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An Irish audience negotiates lesbian visibility in The L Word: "But it's not a perfect world and not everyone looks like that"[1]

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Background

The L Word is a drama series revolving around the lives and loves of a group of lesbian and bisexual women in LA, executively produced by Irene Chaiken with filming locations in West Hollywood, California, and Vancouver[2]. The season one cast comprises of Bette (Jennifer Beals) a museum director; Tina (Laurel Holoman) a social worker, Jenny (Mia Kirshner) a writer, Shane (Katherine Moenning) a hairstylist, Alice (Leisha Hailey) journalist, Dana (Erin Daniels) a professional Tennis player, Marina (Karina Lombard) owner of the Planet Cafe, Kit (Pam Grier) a musician/club owner. Of the eight member season one cast Leisha Hailey (Alice) is the only out lesbian. The series began tentatively in 2003 with Showtime[3] running a short promo for its new lesbian drama before

[1] An earlier version of this article was presented at the SAI postgraduate conference Trinity College Dublin, 8th November 2008, also at Lesbian Lives XVI 'Representations of lesbian in Art, Culture and the Media', UCD 14th February 2009.

[2] Chaiken originally pitched the idea for a lesbian ensemble drama even before the original *Queer as folk* aired in the United States; while Showtime were intrigued nobody at that time was quite ready to do a lesbian show. After Showtime's success with the American version of *Queer as Folk,* the atmosphere toward gay themed shows changed and in that environment Ilene Chaiken pitched her idea to another Showtime executive - this time with success. One difference between The *L Word* and other gay-themed shows is that the main people involved behind the scenes are all lesbians: Irene Chaiken; Rose Troche who directed the pilot; Kathy Greenberg and Michelle Abbott who are producers and collaborated on the script with Chaiken. Interviews - http://www.lwordonline.com

[3] Showtime Networks Inc (SNI) a subsidiary of the CBS Corporation owns and operates the premium television network SHOWTIME® - www.sho.com.

episodes of *Queer as folk*[4]. Originally titled "Earthlings" the show's tagline in the United States was: "Same Sex Different City"[5]. Now in its sixth and final season, the popularity of *The L Word* has been immense[6]. Its main stream appeal, and the community created by the show's fans, has caused a new media frenzy. DVD sales, merchandising, as well as advertising opportunities went through the roof. Websites and internet forums proliferated, for example - www.sho.com (Showtime's own site); afterellen.com; and theLwordonline.com.

The series has provoked intense debate and polarised opinions as evidenced by the contrasting reviews published after the show aired in the US (Huff 2003, McCroy 2003). Much of the criticism centres, in particular, around perceived dissimilarities between *The L Word's* representations of lesbian lives and their lived material experiences. The discourse surrounding lesbian visibility has, up until recently, been one of denial and erasure. Herman (2005) argues that until fairly recently 'out' lesbians and popular television was a contradiction in terms (Herman 2005, p.9). Research, carried out in 2006 on behalf of Stonewall into BBC programming, found that lesbians are much less visible on television than gay men. Where gender was specified during a reference to gay sexuality, 82 percent were about gay men (Cowan and Valentine 2006). *The L Word,* as the first lesbian drama series bears an unbearable representational burden. However this does not mean it should escape critical examination. Does *The L Word* present radical visibility of lesbians or palatable presentation? D'Erasmo (2004) suggests that "Visibility is a tricky thing: is someone visible when you can point

[4] Queer as folk American and Canadian television series produced by Showtime and Temple Street productions based on a British series of the same name created by Russell T Davies. The series follows the lives of five gay men living in Pittsburgh. http://www.sho.com/site/queer/production.do

[5] Referring to popular HBO series, *Sex In The City* (Curve Magazine 2000).

[6] As a product of Showtime *The L Word* has aired in over 51 different countries (Oz and Slicey 2003).

them out in a crowd, or when you understand what her life feels like to her?" (cited in Akass and McCabe 2006, p. xxvi). Clearly increased visibility does not necessarily equate with social acceptance.

