is closer to a daytime soap opera with its stereotypical musical score and the use of backlighting technique (part of a three-point lighting set up) where the subject of the gaze of the camera is illuminated from the back, which creates a glowing effect on the edges of the subject while the rest of the scene appears darker (fig. 11).

![Figure 11 Gay as Blazes Scene 1 (‘Hypocrisy! Don’t Do it’ 2.03)](image)

36 Characters in Gay as Blazes: Curt (Curt Wu), Stephen (John Blakey), Luis (Yan Feldman), Bobby (Christopher Davis), Bruce (Brandon Barre).

37 As fig. 11 shows, the scene is filmed with a standard three-point lighting (blue arrows) that focuses on the dinner table and the five guests who appear detached from the surrounding room. The key light constitutes the main light in the shot and is directly pointed at the subject of the picture, the fill light also shines on the subject but from a side angle to balance the effect of the key light (illuminating shaded surfaces, for instance), while the back light serves to illuminate the subject from behind and detaches it from the background.
The narrative use of the soap opera genre in *Gay as Blazes* is not incidental but directly connected to the way in which the soap opera with its ‘camp undercurrent’ and over-the-top acting became ‘the center of gay male culture in the mid-1980s’ with texts like *Dynasty* (Feuer 1995: 132). As Feuer argues, watching *Dynasty* in the 1980s was ‘a ritual’, people gathered in gay bars to consume each episode and share the experience with other viewers (ibid.). This ritualistic viewing serves to introduce *Gay as Blazes* in *Queer as Folk* when the different protagonists gather at Woody’s to watch the latest episode together. Furthermore, it is used to broach the topic of queer representations on TV, a subject that is directly connected to the early criticisms of its explicit and unapologetic approach to queer representations raised against *Queer as Folk* after its first Season. In an interview taking place ten years after the end of the series in which Cowen and Lipman look back at *Queer as Folk*, both creators recall their surprise when a lot of the early backlash against *Queer as Folk* unexpectedly ‘came from the gay audience’ rather than ‘right wing religious people’ as expected (Goldberg 2015). Both creators explain that some members of the LGBTQ community were concerned that the image *Queer as Folk* depicted for straight people did not reflect LGBTQ people ‘in the best possible light’, by playing into stereotypes and confirming some of straight people’s misconstrued ideas about LGBTQ people (ibid.). Yet, what Showtime bought was a show aimed at representing a group of young people in their 20s exploring their lives, which arguably implied sex regardless of sexual preferences, not the story of ‘two lawyers who lived in the suburbs and who were adopting children’, which some members of the community suggested would have presented a more positive and less controversial image of LGBTQ people, a representation of domesticity that infuses *Gay as Blazes* (ibid.). Instead, Showtime offered Cowen and
Lipman complete freedom over the content of the series, following its motto (at the
time) of ‘No Limits’ (ibid.). Cowen also reveals that Showtime attributed the minimal
negative reactions from religious groups to the fact that Queer as Folk was produced
and broadcast on a pay service (ibid.). Therefore, Showtime was not required to
comply with the same ‘public interest’ condition as broadcast/basic cable networks
and was not subject to the same regulations. On the contrary, Showtime was expected
to offer original programming that differed from broadcast TV’s, which was reflected
in the content and form of its texts (see Chapter I).

Following Cowen and Lipman’s desire to respond to the criticisms of Queer
as Folk’s unrepentant and uncompromising queer images, writers of the show develop
in Season Two Gay as Blazes that parodies past assimilationist depictions of
queerness. In addition, Gay as Blazes answers some community members’ desire for
a representation of LGBTQ domesticity that offers an image of respectability and
responsibility, arguably one that complies with heteronormative ideas of domesticity
and relationships. In the episode, Lindsay comments that ‘The Times says it’s the most
honest look at gay life portrayed on television’, an observation that immediately
triggers Brian’s question: ‘Well, then, where is the sucking and where is the fucking?’
(2.03). Contrary to Queer as Folk with its explicit depictions, Gay as Blazes offers no
promiscuous sex and no nudity. Instead, it portrays five upper-class, well-educated,
elitist men who despair at some people’s preferences for non-monogamous
relationships, club culture and its encouragement of sex, drugs and disco music, like
their friend Jamie who ‘allowed himself to become a stereotype… instead of a role
model for the community’. Through this comment on the necessity for gay men to be
role models in society, the narrative openly mocks criticisms about putting forward
positive representations for straight people to appear in the best possible light, simultaneously meeting concerns about playing into stereotypes and perpetuating them. By establishing a parallel between the politically correct images of *Gay as Blazes* and the unapologetic images of *Queer as Folk*, the narrative clearly signposts its position in relation to assimilationist depictions on television: if viewers want to see a policed but positive image of LGBTQ people, then shows like *Gay as Blazes* are what they are looking for. Conversely, if they want something different, something more daring and ultimately more honest (although not representative of every LGBTQ people), then *Queer as Folk* is the right choice.

The *Gay as Blazes* scenes are the opening and final sequences of the episode. The first scene shows the five protagonists celebrating the tenth anniversary of the couple formed by Bobby and Bruce (on the left in fig. 11):

Curt: To Judge Bruce.
Stephen: And Dr Bobby.
All together: Congratulations.
Luis: Ten years of fidelity.
Bruce: Happy anniversary.
Bobby: Happy anniversary.
Stephen: Where’s Jamie?
Curt: He said he’s stuck in surgery.
Bobby: I’m sure he’s operating. With some boy.
Bruce: Or at Club Sodom.
Curt: That awful place?
Stephen: Where they dance and take drugs.
Luis: And have sex… So I’ve heard.
Bobby: It’s a shame Jamie’s allowed himself to become a stereotype…instead of a role model for the community.
Luis: Mm-hm.
Bruce: Hopefully one day, he’ll come to his senses and realize his time could be spent in so many more productive ways. Like joining our gay men’s reading group.
Luis: Yes.
Stephen: Last week, we read Sylvia Plath. And this week, Jane Austen.
Bobby: That’s the best anniversary gift we’ve ever received.
As opposed to the exclusively white middle-class characters in *Queer as Folk* that can, on the surface, be seen as gay stereotypes, *Gay as Blazes* ticks all the right boxes when it comes to portraying gay men. For instance, in response to criticisms on the absence of representations of differently abled people on television, *Gay as Blazes* portrays a gay man in a wheelchair; it also portrays racially diverse gay men: a mixed couple who celebrate their tenth anniversary, a Hispanic and an Asian. Nevertheless, offering diverse representations does not equate to promoting a progressive viewpoint on gay men when such representations are produced to soothe straight people and alleviate their concerns, the same way suggesting Matt’s sexual life in *Melrose Place* mainly serves to reinforce the double standard. Hence, by drawing attention to these obvious differences in characterisation, the narrative shows that form without content is not a political act but an assimilationist one that can perpetuate prejudice and discrimination against gay men and, by extension, LGBTQ people. In fact, the political limitations of these characters are reinforced by the dialogues that clearly emphasise the protagonists’ assimilationist perspective on gay men and their problematic dissociation between gay identity and gay sexual acts that are often part of said identity. In this sequence, sitting at the dinner table, the five men congratulate themselves for their involvement in community life, their social respectability and their personal participation in the promotion of domesticity and monogamy: ‘Congratulations’; ‘Ten years of fidelity’. Contrary to the *Queer as Folk* characters who go clubbing almost every night looking for ‘the most beautiful man who ever lived’ (Michael, ‘Premiere’ 1.01), the *Gay as Blazes* characters prefer book clubs and

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38 Brian as the sexually promiscuous gay man, Michael as the closeted-at-work, boy-next-door gay man in love with his best friend, Justin the teenager and his first sexual experiences, and so on. Nevertheless, each season offers more in-depth approaches to each character, revealing their complexity that goes beyond these stereotypes.
long-term relationships. Yet, instead of congratulating the couple for their lasting relationship, Luis comments on their capacity to be faithful and monogamous for ten years, a social norm that is usually expected in heterosexual relationships but disturbs in queer ones because it implies ‘affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force’ (Foucault 1998a: 136). In short, the narrative draws attention to straight people’s main prejudice against gay men viewed as sexual predators only seeking immediate pleasure without being interested in long-term relationships, itself strongly reinforced by the hostile political climate at the time of production (2000-2005), and challenges it as being as constructed and ludicrous as restricting gay men to a positive stereotype that depicts them as asexual to alleviate the ‘straight panic’ (Becker 2006: 4). In other words, the narrative uses both positive and negative stereotypes of gay men, first, to highlight their constructedness as over-simplified images that contain very little truth. Second, as an answer to criticisms against unfavourable LGBTQ images, using stereotypes emphasises the dangers of using political correctness for political correctness-sake without considering social, cultural and political implications. Keeping in mind the political environment during the creation of *Queer as Folk*, the narrative points out that sanitising LGBTQ images for the sake/fear of straight people and straight society is less about putting the best foot forward than acknowledging a semblance of truth in prejudice and discrimination.

39 Indeed, when Season Two was produced in 2001, George W. Bush was elected President of the U.S. and his position and his government’s position on LGBTQ issues reinforced (and almost sanctioned) the prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people in society.
Furthermore, the narrative calls attention to the danger of the assimilationist discourse promoted by the *Gay as Blazes* characters that disconnects gay identity and gay sex acts that are often implicit in this identity. Responding to concerns about negative representations expressed by some viewers, the narrative demonstrates how this assimilationist approach does not so much relieve anxiety or advance LGBTQ socio-political rights as achieve the opposite. By divorcing gay identity from gay sex acts that they interpret as shameful and perverted, the *Gay as Blazes* characters perpetuate the stigma of social identity, a stigma that Michael Warner defines as ‘the shame of a true pervert’, which ‘may have nothing to do with acts one has committed’ because ‘it attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status’ (1999: 28).

In short, instead of offering positive images for a scared heteronormative society, the assimilationist discourse that promotes a gay identity detached from its sexual reality not only perpetuates prejudice and discrimination against gay people, but also represents a political danger insofar as it allows for the creation of oppressive social policies that punish gay people for their acts if not for their sexualities. This equation of sex to shame is emphasised through the protagonists’ reactions when Luis comments that at Club Sodom people ‘have sex’. Luis’ remark is immediately followed by silence and the outraged looks of his friends who after interrupting their conversation, eye him suspiciously, at which point he quickly adds ‘so I’ve heard’ in order to save his reputation as a respectable and responsible pillar of the community, which seems to equate to asexuality. In other words, through the example of *Gay as Blazes*, the narrative draws attention to how assimilationism perpetuates a double standard that underlines that gay relationships are fine but gay sex acts are shameful and reprehensible.
The comparison drawn between the sanitised images of *Gay as Blazes* and the controversial representations of *Queer as Folk* is reinforced by the parallel construction of the scenes in the episode. The first *Gay as Blazes* scene representing a dinner with the five friends (fig. 11) is directly followed by a *Queer as Folk* scene depicting some of the protagonists gathered at Woody’s to watch the show and share the experience with their friends. Both scenes offer a different view of the idea of social gathering, each informed by its own definition of what meeting with friends entails for the people involved. The second *Gay as Blazes* scene shows Bruce and Bobby in their home in the company of a young man, Travis (Michael Facciolo), whom they ‘saved’ from living in the streets (fig. 12).

![Gay as Blazes Scene 2 ('Hypocrisy! Don’t Do It’ 2.03)](image)

Bruce: You don’t have to be out on the streets anymore, Travis.
Bobby: From now on, you’re gonna be living here with us.
Travis: You’re so kind. I didn’t know gay people like you existed.
Bruce: We’re not all sexual predators.
Bobby: In fact, the only thing we like bound in leather… is a good 19th century novel.
Bruce: Have you read Jane Austen?
Travis: No.
Bobby: It’s better than sex.

As opposed to Brian’s comment on the lack of sexual content in *Gay as Blazes*, it is noteworthy that although every character condemns promiscuity, privileges monogamy and insists on the fact that there is more to life than sex by actively dissociating identity from sex acts, the conversation in both *Gay as Blazes* scenes is actually focused on sex for the most part. In the first sequence, Luis comments on Bruce and Bobby’s ‘ten years of fidelity’. In addition, the different characters lament over the existence of clubs like Club Sodom, arguably an equivalent to Babylon, a recurring location in *Queer as Folk* that features in almost every episode. In the second scene, Bruce assures Travis that not all gay men are ‘sexual predators’ while Bobby makes a sexually charged comment on bondage. Even Michael who watches the show avidly every time it is on, answers Brian’s criticisms that ‘the whole point of *GAB* is that it’s not all about sex’. There’s more to gay life than that’, which goes against his own statement that constitutes the first spoken sentence of the series and claims that ‘the thing you need to know is, it’s all about sex’ (‘Premiere’ 1.01). Using sexual content and sexual innuendos is in fact a feature of soap operas that has steadily increased since the creation of the ‘Family Viewing Hour’ in 1975. A content analysis of a primetime soap opera sample conducted by Lowry, Love and Kirby reveals that references to sex, sex acts and sexual behaviour occur every nine minutes in a one-hour programme (1981: 93). In short, the narrative draws attention to the

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40 The Family Viewing Hour was a policy created by the FCC in 1975 ensuring that each network broadcast family-friendly programmes during the 8-9pm (Eastern Time) primetime slot. The policy was judged unconstitutional and overturned in court in 1977 (Brown n.d.).
hypocrisy of the double standard promoted by the *Gay as Blazes* characters and, by extension, numerous prior representations on TV, which validates certain behaviour and people that comply with their understanding of what a gay man must be and condemns those that diverge from their social norm.

The *Gay as Blazes* scene is mirrored by a scene in *Queer as Folk* representing Emmett and his current employers Blaine (Marc Richard) and Blair (Derwin Jordan), the ‘real-life’ representations (in *Queer as Folk* at least) of Bruce and Bobby (fig. 13). Blaine is a dentist and Blair is a lawyer, they are educated, they live in a big house in a quiet suburban area of Pittsburgh, they have been together for eleven years and they ‘believe that monogamy is the foundation of a solid relationship’. Yet, as Emmett quickly discovers when he starts working for them as a naked maid, Blaine and Blair are not as monogamous as they pretend to be. On the one hand, they prefer Emmett keeps his clothes on as a ‘small way of bringing a little dignity to [the] community’, contrary to ‘some members of [the] community [who] find it titillating to sexualize even domestic work’ (Blair, 2.03). On the other hand, Blair makes sexual advances to Emmett while the latter is ironing their clothes and Blaine does the same when Emmett is cooking him dinner. Although Emmett does not decline the propositions, he is ashamed of his behaviour and blames himself for the betrayal of their monogamy and their eleven years of fidelity. As a result, he decides to resign to safeguard Blaine and Blair’s relationship and save them from his negative influence, assuming neither men shared their infidelity with the other (fig. 13). Yet, when announcing his resignation, Emmett learns that not only Blaine and Blair shared with the other their respective tryst with Emmett, but they also do not consider having sexual relations with other
people as a breach of their monogamy.\textsuperscript{41} Blaine and Blair’s dissociation between sexual acts and their identity as a monogamous couple reinforces the stigmatisation of same-sex sexual acts as perverse and shameful that prevent LGBTQ people from being accepted by society, like the \textit{Gay as Blazes} characters.

Figure 13 Emmett with Blaine and Blair, the Real-life’s Gay as Blazes Characters (*Hypocrisy! Don’t Do It* 2.03)

\textsuperscript{41} Emmett: I hope you won’t be angry, but I have to give you my notice.
Blair: Oh, Emmett, no.
Blaine: Aren’t you happy here?
Blair: Have we done something to displease you?
Emmett: Oh, no, no. It’s not you. It’s me. I’m unworthy to work for two such fine men.
Blair: You mustn’t say that.
Blaine: No one has ever given us service quite like you.
Emmett: I was afraid you’d say that.
Blaine: In fact, Blair has told me himself how happy he is with your performance. Haven’t you, Blair?
Blair: Oh, yes. And Blaine has done the same, haven’t you, sweetheart?
Blaine: We’ve never had a more congenial menial.
Emmett: Wait a minute. Um… You both know?
Blair: Of course.
Emmett: But I thought… Didn’t you say you were completely monogamous?
Blair: We are. But we can all use a little help around the house.
Blaine: Now, won’t you stay?
Emmett: You know. I may be a slut but at least I’m an honest slut.
To reinforce the parallel between the two scenes, the mirror scenes represent identical pictures (fig. 12 and fig. 13): three protagonists sitting on a sofa, with the two ‘respectable’ gay men surrounding the one they are attempting to save and to convince of the righteousness of their ways. The parallel sequences liken Emmett to Travis and Blair and Blaine to Bruce and Bobby. Therefore, by recreating a scene identical to the one where Emmett finds out that his role models are not who they present themselves to be, the scene in *Gay as Blazes* raises the same question as to whether Bobby and Bruce are who they present themselves to be and whether their intentions towards Travis are as innocent as they claim. This parallel construction of scenes taking place at different time in the episode is reflected in the flow of the narrative, which involves the continuous weaving of narrative threads that is not interrupted by commercial breaks or divided into time-limited acts. Instead, writers can develop a plot/subplot at one moment and revisit it later in the episode (or in a later episode) to add information to it and often complicate it. In the present case, as mentioned above, the later scene with Bruce, Bobby and Travis (fig. 12) serves to question Bruce and Bobby’s intentions towards Travis as Blaine and Blair’s intentions towards Emmett were far from innocent (fig. 13). Yet, instead of clearly answering its own question, the narrative simply hints at the possibility and lets viewers draw their own conclusions, which exemplifies how pay-TV narratives favour subtext and complexity over explicit and definite articulation, to offer viewers a more active interpretative role and a greater freedom to creative teams.
Contrary to Brian’s queer approach to the understanding of sexuality and identity as complex and fluid rather than fixed by heteronormative discourses of sexuality as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Blaine and Blair and the *Gay as Blazes* characters reproduce an assimilationist discourse that encourages LGBTQ people to modify their behaviour and copy straight people to be accepted by society. With the example of *Gay as Blazes*, the narrative suggests that denying the connection between gay identity and sex acts is not only problematic because it implies refuting a part of gay lives, but that it also achieves an equality that exists only in name. As a result, throughout its five seasons, the narrative of *Queer as Folk* offers multiple sex scenes that reconnect this dissociation, not as a means to reduce identity to sex acts but as a way to demonstrate that sexuality is often part of the reality of LGBTQ identities. In addition, these sex scenes are not included to develop the story according to the productive quality of narrative like series produced on broadcast/basic cable networks (Roof 1996). Indeed, with neither structural imperatives nor time and content limitations and with different subscribers’ expectations, Showtime’s original programming can devote some scenes to events unrelated to the theme of the episode to ‘build steadily towards a climax through multiple examinations of a particular theme from myriad perspectives’, a climax that can occur at any point in the narrative (Santo 2008: 28; Lotz 2007: 92-3). In *Queer as Folk*, many episodes start with a sex scene that does not add information content to an episode’s narrative but fulfils another purpose: visual pleasure and avant-garde representations. As clarified by Cowen and Lipman, sex scenes in *Queer as Folk* were not written ‘for pure shock value’ (Duca 2017). Instead, Lipman explains that when adapting the British show for Showtime, they wanted to do it justice as they ‘had a lot to live up to’. Therefore, they ‘made a
pact [...] to at least match or exceed it’, which Lipman confesses, ‘in many ways [they] exceeded it… in terms of the graphic nature’. Yet, Cowen continues, ‘the sex was really not gratuitous’. As this type of depiction ‘had never been done in a show before’, they decided to treat sex ‘as arias, like in opera when language ceases to express, people start to sing’ (ibid.). In short, sex scenes enabled them to express what words sometimes fail to convey, additionally allowing viewers a certain freedom to draw their own conclusions. This approach to narrative goes against the expectation that narratives must produce something that adds to the overall meaning of an episode. Therefore, the intelligibility of these sex scenes is not anchored in a productive end that reveals specific information about the characters, which can help viewers understand them better. Instead, the numerous sex scenes manage to sexualise gay men and, by extension, LGBTQ people, not from the negative perspective of the good gay/bad gay dichotomy of former television representations, but in the sense that LGBTQ people have sex just like everybody else without connoting a perversion. This approach to sex and queer representations is possible because Showtime offers the creative freedom and authorial vision broadcast and basic cable TV do not, two qualities that disrupt TV series conventions in terms of format, genre, storyline, representational trope and visual style.

1.3. Queer temporality

As previously mentioned, the absence of advertising modifies the pace of the narrative as writers do not need to rely on hooks to catch viewers’ attention and entice them to come back after a commercial break. Thus, premium channel series do not follow the
broadcast/basic cable series’ Act Break in which the narrative consists of a succession of problems and resolutions that are often solved by the end of an episode and whose theme is generally set out in the first segment of the episode. In fact, as Susan Talburt suggests, queer narratives are often characterised by ‘indeterminate’ endings that ‘def[y] intelligibility’ (2004: 35). These open endings create an interpretative space of continued and endless possibilities that are not delineated by the texts themselves. As previously suggested, they offer viewers a greater freedom in their interpretations (as well as material for their creative interpretative projects, such as fanfictions or fan art), while providing creative teams the possibility to continue the shows in the future (either via new seasons, reboot or the release of new online content, for example). For instance, most of *Queer as Folk* Season Five depicts a political campaign, Proposition 14, that threatens same-sex couples’ rights and is arguably a fictional re-enactment of real-life legislative campaigns that have affected and still affect several U.S. states. The last six episodes of the season portray the organisation of a political campaign by supporters and opponents of Prop. 14 and show the coordination of public events (for example, organisation of debates and benefits to raise money) and campaigns of information by phone, door-to-door and in the streets (distribution of pamphlets and poster display), to remind people what is at stake and to encourage them to vote. Yet, the series ends before the vote takes place, thus viewers never find out whether Prop. 14 is adopted or defeated in the last episode of the series. However, this open ending is answered by Michael’s final words: ‘So the “thumpa thumpa” continues. It always will. No matter what happens. No matter who’s president. As our lady of Disco, the divine Miss Gloria Gaynor, has always sung: We will survive’. Regardless of the result of the vote, Michael’s final statement is a message of rebellion and survival in response
to the uncertain and threatening political climate of the final season and, to a greater extent, to the political climate of U.S. society in relation to LGBTQ civil rights.\textsuperscript{42} Michael’s final words transmit a message of hope and determination that whatever happens, LGBTQ people will never stop fighting for their rights. In addition, this final address can be interpreted as a reminder to \textit{Queer as Folk’s} viewers that what is happening to the characters in the show has also happened/is also happening to LGBTQ people in real life.

Similarly, in \textit{The L Word}, Jenny’s death in Season Six is never solved. Accident, murder or suicide, her death remains an open question. Through flashbacks to previous seasons and new events happening in this final season, each episode explores the means and motives of different protagonists, without specifically identifying Jenny’s killer if there is one as neither suicide nor accident are ever explicitly ruled out. At the end of the season, viewers are left with various plausible possibilities and no definite answer. Using a combination of non-linearity, indeterminate end and self-referentiality, the entire Season is structured to allow viewers to reach their own conclusions on Jenny’s death.

