

From Queer Reading to Queerbaiting

The battle over the polysemic text and the power of hermeneutics

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on an example of fan activity where fans in internet communities are voicing their concern over a practice they have named queerbaiting. The term is used to describe the practice of enticing and luring an audience with the promise of queer content without any intention of acting on it. Fan communities' increasing use of the internet has changed fans' practices and has made it easier for fans to cooperate, communicate and debate, not only with each other, but also with the people in charge and creators of what the fan community focuses on. Through studying internet fan communities, this thesis, with the focus on TV shows, analyses what is meant with the term queerbaiting and how it works as an example of fan activism. Findings suggest that despite a heated debate over definition, the practice itself and whether it exists or not, there is a general idea of what queerbaiting means and the differences within the debate are mostly due to differences in hermeneutical strategies. Thus this thesis shows how uses of different hermeneutical strategies and discussions on power in fan communities affect each other and how social media's fan participation has affected the way representation, interpretation and ownership are discussed.

Keywords

Queerbaiting, queer baiting, queer theory, queer studies, hermeneutics, interpretation, representation, TV studies, audience, reception studies, queer, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, gay

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Introduction

The internet and social media have changed the way audiences receive, analyse and discuss films and TV shows. This has affected the positions and theories that have been developed regarding fans' and audiences' power over the products and the producers. One side is often being represented by scholars such as John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, arguing the audience's power over the product and the audience's ability to affect the producers, though these two do not necessarily mean the same thing. The other side consists of scholars such as Mark Andrejevic, challenging Fiske and Jenkins by claiming that audiences and fans might very well be active and attempt to take control over the product, but the real power still resides with the producers. One example of fans arguing with producers over the product and the product's meaning is queerbaiting. This term and its definition have been and are being developed and debated by fans and internet communities claiming that producers are intentionally trying to lure an audience to watch something under the false pretence that it will have queer content. Queerbaiting is about an audience claiming to know the producers' preferred meaning and accusing them of lying about it or not standing for it. That this is an issue for that audience, suggests that even if the producers are not the only ones who can create meaning, they seem to be given the power to deny and correct wrong meanings/false meanings. Queerbaiting can be considered to explore/play with/exploit (depending on point of view) the grey area between the visible and the invisible, what is and what is not in the text.

Despite the wealth of studies focusing on queer reading, polysemic texts and fan activity, few scholars have analysed this recent fan-developed term. For example, Judith Fathallah has discussed queerbaiting, a concept suggesting fans' awareness of the producer's knowledge of what they want. One could say that the fans are reflecting over producers' awareness of fan activity and of what fans wish to see. Fathallah's article focuses on whether the object for her case study, BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-), can count as queerbaiting or not, drawing on scholars such as Richard Dyer and Judith Butler. The purpose of this thesis is not to judge which producers use queerbaiting and which do not. Instead this thesis will analyse the concept of queerbaiting, what it means and how the term is used. The debate on queerbaiting will, in this thesis, illustrate how fans and audiences express themselves regarding their power over a developing product. Accordingly, this thesis will look at how a concept such as queerbaiting is created by fans and how such a concept fits into scholars' theoretical framework of queering, queer reading and the power of the audience.

Queerbaiting: without fixed definition

One of the challenges of this thesis is that the concept of queerbaiting has emerged from fan discussions and LGBTQ-activism and as with many concepts, the definition changes from user to user. There is no definition to find in any traditional dictionary, like for instance Oxford Dictionary, although there are definitions to be found in user-generated lexicons such as *Urban Dictionary* and *Wikipedia*, which will be explored in this thesis. Since I am not going to analyse the discourse of one person, but several people, communities and scholars, this thesis does not aim to find THE definition to the term or decide who uses the term correctly and who does not, but rather analyse how it has been used by different players.

Since few scholars have analysed the concept of queerbaiting there is very little scholarly discussion on its definition. Fathallah focuses on the practice rather than the term, but I am going to start off with her definition of queerbaiting where she defines it as “a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility”.¹

This is an excerpt from the TV show *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-), a TV show that on several occasions has been accused of queerbaiting.

Elsa: “So why did you let Regina just walk away?”

Emma: “You heard her, she wants nothing to do with me”

Elsa: “Maybe you shouldn’t give up on her so soon”

Emma: “Like I said, once you screw someone over, there is no going back”

Elsa: “I don’t believe that [...] if someone’s important to you, don’t give up on them, even if they say hurtful things or send a giant snow monster to chase you away”

Cut to Emma and Regina being alone together in Regina’s vault

Emma: “I’m an idiot. I’m an idiot because I’ve been down this road before. No, when I was a kid, someone came into my life for a while and I thought we were going to be . . . best friends. But this girl lied to me and I pushed her away because of that lie and she asked me to forgive her but I never did. It took some time, but I realized that that was a mistake and I regretted the decision, but by then it was too late. The damage was already done. I don’t want to make the same mistake again, Regina. Living in Storybrooke I’ve got my son

¹ Judith Fathallah, “Moriarty's Ghost: Or the Queer Disruption of the BBC's Sherlock,” *Television New Media*, July 17, 2014, p. 2.

and my parents and I love them, but they can't always understand me. They don't know what it feels like to be rejected and misunderstood, not the way I do, not the way you do, and somehow that makes us, I don't know, unique, or maybe even special. I wasn't looking for you to assuage my guilt, I was just looking for you to be my friend [...] I'm not going to stop trying, even if you still want to kill me".²

Blogger for *tv.com* LilyRoRoSparks (with a bit over 100 followers and whose reviews of *Once Upon a Time* episodes are responded with about 400 comments each time) has defined *Once Upon a Time* as a queerbaiting show.³ She comments the scene above with the words "Emma chased Regina back to her vault and made the most subtextual speech ever voiced on TV since *Xena, Warrior Princess* ruled our airwaves [...] if you don't see how this could be read as Emma talking about being gay then you probably get a lot of mileage out of tic-tac-toe games [...] Of course, the show had to then counteract this moment by having Hook [a male potential love interest] visit Emma".⁴ The "of course" is here probably a reference to what Alexander Doty describes as "the more conventional [failing] heterosexual(izing) narrative device of using a woman to mediate and diffuse male-male erotics", only here LilyRoRoSparks suspects that the producers feel the need to heterosexualizing their two female leads with the help of a man.⁵

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse the concept of queerbaiting with focus on mainstream TV shows. How is queerbaiting being discussed and defined as a term, but also as an unnamed concept? For example, some fans use the same description as can be found while others are discussing queerbaiting, but the word itself is not mentioned. What are the differences and similarities between queerbaiting and what scholars have called queer reading? What do the concepts of queer reading and queerbaiting suggest about fan participation, fan production and the relationship between fans and creators?

² "Breaking Glass" (ep. # 4.05, 2014), *Once Upon a Time* (ABC, 2011-).

³ Lily Sparks, "Once Upon a Time Season 4 Premiere Review: Not Cool, Bro," *tv.com*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.tv.com/shows/once-upon-a-time-2011/community/post/once-upon-a-time-season-4-episode-1-a-tale-of-two-sisters-141166404351/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴ Lily Sparks, "Once Upon a Time "Breaking Glass" Review: Date Night," *tv.com*, October 27, 2014, <http://www.tv.com/shows/once-upon-a-time-2011/community/post/once-upon-a-time-season-4-episode-5-breaking-glass-141408435043/?fullstory=1> (accessed February 19, 2015).

⁵ Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 11.

History of the word

Queerbaiting has other definitions than the ones defined here. In 1981 Lawrence Goldyn wrote his article “Gratuitous Language in Appellate Cases Involving Gay People: ‘Queer Baiting’ from the Bench” on how homosexual individuals were being addressed in US courts. Goldyn uses the word queerbaiting as a description of the verbal abuse and the homophobic and discriminating rhetoric that was used in these cases to justify the punishments.⁶ Another example that differs significantly from Fathallah’s and the here discussed internet fan communities’ uses of the word is Nadine Hubbs’ usage of it in the article “Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography” from 2009, where she compares it to red-baiting and uses it to describe the attempt to expose and purge homosexual individuals in the US during the 1950s and 60s.⁷ These are just some examples and the term queerbaiting has then not only no clear definition, but also a history of having been used in a number of ways and contexts to describe different sorts of homophobic practices. The word queerbaiting has almost always come with negative connotations and been used to describe what is considered to be a negative behaviour such as homophobic slurs and persecution. Therefore, when something is described as queerbaiting it is an accusation of negative unwanted behaviour. With the instable definitions it is important to closely discuss how it is used, how it could be used and how I intend to use it.

Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary

Since queerbaiting does not have a set definition, but is a term coined by internet users, it could be fruitful to see what definitions have been constructed on user created sites such as *Wikipedia* and *Urban Dictionary*.

The first definition on *Urban Dictionary* is similar to Goldyn’s and Hubb’s usages of the term. “When a politician, pundit, or other public figure brings up the completely irrelevant detail about a person’s sexuality, true or untrue, as a way of subtly channelling homophobia to attack them”. This was written in 2008 and has since then gotten 316 thumbs up and 77

⁶ Lawrence Goldyn, “Gratuitous Language in Appellate Cases Involving Gay People: ‘Queer Baiting’ from the Bench,” *Political Behavior* 3, no. 1 (1981): pp. 31-48.

⁷ Nadine Hubbs, “Bernstein, Homophobia, Historiography,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 13 (2009): pp. 24-42.

thumbs down, ostensibly meaning that 316 users agree with the definition and 77 disagree. The other definition is more along the lines of what Fathallah is describing. “When people in the media (usually television/movies) add homoerotic tension between two characters to attract more liberal and queer viewers with the indication of them not ever getting together for real in the show/book/movie”. This definition is from November 2013 and has since then gotten 257 thumbs up and 312 thumbs down.⁸ One could question why an *Urban Dictionary* user chooses to give a thumb up/down, if it is solely because the user agrees or disagrees with the definition or if it is a comment on the phenomenon itself. Either way, it is clear that the second definition has more disagreement than the first one and is a definition that has engaged more people to express what they think of it than the first one has.

In the article on queerbaiting on *Wikipedia*, one refers to *Urban Dictionary*'s second more debated definition, stressing that the queerness is often denied in interviews and played off as a joke.⁹ This article was created in October 2014 and has since then gotten a long revision history and in the discussion on the “Talk” (discussion) section for the article it is being called an editing war, not because of the usage of the definition from *Urban Dictionary*, but because editing users disagree on what TV shows should be used as examples and whether or not these TV shows use queerbaiting. Here it is then clear that the discussion surrounding queerbaiting is not only a discussion of what the term means or if queerbaiting is a real existing phenomenon or not, but also a discussion within the group (the group agreeing to the definition and that queerbaiting does exist) of what TV shows should be accused of queerbaiting.

Queer

Since queer, the first word in the term queerbaiting, also is a debated term, with almost as many definitions as there are users, it is important to start this thesis with a discussion on the matter. *The Oxford Dictionary* identifies the word queer as an adjective, a noun and a verb. While used as an adjective it is stated to mean either strange/odd, slightly ill or (often used offensively) homosexual. The noun is identified as homosexual man while the verb form means to spoil or ruin. As will be shown here, the word queer has definitions far beyond *The*

⁸ Urban Dictionary, “queer baiting”, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=queer+baiting> (accessed Mars 28, 2015).

⁹ Wikipedia, “Queer baiting”, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_baiting (accessed Mars 28, 2015).

Oxford Dictionary, for example while being used in terms such as queer theory and queer reading.

In her *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, Nikki Sullivan states that the word queer has a long history of diverse meanings, even though it in queer theory terms could and should not be defined.¹⁰ Historically it has been used to describe something that is strange, has often had negative connotations and has been a synonym to homosexual, though lately it has mostly been defined as something that is opposed to what is normal/legitimate/dominant and more of a strategy/attitude/practice rather than being something indicating an identity essence.¹¹ The painful history of queer as something described as being deserving of oppression and persecution as well as being used as an ugly hateful word has made many non-straight people not want to use it.¹²

Fanny Ambjörnsson confirms the diversity of the word queer in her book *Vad är queer?* (What is queer?), noticing that queer can mean anything from weird to activism to theory. Sometimes it is used as an umbrella term for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) and sometimes it is described as a theory to criticize the norm and through that show what is considered to be against the norm, pinpointing the norm in the process.¹³

The term queer is used in Queer Nation's manifesto from 1990 as a word that includes gays and lesbians and the usage is meant to close the ranks and unite these non-straight identities.¹⁴ It does then not seem to include bisexual or transsexual identities or include a theory on how to expose the norm, such as queer theory does. Sullivan addresses this use of the term, but points out the problem that although it can be used as an umbrella term when it is necessary to unite non-straight identities, it homogenizes people who in the end have very little in common and very little shared experience, not only depending on sexual practices/experiences/expressions, but also depending on gender, class, ethnicity, body etcetera.¹⁵

¹⁰ Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 43.

¹¹ Sullivan, p. v, 43.

¹² Doty, p. 4.

¹³ Fanny Ambjörnsson, *Vad är queer?* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 2006), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Queer Nation, "Queer Nations manifest" in *Vad Är Queer? Professorföreläsningar på DI*, ed. Per Lysander (Stockholm: Dramatiska Institutet, 2003), pp. 129-142.

¹⁵ Sullivan, p. 44.

Ambjörnsson writes that both queer theory and queer activism position themselves against identity politics. Exemplified by Judith Butler, this anti-essentialism is necessary to get away from the oppression that is seen as bound to continue if people support and help the idea to separate people into different essential identities.¹⁶ This attitude has been criticized by feminists and gay activists who find it vital to point out their essential identity as women, homosexuals etcetera.¹⁷ However, queer theory and identity are sometimes united in what Ambjörnsson calls "strategic essentialism", where queer activists temporarily adapt identities despite the problems with them in order to create a momentary platform.¹⁸ This is similar to Sullivan's argumentation, though Sullivan expresses a sharper critique towards umbrella terms and emphasizes that there are people who use queer as a shared banner while at the same time being overtly against identity terms such as gay and lesbian, claiming that those who use them are seeking acceptance from the straight acting and world they are trying to challenge.¹⁹ Solving some of these problems when queer is used as an identity, Sullivan uses Janet R. Jakobsen's idea to use queer as a verb rather than a noun and/or adjective, here meaning to resist and actively challenging and "protesting against 'the idea[l] of normal behaviour'".²⁰ Here Sullivan stresses how normal behaviour is both an idea as well as an ideal that is considered impossible to achieve.

Also Tiina Rosenberg is of the opinion that queer should not be defined, that that is to contradict the purpose, but lists the six most common definitions in the 1990s. One of them is that it is used as a replacement for "lesbian, gay, bisexual or trans identities".²¹ When people use the term queerbaiting, the "queer"-part can be considered to disagree with how it is used in queer theory and/or queer activism described by Sullivan. Instead these people can be considered to agree with an older usage, more in common with the 1990's Queer Nation and Rosenberg's example of being a synonym for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual. The "or" instead of "and" is vital in this context, since queerbaiting often refers to the baiting of a

¹⁶ Ambjörnsson, pp. 194-195.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁹ Sullivan, pp. 45-46.

²⁰ Ibid., "[l]" is Sullivan's addition to Jakobsen's words, p. 50.

²¹ Tiina Rosenberg, "Om queerbegreppet" in *Vad Är Queer? Professorföreläsningar på DI*, ed. Per Lysander (Stockholm: Dramatiska Institutet, 2003), p. 14 (my translation).

certain identity most commonly lesbian, gay or bisexual. However, it will also have much of Sullivan's focus on action, stressing that characters' scripted and directed actions and dialogues are clues to their intended sexual identities.

Baiting

The second word can be considered to be far less complicated in the usage of the term queerbaiting that will be discussed in this thesis. According to *The Oxford Dictionary* there are three ways to use bait as a verb. 1 "Deliberately annoy or taunt", 2 "Cause dogs to attack (a trapped or restrained animal)" and 3 "Put bait on (a hook) or in (a trap, net, or fishing area) to entice fish or animals". Goldyn's definition can be considered to draw mostly on number one, Hubbs' number two, and the sort of queerbaiting that will be discussed here will mostly use the third definition, but will touch upon the first as well.

