

"Sexuality is fluid"[1]

or is it? An analysis of television's *The L Word* from the perspectives of gender and sexuality

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("Seksualność jest płynna" - czy rzeczywiście? Analiza telewizyjnego "The L Word" z perspektywy płci i seksualności)

STRESZCZENIE : Amerykański serial telewizyjny *The L Word* (USA, emitowany od 2004) opowiada historię grupy lesbijek i biseksualnych kobiet mieszkających w Los Angeles. Artykuł analizuje pierwsze dwa sezony serialu z perspektywy teorii feministycznej i teorii queer. Chociaż serial dekonstruuje normatywne kategorie płci kulturowej i seksualności, można również twierdzić, że podtrzymuje on ideały heteronormatywnego społeczeństwa. Przedstawiona argumentacja opiera się m. in. na analizie takich aspektów, jak promocja serialu w Finlandii i w USA oraz normatywna kobiecość postaci lesbijek. Artykuł skupia się także na tych postaciach, które rozciągają normatywne granice płci kulturowej i seksualności. North American television series *The L Word* (USA 2004-present) tells the story of a group of lesbian and bisexual women living in Los Angeles. The current article offers

a close reading of the first two seasons of the series, analysing them from the perspectives of both feminist theory and queer theory. It demonstrates that even though the series deconstructs the normative boundaries of both gender and sexuality, it can also be said to maintain the ideals of a heteronormative society. The argument is explored by paying attention to several aspects of the series. These include the series' advertising both in Finland and the United States and the normative femininity of the lesbian characters. In addition, the article aims to highlight the manner in which the series depicts certain characters which can be said to stretch the normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. Through this, the article strives to give a diverse account of the series' first two seasons and further critical discussion of *The L Word* and its representations.

The analysis in the article is grounded in feminist thinking and queer theory. These theoretical disciplines provide it with two central concepts that are at the background of the analysis, namely those of heteronormativity and homonormativity. Heteronormativity refers to a societal structure that defines heterosexuality as natural, normal and superior to other sexualities. Heteronormativity has an effect on the way gender is perceived by setting the norms for a "right kind" of masculinity and "right kind of" femininity. Homonormativity,

on the other hand, refers to a phenomenon that is constructed by cultural products such as television shows. In the context of homonormativity, homosexuality is seen as good and natural as Didi Herman (141-159) has argued in relation to *Bad Girls* (UK, 1999-2006). It is important to note that heteronormativity and homonormativity are not equal or opposite concepts due to the societal status of heterosexuality as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warren (548) have pointed out in their work. What is more, heteronormativity cannot be questioned, in the words of Samuel A. Chambers ("Telepistemology of the Closet", 39), "by constructing tiny islands of homonormativity". Despite their differences, the two concepts are used as the theoretical backdrop of the analysis due to their ability to conceptualise some elements of the series.

Before moving on to the analysis, it is important to say something about *The L Word* and its lesbian representation in order to make my own perspective as the author of the article visible. The series is remarkable in the sense that it is the first television show that is created by, about and, to some extent, for lesbians. It also tells the story of more than one lesbian character unlike most earlier and also contemporary television series. There is power in numbers. In addition to lesbianism, the series brings visibility also to bisexuality and transgender-issues as well as issues such as lesbian motherhood, parenting, and relationships. It also features a certain

amount of lesbian sex which is depicted in varying ways unlike in many of the earlier television shows, including *Queer as Folk* (USA 2000-2005) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (USA 1997-2003), and lesbian films such as *When Night is Falling* (Canada 1995) and *Desert Hearts* (USA 1985). What is more, the series has a homonormative quality to it since it constructs a narrative in which lesbianism is not only accepted and nothing out of the ordinary but also a potentially desirable identity as can be seen in the series manner of portraying minor, seemingly heterosexual characters as potential lesbians. Lesbianism is also not questioned in the narrative and it is not used as a source of humour like in sitcoms such as *Will & Grace*. Summing up, *The L Word* can be seen as a somewhat positive step in the development of television's lesbian representation. However, this kind of an approach does not give an accurate view of the complex narrative and representations of the series. This has been shown also by Chambers ("Heteronormativity and *The L Word*", 82) according to whom "the narrative structure of *The L Word* often serves to perpetuate, preserve and sustain the normativity of heterosexuality". The current article aims to give a more diverse and critical account of the series and, by doing this, further critical discussion of it.