These open endings transcend the separation between fiction and reality, creating their own queer temporality outside and beyond television, a queer temporality that is ‘at once indefinite and virtual but also forceful, resilient, and undeniable’ (Barber and Clark 2002: 2). Quoting Sedgwick’s \textit{Tendencies}, Barber and

\textsuperscript{42} The final season aired in 2005. Since 2003, sexual activity between same-sex consenting adults has only been legal nationwide after the \textit{Lawrence v. Texas} Supreme Court ruling on 26 June 2003. The ruling struck down the sodomy law in Texas and, by extension, invalidated the sodomy laws in thirteen other states, thus making sex between same-sex partners legal in every U.S. state and territory (\textit{Lawrence v. Texas} 2003). Nevertheless, LGBTQ civil rights laws including laws regarding family, domestic partnership, marriage or anti-discrimination still vary by state.
Clark go on to propose that “The immemorial current that queer represents” conveys a persistent present, “a continuing moment” […], in short a temporal force’ (ibid.: 8, emphasis in original). In other words, queer is ‘a temporal force’ insofar as it is not just a moment taking place in time but a continuous force that shapes the events of the present, a present that does not already exist in time, but which is contingent on the new possibilities created by queer. Thus, the temporality of queer creates possible spaces that do not exist yet or have yet to be imagined, spaces that highlight and disrupt normative times ‘that seem natural to those whom they privilege’ (Freeman 2007: 160). Similarly, José Esteban Muñoz argues that ‘queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world’ (2009: 1). In short, he argues that queer cultural work is characterised by the ‘not yet conscious’ that allows for the integration of queer lives and experiences within the everyday without assimilating them with it (ibid.: 3). Put differently, queer temporality offers alternatives to these normative times that not only regulate daily routines and schedules but also life experiences, which often influence one’s system of identification. In short, as a connection to alternative schedules, experiences and practices, queer temporality does not delimit queerness to sexual identity. As Michel Foucault argues in ‘Friendship as a Way of Life’, ‘to be “gay”, […] is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of homosexuality but to try to define and develop a way of life’ (1998a: 138). Foucault clearly separates social identity from sexual identity and proposes the notion of ‘homosexual mode of life’ as different ways of existing that can ‘yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized’ (ibid.: 137-8). Therefore, Foucault’s ‘mode of life’ challenges the temporal dimension of the homosexual sexual act understood as an ‘immediate
pleasure’ without possible past or future (ibid.: 136). Instead, a ‘homosexual mode of life’ becomes ‘the instruments for polymorphic, varied, and individually modulated relationships’, rather than a way of having sex (ibid.: 139). Judith Halberstam also discusses queer temporality in its connection to life experiences. Halberstam points out that ‘Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’ (2005: 2). In short, Halberstam suggests that queer temporality creates possibilities that exist outside the conventions of the normative domestic space, such as the one supposedly created by television, governed by ‘the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction’ (ibid.: 1).

In *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, the series’ open endings surpass the ‘temporal dimensions of television’, to borrow Needham’s expression, which anchor TV in domesticity and immediacy by producing normativity through its insertion into the ‘rhythms of the everyday’ (2009: 143). Queer temporality goes against the normative time of television as ‘being there’ and ‘bringing it to you as it really is’ (Feuer 1983: 14). Even more so with the Internet-television convergence that ‘decontextualizes and dehistoricizes the television image’ (van Kessel 2016: 117). Moreover, it resists the sense that ‘narrative must produce something and/or go somewhere in an analogue of time or space’ (Roof 1996: xxxi), where narrative imitates the rhythm and pattern of life experiences (birth, marriage, reproduction, death). In short, it opposes the idea that narrative must reach completion to make sense, that only a definite end gives its full meaning to the story and allows readers/viewers to take pleasure, gain knowledge and learn from the story. Therefore, against criticisms
raised by some viewers of feeling cheated (Ficera 2013: 17) or betrayed in their expectations (Davies 2013: 45), I suggest that instead of offering viewers the (de)finite representation of an already existing present that exists in time, queer temporality encourages viewers to imagine a continuity that is neither set in time nor in space. For instance, in The L Word this continuous present is reinforced by the online release of a mini-series entitled Interrogation Tapes exclusively on the Showtime website following the end of the series. Feating Sergeant Marybeth Duffy (Lucy Lawless) and Detective Sean Holden (Sean Tyson) in charge of investigating Jenny’s death, the mini-series consists of seven short interrogation videos of Bette, Tina, Shane, Helena, Alice, Niki and Max, set directly after the last scene of the series when the protagonists head to the police station to answer questions regarding Jenny’s death. Each video provides new content, new information on some unanswered questions and secrets that were never divulged during the course of the series. Moreover, they hint at a possible culprit for Jenny’s death, Alice, the only one referring to Jenny’s death as murder, although no information is provided on her potential arrest for murder either in the main series or in Interrogation Tapes. Yet, in several interviews, Chaiken confirms that Alice is indeed arrested for Jenny’s death, although whether ‘she actually killed Jenny’ remains to be proven (Fonseca 2009b; see also Fonseca 2009a; Halterman 2009; Showtime 2009). During an interview prior to the Season Six premiere, Chaiken

Interrogation Tapes was available exclusively on Showtime only for a few weeks before disappearing completely from the website. The mini-series is now available on YouTube. For instance, Tina divulges some information about her family that was never broached during the course of the series. Shane reveals that she was the one who burnt down her business (5.01) and not her scorned girlfriend Paige (Kristanna Loken) as it was hinted at but never confirmed during the series. Helena explains what she did with the money she stole from Catherine and that led her to prison (4.12). Niki reveals she was the one who hid the film negatives in Jenny’s attic to prevent the film’s release (6.03). Bette confesses to be angry with Tina for not considering that Bette may want to carry their second child instead of adopting (Season Six). Finally, Alice is the only one who thinks these interviews are aimed at identifying Jenny’s killer, revealing she believes Jenny was killed and did not commit suicide.
admitted to waiting for news from Showtime on a possible spin-off, *The Farm*, that would revolve around Leisha Hailey’s character, Alice, who will be sent to prison (Fonseca 2009a; 2009b; O’Connor 2009).45 The continuity of the story offline after the end of both the main series and *Interrogation Tapes* is a reminder that these events are set in their own temporal and spatial dimension, their own continuous present with multiple possible futures. The queer temporality of *The L Word* may be emphasised even further with both the creation of *The Real L Word* and the current reboot in the works at Showtime. Also created by Ilene Chaiken for Showtime, *The Real L Word* is a TV-reality spin-off of *The L Word* that follows a group of lesbians in their everyday lives in Los Angeles (Season One and Two) and Brooklyn (Season Three). Transcending fiction, Chaiken argues that the objective of *The Real L Word* was authenticity: ‘We wanted to make an authentic show that expanded the premise of *The L Word*... [not] to put on a show about lesbians that pushes us forward as trashy, ridiculous, vulgar people who behave badly all the time’ (Bolonik 2010). Similarly, in an interview about the reboot, Chaiken suggests that for the need of the reboot, ‘they might forget that last year ever happened’, which would branch off the timeline of the narrative after Season Five and continue a present started nine years ago, to introduce a new ensemble of characters through their connections with the original protagonists (Miller 2017; Goldberg 2017).46 It will be interesting to see how the (returning and/or potentially new) writing team negotiates this nine-year gap, whether writers will actually bypass the last Season and resume the story post-season five, whether they

45 *The Farm* was never picked up by Showtime (Warn 2009b).
46 Being still at the project stage, whether this idea is pursued or not remains to be seen. It will also depend on the recently confirmed showrunner Marja-Lewis Ryan (Otterson 2017), as Chaiken (the original creator) will only serve as executive producer due to her previous commitment to another network (Goldberg 2017; Miller 2017).
will acknowledge the nine-year gap and create stories to fill this past, or whether the story will restart directly where Season Five (or possibly Six) left off and how all these decisions will be reflected in the narrative.

1.4. Politicised narrative

As suggested earlier, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* have a political dimension made possible by the deliberate integration of events, theories and criticisms of past and contemporary (to the time of production) U.S society into their narratives. For instance, Cowen and Lipman reveal in an interview that when working on *Queer as Folk*, they felt a certain ‘social responsibility to explore the legal obstacles for the LGBT community at the time’ (Goldberg 2015). There were various social and political issues they ‘needed to address’, which they were able to do because they were never ‘censored by the network [Showtime]’ (ibid.). The following sections illustrate how the writers of both shows intertwine these outside elements with fictional ones in an attempt to discuss, challenge and/or deconstruct them. In particular, I suggest that this narrative politicisation helps contextualise historical and contemporary events in order to highlight society’s prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people and to push the limits of television representations of LGBTQ people and queer lives.

In their article on the rejection of identity politics in academia and in the public sphere, Bhambra and Margree argue that politicised identities can be used to produce ‘a tomorrow in which the social injustices of the present have been overcome’, but that

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47 Contrary to Chaiken as mentioned earlier, see footnote 30.
to achieve this goal and prevent the perpetuation of the conditions generating biased identity categories, these ‘politicised identities need to inscribe that tomorrow into their self-definition in the present’ (2010: 65). In short, they propose to use politicised identities to deconstruct fixed identity categories by situating the social injustices and inequalities suffered by oppressed/marginalised groups in the wider context of contemporary society. In doing so, these injustices and inequalities can be addressed by the people wronged but can also trigger ‘solidarities generated through the political movements of people working towards equality [and] justice’ (ibid.: 61). Based on a similar argument, I suggest that the integration of past and contemporary events and policies related to LGBTQ issues and queer lives into the narratives of Queer as Folk and The L Word address, inform, remind and demonstrate their impacts and limitations. By contextualising these past and contemporary events and policies in contemporary U.S society, the narratives adopt a queer perspective by drawing attention to the minoritising strategies behind the idea that these events and policies only make sense and can only be articulated by those they directly concern, supporting their classification as queer narratives (Warner 1993: xxvi; Piontek 2006: 2). Instead, they should be addressed in relation to the society that produces them. Although these events and policies affect LGBTQ people and queer lives in the first place, limiting their mobilisation to the wronged identities also limits the political actions and ‘solidarities generated as a consequence of the activities around perceived injustices’ (Bhambra and Margree 2010: 61). In addition, this wider contextualisation highlights that the injustices and inequalities are caused by the society that generates them, not by the people wronged by them. Therefore, one way to highlight and remedy these injustices and inequalities is to mobilise others by calling attention to the way society
enables and perpetuates discrimination and prejudice against certain identities through the use of narrative.

1.4.1. Contextualising history: Stonewall and Pride

LGBTQ history is composed of various movements and events marking the evolution of activism in the defence and promotion of LGBTQ rights in the U.S. However, Stonewall is often referred to as the birth of the lesbian and gay movement and has become ‘the emblematic event in modern lesbian and gay history’ (Duberman 1993: xv, emphasis in original; Piontek 2006: 9). Although several theorists challenge misconceptions about Stonewall and discuss the reasons behind the attribution of a historical meaning to the Riots (D’Emilio 1983; Duberman 1993; Marcus 1999; Armstrong and Crage 2006, to name but a few), Stonewall is common knowledge among people familiar with LGBTQ rights politics. Moreover, its yearly

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48 Specifically, the 1950s mark the moment when activism in defence and promotion of homosexual rights in the U.S. became slowly visible and took a political turn. I understand ‘activism’ in its potential to bring about political or social change. Although homophile organisations, such as the Veterans Benevolent Association (1945), the Civil Readjustment Committee of the Quaker Emergency Service (1946) or the George W. Henry Foundation (1948) existed before the 1950s, they were support groups and counselling services (Stein 2012: 44-5). Hence, they were less oriented towards a political agenda and the promotion and defence of male and female homosexual rights and more towards supporting and advising homosexuals. It was only with the experience and efforts of activist Harry Hay, who launched the idea of a homosexual activist group in 1948 and became one of the founders of the Mattachine Society in 1950, that gay and lesbian activism began. Moreover, the 1950s mark the beginning of a continuous phase of LGBTQ activism uninterrupted to this day, and which has gradually increased LGBTQ visibility throughout history.

49 In retrospect, with LGBTQ history generally divided into ‘before Stonewall’ and ‘after Stonewall’, Stonewall has become a symbol of the visibility of non-heteronormative sexualities. However, as Armstrong and Crage argue, gay liberation activists made Stonewall into the point of origin of the Gay Rights movement by using the Riots as a spark to ignite the Gay Liberation fire (2006: 725, 737). In other words, activists at the scene quickly understood the possible political impact and implications of the Riots for their movement and started to organise press coverage, which kept the events alive for several days. Thus, Stonewall was an instrument used to rally people. Although the Stonewall Riots were not the first time gays fought back (Bernstein 2002; Stein 2012) and did not mark the beginning of the Gay Liberation movement (D’Emilio 1983; Epstein 1999), they were a prominent milestone in the fight for gay rights. Stonewall was marked by the media coverage of the Riots during and after the events and continues to be celebrated today with a yearly organisation of gay pride parades in numerous
commemoration through Pride serves as a reminder, although in this case the origins of the parade may not be known by either/both the people participating and those watching. Despite its contested historical position as a rupture from LGBTQ past invisibility, Stonewall remains an important historical event for LGBTQ visibility in society.

*Queer as Folk* addresses the importance of Pride in an episode that illustrates what the gay pride parade means for the different characters (‘Pride’ 2.04). Through the celebrations commemorating the Stonewall Riots, the narrative emphasises the multi-dimensionality of Pride and stresses the changes that have occurred since the first parade a year after the Riots. In addition, it demonstrates that Pride holds significance for LGBTQ identities other than white men, a whitewashing of the Riots that ‘survived unquestioned for several decades and has only recently been challenged’ (Piontek 2006: 3). For instance, Lindsay and Mel take part in Pride as a political act to further the fight for LGBTQ civil rights, an activism that is already part of their everyday lives. Throughout the year, Mel and Lindsay support and actively participate in the work of the local LGBTQ youth centre. Lindsay helps organise art shows to raise money for the centre and promote the work of young LGBTQ artists, while as a lawyer, Mel helps prosecute cases of discrimination against LGBTQ people. For Pride, they intend to participate in the march with the marriage initiative group, to take advantage of the parade to advocate for the legalisation of same-sex marriage in cities not only in the U.S but worldwide, and by the commemoration of the Stonewall Inn as a National Landmark in 2000 (NHL 2015).

50 Some theorists and historians argue that during the night of the raid, the resistance to the police was led by drag queens and butches of colours (Duberman 1993: 190, 196-7; Feinberg 1996: 97; Frye 2000: 457; Valentine 2007: 44; Stein 2012: 80), while other commentators deny the involvement of drag queens and other transvestite actors (see, for instance, Marcus 1999).
Pennsylvania. Being reminded that their approaching commitment to each other will not legally be recognised in Pittsburgh, Lindsay and Mel intend to capitalise on the media coverage of the parade (print, television and Internet) to publicly voice their demands to the government. Although as Sweeney argues, Lindsay’s vision of her wedding is especially heteronormative in her ‘dream of a wedding with all the traditional trappings’ (2016: 44), her and Mel’s activism during Pride has another dimension. Besides celebrating LGBTQ culture and pride with events that Michael, Ted and Brian summarise as ‘the dancing’, ‘the parade’, ‘the fucking’, the narrative illustrates the political and activist dimension of Pride that can be used for demonstrations for legal rights, as did the original parades. Moreover, through Lindsay and Mel’s involvement in the parade, the narrative calls attention to the state of LGBTQ rights in Pennsylvania specifically. Since 1996, same-sex marriage in the state has been banned by statutory law, a law that also prevents the state of Pennsylvania from recognising same-sex marriages performed in other states as legally binding. In other words, the narrative combines fictional stories and real-life social situations and politics to represent society’s problems and potentially find possible solutions. By doing so, the narrative bridges the segregation between fiction and reality, opening the possibility for a liminal viewing space that I discuss in Chapter III as a transient and unstable viewing space enabling pay cable television viewers to negotiate various and multiple viewing positions that can be adopted and discarded as the narrative progresses (see my discussion in Chapter III).

51 The ban was lifted in May 2014 when the U.S. federal district court of Pennsylvania ruled that the 1996 ban was unconstitutional (Botelho 2014).
In addition to this political and activist dimension, the narrative underlines the social dimension of the parade by illustrating that Pride can be a means to show the support of non-LGBTQ people for equalised civil rights, people commonly referred to as ‘straight allies’ (Stonewall 2011). Research shows that supportive reactions from families can have a major influence on the mental and physical health of LGBTQ young adults. For instance, Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez observe that LGBTQ young adults who experience higher levels of rejection during adolescence are 8.4 times more likely to report having attempted suicide, 5.9 times more likely to report high levels of depression and 3.4 times more likely to use illegal drugs, compared with LGBTQ young adults who experience no or low levels of family rejection (2009; see also Coker, Austin and Schuster 2010).

In the episode, by marching with the PFLAG group (Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), Debbie (Michael’s mother) and Jennifer (Justin’s mother) openly
declare their support for their sons (fig. 14). Contrary to Brian’s claim that ‘there are two kinds of straight people in this world: the ones that hate you to your face and the ones that hate you behind your back’ (‘Queer, There and Everywhere’ 1.02), the narrative highlights the solidarity of non-LGBTQ people, not from an assimilationist viewpoint that encourages LGBTQ people to copy and act as straight people, as previously discussed. Instead, this strategy calls attention to the importance of situating the parade in the social context in which it takes place to call out the discrimination and injustices enabled and perpetuated by society. Hence, by showing Debbie and Jennifer take part in the parade and march with the PFLAG, the narrative calls attention to the fact that queers have families (by blood and/or chosen) that support them. This perspective situates these supposed minorities in the wider context of contemporary society not as existing outside society but existing alongside it. In doing so, the narrative weakens the us-versus-them segregation of the hetero/homo binary of heteronormative culture. From a queer viewpoint, this integration into mainstream U.S. society mediates the play of inside and outside that Diana Fuss recognises as central to queer theory (1991: 1). As Fuss argues, ‘[w]e really only have the leisure to idealize the subversive potential of the marginal when our place of enunciation is quite central’ (ibid.: 5). Fuss acknowledges the impossibility of situating oneself outside dominant discourses. Yet, existing within dominant discourses does not equate to accepting their rules and limits. Instead, what queer theory proposes is to negotiate these rules and limits and call into question their naturalness by highlighting how they are created, controlled and perpetuated. This is, I suggest, what Chaiken sought to accomplish with her writing team when she revealed that her initial objective when working on *The L Word* was to reach a mainstream audience: to tell her own and other people’s stories
and situate these stories within dominant heteronormative discourses to challenge and disrupt preconceived ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives (Halterman 2009; Showtime 2009). Hence, contrary to the criticism of Chaiken’s rejection of lesbian viewers in favour of straight ones (see footnote 29; see also Davies 2013: 54; Ficera 2013: 17-8), I propose that Chaiken’s objective to reach a mainstream audience does not so much reveal a lack of consideration for lesbian viewers than a desire to situate this (mainly) lesbian-focussed series in a usually heteronormativity-dominated medium. As a result, Chaiken and her writing team can offer images of lesbians that do not necessarily comply with the need to appear in a positive light for straight society, similar to Cowen, Lipman and their writing team’s refusal to participate in the re/production of assimilationist representations of gay men (see my discussion of Gay as Blazes). In short, from a queer perspective, by locating supposed minorities in mainstream contemporary society, the narrative underlines LGBTQ visibility and queer subject-positions. Second, like the example of Jenny discussed earlier, the narrative demonstrates that ‘coming out’ and building one’s identity as a LGBTQ individual are connected to one’s relations to others, a fact that Brian reminds Justin of when the latter questions his participation in the parade.

Being his first Pride, Justin confesses to Vic that he is looking forward to marching, especially considering that he survived a gay bashing a few months earlier (‘Full Circle’ 1.22). At that moment, Vic reminisces about his first march after the Stonewall Riots, when Pride was not the celebration it is today and ‘there were no more than twenty-five of [them] that first year’. At Justin’s surprise at such a small number of participants, Vic declares that ‘if coming out is tough’ in the 2000s, it is nothing compared to what it was back then. The brief mention of Stonewall that Vic
situates ‘in the Stone Age’ in reference to Justin’s youth, serves as a vehicle for the transmission of cultural values and traditions within a subcultural community. It emphasises the progress accomplished by LGBTQ activists and how LGBTQ visibility has changed since the Riots: in 1970, the year of the first gay pride parade, the gathering of twenty-five people who marched for their civil rights was brave given that homosexuality was still classified as a mental disorder (reclassified as a psychosexual disorder in 1973 until it was removed from the list of mental disorders in 1986), in addition to the fact that although homosexuality was never outlawed per se, sodomy laws existed in all fifty states at the time.\textsuperscript{52} \textsuperscript{53} By comparison, in 2001 (time of broadcast of Season Two) Pittsburgh’s Pride has become a weekend celebration on Liberty Avenue. In other words, using Justin and Vic’s discussion, the narrative first situates historically the origins of the parade since, as previously mentioned, although Pride is a well-known event that takes place each year in major cities in the U.S (and around the world), some people may not necessarily know its historical source. Second, it establishes a parallel between past and present to highlight the changes and evolution of LGBTQ rights activism since the Stonewall Riots. At the same time, this temporal reminder shows how different LGBTQ generations face different issues but also how responses to these issues are connected to the socio-political status of

\textsuperscript{52} Decision ratified in 1974 by the Board of directors of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). However, because some psychiatrists were strongly opposed to the decision to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders, a new category, Psychosexual Disorders, and a new diagnosis, Ego-dystonic Homosexuality, were created for the third edition of the \textit{Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders} (DSM). The ego-dystonic homosexuality applied for homosexuals who desired to change their sexual orientation because of ‘the negative societal attitudes toward homosexuality’ (American Psychiatry Association 1980: 282). The diagnosis was criticised by many health professionals as a ‘political compromise to appease those psychiatrists […] who still considered homosexuality a pathology’. Homosexuality was eventually removed entirely from the DSM in 1986.\textsuperscript{53} Laws against sodomy existed mainly to protect the Christian values of the West during the Christian era and to prevent non-procreative sex. According to Jeffrey Weeks, it was mostly a form of regulation of male sexual behaviour (1996: 44). In the United States prior to 1962 when Illinois became the first state to remove criminal penalties for consensual sodomy, sodomy was a felony in every state and punishable by prolonged imprisonment or hard labour (Canaday 2008; Painter 2004).
LGBTQ people in society. By highlighting the temporal dimension of Pride, the narrative adopts a queer viewpoint on Stonewall by calling into question the notion of a unified gay past in a challenge to historical ‘master narratives and the humanist conceptions of identity and subjectivity as unified and stable’ (Piontek 2006: 4). If for Vic being able to march (i.e. being authorised to participate in a legally sanctioned gathering of gay men) was a major step in 1970, for Justin in 2001, Pride is a place for performing self-representation, a gathering of various identities with their own understanding of gender, sexuality and body.