It is clear that taking the two words queer and baiting together can evoke an infinite number of definitions. In this thesis queerbaiting will refer to the practice of intentionally adding homoerotic tension between characters in order to lure in an extended audience without any intention of turning the homoerotic tension to overt homosexual action.

Methodology

In this thesis, definitions and usages of the term queerbaiting are definitions and usages that have been developed in internet communities in chat rooms, fan forums and blogs. A quick search will get you over 83 000 hits on the search engine *Google* and over 174 000 on the search engine *Yahoo*.

The method I am using in this thesis is what John Fiske describes as ethnography of discourse, to analyse "viewers' verbalizations of their responses to television". The advantage here being that discussion and debate are in the nature of a varied audience and one does not assume that the audience works as a single homogenous entity.²² "[When people discuss] television it works to activate and circulate meanings of the text that resonate with the cultural needs of that particular talk community". Within a group, separated people's knowledge and reactions result in creating collective understandings of texts.²³ Even though Fiske is

²² John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

discussing oral communication/gossip, his ideas are applicable to internet communities, which are communication involving a larger geographical space.

The use of the term queerbaiting is not seldom referred to as a *Tumblr*-phenomenon in the aspect that it is on *Tumblr* the term was created and recognized with the meaning discussed here. *Tumblr* is a microblogging site where anyone with an account can post notes and supply them with hashtags (words through which posts can be searched for). In 2013 the site was said to have over 300 million unique visitors each month with 30-50 million active users.²⁴ The internet blog *The Daily Dot* argues that fans active on *Tumblr* coined the term queerbaiting with the definition entailing TV producers' teasing queer relationships, and that *Tumblr* changed how fandoms work, creating a force that producers had to recognize and pay attention to.²⁵ A longer posting on *Livejournal*, which have generated over 500 comments, also finds *Tumblr* along with *Livejournal* as where the term queerbaiting originated.²⁶ The term producer is in these posts and in this thesis used to refer to those who are considered to have power over the forming of the content within a TV show.

One of *Tumblr*'s hashtags is "queerbaiting" where definitions, opinions, examples and links are being posted. I have been looking through countless of posts which have been supplied with the hashtags "queerbaiting" and/or "queer baiting", followed links to articles and other websites discussing queerbaiting and attempted to get a wider scope while still remaining within the definition I stated earlier: the practice of intentionally adding homoerotic tension between characters in order to lure in an extended audience without any intention of turning the homoerotic tension to overt homosexual action.

Twitter is another microblogging website with hashtags with 288 million monthly active users and there will be references to both these websites. *Livejournal* is a blogging platform that in

²⁴ Jay Yarow, "The Truth About Tumblr: Its Numbers Are Significantly Worse Than You Think", *Business Insider*, May 21, 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com/tumblrs-active-users-lighter-than-expected-2013-5?IR=T> (accessed April 28, 2015).

²⁵ Aja Romano, "How to kill your slash fandom in 5 steps", *The Daily Dot*, July 21, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/geek/how-to-kill-your-fandom-sterek-queerbaiting/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

²⁶ User Sanditar, "How Do We Solve A Problem Like 'Queerbaiting'? On TV's Not-So-Subtle Gay Subtext," *Livejournal*, June 26, 2013, <http://ohnotheydidnt.livejournal.com/79072689.html?page=1#comments> (accessed April 28, 2015).

2012 had over 35 million accounts whereof 2 million were active users.²⁷ I have not followed these as attentively as *Tumblr*, but several *Tumblr* postings refer to them and, as will be shown, they are both important factors regarding fans making meaning through internet and internet communities.

When Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson discuss *Livejournal*, they see it as an example of a blog space. Blog spaces have affected the way fan communities work and organize themselves and “[have] led to a vocabulary unique to this space”.²⁸ Fan communities have here all sorts of functions, from gathering people with similar interests to encouraging and creating in-depth discussions to sharing knowledge. The focus for this thesis, the term queerbaiting, can be considered to be part of such vocabulary. The thesis will also mention another examples of such vocabulary such as “fanon” and “canon” and will explain and discuss these words as they are being introduced.

Since queerbaiting is a term coined by fans and internet-active members of different communities there are many people offering their definition and even more people that use the term without defining exactly what they mean. The discussion of what is considered queerbaiting practice can be considered a form of queer activism, which will be discussed in the last chapter.

Since I mean to focus on the definitions and discussion surrounding the word queerbaiting, there seemed to be little point in piling definitions upon each other. Instead I have tried to find the debate within fan communities. What is queerbaiting, what isn't queerbaiting, sometimes the debate is whether queerbaiting even exist or if it is an illusion and wishful thinking, a strategy to criticize show creators for not giving fans what they want from a TV show. The term is not limited to TV shows and fans discuss how they experience that queerbaiting is happening within books, films, and the music industry as well. However, a lot of the discussion is focused on a few American and British TV shows such as *House M.D.* (Fox, 2004-2012), *Supernatural* (The WB/The CW, 2005-) and *Merlin* (BBC, 2008-2012), and more recently *Sherlock*, *Rizzoli & Isles* (TNT, 2010-), *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-), *Once Upon a*

²⁷ Robert Greenall, “LiveJournal: Russia's unlikely internet giant”, *BBC*, March 2, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-17177053> (accessed April 28, 2015).

²⁸ Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson, *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (London/Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 12.

Time and *Vikings* (History, 2013-). It is then not a practice that is limited to one channel or production company, but a recent and widespread phenomenon in western mainstream TV shows.

Two of these TV shows that have been aired during the time for my research are *Vikings* and *Once Upon a Time*, which have led to an increase in fan activity and discussions in internet communities regarding these TV shows. I have followed hashtags regarding these TV shows such as “vikings”, “once upon a time”, “ouat” (an acronym for Once Upon a Time), and several of the characters’ names and pairing/shipping names for same-sex couples. Pairing/shipping names are often contractions of the names of two characters who fans support as a couple, for example the two male characters Ragnar and Athelstan on *Vikings* are sometimes referred to as “Athelnar” or “Ragnalstan”. Another example is Emma Swan and Regina Mills from *Once Upon a Time*. Regina is also the Evil Queen and the most common shipping name is “Swan Queen”. The choice to focus on the two TV shows *Once Upon a Time* and *Vikings* is also to show that queerbaiting is considered to take place both between male and female characters, though a majority of the cases concern male characters. In order to have the time to do the material justice, I stopped following these discussions as of May 1 2015.

This thesis is an analysis of fan forum discussions on the internet of what the participants call queerbaiting. Therefore, it entails a sociological over-the-shoulder method where I as a scholar have taken on the role of a silent observer. I will be looking at how the term is used, if it is defined or if its meaning is being taken for granted and shown through use rather than definition. I have also looked into the history of debate of queering during the last 20 years. How scholars during the 90s and early 00s discuss the possibility of double audiences and hermeneutic strategies, to how fans during the 2010s show less faith in such queer readings. This is of course not something that can simply be divided into different eras, since it is also an on-going debate. Still, studying how one discusses the possibility of queering and how scholars are handling the subject are attempts to dissect attitudes and tensions in how queer interpretations should be handled.

Theory

As has already been suggested in the introduction, dissecting the discussion and phenomenon of queerbaiting through fan discussion touches upon several theories and possibilities of

approaches. It can, as Fathallah has shown, be discussed through queer studies and queer theories; it touches upon the question of intention and hermeneutics as well as audience participation and fan production. When I discuss hermeneutic theories and strategies, I do not suggest that the fans and scholars are necessarily actively consciously using them, but that they follow certain patterns, which have consequences for the debate.

Hermeneutics is “the many ways in which we may theorize about the nature of human interpretation” whether it is a text, a book, a film or verbal communication.²⁹ It is therefore most fitting to use the theories of hermeneutics to analyse the ways fans understand TV shows, producers and each other. Hermeneutics has a tradition of being closely linked to politics in the sense that interpretations have political consequences.³⁰ This will become evident in the discussion on how queering and queerbaiting are related to representation politics and the power of spreading meaning. The hermeneutics theories used when discussing the moving image are theories developed in literary theory. As will be shown in this thesis, this has led to new questions and discussions when it comes to hermeneutics in relation to popular culture. For example, one can easily see how a mainstream TV show like *Once Upon a Time* would have far more people involved in its production and be under more pressure to become financially successful than for instance Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915).

Jenkins writes about how fans’ emotional capital and participation grows more important and thus garner greater attention from producers. “Consumers are using [...] the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation and grassroots creativity”.³¹ Jenkins also describes how the internet offers the experience of “living in a world where knowledge is shared and where critical activity is on-going and lifelong”.³² The growing attention from producers and fans is a reason why scholars should pay more attention to the internet and with its creating a shared world for users, it also becomes a place where one can study discourse and phenomena.

²⁹ Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), p. 1.

³⁰ Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as politics* (London/New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 104.

³¹ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London/New York: New York University Press, 2006), p. 169.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Quoting Jenkins, Brett Mills suggests that an “organized fandom is, perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism”.³³ The concept of queerbaiting does then constitute an example of audience’s theorizing and organized critique and this thesis will show how that is done. According to Ruth McElroy, referring to the scholars B. Klein, C. Wardle, H. Jenkins and B. Mills, “[t]he analysis of fans’ online message boards offers scholars a route into understanding how those invested in television programmes negotiate, establish and debate the show’s meanings and value from within the parameters of everyday life”.³⁴ Through queerbaiting I intend to investigate how fans debate and negotiate their meaning and interpretations and compare them to the assumed producers’ meaning and intentions, and how these fans relate to sexual representation and foremost queer representation.

Marnie Pratt does not define queer when she discusses queer representation in the TV show *The L Word*, but it is clear that to her being queer is essential and identifying and therefore she does not use the word in any queer-theoretical anti-essential way.³⁵ On the contrary, Pratt suggests that representation of the invisible queer cannot be unless it is recognized as essential, at least in a heteronormative context. So even if one argued on a theoretical basis that sexuality is non-essential, this would in a heteronormative context only erase homosexual behaviour, since in a heterosexist context no behaviour could be considered gay-coded.

The thesis will show how many of those who discuss queerbaiting in TV shows argue on the premise that certain sexual behaviour means that a character has a certain sexual identity. This essential sexual identity and the *confirmation* of this essential sexual identity are deemed important when it comes to the representation of any other sexuality than heterosexuality. However, even though many seem to separate confirmed sexuality and the displayed behaviour, both these things are deemed important and some fans discuss what they consider are cases of queerbaiting where a TV show confirms a character’s queer sexuality but does not display it.

³³ Brett Mills, “America Remake – Shudder’: Online Debates about *Life on Mars* and ‘British-ness’” in *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*, eds. Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), pp. 133-134.

³⁴ Ruth McElroy, “Consuming Retrosexualities: the Past Live On Screen, Online Now,” in *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*, eds. Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 124.

³⁵ Marnie Pratt, “Somewhere between Love and Hate: Disidentification and *The L Word*,” in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. Rebecca Beirne (New York/Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 135-151.

Intention, interpretation and meaning are all very central concepts when discussing queerbaiting. The idea of queerbaiting is all about what fans believe the producers intend with their work. It is here important to separate *what* the producers are considered to be trying to say with their work (how they think the work will be interpreted), which is what is being discussed here, from producers' intentions as in *why* the producers are making these works (for example that they would be doing it for fame, money etcetera). These two, what and why, are definitely connected, but those discussing queerbaiting are much more focused on the what rather than the why. Though fans may discuss that queerbaiting is conducted to reach out to a wider audience, the accusations start with how they think the producers' want their works to be interpreted.

Overview

Following this in chapter 2, I will discuss queerbaiting as an internet term and analyse the internet discussion. Here I ask and answer the questions what arguments are being used, what positions there are, how fans that accuse TV shows of queerbaiting relate to queering and queer reading and how they historicize the phenomenon. Chapter 3 is a theoretical discussion looking to scholars' approaches to fan readings and queering. The chapter will focus on scholars such as Alexander Doty, John Fiske and Henry Jenkins. There will also be a greater focus on internet based fan communities' activity in creating and debating meaning and interpretation. In chapter 4, I move on to see what political meaning the internet discussion of queerbaiting might have when it comes to visibility and representation as well as who has the right to create meaning. Chapter 5 is a continuation on this political activity, but with a greater focus on fan labour and whether this labour has the ability to affect status quo. The thesis ends with a conclusion where I summarize my findings and discuss how these affect the way scholars should look at audiences' creation of meanings, internet fan activity and queering.

Queerbaiting, the internet discussion: we know there is a queer character in there.

There seems to be a general idea of what queerbaiting implies, which leads to fans and people who discuss it either take the definition for granted or make an effort to define what they mean. For example, LilyRoRoSparks simply states that *Once Upon a Time* has a “known history of queer-baiting” without much effort to define the term, but it is mentioned in the context of the show portraying the relationship between two women in such a way that if one of them had been a man it would have been obvious to be meant to be interpreted as romantic.³⁶

LilyRoRoSparks’ post is commented by a fan who tries to define queerbaiting: “the queerbaiting that while many people see the blatant queer analogy, the writers and show heads can’t/won’t acknowledge that intentional subtext openly for fear of alienating bigoted fractions of their fanbase”. The fan continues claiming that an interpretation not entailing queer characters “makes no sense in the narrative they are writing and cannot honestly be considered an alternative interpretation of the material. Just because there is no talk about or mention of any lgbtq words in the context of the show, that doesn’t negate the existence of such types of interaction”.³⁷

Just as in Fathallah’s definition there is the suggestion that the writers are aware of the interpretation of queer characters, but will not acknowledge this fact. Consequently, identifying a queer storyline would not be an alternative reading, but the only reading that makes sense, the only realistic one.

A writer on *Livejournal* writes in a posting called “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting’?: On TV’s Not-So-Subtle Gay Subtext”:

‘[Q]ueerbaiting’ – when they give us [the LGBTQ viewers] just enough to keep us interested, but not enough to satisfy us and make us truly represented. But what does that mean exactly? [...] Some interpret ‘queerbaiting’ as just about any subtext; others say that it has to include some sort of ‘no homo’ joke, a clear acknowledgement that, despite the obvious chemistry, it’s never going to happen and the characters are

³⁶ Lily Sparks, “*Once Upon a Time* Season 4 Premiere Review: Not Cool, Bro” (accessed April 28, 2015).

³⁷ Ibid.

straight [...] [queerbaiting] may not be *homophobia* per se – which, besides being a (necessarily) loaded term, implies fear or malice toward homosexuality. What it is is *heterosexism*, the unchecked assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and anything else is the Other”.³⁸

This posting acknowledges the unstableness of the term queerbaiting, but also defines it as heterosexism in the way that whatever queer behaviour one might find, the fact that only heterosexuality is allowed to exist (and not any other like bisexuality or homosexuality) these actions can never be sexual, hence homosexuality and bisexuality can never be represented. Queer is then not an anti-binary term opposing sexual identity, but a term to sum up the different sexual identities connected with the LGBTQ-community.

This stance is reinforced by another fan of *Once Upon a Time*: “the queerbaiting aspect of [the discussed] story line – a possible queer character, yes, a canonical lesbian relationship, no”.³⁹ So the queerbaiting is here defined as not going all the way. As Fathallah suggests, it is a teasing of a queer character, but the queerness of that character will not be confirmed for example by having that character be in a romantic/sexually overt relationship with another character of the same gender.

As already stated, queerbaiting is a debated term and the connection between it and homophobia and heterosexism is not always agreed upon. Another addition to the debate is: “Queerbaiting means exploiting queer audiences with promise of queer content. It does NOT mean failing to provide queer content to present audiences. THAT is just really heterosexist”.⁴⁰ It is not unusual that this exploitation has to do with the fact that queer representation is scarce in general. While referring to a study of how lesbians take pleasure in straight romances Doty quotes an interviewee “We’re so starved, we go see anything because something is better than nothing [...] It’s a compromise. It’s a given degree of alienation”.⁴¹ This is reaffirmed by a *Tumblr* post which have gotten 77 000 notes (numbers of times other

³⁸ User Sanditar, “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting’?” (accessed April 28, 2015).