The following article is based on qualitative research I undertook for my FYP (final year project for my undergraduate degree) in an attempt to achieve insight into how *The L Word,* a US lesbian drama, was received by a lesbian audience in Ireland and how this representation impacted on their sense of self. This small-scale research project was impacted by limitations of time, geographical location and access and a snowball sampling method was selected to recruit the participants[7]. The starting point for the snowball with me the researcher was significant as it created particular boundaries and exclusions[8]. My sample consisted of white, able-bodied lesbians ranging in age from late twenties to early forties all presently living in Limerick city. All participants were given pseudonyms for the purpose of this research paper. This was not intended as a representative sample of lesbians in Ireland, rather, an exploration of a specific lesbian audience's responses to *The L Word*. Gray (2006) suggests that in a small-scale study respondents should be identified as those who are "information rich" (have direct experience of the phenomena to be explored) and the potential that exists to gather rich data from a very small number of interviews (2006, p. 101). Utilising friendship networks entailed that my 'friends', knew and trusted me and this rapport was very important especially

[7] This 'snowball sampling' has been described, by Browne (2005), as a means by which a researcher can gain access to individuals who live outside the boundaries of heterosexuality. It is acknowledged that this process does have some methodological flaws. In that, each interviewee is in some way connected to the one before and this has the potential to generate an unrepresentative and usually homogenous sample.

[8] My social networks and friendships revolve around access to particular social spaces (straight and gay pubs and nightclubs), sport and leisure activities, limitations for my sample entail for example, as Butler (1999) argues that disabled lesbians and gay men can be excluded from gay social settings and nightclubs (Butler cited in Browne 2005).

when participants are wary of revealing details about their (personal) lives to strangers. I interviewed a total of eight women. The interviews for the most part lasted 45 minutes and took place in the homes of the interviewees.

In what follows I will explore some of the themes that emerged from the interview data: Pleasure, Talking point/visibility, Representation/Invisibility, Criticism/Reflexivity.

Pleasure

The L Word provides lesbian audiences with an unprecedented opportunity to populate and dominate a television drama. Film theory argues that the pleasure derived, from the act of viewing can be understood as 'scopophilic[9]' (Wilton 1995, p.153). As a result some would argue that watching *The L Word* is an immense turn on for many lesbian viewers. An indication of this was found in the response of one of the interviewees to the question of "what would you like to see more of in *The L Word?"* - "gratuitous sex" was the reply. Lesbians finally have their own drama on television which portrays more than chaste kisses and lingering glances between women. The pleasure of viewing is not only scopophilic but also revolves around seeing oneself represented in abundance. Moreover this involves: not having to 'read against the grain'; imagining plot lines that never get played out; viewing scenarios where the girl actually does get the girl. The following interviewee responses indicate there is vast pleasure in the visibility *The L Word* brings:

> *"... It's a nice change to be I suppose in some way represented in a programme on telly*" (Mairéad)
> "*It's about lesbians!*" (Orfhlaith)

[9] 'Scopophilic' obtaining pleasure of a sexual kind from the act of looking. Commentators disagree as to whether or not a lesbian cinematic gaze is possible whether it disrupts or merely reinforces the hegemony of phallocentrism.

> *"...I suppose having something that I identify with personally on the television. I like it because it is well produced, I think it's sexy; it has good storylines*" (Ailís)

However one has to be mindful of the fact that while *The L Word* is making history. It is however constrained by the conventions and rules for lesbians appearing on television. As one of the interviewees cautions:

> "*...it's the only lesbian drama that's on at the moment so you can't compare it to anything else, so therefore we watch it*." (Gráinne)

The point is well made that there is nothing to compare it to and so starved of lesbian visibility in the mainstream, it might be argued that a lesbian audience will watch anything with lesbian content. The hard won nature of contemporary lesbian visibility and the relatively precarious position occupied by lesbians as opposed to gay men, means as Fuss (2000) argues that lesbians have more to lose in relinquishing a 'visible' lesbian position before it has emerged (cited in Farquhar 2000, p.220). The importance of this visibility is illustrated by the interviewees' responses:

> "*it's good for both gay and non-gay people to watch this programme and see that life is the same, you know for both sets of people, you know, that really you see every single programme on TV and it's non-gay and you have to sit there and watch, well you don't have to, but you sit there and you watch it and then you have this L Word coming on and you still have people who are not gay and they are watching it and they are enjoying it*" (Eilís)

> "*...I think it is important. I think any bit of publicity is important because there are there are so many negative opinions and attitudes towards something that is not seen to be normal. So anything that can normalise is good. And I think that the more that is shown just probably makes it more acceptable to somebody, do you know what I mean. Just*

> *shows you as these people living normal lives just doing normal things*" (Teamhair)

The dominant discourse that lesbians are just like everybody else is very apparent here. However, in our heteronormative society life is far from 'normal' for lesbians when you scratch the surface. Contrary to the message that *The L Word* might send out, 'normality' needs to be questioned and ultimately revised.