The performativity of self-representation is in fact embodied by Michael in this episode. Michael, who pretends to be straight at work, has always refused to participate in the parade through fear of being seen by one of his colleagues. Upon Debbie’s insistence, Michael tells her that ‘it’s easy for [her] to wave banners and march around’ because she has ‘nothing to lose’. Nevertheless, Emmett finds the solution for Michael to march with his mother and thank her for her support while avoiding being seen by his colleagues who plan on going to the ‘pansy parade’ to ‘check out the freaks’ because they admit that Pride ‘is the best party in town’.
Emmett proposes that Michael dress in Godiva’s drag queen outfit, who has just passed away at the local hospice for patients with AIDS. As a result, Godiva can participate in her last parade while Michael can keep his secret from his colleagues and march with his mother (fig. 15). When Michael marches with Debbie, he notices his colleagues watching from the sidewalk. Tired of his boss’ constant criticism of his work in addition to the derision of his sexuality (‘pansy parade’, ‘check out the freaks’), walking up to them Michael asks them ‘which one […] is a real man’. When one of his colleagues answers that ‘[they] all are’, his boss asks Michael if he is one as well, to which Michael answers ‘you tell me’ before kissing him. Through Michael’s drag performance and his interactions with his colleagues and boss, the narrative points out how ‘being a real man’ often equates to heterosexuality, where ‘being a real man’ is not solely a question of male sexual organs but a question of sexuality. According to Michael’s colleagues, a ‘real man’ is a man who is attracted to and has sex with female partners. In short, the narrative calls attention to the fact that for them, sexuality dictates the performance of identity through the performance of gender (see Butler
1990). This is further emphasised by the fact that although they have been working together for several years, none of his male colleagues recognise Michael when the latter walks up to them dressed in drag, whereas Debbie and Tracy recognise him immediately. As Michael’s colleagues associate homosexuality with effeminacy, they cannot imagine that Michael whose masculinity never raised their suspicion could be gay, neither can they envisage him dressing in drag, because it would call into question their equation of homosexuality with effeminacy and also raise the question of the performativity of masculinity. As Judith Halberstam suggests, male masculinity is ‘nonperformative’ by nature, in the sense that contrary to femininity which is characterised by artificiality, masculinity inherently ‘just is’ and cannot be performed or constructed in any serious or believable forms (1998: 234-5). Hence, in his drag performance, Michael’s identity is protected and so is his sexuality.

The non-performativity of masculinity is also addressed in *The L Word*, where the narrative effectively disrupts it with the character of Moira/Max. Throughout Season Two, Jenny commits self-harm as she is haunted by the memories of the sexual abuses she was victim to as a child and by the fact that her mother refused to acknowledge it, in addition to her struggle with defining her sexual identity and her sense of self. At the end of Season Two, Jenny has a nervous breakdown and moves back to her mother and step-father’s in Skokie, Illinois, to get better. Although it was supposed to be a short-term solution, in ‘Labia Majora’ (3.01) Jenny has already been in Skokie for six months, dealing with her problems and writing a book. In the Season premiere, her mandatory therapy sessions being over, Jenny is finally ready to move back to Los Angeles and is accompanied by Moira Sweeney, a butch lesbian she met during her time in Skokie (fig. 16).
Unlike the other protagonists of the show, Moira comes from a working-class family and is an example of female masculinity. She is generally portrayed wearing baggy jeans, t-shirt and plaid shirt, with no bra and no make-up. She is often mistaken for a man, in which case she prefers to introduce herself as Max so as to avoid any violence that her gender transgression may trigger. As long as Moira is identified as a man, her gender transgression remains inconspicuous. However, when her female masculinity transpires, she is at risk of violence. For example, in ‘Lost Weekend’ (3.02), after stopping on their way to Los Angeles, Moira faces the ‘bathroom problem’ when, needing to use the toilet, she is reminded by a teenage girl present at the same time that she is in the wrong place as this is the women’s bathroom (see for instance, Halberstam 1998; Browne 2004; fig. 16). Through the idea that Moira is using the wrong space, the narrative calls attention to the limits gender binarism imposes on public spaces. Because of her female masculinity, which positions her gender identity as transgressive, Moira is forced to defend her right to use the ladies’ room. Indeed, an ‘unproblematic’ body often disappears, insofar as it does not seize attention or raise concerns in regard to its meaning in relation to identity. By opposition, a transgressive body is a body that becomes highly visible because it exposes its breaking or crossing of corporeal boundaries, at the same time disclosing these very boundaries. In short, a transgressive body simultaneously breaks the rules and reinforces their stability and coherence by revealing their limits, highlighting how limit and transgression are deeply interrelated. As Chris Jenks argues, ‘transgression confirms limits, it shows a consciousness of limits not their absence’ (2003: 95; see also Foucault 1977: 35; Fuss 1991: 6). Transgression and limit depend on each other insofar as to validate itself as such, a transgression must also simultaneously re-
establish that which it seeks to defy. Indeed, a system without limits is a system without rules, for rules (and their limits) are the means through which a system is constructed and functions coherently. Conversely, the existence of rules (and consequently the existence of limits) implies the possibility of transgression, a possibility which simultaneously exposes the constructedness of rules (and the system they belong to) while strengthening their inexorability. Hence, by calling out Moira’s presence in the wrong space, the narrative reveals the manner in which, in public bathrooms, female bodies that fail to pass the gender test and are thus read as male, are re/situated within a sexed dichotomy, which promotes the illusory binary of heteronormative sex categories. In the scene, the teenage girl identifies Moira as a man who is wrongly using women’s restrooms and demands (s)he leaves immediately (‘What the hell are you doing in here, boy? Can’t you read this is the ladies room? Get the fuck out!’, 3.02).

Figure 16 The ‘Bathroom Problem’ (‘Lost Weekend’ 3.02)
Moira’s presence as a man in the women’s bathroom inscribes her gender transgression as a sex transgression: being read as a man, Moira is using the wrong public space. As Kath Browne argues:

Toilets, as sites that are separated by the presumed biological distinction between men and women and their different excretionary functions, can be sites where individuals’ bodies are continually policed and (re)placed within sexed categories (2004: 332-3).

In fact, the genderism of public spaces collapses gender and sex in a single category: public gendered spaces become sexed spaces. By entering the ladies’ room, Moira inscribes herself within the identity category ‘woman’. However, because her gender display is not read as feminine, her sex is assumed to be male, resulting in her ejection from the ‘wrong’ place. Nevertheless, when Moira informs the teenage girl that ‘[she is] a girl’ before leaving the restroom, what the girl first read as a sex transgression (a man using the wrong restroom) is forced to be reinterpreted as a gender transgression (a woman who fails to conform to heteronormative gender presentation). Thus, the problem with Moira’s presence in the ladies’ room no longer comes from the fact that she is a man who is using the ‘wrong’ toilets, but from the fact that Moira is a woman whose gender does not align with her biological sex. By acknowledging her femaleness, Moira ceases to be a man out of place. Yet, she is not identified as a woman because of her masculinity: Moira becomes a not-man/not-woman whose position within heteronormative identity categories is that of the monster.\footnote{The term ‘monster’ refers to that which exists outside the norm and disturbs normative systems, which is often articulated in reference to the masculine. For instance, Julia Kristeva discusses the idea of the monstrous-feminine in terms of ‘abjection’, that which does not ‘respect borders, positions, rules’ and which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (1982: 4). She discusses abjection as a way of distinguishing the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially constituted one. Additionally, Barbara Creed in her discussion of the monstrous-feminine argues that the monstrous-feminine is ‘constructed within/by patriarchal and phallocentric ideology, [where it] is related intimately}
Moira’s use of the ladies’ room turns into verbal violence when the teenage girl tells her male friend that ‘the freak here [was] in the girls’ bathroom’, simultaneously revealing that the teenage girl was unconvinced by Moira’s acknowledgment of her femaleness. The teenage boy immediately answers that ‘he must be a faggot’, thereby calling into question Moira’s identity as a man. The teenage boy reads Moira as a gay man and refers to her as ‘a faggot’, rather than as a masculine woman after knowing that she was using the ladies’ room. He focusses his interpretation of Moira on her gender display rather than her presence in the women’s bathroom, collapsing gender, sex and sexuality into a heteronormative understanding of the body and of identity. As Moira’s body is read as a male body, both because of the concealed presence of visible (physiological and cultural) female signifiers on her body (for instance, breasts, curves, long hair, make-up) and her masculine clothing, the teenage boy immediately associates her gender presentation with a signifier of her sexual orientation. By using the supposedly ‘wrong’ public sexed space, Moira is instantly read as a gay man. The attack on Moira’s gender identity and sexual orientation becomes physical violence after Jenny demands the boy leave them alone. At that point, the teenage boy physically assaults Moira (fig. 17) and, addressing Jenny, threatens her: ‘Shut up, freak. He’s your fucking boyfriend? He fucks you like a man? […] I’ll show you how a real man can fuck you’ (3.02).

to the problem of sexual difference and castration (1986: 44). In both examples, the monstrous-feminine is articulated in reference to the masculine without actually telling much about the feminine. In short, the feminine is not monstrous per se, it is constructed as monstrous in reference to male desires and fears.
The teenage boy calls into question Moira’s manhood (the state of being a man as opposed to a child or a woman), not ‘his’ maleness, and threatens Jenny with rape to show her what ‘a real man’ is. As with Michael’s example in Queer as Folk, the teenage boy’s understanding of what constitutes ‘a real man’ is not solely a question of possessing male sexual organs, as he still thinks of Moira as a man, but a question of sexuality. He thinks of himself as a ‘real man’ because of his heterosexuality as opposed to Moira’s alleged homosexuality. Therefore, his threat of rape is both a threat of physical violence but also a threat of punishment: Moira must be punished for her transgression of heterosexuality and Jenny must be punished for participating in it. As with the example of Michael’s colleagues, the narrative emphasises how (real) masculinity is defined in relation to (hetero)sexuality and queers it by demonstrating the constructedness of gender. In short, these two examples emphasise how the performance of gender creates the political category ‘identity’, where hegemonic male identity is defined in opposition to problematic male identities, themselves established.
‘not on the basis of their offending behavior but, more neutrally, on the basis of their “identity” – that is, their common membership in a “community”’ (Halperin 2012: 73). Hence, by calling into question the performativity of masculinity, these two examples demonstrate the constructedness and limits of binary identity categories. In doing so, both narratives emphasise that identities are constituted by a set of intersecting characteristics best defined by their plurality, complexity and nuances.

1.4.2. Contextualising politics: DADT and LGBTQ visibility

As mentioned earlier, interviews with the creators of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* reveal that creators and writers of both shows accounted for the political environment at the time of production when developing protagonists and storylines, despite Chaiken’s reserve towards social responsibility. Yet, the objective was not to make waves by pulling from the headlines, but to tell stories about issues that affected (and may still affect) LGBTQ people and queer lives in the most honest ways possible. Ron Cowen, for instance, describes the early twenty-first century as ‘a rather hostile environment […] toward gay people’ (Goldberg 2015), where until 2003, fourteen U.S states still had sodomy laws (see footnote 53) and policies, such as ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ (DADT) and the ‘Defense of Marriage Act’ (DOMA), were still in place.  

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55 DADT was repealed in 2010, while the legal defence of DOMA in Court by the Department of Justice ended in 2011, under the Obama administration (in office between 2009 and 2017; White House Record 2014). DADT was presented by Bill Clinton on 19 July 1993. Prior to DADT, the ban on gays in the military was absolute and the simple suspicion of a person’s homosexuality led to his/her immediate dismissal from service. In theory, DADT lifted the ban on gays in the military. In practice, it allowed closeted members of the military to serve, while prohibiting openly gay soldiers from doing so. Thus, despite Clinton calling the policy ‘a major step forward’, the implementation of DADT was merely an unsatisfactory compromise for those who wanted the ban lifted and those opposed to it (Clinton 1993). DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) was signed by the Clinton administration in 1996. Entitled ‘an Act to define and protect the institution of marriage’, section 3 of DOMA defined marriage as ‘a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife’ and limited the term spouse to refer ‘only to a
Similarly, Ilene Chaiken reveals that in addition to requests from many viewers of the show, Tasha’s character was developed because her story as a gay soldier would permit to broach political issues that the other protagonists would not (Showtime 2009). As a result, both narratives are infused with references to the political climate generated by various contemporary policies and events. By integrating these contemporary events and policies, both narratives candidly draw attention to their existences, their impacts and their limits for LGBTQ people and queer lives.

Using the storyline of Tasha Williams, Captain in the Army National Guard, *The L Word* addresses the U.S. military’s gay ban and DADT at the beginning of its fifth season. In 4.11 ‘Literary License to Kill’, Tasha informs her girlfriend Alice that her unit is set to leave for a second tour in Iraq in two weeks. However, while her unit is deployed, Tasha is held back. In 5.02 ‘Look Out, Here They Come’, Tasha is officially notified that she is under investigation without being formally informed of the charges, although she believes that she is being investigated for homosexual conduct. Her assumption is confirmed when she gets an official discharge for homosexual conduct in 5.03 ‘Lady of the Lake’.

Because Tasha wants to stay in the person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife’ (DOMA 1996). Effectively, it allowed states the right to refuse to recognise same-sex unions performed under the laws of other states. By 2004, DOMAs were adopted in thirty-eight states, among which four amended their constitutions to include the Act (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia (American Bar Association 2004: 397-402)). It was not until 26 June 2013 that the Supreme Court of the United States ruled section 3 of DOMA unconstitutional, declaring it ‘a deprivation of the equal liberty of persons that is protected by the Fifth Amendment’ (*United States v. Windsor* 2013).

Chapter 15 has officially been rescinded from the Military Code by President Obama in December 2010 and came into effect in September 2011. The Chapter previously read:

Discharge for Homosexual Conduct, Section 2

15-2. Discharge policy

a. Homosexual conduct is grounds for separation from the Army under the criteria set forth in paragraph 15-3. This includes preservice, prior service, or current service homosexual conduct.

(1) Homosexual conduct is engaging in, attempting to engage in, or soliciting another to engage in a
army and keep serving her country, her lawyer, Captain Curtis Beech (Ted Whittall), informs her that her only option is to prove that the allegations against her are false (meaning that she will have to lie), but that her chances of refuting the charges are very thin. The hearing to decide her fate takes place in 5.08 ‘Laydown the Law’. Colonel Gillian Davis (Kelly McGillis), the recorder for the prosecution, subpoenaed Alice to testify at the hearing as she is cited in two of the three allegations against Tasha. Although refusing at first, Davis threatens Alice with further legal actions if she does not appear in court. When called to testify before the board of officers, Alice denounces the hypocrisy of the procedure, calling it a ‘witch hunt’ and stating that the allegations against Tasha are purely circumstantial because being seen with a lesbian does not make one a lesbian, and that she could as easily allege that Colonel Davis is herself a lesbian ‘because of the way [Davis] looked at [her] in the hallway earlier’. Although Alice did not mean anything by her allegation against Davis other than to prove that anyone could be accused on the basis of very little evidence, this scene confirms the clues about Davis’ sexual orientation revealed during an earlier scene in the episode (fig. 18 and fig. 19). In this earlier scene, Davis is getting dressed in the

homosexual act or acts; a statement by the Soldier that he or she is a homosexual or bisexual, or words to that effect; or marriage or attempted marriage to a person known to be of the same biological sex. (2) A Soldier’s sexual orientation is considered a personal and private matter and is not a bar to continued service unless manifested by homosexual conduct as described in paragraph 15-3.

15-3. Criteria for discharge
The Soldier has engaged in, attempted to engage in, or solicited another person to engage in, a homosexual act or acts […] (Army Regulation 2015).

57 The three allegations made are:
(1) Tasha was seen at the Santa Anita Racetrack with a group of women who were openly lesbian and where Alice had her arm around Tasha’s shoulder.
(2) Tasha was seen quarrelling with the same woman outside the Los Alamitos Base.
(3) Tasha showed a female soldier in her unit preferential treatment for job reclassification because she was romantically involved with her.

58 This ‘guilt by association’ was in fact one of the charges against government employees suspected of being homosexual during the ‘Lavender Scare’ period in the 1950s (see also Dean 2001). The example of Dana rebuking Shane for her clothing also echoes this fear of ‘guilt by association’ (see pp. 109-16).
locker room after finishing her workout when a female soldier walks out of the shower naked and stands next to Davis.

During the scene in the locker room, the position of the camera at eye-level offers viewers an outsider position to observe the event. In the first half of the sequence, the camera draws attention to the naked soldier as she walks out of the shower towards her locker. From the moment she appears on-screen, the camera focusses on the naked woman who is situated at the foreground of the image, while Tasha occupies the background (fig. 18). In short, the naked soldier is the subject of the camera gaze. During the few seconds when the naked soldier walks towards her locker, the scene shows Tasha quickly glancing over the naked body, her eyes scanning the whole body from head to toe, before returning her attention to getting dressed. Once the soldier reaches her locker and Davis enters the shot, the naked soldier shifts from a subject position to an object position, while Davis becomes the subject of the camera gaze.
This shift is emphasised by the location of the naked woman at the front left of the shot, where the naked body is almost completely off-camera (fig. 19).

Figure 19 Parallel Scenes: Colonel Davis and the Naked Soldier (‘Laydown the Law’ 5.08)

The narrative uses the naked soldier to establish a parallel between Tasha and Davis. The first half of the scene shows Tasha’s reaction to a naked female body, the second half of the scene shows Davis’ response. When Davis enters the shot, the naked soldier becomes secondary, while the camera is oriented towards the Colonel to gauge her reaction to the entrance of a naked woman. From the moment the soldier stands at her locker, Davis stares at the naked body for a few seconds longer than Tasha, stopping successively on the woman’s face, breasts and buttocks, before realising what she is doing and leaving the room. In other words, the scene draws attention to both the similar responses from Tasha and the Colonel and to the fact that Davis lingers a few seconds longer than Tasha on the woman’s naked body, to hint that Davis may find what she sees appealing. The suspicion of Davis’ lesbianism is further underlined,
although never explicitly confirmed, in the later scene when Davis calls for a recess after Alice’s allegation. This hint without confirmation is another example of the way pay cable TV’s narratives avoid explicit and definite articulations in favour of subtext and complexity, as argued earlier. During the recess, a nervous and angry Davis offers a deal to Alice that will allow Tasha to dismiss the charges and stay in the military, a very unlikely outcome in this type of case as Beech told Tasha when she first brought her case to him (5.02). Davis’ reaction to Alice’s implication betrays her fear of being tried and discharged from the military because she knows that these allegations are almost impossible to shake off and would put an end to her career, thereby proving the inefficiency of DADT. 59

In short, the narrative exemplifies how DADT worked and how very little protection it offered to gays in the military. The situation in the series shows that DADT could, to some extent, protect gay/lesbian soldiers as long as their sexual orientation remained invisible and was never addressed. As Tasha’s commanding officer, Major Kevin Dixon (Peter Bryant), advises her: ‘your lifestyle is your lifestyle, but I don’t want to see it or hear about it ever again’, otherwise he will be forced to ‘take action’ (4.11). Through Dixon’s statement about not wanting to see or hear about Tasha’s lesbianism, the narrative highlights the foundation of DADT: the policy was based on maintaining the invisibility of/silence on queer sexualities. Hence, through the example of Tasha, the narrative demonstrates that the problem with lesbianism and the military was never that lesbianism exists or that it is viewed as natural or as a perversion (as early discourses on homosexuality suggested), rather it was always a

59 Although Alice relays the message, Tasha eventually confesses to being in love with her, declaring that denying it, denying who she is and lying to the board of officers contradict the military codes of conduct to which she has adhered her whole life.
question of visibility. Situated in the context of television representations of LGBTQ people and queer lives, the example of DADT illustrates that there is a gap between cultural and socio-political visibility in U.S. society that the multiplication of queer images accessible in popular culture often obscures, as Villarejo suggests. Indeed, neither the growing presence of queer representations on television and in other media (press, film), nor the open support of the U.S. President, mark social and political progress in terms of equalised civil rights and political access. As Susanna Danuta Walters proposes, cultural representations provide ‘a picture of a society readily embracing the images of gay life but still all too reluctant to embrace the realities of gay identities and practices in all their messy and challenging confusion’ (2001: 10, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, as this chapter demonstrates, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* create queer narratives that are not solely defined by the fact that they represent LGBTQ people and queer lives. Instead, the showrunners and writing teams working on these texts develop queer narratives that are not only characterised by their queer content and non-heteronormative perspective, but also by their form that neither depends on structural imperatives nor time and content limitations and are connected with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand that distinguishes its original programming.

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60 Indeed, starting in the 1990s, 42nd U.S. President Bill Clinton (in office between 1993 and 2001) openly pledged his support to the LGBTQ community during his presidential campaign in 1992, which encouraged LGBTQ activists to continue the fight. During his campaign, Clinton advocated for LGBTQ rights, promising, for instance, to end the ban on homosexuals in the military. Not only did Clinton talk about LGBTQ issues during his run for office, but he also talked to LGBTQ people, thereby urging voters who were not directly concerned with the issue (and thus did not necessarily feel involved in the debate on LGBTQ rights) to consider the issue and form an opinion. At the same time his pro-LGBTQ rights campaign acknowledged an electorate that was usually left out. A decade and several pro- and anti-LGBTQ rights legislations and amendments later, Barack Obama, 44th U.S. President (in office between 2009 and 2017) and his staff, implemented a variety of laws and practices that protected U.S. LGBTQ citizens nationwide. Among the different LGBTQ advances figure the passage and signature into law of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act in 2009, the development of a national HIV/AIDS strategy in 2009, the repeal of DADT in 2010, the ending of the legal defence of DOMA in Court by the Department of Justice in 2011 and the ensuring of equality for LGBTQ people in housing, employment and crime prevention (White House Record 2014).
from its broadcast counterpart (see Chapter I). These three narrative devices with a queer dimension offer less politically correct representations that call attention to contemporary normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society, simultaneously problematising previous queer representations on TV.
CHAPTER III
1. Watching queer television

As previously discussed, ‘television’ encompasses different meanings and practices that must be contextualised with the U.S. television landscape in mind. Focussing on pay cable TV in general and Showtime in particular, this work suggests that this form of television can be theorised as queer, in the sense of defying (hetero)normativity and advocating for political resistance. To this end, it examines how this queerness manifests at the production, textual and reception levels and what it entails for the understanding of television as a domestic medium established during the network era in the post-network era. The previous chapter discusses the characteristics of my case studies that make these TV texts queer narratives. Paying particular attention to the creative process of Showtime (and premium networks in general), it identifies three major features used in the narratives of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* that complicate the understanding of sexuality and offer uncensored queer representations that generate critical and political interests and problematise and challenge cultural ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives. The current chapter discusses another characteristic of queer narratives that is directly connected with viewers and their integration into the narrative: liminality as viewing positions available to viewers of my case studies. Related to the pace of the narrative unconstrained by temporal and commercial rules, liminality is linked with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand and manifests in the construction of the narrative where writers can take their time to introduce the characters and let the different storylines unfold, by creating moments with no dramatic function (by introducing longer silences and a slower release of information, for instance), which give viewers more time to integrate information and let them enjoy the on-screen life-world and the various stories without the urgency and
abruptness of network texts discussed in Chapter II. Compared with the queer narrative features discussed earlier, liminality involves viewers and their participation in the narrative rather than being a feature of the texts themselves. To this end, this chapter examines television viewers by exploring the reception side of pay cable television and what ‘watching queer television’ entails in the case of Showtime.