³⁹ User Corikane, “Let’s Talk ‘Queerbaiting’ – An Inquiry into Queer Shipping on ABC’s ‘Once Upon a Time’.” *Not an archaeology blog*, October 19, 2013, <https://notanarchaeologyblog.wordpress.com/2013/10/19/lets-talk-queerbaiting-an-inquiry-into-queer-shipping-on-abcs-once-upon-a-time/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴⁰ User Hope2x, “Fandom uproar ensues after ‘Once Upon a Time’ actor insults shippers.” *Tumblr*. <http://hope2x.tumblr.com/post/70966356410/fandom-uproar-ensues-after-once-upon-a-time> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴¹ Doty, p. 8.

users have liked and reblogged the post) simply stating “Not putting lesbians on tv is a huge mistake because lesbians will literally watch anything that has lesbians in it”.⁴²

The lack of representation is not only described as a reason why queerbaiting works, but also as a form of queerbaiting in itself. April 5, 2015 the American TV show (remake) *Shameless* ended its fifth season, starting a debate in the fan community whether the show had used its male gay couple to queerbait their audience. The queerbaiting was then not that the producers denied that the two male characters were meant to be interpreted as gay, but the fact that it was obvious that these two had during the season had considerably less kisses, sex scenes and other expressions of their homosexuality than the straight characters.⁴³ However, there was also critique towards this sort of accusation, partly due to the fact that there was considered to be a difference between queerbaiting, where the queerness in the end is denied, and poor representation.

Queerbaiting is considered a conscious process, built on the notion of tight and common communication between writers, networks and their fans. However, as has already been hinted in the quotes, what has been promised by who and what would be acquired in order for those alleged promises to be fulfilled are never clearly stated in the dialogue between writers, networks and fans, but as the word suggests, teased and tempted with. The anger with queerbaiting is with the experience that representation of queer characters (with biggest focus on homosexual characters) is scarce and that queerbaiting would be a widespread and commonly used phenomenon. Heterosexuality is taken for granted and always validated and often considered to be rewarded by the producers.

⁴² User Matt-tetska, “sigh chobabble: not putting lesbians on tv.” Tumblr. <http://matt-tetska.tumblr.com/post/116302393850/sigh-chobabble-not-putting-lesbians-on-tv-is-a> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴³ User Modwatson, “Hey kids! Now that the Shameless season finale is over.” Tumblr. <http://modwatson.tumblr.com/post/115756241759/hesinyourbed-hey-kids-now-that-the-shameless> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Hubrisandwax, ““it’s on you’ no, no it’s not on us.” Tumblr. <http://hubrisandwax.tumblr.com/post/115556414552/mandyfuckinmilkovich-its-on-you-no-no-its> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Youknowwhatilikeeh, “Wow I'm finally becoming convinced.” Tumblr. <http://youknowwhatilikeeh.tumblr.com/post/115648557279/wow-im-finally-becoming-convinced-that-shameless> (accessed April 28, 2015).

Criticising the criticism of queerbaiting

Disagreement is a part of fan culture, McElroy states and “[what is] commonly experienced is not necessarily commonly understood”, using the example of knowing/not knowing about real events in the British 1980s while watching *Ashes to Ashes* (BBC, 2008-2010), a show set in the 1980s.⁴⁴ Queerbaiting is highly discussed within TV shows’ fandoms and for every person who states that queerbaiting is going on there is someone else claiming that that person is mistaken, deluded and/or indulging in wishful thinking. The article “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting?’” has over 500 comments and some of them are of the opinion that this is not a problem and that queerbaiting is a term made up by unhappy fans wanting two characters to get together even when that is not part of the story. A few commenters agree that not only is the term queerbaiting a *Tumblr*-term, but that queerbaiting itself does not exist outside *Tumblr* because queerbaiting is not considered to be a real practice. There are also discussions about which shows are queerbaiting and which shows are not.⁴⁵

Another example of disagreement is the lengthy *Tumblr* post “Why Once Upon a Time isn’t Queerbaiting Swan Queen” which was posted on “Queer OUAT fans (who do not ship Swan Queen)”, a *Tumblr* blog where anyone in the group can post and which have had over 2000 postings the last year.⁴⁶ This article lists six control questions for what constitutes queerbaiting and then explains how *Once Upon a Time* does not fulfil enough to be accused of queerbaiting. The author mentions TV shows that are considered to answer yes to enough of these questions to constitute queerbaiting, namely *Sherlock*, *Supernatural*, *Teen Wolf* and *Rizzoli & Isles*.

The questions are: 1. Are their [sic] any legit no homo jokes from the couple in question? 2. Can you replace the story with a heterosexual couple and it’s magically, unequivocally a romance? 3. What have those involved in the show said about the relationship? Have they teased it before? 4. The words “I love you” will not be spoken, as that will be confirmation of a main text relationship, 5. Is there a non-threatening secondary queer character thrown in after a duration? 6. Does the show stereotype queer people? These are not the most agreed

⁴⁴ McElroy, p. 127.

⁴⁵ User Sanditar, “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting?’”, (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴⁶ User Ouatqueer-antisq, “Why Once Upon a Time isn’t Queerbaiting Swan Queen.” *Tumblr*. <http://ouatqueer-antisq.tumblr.com/post/94018358604/why-once-upon-a-time-isnt-queerbaiting-swan-queen> (accessed April 28, 2015).

upon criterion and as will be shown, some of these are even contradicted. For example, there are instances where fans accuse TV shows of queerbaiting after one character has told another character of the same sex “I love you”. The accusation is that this is often played off as insincere or a joke, and offers the possibility of a same-sex sexual/romantic relationship, but refuses to grant it. The article indicates that love is sexual and that the queerbaiting is something the producers do with the show as a whole, since minor queer characters will not make up for queerbaiting between main characters. However, in many ways this definition follows earlier ones, including jokes, textual as well as paratextual teasing and hints, and that the queer content that might be there simply is not enough.

There are also discussions on whether fans want something to have queer potential or not. In these cases queerbaiting is discussed from the perspective of being potential queer representation and then whether this is a desired representation or not. For example in the comment thread to the article “Swan Queen: Queerbaiting's Impact on LGBTQ Youth” several of the commenters state that one of the persons in the “Swan Queen” pairing, Regina (The Evil Queen) is a bad representation and role model for queer youth so they would rather that some other character would turn out to be bisexual or homosexual.⁴⁷ The sentiment is then that the hints can remain just hints rather than having them turned into unwanted negative representation.

One cannot simplify criticism towards the term queerbaiting by saying that it is made only by homophobic straight people who do not wish any characters to be queer. Some fans mean that the accusation of queerbaiting is really about straight people fetishizing male homosexuality and want to see more explicit material in their TV shows. Several compare the act of straight girls wanting two (white, traditionally attractive) male characters to get together to straight males enjoying lesbian porn.⁴⁸

When Kristina Busse discusses fans’ exploration of sexuality within fan communities, either through sexualized language while interacting with other fans or writing slash fanfiction (stories written by fans based on the text with homosexual desire between two characters), she notices that a lot of gay, lesbian and bisexual fans find this excluding and sometimes even

⁴⁷ User Kiran, “Swan Queen: Queerbaiting's Impact on LGBTQ Youth”, *officialgaygeeks.com*, <http://www.officialgaygeeks.com/2014/07/swan-queen-queerbaitings-impact.html>, (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁴⁸ User Sanditar, “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting’?”, (accessed April 28, 2015).

homophobic. Not only is it criticized because it is assumed that it is straight (foremost women) playing around with “safe straight mimicry [of homosexual interaction]” without any intention of owning up to such explorations of their sexuality, but also because it is considered to “[trivialize] queer identities and experiences”.⁴⁹

Busse does not use or discuss the term or phenomenon queerbaiting, but the reaction she describes is similar. The critique towards accusations of queerbaiting can then be divided between those who think that those who accuse TV shows of queerbaiting are imagining things and those who think the same people are engaging in behaviour that is just as homophobic and exploitative as queerbaiting is accused of being. Queerbaiting is according to this criticism both imagined and exploitative at the same time.

Queer reading and its critics

Another way of relating to experienced queer content in a text is to see it through the eyes of queer reading. The notion of interpreting non-overt queer characters as queer is nothing new. Fanny Ambjörnsson describes queer reading, to interpret a character as queer, as one more way to look at reality, one reading among many.⁵⁰ Diane Raymond agrees that “there is no unambiguous meaning in a cultural text and that the reception positions that audience members occupy are culturally and historically grounded”.⁵¹ So there is always more than one possible reading and audience members’ different backgrounds will make them see things differently and interpret them in different ways. Ambjörnsson uses Frodo and Sam from *Lord of the Rings* as an example of two men inhabiting queer potential when their relationship verges on the edge between friendship and homoeroticism, even though they are never confirmed as gay.⁵²

Ambjörnsson refers to Doty and his work from 1993 *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. Doty has three ways of queering a text. One is queer influence when the text is produced, the

⁴⁹ Kristina Busse, “My Life is a WIP on My LJ: Slashing, the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performance” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (London/Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 211.

⁵⁰ Ambjörnsson, pp. 167-168.

⁵¹ Diane Raymond. “Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective,” in *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*, eds. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez (London: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 99.

⁵² Ambjörnsson, p. 162.

second is where self-identified LGBTQ people use specific reading-strategies and the third is to adopt a queer reception position. He also states that “unless the text is *about* queers, it seems to me the queerness of mass culture texts is less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production reception”. The text itself “*might* [my emphasis] be seen as a distinct source of queerness”. However, it is important to Doty to point out that these queer readings are just as valid as the straight readings.⁵³

Doty describes how a lot of queer representation, or queer texts, have been so through connotation and that this it to be considered problematic since “connotation allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in the mass culture without admitting to it”, since connotation allows deniability. This could be considered a way to formulate the same criticism that fans that accuse TV producers of queerbaiting have. However, Doty’s point is that the queer reading is allied with the straight one as one more reading and the detected queerness is no less “real” than detected straightness.⁵⁴ This can be compared to Ambjörnsson’s reasoning that there is no main reading or alternative reading, just several readings.

This, to ignore the intentions of the author and focus solely on the reading, belongs to the hermeneutic tradition of New Criticism and literary hermeneutics, where the text is seen as a mirror rather than a window. That is, the text is not a window through which one can see the author and the time of the author, but a mirror in which the readers see themselves through the text and the text through themselves.⁵⁵ The theory of the “The Intentional Fallacy” was made popular by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, two important forces in New Criticism, in 1946, stressing that the intentions of a maker are irrelevant for the work’s meaning.⁵⁶ Wimsatt’s and Beardsley’s thoughts were later continued by the post-structuralists imposing “the death of the author”, meaning that the author and the author’s intentions do not matter, only the relationship between the text and the reader.⁵⁷ The Intentional Fallacy is then

⁵³ Doty, p. xi.

⁵⁴ Doty, pp. xi-xii.

⁵⁵ Porter and Robinson, p. 20.

⁵⁶ Peter Lamarque, “The Intentional Fallacy,” in *Literary Theory and Criticism: an Oxford guide*, ed. Patricia Waugh (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 177.

⁵⁷ Lamarque, p. 183.

considered to include a number of other fallacies such as objectivity, identity, relevancy etcetera and “a loss of grounded meaning in the text”.⁵⁸

The Intentional Fallacy does not deny that intentions can affect the work, but that the only intentions that matters are the ones realized in the work and are they realized in the work, then they can be found in the work itself and the author remains unnecessary.⁵⁹ The anti-intentionalists mean that it is the effects of the work rather than the intended effects that matter. The intentionalists however, argue that sometimes intentions are important to know in order to know how to evaluate a work.⁶⁰ For example, a film cannot be criticized for being a bad action thriller when the intention of the producers was to make a romantic comedy. However, the anti-intentionalists claims that it will be evident from the text itself what sort of form it is, and thus one does not need to know the intentions of the author/creator. It is important to point out that anti-intentionalists do not deny that the author has intentions, but the “author’s own interpretation of a text [is] one among others”.⁶¹

Farah Mendlesohn also uses the term “queer reading”, but in a slightly different way from Ambjörnsson and Doty. Just as for Ambjörnsson, it has to do with the potential attraction between “two characters labelled as inaccessible to each other [...] However, should the attraction become overt, should the homosexual interest become blatant, a queer reading as such is no longer possible, as it depends for its structure on hidden and coded messages”. According to Mendlesohn a queer reading can only be made by someone who is gay or bisexual.⁶² A queer reading is then not just one more reading of a text, but an oppositional/hidden reading unlike the blatant/open one. Mendlesohn’s use of queer is not the same as in queer theory, which objects the binary homosexual/heterosexual, but uses it to describe a power residing with a queer audience. Nevertheless, she conforms to the tradition of queer theory when she describes the interpretation of queer reading to be something outside the norm, or outside what is allowed to be overt. This is also interesting from a perspective that takes power relation into account, since Mendlesohn argues that the queer reading overcomes

⁵⁸ Porter and Robinson, p. 260.

⁵⁹ Lamarque, p. 179.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 179.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 180.

⁶² Farah Mendlesohn, “Surpassing the Love of Vampires; or, Why (and How) a Queer Reading of the Buffy/Willow Relationship is denied,” in *Fighting the Forces. What’s at Stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, eds. Rhonda V. Wilcox and David Lavery (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002) pp. 45-46.

obstacles within the text that makes characters inaccessible to each other. However, for that subversive power to exist the queer reading cannot be considered overt, but be a reading only accessible for gay and bisexual readers. The claiming of the text is then to claim it for the gay/bisexual group rather than fight with straight (and presumable straight people's) readings of the text. This would then solve accusations of queerbaiting from straight people, since those would not be able to make a queer reading, at least not one that could be compared to a queer person's reading. Consequently, only gay and bisexual people who accuse a TV show of queerbaiting.

Mendlesohn argues against that all texts would be open for queer readings, using the example of Buffy and Willow from the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2001/UPN, 2001-2003). She argues that a queer reading is denied though Buffy's emotional wellbeing being depicted as depending on men, the conventions of the romance trope how a romantic pairing often starts out (none of them is fulfilled) and the structure of heterosociality.

Mendlesohn does not mean that queer reading is denied in *Buffy* altogether, but argues that it is possible to construct such relationships, as the one between Buffy and Willow, where a queer reading is actively discouraged and therefore denied.⁶³ The queer reading between Buffy and Willow is not impossible, but it is countered by the structure. Mendlesohn could argue like this without any regards to the author's intentions, instead focusing on the reader's sexuality. However, her reasoning about structures that either encourage or discourage certain readings is closely linked to John Fiske's theories on textual meanings through textual structures. These theories will be discussed further in chapter 3, along with the complications regarding intentions that this sort of reasoning brings.

Even if she uses the term queerbaiting, Fathallah argues that although writers and networks try to "[laugh] off" implied queerness or a queer reading, the mentioning of the possibility has forever disrupted the heteronormative text.⁶⁴ Therefore, since the suggestion has been made that the text is not 100 % heterosexual the text can never go back to be just heterosexual. A part of queer theory is that it is anti-essentialist and against the binary homosexual/heterosexual, therefore every hint of challenging these categories could be considered to enable a queer reading. Therefore a character or situation between two characters that are

⁶³ Mendlesohn, p. 60.