Advertising femininity

The first thing that seems to strike one when seeing *The L Word* or its promo pictures for the first time is the clear femininity of the lesbian characters. With perhaps one exception, all of the women in the main cast fall into the category of normative femininity. They have long, styled hair, wear make-up and feminine clothing and are thin and otherwise conventionally beautiful (see also Reeder 51-52). Consequently, the characters of *The L Word* embody a category written about by Leena-Maija Rossi (105) according to whom slim and long-haired women in advertising imagery repeat a certain ideal of a heterosexual woman. In a different context, Sherrie A. Inness (63-68) has noted that also American women's magazines convey an image of a beautiful and feminine lesbian. Through this sort of a depiction, similar to advertising and women's magazines, the series maintains a feminine ideal of lesbian representation and constructs a specific image of stylish, fashion-savvy, middle class, thin, feminine and white lesbian women [2]. At the same time, the series maintains a heteronormative idea of gender by repeating the "right kind" of femininity traditionally associated with women.

Ann M. Ciasullo (577-608) has written about mainstream lesbian bodies of magazines and films of the 1990s America. According to her, in mainstream media, lesbian women are made into objects of desire for heterosexual audiences through heterosexualisation which is a process that is achieved by representing the lesbian as

embodying a hegemonic femininity. As a result, lesbians in the media look like "conventionally attractive straight women" (Ciasullo 578). It is important to note that this kind of a process would not be possible if the bodies were experienced to be threatening. This is avoided through femininity; in Myra Macdonald's (187) words, "by ensuring that lesbianism fits easily into standard paradigms of femininity." Depicting lesbian characters as feminine and also maternal, for example, makes lesbianism safer, less threatening for a heterosexual audience. This is a characteristic of *The L Word* as well as other television series such as *Queer as Folk* where also lesbian sexuality is linked to motherhood (see Kuorikoski 81-94).

In addition to maintaining a heteronormative ideal, there is another side to depicting lesbian characters as feminine femmes. According to Chris Holmlund (34-35), a femme lesbian questions the heterosexuality of femininity by emphasising it. This seems to be a possible logic when comparing the lesbian characters of *The L Word* to other, earlier representations of television and films, in particular, in which lesbians have often been depicted as mannish (Stacey, 96) or otherwise masculine. As Ciasullo (585) has suggested, depicting lesbians as feminine offers "a corrective to the relatively rigid image of the lesbian that has dominated for decades." On the other hand, depicting lesbian women in this way assures "mainstream audiences that there is nothing "different" about

lesbians." In other words, even though femme representations deconstruct the stereotype of a heterosexist culture of mannish, masculine lesbians, they, at the same time, dissolve the potential difference between lesbian and straight women. At the same time, they produce another type of a repeating pattern in which, like in the heteronorm of femininity, there is no room for diversity. In the case of *The L Word* this means portraying lesbian bodies as also white, middle-class and fashionable as was already pointed out above. This certain kind of rigidity in lesbian images, present in the series throughout its seasons, questions the subversive potential of femme lesbians written about by Holmlund (31-50).

Ciasullo's (578) argument about making mainstream lesbian representations objects of desire for heterosexual audiences can be clearly seen in the advertising of *The L Word*. Despite the fact that the series is written by and about lesbians, it is not written for an exclusively lesbian audience. In the United States, *The L Word* has been openly marketed for a straight male audience (see e.g. Stanley 1; McCroy 2). This might be one central reason for depicting lesbian characters as conventionally feminine because, through this, the characters are placed as the objects of daydreams of a straight male audience. This is clearly utilised in the advertising of the series in which the femininity of the lesbian characters is not only played with but also continuously emphasised. Many of the series'

promo pictures, advertisements, DVD and book covers show the cast dressed in matching, frilly dresses made of silk, for example. In these images, one sees a group of extremely styled and groomed feminine women in showy poses. This is commonly the case in terms of all the characters of the series including Shane (Katherine Moennig) who, in the series, typically wears jeans and t-shirts and could be characterised as a soft butch (see Moore & Schilt 159-171). As can be seen from this example, the already feminine cast of the series is further feminised for the purpose of marketing the series for its targeted audience. Through this, the series continues to perpetuate the heteronormative ideal of femininity that characterises its lesbian representation as has been shown here.