Because of the widespread presence of television (both in terms of medium and content) in U.S. households (see Nielsen Media Research 2009), the manner in which watching television is incorporated into the lives of its viewers has garnered scholarly attention. Research tends to disagree on whether watching TV can be considered a social activity or a solitary one. Some studies find that watching television negatively affects socialising with family and friends (see, for instance, Bickham and Rich 2006; Vandewater, Bickham and Lee 2006), while others note that watching television positively influences socialisation (see, for example, Dempsey 2005; Pigeron 2006; Saxbe, Graesch and Alvik 2011). It must be noted that all these studies focus on watching TV the ‘traditional way’ via a TV set. Additionally, they examine watching habits within the family to analyse the (possibly differing) effects of TV on parents and children. Therefore, whether watching TV helps or hinders socialisation, all these studies highlight that television watching remains an activity practiced in the co-presence of other people, usually family and friends, who share a physical viewing space with one another. This understanding is consistent with the notion of television as a domestic medium, in which the TV set is the means through which the social family gathers to watch the same programme (see, for instance, Williams 1990; Adams 1992; Ellis 1992, 2000; Spigel and Mann 1992; Fiske 1997; Capsuto 2000; Caughie 2000; Marc 2000; Newcomb 2000; Morley 2004; Bignell and

Nevertheless, although all viewers are present in the same physical space to watch the same episode of a TV series, for instance, this does not mean that they all adopt the same viewing position or experience the episode the same way. On the one hand, TV viewers may pay a lesser degree of attention to television, for instance, when television is left playing in the background while viewers attend to other tasks without effectively watching (Altman 1986: 40). This outsider position involves a more distanced reception of the text, generally referred to as spectatorship. On the other hand, TV viewers can participate in a more engaged reception and interpretation of a text, generally referred to as identification (Cohen 2001: 245). Identification supposes that viewers pay attention and are affected by what they see on TV to various degrees, for instance, by relating to a personal experience, by representing something familiar or conversely by depicting something viewers are glad to be able to avoid, or simply by piquing their interest. In other words, the reading of a text depends on the degree of involvement (or lack thereof) of television viewers in terms of how a text raises the interest of viewers for, as Morley argues, ‘one can hardly imagine any television text having any effect whatever without that identification’ (1992: 209). Media scholars suggest that the text-viewer connection is usually realised through the characters developed by the writing teams and brought to the small screen by the showrunners and directors (Liebes and Katz 1990; Wilson 1993; Zillmann 1994; Stacey 1994; Smith 1995, 2010; Fiske 1997; Livingstone 1998; Eder 2010; Blanchet and Vaage 2012; Mittell 2015, to name but a few). As Jason Mittell argues, ‘characters are triggered by the text but come to life as [viewers] consume fiction and are best
understood as constructs of real people, not simply images and sounds on screen’ (2015: 118). Similarly, in his analysis of ‘the structure of sympathy’ (recognition, alignment and allegiance), Murray Smith contends that characters constitute an ‘entry point’ into viewers’ engagement with texts (2010: 234; 1995). He argues that narratives often ‘elicit[e] our empathic engagement with characters either as a means of understanding them […], or as a means of appreciating their feelings more profoundly where we already understand them’ (2010: 252).

In the mass media literature, identification with media characters is generally defined in two main ways and determines the position viewers adopt in relation to a text. The first definition proposes that the process of identification with TV characters is defined in terms of empathy or feelings or, as Sonia Livingstone suggests, in terms of putting oneself into a character’s shoes and seeing the on-screen world through his/her eyes and adopting his/her perspective (1998). In this case, viewers imagine becoming this character, taking on his/her identity and adopting his/her goals by ceasing to be (and to be aware of being) a viewer and taking on the role of this character (see Wilson 1993; Zillmann 1994; Fiske 1997; Cohen 2001). The second definition of identification with TV characters describes a process that extends beyond the viewing situation to viewers’ real lives. In this case, identification becomes a type a response through which viewers modify their attitudes, behaviour, values and aspirations in response to a text (Caughey 1986; Murray 1999; Blanchet and Vaage 2012; Norman 2015) or acknowledge a desire to ‘be like the people in this programme’ (Hoffner and

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61 Recognition involves the individuation and identification of a character as such, which is the first step but also an on-going process in the structure of sympathy; alignment refers to the extent to which the camera gives viewers access to a character; finally, allegiance indicates the moral or emotional attachment of viewers to a character (Smith 1995, 2010).
Buchanan 2005: 327), a psychological process that v. Feilitzen and Linné describe as ‘wishful identification’ (1975: 53). For instance, Susan Murray finds that in response to their attachment to a TV character, teen female fans of the TV show *My So-Called Life* often tried to emulate Angela (Claire Danes), the lead character, by acting like her, dressing like her and/or dying their hair red like hers (1999: 227-8). Discussing the psychology of fandom, Abby Norman suggests that ‘our attraction to fictional characters may not be that we identify with them that much at all – but rather, we just really like spending time with them’ (2015). In the same way, Robert Blanchet and Margrethe Bruun Vaage propose that empathy and sympathy do not fully capture the extent to which television viewers engage with long-term narratives, as people ‘can also sympathize and empathize with strangers to whom [they] do not feel connected in such a special way’ (2012: 28). Instead, they suggest the metaphor of friendship or relationship to discuss the text-viewer connection, arguing that similar to developing a relationship in real life with real people, viewers’ engagement with fictional characters is based on the invocation of ‘a shared history’ developed over the various seasons of a show. Both types of identification process may start from viewers’ liking a character (Cohen 1999) or from viewers’ recognising some similarities (and subsequently differences) with a character (Stacey 1994; Smith 1995, 2010). More importantly, as previously mentioned, both depend on the skilful and deliberate construction of characters and textual features by showrunners, directors and writers who create and develop characters that viewers should enjoy interacting with and who use textual features that provoke and facilitate identification, as I demonstrate later in my discussion of Justin and Jenny as guides and viewers’ proxy. The two types of identification present one major difference. The first type of identification ‘requires
extreme absorption in the text and involves intense emotional experience’ (Cohen 2001: 253). In short, viewers are always situated in the text and take part in the on-screen events through the character’s perspective without being aware of their status as viewer. Hence, rather than having ‘feelings’ for or about a character, viewers ‘feel’ with the character. In contrast, the second type of identification (whether friendship, imitation or affinity) involves interactional components that require viewers to be aware of being viewers and to be able to distinguish between themselves and the character(s) they identify with. For instance, originally coined by social scientists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in the mid-1950s, the engagement in parasocial interaction or parasocial relationship (the development of friendship or relationship) with media characters has since been used in several empirical studies to discuss viewers’ connection with TV characters (for example, for connections with characters in soap operas, see Rubin and Perse 1987; in animated series, see Hoffner 1996; in sitcoms, see Cohen 2004). Whether describing affinity, similarity, liking or imitation, this type of identification requires viewers to be positioned outside the text to be able to analyse their relation to the character(s) and emit a type of judgement based on their perceptions of the said character(s) and of themselves. In short, viewers distance themselves from the text and the character(s) as they are conscious of being viewers.

In light of these two branches of media studies of identification, I argue that the writers, showrunners and directors of Queer as Folk and The L Word use a combination of both types of identification. As I suggest later in my discussion of guides as viewers’ proxy using the examples of Justin and Jenny, Justin and Jenny are constructed to guide viewers in the narrative, which is facilitated by the camera work. I propose that the viewing positions adopted by viewers in both texts are liminal
positions that enable them to exist in-between their life-worlds and the on-screen life-worlds. As a result, viewers are envisaged as tourists visiting on-screen life-worlds where they navigate the narrative by oscillating between adopting their guide’s (Justin and Jenny) perspective, which helps them discover the unknown life-worlds and meet the locals, while being deliberately made aware of taking on their perspective through the camera work. This dual immersion and awareness is especially important because of the queer content of my case studies. Indeed, identification as adopting the perspective of a queer character (and his/her identity in the narrative) helps viewers with different sexual identities to develop ‘heightened and emotional cognitive connections with [this] character’ (Cohen 2001: 251; referred to as heteroflexibility in this work) without sacrificing the representations offered to viewers in an attempt to make them ‘comprehensible and accessible to a heterosexual viewership’ (Griffin 2016: 125). At the same time, the fact that some features of the narrative distance viewers from the character they identified with earlier (and will be guided to identify with later) helps develop parasocial relationships with consequences that last beyond the viewing situation, for instance raising awareness of social, political or cultural issues. This is particularly relevant to my case studies as both address contemporary LGBTQ issues and portray prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people and queer lives perpetuated by U.S. society (see my discussion of queer narratives in Chapter II).

As previously noted, most readings of television are conditional on the understanding of television as a domestic medium that is assumed to cater to the family, which leaves out viewers who do not fit in this category. As previously mentioned, one can wonder what happens to viewers who do not belong to this
restricted and restrictive notion of traditional family. Is the position offered to these viewers solely an outsider one that prevents them from enjoying, relating to, taking pleasure in the on-screen narrative? Or is there a space/position/perspective available for these queer (in the sense of non-, anti-, and contra-normative, yet not limited to questions of sexuality) viewers and if so, how does it transpire in the narrative? The present chapter discusses television viewers. First, it outlines and examines various understandings of television viewers generally applied to broadcast TV viewers, before developing my understanding of television viewers in relation to pay cable TV in general and Showtime in particular. Specifically, this chapter explores the viewing positions made available by Showtime to its viewers and how these are reflected in the narrative. I argue that the viewing positions offered to television viewers in my case studies are situated in-between that of the cinema and broadcast television, and that these viewing positions are liminal positions that exist betwixt and between the on-screen life-world and the viewers’ social life-worlds. Television viewers are equated to tourists visiting places, meeting the locals, discovering events and stories and all the other elements that constitute a specific life-world. These viewing positions are available through the liminal space that enables viewers to experience a plurality of subjectivities and to generate multiple variables and alternatives that cannot be restricted to/by (hetero)normative categories.

1.1. Television viewers

Television content of any type is omnipresent in everyday life. Whether in the visual form of television images, or online, for example on social media platforms, or in the
form of ads in newspapers or displayed on billboards, television content is advertised for its loyal but also potentially new viewers. Arguably, television content is produced to be watched. Indeed, why spend money and time on producing, distributing and advertising content if not for it to be watched and thereby generate profit. Therefore, an important point that needs to be acknowledged regarding all forms of television is that whether we discuss ‘traditionally’ watching television series via the TV set, through online access via mobile technology, or via streaming media providers, Video-On-Demand or through DVD, one thing proves a constant in a perpetually evolving medium: its need for an audience. Television is a consumer medium that functions largely in terms of profitability. In fact, even with its defence of the public interest, broadcast television remains both a democratic and a capitalist medium that acknowledges its viewers as both citizens and consumers. This consumerist side of television is even more evident with pay cable television, insofar as pay cable channels are a service accessible only (legally at least) to their subscribers.62 Therefore, viewers are essential to television. As previously discussed, success on television is estimated either in terms of programme ratings, which measure the capacity of a TV series to attract and retain viewers, or through the number of subscribers. Although the latter does not evaluate how many viewers watched a specific series at a given time, it assesses the total number of viewers who are willing to pay to watch the programmes offered by a specific premium channel/network.

62 Indeed, although this type of streaming is not legal per se, with an Internet access, programmes broadcast only on pay TV channels can be accessed by anyone without a subscription. A quick Internet search on any search engines for a specific programme returns hundreds of thousands of results in less than a second offering streaming links to this programme. For instance, the query ‘watch The L Word online’ returns 21,000,000 results in 0.34 seconds, while the same query for Queer as Folk returns 459,000 results in 0.47 seconds.
Interests in television audiences emerged in parallel with the birth of television studies. Between the late 1970s and the late 80s, audience theory models have shifted from ‘a stable text fixing the subjectivity of passive spectators to one of active readers negotiating their own meanings and pleasures in play with a slippery text’ (Nelson 2001: 9, emphasis in original; see also Hall 1980; Morley 1980, 1992; Mitchell 1994: 2; Fiske 1997: 16-7; Croteau and Hoynes 2003: 266; Olson 2004: 121; Massey 2010: 20). In other words, audience theory models have been reversed from a conviction that television viewers are easily manipulated into adopting a typical viewpoint on a text without possibility for differing interpretations, to an approach that considered the heterogeneity of society, and which established that different television viewers engaged from varying positions in different ways and were able to derive different meanings and pleasures from a single text. Instead of theorising how audiences may react to a text from the perspective of the text itself, audience research focusses on analysing how ‘real’ viewers understand and make sense of television texts from the perspective of the audience. Audience research thus examines as directly as possible (generally through qualitative, often ethnographic method) how viewers respond to a given text. It emphasises the diversity of responses that the said text can arise, paying attention to different variables (such as sex, race, class, education, income, religion, ethnicity, nationality, geography), in an effort to understand how these variables affect textual meanings and interpretations in different social groups. In relation to my case studies, for instance, Faye Davies conducts a thorough analysis of the ‘pleasures and anti-pleasures’ *The L Word* engendered in its viewers through its six seasons. Relying on viewers’ participation in Showtime’s fan forum, Davies demonstrates that whether happy or unhappy about the direction of the various seasons, viewers kept watching
because the show offered them ‘non-traditional viewing perspectives that embraced the openness of the storyline or the celebration of the lesbian culture […] portrayed’ in the series (2013: 37). David Morley (alongside Charlotte Brunsdon) is one of the first theorists to publish a study on audience research that seeks to apply the encoding/decoding model developed by Stuart Hall in the early 1970s, who proposed that audience members produce three types of textual readings: dominant, negotiated and oppositional positions. Morley shows that in his model of audience readings, Hall overestimates the importance of class while underestimating other influential factors and concludes that readers construct different meanings of a same text, which are directly dependent on the reader’s background (1980: 18; see also Morley 1992; Fiske 1997; Hoffner and Buchanan 2005). In his discussion of broadcast television viewers, John Ellis also addresses the idea of active viewers. In his volume, Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television: Video (1992), Ellis establishes a clear distinction between cinema spectators and television viewers. He argues that cinema spectators are given the position of the omniscient ‘seer’ whose voyeuristic gaze offers an outside position of mastery over the narrative and its events (1992: 82). This voyeuristic standpoint grants cinema spectators the means to see the events and comprehend them, but not to change them. Yet, although cinema spectators are outsiders to the narrative, the film is constructed for them and offered to them to make sense of, which is facilitated by the conditions in which viewers watch movies at the cinema (dark room, no noise except for that of the movie). Conversely, television viewers occupy a bystander position, a position where viewers partake in the events of the narrative from the ‘very specific circumstances [of their] home’ (ibid.: 160). In short, Ellis discusses television viewers as passively active viewers. TV viewers are ‘casual’ viewers who glance at the
unfolding events of on-screen life-worlds as they pass through the literal window of the TV screen (ibid.: 162). Ellis understands TV viewers as existing in a domestic setting and as investing ‘no extraordinary effort […] in the activity of looking’ (ibid.: 137). Therefore, he contends that TV narratives must be constructed in such a manner as to regularly seek and attract viewers’ attention (see also Newman 2006: 17). He proposes that TV images exist in a co-present state with viewers, offering familiar and intimate depictions that are easily identifiable, integrated and related to by viewers as representations of their everydayness, but which are nevertheless independent of viewers. Indeed, television programmes keep running whether the television is switched on or not and whether viewers are watching or not.

Ellis offers a valuable insight into broadcast television viewership by highlighting how television viewers and television narratives are interconnected. On the one hand, narrative acts are constructed to draw back viewers after each commercial break (through sounds, dialogues and/or events; see Chapter II). On the other hand, it shows how broadcast TV understands its viewers. First, TV viewers are assumed to be fleeting entities with a short attention span and whose interest in television is simply that of a means of distraction. Therefore, writers for broadcast TV must develop clear and efficient stories based on a quick succession of short ‘beats’ that solicit reactions and retain viewers’ attention. Second, viewers are assumed to be part of the dominant market targeted by TV programmes and images, that of the domestic unit, generally in the form of the family. Yet, his reading of TV viewers as belonging to a domestic setting is problematic for viewers who do not recognise themselves in the representations of everydayness offered by television, as it may limit these viewers’ pleasure in the experience of watching television. Moreover, it does not
take into account the fact that viewers do not necessarily watch television via the TV set.

In contrast to Ellis’ passively active viewers, Graeme Turner contends that viewers can influence television programmes. He argues that ‘[t]elevision producers change aspects of their programmes in response to audience feedback’. For example, ‘characters can be killed off or foregrounded; presenters can be siphoned out of prime time into late night or weekends, or off-air altogether’ (2001b: 6; see also Hanan 2013: 159; Beck 2005; Mayberry 2006). As discussed in Chapter I, this means that television creates a quasi-direct connection between programmes and viewers who have a say in the survival and continuity of a programme. In the case of broadcast TV and basic cable TV, today it is possible to accurately record viewers’ choices of programmes every fifteen minutes (ibid.: 6), therefore to know almost instantly how many people are watching a specific programme and whether they are just zapping through the different channels or if they are interested in what they are watching (insofar as they keep watching the same channel). In addition, the increased use of websites, email address and any social media devoted to a single programme create a platform where viewers can leave comments and suggestions on the latest episodes, as well as discuss with other viewers their favourite shows. For instance, on the webpages dedicated to *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* on the Showtime website, there is a fan forum in which people can discuss the shows; there is also a ‘community’ tag that connects viewers by redirecting them to the pages dedicated to each series on all the major social media platforms. First, these public websites enable professionals involved in the television system to know whether the financial risk they took paid off or to limit their loss if they are proven to have been wrong, by modifying a programme or even cancelling it,
although sometimes storylines cannot be undone. For instance, some of the strongest online viewers’ reactions engendered by *The L Word* came at the end of Season Three when Dana dies following her battle with breast cancer throughout the season. Although she and her writing team believed in the story and told it with ‘great sensitivity and verisimilitude’, Ilene Chaiken acknowledges that it is the one thing ‘the audience never forgave [her and] the one thing [she] maybe would change if [she] could go back and change anything’ (Stack 2017; Showtime 2009). Second, these online platforms also help build fandoms, a perfect example of parasocial relationships with television and TV characters. Fandoms are subcultures composed of fans who share a common interest in one or more programme(s), which exist ‘in the “borderlands” between mass culture and everyday life and that construct [their] own identity and artifacts from resources borrowed from already circulating texts’ (Jenkins 2013: 3; see also, for instance, Hills 2002; Busse and Hellekson 2006: 5-17; Storey 2010: 138-59; Davies 2013: 41; Hanan 2013: 165; Heller 2013: 8).

Fans and fandoms are important for television series because fans devote a lot of time to watching and discussing the latest episodes of their favourite shows online via forums assigned to this effect, in which they share their expectations for upcoming episodes in terms of narrative or character development, for instance. The Internet has thus offered fans an unlimited playground to interact with one another and share their views on their favourite programmes, with literally thousands of websites and personal pages devoted to a particular TV series. This connectivity is even enhanced by the quasi-instantaneous interactivity of the Internet. As Matt Hills notes, ‘fans go online to discuss new episodes immediately after the episode’s transmission time – or even during ad-breaks – perhaps in order to demonstrate the “timeliness” and
responsiveness of their devotion’ (2002: 178). Although series are almost never live broadcast and have often been filmed long before their first broadcast on television, television creates illusions of immediate interactivity, timeliness, liveness that constitute its temporality (see Feuer 1983; Ellis 1992; Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2007; Needham 2009). But more importantly, fans re-watch these TV shows over and over, generally using these repeated re-viewings to focus their attention on details that build the verisimilitude of the on-screen life-world, but which are not necessarily relevant to understanding the plots/subplots. However, these clues give fans the materials they need to construct their own theories and interpretations of the text(s). This multiple re-viewing process ‘profoundly changes the nature of the text-reader relationship’ (Storey 2010: 154; see also Barthes 1974: 16; de Certeau 1988: 169). Storey argues that the constant re-reading of a text ‘shifts the reader’s attention from “what will happen” to “how things happen”, to questions of character relations, narrative themes, the production of social knowledges and discourses’ (ibid.). In other words, through their online discussion and sharing with other viewers, fans appropriate the text and strip it of its origins. The text thus belongs to fans, to the community that discusses and extrapolates on the significance of a specific event in the narrative in relation to a given episode or to an entire series. Additionally, by paying close attention to fictional characters, events and narratives, fans blur the lines between fiction and reality. They create a bridge between fiction and reality by transporting fictional characters/events/narratives into their social life-world and discussing them as though they exist outside their fictional worlds, while simultaneously invading on-screen life-worlds as though these fictional worlds can be inhabited by viewers. As Toby Miller suggests, ‘the active audience is said to be weak at the level of cultural production, but
strong as an interpretative community’ (2001: 77; see also Jenkins 2013: 18; Heller 2013: 8). Thus, through various reading practices (close textual analysis, multiple re-readings) and personal participations in interpretative productions (fanfictions, fan art), fans produce their own cultural creations that exist in parallel to the original texts.

These different perspectives on television viewers demonstrate that there exists a connection between television texts and their viewers but that, as a cultural practice, watching television ‘involves not only “doing it” but “ways of doing it”’ (Lewis 1991: 49). As a result, it is also appropriate to complicate the meaning of television viewers as viewing positions can no longer be solely limited to the in-front-of-the-TV-screen-within-the-domestic-setting-of-the-living-room location (if it ever were). Indeed, the diversification of viewing media engenders a distribution of viewers across different platforms and practices, thereby re-signifying viewing positions and approaches to television as a medium. Therefore, I suggest that discussions of pay cable viewers should consider the specificities of this form of television. As previously mentioned, pay cable differs from broadcast television on several important aspects, including its viewers. Basically, pay cable subscribers voluntarily pay for services that broadcast television does not offer. This means that the number of subscribers is directly linked to consumer satisfaction, as subscribers will cancel their subscriptions if they do not find value in the services they pay for. Pay cable networks thus make it a point of selling to their subscribers something they want to watch and are willing to pay for, something they cannot find elsewhere, a thing that networks market as not ‘regular TV’. This not ‘regular TV’ status, directly derived from ‘the HBO model’ characterised by ‘high quality original programming, in addition to the showing of feature films, adult content, and televised sport’, is closely connected to the notion of
‘quality TV’ (Leverette, Ott and Buckley 2008: 1; Miller 2008: ix; McCabe and Akass 2008; Smith 2011). As McCabe and Akass argue when discussing the HBO brand of ‘quality TV’ (a formula subsequently adopted by Showtime, among others), ‘a quality TV aesthetic plunders already established “high-end” media – theater, European art cinema and painting – to determine and legitimize the new […]’, [while] HBO intensifies speech around such a debate as it institutes aesthetic difference’ (2008: 88).