⁶⁴ Fathallah, p. 9.

open to subversive/queer readings (which would then arguably with Doty's and Ambjörnsson's theories be all characters) is a part of anti-binary queerness. Raymond challenges this, using the example of the trope of the "gay pretender" (a character temporarily pretending to be gay because it is in his/her interest) writing that even though one could see this as non-binary "such a reading, I suggest, is possible yet unpersuasive".⁶⁵ Her critique is then similar to Mendlesohn's reasoning regarding Buffy and Willow. Raymond also analyses the comedy trope of "straight-mistaken-for-gay" and concludes that "[w]hat makes for the humour in these situations is, at least partly, the fact that the viewers know that the character's heterosexuality is never in doubt".⁶⁶ This is then much like when producers are accused of queerbaiting and using "no homo"-jokes to re-establish heterosexuality after a queer hint. Using Larry Gross theories on power, Raymond states that since "representation attaches to power, then invisibility evidences the powerlessness of the queer community".⁶⁷ She does not trust subversive or queer readings to provide that power. These readings are then considered to compete with a dominant meaning and Raymond opposes the idea that there would just be different readings.

Because even though Raymond argues along with Ambjörnsson that there are always several readings of a text, she still points to difference in value in different readings. While discussing the increasing numbers of openly gay/lesbian characters and such topics being discussed on mainstream television she states: "Thus, where once glbt viewers had to resort to oppositional or subversive readings [...] such readings seem quaint and tame by today's television standards".⁶⁸ Subversive readings are then according to Raymond not up to par with "the real thing", which would then be confirmed LGBTQ characters.

The blogger Kate on the lesbian website *Autostraddle* criticizes what she perceives as queerbaiting in *Once Upon a Time*, writing that despite what readings can be extracted with the help of queer theory, "you and I both know that my gay feminist reading is not at all the intention of its creators and that what's actually happening on the screen is a lot less friendly to an LGBTQ audience. The thing is, representation matters, and one of the worst things that

⁶⁵ Raymond, p. 107.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 102.

this kind of narrative does is that it expects an LGBTQ audience to be satisfied with the bare minimum”.⁶⁹ Once again there are the returning concepts of queering, intention and representation. This is a similar rhetoric and reasoning to the one Devon Maloney is using in her article “Sherlock Isn’t the Fan-Friendly Show You Think It Is.”⁷⁰

What Kate argues is that queer reading cannot represent. The logic here is that if what is being represented is only a question of how the reader interprets the text then surely everything has the potential to represent anything we want it to and the other way around, every meaning could be denied in favour for the opposite. It is then turned into a question of who has the power to express and spread their interpretation. Ambjörnsson’s theory about several equally valid interpretations and readings solves this problem, but it seems like to many of the fans, this is not enough. As Raymond argues, in the fandoms and among LGBTQ viewers there is little trust in the political power of queer reading.

When those accusing TV shows for queerbaiting criticize those arguing for queer reading, it is not necessarily because they oppose queer reading as a practice. In the next section I will analyse how the debate on queerbaiting treats TV shows from a time when queer representation was not possible the same way it is considered to be now. Queer coding encouraging queer readings is here considered to have been subversive and powerful because of its cultural and historical context, even if the same TV show would by the same people be accused of queerbaiting, had it been produced today.

Before there was queerbaiting there was . . . ?

The idea of queerbaiting is a fairly recent phenomenon. Though Doty points out in 1993 how queer tendencies are being exploited, the concept with the word attached to it has been coined by fandoms during the last decade. However, queer readings are far older than that, as is the discussion of homosexually coded characters in TV shows.

⁶⁹ User Kate, “And They Lived Heterosexually Ever After: Why I’m Not Recapping Once Upon A Time Anymore”, *Autostraddle*, April 17, 2014, <http://www.autostraddle.com/and-they-lived-heterosexually-ever-after-why-im-not-recapping-once-upon-a-time-anymore-233838/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁷⁰ Devon Maloney, “Sherlock Isn’t the Fan-Friendly Show You Think It Is,” *Wired*, January 24, 2014 <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2014/01/sherlock-fandom> (accessed October 18, 2014).

Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg analyse the TV show *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (ABC, 1996-2000/The WB, 2000-2003), claiming that the TV show has several storylines that refers to confessing to be a witch as “coming out of the closet”. When the protagonist Sabrina in several episodes “comes out” to friends and family, Projansky and Berg see this as a metaphor for coming out as gay and that the storyline encourages love and acceptance.⁷¹ The coming out of the closet-metaphor is widely spread, but not always comment upon. In his analysis of *Harry Potter* Jenkins notices that “Rowling is mercilessly making fun of the Dursleys, Harry’s adopted family, [who] are totally uncomfortable with his special abilities and kept him literary closeted”.⁷² Jenkins do not suggest that this is a metaphor for homosexuality, but perhaps Projansky and Berg would, at least that according to one reading Harry could be considered gay-coded.

Sabrina’s two aunts Zelda and Hilda are portrayed as two sisters who date men, but Projansky and Berg also claim them as lesbian coded as two women who live and raise a child (Sabrina) together. They share and plan their life together and are sometimes mistaken for a couple, though denying it in dialogue with one them stating that they are “sister, not an alternative couple”. Projansky and Berg are positive to what they consider is the TV show’s opening up for a possible lesbian reading, referring to Doty’s theory that the more a TV show insists on heterosexuality while displaying a homo-social relationship, the more material there will be for a queer reading.⁷³

These are similar strategies to the ones used by those who claim that the producers of *Once Upon a Time* queerbait with the characters Emma and Regina, the biological mother and the adoptive mother of Henry who they both have referred to as “our son” and he calls them both “mom”. The initial conflict in the TV show is a custody battle between the two women who fans’ have claimed are a metaphor for a divorced lesbian couple. Later episodes have had them join forces to create powerful magic and together save their son. Despite the similarities, I have not found any articles or blogs accusing *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* of queerbaiting. Perhaps the show did not have enough fans to create the interest necessary for an internet

⁷¹ Sarah Projansky and Leah R. Vande Berg, “Sabrina, the Teenage . . . ? : Girls, Witches, Mortals, and the Limitations of Prime-Time Feminism” in *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. Elyce Raw Helford (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 19.

⁷² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, p. 197.

⁷³ Projansky and Berg, pp. 23-24.

discussion. Though some of the TV shows discussed in this thesis began during a time before social media had been developed, many of them have induced internet community discussions retroactively. In *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*'s case, the lack of debate can also be due to that the show is considered to belong to a time before queerbaiting, such as some regard *Xena: Warrior Princess* (Syndication, 1995-2001).

Xena: Warrior Princess (which from now on will be abbreviated to *X:WP*) is about two women, Xena and Gabrielle, who go on adventures together and share a deep emotional bond. In discussions regarding queerbaiting the TV show is sometimes mentioned and at times accused of being an early case of queerbaiting.⁷⁴ However, several articles and postings defend the TV show, sometimes claiming that the queer relationship between Gabrielle and Xena is overt in the text, but more often that the TV show did what the rules of censorship allowed during the 1990s.⁷⁵

In her analysis of *X:WP* Elyce Rae Helford analyses how the TV show has been loved by popular press and fans, but also by its feminist and LGBTQ audience for “alleged feminism and progressive sexual politics” in the form of Xena and her ambiguous sexuality.⁷⁶ Helford states that “*X:WP* is an excellent example of a polysemic text” open to multiple interpretations, but admits that while many interpreters have seen lesbian desire in Xena it is not because of “overt expression or demonstration but relatively subtle hints”. She mentions elements that she considers enable (and another scholar means encourage) a lesbian reading,

⁷⁴ see for example User Kiran, “Swan Queen: Queerbaiting’s Impact on LGBTQ Youth” (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁷⁵ see for example User Rose, “How Do We Solve A Problem Like ‘Queerbaiting’?: On TV’s Not-So-Subtle Gay Subtext” *autostraddle.com*, June 26, 2013, <http://www.autostraddle.com/how-do-we-solve-a-problem-like-queerbaiting-on-tvs-not-so-subtle-gay-subtext-182718/> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Xenainnuendoisland, “Do you think Xena would be considered queerbaiting?” Tumblr. <http://xenainnuendoisland.tumblr.com/post/88493045613/do-you-think-xena-would-be-considered> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Emclainable, “so I was thinking.” Tumblr. <http://emclainable.tumblr.com/post/94377191640/so-i-was-thinking-of-watching-the-xena-warrior> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Iwriteaboutfeminism, “Xena: WP’s Xena/Gabrielle ship was my first.” Tumblr. <http://iwriteaboutfeminism.tumblr.com/post/96744406753/xena-wps-xena-gabrielle-ship-was-my-first> (accessed April 28, 2015),

Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “No, ‘Hannibal’ isn’t queerbaiting - that’s just gay subtext,” *The Daily Dot*, May 8, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/geek/hannibal-queerbaiting-gay-subtext/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁷⁶ Elyce Rae Helford, “Feminism, Queer Studies, and the Sexual Politics of *Xena: Warrior Princess*” in *Fantasy Girls: Gender in the New Universe of Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. Elyce Raw Helford (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 135.

such as hugs, kisses, sexual innuendos and declarations of love. As in Projansky and Berg's example with Sabrina's aunts Zelda and Hilda, the fact that Xena and her sidekick Gabrielle have relationships with men is not a hinder for a lesbian or bisexual reading.⁷⁷ Helford explains the choice of subtextual rather than overt representation when discussing it in the light of another TV show contemporary with *X: WP*, *Ellen* (ABC, 1994-1998). *Ellen*'s main character comes out as a lesbian at the end of season 4, but after that episode aired the TV show suffered great critique from conservative groups, and that together with declining viewing numbers made ABC cancel the show after season 5. *X: WP* is then considered a good alternative which has the lesbian subtext, but stayed non-overt so that it would not suffer the same risk of being cancelled.⁷⁸ Helford's theory supports the one being presented by several fans discussing queerbaiting, that *X: WP* did as much queer (or at least lesbian/bisexual) representation as the time allowed.

Helford herself does not mention queerbaiting or suggests that fans would be upset that the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle was not overt enough. It is then not a discussion on the producers' intent as much as it follows a focus on the reader-text relationship. She describes how the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle has been thoroughly discussed by fans on the internet. Some fans gather all moments with subtextual lesbian hints and use it as proof that Xena and Gabrielle are together, while others oppose the very idea. Helford quotes examples of what she states are clearly homophobic fans who claim that the very idea that Xena and Gabrielle would be a couple is "stupid", "wishful thinking", "cruel and offensive" and a queer reading is then in Doty's words considered to be "delusional attempts to see something that isn't there".⁷⁹ It resembles a great deal of the critique against those who claim queerbaiting is taking place, but the debate has very little focus on the producers' intentions and far more on what can be said to be found in the text itself.

Helford describes a moment from the show where she states that "'subtext' plainly becomes 'text'" in a moment where Xena and Gabrielle sing about how they must stop fighting with each other and as Helford quotes them sing "turn again to love".⁸⁰ She goes through various

⁷⁷ Ibid., pp. 138-139.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 141.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

ways how to read Xena and Gabrielle as a queer couple, but in the end also criticizes it for how that queer relationship then is portrayed, as a, in her interpretation, violent gender-traditional stereotypical yet mainstreamed butch/femme relationship.⁸¹ Again the possibility of representation is not all that is at stake, but also what sort of representation is in that case portrayed. If realized, is what is being hinted a welcomed representation of a lesbian/bisexual/gay/trans/queer character?

Some fans in these discussions about characters' sexuality do not seem very interested in a debate at all, but rather how these characters' relationship are portrayed. The point is that the matter of sexuality is already decided because it is obvious what is there, thus the discussion of whether someone is gay or not is made redundant. For example "After the last episode of Vikings there is nothing anyone can do to convince me this isn't a gay love story".⁸² Regarding the same couple another fan lists "Athelstan and Ragnar love each other" under "Obvious things that should not be questioned".⁸³ This is very similar to Richard Dyer's discussion on portrayal of homosexual characters in film. There is no discussion on the homosexual identity of the characters, instead Dyer quickly establishes that "we [can] at once and without difficulty identify the men second and fourth [in the picture] from the right as homosexual".⁸⁴ Dyer is not saying that homosexuality does always show, but that gay representation has taken place throughout the history of film and television through signs and typification. "There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments [...] that bespeaks gayness".⁸⁵ If these signs and this typification can be found, then what takes place before the audience's eyes is gay representation. This is very much in line with New Criticism and literary hermeneutics. The author's intentions are not even discussed because Dyer knows what he sees. The anti-intentionalists mean that the text's meaning is found in the text and in the knowledge of

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 158.

⁸² User Fullonmonet, "After the last episodes of Vikings." Tumblr.
<http://fullonmonet.tumblr.com/post/117031252951/after-the-last-episode-of-vikings-there-is-nothing> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁸³ User Teacupsandreigningseasons, "Obvious things that should not be questioned." Tumblr.
<http://teacupsandreigningseasons.tumblr.com/post/116758792831/obvious-things-that-should-not-be-questioned-the>, (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁸⁴ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on representation* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 22.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

conventions.⁸⁶ Dyer's typification and signs can then be considered to be part of conventions regarding gay representation. An effect of this anti-intentionalistic reasoning is that the textual meaning, which is separated from the authorial meaning, can change as time goes by and connotations and society changes.⁸⁷ According to this, Dyer's connotations might not last forever and what he calls a homosexual character might in another context and time not be a homosexual character.

To illustrate the way a discussion can shift between different perspectives one can look at a discussion thread on the *Tumblr* blog "Textual Deviance".⁸⁸ It starts with a fan writing that "I know for a certainty [sic.] Ragnar [a character from the TV show *Vikings*] isn't gay or bi canon-wise". The fan is thus using the same sort of "It is obvious" – rhetoric as Dyer. Another fan replies that "unless you ARE Hirst [the TV show creator and scriptwriter], you know nothing". The argument is then that the author owns the text and it is the author's intentions that decide the text's meaning and thus the fan follows a tradition this thesis will look closer at through E.D. Hirsch. Hirsch's theory is that the meaning is owned by the author, no matter what dis/pleasure readers find or how the readers interpret the work. This will be further explained in the section "The producer's meaning".

The second fan is being answered by a third fan writing "even Hirst wouldn't know, not really. I mean, the author is dead and all that - especially in a collaborative endeavour like a TV show. I mean, even if Hirst said he was straight, I'm pretty sure Travis [the actor playing Ragnar] would disagree". The third person is mentioning the death of the author, that the author does not decide the meaning, but with the main argument that a TV show is such a collaborative work that Hirst would not be able to have absolute control over his work. So this is still having a hermeneutic approach that focuses on the creators rather than the readers. This is being answered by a fourth fan discussing actors' and directors' intentions along with Hirst's in the light of Hirst's biography and Hirst's earlier works. In the language of New Criticism, this could be considered to go back from seeing the text as a mirror to seeing the

⁸⁶ Lamarque, p. 180.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁸⁸ User Textualdeviance, "I know for a certainty." Tumblr.
<http://textualdeviance.tumblr.com/post/117065138763/oneiriad-starrose17-talktotheseer-i> (accessed April 28, 2015).

text as a window (to Hirst and Hirst's earlier works). Even though these are all different hermeneutic traditions, they are mixed and used as arguments in the same debate.

Quite evidently, the issue of queer readings as well as of queerbaiting raises a wider set of questions regarding intention, context, subtext, textual understanding, and interpretations. Since the Russian formalists and New Criticism, such questions have been discussed in various ways in relation to the literary text – discussions which were adopted and adapted into scholarship on the moving image (film and television). Modern literary theory can be divided into three stages: Romanticism with its focus on the author, New Criticism with its focus in the text and reception theory with its focus on the reader. Of course, within hermeneutics all three parts have to be considered, but different theories often emphasise one of the three.⁸⁹ Scholars such as John Fiske has continued the Russian formalist tradition focusing on the text itself, while others such as William Evans are far more interested in the reader. In the following section I am analysing several of these traditions, focusing on how they oppose, agree with and complement each other.

⁸⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden/Oxford/Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), p. 64.