In addition to emphasising femininity, many of the promo pictures and commercials published during the first two seasons, position the characters so that desire between them is left invisible - a characteristic Ciasullo (578) calls de-homosexualisation. Looking at the promo pictures, one cannot help but to think that we could be looking at a cast of a model search show such as *America's Next Top Model* (USA, 2003-present). In addition to American promo pictures, this refers to a commercial seen on a Finnish television channel, MTV3. Before the re-runs of the series started airing on the channel, it aired a commercial in which the members of the cast were seen in singular images taken from the series first

couple of episodes. The images had been chosen so that desire between women, which has a clear presence in the show itself, was left invisible, unspoken. The commercial consisted of images in which the cast members were seen either one at a time or in neutral situations. The slogan, uttered by a male voice was: "*Shane ja muut L-koodin viehkeät naiset tanaan kello 23 Maikkarilla*". ["Shane and other attractive women of *The L Word* tonight at MTV3 at 11 pm."] My own interpretation would be that this sort of a commercial, like the promo pictures, aims at attracting a wider, heterosexual audience and offers lesbian characters of the series as material for the fantasies of the average straight man.[3]

The L Word evokes a tradition typically seen in Hollywood films in which lesbianism is left unmentioned or implicit in advertising and when talking about the film in the media. According to Chris Holmlund (36), it has been typical to emphasise and draw attention to the more general themes of Hollywood films at the expense of homosexuality. The same phenomenon can be seen in made-for-TV films analysed by Suzanna Danuta Walters (124-125). People who had been involved in making the films emphasised the familiarity and sameness of the themes in relation to heterosexuality. The situation is similar in the case of *The L Word* : when being interviewed, the actresses of the series have pointed out that the series is about familiar themes such as love and

relationships. In addition, this point has been emphasised in advertising on the Finnish channel, Sub TV, which is the primary channel for airing the series in Finland. According to the voice-over in one commercial seen on the channel, the characters of the series struggle with issue that we can all recognise and relate to. This phenomenon, which Holmlund (37) calls downplaying lesbian subject matter, can be described as heteronormative in the sense that it emphasises themes from a heterosexual perspective and, thus, limits the scope by leaving out lesbianism. This sort of marketing is directed at a heterosexual audience and it leaves out other audience groups while encouraging the average heterosexual viewer to relate to the themes and identify with the characters of the series or film.

However, in addition to attracting a straight (male) audience, *The L Word* is aimed at a lesbian and bisexual audience. The characters of the series are placed as the objects of the gazes of lesbian and bisexual women which becomes quite evident when visiting different Internet forums and discussing the series with its lesbian and bisexual fans. This questions the idea of placing the characters as an object of a solely straight male audience; the series is also directed at a lesbian and bisexual female audience. In addition, there are cracks in the series' manner of depicting its characters as normatively feminine. These can be seen in the characters of

somewhat androgynous, soft butch Shane, the slightly butch carpenter, Candace (Ion Overman) and Moira/Max (Daniela Sea) who is introduced during the third season of the series. Arguably, the series is homonormative in the sense that it brings to the screen also characters that question the clearly feminine hegemony prevalent in the series and constructs a space for lesbian and bisexual women in which they can look at fictional lesbian characters and both identify with and desire them. Consequently, the series is a source of pleasure, desire and also identification for lesbian and bisexual women who actively watch, consume and are fans of the series [4]. As a result, the series cannot be straightforwardly interpreted as a heteronormative series, attempting to attract a solely heterosexual audience.