In short, ‘quality TV’ is a highly advertised (as new and groundbreaking) combination of characteristics belonging to respected media forms that are instead used for TV series. This definition echoes my argument that what ‘quality TV’ in general and my case studies specifically offer to viewers are viewing positions that are situated in-between that of the cinema and broadcast television. Nevertheless, although ‘quality TV’ is difficult to specify in precise terms (see my discussion in Chapter I), critics and theorists participating in the debate on contemporary U.S. television all seem to agree on one point about ‘quality TV’: you know it when you see it.

Ever since the convergence of television and computer, television has become increasingly more interactive, resulting in the emergence of the ‘era of personal television’ (Parks 2004: 135; see also van Kessel 2016: 116). In fact, pay cable channels’ scheduling strategy based on a rotation system and on-demand access, both privilege this interactivity or personal and individual programming, as they enable viewers to access programmes at different times and often from different platforms. The new ‘personal television’ modifies the understanding of television as a familial medium, insofar as it creates an interface between viewers and programmes in which each individual viewer can navigate, select, sort, (re)order and (re)watch any programmes according to his/her preferences and schedule. In short, ‘personal
television’ is an interactive digital connection between viewers and programmes that can be equated to a personal digital television world that exists alongside other viewers’ own personal digital television worlds but remains nonetheless isolated from them. Additionally, this interactive form of television participates in the debate regarding television as a social or solitary activity, in the sense that this viewing practice can hardly be understood as a social activity practiced in the co-presence of family or friends. Instead, ‘personal television’ becomes a site for targeted, single-user use that privileges watching television alone, thereby renegotiating the understanding of television as a domestic medium. In other words, instead of ‘the casual viewer relaxing at home in the midst of the family group’ as described by Ellis (1992: 162), I suggest that pay cable viewers come to occupy betwixt and between positions in regard to television, liminal positions that exist in the threshold between on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds. This liminality enables viewers to travel within narratives to discover new places and indigenous characters, to hear and learn new stories, granting them the experience of ‘being there’ while simultaneously never physically visiting these on-screen locations. In short, television viewers become tourists visiting on-screen life-worlds, a betwixt- and betweenness that is facilitated by the construction of the narrative that helps viewers oscillate between their awareness of being viewers and their immersion in the narrative through their identification with on-screen characters.

1.2. Television viewing and liminality

In anthropology, liminality (or threshold rite) refers to the second of the three stages of the *rites de passage* identified by Arnold Van Gennep, which follows the rites of
separation (or preliminal rites) and precedes the ceremonies of incorporation (or postliminal rites; Van Gennep 1960: 21). These rites of passage engender the passage of an individual or social group from one social or cultural status to another and consists in (physically or metaphorically) crossing a threshold, in which ‘to cross the threshold is to unite oneself with a new world’ (ibid.: 20). In short, the transition rite marks the passage from one socio-cultural status to another, for example, the betrothal rite in which the betrothal stage corresponds to the transition between the states ‘single’ and ‘married’. Yet, the threshold also marks a dissociation between two states: it is the part of a door that separates two rooms and delineates the outside from the inside; or, in the present case, the threshold marks the separation between one life-world and another. Additionally, crossing the threshold is a transitory state that indicates a rupture and a shift between a prior and a subsequent stage, which means that although the duration of the stage varies from one rite to another (ibid.: 11), liminality generally lasts for a limited time.

In relation to television viewing, liminality is a way of watching pay cable television and integrating viewers into its narratives that represents the in-between positions offered to viewers between on-screen life-worlds and their real-life life-worlds. The threshold crossed in this case corresponds to viewers’ entrance into an on-screen life-world. I suggest that liminality is achievable because of the construction of the narrative that is related to the characteristics of the premium channel texts, such as the creative freedom and authorial vision offered to writers, the uninterrupted narrative that eliminates obligatory scheduled commercial breaks and thereby the need to bring back viewers after these interruptions, the personal, interactive and generally solitary viewing habits offered by the on-demand access and rotation-basis schedule, and the
aesthetic of the texts that applies other media’s techniques and forms to their TV texts. As previously mentioned, as the pace of the narrative is not constrained by the same temporal and commercial rules as broadcast/basic cable texts (also modifying the overall flow of the text), writers can take their time to introduce the characters and let the different storylines unfold, by creating moments with no dramatic function (by introducing longer silences and a slower release of information, for instance). This gives viewers more time to integrate information and let them enjoy the on-screen life-world and the various stories without the urgency and abruptness of network texts (see Chapter II). In short, liminality can be seen as a characteristic of queer narratives, one that directly involves viewers and the way they are integrated into the narrative rather than a feature of the texts themselves (as my discussion of the characteristics of queer narratives in Chapter II). Additionally, liminality is also possible because of the technological developments made both in the field of TV/mobile technology screens and in the field of video images. Indeed, high-definition displays, high-definition video images, flat screens, home cinema, all this new equipment enhances the experience of watching television thanks to a better quality of images and sounds, a bigger screen size or better display resolution. Although these screens do not rival the cinema screen, they provide an experience that is closer to that of the cinema compared with any pre-2000s technology. Suffice to watch TV series filmed prior to the 2000s to see the difference in image and sound quality: noise of images (grainy look), low brightness (dull colours), muffled sounds.

The liminal space is a site of connection between viewers and TV texts, in which viewers can participate in the events of the narrative and meet and follow the protagonists who inhabit an on-screen life-world via the TV screen (or other watching
devices) by adopting the perspective of on-screen character(s), while also being aware of their status as viewers and of their adoption of someone else’s perspective (dual identification discussed earlier). As mentioned earlier, liminality is contingent on the showrunners, directors and writers’ deft and intentional construction of the narrative, by developing characters that viewers should enjoy interacting with and using the camera work to provoke and facilitate connections with the on-screen life-world and its inhabitants. Liminality involves that viewers tacitly agree to pay close attention to the TV texts, not simply glance at it from time to time, to follow the storyline, to actively participate in the reading of the texts, to attempt to answer the questions raised or to speculate on the outcomes of certain narrative decisions. Because of this tacit agreement, the liminal space is accessible for as long as viewers respect these watching conditions. Once the agreement is terminated, viewers leave the liminal space and enter the post-liminal space, which corresponds to their real-life life-worlds modulated (positively or negatively) by their watching experience, as active watching implies the individualisation of a text through interpretation and long-term consequences (see Barthes 1974; Rosengren et al. 1976; de Certeau 1988; Wilson 1993; Hills 2002; Hoffner and Buchanan 2005; Busse and Hellekson 2006; Storey 2010; Jenkins 2013).

In short, the liminal space fulfils similar tasks to the ones Ellis understands as specific to cinema spectatorship and the cinematic process:

Entertainment cinema puts the spectator in a particular relation to the enigmas it poses. The spectator is the point of intelligibility of the film, where it coalesces meaning, vision and truth. The film works by constructing and reconstructing a position of relative knowledge and relative vision for the spectator throughout. It perpetually promises to make this vision full, to totalise the various partial visions and scattered knowledge at the end of the film’s projection (1992: 88-9).
Precisely, I propose that the viewing positions offered by the liminal space are positions that use the voyeurism of the cinema spectatorship for television viewership, in which television viewers become tourists visiting unfamiliar/foreign places and meeting the locals while being aware of being viewers.

One important point regarding liminality is that the liminal space is not a fixed or immutable space. It is a transitory space that offers transient and shifting viewing positions that are adopted and discarded as the narrative progresses generally through the work of the camera. In short, the liminal space is a queer space that deliberately combines blurring and separating on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds and characters and viewers in order to renegotiate the division between private and public (or domestic and queer) and to call attention to the social and cultural rules and constraints of both on-screen and real-life life-worlds and highlight the constructedness of normative practices. Indeed, as previously mentioned, queer derives its power from its marginal position, which enables it to stand in opposition to the norm. By doing so, queer acknowledges and performs the authority of the norm. Yet, despite performing its authority, the liminal space does not so much establish rules, laws, customs or conventions as deconstruct them. As Lee Edelman argues, the notion of a queer space in which everything/everyone that is qualified as ‘queer’ in relation to the heteronormative exists together ‘is to presuppose a fantasy’ (1995: 343). Edelman brings forward an important argument when he proposes that queer is not and should not be envisaged as an organised community whose particularities coalesce into a unified and homogenised space. He insists on the elusiveness of queer that encourages its resistance to totalised definition. It is indeed one purpose of queer to disrupt and highlight normative practices that seek to normalise internalised
characteristics as second nature. Therefore, envisaging queer as a homogenised space equates to failing queer theory in its rejection of any forms of normativity. Indeed, if the creation of a queer space is based on a system of exclusion, the rejection of that which is not queer, the same way as heteronormativity, then this system is not so different from a heteronormative one, insofar as it defines its principles and limits in comparison with what has been defined as ‘normal’ and excludes everything that does not fit in this category. It can be argued, then, that the queer space thus created becomes nothing more than another normalised category for which the norm is defined in relation to what should be called ‘queer standards’. Hence, the creation of a queer space, although conducive to social realisation and social visibility, nevertheless testifies to the constraints of categorisation and the pressure to qualify and classify everything and anything that encounters the said queer space.

This reasoning applies to the liminal space envisaged in terms of rules, laws, customs or conventions. The betwixt- and betweeness of the liminal space offers various and varying viewing positions to TV viewers that are not constrained by the rules, laws, customs or conventions of neither life-worlds, to a certain extent.\(^a\) As Turner argues

\[ ^a \text{Indeed, as I argue later in this chapter, viewers’ unrestrictedness is contingent on the connection of the three stages of the rites of passage, which exist together or not at all, and on the limited lifetime of the liminal stage (see Van Gennep 1960: 11). In addition, in relation to the dual identification process of pay cable TV viewers discussed earlier, when viewers are made aware of their viewer status through the camera work and the construction of the narrative, personal factors, such as their identities or personal experiences, may intervene in their engagement and interpretation of the texts. Therefore, queer viewers and straight viewers may relate to and emit judgements about on-screen images and characters in different ways based on their perceptions of these characters/images and of themselves (see my earlier discussion about dual identification and the formation of parasocial relationships).} \]
which may then be reconstructed in novel ways, some of them bizarre to the point of monstrosity [...] Liminality is the domain of the “interesting”, or of the “uncommon sense” (1977: 68).

Turner envisages liminality as the means through which the naturalness of ‘common sense’, which corresponds to the ensemble of social meanings by which the world is organised, can be re-evaluated. When television viewers enter the liminal space, they assume an in-between position: they are neither here nor there but exist in a transient position between their life-worlds and the on-screen life-world. As they are aware that they no longer belong to their own worlds, they are able to appropriate varying subject positions available in the on-screen life-world. As tourists, television viewers discover the different stories, events, locations and meet the locals as the narrative progresses, a journey that is facilitated by the work of the camera that invites viewers to follow in the footsteps of one (or several) character(s) and to adopt temporarily the point of view of the said character(s). As John Urry contends, ‘the tourist is a kind of contemporary pilgrim, seeking authenticity in other “times” and other “places” away from that person’s everyday life’ (2002: 9; see also MacCannell 1976; Strain 2003; Geiger 2011; Stasch 2017). Similarly, as Ellen Strain argues, the tourist gaze is ‘mobile, portable, and even culturally promiscuous’ (2003: 2). In terms of television viewing, this tourist gaze translates into a virtual tourism that allows tourists/television viewers to travel to different places, to different social worlds where they experience ‘being there’, while staying behind the literal window of the screen.

Arguably, using tourism can be problematic insofar as tourism is often paradoxically understood as a means for people to escape their own reality, while in practice this escapism translates as ‘the imposition of tourists’ systems into places they
engage with’ (Stasch 2017: 3). Indeed, tourism is an intrinsically commercial activity that involves ‘market-organized infrastructures of transport and hospitality’ developed specifically for tourists in different destinations that have been ‘actively shaped by host communities and professional mediators to match visitors’ expectations and desires’ (ibid.: 2, 5). In other words, tourists experience these places through their ‘staging’, to borrow MacCannell’s expression (1976: 13), a spectacularisation that usually corresponds to the images tourists are assumed to want to see rather than the reality of the place (and its inhabitants) itself. This implies that these assumed images are usually tourists’ own understanding of the place they are visiting (and the people that inhabit it) that they carry and project on to what they see. Therefore, tourists’ search for ‘authenticity’ may in fact be a ‘staged authenticity’ that MacCannell defines as the way to offer tourists the feeling of being privy to a more authentic (and generally inaccessible) reality of the place they visit. However, first, the commercial dimension of tourism works well with the understanding of television as a commercial medium, even more so with pay cable TV and its subscriber-based model that relies solely on paying subscribers to ensure its survival in a capitalist market (ibid.; see Chapter I). Second, similar to TV audiences, tourists are generally assumed to be heteronormative and therefore to have heteronormative expectations and desires. These expectations and desires are reflected in the images and infrastructures specifically created for them and the various activities marketed as ‘less touristic’ than other options organised by tourism professionals, the same way mainstream television constructs narratives and market them to viewers. Nevertheless, as my discussion of queer narratives argues in Chapter II, the narratives of my case studies follow construction rules that differ from broadcast/basic cable TV narratives. Therefore, this queerness is also reflected in the
images viewers/tourists are offered and in the way they engage with the texts and their characters. Finally, adopting a new approach to tourism studies, a recent stream of tourism research looks into the interactions between tourists and locals, analysing their mutual involvement and ‘the systems of ideas and social relations they create together’ (Stasch 2017: 11). In other words, instead of a one-sided relationship between tourists and locals, anthropologists propose that both participants develop and benefit from this interactional relationship, which brings closer two cultures and allows both participants to experience the other’s culture, despite the potentially inaccurate system of reference one uses to understand the other. As a result, based on the queer theory perspective adopted throughout this thesis and my argument that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand offers its viewers something that is not ‘regular TV’, applied to TV viewers, I suggest that this understanding of tourism fits with my reading of pay cable TV viewers as virtual tourists visiting on-screen life-worlds, meeting the locals and learning from these virtual encounters rather than simply projecting their own social systems on to these on-screen life-worlds and their inhabitants.

Because of the betwixt- and betweenness of the liminal space, television viewers are neither fully outside nor fully part of the on-screen world, they exist in a transitory state in which they can look upon both worlds and be aware of the constraints and rules of both worlds but remain unrestricted by both sets of rules (see footnote 63). As such, the narrative uses liminality as a way to highlight the constructedness of the various elements that compose the ‘natural’ systems of culture, systems that are based on a binary logic. In a general sense, the expression ‘binary logic’ refers to any system of paired terms that are related because of their opposite meaning. Precisely, the system of binary opposites referred to in this work is the gender binary that divides
people into dichotomised gender roles, identities and attributes based on biological sex, and which is then used to justify heteronormativity and the hegemony of heterosexuality. This gender binary generally is at the centre of the debate on the difference of the sexes, in which the biological sex of an individual determines and dictates his/her identity, sexuality, social role within society, body and the type of pleasure and desire s/he has access to, or more accurately is allowed to have access to. One problem with such a two-term system is that one element of the pair is always privileged over the other. For instance, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that ‘in any gender system, female identity or definition is constructed by analogy, supplementarity, or contrast to male, and vice versa’ (1991: 31). In short, gender is inscribed within heteronormativity with only two possibilities (masculine or feminine), that must correlate with the two available biological sexes (male or female) or take the risk of being punished (see also, for instance, Rubin 1975; Rich 1981; Wittig 1981; Cixous and Clément 1986; de Lauretis 1987; Butler 1990, 1993, 1996; Bragg 1999; Tripp 2000). The naturalisation of heteronormativity through the normalisation of heterosexual binaries seeks to prevent any person whose gender does not correspond to both his/her biological sex and sexuality from being allocated a subject position. In the same way, Hélène Cixous proposes that subjectivity is always typically masculine, the feminine representing its negative opposite, that which is not-masculine (Cixous and Clément 1986). For instance, consider the pairings male/female, man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality, masculine/feminine: in these dichotomies, the elements ‘male’, ‘man’, ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘masculine’ are produced within heteronormative society as the stable, normative terms, while
‘female’, ‘woman’, ‘homosexuality’ and ‘feminine’ are the object of various studies, theories and discourses that seek to characterise, qualify and limit them.

Not only does the binary system produce and oppress certain elements, it also takes care of reducing plurality and complexity to a single question, an either/or choice. For example, in the case of sexuality, as Gayle Rubin argues, the identity categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ have been created as heterosexual:

Gender is a socially imposed division of the sexes. It is a product of the social relations of sexuality. Kinship systems rest upon marriage. They therefore transform males and females into “men” and “women”, each an incomplete half which can only find wholeness when united with the other […] Gender is not only an identification with one sex; it also entails that sexual desire be directed toward the other sex. The sexual division of labor is implicated in both aspects of gender – male and female it creates them, and it creates them heterosexual (1975: 179-80).

Rubin understands that the gender/sex distinction is at the service of a sexual difference whose purpose is to reinforce the normativity of heterosexuality and the naturalness of the heterosexual matrix, to borrow Judith Butler’s expression. Hence, on the one hand, heterosexuality is produced and encouraged as the ‘natural’ sexuality.

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64 Butler draws from Monique Wittig’s notion of the ‘heterosexual contract’ (1980) and on Adrienne Rich’s concept of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (1981) to characterise a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality (1990: 151, n. 6). In short, the heterosexual matrix enforces a correlation between gender, sex and sexuality. It is worth noting that the word ‘matrix’ is itself a gendered term that means womb, uterus in Old French, but also refers to the source where something develops, the point of origin, in Latin. Therefore, the expression ‘heterosexual matrix’ refers to an interconnecting network of norms in which gender occupies a privileged position and where female and the feminine are at the origin of the system. In Bodies That Matter (1993a), Butler rejects the term ‘heterosexual matrix’ preferring instead ‘heterosexual hegemony’. Later, she suggests that ‘the heterosexual matrix became a kind of totalizing symbolic’, hence the change for ‘heterosexual hegemony’ that ‘opens the possibility that this is a matrix which is open to rearticulation, which has a kind of malleability’ (1996: 119). In this passage, Butler suggests that she still understands ‘heterosexual hegemony’ as a matrix, therefore against Butler’s lead, I use the expression ‘heterosexual matrix’.
On the other hand, homosexuality exists mainly to remain other, to reinforce the social distinction of heterosexuality.

Given its premise, the system of binary opposites is a vicious circle: the negative term defines and normalises the positive term, which itself needs the negative one to exist and be recognised as the norm. In relation to identity, this vicious circle obscures the intersectionality – ‘the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations’ (McCall 2005: 1771) – of identity and conceals its complexity and multi-dimensionality, in favour of its articulation in reference to a single analytical category (generally biological sex, which subsumes a gender and a sexuality). Nevertheless, from a queer theory perspective, the binary logic is nothing more than a dichotomised segregation that naturalises a division that has been socially, historically and culturally re/produced. Indeed, there are no such things as ‘natural’ binary opposites in the sense that there is nothing ‘natural’ about the opposition between man and woman, male and female or masculinity and femininity. Biologically speaking, human beings (male and female alike) exist on an equal footing, insofar as they are composed of the same cells and originate from the same process of cellular reproduction and division. However, this does not mean that all women and all men are the same and can be reduced to the homogenised identity categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’. Thus, the differentiation between male and female comes from a social and cultural divergence in which boys and girls are brought up, dressed, taught in dissimilar ways that generally privilege male over female. In other words, the compulsory binary logic of the heteronormative system (or any normative systems) simply serves to produce normative identity categories, thereby leaving no space for alternative subjectivities. Conversely, queer theory challenges the
naturalness of binary opposites and creates the possibility of plurality, a plurality also reflected in the various and varying viewing positions offered by the liminal space. This plurality, as opposed to the singular either/or choice of the binary logic creates a space for differences, allowing for the existence of m/any other types of subjectivities that are not articulated in reference to a dichotomy. As Moe Meyer contends, ““queer” signals […] an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts’ (1994: 3). In short, from a queer perspective, the liminal space opens the possibility of variability, alternatives and multiplicity, a space within which viewers access the possibility for different selves that are susceptible to changes and contradictions, which therefore cannot be restricted to binary identity categories.

Consequently, liminality challenges the theory of television as a gendered medium in which the sex, gender and sexuality of TV viewers influences their reception of a text. For instance, discussing gendered television in Television Culture, John Fiske argues that television producers successfully create TV series that are specifically designed for male or female viewers (1997: 179; see also Joyrich 1996; Hermes 2002; Hoffner and Buchanan 2005; Vaughn and Goren 2013; Villarejo 2014). He contends that there are programmes that are typically masculine (action series as masculine narrative) and others that are typically feminine (soap operas as feminine narrative). This gendering of television is noticeable in the way these series represent men and women (and their respective masculinity and femininity), representations that procure television viewers either an example to follow or an ideal to tend towards. Fiske writes:
Women’s view of masculinity, as advanced in soap operas, differs from that produced from the masculine audience. The “good” male in the daytime soaps is caring, nurturing, and verbal. He is prone to making comments like “I don’t care about material wealth or professional success, all I care about is us and our relationship”. He will talk about feelings and people and rarely expresses his masculinity in direct action. Of course he is still decisive, he still has masculine power, but that power is given a “feminine” inflection […] The “macho” characteristics of goal centeredness, assertiveness, and the morality of the strongest that identify the hero in masculine television, tend here to be characteristics of the villain (ibid.: 186).