Scholars discussing the possibilities of (queer) readings and fans' queering

Fiske claims that the audiences' created meanings are related to their social experiences. However, "a white hero shooting a Hispanic villain can never be anything outside those terms", the situation can be interpreted in different ways, but it cannot not be that the Hispanic villain is shot by the white hero. According to Fiske there is always a dominant meaning of a text, which attempts to signify a closed reading, but a text is opened up for a polysemic reading through different strategies such as irony, metaphors, jokes, contradictions and excess. The openness can then be for example to explain why something is happening or why a character is acting a certain way. Different viewers with different experiences will interpret the text in different ways, see different things and here Fiske challenges Screen Theory which suggest a hierarchy of discourses and meanings and that the audience "knows" how a text is supposed to be interpreted, the preferred meaning. Fiske contradicts himself here, since of course one could question characterizations such as "hero", "villain", "Hispanic" and "white", though perhaps Fiske considers these to be obvious within the framework of the film or TV show.

Irony stresses that everything cannot be taken at face value since the "unstated meanings take precedence over the stated ones". Metaphor is when two discourses exist simultaneously where one phrasing is describing something else and though one meaning is often preferred, that meaning can never be enforced, giving the audience margins to interpret what is happening. Joke works in much the same way in a collision of discourses and its openness originates in the viewer's freedom to interpret a joke and understand why it is (not) funny. The perhaps most important strategy for the polysemic text, according to Fiske, is contradictions. Texts always have several meanings and contradictions and readers can go into dialogue with the texts in a number of ways, which is essential for the producers since a text's popularity is built on unresolved contradictions that allow different interpretations. Contradictions can work for example through excess when hyperbole creates camp and a sort of self-parody that can either be taken at face value or as a joke or irony. There is also semiotic excess, meaning that there is always too much meaning for the dominant structures of preferred meaning to contain, leading to the necessity of multiple readings. What is important is that all these strategies can be recognized and used by the audience who can then

see how several readings exist simultaneously.⁹⁰ Of course, this power can be questioned as for example earlier mentioned Kate from *Autostraddle*, who states that her gay feminist readings do not affect intention, content or political power and though she can make her own (for her) pleasurable reading, something else is being shown on her TV screen. Before mentioned Raymond's analysis of comedy trope "gay pretender" is a clear example of when a joke can be exposed as not funny because of what it suggests. When Raymond criticizes the comedy tropes of a character being mistaken for being gay and/or pretending to be gay for situational advantage, she expresses doubts that the semiotic excess would lead to any reading that could challenge the dominant meaning, which would then be the meaning that the structures support the most.

In the chapter "Character Reading" in his book *Television Culture*, Fiske presents a number of ways that a viewer can read a text. His two main categories are realism where the character is read as an individual mirroring someone and is to be understood as someone who could exist in real life, and structural reading where the character is to be regarded as a structure and representation of social and ideological values. There is the possibility for the viewer to shift between the modes of reading, but Fiske has no discussion on how these modes can contradict each other or what happens when readers get their readings opposed by someone else.

Despite Fiske's claim of several readings of a text, it is clear that he considers a lot to be almost objectively drawn from the text. For example, what characters say and do, but also character traits such as tough/soft, class belonging etcetera.⁹¹ Sexuality is not listed among Fiske's detectable traits, neither is it mentioned when he lists ways of identification traits through which a reader can read and relate to a character such as "nation, race, gender, power, work, etc."⁹² This could be due to that Fiske's *Television Culture* was published in 1987, a time where scholars focused more on gender and class rather than on sexuality. However, these parts were not changed for the second edition, which was published in 2011.⁹³

⁹⁰ Fiske, pp. 84-91.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁹² Ibid., p. 178.

⁹³ John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 160, 179.

To understand the concept of queerbaiting in these terms one can look at one of the examples of what has been considered queerbaiting mentioned in the article on “Queer Baiting” on the user-generated website *Fanlore wiki!* “Fanlore is a collaborative site by, for, and about fans and fan communities that create and consume fanworks” and has as of April 21 almost 34 000 articles which have undergone almost 590 000 edits.⁹⁴ As an example of queerbaiting, the article mentions one episode from the TV show *House M.D.*⁹⁵ Two male main characters, House and Wilson, are living together and in one episode a female neighbour, who they are both portrayed to be sexually/romantically interested in, assumes them to be gay. To stop the other to succeed with the woman they both portray the other as inaccessible by pretending to be the other one’s boyfriend leading to many jokes and misunderstandings. At the end of the episode when House is alone with the woman at a restaurant, Wilson shows up and proposes to House, making the woman equally inaccessible to both of them. With Fiske’s reasoning this episode creates a polysemic reading through jokes and irony (the two men trying to get together with a woman by pretending to be sexually interested in men, thus trying to secure heterosexual interests by pretending to be homosexual. Bisexuality is not mentioned as an option). The proposal is at face value a proposal of marriage and declaration of love (Wilson declares to the whole restaurant “I love this man and I am not wasting another moment of my life denying that” and then goes down on one knee), but is being polysemic and falls more under Raymond’s comedy trope “gay pretender” when the narrative frames it as insincere and more of a parody. The excess opens up for more than one reading and it is the extra meaning that, with Fiske’s reasoning of metaphor and parody, destroys the face-valued one.

This is also an example of a case where the words “I love [you]” are spoken, but it is still considered to be a case of queerbaiting. This opposes then the criteria from the earlier mentioned *Tumblr* post “Why Once Upon a Time isn’t Queerbaiting Swan Queen” that claims that when queerbaiting occurs the words “I love you” remains unspoken. However, there are “I love you”-scenes between characters of the same sex which are not necessarily supposed to be interpreted as insincere, but are still deemed problematic. One example is the TV show *Vikings* where one man tells another man “I love you” without it being framed as a joke. Nevertheless, some fans still criticized the show for killing off one of these characters within the episode, suggesting that the sincere declaration of love was only allowed to occur because

⁹⁴ Fanlore, “Main Page,” http://fanlore.org/wiki/Main_Page (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁹⁵ Fanlore, “Queer Baiting,” fanlore.org/wiki/Queer_Baiting (accessed April 28, 2015).

it would be followed by the death, preventing any chance of future queer moments between the characters.⁹⁶

According to Fiske, texts are open even to “meanings not preferred by the textual structure”. However, rather than seeing it as if the texts contained several meanings, one should according to Fiske see it as though all texts contain certain structures that “prefer some meanings and close others off”, much like Mendlesohn discusses queering in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* when she claims that the queering of Buffy and Willow can be made, but is denied by the text. The reader and the text are equally contradictory in their polysemy leading to multiple possible readings and one meaning is created, the viewer is often aware if s/he adapts a less preferred reading, or have what Fiske calls “awkward” readings and “misreadings of the text”.⁹⁷

To interpret a character’s sexuality is to follow the tradition of realism. As Fiske puts it, realism is when “the text provides us with accurate and adequate metonymic pointers to the characteristics of the person being portrayed: we, the viewers, then call upon our life experience of understanding of real people [...] to fill out these characteristics in our imagination so that we make the character into a ‘real’ person whom we ‘know’ and who has a ‘life’ outside the text”.⁹⁸

The question of queerbaiting can be considered to be more of structural and discourse theory. “[A character] is seen as a textual device, constructed, like other textual devices, from discourse”. Fiske puts the two approaches realism and structuralism in contrast to one another, meaning that the first is more in line with a dominant reading while the other is more of a oppositional reading, though mentions the possibility of a mix or alternation between them depending on “the political orientation of the viewer”.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ See for example User bubblewrapstargirl, “Athelstan and Ragnar.” Tumblr. <http://bubblewrapstargirl.tumblr.com/post/114796242132/jensens-little-spoon-athelstan-and-ragnar-had-so> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User 50 shades of otp, “My OTP.” Tumblr. <http://50-shades-of-otp.tumblr.com/post/116741087916/my-otp-doesnt-always-becoma-canon-but-when-it> (accessed April 28, 2015).

⁹⁷ Fiske, 1989, pp. 67-71.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 153-154.

In the discussion on queerbaiting one can see both kinds of readings intermingle in fans' analyses of characters' sexualities. The realist approach is involved when trying to analyse a character's sexuality, while the accusation that queerbaiting is a homophobic practice that denies representation is more of a structural analysis.

William A. Evans' article "The Interpretive Turn in Media Research Innovation, Iteration, or Illusion?" is from about the same time as Fiske's *Television Culture*, but while Fiske's focus on the text, Evans focuses on the audience and different approaches to view the audience reception of and relationship to media. In the article he compares three different ways of analysing the audiences' relations to a text. The three are interpretivism, structuralism and gratificationism, and Evans concludes that the interpretivism complements the other two rather than opposes them. Structuralists' biggest focus is how social structures lead the audience to a hegemonic interpretation. Interpretivists do not necessarily oppose the idea of a dominant hegemonic reading, but stress the polysemy of the text where resistant/oppositional readings are also in play.¹⁰⁰ According to Evans, interpretivism and gratificationism have a lot in common; "interpretivists have positioned audience members as cultural masters, aware of the implicit ideology of media content and frequently capable of ('playfully') resisting or negotiating the media message in ways consistent with their own interests [...]" Gratificationists also see media use as a conscious decision based on the capacity of media offerings to satisfy individual needs".¹⁰¹

These three theories about the audience can begin to answer a lot of questions, but one could ask why problems with e.g. representation occurs if audiences can bend the media after personal interests and individual needs. Evans analyses the term "interpretive community", stressing that "differences in interpretation arise from differences in the assumptions that underlie different 'interpretive communities', rather than from differences between individuals".¹⁰² Interpretivists sometimes refer to a dominant hegemonic reading that is being challenged by oppositional or subversive readings. However, with "sociostructural analyses of media texts and audiences, a unilateral preferred or dominant meaning cannot be presumed" because it shows how the reading can depend on for example class and then within different

¹⁰⁰ William A. Evans, "The Interpretive Turn in Media Research Innovation, Iteration, or Illusion?" *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 7:2, 1990, p. 149.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 156.

classes there are different dominant readings.¹⁰³ Another critique against the interpretivist theory of hegemonic vs. oppositional readings is that tools to define hegemonic/dominant and oppositional/subversive readings are lacking.¹⁰⁴ Fiske is then clearly a part of interpretivism and gratificationism, arguing that the readers have the power to make individual interpretations within the structures of the text and make the text pleasurable for themselves.

Fiske's theories are close to Paul Ricœur's theory of hermeneutic phenomenology, which is inspired by Russian formalists.¹⁰⁵ Ricœur argues that "the speaker's meaning is found within the discourse, by means of the sentence structure".¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Ricœur discusses how texts have "a surplus of meaning", using metaphor as an example of more meaning than the words themselves.¹⁰⁷ This is very similar to how Fiske does not discuss a text's (film's/TV show's) correct meaning, but rather the structures creating meaning. Fiske also uses the example of metaphor to explain how several meanings can exist within one text and, just like Ricœur, Fiske argues that these meanings can be put in a hierarchical order. The notion of hierarchy of meanings and validity raises the problem of criterion for that sort of grading system (what is a good/probable/authorial interpretation?), leading back to textual intention, suggesting that the correct meaning/s of a text is/are still linked to the author's intention.¹⁰⁸ This is then the same critique constructed against the interpretivists, that there are no satisfying criterion how to divide meanings into hegemonic/dominant and oppositional/subversive readings. Despite the strict focus on the relationship between reader and text and the "the author is dead"-attitude following New Criticism, one seems to never be able to escape the author completely.

This is a problem that the likes of Doty and those who defend queer reading by calling it just one more reading avoid when they claim that all readings are equal, that is that a queer reading is equally valid as a straight reading. However, this does not mean that Doty is a sociostructuralist, since he argues for individuals' different equally valid interpretations rather than a group's dominant meaning.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 159.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 160.

¹⁰⁵ Porter and Robinson, p. 118.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 126.

Far from everyone is sympathetic towards a queer reading of a certain product. While discussing comics Danny Fingeroth mentions the “speculations [...] whether Batman and Robin are a gay fantasy, and what that means as subtext” but states that “such a fantasy and its meanings are pretty much in the eyes of the beholder. Certainly, one would be hard pressed to say that this was the intention of the characters’ original creators”.¹⁰⁹ He then goes on to analyse the fact that Batman chooses to let Robin help him fight crime, something that Fingeroth describes as “a much more serious byproduct of [Batman and Robin’s] relationship”.¹¹⁰ This is not described as a fantasy in the eyes of the beholder but something in the text, perhaps according to Fingeroth more in line with the creators’ intentions.

When Fingeroth later touches upon the interpretation of romantic interest between male superheroes and their male sidekicks, this is dismissed as homophobic ways of accusing comics for “gay-brainwashing”.¹¹¹ When it comes to female superheroes, Fingeroth stresses that it is accepted for a female superhero to be gay, not least due to that “many men are titillated by lesbianism”, but that even gay superheroes have to be sexy in order to appeal to straight boys and men.¹¹² However, he does not mention any examples of gay superheroes. He mentions Xena as a “notable exception” because she unlike other female superheroes does not have a boyfriend or husband, but does not establish her sexuality.¹¹³ However, as has been stated by Helford, Xena is throughout the TV show romantically and sexually connected to several men.

So in Fingeroth’s analysis, the creators’ intentions are brought into the discussion and deemed important. The interpretation that superheroes and their sidekicks such as Batman and Robin would be gay is according to him either a subtextual fantasy clashing with the creators’ meaning or homophobic conspiracy theory. Consequently, Fingeroth dismisses other interpretations than the ones he appears to have in mind, where the creators never meant for the male superheroes to be gay and Batman is straight.

¹⁰⁹ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (London/New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 67-68.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

In his *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, Doty describes the queerness of a text as something that can happen during production, during readings by “self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals [and] queers” and during readings made by people adopting a queer view. Doty opposes what he calls “‘queerer than thou’ attitude[s]”, defining queerness in his use of the term as “any expression that can be marketed as contra-, non-, or anti-straight” and queers are then people who are contra-, non- or anti-straight.¹¹⁴

His discussion on queer readings is about texts where a character has not been defined or confirmed as contra-, non-, or anti-straight (Doty does not define the differences between the three). These are the same sort of texts that have been accused of queerbaiting, where a character is regarded to have been hinted but not stated as being queer. When Doty states that queering a text where the queerness is not stated through characters is an act made through production and/or reception, he is turning queerness into a question for producers and audience rather than the text itself. This also crucial for the discussion of queerbaiting where the debate often relates to whether it is a product of the producers or the audience. Indeed, Doty is touching upon the same criticism used by fans who accuse producers of queerbaiting when Doty himself accuses mass culture for its bad treatment of queerness and “the shadowy realm of connotation to which much of [mass cultural queerness] has been relegated. Notorious for its ability to suggest things without saying them for certain, connotation has been the representational and interpretive closet of mass cultural queerness for far too long”.¹¹⁵

However, instead of reaching the same conclusion as those fans who accuse TV shows of queerbaiting through connotations and hints without owning up to what is being represented, Doty criticizes the way queer *readings* (rather than the hints themselves) have been treated, stressing that all readings are valid. Unlike Fiske, Doty opposes the idea that some (queer) readings would be “*sub-textual, sub-cultural, alternative* readings, or pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn’t there”, agreeing with and quoting Michael Warner: “you can’t eliminate queerness, says queer theory, or screen it out, it is everywhere”.¹¹⁶ Fiske does not claim that some readings are invalid, but Doty argumentation opposes Fiske’s reasoning

¹¹⁴ Doty, pp. xi, xv.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. xi.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. xii-xiii.

that some a texts' structures open up for some readings while trying to close off others, leading to a hierarchy of meanings. Doty is very clear on that "[q]ueer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or wilful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audience all along".¹¹⁷

The producer's meaning

In their book *Practices of looking* Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright discuss the creation of meaning in images, pointing out that no image has a meaning in itself but that meaning is created through a complicated web of social context, "(1) how viewers interpret or experience the image and (2) the context of which the image is seen". Regarding a producer's intended meaning, Sturken and Cartwright states that there is almost always a preferred meaning harboured by the producer. However, they do not consider it very useful to analyse the producers' preferred meanings, since it can be difficult to find out and may not coincide with the audience's. Furthermore, the audience's meaning depends on context, such as time and viewers, which creates different meanings for different audiences, all to be considered equally valid according to Sturken and Cartwright.¹¹⁸ This is then very much in line with the theories that include the elimination of the author.