Constructing and deconstructing gender and sexuality
Queer as Folk's British (UK 1999) and North American versions have been groundbreaking in their manner of depicting gay men as openly sexual and bringing forth gay issues from gay parenting to bug chasers. Despite this, neither version of the series questions the gender dichotomy, the idea of two complementary genders - male and female - and emphasising traditional gender roles is a common feature of the series' two versions' narratives. In addition, the image of sexuality conveyed in the series is binary: the characters of the series are either gay or straight while bisexuality and other forms of

genders and sexualities are left invisible. This refers to the invisibility of bisexuality, in particular, as well as transgenderism in both versions of the series. In addition, the series depicts lesbians in a certain, stereotypical manner. Minor lesbian characters of the series two versions' are extremely feminine - and depicted from the perspective of having and/or raising children - or very masculine, butch. Of these two types of lesbian characters, the butch characters are consistently the extras standing in the background and not saying anything. (See e.g. Kuorikoski 81-94 for an analysis of *Queer as Folk*).

The British prison drama *Bad Girls* resembles *Queer as Folk* in the sense that "sexuality is not really fluid and "gender bending" and transgenderisms are entirely absent" as Herman (152) has pointed out in her work on the series. *The L Word*, however, is different. As I have argued, the series constructs a heteronormative image of gender by depicting lesbians, among other things, as extremely feminine and conventionally beautiful. At the same time, it has some elements of what Herman calls queer - "gender bending" and transgenderisms - and it unsettles, even deconstructs, the heteronormative boundaries of sexuality and gender. This is done through two characters, in particular, which will be briefly analysed next.

The first of these characters is Lisa (Devon Gummersall) who is a biological man who identifies himself as a lesbian and calls himself a lesbian identified man. Lisa is interested in Alice (Leisha Hailey) and they date for the duration of a few episodes. Alice later ends the relationship by telling Lisa that she wants "a boyfriend who's straight or a lesbian who's a girl". The second character, Ivan (Kelly Lynch) is a drag king who is courting Bette's (Jennifer Beals) half-sister Kit (Pam Grier). Ivan is introduced in the 12th episode of the first season in which she performs for an adoring audience at The Planet's Kings of the Night show. After the drag king performance, Ivan and Kit start spending time together and it seems like there is a romance on the way. Ivan's character is part of the narrative also during the beginning of the second season. Through these two characters, *The L Word* constructs an interesting and diverse image of sexuality and gender while, at the same time, unsettling the normative boundaries of the two concepts. However, there are also opposite elements in the depiction of the characters, elements that, in a sense, reproduce or "guard" the normative boundaries of sexuality and particularly gender. I am most interested in these elements.

The opposite elements can be seen in the character of Lisa. The character questions the idea of the tight connection between biological sex and sexuality and, at the same time, emphasises the

fluidity of sexuality as well as the performative nature of gender. However, through the eyes of the other characters, Lisa is seen as a rather comical character that is not taken at all seriously. Dana's (Erin Daniels) girlfriend Lara (Lauren Lee Smith) asks if Lisa is a transsexual, the word used in the series, and Dana herself has problems with accepting Lisa's lesbian identity. Also Alice, the character who is dating Lisa, adds to this. For example, Alice questions Lisa's identity in bed by demanding him to have sexual intercourse with her against Lisa's will and makes derogatory remarks concerning Lisa's identity. For Alice, Lisa is too much of a lesbian: "You do lesbian better than any lesbian I know."

Compared to Lisa, Ivan is a more complex character. She is an anomaly in the context of the series and its plethora of femmer-than-femme lesbians. It is easy to recognise Ivan as a lesbian: her body has been marked with certain codes that can be interpreted to connote lesbianism. She is also more butch than the other characters which can be seen in her appearance, behaviour and manners. Ivan's butchness becomes clearly emphasised when comparing her to the other characters of *The L Word* as well as to any other lesbian representation offered by television. However, despite the complexity and clear lesbian signs of Ivan, the character is also problematic. It reproduces the stereotype of lesbians who seduce, "recruit" straight women [5] and includes some other

aspects that raise questions.