According to this argument, television manipulates gender depictions to please television viewers and provide a model that reproduces the heteronormative understanding of man and woman in terms of dominant/subordinate, active/passive behaviour. Fiske’s argument that television producers intentionally gender TV series with a specific viewership in mind is a fair point. Nevertheless, this does not mean that every viewer of these TV series belongs to the intended category, especially considering the emergence of ‘quality TV’ series that mix old genres to create new ones (Thompson 1997: 15). As Thompson argues, all ‘quality TV’ shows integrate comedy and tragedy within their narratives. In the case of Queer as Folk and The L Word, they belong to the ‘quality TV’ drama genre, but their narratives also possess soap opera features and depict comic situations, elements that transpire in the various examples I analyse in this work.65

In light of the argument that ‘gender affects the reception not simply of particular programs but of TV as a whole’ (Joyrich 1996: 76; Hoffner and Buchanan

65 Mary Ellen Brown identifies eight characteristics of soap operas: (1) serial form which resists narrative closure; (2) multiple characters and plots; (3) use of time which parallels actual time and implies that the action continues to take place whether we watch it or not; (4) abrupt segmentation between parts; (5) emphasis on dialogue, problem solving, and intimate conversation; (6) many of the male characters portrayed as “sensitive men”; (7) female characters often professional or otherwise powerful in the world outside the home; (8) the home, or some other place which functions as a home, is the setting for the show (1987: 4).
2005; Fiske 1997), I suggest that as a way of watching television, the liminal space generates variability and multiple subjectivities, regardless of the supposedly fixed categories of sex, gender and sexuality. As previously mentioned, from a queer perspective, liminality offers television viewers the possibility of seeing and acknowledging the constructedness of the norms on which both their social life-world and the on-screen social life-world are built. Because of this liminal position, television viewers can forget the impositions and limits of their biological sex and adopt viewing positions that are not defined by it. In short, within the liminal space, the singular either/or choices of the binary system are replaced with a plurality of possibilities. This does not mean that in liminality television viewers are completely unconstrained by the rules of both worlds for, first, the three stages of the rites of passage are connected, they exist together or not at all. Second, the liminal stage has a limited lifetime. Third, by allowing viewers to oscillate between various viewing positions (adopting various characters’ perspectives) and being aware of their status as viewers (formation of parasocial relationships), viewers’ personal factors (for instance, their identities, experiences, background) may intervene in their understanding of on-screen characters/images and their judgements about these characters and about themselves (see footnote 63). Indeed, although liminality possesses the potential to disrupt ‘common sense’, it must also ‘ensur[e] the continuity of proved values and norms’ (Turner 1977: 69). Moreover, as I argue in the Introduction, normative categories are pervasive as they have been socially, culturally and historically re/produced. Yet, using a queer approach, it is possible to expose the constructedness of norms that compose normative categories and to disrupt them. In my example of available viewing positions regardless of the constraints of the
heterosexual matrix, the limit of liminality in this case comes from the fact that although viewers are invited to follow in the footsteps of characters of both sexes and adopt their viewpoints, the categories of sex still exist: characters are still read in relation to the fact that they are biologically male or female (although as I demonstrate in Chapter II, both my case studies draw attention to any fixed normative categories through the construction of their narratives). In addition, viewers’ own understanding of these categories will intercede in these reading of the characters as judgements often have a personal dimension. Hence, at the same time as liminality allows for plurality, it reintroduces the idea of sex categories. Therefore, although liminality possesses the potential to disrupt the norm by highlighting social constructs, it does not erase them: binaries do still exist. However, what the narrative enables television viewers to create through liminality are alternatives to the norm that exist outside and alongside the said norm, where both norms exist concomitantly. Thus, liminality possesses the potential to expose the constructedness of any forms of normativity. I suggest that through liminality, the narrative disrupts and threatens the hegemony of (hetero)normativity by illustrating how norms of identity, gender, sex and sexuality are in fact one possibility among many others. Therefore, the importance of liminality rests on its provision of intermediate viewing positions that enable viewers to recognise the socio-cultural constructedness of their worlds and the on-screen life-world, and of creating various alternative models to replace normative constructs of identity, gender, sex, sexuality and other norms that constitute heteronormativity.
1.2.1. An example of liminality: The case of Ivan

The example of the drag king Ivan (Kelly Lynch) is a good illustration of how liminality functions in *The L Word*. In the narrative Ivan’s transgressive body exists between two states, the performative state of kinging and the heteronormative state of everyday socio-cultural environment, each defined by its own rules. As previously mentioned, a transgressive body is a body that exposes corporeal boundaries by transgressing these very boundaries. In *The L Word*, Ivan is not only a drag king who performs masculinity through his body (pompadour, facial hair, stuffed trousers) and clothing (usually black suit, white shirt) and imitates the masculinity of 1960s cultural icons on specific occasions (fig. 20).

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66 A drag king can be defined as:

A person who identifies as a woman or female who dresses in masculine or gender-marked clothing, makeup, and mannerisms for the purpose of performance. Many drag kings perform by singing, dancing or lip-synching; (2) A person who feels connection to a male or masculine identity while wearing masculine clothing, either in a performance space or in everyday life; (3) A person of any gender identity that identifies with masculine drag “king” performance communities (Stringer 2013).

As this definition emphasises, a drag king is a female who dresses in male clothing to perform and parody masculinity, by copying the cultural meaning of masculinity through the gendering of her body in a style that mimics gestures, clothing, and attitudes that are socially, culturally and historically constructed as typically male (see Butler 1990, 1993b; Halberstam 1998, 2005). Through its parodic act, the drag king demonstrates that masculinity (and by extension all genders) is constructed on the body as well as in clothing. Thus, masculinity can neither be the effect of maleness (the quality of being of the male sex) nor its precursor, nor is it a fundamental quality of male bodies. Instead, masculinity becomes a naturalised attribute of male bodies that simultaneously reinforces the compulsory system of gender binary that contends that gender being the effect of biological sex, a person with male/female sexual organs necessarily expresses masculinity/femininity on his/her body, and compulsory heterosexuality where the sexual difference between men and women is fundamental to the continuity of the heteronormative network. As Butler argues, ‘drag constitutes the mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn and done’ (1993b: 313). In short, through its performance of genders, drag demonstrates the manner in which gender, sex and often sexuality, are signified in and through collective terms.
Instead, his liminality extends to his everyday life where he constructs his body and identity with signifiers that transgress gender binarism. Contrary to Moore and Schilt who argue that Ivan’s gender fluidity is lost when the latter takes his on-stage performance into his everyday life (2009: 168), I suggest that by using Ivan’s liminality, the narrative points out how the performativity of identity is often constructed through the body, as I argue in Chapter II, which is highlighted by the way Ivan is presented. First, Ivan is shown usually referring to himself as ‘he’ rather than ‘she’, although he ‘is happy either way’ (‘Locked Up’ 1.13). Second, viewers are reminded on several occasions that although Ivan never completely erases his female body by surgically altering it, in his daily life he hides his femaleness and continually constructs his body with masculine signifiers that mimic male bodies. Specifically, Ivan’s masculinity is not constructed from a female perspective (as a masculine woman embodying female masculinity), but from a male-identified point of view where his identity comes from his understanding of male masculinity that does not fit
in the male-female binary, but which denotes the fluidity of gender. Viewers’ cue is mainly realised by using Kit’s perspective who interacts with Ivan on several occasions, during which the camera alternates between filming Kit and Ivan’s interactions (positioning viewers outside the scene and aware of being viewers) and watching Ivan through Kit’s eyes and her perspective as she interacts with him (where viewers become Kit by seeing through her eyes and adopting her viewpoint in the scene). As I argue in my discussion of identification, *The L Word* (the same is true for *Queer as Folk*) uses both definitions of identification: identification as immersion and identification as awareness.\(^67\) Therefore, using Ivan’s transgression of gender identity, the narrative illustrates that Ivan goes beyond the parodic act of masculinity that kinging, to borrow Halberstam’s expression, enables within the limits of a specific time and space and relocates his constructed masculinity within the social and cultural environment of his everyday life. Hence, his transgressive body becomes liminal insofar as it exists between the performative state of kinging and the heteronormative state of everyday socio-cultural setting. In the performative state of kinging, Ivan’s body is a female body that is constructed as a male body whose theatricality to perform masculinity is used to challenge the naturalness of gender. By comparison, from a heteronormative perspective, in his everyday socio-cultural environment, Ivan’s body is a female body that is abnormally gendered, a body that displays a problematic masculinity that positions Ivan as a monstrous female (see footnote 54). However, in the betwixt- and betweeness of liminality, Ivan exists outside the male/female binary and opens the possibility that a man can possess a prosthetic masculinity and a female

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\(^{67}\) In fact, when meeting Ivan for the first time after the Kings contest organised at The Planet, Kit has trouble recognising Ivan without his drag king attire as she expects him to look ‘like a woman’, not to continue his performance of masculinity in his daily life.
body. Put differently, through Ivan’s drag performance, the narrative challenges and subverts normative systems that impose demands and regulations on bodies to dress, to move, to live, to love, to behave, to have sex in certain ways that correspond to socially, culturally and historically constructed imperatives.68

Nevertheless, the betwixt and between liminal position of the drag king is threatened when Kit comes across his male paraphernalia (strap-on, wig) while exploring Ivan’s apartment and is directly confronted with Ivan’s female body (fig. 21a and 21b).

![Figure 21 (a and b) Kit is Confronted with Ivan’s Artificial Maleness and Female Body (‘Life, Loss, Leaving’ 2.01)](image)

Arguably, one can wonder whether the male body as performed by white drag kings actually challenges these norms or perpetuate the signifiers of the ‘normal’ male body through their parody. As Biddy Martin argues, ‘parody depends on keeping one term stable, even to do its work of destabilization’ (1994: 112). By parodying masculinity (and often maleness) through a comedic reproduction of masculine signifiers, Ivan can be said to transgress the corporeal limits of the ‘normal’ body to show the constructedness of gender. Nevertheless, because of the nature of transgression and its intercorrelation with limits, by transgressing limits, Ivan’s performed white male body also runs the risk of fixing the terms of masculinity and the ‘normal’ male body.

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Until this scene, the narrative clearly signals that Kit understands Ivan as a man who possesses a female body, although his female body remains hidden under his constructed masculinity. However, in this scene, Kit and viewers are directly brought into visual contact with his biological reality as female through the camera that

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69 It is made especially clear in a scene between Bette and Kit, in which the former worries that Kit does not realise that Ivan is not simply looking for a friend or a business partner but is in fact ‘courting’ her (‘Limb from Limb’ 1.14):

Bette: You want to tell me what you’re doing?
Kit: I’m just taking out the trash.
Bette: No, with her. She’s madly in love with you, you know.
Kit: No, he’s not, we’re friends. He helps me out with stuff.
Bette: That’s because she is in love with you, and she wants to be your husband.
Kit: No, it’s not like that.
Bette: Kit, believe me. You might not be able to read the signals, but they’re there. I saw the way she looks at you. She is fully courting you, old school, and you’re letting her.
Kit: Oh, is that so?
Bette: Yeah, it is.
Kit: Well, thank you for the lessons on the ritual mating habits of indigenous lesbians. Maybe next week, we’ll do butch and femme role playing.

During the conversation Bette and Kit use different pronouns to talk about Ivan: Bette keeps referring to Ivan as ‘she’, alluding to Ivan’s biological sex and ignoring his gender identification as a man, while Kit uses the masculine pronoun ‘he’, referring to Ivan’s gender identity and gender display, although it can be argued that Kit refers to Ivan as ‘he’ out of her attraction to him, purposely forgetting his female body to suit her heterosexuality.
alternates between a POV shot (point of view shot) that shows the scene through Kit’s eyes when she sees his male paraphernalia and a close-up shot on Kit entering Ivan’s apartment and reacting to what she sees (also enabling viewers to react to/interpret what they see)⁷⁰ and Ivan’s reaction to her presence. In the sequence, Ivan’s persona is peeled off and deconstructed: his masculinity is (literally) left lying on the dresser while his female body is out in the open. Ivan’s constructed image is shattered, and his male-identified masculinity is returned to its performed form, exposing the theatricality of his gender identity. In other words, Ivan’s liminal state ends at the moment when the performative state of kinging (his masculinity lying on the dresser) and the heteronormative state of everyday socio-cultural environment (his female body made visible) are simultaneously exposed, thereby illustrating the time limit of liminality. Using the example of Ivan, the narrative shows how liminality functions as a betwixt and between position between two states of being (kinging and heteronormative culture in the case of Ivan or two life-worlds in the case of television viewers) and draws viewers’ attention to the performativity and constructedness of both states without eliminating them.

2. Virtual tourism in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*

Discussing television viewers, the previous section examines liminality and the liminal space theorised as a transient and unstable viewing space that enables pay cable

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⁷⁰ As previously suggested (see footnote 63), viewers’ reaction to Ivan’s exposed femaleness and performed masculinity may differ from Kit’s surprised/shocked reaction due, for instance, to their own understanding of drag king, their potential personal experience of gender transgression or their possible expectation of the scene. These various reactions will allow viewers to emit judgements on Ivan but also on Kit based on their perceptions of the situation mitigated by personal factors.
television viewers to negotiate various and multiple viewing positions that can be adopted and discarded as the narrative progresses. As a queer narrative feature, I suggest that the liminal space is an in-between space between on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds that renegotiates the usual division between the domestic settings of television watching and the abnormality of the television content (Ellis 1992: 166; see also Williams 1990; Adams 1992; Ellis 2000; Spigel and Mann 1992; Fiske 1997; Capsuto 2000; Caughie 2000; Marc 2000; Newcomb 2000; Morley 2004; Bignell and Orlebar 2005; Davis and Needham 2009; Medhurst 2009; Gray and Lotz 2012; Joyrich 2014; Pullen 2016). Additionally, because of its betwixt and betweeness, the liminal space opens the possibility of variability, alternatives and multiplicity.

The following section continues the discussion of liminality and the liminal space with the specific examples of my case studies. I explore how the narratives of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are constructed to integrate viewers by encouraging the creation of a text-viewer bond. To this end, I introduce the concept of heteroflexibility and discuss its significance for the viewing positions of television viewers. I contend that the encouraged text-viewer connection relies on both a character-viewer connection articulated in terms of focalisation and viewers’ awareness of their status as viewers. The reliance on a character’s viewpoint specifically designed to guide television viewers in the narrative facilitates viewers’ entrance into the unknown life-world of both programmes. These ‘guiding’ characters (Justin in *Queer as Folk* and Jenny in *The L Word*) assist the virtual tourism of viewers because both Justin and Jenny occupy the role of the newcomer/tourist who discovers an unknown world simultaneously with viewers, who also occupy a spectator position at times that distances them from their guide. In short, using both POV shot and
(extreme) close-up shots of Justin/Jenny, the narrative encourages viewers to adopt Justin/Jenny’s perspective while also reminding viewers of their viewer status. To illustrate my argument, I examine in detail the manner in which Justin and Jenny are introduced in the narrative and how they are positioned as the ideal anchor point for television viewers.

2.1. The tourist gaze, heteroflexibility and on-screen life-worlds

As discussed in Chapter II, most characters on broadcast, basic and pay cable television are heterosexual, with only a small percentage of LGBTQ characters. The assumption of heterosexuality also extends to television viewers, as society is usually constructed as heteronormative and heterosexuality understood to be the norm. Therefore, non-heterosexualities are considered a deviation from this norm, which has engendered numerous debates about their origin. Between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, discourses of sexology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis established the existence of homosexuality as a ‘natural, biologically rooted, psychological condition’ in which external factors (be it social, cultural, environmental, historical, medical) played no part (Seidman 1996: 14). Early works on sexuality examined homosexuality from an essentialist point of view (for instance, Ulrichs and Westphal’s work on homosexuality),

Most works on sexuality (and what was then referred to as deviant sexual behaviour) date back to the end of the nineteenth century throughout the twentieth century and mainly originate from the German world. Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Carl Otto Friedrich Westphal, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing stand among the most influential authors on the topic of sexuality. Ulrichs’ work in 1868 on same-sex sexual desire introduces the concept of inversion, which he describes in the famous Latin quote ‘anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa’ (a female soul/psyche in a male body; Kennedy 1997: 3; see also Meyerowitz 2002; Greenberg 2007; Halperin 2012). He suggests the term ‘Urnung’ that he considers as a third sex to designate a man with a female psyche who is attracted to other men. In other words, he discusses homosexuality in terms of gender role reversal, where an individual’s gender does not align with his/her

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homosexuality from a degenerationist perspective, labelling homosexuality as a medical condition.\textsuperscript{72} The latter theory prevailed until the emergence of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of homosexuality as a perversion of the sex drive in the early twentieth century, a perversion primarily caused by the stress of modern life.\textsuperscript{73} It is only around the late 1950s that positions on homosexuality changed. Succeeding to both essentialist/degenerationist viewpoint and psychoanalytic theory, the social constructionist perspective emerged. It perceived homosexuality as nothing more than a socially, culturally and historically created sexual category meant to normalise heterosexuality and segregate sexual ‘deviants’ (Weeks 1977; Epstein 1996; McIntosh 1996; Seidman 1996; Foucault 1998b). Since the 1980s, the social constructionist viewpoint has prevailed and has become a central focus in lesbian and gay studies in academia.

\textsuperscript{72}Sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing envisages homosexuality from a degenerationist viewpoint, proposing that homosexuality is a constitutional defect. Therefore, he shifts the approach of homosexuality from a crime against nature to a medical condition. He posits that although ‘aesthetically very repugnant’, the sexual instinct of an invert is ‘from his morbid standpoint, natural’ (1894: 573). In short, Krafft-Ebing postulates that same-sex sexual desire is not a perversion, nor should it be looked upon as a criminal offence, but is a genetic disorder and should be treated as such.

\textsuperscript{73}Freud rejects the idea that homosexuality is either ‘natural’ or congenital. Contrary to the inversion theory, Freud insists on the distinction between ‘sexual aim’ and ‘sexual object’, where the sexual aim represents the ‘act towards which the instinct tends’ while the sexual object designates the ‘person from whom the sexual attraction proceeds’ (Freud 1962: 1-2). In other words, the sexual aim corresponds to an individual’s preferred sexual behaviour (active or passive role, preferred sexual practices), while the sexual object designates the type of partners that engender a sexual desire in an individual. Freud argues that a deviation in the choice of sexual objects is largely responsible for an individual’s homosexuality, a conclusion he justifies by suggesting that most homosexual men seek in their sexual object ‘feminine mental traits’ (in effeminate male prostitutes and young men, for instance) while they ‘retain the mental quality of masculinity’ (ibid.: 10). Thus, in his theory on homosexuality Freud establishes that in the interrelation between sex, gender, and sexuality, a homosexual individual relies on gender identification in his/her attraction to another person, contrary to Ulrichs, Westphal and Krafft-Ebing who suggest that homosexuality is connected with the presence (or absence) of specific sexual organs.
Contrary to societal heteronormative assumptions, my case studies are both based on a different premise. Both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* centre around a group of mostly gay men and lesbians, thereby positioning non-heterosexualities at the centre of the narrative. Nevertheless, in contrast to most previous scenarios depicting LGBTQ characters on TV, the purpose of their narratives does not lie in the revelation of the queer sexuality of a character, neither in the defence of, nor the apology for, the said sexuality. Instead, both series follow the evolution and the changes in the lives, loves, careers, ambitions and friendships of its various protagonists. In both series, the sexuality of most protagonists is stated from the beginning and incorporated in the narrative without further explanation, the way heterosexuality is generally assumed in TV series. Yet, despite their queer content both narratives are constructed to attract all viewers, regardless of their sexuality, to avoid relegating these series to the LGBTQ programming niche in the television market as suggested by Chaiken (2009; see also Hanan 2013). As a result, both narratives begin with the introduction of a character, Justin in *Queer as Folk* and Jenny in *The L Word*, who discovers the on-screen life-world at the same time as viewers. These two characters thus initially occupy the same viewing position as viewers, that of the tourist. Moreover, in addition to occupying the role of the tourist, I suggest that both Justin and Jenny facilitate virtual tourism by serving as a guide for queer and straight viewers in different ways. In the case of queer viewers who are (more) likely to be familiar with LGBTQ issues and cultures, the innocence/ignorance of Justin and Jenny about these topics can bring at the same time a sense of superiority and a sense of nostalgia to viewers. Although queer viewers also occupy the role of the tourist, their previous knowledge of LGBTQ issues and cultures enable them to become tourists in-the-know, who can compare and contrast past
experiences and knowledge with Justin and Jenny’s reactions, which may also trigger (positive or negative) memories about their own first time in this situation and feelings of sympathy/empathy for their guide. In the case of straight viewers who (supposedly) know less about LGBTQ issues and cultures, following in Justin and Jenny’s footsteps by adopting their viewpoint allows them to be immersed in the on-screen life-world and to experience it through various relations to the locals and localities. Moreover, although not from the same perspective, straight viewers can be reminded of past situations of their own where they experienced a similar range of emotions even if the situations differed, in what Ien Ang calls ‘psychological reality’ (1985: 47). As previously argued, this dual identification position (immersion and awareness) is possible because the camera work uses both POV shot and (extreme) close-up shots of Justin/Jenny, alternatively positioning viewers as Justin/Jenny and watching Justin/Jenny. When adopting the perspective of the guide, viewers also adopt their identity and their goals and process information ‘from the character’s perspective […] transform[ing it] into empathic emotions’ (Cohen 2001: 251). Conversely, when being made aware of their viewer status and observing the guide, viewers engage in interpersonal relationships to compare/contrast their understanding/position/knowledge/feelings with the characters, in what Murray Smith, for instance, refers to as alignment (1995, 2010, 2011; see also Blanchet and Vaage 2012: 27). Being aware of their separation from their guide, these interpersonal relationships enable viewers to emit judgement about Justin/Jenny and about themselves.

Furthermore, the guides enable a queering of the gaze of straight viewers, permitting them to experience different desires and emotions and to take pleasure in
same-sex relationships, becoming what Lisa Blackman refers to as ‘the heteroflexible’ (2009: 124, emphasis in original). Blackman defines heteroflexibility as ‘an invitation to straight men and women to open themselves to the possibility of emotional and sexual same-sex relationships’ (ibid.). Heteroflexibility is linked with the re-articulation of subjectivities in relation to contemporary queer discourses that negotiate new ‘sexed subject positions’ according to the understanding of sexuality as ‘unfixed, fluid, temporary’ or even disconnect ‘sexual identity from sexual preference altogether’ (ibid.). Although Blackman limits her reading of heteroflexibility to straight viewers, I suggest that heteroflexibility does not only refer to the subject position of heterosexual viewers but acknowledges the flexibility of all subject viewing positions. Therefore, heteroflexibility can also apply to queer viewers watching a heterosexual sex scene and finding pleasure in it. In short, heteroflexibility is concurrent with my argument that pay cable TV does not so much offer hegemonic viewing positions aimed at domestic (heteronormative) viewers as it does queer viewing positions, by denouncing the constructedness of (hetero)normativity and emphasising the flexibility of the norms that compose it. To clarify things, on the one hand, I envisage liminality as a viewing position that offers viewers in-between positions between on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds. As previously argued, liminality is linked to watching pay cable TV and to the construction of the narrative that is neither constrained by time nor commercial imperatives, which allows writers to create moments with no dramatic function during which viewers have more time to integrate information and let them enjoy the on-screen life-world and the various stories; in addition to the personal, interactive and usually solitary viewing model of on-demand access and rotation-based schedule and the aesthetic of the texts
that uses the voyeurism of cinema spectatorship for television viewership. On the other hand, heteroflexibility specifically applies to my case studies because of their queer content that traditionally would relegate these texts to LGBTQ programming. Heteroflexibility highlights the flexibility of all subject viewing positions and facilitates the renegotiation of viewers’ understanding of sexuality, sexual identities and behaviour, by emphasising how sexuality is not fixed and singular but fluid and multiple.

