

Establishing a Multi-ethnic Imagined Community?

Ethnic Minority Audiences Watching Flemish Soaps

I *Alexander Dhoest*

ABSTRACT

Television is often conceived as a unifying force, creating a national imagined community'. This article tries to apply this concept to the audience of domestic fiction in Flanders, in particular ethnic minority viewers. Based on in-depth interviews with 80 young adults of both Flemish and ethnic minority backgrounds, it focuses on the viewing of domestic soaps. The findings show very similar patterns of reception, both groups preferring American fiction and criticizing Flemish fiction. An important difference is that ethnic minority viewers do not consider the soap world as a representation of their own reality. A related difference concerns their dissatisfaction with the portrayal of ethnic minorities, in spite of the attempts of programme makers to provide positive role models. While confirming the importance of ethnic identity in television viewing and demonstrating the variety within the assumed homogeneous national viewing community, the similarities found caution against a binary opposition between native Flemish and ethnic minority viewpoints.

Key Words ethnic identity, reception research, representation, soap, television fiction

Alexander Dhoest is lecturer in communication studies at Universiteit Antwerpen, Departement Communicatiewetenschappen, Sint-Jacobstraat 2, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium, [email: alexander.dhoest@ua.ac.be]

European Journal of Communication Copyright © 2009 SAGE Publications (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi and Singapore) www.sagepublications.com, Vol 24(3): 305-323. [10.1177/0267323109336760]

This article investigates the reception of contemporary Flemish television fiction, starting from the question: do contemporary audiences constitute a national 'imagined community' of viewers? This question draws on Benedict Anderson's (1991) seminal definition of nationhood as an imagined community, constituted among other things by modern print media. Stuart Hall (1992) elaborated on the discursive devices used to present such 'imagined communities' as (ethnically) unified and homogeneous. Like many others, I wonder how television may contribute to similar processes by uniting communities of viewers. Does it (still) provide 'culture in common to whole populations' (Scannell, 1992: 320) or 'a symbolic home for the nation's members' (Morley, 2004: 418)? Does it still 'bring together members of the nation around language, symbols, and common experiences' (Waisbord, 2004: 389)? In particular, this article poses the question whether ethnic minority viewers are part of such an 'imagined community', conceived here as an interpretive community sharing discursive modes of interpreting media content (Schröder, 1994). The idea of culturally unified and homogeneous nations may always have been a (problematic) fiction (Creeber, 2004); nowadays it has become all but an illusion. However, until recently, Belgian broadcasters have largely ignored ethnic minorities both on screen and as potential audiences.

By focusing on ethnic minority viewers, this text may suggest an 'us' vs 'them' opposition between 'Flemish' viewers and their 'others'. However, one of the aims and outcomes of this research is to question this very opposition. Ethnic identity is not conceived as something fixed, let alone an essence. As Harindranath (2005) cautions, we have to take into account the complexity and fluidity of ethnicity and the intersection with other social classifications such as gender, class and religion (see also Gillespie, 1995; Ogan, 2001). Contemporary writing on identities uses the model of multiple, overlapping 'axes' of identification that are mobilized in particular contexts and none of which completely defines one's social identity (Gillespie, 2007: 285). Inspired by Social Identity Theory, in this article identities are considered to be constituted by a complex of aspects that can become salient in specific (intergroup) contexts (Hogg and Vaughan, 2002; Simon, 2004). The question, then, is whether ethnic identity becomes salient while watching television fiction.

There are many reasons to believe that this is indeed the case. If we consider cultural identity as a 'contingent, historically and culturally specific social construction to which language is central', then television is an important resource for such 'discursive' formation of identities (Barker, 1999: 8). As proposed by Straubhaar (1991), cultural proximity is an important factor explaining the audience preference for programmes from

their own or similar cultures. Given the close links between cultural and ethnic identities, the same line of thought could be applied to ethnicity. Audiences are generally keen on characters similar to themselves, particularly in terms of gender, race and age (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). As indicated by Simon (2004: 101), members of minorities are generally more likely to base their self-interpretation on minority membership, which becomes more easily salient. This explains why African American viewers seek out programmes with black characters, supporting their social identities (Abrams and Giles, 2007; Edwards, 2001). Similarly, Fujioka (2005) found that ethnic identity is less salient for white than for black Americans, who are more critical of black images. Instead of salience, Lind (2004) uses the term 'relevance' to address the importance of images resonating with the cultural and racial experiences of audiences. In this article, the aim is to investigate whether similar processes are at work when ethnic minority audiences watch Flemish soaps.

Media, national identity and multiculturalism in contemporary Flanders

Nowadays, Flanders is a subnational community within the federalized state of Belgium, with a large degree of political and cultural autonomy. Belgian television has always been divided across language lines, Flemish television in particular being devised to stimulate Flemish culture (Van den Bulck, 2001). From the 1950s, the ascent of Flemish nation-building was accompanied by public broadcasting policies and practices directed towards 'the nation'. Among other genres, television fiction was an important source of (sub)national representations for the public broadcaster BRT (later BRTN, now VRT) (Dhoest, 2003, 2004). From 1989, its commercial competitor, VTM, also prioritized domestic productions, but less from a (culturally) nationalist perspective. Strongly culturally rooted fiction was replaced by international genres such as soaps, sitcoms and crime series. On the surface level, at least, the contemporary television output is less obviously 'Flemish', although domestic productions have thrived. If anything, contemporary fiction evokes notions of 'banal' (Billig, 1995) or 'everyday' nationalism, primarily showing pictures of everyday life in Flanders (Dhoest, 2007).