It is also very much a comparison of meanings and if the producer's and the viewer's meanings differ, then the solution is that no meaning is more valid than the other, much like Doty and Ambjörnsson stress in their writings. However, queerbaiting is not an audience arguing that their meaning is more valid than the producers'. Queerbaiting is about an audience claiming to know the producers' preferred meaning and accusing them of lying about it or not standing for it. That this is an issue for that audience suggests that even if the producers are not the only ones who can create meaning, they seem to be given the power to deny and correct wrong/false meanings. People accusing producers of queerbaiting do argue for their interpretations and in that sense do not give producers the power to deny meanings. The criticism is then more towards the producers who are considered to have a preferred meaning, but then denying it. To put it simple, they are accused of lying. They are accused of

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 16.

¹¹⁸ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of looking: an introduction to visual culture* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 45-47.

lying intentionally and disregarding alternative interpretations, interpretations which are not so alternative, since the fans who share them assume these are the preferred interpretations and thereby the intended interpretations.

Producers' meaning does not necessarily redeem the text. Helford mentions one of *Xena: Warrior Princess*'s producers who on several occasions confirmed that Xena and Gabrielle were not meant to be heterosexual. However, Helford considers the praising of the show exaggerated when it despite intention did little for queer representation since "subtlety and subtext sell while directness (being out) does not".¹¹⁹ She thus criticizes the TV show's poor queer content, despite that one of the producers confirmed and claimed queer meaning. This is another example of when someone finds that what is being shown and what producers claim is being shown are not the same thing. Helford does not accuse the producer of lying, but states that the intention did not correspond with the result. This is then in line with anti-intentionalists who say that the only intentions that matter are the ones realized in the text and those who are not realized do not matter. Helford does not blame the producer for not realizing her intentions in the text, but criticizes the text itself.

The great focus on the producer or author found in the discussion on queerbaiting belongs to the same hermeneutical tradition as E.D. Hirsch, following the stressing of the authors' intended meaning, which was so important to phenomenologist Edmund Husserl. The theory does not deny several interpretations, but the "meaning" is the author's intended meaning. Meaning is created in the intention and will remain even if the authors die or forget their intended meaning.¹²⁰ According to this theory one has to consider the time the author lives/lived in and "probable authorial meaning" has to be considered. The text does then belong to the author and its meaning cannot be appropriated by readers.¹²¹ Consequently, the author cannot change the meaning either, since the meaning is fixed with the intention the author had when the text was created. So even if producers deny a certain interpretation, fans can still claim that they had a certain intention when the work was created, which is then the real meaning of the work. The debate points to an even more complex "author", since a film or a TV show have several people who can affect what is being produced, such as producers,

¹¹⁹ Helford, p. 144.

¹²⁰ Eagleton, p. 58.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 59.

scriptwriters, directors and actors. The idea of the probable authorial meaning is in agreement with Ricœur's idea that increased probability increases the validity of an interpretation, hence creating a hierarchy of meanings.¹²²

The critique against an accusation of queerbaiting on the grounds that producers have not intended to portray two characters as sexually/romantically involved can also be considered to follow Hirsch. Hirsch separates meaning, which is the authors' intended meaning, from significance, which is the way a reader can make the text significant in a new context.¹²³ Fans accusing TV shows of queerbaiting or fans making queer readings can then be considered to change the significance of the text, but they cannot change its meaning.

The criticism towards Hirsch is that meaning is not as stable as he suggests it to be and that it is hard to give any good reason, except to see it as a created norm of interpretation, why the author's meaning should have so much authority, and the meaning of words do not necessarily correlate with the intention of the person who uttered them.¹²⁴

Jonathan Gray might here argue that even though there is no good reason why authors' intended meanings have precedence, the fact that it works as a norm and is accepted in practice is enough for it to be true. Just like Helford, Gray does not necessarily equalize a producer's expressed intended meaning with a text's preferred meanings or, in Fiske's terms, what structures the text has. Nevertheless, unlike Sturken and Cartwright, Gray seem to deem it important to pay attention to producers' preferred and intended meanings, if for no other reason than that those are meanings that many fans show an interest in.

Gray analyses how the audience is guided to interpret a certain text in a certain way, and guided to what he calls a "preferred reading", by the producers and distributors through trailers, promos, posters and other paratexts. "In short, promos offer 'proper' and 'preferred' interpretations".¹²⁵ Since trailers and posters and the likes must be considered to be carefully constructed paratexts, this assumes that there is a preferred meaning that the producers and

¹²² Porter and Robinson, p. 123.

¹²³ Eagleton, p. 58.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

¹²⁵ Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers and Other Media Paratexts* (London/New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 72.

distributors want and work hard for the audience to make out of the paratexts, and then again when the audience later watches the film/TV show. Fans discussing queer readings and queerbaiting discuss paratexts such as trailers and promos. This marketing aspect becomes particularly interesting when it comes to the concept of queerbaiting, since the accusation of queerbaiting is an accusation of not living up to a promise and a promo can be considered to be a promise of what will happen.

For example, several fans discussing a promo for *Vikings* on *Tumblr* note that in the quick editing between characters and clips of what will happen during the season, the promo shows King Ecbert asking someone to be his mistress and then cuts to Athelstan, one of the younger male characters who has had a lot of close interaction with King Ecbert. The reactions vary between hopes that it means something for the two characters, humour for those who take it as a joke, and suggestions that it is a case of queerbaiting and King Ecbert will not ask Athelstan to be his mistress.¹²⁶¹²⁷ This shows that some fans took it as a promise of what would happen, some saw it as a promise that would turn out not to be fulfilled (and therefore a case of queerbaiting) and some saw it as a joke from the producers.

Gray also discusses how extra material on TV shows' (and films') DVD releases such as interviews, documentaries and commentaries to films/episodes "lends them and their meanings extra authority, precisely because they are now a digitally integrated part of the show itself". Through the encouragement of fan culture and the possibility to find out more through a DVD's extra material, "viewers are given a carefully crafted set of meanings". Referring to a study made on *Fight Club* (Fincher, 1999) where the scholars show how the commentary track on the DVD "downplays the film's obvious homoeroticism" and that commentary tracks were referred to as the "'real' text" by reviewers. Gray shows how paratexts such as commentary tracks can establish what is to be considered a "proper interpretation [and] can at least try to hide or overpower other interpretations".¹²⁸ This is then

¹²⁶ User Livinonamisha, "I want you to be my mistress." Tumblr.

<http://livinonamisha.tumblr.com/post/111691325922/brianbackwards-i-want-you-to-be-my-mistress> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Sleepsonclouds, "Vikings 3x02 promo." Tumblr.

<http://sleepsonclouds.tumblr.com/post/112050480551/seriousasajoke-vikings-3x02-promo-x-well> (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹²⁷ When the line was uttered in the penultimate episode of the season, it was directed to a female character.

¹²⁸ Gray, p. 89.

what could be called a practical intentionalist point of view. Anti-intentionalists separate internal and external evidence for a text's meaning. Internal evidence is found in the text while external evidence constitutes of journals, letters, etcetera. According to the anti-intentionalists, the internal evidence is all that matters.¹²⁹ What Gray is discussing is what according to Wimsatt and Beardsley would be considered external evidence, irrelevant to the text's meaning. However, Gray does not claim that what is being conveyed is the "real" meaning of the text, but that producers have been established as having authorial interpretive power and that they use this power to steer their audience towards what they consider is a preferred/good meaning.

According to Gray, not only do the producers then have meaning that they work hard to convey to their audience, but many media producers try to control and filter fans' interpretations as well as control the spreading of those interpretations in trying to ensure proper readings. "Most notoriously [those fan paratexts] that posit a same-sex relationship between two characters – are often met with disapproval by media firms' moderators".¹³⁰ The possible meanings of a text seem to be of little interest to Gray and instead of the text, he rather focuses on the politics and power over meanings and who is in a position to formulate and spread their interpreted meaning.

Gray's idea of how fans value the producers' intended interpretation is supported by Deborah Kaplan when she illustrates how fans engage in character interpretation, using the example of a fan of the TV shows *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spinoff *Angel* (The WB, 1999-2004). In 2004 this fan made and posted on *Livejournal* a list of "evidence" that two of the male characters had a shared romantic/sexual past. The fan used dialogue and interactions from the TV shows and subjective analyses of these moments made by other fans, but also "extratextual elements (statements of the show's actors and writers)".¹³¹ This demonstrates that the way DVD releases support the authority of producers' interpretations is something confirmed by the practices common in fan communities. Here, statements made by those involved with the production can be used as evidence of what is considered to be a more

¹²⁹ Lamarque, p. 181.

¹³⁰ Gray, p. 165.

¹³¹ Deborah Kaplan, "Construction of Fan Fiction Character Through Narrative" in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (London/Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 137.

correct interpretation of the TV show. However when it comes to the accusations of queerbaiting, producers' statements are examined to see if they correlate to fans' analyses of the dialogue and character interactions, and precedence is given to the fans' analyses rather than the producers' expressed interpretations. Fans accusing producers of queerbaiting separate the producers' expressed interpretations and intentions from what they believe are the producers' real intentions with their product. Consequently the producers can be accused of lying and though the producers are considered to have precedence when they create the meaning of the text, these fans do not assume that that will be the same intentions and interpretations as those that will be expressed in statements and interviews.

Following Gray's arguments there are reasons to focus and analyse producers' intended meaning or the interpretation that producers want the audience to make, even if it might be hard to find out, because it is the meaning that the producers' will work hard to convey to their audience and prepare the audience for through posters, trailers and interviews. This shows that despite widespread attitudes that the producers' intentions do not matter for the audience's meanings, audiences and fans are interested in the producers' meanings and intentions and often give these interpretations precedence. The discussion of queerbaiting is very much affected by this, since it is about what are the producers' intentions and how the fans' feel that the producer's have guided them to interpret characters and their sexuality. However, Gray's reasoning still leaves room to separate the producers' intended meaning (how they interpret their own work) from the meaning and interpretation they wish their audience to make.

However, Fiske has arguments regarding preferred meanings in line with Gray's, but without mentioning the producers and instead focusing on the structure of the texts. Fiske claims that "[a]ll meanings are not equal, nor equally easily activated, but all exist in relations of subordination or opposition to the dominant meanings proposed by the text". The audiences, not the producers, are the ones to make a program popular and they do that by finding ways to interpret the programs in such a way that they are made pleasurable for them.¹³² However, if one agrees with this it makes it very hard to understand why a debate such as the one regarding queerbaiting could arise. A viewer's queer reading could be considered to make the program more pleasurable, but why would viewers choose to accuse a program of

¹³² Fiske, 1989, p. 93.

queerbaiting instead of taking pleasure in their queer reading? Perhaps Fiske would explain queerbaiting not as fans wanting more queer characters, but as fans wanting recognition that the most easily activated meaning is to read a character as queer. The importance of confirmed meaning (sanctioned by the producers) increases within representation politics. Fans look for support for their interpretations from those who in practice have achieved a status of being able to sanction and spread certain meanings. As Gray has shown, these people are often the producers.

Fanfiction and slash fiction

Slash and fanfiction (stories written by fans based on the object of the fandom) could be considered to be related to the subject of queering and queer reading. This thesis will not spend too much time on the subject, since even if it is partly related, this is an area more concerned with fans' creativity while producing their own stories, which can be seen as commentaries on rather than discussions of the original text. Fanfiction is a wide field on its own and this thesis cannot do it justice. Nevertheless, research regarding fanfiction has to do with audience reception and response to a text and is therefore related to the subject of queer reading and queerbaiting, especially when it comes to fan internet communities discussing what is the "real" text and what is fan made stories/commentaries. This is a part of the discussion on fanfiction and what is considered to be "canon" or "fanon", which will be discussed in the next section. Seeing to the rhetoric used when discussing fanfiction can help us further understand the part of the debate on queerbaiting that regards what is considered to be shown and what is considered to be invented by the fans. Again, I want to stress that I have no intention of judging what is and what is not queerbaiting, but the reasoning and the rhetoric regarding the term itself.

While discussing different types of fanfiction Hellekson and Busse define "het" and "slash" like this: "*Het* stories revolve around a heterosexual relationship, either one invented by the fan/author or one presented in the primary source text. *Slash* stories posit a same-sex relationship, usually one imposed by the fan/author and based on perceived homoerotic subtext".¹³³ Heterosexuality is here assumed either to be or not to be, while homosexuality is assumed not to be there but added, even if the fan/author has "perceived" it to be. It shows how convention is used to deduct heterosexual desire, which is considered either to be there

¹³³ Hellekson and Busse, p. 10.

or not there at all (much like Dyer formulates expressions of homosexuality), while leaving queer desire to be more blurry and uncertain, which leaves room for the sort of “it might be there”-reasoning that allows deniability. The way Hellekson and Busse are formulating the difference between *Het* and *Slash* is then very much in line with how fans accusing producers of queerbaiting describe how those producers conduct queerbaiting. Producers are then considered to be very straightforward (pun intended) when it comes to heterosexual desire, portraying it as either to be there or not to be there, while deliberately keeping homosexual desire as a “maybe it is there. Keep watching and you will see”.

The word fanon and the world of canon

In their study Hellekson and Busse discuss many terms within fandom and fanfiction writing, among others the words “*canon*, the events presented in the media source that provide the universe, setting, and characters, and *fanon*, the events created by the fan community in a particular fandom and repeated pervasively throughout the fantext. They explain how fanon is not always in line with canon and sometimes even contradicts it. Still, because of individual interpretations of the primary text “[c]omplete agreement of what comprises canon is rarely possible”.¹³⁴

The concept of canon is then part of an idea that there is a “real world”, what is considered to be there in the text itself while fanon is what the fans decide, unlike what the authors of the primary text have decided. Even though Hellekson and Busse point out individual readings leading to discussion of what the “real text” really is, the terms themselves working within fandoms, no matter what is and what is not considered “canon”, still support the idea that there is a correct reading, what is considered to be presented within a text that can be separated from what fans choose to add.

Fanon is then things that have not been established within the text and things that contradict the text. Canon within fanfiction writing is suggested to be following a “strict list of canonical content”, while fanon is more about exploring a fantasy. Using the theories of Judith Butler’s analysis of porn fantasies, Catherine Driscoll in Hellekson and Busse’s anthology claims that despite that “[f]anon is a false image of canon”, it “is not an inferior interpretation of canon

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 9.

[...] but a fantasy based on the needs of the individual writers rather than the reality established by shared source text”.¹³⁵

What Driscoll is actually stating, despite opposing binaries such as inferior/superior, is that fanon, the false image, is not inferior to canon, the reality. However, in the process the definitions devoid the idea of equal though different interpretations, because despite what is argued, one is still considered false and one is considered real. Then, for example, it can be argued to be a false image and a reality of a character’s sexuality. Even if people who argue that some shows use queerbaiting seem to agree with Driscoll that there is a real and a false/wrong/misunderstood image, they would disagree that both are valued equally, or even should be valued equally. Queerbaiting is in this context a debate, not only over what is fanon and what is canon, but also what the creators intend to be canon and what they try to claim to be fanon even though it is canon, what is real and what is false.

While mentioning fanfiction, Jenkins describes how for a certain *Harry Potter* fandom website it is important to not stray from the information given in the books by the author J. K. Rowling. It is acceptable to explore, but one has to stay within “canon” and make sure that established characters “‘sound’ like they are supposed to”. Jenkins compares the writing of fanfiction to apprentices’ copying a master of the art before continuing to something more original, a tool to develop one’s writing skills rather than a comment to the original work or an end in itself. He writes how the fans analyse the books with theories regarding philosophy, theology, gender etcetera, focusing on how the fans use the material to develop their thinking rather than what they think of the work or how they criticize it or criticize each other for not following the instructions.¹³⁶ Still, it is another example of how fans value what they consider “canon” and how things which are not according to canon do not hold the same value.