Some time after the drag king performance, Kit goes to The Planet to meet with Ivan. Kit stands in the cafe and searches for Ivan but is not able to see her before Marina (Karina Lombard) points her out directly as being "right there". Now that Ivan is no longer on the stage, she is not wearing her black wig Kit is used to seeing. Instead, Ivan has long, rather blond hair and there is no moustache on her face. Kit does not recognise Ivan without her drag king appearance because she sees - or perhaps wants to see - Ivan as a man. This becomes clearer in a few following scenes where Kit refers to Ivan through the pronoun "he" which Bette questions by emphatically alluding to Ivan with "she". As Lo (1-2) has argued, both Bette and Kit see Ivan belong to one, certain gender whereas Ivan does not categorise herself. When Kit and Bette have a difference of opinion in relation to the correct pronoun with which to refer to Ivan, Ivan points out that she is comfortable with both pronouns. Through this, Ivan questions the normative boundaries of gender also on the level of dialogue while Bette and Kit try and place her in one of the two categories of binary gender. It is easy to agree with Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (148) according to whom "it would have been nice to think that in the lesbian friendly world of *The L Word* those sexual binaries could be relaxed". Despite including characters like Ivan, the series is still somewhat loyal to the heteronormative ideal of gender as dichotomous.

As was mentioned above, Ivan looks different on stage than she does in other environments. First, we see Ivan in her drag king appearance only on stage. This is changed in the first season finale when Ivan shows up at Kit's door wearing her black wig, moustache and drag king attire. Later in the episode, Ivan tries to seduce a fascinated yet resisting Kit by showing off her manhood. In the scene in question, Ivan performs for Kit at a parking garage, lip-synching to Leonard Cohen's "I'm Your Man". Lo (2) suggests that in the scene Ivan is wearing a mask for Kit in line with the lyrics of the song Ivan is privately performing to Kit. This is supported by the fact that Ivan is not seen in her drag king appearance outside of the stage before this scene. What is more, earlier, when Kit and Ivan talk, Kit tells Ivan that she thinks Ivan would be a perfect man: "If you were a man, you would be the perfect man." Instead of Ivan performing different genders in a flexible manner, she has to masquerade as a man, create an illusion of manhood - to court Kit who identifies herself as heterosexual. After Kit says that as a man Ivan would be perfect, Ivan takes her drag king persona of the stage and tries to woo Kit by convincing that she can indeed be a man: "If you want a lover, I'll do anything you ask me to./And if you want another kind of love, I'll wear a mask for you." It seems as if Ivan, who is clearly the series' most complex character in terms of depicting gender, tries to play the role of a man and create a fantasy for Kit.[6]

The analysis offered here of Ivan is contrasted by Tavia Nyong'o (105) in her comment on the series. According to her, Kit's seduction by Ivan is, indeed, queer, and the story line reveals the restrictiveness of compulsory heterosexuality. Nyong'o is correct in relation to the possible queerness of Ivan's character and the story line. However, it can be argued that they, in their entirety, were not that queer at all as I have attempted to show here. Akass and McCabe (143-156) seem to agree with this. They write about the seduction story line, discussing its possible meanings in terms of female desire and cross-dressing. Towards the end of their discussion they turn to the events from the second season of the series where it is revealed that Ivan has been in a long-term relationship with a woman for several years. Akass (154) sees Ivan's explanation about monogamy "not working for her" as stereotypically male. According to her and McCabe, "it is not long before the representation that Ivan performs so well to impress the ladies reveals its true heterosexual colours. Has *The L Word*, like Ivan, led us on just a little too much, treated us just a little bit shabbily? It tickles our fancy with the promise of queer desire. Only to make us feel tricked and slightly ashamed". (Akass & McCabe 156.) Summing up, the series representation seems to fall short of employing the queer potential of Ivan and, instead, offers one more heteronormative representation.