As previously mentioned, sexuality has been constructed through discourses: the verbalisation and classification of desires and pleasures, the study of the sexed body as the site of expression of sexuality, the criminalisation of sexual practices, all these produce the various discourses on sexuality by defining and delimiting what is ‘natural’ (thus acceptable) and what is contrary to nature (thus pronounced perverse). For instance, the proliferation of discourses on homosexuality and their analyses of homosexual bodies as anomalous have implemented norms of sexuality, behaviour, desire and body (see Foucault 1998b). The sexuality ‘homosexuality’ has produced the identity ‘homosexual’, itself determined in terms of body type, desire, pleasure, but also in terms of sexed bodies. It is indeed noteworthy that discourses on homosexuality not only define ‘normal’ heterosexual practices, they also limit and regulate ‘anomalous’ sexual practices by relating a sexual practice with a specific identity category, which is itself delineated in accordance with the sex of its practitioners (gay men, lesbians). In short, sexuality is a construct that produces (and is produced by) sexed and gendered bodies and that also produces pleasures and desires.
Sexuality is a complex and ambiguous term, as the word has different resonances. In psychoanalysis, for instance, sexuality designates a drive that directs a subject towards a specific object of desire. But sexuality also designates an act (the act of sex), that is directly connected with the material body, where sexuality defines a set of practices that involve sexual organs, erogenous bodily parts and pleasures, practices that are generally articulated in reference to male bodies and pleasure (see Butler 1990: 70; Grosz 1994: xi). Finally, sexuality also refers to identity. On the one hand, sexuality as identity is defined in terms of sexed bodies where the type of pleasure and desire that a person seeks, and has access to, is determined by her/his fe/male body (see, for instance, Dimen 1992: 38). On the other hand, homosexuality and homosexual identity generally overlap, insofar as sexual acts have been (and are still at times) constructed as synonymous with identity and vice versa. As David Halperin argues, identity allows and indeed encourages normal people to categorize the members of a stigmatized population as a single group, not on the basis of their offending behavior but, more neutrally, on the basis of their “identity” – that is, their common membership in a “community” (2012: 73).

Therefore, the disarticulation of identity and sexuality of heteroflexibility helps challenge and denaturalise the heterosexual matrix, the gender binary and any normative categories that re/produce norms based on a biased and dichotomised politics of identity.

It should be noted that although heteroflexibility queers the gaze of viewers and offers viewers the possibility of taking pleasure in watching the on-screen representations of any sexualities, this only influences their experience as viewers, not
their sexual orientation. Indeed, heteroflexibility challenges normative social scripts and preconceived ideas regarding sexual behaviour and practices. Several theorists use scripting theory to discuss sexuality and address how society teaches people what to include in this concept and how sexuality is defined by culturally available sexual scripts. For instance, Gagnon and Simon use the term ‘script’ in their analysis of human sexuality to designate human behaviour and etiquette people are required to learn and to apply in pre-determined situations (2005: 6, 13). Adrienne Rich uses the theory to discuss how society is biased towards compulsory heterosexuality, and instead encourages readers to think about social scripts as political institutions rather than natural predispositions (1981: 9). Therefore, heteroflexibility encourages all viewers to re-articulate their own understanding of sexuality, sexual identities and behaviour by queering their gaze, thereby demonstrating how sexuality is not necessarily fixed and singular but fluid and multiple. As a result, through the development and evolution of Justin and Jenny’s personal lives in the on-screen life-world and their meeting and relation with other protagonists, all viewers can travel in the on-screen life-world, meet the cast and take pleasure in the experience, regardless of their sexuality, as I demonstrate in the next section.

To summarise my theory on pay cable TV and television viewers in relation to *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, liminality is a distinct feature of queer narratives that is directly connected with the integration of viewers into the narrative. Through the liminal space, viewers are enabled to exist in a transitory state of being there and participating in the events of on-screen life-worlds without physically being there and

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74 Although one can argue that both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* demonstrate that sexual orientation need not be limited to hetero- and homo- sexualities. Moreover, both texts can help viewers become aware and/or come to terms with their own queer sexuality.
leaving their own life-worlds. Consequently, they can look upon both on-screen and real-life life-worlds and be aware of the constraints and rules of both worlds but remain unrestricted (to a certain extent, see footnote 63) by both sets of rules. These multiple subject viewing positions are possible because liminality favours the understanding of television viewers as tourists travelling to on-screen life-worlds, visiting localities, meeting the locals and immersing themselves in the cultures represented in on-screen life-worlds. Finally, specifically applied to my case studies, heteroflexibility enables all viewers to experience various queer (as non-, anti-, and contra-normative) desires and emotions and take pleasure in any on-screen sexualities, regardless of the sex, gender and sexuality of both protagonists and viewers.

2.2. The guide as viewers’ proxy

As previously argued, in both Queer as Folk and The L Word, viewers’ entrance in the on-screen life-world is facilitated by the introduction of a new protagonist, who enters and discovers the fictional life-world simultaneously with viewers. Because these protagonists are new to their respective life-world and are introduced to it and its several characters at the same time as viewers, I suggest that these characters operate as a proxy for television viewers. In short, they become a guide whose perspective introduces the on-screen local culture and localities to viewers. From the moment Justin and Jenny are introduced in the narrative, they guide television viewers through a journey into their respective fictional life-world in different ways. For queer viewers who are familiar with same-sex relationships, Justin and Jenny operate as a means of access to the plotline and to the various characters. For straight viewers, however, in
addition to fulfilling the same duties, both protagonists help to queer the tourist gaze of straight viewers while also representing an ideal means of freely indulging their voyeuristic tendency.

2.2.1. *The case of Justin: Queer as Folk*

In ‘Premiere’ 1.01 (*Queer as Folk*), viewers are introduced to 17-year-old Justin when he first appears in the street outside the gay club Babylon. Babylon is a recurring location in the series that occupies a central place in the various protagonists’ lives, and by extension becomes a familiar location for viewers through its repeated on-screen presence (the club features in almost every episode). Babylon is a good example of how on-screen localities shift in parallel with the tourist gaze, from the curiosity of the first visit to a familiar and comfortable place where viewers are as much regular members as on-screen protagonists.75 Yet, before working up the courage to enter Babylon, Justin stands on a street corner and observes his surroundings. His attitude betrays his nervousness, restlessness and overall indecision, which can be explained by the fact that it is Justin’s first visit to Liberty Avenue that night, as viewers learn later in the episode.76 Moreover, Justin’s presentation is constructed to pique viewers’ interest in finding out what will happen to him. After some hesitation, Justin makes up his mind and decides to join in with the crowd. Eventually he meets Brian who invites him to follow him home, an offer Justin is eager to take. Brian drives Justin to his

75 The Planet, a café first owned by Marina and later by Kit, is a similar place in *The L Word*.
76 A semi-fictionalised version of the eponymous avenue located in downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The area used to be a red-light district until its refurbishment in the 1980s to transform it into the cultural district and centre of the arts of the city. In *Queer as Folk*, Liberty Avenue is the central point of the booming gay nightlife area of Pittsburgh with its clubs, bars and animated street life.
apartment, but their night is rapidly interrupted when Brian, accompanied by Justin and Michael, must rush to the hospital where Lindsay is about to give birth to Brian’s son, Gus.77 After the birth of his son, Brian takes Justin home with him despite finding out that he is only 17 years old and against Michael’s strong disapproval.78 Justin loses his virginity to Brian that night. The next day Brian and Michael drive Justin to school where Brian tries to make Justin understand, to no avail, that they will not be seeing each other again. Having discovered where Brian and Michael are meeting up later that day, Justin goes to the same bar where Brian ignores him. Eventually, Justin follows Brian to his apartment where the latter is meeting his latest conquest. After Justin interrupts them, Brian tells him that he is not looking for a relationship and that Justin does not interest him anymore since he already ‘had him’, a declaration that leaves Justin feeling used and rejected and crying on his way home.

Justin’s entrance is the second scene of the first episode of the series and takes place in the street outside the club, while the first scene is set inside Babylon. The episode starts with a panorama of Babylon where the camera flies over the crowd dancing to 80s music,79 before Michael, on voice-over, declares:

The thing you need to know is, it’s all about sex. It’s true. In fact, they say men think about sex every twenty-eight seconds. Of course, that’s straight men. Gay men, it’s every nine. You could be at the supermarket or the Laundromat, or buying a fabulous shirt, when suddenly you find yourself checking out some hot guy. Hotter than the one you saw last weekend or went home with the night before, which explains why we’re all at Babylon at one in the morning instead of at home in bed. But who wants to be at home in bed? Especially alone, when you could be here, knowing that at any moment you might see Him. The most

77 Lindsay has been Brian’s close friend since college. Herself in a partnership with Mel, a lawyer, both Brian and Lindsay decided to have a child together.

78 The age of consent in the State of Pennsylvania is 16 for sex between minors (under 18 years of age), however the age of consent moves up to 18 if one of the partners is 18 or older as the corruption of minors statute applies in this case (HHS 2015).

79 Feel It by The Tamperer Feat. Maya.
beautiful man who ever lived. That is, until tomorrow night (Michael, 1.01 ‘Premiere’).

Unlike the first scene in which Michael talks about gay men and about sex while surrounded by men dancing half-naked (that constitutes the first spoken sentence of the entire series), which precipitates viewers into the life-world of *Queer as Folk*, Justin’s view from the periphery takes viewers a step back. The parallel between these two scenes serves two purposes: first, it sets the tone of the series showing viewers where the narrative is heading and where it will take them if they allow it, before effectively taking them there. Second, it creates a connection between viewers and Justin as both are in a similar position in relation to the narrative (though not necessarily in relation to gay scenes), while offering viewers an advantage over the latter as they already had a brief peep into the life-world Justin is about to enter. Moreover, Justin’s entrance into the narrative establishes Justin as not yet a full participant, but still an outsider, a tourist, just like viewers. By placing viewers and Justin in a comparable situation and in similar conditions regarding the introduction to and integration into the narrative, the narrative encourages the development of an empathetic relation between viewers and Justin, by using viewers’ personal experiences with first-time situations and evoking the emotional experience linked with these situations. Therefore, the location and circumstances of the scene matter less than the various feelings and emotions it arises in viewers. Emphasising this emotional evocation, the camera switches between an eye-level position that places viewers on an equal footing with Justin and offers extreme close-up shots of Justin, and a subjective camera (POV shot) from Justin’s point of view giving a panoramic shot of the scene surrounding him. Extreme close-up shots are traditionally used to
focus on one character to stress his/her importance at this moment in the narrative. Meanwhile, the subjective camera is used to emulate a character’s point of view (Owen 2000). In this case, the extreme close-ups of Justin carry out the identification process as awareness by segregating viewers and Justin and making them aware of their status as viewers, while encouraging viewers to understand Justin’s feelings and emotions by reading his expressions and comparing his reactions to viewers’ in similar situations. It calls on viewers’ perception of Justin in relation to their understanding of themselves. Conversely, the panoramic shot of Liberty Avenue and its clientele from Justin’s viewpoint installs the scene taking place before Justin’s eyes for both Justin and viewers’ benefit (fig. 22a to 22g). In this case, the identification with Justin is one of immersion where viewers become Justin, they temporarily adopt his identity, his goals and his understanding of the on-screen events.

Figure 22 (a to g) Introduction of Justin (‘Premiere’ 1.01)

22a
First, the position of the camera at an eye-level offers viewers an extreme close-up shot on Justin’s face while he takes in his surroundings. Justin watches people and
viewers watch him watching them evolve in their environment. Through the camera, the viewers’ attention is focussed on Justin to establish the connection between the guide and his followers. Viewers are positioned as observers of the scene, specifically they observe Justin’s reactions and emotions as he discovers Liberty Avenue for the first time. Indeed, the extreme close-up shot invites viewers to enter Justin’s personal space, which deepens the connection with Justin because at such a proximity his feelings are intensified and his facial expressions are more apparent, allowing viewers to read Justin’s emotions more easily. The expression on Justin’s face is that of surprise with his mouth slightly open and his gaze fixed on his surroundings.

When Justin observes his environment, the camera switches from an extreme close-up shot to a POV shot, which recreates Justin’s gaze. This camera movement deepens further the connection between Justin and viewers by placing viewers in Justin’s position. Viewers are thus enabled to see what Justin is looking at, in his stead and through his eyes. By taking on Justin’s viewpoint and embodying him, they become part of the scene. This position increases the possibility for viewers to interact with the
locals as they no longer stand on the side looking at Justin who is himself looking at the locals, they are Justin. In the scene, Justin’s outsider position (tourist) to this world is also intensified by the opposition between the crowd that Justin (and viewers) looks at and his isolated position on a corner. Additionally, the difference between the crowd and himself is emphasised by clothing. The group of people he looks at are all wearing similar outfits: colourblock tank tops and jeans/trousers with no pattern and no superposition. By comparison (fig. 22c), Justin stands out with his superposed white t-shirt, blue plaid shirt and dark blue jacket (blue being a cool colour as opposed to the red and orange warm colours of fig. 22b).

22c

The camera shifts again, this time to a close-up shot of Justin. This brings viewers’ attention back to Justin and the emotional turmoil he is currently experiencing. This scene accentuates viewers’ awareness of Justin and focusses on deepening the connection between viewers and Justin. Their curiosity/tourist gaze is replaced by their empathy and sympathy for Justin, who appears frightened. This intense emotion is
highlighted in fig. 22d by the movement of the camera where Justin is standing still while everything around him moves rapidly, creating a blurry effect.

22d
The entirety of this first scene with Justin is characterised by the fact that until he takes a decision, Justin does not move at all. The movements in the scene derives, first, from the camera that moves around him and, second, from the movement in the street (people, cars). Thus, his immobility as opposed to the rapid movement of his environment signals the importance of the present moment: Justin’s decision to stay or leave will affect his immediate future. Either he decides to become part of this rapidly moving world, in which case he will no longer be an outsider, or he decides to stand still and remain an outsider. The position of the camera changes again and the scene is now shot from behind Justin, thereby emphasising Justin’s perspective as an outside observer, which simultaneously re-positions viewers outside the scene waiting for Justin to decide. With Justin standing between viewers and the motion of the streets that symbolises the potential progression of the narrative, this scene emphasises the
significance of Justin’s decision for the continuity of the story, at the same time highlighting his importance both in relation to the narrative and as a guide for viewers.

Next, the camera moves rapidly around Justin at 360°, which creates a dizzying effect on viewers that expresses Justin’s anxiety and his feeling of being overwhelmed. The 360° movement marks the cruciality of the moment: if Justin goes home now, his life stays the same, while if he takes that step, Justin starts a new adventure. Moreover, the dizzying effect of the camera draws attention to the camera movement itself to remind viewers that their presence in the narrative is temporary. This self-conscious act reinforces the betwixt- and betweeness of viewers’ transitory state and calls attention to the performativity of the on-screen life-world, as a means to signal that their subject positions do not necessarily follow the set of rules of the on-screen life-world. Hence, contrary to Justin, viewers are able to shift from one subject position to another, from one character to another in parallel with the narrative (or even leave this on-screen life-world).
The circular movement of the camera stops in one final close-up of Justin to signal that he has made up his mind. For the first time since the beginning of the sequence, Justin moves: he lights up a cigarette and takes his first step to join the crowd of Liberty Avenue.
This decision is represented by an extreme close-up of Justin’s foot symbolically taking his first step into his soon-to-be new home. During the time necessary for Justin to decide whether he wants to stay or leave (fig. 22e to 22g), viewers are offered a dual identification position, which underlines the bond between viewers and Justin. In this scene, viewers never occupy the position of the locals but are always connected to Justin and his position as a tourist visiting/discovering the on-screen life-world. Therefore, even if queer viewers (and perhaps some straight viewers) are familiar with gay scenes such as the ones represented in this sequence, what matters in this scene is to develop the relation between viewers and Justin to ensure viewers’ entrance in the narrative and their interest in continuing watching the programme.

In sum, the work of the camera and the scene’s editing encourage viewers to bond with Justin and empathise and sympathise with him. Throughout this sequence, viewers are led alongside Justin to the gay scene of *Queer as Folk* where both experience the same fears, anxiety and excitement. The relationship that is established from this first moment between viewers and Justin is, I suggest, meant to address all viewers, regardless of sexual orientations. Indeed, the excitement of the unknown as well as the possibility of a first sexual encounter is something that most people have experienced, even though the scene and circumstances might have been different. Conversely, viewers may also recognise a similarity with their own past experiences, thereby potentially deepening their connection with Justin. This sequence is an example of the ‘psychological reality’ advanced by Ang who argues that TV series call on viewers’ emotional connections to past experiences (Ang 1985: 47). As Ang proposes in her discussion of realism and reality in TV series, it is not necessary for *Queer as Folk* to represent a situation within a life-world that corresponds in every
detail to a similar situation in an existing social reality, as psychological reality does not appeal to a specific situation or a special event but to an emotional experience. In the case of Justin, it is the experience of first times: first time going out by himself, first time in Liberty Avenue, first time in a gay bar, first sexual intercourse and the variety of emotions that these experiences trigger. For viewers, the experience is a reminder of their own first times besides being their first view of *Queer as Folk* and their first contact with the different protagonists.

The introduction of Justin is important insofar as he enters *Queer as Folk* as a gay teenager who is looking for other gay men. Therefore, he does not go through the usual script of the teenager’s sexual identity crisis where a protagonist suspects s/he may be gay and is trying to either silence his/her feelings or to come to terms with it before eventually ‘coming out’ to his/her family and friends. Justin’s sexual desire is indeed posited from the start. Instead of creating a storyline whose ultimate revelation is the acknowledgement of his homosexuality, and which often signifies the end of it as well (Warn 2009a: 5), Justin’s storyline starts with him looking for other gay men and meeting Brian. It is only in the next episode (‘Queer, There and Everywhere’ 1.02), when Justin tells his best friend Daphne that he had sex with a man the night before, that the subject of his ‘coming out’ is broached. In the sequence, Justin boasts about the previous night to Daphne, who offers no reaction. Faced with her lack of response, he asks:

Justin: Well? Aren’t you shocked?
Daphne: Not really.
Justin: Oh.
Daphne: Well, I kind of figured that you were... You know. Even though you never told me.
Justin: I’m telling you now.
And the conversation ends there. There is no big reveal, no heartfelt declaration of acceptance from his friend. Justin does not label himself, he does not qualify himself as gay or homosexual or queer; he simply recounts his previous night to Daphne (and to viewers) and both Daphne (and viewers) listen to him. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that where Justin discusses a sexual act, Daphne responds with sexual identity (although she does not directly refer to it and instead uses a vague ‘you know’). By recounting his sexual experience with another man, instead of focussing on his loss of virginity, which would have certainly been the case if he had sex with a woman, it is his gay identity that is addressed: his entire identity (and his entire future sex life) is defined in this very moment by this sexual act. As opposed to the divorce of gay identity and gay sex acts as illustrated in Gay as Blazes for instance, Daphne collapses identity with sexuality in a problematic reduction that classifies Justin into an identity category defined by a normalised system of desires, pleasures and acts consistent with hegemonic discourses of sexuality. Although Queer as Folk centres on gay men and portrays mostly gay characters and despite the greater visibility of LGBTQ people in society, the increasing number of queer images on television and the sexual revolution, there is still the need to make it clear to (straight) viewers that Justin is indeed gay.

2.2.2. The case of Jenny: The L Word

The introduction of Jenny in The L Word is somewhat similar to Justin’s, insofar as she does not know any of the main protagonists and is introduced to them simultaneously with viewers. However, the one difference between Jenny and Justin’s
respective entrances comes from the fact that Jenny is presented at first as a heterosexual character who moves to West Hollywood after her college graduation to live with her boyfriend, Tim. It is only when she meets the couple living next-door (Bette and Tina), who introduce her to Marina to whom Jenny is immediately attracted and with whom she eventually has an affair, that Jenny starts to question her sexual orientation. After graduating from Iowa Jenny sets off to Los Angeles and moves in with Tim. She settles in her new place, which she describes as ‘traditional’, a comment Tim meets with a smile and enigmatically declares: ‘Wait ‘til you get to know it […] It’s just not as traditional as you might think’. She soon understands what Tim meant when she glimpses two women, whom she then thinks are her next-door neighbours Bette and Tina, skinny-dipping in the swimming pool. At that moment, Jenny hides behind the fence and watches the two women have sex (fig. 23a to 23d).

80 But is in reality a friend of the neighbours, Shane McCutcheon with her most recent date.
This scene offers a dual tourist/voyeur role to Jenny. She embodies the tourist as she just arrived in this life-world and she knows nothing about the locals (for instance, she mistakes the couple in the pool for her neighbours), thus she is curious about them. Yet, instead of standing up and making her presence known or leaving them without watching, Jenny crouches behind the fence and observes them. Hence, because of the position of the bamboo fence between Jenny and the object of her gaze, the scene also plays on Jenny’s voyeuristic tendency. In fact, the scene is explicitly voyeuristic, peeping on a moment that is not meant to be witnessed by anyone. With the fence standing between Jenny and the couple in the pool, Jenny can only watch them through the space between the bamboo slats, which frames the perspective of the scene and reinforces the illicitness of Jenny’s watching position. In this moment, viewers are situated on the other side of the fence, watching Jenny watch the two women in the
pool. Neither Jenny nor the couple are aware of being observed, which positions viewers outside the narrative. At the same time, it establishes their connection with Jenny by focussing their attention on her, her position in relation to the unaware couple and her voyeurism. In the first moments of the sequence, the camera focusses viewers’ attention on Jenny rather than the couple in the pool, hierarchising the scene by making Jenny the subject of the scene and the couple the object of the scene. In short, it prioritises viewers’ attention on Jenny first and then on the lesbian couple. Similar to Justin’s first scene, during the sequence, the camera alternates between a subjective perspective (POV shot) that focusses on the lesbian couple and follows Jenny’s standpoint (fig. 23c) and filming Jenny’s reaction to the scene (fig. 23b and 23d).

23b

After focussing on Jenny who hides behind the fence, the camera moves to the other side of the fence, joining Jenny’s watching position. Nevertheless, it keeps focussing
viewers’ attention on Jenny through an extreme close-up shot of her facial expressions. Like the example of Justin in *Queer as Folk*, this extreme proximity invites viewers in Jenny’s personal space, thereby deepening their connection with Jenny. The extreme close-up shot highlights how Jenny is unable to tear her gaze away from the couple. She watches them move around the pool, she adjusts her position to have a better angle, while making sure that she stays hidden and cannot be seen by the lesbian couple. Throughout the beginning of this scene, viewers’ attention is constantly kept on Jenny and her reactions to the couple in the pool, the couple being signalled as participating in this sequence only through the noise coming from the pool.

The camera finally moves from Jenny to the couple. At that moment, viewers are allowed to watch what is happening in the pool, through Jenny’s viewpoint. This is translated by a POV shot of the swimming pool that reproduces Jenny’s perspective
on the scene. The camera is placed directly against the bamboo fence that appears at
the foreground on the image and peeps through the bamboo slats, thereby positioning
viewers in the exact same position as Jenny. Similar to the scene with Justin, viewers
are no longer outside observers excluded from the action, instead they become Jenny.
They can then watch the couple in the pool through her partially obstructed point of
view, which recreates Jenny’s position crouched behind the fence. This hiding (and
hidden) position deepens the connection between viewers and Jenny, because not only
are they secretly looking on a private moment between the lesbian couple who are
unaware of their audience, but they also share this experience with Jenny by
embodying her voyeurism, until she becomes aware of it.