Fanon is a debated term and sometimes scholars contradict themselves while trying to describe it. Mafalda Stasi writes “fanon: a series of details and characteristics that are shared by most [fanmade] stories, but that have no factual basis in the original media text. Fanon is developed by the fan community as an integral part of the process of interpretation of the

¹³⁵ Catherine Driscoll, “One True Pairing: The Romance of Pornography and the Pornography of Romance” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, eds. Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (London/Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 88.

¹³⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 180-183.

original text”.¹³⁷ Fanon is here the opposite of “canon”, which is described as “the initial setting and characters”.¹³⁸ So on one hand fanon is made up and has little to do with the original text, on the other hand it is part of the interpretation. It is then an interpretation that is not accepted as being “the original” suggesting that the text is something other than fans’ interpretations of it. This suggests that the text is then the author’s intentions and the addition made by fans are by those fans who try to make the text more pleasurable for them, those that Evans would call gratificationists.

Kaplan defines fanon as “the noncanonical knowledge about a source text [...], the sum of the community’s shared interpretive acts”. Fan activity in internet communities “all contribute to a shared understanding of the source text [...] Fans in a given community may accept as fact some of these interpretations and analyses”.¹³⁹ Kaplan develops the differences between fanon and canon when she discusses a fanfiction, mentioning a “character known to canon viewers as a villain” and writes that the reading of the character “may not be at odds with the interpretation insisted upon by the source text [...] Nevertheless, it is certainly at odds with a common fan interpretation of [the character] as despicable”, yet the character is “carefully constructed as a recognizable source character interpreted in a new light”.¹⁴⁰ The idea of canon and fanon builds on what is being considered to be in the text and what is considered to be added by fans and therefore fits with intentionalists’ view of the text being the author’s text, for example *Harry Potter* belongs to J.K. Rowling who is providing the canon. Nevertheless, the rhetoric used when discussing fanon is much more aligned with anti-intentionalists’ view on how conventions steer the interpretation of a text, since fanon depends on agreed upon ideas within the fandom. It is a clear hierarchy between canon and fanon, still the idea that combines them is depending on two different schools of hermeneutic theory.

What seems to be the case is that despite that many scholars stress that all readings should be equally valid, practices and rhetoric in fan communities (and among scholars) regarding

¹³⁷ Mafalda Stasi, “The Toy Soldiers from Leeds: the Slash Palimpsest” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* eds. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 121.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹³⁹ Kaplan, p. 136

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 143

concepts such as “canon” and “fanon” show that different meanings/interpretations are valued differently. There appears to be an uncertainty when trying to decide what fan activity should be regarded as interpretation instead of fans’ expansion of the original text, and what should be considered to be facts found in the text oppose to what is being added by fans. Still attempts are being made to distinguish these concepts, causing constant negotiation and debate regarding this grey area of what is what is not there in the text. These questions are directly linked to visibility, what is and what is not seen, and representation, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The discussion of queerbaiting in search for representation and the question of visibility

The anger people express when accusing a show of queerbaiting seems to originate with the experience that representation of queer characters (often with biggest focus on homosexual and bisexual characters) is scarce, which makes those who wish to see such representation easy to lure with queerbaiting. Another source of anger is that queerbaiting is considered to be a widespread and commonly used phenomenon, used as an intentional tactic. Heterosexuality is in these circumstances taken for granted and often considered to be validated and rewarded by the producers while homosexuality is considered to be made invisible or is made visible but is then denied.

In the portrayal of Emma and Regina from *Once Upon a Time*, the discussion regarding their queerness is not only about intended portrayed sexuality, but also that the producers would be depicting them as typically butch/femme and therefore with styling evoking lesbian stereotypes.¹⁴¹ One could say that, in that case, they would do the same lesbian coding as Helford describes as being used in *Xena: Warrior Princess*. Some fans mean that describing Emma and/or Regina as butch/femme is not only false, but also stereotypical and homophobic. The critique against this sort of reasoning that they would be depicted as a butch/femme couple is then both from those who deny a queer reading, but also those stating that these characters do not have to be forced into stereotypical categories such as butch and femme in order to be queer. While addressing this, one fan writes:

“[W]hy wouldn’t a tv show use stereotypes to help depict their sexuality? Clothing is a simple way to do that, but doesn’t necessarily imply anything. Why wouldn’t they use things that people tend to identify with queer women? Why shouldn’t we talk about it? We’re not talking about real life people, they’re fucking characters on a tv show where the clothes are important. And a part of relating to them can even be how they dress.”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ User Lzclotho, “Emma Swan arms appreciation post.” Tumblr. <http://lzclotho.tumblr.com/post/58612216624> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Ashermajestywishes, “I miss soft butch Emma Swan.” Tumblr. <http://ashermajestywishes.tumblr.com/post/91980676312/i-miss-soft-butch-emma-swan-hot-ruby-sexy-milf> (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁴² User Sheerlust, “To be honest, it kind of bothers me,” Tumblr. <http://sheerlust.tumblr.com/post/86892622173/swan-queenconfessions-to-be-honest-it-kind-of> (accessed April 28, 2015).

This would then be a problem with queerbaiting, that old signifiers are used to hint things that now could be overt. That things could be overt leads to the redundancy of hints, leading hints and teases to only be just that. As the fan states, it is not necessarily implied, but it is there which to some fans implies queer content.

The power of representation

So, following Fiske, does the discussion of meaning matter? Can one not just say that the audience always has and always will be a heterogeneous poly-reading audience? When Helford discusses *Xena: Warrior Princess* she makes a difference between overt and subtextual lesbian text, claiming it to be the latter. She also mentions the problems with subtext when it does not challenge homophobia and does not change the status quo, thus not serving feminism or LGBTQ rights, but because of *Ellen*'s cancelation it was the best that most producers would dare to do.¹⁴³ Thus Helford puts very little political power in such subtextual representation, even if she admits that it can give pleasure to those viewers who indulge in a queer reading of the text and was denied such overt representation as one could find on *Ellen*. This can be compared to Kate on *Autostraddle*'s reasoning as well as Raymond's analysis of potential but political impotent queer content.

Marnie Pratt stresses the importance people feel to see themselves represented in mainstream media. "Certain markers related to aspects of skin tone, physical ability, gender, or age may result in oppression [but] such traits also render these individuals visible. [...] For queer individuals, who live within a dominant culture that assumes heterosexuality and compels the concealment of divergent selves, invisibility becomes central to their oppression". Pratt then goes on to explain how for a queer audience this makes queer representation "closely linked with the ability to exist at all" especially when having an invisible identity in a very visual culture.¹⁴⁴

As stated in the introduction, queerbaiting can be considered to explore/play with/exploit the grey area between the visible and the invisible. If the image of a queer character could be categorized as either visually displayed or not displayed, there or not there, then queerbaiting could not exist (and indeed, some say that is does not).

¹⁴³ Helford, p. 142.

¹⁴⁴ Pratt, pp. 138-139.

Queerbaiting is then a new approach to representation and identity politics. Allison Burgess argues that with so many queer characters (she discusses foremost gay, lesbian and bisexual characters) the debate has shifted from being about visibility to what sort of representation that is out there.¹⁴⁵ The debate on queerbaiting shows how these two not necessarily can be so easily separated. Queerbaiting can be considered to be about how producers use visual signs to hint and tease representation and then one could argue representation is there because fans claim to see it, but on the other hand representation is considered to not take place because in the end it is denied. So it is about how visual signs of representation are claimed by the producers never to have been there in the first place, that these are not signs, denying conventions and “it’s obvious”-attitudes.

Some queer identities are harder to represent than others. For example, it has been considered difficult to represent bisexual characters. “A sexual identity with so many different meanings and such varied manifestation [as bisexuality] cannot be done justice through one, or even two or three, representations. In the context of an utter dearth of such representations, each one bears the burden of embodying The (monolithic) Representation. And, as such, each inevitably falls short”.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, even with an increasing representation of a variation of sexual identities, it is made clear that as long as those representations remains scarce, they will all remain inadequate.

Some people claim that a TV show erases its overt hints at a homosexual relationship with the help of establishing heterosexual ones and straighten out queer characters with the help of heterosexual romances. Is bisexual representation then even at all possible and if it is not, is bisexual queerbaiting possible? Bisexuality in the discussions of possibly queer characters is to solve the problem that heterosexual and homosexual acts would exclude each other. However, this is to still be of the opinion that sexuality is a sexual identity. If one were to use Sullivan’s preferred use of queer, queer as in action and verb instead of noun, homosexual hints would break up the heterosexual representation and consequently make it bisexual,

¹⁴⁵ Allison Burgess, “There’s Something Queer Going On in Orange County: The Representation of Queer Women’s sexuality in *The O.C.*” in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 88-89.

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer Moorman, “Gray Matters: Bisexual (In)visibility in *The L Word*” in *Televising Queer Women: A Reader*, ed. Rebecca Beirne (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 133.

making bisexual representation fully possible, though perhaps not bisexuality, since Sullivan disagree with the idea of sexual identities. From this point of view queerbaiting would not be to deny that ostensible gesture hinting at queer desire would affect the way one is suppose to interpret a characters sexuality, but rather denying that the gesture (for example saying the words “I love you”) where supposed to be interpreted as sexual at all.

In a discussion about *Vikings* on *Tumblr* some fans show clear awareness of the tension between conflicting readings of a character’s sexuality. While discussing how several characters have been hinted to be gay and/or bisexual, foremost the protagonist Viking Ragnar and the English Christian King Ecbert and their interest in the monk-turned-Viking Athelstan one fan comments: “I would bet money that, if it’s ever addressed in the show, it will be homosexual before bisexual, even though the evidence would indicate otherwise. Since I don’t think it ever will be, we can think what we like anyway”.¹⁴⁷

Here then, expectations are discussed of what “the evidence” indicates and what will actually be acknowledged by the show without assuming that the show will ever display what it has earlier hinted at. The rhetoric suggests that there will be a confirmed meaning/interpretation that will be despite of, and possibly even contradict, what has been shown. Such statements allude to queerbaiting where hints will only be hints and never acknowledged. However, it is suggested that as long as the TV show does not openly address the subject, the audience will have the power to interpret and create whatever meaning they think should be applied, alluding to the power of an alternative queer reading. So with this logic, as long as there is no addressing of the issue and active denial, all readings are possible. This could be considered an alterative to the theory of authors’ intentions and meanings having precedence. All interpretations are valid until the issue (in this case, homosexual desire) has either been confirmed or denied.

In the same debate another fan answers that s/he does not believe that one of the characters discussed, Ragnar, is gay or even implied to be, but agrees that “it remains to be seen

¹⁴⁷ User Admiralhip, “I fully support these two.” Tumblr.
<http://admiralhip.tumblr.com/post/83688053880/azryal00-admiralhip-azryal00-azryal00> (accessed April 28, 2015).

although I myself would like to see some bisexual representation . . . but imo [in my opinion] I feel like that's maybe what they are implying with Ecgbert [sic.]”¹⁴⁸

Here is then another person who suggests that implying might not be representation, though it can work as an attempt at representation. Again, we also see how what is implied and what is not is constantly debated, even in the heart of the discussion.

Again, this is just one side of the queer *Vikings* debate and far from everyone agrees, some stating that viewers are meant to interpret several characters as homosexual/bisexual, while some fans state that this is all wrong.¹⁴⁹ Others accuse the show of queerbaiting, urging the producers to include “some real gayness” while accusing them of fearing repercussions from a homophobic audience, despite the popularity of the bisexual character Oberyn Martell from *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-).¹⁵⁰ Consequently, representation of sexualities is hard, not only because it is about meaning and the construction of meaning, hermeneutics, is a complicated process, but also because, as Gray illustrates, it is also about the politics of meaning and the power of hermeneutics. So where is the power to affect status quo?

¹⁴⁸ User Admiralhip, “I fully support these two.” Tumblr. <http://admiralhip.tumblr.com/post/83688053880/azryal00-admiralhip-azryal00-azryal00> (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁴⁹ User Soyeon-mafia, “turns out athelstan is 100% hetero.” Tumblr. <http://soyeon-mafia.tumblr.com/post/112968227524/turns-out-athelstan-is-100-hetero> (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁵⁰ User Neairamartell, “Dear Vikings Showrunners.” Tumblr. <http://neairamartell.tumblr.com/post/113725217186/dear-vikings-showrunners> (accessed April 28, 2015).

The power to affect status quo and the attempt to affect the product

Since queerbaiting is a term created by fans wanting to criticize something they think is wrong and should change, I will here discuss fan power and how scholars have viewed fans in regards to their power to interpret and to affect the product.

Fiske names television and the TV show as very different from film because of their long-termed viewing. This excepts the form of season release used by for example Netflix when they release a whole season at once, but still the most common way of distributing a TV show is one new episode a week until the season is over. Analysing the more traditional form of broadcasting TV shows Fiske states that “[t]he suspense in television, its resolution of uncertainty engages the viewer more intensely because its enigmas appear to be unresolved and the viewer is invited to experience their resolution, not merely to learn of it”. This encourages viewer to want to affect how the plot will progress and Fiske mentions examples of viewers trying to affect the actual scripts and plotlines, for example whether a character is going to die or not.¹⁵¹ However, when it comes to the discussion on queerbaiting, some fans are adamant that it cannot be determined whether a show has queerbaited its audience or not until after the TV show has ended, since that is the only time that one can know whether the producers ever intended to realize what they have hinted at (that the TV show has queer content).¹⁵² However, if an audience can affect a TV show through internet communities and the debates there and direct pleas to the producers, one can only affect as long as the TV show is running. If one can only criticize after a TV show is done, then there is no room to affect through viewing numbers (for example a boycott) or plea for change. After the end of a TV show one can still comment and criticize, but there is no way to affect the content and the critique against queerbaiting has to be seen as a critique against content.

¹⁵¹ Fiske, 1989, p. 97.

¹⁵² User amyrat151, “Schrödinger’s Queerbaiting.” Tumblr.

<http://amyrat151.tumblr.com/post/87749086933/schrodingers-queerbaiting> (accessed May 15, 2015),

User loudest subtext in television, “I would say Thompson and Gatiss.” Tumblr. <http://loudest-subtext-in-television.tumblr.com/post/73381324637/i-would-say-thompson-and-gatiss-are-pretty-dead> (accessed May 15, 2015),

User deathbycoldopen, “I’m cryin bc of that promo.” Tumblr.

<http://deathbycoldopen.tumblr.com/post/104457237022/ok-ok-ok-ok-im-cryin-bc-of-that-promo-deans> (accessed May 15, 2015).

Fan discussion online is clear proof that audience members pay attention when they watch TV, remembering, noticing small details, double-checking and then discuss it with fellow fans.¹⁵³ However, it is not only the fans who pay attention to and on internet forums, “the digital media are having an impact on the relationship between the writers of long-running series and their fans” Stephen Lacey and McElroy states, using one of the creators of *Ashes to Ashes*, Matthew Graham, as an example of a TV show creator who checked fans’ theories through online forums and made himself highly aware of fans’ analyses and interpretations.¹⁵⁴

Mark Andrejevic discusses how modern technology allows a more direct interactivity and how fans can communicate and be heard by producers of their favourite TV shows. This is both an increased agency for the audience, but also an opportunity for producers to share the work of promotion and “value-enhancing labor”.¹⁵⁵ He stresses that all audience members are active, opposing the likes of Jenkins and Fiske whom he criticizes for only acknowledging and celebrating certain audience activity, an activity that he considers to be exploited by producers.¹⁵⁶ Andrejevic describes in great detail the amount of work these fans do to prepare posts in fan forums and how much effort is put into it, using the same definition of free labour as Tiziana Terranova, referring to the process through which “work processes have shifted from the factory to society”.¹⁵⁷

Andrejevic’s ideas challenge Andrew Scott’s claim (quoted by Abigail De Kosnik) that “free labor [...] is not necessarily exploited labor”.¹⁵⁸ However, De Kosnik uses Scott’s statement is more concerned with free labour as when fans build a community together and has a positive view of free labour, while Andrejevic’s concern is that the value added through that labour is inevitably serving the producers of the TV show.