As has been argued, *The L Word* unsettles the normative boundaries of gender and sexuality by introducing characters that cannot be placed in the strict, binary and dichotomous categories of homosexual and heterosexual and female and male. The gender image of the series is not one-dimensional; gender does not consist of two complementary abstractions: a masculine man and a feminine woman. In contrast, the series brings up the artificial and performative nature of gender by introducing a character such as Ivan who does not identify as either male or female. In a sense, Ivan is neither nor, she - or he - is both. Also Lisa, the self-identified lesbian, questions traditional ideas of biological gender and sexual identity and Alice, the bisexual character of the series, questions the binary idea of sexuality often prevalent in television series. Despite this, gender and sexuality are depicted in *The L Word* in a certain manner which seems to follow some kind of a normative code. The series constructs its own kind of framework which defines the boundaries of depicting sexuality and gender. In Chambers' ("Heteronormativity and *The L Word*", 82) words, quoted above, the series "often serves to perpetuate, preserve and sustain the normativity of heterosexuality".

In conclusion

As has been shown in the current article, *The L Word* includes several elements that can be interpreted as heteronormative such

as employing a certain type of a feminine ideal in depicting its lesbian characters both in the series and its advertising in Finland and the United States. In addition, the series includes characters that can be characterised as heteronormative and that both deconstruct and reproduce the normative boundaries of gender and sexuality. As such, the series creates a somewhat complex and contrasting image of lesbians and lesbianism that includes different elements. This is the case also on the level of the series' genre: the series combines elements of drama, soap opera and melodrama. In addition, *The L Word* is a series that changes and is somewhat inconsistent in terms of its writing. This refers to the series' structure and its storylines and their characteristics. The series changes within episodes, one episode can include many different kinds of scenes and moods ranging from comical to dramatic and powerful and, in a sense, light and less meaningful. In a larger perspective, the series' seasons are different from each other: season 1 is different from season 2 which is different from season 3 and so on. Consequently, an analysis of *The L Word* might well look different as the emphasis of the analysis shifts from one season to the next. In this article, the emphasis has been on the first season. Through my analysis, I have captured a certain, rather specific moment in the series' history that has, in the course of the series, become a part of the series short and, arguably, rather interesting history.

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[1] The quote is taken from the series' first season during which it is uttered by the character of Shane (Katherine Moennig).

[2] During the first season, one of the main lesbian characters is biracial and there is one minor lesbian Latina character. In the second season, the series' cast is joined by Carmen (Sarah Shahi), a Latina lesbian, and new characters are introduced also in the fourth season. Thus, the cast becomes more diverse as the series progresses. In addition, the character of Kit (Pam Grier), who is in the series from the beginning, is African-American but she is identified as a heterosexual.

[3] In addition, it could be argued that the images of commercials and promo pictures are interpreted as desirable also by the lesbian and bisexual women that actively consume them. This seems like a viable interpretation based on conversations with lesbian and bisexual women who watch - and are fans of - the series. However, the commercials that are analysed here do not seem to be directed at lesbian and bisexual women and their gaze.

[4] I say this based on my own observations and discussions with lesbian and bisexual women rather than existing research results. However, I will return to the thematic of lesbian and bisexual audiences in my later work on the series.

[5] This "recruiting" characteristic is somewhat common in *The L Word*. In the first season of the series, the character of Marina Ferrer (Karina Lombard) seduces young Jenny (Mia Kirshner) who is in a relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Tim (Eric Mabius). In the third season, Helena Peabody (Rachel Shelley) appears to seduce a straight woman, Dylan (Alexandra Hedison), until it is revealed that Dylan and her boyfriend had a ploy of suing wealthy Helena for sexual harassment. Also Bette and Tina's (Laurel Holloman) relationship began in recruiting when Bette was introduced to heterosexually-identified Tina who, at the time, was in a relationship with a man.

[6] In addition to this interpretation, it could be argued that what the character of Ivan is doing is more complex than trying to be a man for Kit. In accordance with the thinking of Judith Butler, a woman who is playing a man is not a copy of an original but, rather, shows that the origin does not exist. See e.g. Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Thank you to the reviewer of my article for reminding me of this dynamic.

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