Talking Point/Visibility

Warn (2006) discusses the sense of community that *The L Word* has created both on and off the screen. How, for many, consuming *The L Word* is as much about discussing the show with friends as it is actually about watching the episodes. This can be taken a step further in that the series has enabled those 'tea-break' conversations to tentatively bridge the straight/gay divide, whether at the office, socially or with other family members. As one interviewee outlines:

> "*... And it was even my sister who was saying to me that there was this great programme on called the L word, my sister who is straight...eh but she actually enjoyed it and she got a great kick out of it and she thought the storylines were good. I think it's good; it just sort of became a talking point*" (Meadhbh)

The L Word, as Warn (2006) suggests, is a fertile ground for a long-overdue conversation about issues important to lesbian and bisexual women, as the interviewees' responses attest to it is also enabling other conversations between gay and straight women and this can only be seen as a positive step. For lesbians (and gay men) living in a culture which is homophobic, at times to the point of physical violence, passing (as heterosexual) is a survival strategy that many must choose. While much has improved and equality legislation is

present[10] - for the baby dyke (young or recently out lesbian) or the woman 'coming out' later in life - what she must deal with is her own invisibility (Wilton 1995, p.121). However, the presence of *The L Word* counters this invisibility. This mainstream presence was acknowledged as significant by many of the interviewees as indicated in the following responses:

> "*I think in general it's brought mainstream entertainment of a lesbian nature to the wider public, I don't think it just has lesbian viewers and I think that's good. I think that's very powerful, that somebody coming out or somebody just can sit down and see romance happening, lives happening in a soap opera kind of format. Personally what has it done for me, I think it's focused on a lot of issues that would happen in a lot of people's lives*" (Ailís)

> "*...do you know what is nice to see, is a show where the gay characters stay that is what the L Word gives us. Gay people live in everybody's communities and they are just normal people*" *(Meadbh)*

The impact of this landmark visibility, however, it can be argued here in Ireland was somewhat diluted where *The L Word* was targeted at and advertised as viewing for "Boys night" here on channel 6[11] (at ten pm on a Friday night). The mainstream discourse regarding lesbian sexuality prevailed (lesbians as heterosexual male fantasy). The implication being that the lesbians represented

[10] Equal Status Acts 2000 and 2004 - equality.ie

[11] Channel 6 (also marketed simply as Six), is an Irish television service that began broadcasting on 30 March 2006. The channel targets the under-35 age bracket and airs a mix of foreign made and in house programming. It is the sixth national station to be launched in Ireland after RTÉ One, RTÉ Two, TV3, TG4 and City Channel. Around 80% of homes have access to Channel 6 through a variety of platforms. These include the cable systems owned by NTL in Dublin, Galway, and Waterford, as well as the nationwide Chorus digital platform, and some of Chorus' analogue platform, including Cork, Limerick and Tralee. In July 2008, the channel's owners accepted a takeover bid from rival broadcaster TV3 and the channel was rebranded as 3e on the 5th January 2009.

in the show are sexually available to men refusing any potential threat or disruption to the heterosexual status quo.

Representation/Invisibility

When individuals or groups are not represented in our culture or society and, by extension in the media, they can feel socially dislocated and suffer as D'Erasmo (2004) argues "the consequences of living in a representational desert" (cited in Akass and McCabe 2006, p. xxvi). The interviewees acknowledge the significance and impact of *The L Word* and are quite vociferous in their opinions about the limited lesbian representation offered in the show:

> "*... Yes, not represented by the characters, but represented by the issues that come up*" (Teamhair)

> "*...it all looks lovely in a perfect world, but it's not a perfect world and not everyone looks like that*" (Orfhlaith)

However, *The L Word's* narrow portrayal (while significant as lesbians on mainstream television) is problematic as Dow (2000) suggests what gay visibility can be is hugely regulated. One of the interviewee's reflects on the meaning of the visibility that *The L Word* brings:

> "*...I suppose just to see lesbians portrayed on screen, maybe not in a very positive light at times but other times quite positive and to see it as the equivalent as a straight drama or a straight film*" (Grainne)

While it might be argued that this first show is breaking all the rules by providing lesbian visibility, the question still needs to be posed as to why this particular representation is limited to portraying them as femme, middle-class professionals. One of the interviewees captures the conundrum quite eloquently when she says:

> "*...but what is an accurate picture do you know, the lesbian and gay community is very diverse community and I think by*

> *saying either yes or no you are actually pigeon holing an entire bunch of people into one thing, so like it presents loads of different stories and yeah all the people may all be thin but that is how TV is, it's not just because it's a lesbian programme, I think it's just stories about people's lives*" (Caitlín)

The dilemma of visibility, as the interviewee's response indicates, is: that the pleasure of viewing is countered at times by the narrow representation.

Cultural invisibility involves not seeing ones sexual identity, lifestyle, or the experiences and needs associated with that identity represented in the public sphere. Inness (1997 cited in Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006, p.45) writes about the image of lesbians in popular women's magazines "viewers are given a fantasy image of lesbians, which is as unrealistic as the image that all lesbians are ugly". It is argued that post-lesbian scholarly perspectives exhibit anxieties about identity and representation. There is a perceived need to separate lesbian and feminist identities. It is interesting to note as Wolfe and Roripaugh (2006) point out that these former embodiments of lesbian-feminist identities are the ones frequently caricatured and depicted as negative stereotypes in the mainstream media (ibid p.46). Two of the interviewees felt it important to distance themselves from what they considered negative stereotypes:

> "*...because if you are turning on the telly to look at butch, probably portrayed as biker women with checked shirts and skin tight haircuts I would find it unappealing*" (Meadbh)

> "*... I'd expected it to be, like, I don't know like stereotypical lesbian life like really dykey and baggy clothes*" (Caitlín)

However, it must be remembered the 'butch' lesbian is not only a stereotype but also a form of lesbian. Beirne (2006) argues that in *The L Word* the visible lesbian subject, the 'mannish lesbian' of modernity, has been replaced with a

more marketable 'lipstick lesbian', and the marked lesbian body is at times expressly disavowed. Critical reflection is needed and we need to be aware why we consider certain images appealing. Aston (1996 cited in Wolfe and Roripaugh 2006, p.47) argues that "the reason for post-lesbianism's current popularity with the mainstream media lies in the fact that it doesn't look or act any differently from other forms of accepted femininity". *The L Word's* emphasis on generating positive images of lesbians that are palatable for both lesbians (who it can be argued may internalise the hegemonic societal messages about acceptable femininity) and mainstream viewers has resulted in a constricted lesbian representation and a failure to really engage with female masculinity. Halberstam's (1998) analysis of cinematic conventions regulating lesbian representation in the eighties cinema raises a similar point when she observed that "the butch character is played as a shadow of her former self" (Halberstam 1998, p. 217). It can be argued that Katherine Moennig's character (Shane) is a (re)presentation of the 'butch', her presentation I would argue reflects a more androgynous or fluid identity in comparison with the rest of the characters but ultimately reads visually as feminine.

Criticism / Reflexivity

The L Word's (re) presentation I would argue is totally consistent with the television industry's emphasis on conventional femininity and its portrayal of lesbians as non-threatening ready to be consumed by some imagined mainstream audience. Beirne (2006) suggests that the growth in images of "lipstick lesbianism" can be seen as a product of mainstream media attention which inevitably favours a "consumable lesbian". Similarly Dow (2000) writing about Ellen coming out on mainstream television in 1997, "Ellen was a sitcom about a lesbian that was largely geared toward the comfort of heterosexuals" (Dow 2000, p.130). This point has not gone unnoticed by the interviewees as illustrated by the following responses:

> "*I think it's a bit glorified, too glorified*" (Orfhlaith)

> "*it's pandering to a, to the straight side of bringing lesbian or gay or whatever, they don't cater I suppose for the whole diversity within the lesbian community, so they see what's I suppose celebrated at the end of the day*" (Meadbh)

The differences between lesbians in terms of race, class, nationality, (dis)ability; body image and gender are de-emphasised or go unnoticed as one of the interviewees reflects:

> "*...Well i suppose it is maybe quite a standard across the board, they are all quite affluent and body image they are all the same, there aren't any, definitely butch characters they are all quite femme so therefore you know they are portraying that whole image of the 'lipstick lesbian' as opposed to any other form, I know Shane is considered butch but you know she's not really butch if it came to it*" (Grainne)

However, as Kitzinger (1999) suggests that it is sometimes only when invited to do so, within a research setting, that people can challenge attitudes or facts conveyed by the media which previously they had accepted without question (cited in Devereux 2007, p.238). *The L Word* has a white, able-bodied, homogenous cast. As shown by other television programmes such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Will and Grace* the dominant message is 'we are just like you'.

The "active" audience is not immune from influence (Kitzinger 1999) and, in engaging with *The L Word,* the interviewees were critical at times about the lesbian representation but, even so, tended to follow the dominant discourse regarding the norms for lesbian visibility on television. Ideas about acceptable femininity were not acknowledged or challenged. The interviewees were at pains for the most part to defend the series:

> "*...it's a TV drama so therefore you are not, it's not solely aimed at a lesbian audience, it's aimed at a wider audience so therefore you have to take that into consideration*" (Grainne)

> "*You can't come on like in the first series and get everything out there, you know, you have to build up otherwise people would lose interest as well, because there would be too many things going on*" (Eilís)

An appreciation of the fact that *The L Word* is making history does not mean that it can avoid critical analysis. The interviewees could be described as taking what Hall (1974) would call a "negotiated reading" of the text in respect of its contribution towards lesbian visibility as indicated in the following responses:

> "*I think putting a programme on the telly about lesbians is ground breaking enough without trying to factor in everything that would be ground breaking. I think its enough that it's about lesbians rather than trying to address every single social issue that's like going on in the world. I think it would be too much and I think people wouldn't watch it*" (Caitlín)

> "*... I mean the L Word is a very, very, small part of lesbian culture. Lesbians are everywhere, they are in every country or every town and, you know, we have our own identity. It's great to have this on television but you can't blow it out of proportion from what it is. It's a bit of, you know, soap opera*" (Ailís)

The developments in reception research underline a distinctive break from the behaviourist/effects model, with an emphasis on the potential power of the audiences to resist the content of media text (Devereux 2007, p.217). However, as outlined above, the reception and interpretation of *The L Word* by the interviewees is not a straightforward process and it involves negotiation and compromises.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how an Irish audience negotiates the lesbian visibility that *The L Word* brings. For this particular lesbian audience *The L Word* is a positive step for lesbian visibility. The endorsement of this fact is quite clear by the interviewees' responses at large. However, what is less straight forward is whether such narrow (re)presentation of lesbian identity will be positive in the long run. During my interviews, and in my analysis, I found audience engagement with *The L Word* to be a very complicated process as illustrated by the themes that emerged. The pleasure taken in having a lesbian drama on mainstream television was immense, for the majority in my research sample it gave a sense of 'normality' to their lives. The interviewees were critical of certain issues but excused and made allowances for more. *The L Word* challenges mainstream ideologies, which desexualise and render as non-threatening the lesbian characters, by representing lesbians *en masse* and sexually active. However, what must be recognised as problematic about the show is its lack of diversity in relation to its characters' gender identity, body image, socio-economic status, and race. *The L Word's* ensemble composition would allow for multiple constructions of lesbian identity. However, this opportunity is not grasped; the characters are predominately white, able-bodied, middle-class, falling close to each other on the gender continuum as femme. Ciasullo (2001) suggests in interpreting increased lesbian visibility in the mainstream media, we need to consider how this increased visibility is channelled through commodification and consumerism, how this impacts on who gets seen, and what it means to be seen. The research to date in this area, apart from McCabe and Akass (2006), Beirne (2006, 2007), Moore (2006, 2007), Kraus (2007) and Himberg (2008) on *The L Word*, has been on cultural representations of lesbians. This research only examined the first two episodes of season one. What is needed going forward is more critical, academic scholarship on *The L Word*. It has made history as the first lesbian drama on

mainstream television. Its 6th and final season will end early this year, and Showtime has already begun working on the '*L Word'* spin off (Nordyke 2008). For these reasons alone *The L Word* merits further analysis.

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