¹⁵³ Robin Nelson, “*Life on Mars*: Hybridity and Innovation in a British Television Context,” in *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*, eds. Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 27.

¹⁵⁴ Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy, “Introduction,” in *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York*, eds. Stephen Lacey and Ruth McElroy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), p. 14.

¹⁵⁵ Mark Andrejevic, “Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans,” *Television New Media* 9, no. 24 (2008): p. 24.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29-30.

¹⁵⁸ Abigail De Kosnik, “Fandom as Free Labor,” in *Digital Labor: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, ed. Trebor Scholz (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 106.

Andrejevic explains how being a fan often means collecting information about and around the show and becoming “invested in the creation of the show, rather than simply a passive recipient”, increasing a participant-based loyalty.¹⁵⁹ As been observed earlier, this gathering of information can also be seen as part of the process of creating meaning and trying to understand the intended meaning, how producers’ intend the audience to interpret the material as well as a search for canon.

According to Andrejevic, the participant-based loyalty is what will keep the fans watching and therefore their labour is still serving the producers. He describes the audience as “taking on the role of production assistants”, but then *offering* their help rather than actually contributing.¹⁶⁰ He also states that participation in fan forums “invites viewers to adopt the standpoint of producers”.¹⁶¹ So according to Andrejevic the fans’ great engagement in the product and production makes them fans not only of the product, but the production as well. However, as long as they keep watching, there is no real reason for producers to listen to what they have to say. They might understand the text better, but they do not affect it.

A part of the definition of queerbaiting is that it is exploitative.¹⁶² It is described as benefitting producers at the expense of actively denying full queer representation, meaning producers benefit from what is perceived as hinting and teasing, but will not allow overt queer representation. One *Tumblr* blogger writes that all the internet discussions of queerbaiting peak people’s interest and bring them into the show to watch and analyse for themselves, “In the age of netflix and hulu, this is especially more beneficial, since whenever people go back to re-watch episodes of something, they’re indirectly giving money to and supporting that show”.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Andrejevic, p. 30.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹⁶² Teoh Lander-Boyce, “LGBTQ+ ON YOUTUBE: WHAT IS QUEER-BAITING?” *TenEighty*, February 24, 2015, <http://teneightymagazine.com/2015/02/24/lgbtq-on-youtube-what-is-queer-baiting/> (accessed April 28, 2015),

User Ouatqueer-antisq, “Why Once Upon a Time isn’t Queerbaiting Swan Queen” (accessed April 28, 2015),

Sadie Gennis, “*Supernatural* Has a Queerbaiting Problem That Needs to Stop.” *TV Guide*. November 17, 2014, <http://www.tvguide.com/news/supernatural-queerbaiting-destiel-1089286/> (accessed April 28, 2015).

¹⁶³ User Fadeintocase, “sorry if this is a dumb question, but what is queer-baiting?” *Tumblr*. <http://fadeintocase.tumblr.com/post/111695639476> (accessed April 28, 2015).

This differs slightly from what Andrejevic is discussing, since this has much more to do with a phenomenon and people who perhaps watch and analyse a number of TV shows to find this phenomenon rather than investing all their energy in a certain show. However, the conclusion remains, talking about it creates awareness of the product and one could claim that if it leads to a bigger audience, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

There are scholars who argue that the audience and fan community can be producers and therefore affect the product independently of the official producers. Despite the possibilities of using fan forums as marketing strategies, Andrejevic explains that it is a marketing strategy where the producers do not have to be involved at all, since for many fans the fan forums are a “collective effort [...] of finding ways to make the show more interesting” and this in itself makes them watch more television.¹⁶⁴ Thus, this constitutes another example of Evan’s gratificationism. This could also go along with Kosnik’s argument of free labour not necessarily being exploited, begging the question if producers could passively exploit the free labour provided by the fans. However, the consequence is that that the work made by the fans cannot be considered independently of the producers, since all interaction encourages viewing of the discussed TV show and provides the producers with feedback. The discussion of queerbaiting would then fall under this category of fan-produced work related to the show.

In the book *Spreadable Media* Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green answer to Andrejevic’s critique of dividing fans and claiming that only certain fan activity is valuable. Jenkins, Ford and Green agree that such a division should not be made. On the contrary, they stress how even passive fans (those who do not produce, but share, read and enjoy fan produced material) are an important part of a fandom and therefore contribute to the fan made enhanced value of a TV show.¹⁶⁵ This is then a value that must be considered to benefit the producers as well as the fans, since watching the TV show becomes more pleasurable.

However, Jenkins, Ford and Green do not have the same problem with the supposedly exploitation of fan forums as Andrejevic. The fan communities are often started and organized by the fans out of a will to share and engage with one another, not by producers as part of a PR scheme, even if the producers later try to use the already existing fan

¹⁶⁴ Andrejevic, p. 28.

¹⁶⁵ Henry Jenkins et. al., *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York/London: New York University Press, 2013), p. 157.

communities.¹⁶⁶ According to the reasoning that fan production can increase the pleasure fans get from a TV show, queering could be a strategy to make a TV show more interesting. This enhancement of value can be conducted independently of producers, but the TV show still provides the raw material to interpret it to the audience's satisfaction. Jenkins, Ford and Green's way of seeing the content as raw material for fanfiction, reviews and debates and other activities enjoyed by fans generated by a TV shows, is then similar to how some consider queer reading to be a strategy for some fans to increase the pleasure they get from a TV show. However, the attitude towards the content and fan production does not affect the content and it is the content that is being accused to be used to queerbait audiences. Those fans who accuse TV shows of queerbaiting want to affect the content itself, stressing the question how this can be done.

How does one affect?

Doty finds that the theoretical can have social impact and that enough people noticing queer moments can affect how other people view something and increase awareness of queer content.¹⁶⁷ Therefore just discussing what is considered queerbaiting can have a political effect, since this points out what can be interpreted as queer moments and can also potentially create a bigger awareness of the problem of teasing, exploitation and denied representation. Every step forward towards improvement would then be considered a victory.

Jenkins states that finding other people on the web who share one's opinions is not difficult. There are special websites, communities and tags for most ideas and these are otherwise easily created. "The real challenge is to get those ideas back into mainstream media, where they will reach people who do not share your commitments". The new media has created a new landscape for communication, more voices can be heard though it is harder to reach many people at once since social media has developed into something that grants "access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one-to-many".¹⁶⁸ People find each other, self-organize, collaborate and take action together and have turned "blogging [into] a form of grassroots convergence".¹⁶⁹ Through sharing their information, using each other's

¹⁶⁶ Jenkins et. al, p. 164.

¹⁶⁷ Doty, p. 4.

¹⁶⁸ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 107-108.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

knowledge, analyse and question information and, what Jenkins deems perhaps most important, debating among themselves and challenging each other into finding more evidence and stronger arguments.¹⁷⁰ One can assume that they in this collective effort also support each other and feel the security that a community can achieve and the encouragement to stay strong together.

Jenkins does not in this instance discuss *Tumblr*, but does besides blogs mention the more visual medium of Photoshop. He describes it as “the grassroots equivalent of political cartoon”, since it can be used as a tool of activism and democracy, being more amateur friendly and as much a political act as a letter or brochure, though admittedly perhaps not as good.¹⁷¹ Jenkins’ book *Convergence Culture* was published before *Tumblr* was launched and therefore it would be impossible for him to discuss *Tumblr*. However, there are several observations that Jenkins makes that can be applied to *Tumblr*.

While discussing how some news spread over the internet, Jenkins describes how segments of programs and interviews spread messages and knowledge to far more people than those who watch the actual program or read the interview. This is something that Jenkins finds has potential for further democratic participation, since it increases the chances of more people getting involved (though by no means suggesting that *everyone* who reads/watches a certain segment of a program, or article etcetera will get involved).¹⁷² This can easily be compared to *Tumblr*, which with its fan discussion through microblogging mostly consists of short messages, quotes, clips etcetera. When trying to prove that queerbaiting has occurred, fans edit together clips from scenes or write lists of quotes in order to show others (fans, but also people who do not necessarily watch the TV show) what they think are occurring. Another parallel between Jenkins’ discussion of politics and fan discussion on *Tumblr* and other fan sites is when he compares the “Powers that be in Washington” to “Powers that be in Hollywood”.¹⁷³ “The Powers that Be” or simply TPTB is a common expression in fan communities discussing TV shows, meaning roughly “whoever is making the decisions”.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 220-222.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 225-227.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 234.

Blogging is a form of activism. While discussing American politics and blogging, Jenkins shows how in many cases bloggers “are attempting to shape future events, trying to use the information they have unearthed to intervene in the democratic process”. He also claims that blogs are mostly read by people who already agree with the author of the blog.¹⁷⁴ This is not necessarily true with microblogs such as *Tumblr* where a hashtag not necessarily states if the author is positive or negative to the subject discussed, thus others have to read the post before they know if they agree or disagree with the post. People then try to affect through talking, boycotting, keep watching and reporting what they see.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 116.

Conclusion

So what is queerbaiting? At this point it should be clear that queerbaiting is more than Fathallah's definition: "a strategy by which writers and networks attempt to gain the attention of queer viewers via hints, jokes, gestures, and symbolism suggesting a queer relationship between two characters, and then emphatically denying and laughing off the possibility". This thesis has shown that the debate over the definition is far from over and that the debate calls for a closer analysis of what queerbaiting is supposed to be.

Queerbaiting is a historical situated term, assuming that we live in a time and place where queer representation is possible yet constantly denied. The same people that accuse producers of TV shows from the 21st century of queerbaiting, defend TV shows from the 1990s, because these are considered to have been produced under other circumstances that did not allow queer representation.

Queerbaiting is a worse crime in the light of scarce representation of queer people, but even with shows with clear outspoken representation, such as *Queer as Folk* (UK version: Red Production Company, 1999-2000, US version: Showtime, 2000-2005), *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009), *Looking* (HBO, 2014-2015) and *Lip Service* (BBC, 2010-2012) (all with debates of their own) the accusation of queerbaiting does not disappear. On the contrary, it seems to be getting stronger because, as the fan who uses *Game of Throne's* Oberyn Martell as an example, the inclusion of defined queer characters in mainstream TV shows seems to prove that such representation is possible. There is then no need to, as Doty describes it, hide queer content in the shadows.

Queerbaiting is then considered to be a crime in the light of history and always wrong no matter the circumstances. It is defined as teasing and denying, robbing people of representation and space, an expression of homophobia and exploitation, and reproduction of heterosexism. However, the term queerbaiting and those who use it to accuse TV shows are also accused of being homophobic and/or simply indulging in make-belief.

For people using queer theory, the term queerbaiting as it has been discussed in this thesis may not seem very queer. It does not question categories, but upholds binary terms such as the ones between queer and non-queer, stressing essential identities with characters. The

discussion seems to forget to include many of the non-straight identities and expressions that are out there. Queer in queerbaiting is then not the same inclusive movement that queer theory often promotes, but an example of the hierarchy within the queer movement. For example it often focuses on white traditionally attractive men and sometimes women. However, this could also be seen as an expression of what sorts of characters are being shown in mainstream TV shows.

The debate on queerbaiting is a discussion of representation. Despite that several people who accuse TV show producers of queerbaiting are very firm when pointing out that queerbaiting is not representation, it is the false promise of representation that seems to anger them the most. Another source of anger is when the producers deny that a character would be queer, which is partly seen as denying people their right to interpret and partly seen as the producers lying to their fans.

However, accepting all interpretations would not solve all problems. To accept any reading that can be made, like Doty or Ambjörnsson, does not mean the criticism disappears. Despite claiming all readings to be equally valid, Doty can still criticize how hints and insinuations have been used through the years. Raymond declares that we have reached a time when the audience demands more and that Doty's queer readings simply are not enough, or rather that acknowledging such readings hinders the struggle for better visual representation.

The coining of the term queerbaiting has to be considered as a form of activism. It is to create a term that in itself is an accusation, using the fact that whatever definition "queerbaiting" has had, it always seems to be something negative. An alternative would be to have and acknowledge queer reading, which is also an act of political power even if not considered to be enough, but an acceptance of status quo. It is hard to say how one succeeds to affect, but clearly attempts are being made. The debate creates awareness and individual actions are being made, such as boycott, reporting and people expressing their frustration.

From a hermeneutic point of view, queerbaiting is an excellent example of how meaning is created and how the ownership of meaning is debated. As has been shown in this thesis, several hermeneutic strategies are being used to establish who has the power over the meaning of a text. The accusation of queerbaiting focuses on the author, but it is not always

clear who the author is, who controls the text, or in Fiske's terms the structures of a text. Is it the screenwriter, the producer, the director or the actor?

According to Stanley Rosen, a hermeneutical program or theory "is at the same time itself a political manifesto".¹⁷⁵ All hermeneutic interpretations (which is arguable all interpretations) are then political. The choice of hermeneutic tactic, whether it is an aware informed choice or not, is then a political act and it appears to depend on where or to who one chooses to ascribe ownership over the meaning, the reader, the author or the text. As has been shown here, it is not as simple as that. For example, a hermeneutical theory can describe meaning as the author's intended meaning, but that does not mean that access to the author is of any help, since the author could lie or have forgotten the original intended meaning. The discussion on queerbaiting shows that the choice of a hermeneutical theory is not to choose a political camp or side in the debate. Fans can agree on what determines the meaning, but disagree what are the results. For example, two fans can agree on that the author's intention is the real meaning, but disagree while discussing what that intention might have been.

It is easy to fall for the fallacy that the only way to debate meaning is to agree that certain interpretations are wrong and that certain interpretations are right. However, politics of hermeneutics is not only about choosing strategies and argue for what answers/meanings can be found using that strategy. As Doty shows, it can also be the politics of what interpretations might be voiced. One can agree that all readings are equally valid, but then still, as Gray shows, try to deny certain readings and try to hinder that those unwanted interpretations are spread, not because one perceives them as wrong, but because one perceives them as harmful or negative. This is not only a decision made by the producers. Within the debate of queerbaiting one can see how fans discuss desired and undesired queer representation. Yes, one would like to see more queer representation, but what kind? Is it perhaps more harmful that a certain character would be interpreted as queer than that no queer characters would be detected at all? Because of the increase in queer visibility, Burgess and Raymond are right when they detect that some of that visibility will be considered more preferable or more harmful.

¹⁷⁵ Rosen, p. 141.

The term queerbaiting as it has been discussed in this thesis is relatively new, not many scholars have paid it much attention, but as has been shown here, it is very much a part of a field discussing interpretation, representation and queer theory. This thesis has focused a great deal on the theoretical basis on which one can understand the term queerbaiting. It is a start and evokes several leads to follow up on. For instance, one could instead of focusing as much on the relationship between reader-text-author, focus on the continued contact between producers and fans and more closely research if/how producers acknowledge fans' wish for more queer representation (through conventions, twitter and more interactive media than *Tumblr*, *Livejournal* and other blogging sites). For example has Jane Espenson, screenwriter for both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Once Upon a Time* discussed queer content and queer subtexts and what restrictions she feels dictates what can or cannot be written/shown.¹⁷⁶

This thesis has analysed how readers estimate how a text can be interpreted, fans' and scholars' reflections on and use of hermeneutics rather than their actual interpretations. As stated in the beginning, this thesis would not dwell on creating some sort of reference for what should and should not be considered queerbaiting, but rather what strategies are used to do so. What this thesis has shown is an example of a battle of hermeneutics; a political power struggle over what meanings can exist and be spread.

¹⁷⁶ See for example Lisa Granshaw, "After 'Buffy' and 'Battlestar,' Jane Espenson continues a charmed career," *The Daily Dot*, August 25, 2014, <http://www.dailydot.com/geek/jane-epsenson-interview/> (accessed May 15, 2015).

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