Jenny eventually realises that she is peeping on a private moment that was not meant
for her to see. At this point she stops watching the couple, which simultaneously stops
viewers from watching. Viewers are brought back to focussing on Jenny and her reactions to her voyeurism. Through an extreme close-up shot, viewers are guided to notice her embarrassment at her voyeurism because of the pleasure and curiosity she felt in watching, which may otherwise have gone unnoticed. However, because in this scene viewers are positioned to embody Jenny and reproduce her voyeurism, her embarrassment does not extend to them. As their guide, Jenny simply embarks viewers on her discovery of/peeping on the scene happening behind the fence. Indeed, throughout the scene Jenny stays hidden behind the bamboo fence and focusses on the lesbian couple: she is the voyeur. Therefore, viewers are simply following in Jenny’s footsteps, which enable them to be relieved of any feelings of unease or guilt at their own voyeurism and to instead focus on enjoying watching. Thus, the viewers’ voyeuristic standpoint is in fact a watching standpoint: viewers are watching Jenny watch. They observe Jenny and her behaviour from the outside, while also occupying a voyeur role through Jenny’s embodiment/perspective (which enables them to watch the sex scene in the pool). As the cameras alternate between POV shots (function as a window into the narrative) and extreme close-up shots (focus on Jenny’s expressions and feelings), Jenny offers viewers a dual identification position through a combination of distance and proximity to the narrative. On the one hand, by watching the scene through Jenny’s eyes and thus adopting her position in the sequence, viewers are placed in proximity to the narrative: they are embodying Jenny, looking where she is looking and experiencing what she is experiencing, thereby integrating viewers in the on-screen life-world and allowing them to interact with on-screen characters. On the other hand, the extreme close-up shots of Jenny distance viewers from the narrative by focusing directly on the character to understand her, her reactions, her attitudes and
her evolution, which enable viewers to empathise and sympathise with Jenny and to feel connected to her, while also reminding them of their status as viewers.

In sum, in this scene Jenny opens her gaze and her position to all viewers, regardless of their sex and sexuality. Arguably, Jenny’s voyeurism can be equated to the straight male gaze, for whom ‘lesbian sexuality is sexy’ and represents a straight male fantasy (Capsuto 2000: 332). Jenny indeed objectifies the couple in the pool. The female erotic objectification by the voyeur as subject is at its height, as the object of the gaze is not even aware of being watched. In fact, the only point of view that is not made available for viewers is that of the lesbian couple, who remain unaware of their audience. One can thus denounce the objectification of lesbians as the production of the stereotypical sexual fantasy of heterosexual men. Yet, the voyeur in this scene is not a man who gives in to his sexual fantasy, but a woman, Jenny, whose voyeurism is justified later in the episode as an uninformed curiosity. When Tina meets Jenny on the next day for the first time and tells her that she is trying to get pregnant, Jenny is astounded by the news, innocently (one can say ignorantly) wondering how it is possible as ‘Tim said that [her] and Bette were a couple’. Tina smiles and jestingly answers that, yes they are a couple but that ‘everything still works […] [we] can still have babies’. Because of Jenny’s genuine innocence/ignorance, her voyeurism is purged of its (negative) sexual connotation, thereby rendering it acceptable for viewers to share. As the tourist/voyeur, Jenny enables queer and straight viewers to react differently. Queer (and some straight) viewers may feel a sense of superiority over/sympathy for Jenny because of her innocence/ignorance of LGBTQ issues and cultures, for example, her astonishment over the fact that Tina and Bette can procreate. While straight viewers who may know little about these topics may feel a sense of
relief/empathy for her, as her attitudes and behaviour echo theirs and her questions answer theirs. Therefore, the fact that Jenny is a woman who is introduced as heterosexual and that she can experience pleasure in watching two women have sex, make her the heteroflexible. Jenny becoming the subject of the tourist/voeuristic gaze can be interpreted as the re-appropriation of female desire and the empowerment of female subject position. In short, I propose that Jenny does not so much ‘masculinise’ her position as queer the right to pleasure and desire as not solely limited in terms of sexed and sexual dichotomies.

As previously mentioned, Jenny is introduced as a heterosexual character who, upon meeting Marina, realises that she might not be as straight as she thought she was. In the same episode, the evening after the swimming pool sequence, Jenny asks Tim if their next-door neighbours are a couple as she saw them have sex in the pool (as she has yet to meet Bette and Tina she still believes that the couple she saw was them). Tim tells her that yes, they are a couple but that it must not have been Bette and Tina as they are not the type to have sex in a pool. However, he asks her to describe what she saw as preliminaries for their own intercourse, thereby fully exemplifying her role as the heteroflexible by highlighting the fluidity of desires and pleasures (fig. 24a and 24b).
During the re-enactment scene, viewers are constantly positioned in proximity to either Tim or Jenny through close-up shots, yet they never move to embody either of them. As with the pool scene, viewers are kept close but outside the sex scene. Viewers are invited to enjoy the experience of watching but not yet to participate in the scene itself (which happens later in the series). This gradual integration of viewers through the
camera work suggests a progression of Jenny’s guiding role, emphasising her evolution in the series in parallel with that of viewers, from novice tourists discovering an unknown life-world with unknown cultures and inhabitants to knowing participants integrated into the narrative, thus able to let go of their anchor point. Moreover, Jenny’s re-enactment of the pool scene between a heterosexual couple creates a parallel between the visual pleasure of gay and straight sex, demonstrating how visual pleasure should not be limited to questions of sex and/or sexuality, both the sex and sexuality of those participating in the scene and those watching it. Instead, visual pleasure can be queered to emphasise its fluidity, plurality and flexibility, as opposed to the supposed fixity of identity categories.

In conclusion, as these two scene analyses show, both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* are built to encourage viewers to bond with Justin and Jenny respectively as they enter an unknown life-world. Extreme close-up shots and POV shots are used to make viewers understand and share the personal dimension of these situations for the characters, at the same time encouraging viewers to get involved in the storylines and attached to the protagonists. This does not mean that every single viewer necessarily feels connected to Justin and Jenny as protagonists or empathises and/or sympathises with them. However, both narratives are constructed for viewers to identify Justin and Jenny as a guide and to let themselves be guided by them through the narrative, at least for the first episode(s). The bond created between viewers and the guide is important as it facilitates viewers’ virtual tourism, helping them navigate through the unknown life-world, discover new cultures and meet the locals. Moreover, it helps queer the tourist gaze and enable viewers to themselves become the heteroflexible, by
highlighting the fluidity, flexibility and plurality of visual pleasure, of viewing positions and of identities.

Furthermore, regarding queer representations on television more generally, the viewer-guide bond established in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* is significant, as it does not simply produce queer images that vary from past TV representations. As discussed in Chapter II, the queer images in *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* differ from past invisible depictions of sexuality, the good gay/bad gay dichotomy or the no-kiss rule. What it also does is give these queer representations a personal dimension. By using the TV drama genre, a formula that has proven its efficiency countless times, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* manage to attract a large and diverse viewership that is not limited to LGBTQ targets. As previously mentioned, in addition to its queer audience, many married heterosexual women watched *Queer as Folk* (Goldberg 2015; Kevyn 2006), while Chaiken reveals that she and her writing team wrote *The L Word* to reach a mainstream audience (Showtime 2009), the show attracting male and female viewers between twenty-two and forty-five years old (Beck 2005). Thus, the importance of both series in terms of LGBTQ visibility is connected to the size of their viewership and the diversity of their viewers who follow the stories of the different characters whose lives are intertwined with LGBTQ issues. Using liminality and the relationship established between viewers and Justin/Jenny, whatever happens to Justin/Jenny matters to viewers, as it personally affects Justin/Jenny and the viewers. Therefore, the queer content of the series does not so much define/delimit a target audience as demonstrate that television should not be limited to a domestic medium that caters to a ‘traditional family’ audience and re/produces hegemonic ideologies under the guise of being ‘what people want to see’. Instead, Showtime’s texts offer
various and varying viewing positions that are not limited to sexed and sexual dichotomies and emphasise the flexibility of visual pleasures. Viewers are thus able to participate and take pleasure in these narratives, regardless of their sex, gender and sexuality and those of the characters in the scenes.
CONCLUSION
This thesis adopts a queer theory approach to examine U.S. pay cable television as an example of queer TV that defies (hetero)normativity and advocates for political resistance. To this end, it focusses on a historical moment of U.S. pay cable TV resulting from the growing competitiveness of mass-market television since the 1980s that has led to new ideologies and new industry needs in the 1990s to gain audience share. Using the example of the premium network Showtime and two of its most popular texts, *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, this work analyses what these texts reveal about U.S. pay cable television as a queer object of study. Specifically, it explores how this queerness manifests at the production, textual and reception levels to shift the understanding of television as a domestic medium and a re/producer of mass culture. Examining a specific aspect of pay cable television with respect to the production and broadcast of my case studies on Showtime, each chapter contributes to answering my research questions. Outlining the evolution of the U.S. TV landscape from the late 1940s and early 50s onwards, Chapter I proposes that U.S. television is a complex medium that encompasses various forms of television, each with its own set of characteristics and regulations, and suggests that each form of television (and its products) should be discussed in terms of the system that produces it. In addition, it defines my understanding of ‘queer’ in queer television studies as not limited to the queer content of my case studies, but as the possibility of creating diverse and flexible non-, anti-, and contra- normative positions to produce, circulate and respond to television. This chapter establishes the framework of the thesis by situating my discussion in the context of Showtime and the U.S. TV landscape in relation to the current literature on television studies and queer television studies. As a result, it theorises my reading of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* as queer television narratives.
whose characteristics are connected with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand developed to distinguish its original programming from broadcast ones to gain its own audience share and identifies the research questions on the queerness of pay cable TV addressed in the rest of the work. Specifically, this thesis poses two sets of questions related to the texts and their reception. The first set of questions involves the form and content of my case studies and interrogates what aspects of these texts make them queer narratives, how they affect the construction of the narrative and how they are connected to Showtime and its status as a pay cable network. The second set of questions draws attention to TV reception and TV viewers in the context of pay cable TV and questions how viewers are integrated into the narratives and how it manifests in the texts, what positions viewers are offered to engage with the texts and how these elements can be articulated queerly.

Examining my case studies from a queer perspective at the textual level, Chapter II argues that the creative freedom and authorial vision offered by Showtime to its writing teams affect the construction of these texts, identifying three related features that make these texts queer narratives (use of stereotypes and typical scripts, queer temporality and politicised narratives). These findings emphasise how the construction of the narrative modifies both the pace of the narrative and the flow of television, in turn modifying the overall experience of ‘watching television’ often discussed in relation to broadcast TV in the literature. Instead, my work proposes that my case studies offer a watching experience that is situated between that of ‘traditional’ broadcast TV and the cinema, which connects my analysis with queer television studies located at the intersection between the articulation of the mainstream and its disruption. As a result, it complicates the understanding of television as a
domestic medium that caters to the ‘traditional family’ and re/produces a constructed ideal of what the U.S. ‘traditional family’ reportedly looks like. In particular, my analysis highlights how the absence of temporal and commercial imperatives affects the creative process of Showtime’s writing teams, granting them a greater freedom in their writing. Consequently, my discussion of the creative freedom and authorial vision of Showtime illustrates how Showtime used the second phase of ‘quality TV’ to develop its own branding and offer ‘quality’ original programming unavailable on other forms of TV. As a result, my work shows that the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand enables its writing teams to destabilise mass culture by drawing attention to essentialised norms and ideas (through stereotypes, for instance) and subverting them by highlighting their constructedness. In short, my work shows that instead of re/producing mass culture and complying with norms and ideas promoted by contemporary U.S. society, through its creative process, Showtime queers these norms and ideas to offer critical and political sites of resistance that do not necessarily eliminate these norms and ideas but at least call into question their naturalness.

These challenges to domesticity and the re/production of mass culture are further realised in Chapter III through the analysis of television viewers. Analysing my case studies at the reception level, Chapter III identifies a fourth queer narrative characteristic (liminality) and contends that viewers occupy liminal positions that exist betwixt and between on-screen life-worlds and viewers’ real-life life-worlds, which address viewers as tourists and offer them an integration into the narrative via a dual identification process: immersion and awareness. These findings situate pay cable television viewers in relation to the personal, interactive television that has emerged with the convergence of television and the Internet. Envisaged from this perspective,
my work argues that pay cable television and TV viewers should not be understood in terms of domesticity and the ‘traditional family’, but in terms of individual digital television world and individual screen. As a result, the example of Showtime complicates John Ellis’ definition of broadcast television viewers as passively active viewers and their position in relation to the narrative understood in terms of the glance, proposing instead in-between viewing positions articulated in terms of liminality and heteroflexibility. Therefore, my work suggests that Showtime’s queering of norms and ideas is also achieved through the liminal space envisaged as a queer viewing space that renegotiates the division between private and public or domestic and queer through a dual blurring and separation between on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds and characters and viewers, which simultaneously draws attention to the rules and constraints of both life-worlds and highlights the constructedness of normative practices. Using the dual identification process set out by the construction of the narrative and the camera work, my analysis reveals how viewers are made aware of these normative ideas and practices. Consequently, instead of perpetuating these norms and participating in the re/production of mass culture, by highlighting them and emphasising their constructedness, my case studies disrupt and subvert them.

Focussing on a historical moment of U.S. pay cable TV and the significance of the creation and broadcast of *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in the early 2000s, all these elements participate in the theorisation of U.S. pay cable television as queer TV, in light of the literature on television studies and queer television studies. Situating my analysis at the intersection between the articulation of the mainstream and its disruption, my thesis concludes that the queerness of Showtime’s *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* renegotiates the understanding of television as a domestic medium and a
re/producer of mass culture, rearticulating the meaning of ‘watching television’ in the early 2000s.

My work contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, it offers a new approach to *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. As mentioned in the Introduction, although the subject of various studies, most research on *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* addresses these texts from a representational politics and/or visibility perspective, paying attention to the ways both series manage (or fail) to offer verisimilar and comprehensive representations of LGBTQ identities. Despite some notable exceptions, many studies discuss these series in terms of representational practices and politics and recognise their participation in a larger history of LGBTQ representations on television and cultural and social visibility. However, most disregard the importance of Showtime and the U.S. television landscape with respect to the form, content and reception of these texts. As a result, they fail to address what these queer narratives reveal about Showtime (and pay cable television to a greater extent) and its position regarding the re/production of normative ideas about LGBTQ people and queer lives promoted by U.S. culture and society and other queer images on U.S. television. In contrast, my work discusses *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* in the context of Showtime, to examine how the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand shifts the construction of the narrative to create queer narratives that differ from ‘regular TV’ because of its status as a pay cable TV network. Drawing attention to Showtime’s creative process, my work identifies four narrative characteristics that make these texts queer narratives and are directly connected with the Showtime ‘quality TV’ brand. I suggest that these narrative devices modify the pace of the narrative subsequently changing the flow of the texts, which lead to a watching experience that is situated in-
between that of television and the cinema. Consequently, this approach contributes to the discussion of ‘quality TV’ that suggests that ‘quality TV’ texts mix genres and use features belonging to other media forms for TV texts, to produce texts that are considered as not ‘regular TV’. My discussion argues that Showtime collapses different understandings of ‘quality TV’ to create its own ‘quality TV’ brand, producing texts that combine cinematographic elements with televisual ones and offering viewers viewing positions that are in-between that of television and the cinema.

Second, my thesis contributes to the literature on queer television studies through my theorisation of U.S. pay cable TV as queer TV. Specifically, my literature review of television studies and queer television studies demonstrates that U.S. television is usually addressed as one institution regardless of its various systems of television. Conversely, I suggest that the complexity of the television medium warrants the distinction between the various forms of television that characterise the current U.S. television landscape and proposes that each form of television (and its products) be addressed with respect to the system to which it belongs according to its specific features. From this perspective, my work demonstrates how Showtime shifts the meaning of television from a domestic medium purportedly catering to the ‘traditional family’ to a cultural medium that is better thought of in terms of personal, interactive television and individual screen. By acknowledging the complexity of U.S. television and focussing on pay cable TV’s features (creative freedom and authorial vision, lack of commercial and temporal imperatives, personal, interactive and solitary viewing habits of on-demand access and rotation-basis schedule, and the aesthetic of the texts that applies the techniques and forms of other media to its texts), my discussion
complicates the understanding of TV viewers as passively active and glancing at the
screen from time to time. Instead, it suggests a reading of pay cable TV viewers in
terms of liminality and heteroflexibility, contending that the construction of the
narrative and the camera work give viewers access to a dual identification process that
offers them viewing positions that are situated in-between that of television
(articulated in terms of the glance) and that of the cinema (articulated in terms of the
gaze). As a result, my analysis proposes an alternative perspective to television
viewership that queers the viewers’ gaze, drawing their attention to the
constructedness of both on-screen life-worlds and real-life life-worlds.

Despite its contributions, my research has some limitations. First, as I argue in
Chapter I, television is a hybrid, ever evolving object of study and a cultural practice
with temporal, technological and regulatory aspects that are culture-specific. In
addition, my discussion is situated in a historical moment of pay cable TV resulting
from the growing competitiveness of mass-market television since in the 1980s and
the emergence of the second phase of ‘quality TV’ in the 1990s, making my queer
television model a historical model of TV consumption subject to evolution.
Therefore, analysing the evolution of this model with more recent texts may have
theoretical and practical significance for ‘quality TV’ texts in light of the criticism that
in many recent pay cable TV texts, queer characters have resumed their supporting
roles, with some notable exceptions (see Introduction). Second, my case studies were
written before some major legal changes to LGBTQ rights and status took place in the
U.S. (for instance, the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2015 or the repeal of
DADT in 2010 and DOMA in 2013). As my discussion illustrates, some of these issues
are integrated and addressed in the narratives. Therefore, it may be interesting to see
whether/how these changes affect the narrative and whether/how they are integrated into the plot(s). Analysing post-2010 texts produced and broadcast on pay cable TV networks may offer an answer to these questions. *Looking*, broadcast on HBO, and the reboot of *The L Word*, in the works at Showtime, may provide good examples to examine if these socio-political changes have an effect on pay cable TV narratives and how writing teams negotiate these changes. Third, although I broach the topic of streaming media several times throughout my thesis as another example of personal, interactive television, my work focusses exclusively on pay cable TV texts. Hence, exploring whether/how streaming media and their texts (such as *Orange is the New Black, Sense8* or *Transparent*) can be thought of as queer TV may also contribute to queer television studies. Moreover, identifying the characteristics of streaming media texts and examining their writing process may further complicate the understanding of the domesticity of television and its re/production of mass culture and establish an alternative model of TV consumption. Fourth, my thesis focusses on one-hour pay cable TV dramas representing LGBTQ identities and queer lives. It may be interesting to look at other genres and formats of pay cable TV (such as sitcom, reality TV or comedy) to analyse whether/how the queer narrative features discussed here apply to other genres and formats: if yes, how they are integrated and used in the narratives; if no, why and what features (if any) are used instead. Finally, as Tony Kelso suggests, some basic cable networks have started to imitate pay cable TV networks’ formula by limiting the number of episodes per season or offering more controversial/explicit content (2008: 56). Therefore, conducting a comparative analysis of the narratives of basic cable texts (such as *The New Normal*, broadcast on NBC, or *The Fosters*,
broadcast on Freeform, both depicting queer content) and pay cable texts may further contribute to the literature on queer television studies.


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**TV guide**


*Boy Meets Boy* (Evolution Film & Tape/Bravo Networks/National Broadcasting Company, 2003)

*Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (Mutant Enemy Inc./WB, 1997-2003)

*Cagney and Lacey* (CBS/Filmways Pictures/Orion Television, 1981-1988)

*Dawson's Creek* (Columbia TriStar Television Inc./WB, 1998-2003)


*Friends* (Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions/WB, 1994-2004)


*Grey’s Anatomy* (ShondaLand/Mark Gordon Company/The Touchstone Television/ABC Studios, 2005-present)

*Hill Street Blues* (MTM Enterprises, 1981-1987)


*Modern Family* (Levitan/Lloyd/20th Century Fox Television/Steven Levitan Productions/Picador Productions, 2009-present)


*Orange is the New Black* (Tilted Productions/Lionsgate Television, 2013-present)

*Queer as Folk* (Cowslip Productions/Showtime Networks Inc., 2000-2005)

*Queer as Folk UK* (Channel 4 Entertainment, 1999-2000)

*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo Original Production/Scout Production, 2003-2007)

*Scandal* (ShondaLand/ABC Studios, 2012-present)
Sense8 (Anarchos Productions/Georgeville Television/Javelin Productions/Motion Picture Capital/Studio JMS/Unpronounceable Productions, 2015-2018)

Sex and the City (Sex and the City Productions/HBO, 1998-2004)

Six Feet Under (HBO/The Greenblatt Janollari Studio/Actual Size Films/Actual Size Productions, 2001-2005)

The Fosters (Blazing Elm Entertainment/Nitelite Entertainment/Nuyorican Productions/Prodco, 2013-present)

The L Word (Dufferin Gate Productions/Showtime Networks Inc., 2004-2009)

The New Normal (Ali Adler is Here Productions/Ryan Murphy Productions/20th Century Fox Television, 2012-2013)

The Real L Word (Magical Elves Productions/Showtime Networks, 2010-2012)

The Wire (Blown Deadline Productions/HBO, 2002-2008)

The X-Files (Ten Thirteen Productions/20th Century Fox Television/X-F Productions, 1993-2002; 2016-present)

Transparent (Picrow/Amazon Studios, 2014-present)


Will & Grace (KoMut Entertainment/NBC, 1998-2006)
APPENDIX
**Queer as Folk regular cast**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben Bruckner</td>
<td>Robert Gant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daphne Chanders</td>
<td>Makyla Smith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vic Grassi</td>
<td>Jack Wetherall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emmett Honeycutt</td>
<td>Peter Paige</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl Horvath</td>
<td>Peter MacNeill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Kinney</td>
<td>Gale Harold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie Marcus</td>
<td>Michelle Clunie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James ‘Hunter’ Montgomery</td>
<td>Harris Allan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie Novotny</td>
<td>Sharon Gless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Novotny</td>
<td>Hal Sparks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay Peterson</td>
<td>Thea Gill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted Schmidt</td>
<td>Scott Lowell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Taylor</td>
<td>Sherry Miller</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin Taylor</td>
<td>Randy Harrison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake Wyzecki</td>
<td>Dean Armstrong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The L Word regular cast

Dana Fairbanks  Erin Daniels
Marina Ferrer  Karina Lombard
Tim Haspel  Eric Mabius
Tina Kennard  Laurel Holloman
Phyllis Kroll  Cybill Shepherd
Jodi Lerner  Marlee Matlin
Shane McCutcheon  Katherine Moennig
Angus Partridge  Dallas Roberts
Helena Peabody  Rachel Shelley
Lara Perkins  Lauren Lee Smith
Carmen de la Pica Morales  Sarah Shahi
Alice Pieszecki  Leisha Hailey
Bette Porter  Jennifer Beals
Kit Porter  Pam Grier
Jenny Schecter  Mia Kirshner
Niki Stevens  Kate French
Moira/Max Sweeney  Daniela Sea
Eva ‘Papi’ Torres  Janina Gavankar
Mark Wayland  Eric Lively
Tasha Williams  Rose Rollins