Just as the organization of television on the Flemish level is never questioned, so is its representation of Flanders taken for granted. Nationalism has never been violent in Belgium, but contemporary television fiction is further removed from 'hot', militant nationalism than ever. That said, nationalism has been on the political agenda for the past 50 years, leading to drastic

state reforms. Television implicitly supports this agenda, Dutch- and French-language television hardly representing or addressing the other community. For this reason, this article excludes French-speaking Belgians from its analysis: they are not represented in Flemish fiction and they rarely watch it. From the late 1980s, the agenda has been further burdened by the resurgence of the extreme right party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block), renamed Vlaams Belang (Flemish Interest) in 2004 after a conviction for racism. Despite being isolated politically, Vlaams Belang has steadily grown and is now one of the largest Flemish parties. Beside Flemish separatism, a strong opposition to immigration and multiculturalism constitutes the core of its political manifesto.

In the past, Belgium has actively recruited immigrants in times of economic prosperity, mostly Italians, Turks and Moroccans. In 1974, a stop on immigration was instituted and continues to this day (Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen, 2003). Despite the strong presence of migrants, Belgium and Flanders were late and less than decisive in developing integration policies. Overall, Flemish integration policies are based on a multicultural model, aiming for social integration without homogenization, and respecting cultural diversity (Loobuyck and Jacobs, 2006: 108–10). There is controversy over the success of this approach, as certain groups of migrants are still highly marginalized, and face unemployment and poverty. A large proportion of the population perceives them as 'outsiders' profiting from and threatening the Belgian welfare model. Needless to say, such sentiments constitute a breeding ground for the Vlaams Belang, who actively exploits the combined sentiments of xenophobia and economic insecurity (Billiet, 2006: 37-41).

While political debate on migration and integration has been going on for some time now, only quite recently has there been a growing awareness of the potential role of the media in constituting a harmonious multi-ethnic society. In 2003, the public broadcaster VRT signed a 'Diversity Charter', aiming to reflect the diversity in Flemish society, to prevent any form of discrimination and to work towards equal opportunities (VRT, 2003). One of the actions taken was to monitor diversity on Flemish television, using a quantitative content analysis charting the 'visibility' of minorities (VRT Studiedienst, 2004). This research was inspired by similar Dutch research, which reported a failure in mainstream television to represent the actual diversity in Dutch society (d'Haenens, 2006: 153). By merely measuring visibility through an assessment of skin colour and language, the so-called 'Diversity Monitor' charts representational patterns while avoiding terminological and methodological quicksand. The term currently used to refer to ethnic minorities in Flanders is *allochtoon*, which

means 'from another country' and is generally defined as 'born in another country or having at least one parent born in another country'. This term has become problematic for third generation migrants whose parents are also born in Belgium, and is increasingly criticized for its negative or at least homogenizing undertones. While avoiding this terminological discussion, the Diversity Monitor does introduce the equally problematic 'racial' criterion of skin colour.

There is also a problem of measurement, as most official statistics only distinguish 'foreigners', i.e. people with a foreign nationality, while many ethnic minority inhabitants have acquired Belgian nationality. In 2005, 8.57 percent of the Belgian population had a foreign nationality, but 15 percent were born abroad (Algemene Directie Werkgelegenheid en Arbeidsmarkt, 2008). Therefore, the findings of the Diversity Monitor cannot be straightforwardly compared to official figures. The second Diversity Monitor (VRT Studiedienst, 2007) shows that in fiction, the ethnic minority presence on the main public television channel Eén is limited (6 percent). Commercial channels are doing better (10—14 percent), mostly due to African American characters in imported American fiction. In Flemish programmes, compared to 2004 there are more ethnic minority characters in everyday contexts rather than in 'serious' contexts and in static roles. Overall, however, there is still a clear underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in Flemish fiction, only imported fiction consistently portraying them.

Researching ethnic minorities and television fiction

The growing interest in the representation of ethnic minorities is paralleled by research on their media use. Several Flemish researchers have charted media possession, access and use among ethnic minorities, focusing on adolescents from the largest non-EU groups of ethnic minorities, Moroccans and Turks (e.g. Devroe et al., 2005; d'Haenens et al., 2004; Sinardet and Mortelmans, 2006). Most of this research takes a quantitative look at media possession, access and preferences, prioritizing informative needs. Overall, what is lacking is more in-depth qualitative research into actual interpretations of specific genres and programmes, in particular entertainment.

For this research, 80 young viewers were interviewed, using in-depth face-to-face interviews. All were between 18 and 25 years old, or 'emerging adults' as Arnett (2004) calls them, claiming that this is a period of particular instability and identity exploration. Phinney (2006) stresses the importance of ethnicity in this process — many non-western adolescents and emerging adults are struggling to form bi- and multicultural identities.

Brown (2006: 279-81) calls the current generation of emerging adults a 'media generation', who use media as a 'virtual tool kit' for identity work. Confirming the findings mentioned earlier, race and ethnicity are important in this process, as for instance non-whites in the US prefer programmes with African American actors (Brown, 2006: 285).

To assess the importance of ethnicity, in our research equal numbers of Flemish and ethnic minority members were interviewed.¹ Viewers from two large ethnic groups were selected, Moroccans and Turks. The research was carried out in Antwerp, where 23 percent of non-European citizens are Moroccan (as opposed to 7 percent Turkish; Provincie Antwerpen, 2002), which explains the majority (35) of Moroccan respondents in our sample. This article focuses on the findings for the 40 ethnic minority viewers, occasionally comparing them to the Flemish viewers. To ensure diversity, within each group there was an equal division across gender and level of education. Although these (in particular gender) are important dimensions in soap viewing, in this article ethnicity will be the key variable. The interviews were semi-structured, starting with questions on media ownership and use, moving on to questions on TV channel, genre and programme preferences, concluding with specific questions on the viewing of foreign (American) and domestic fiction.

The interviews focused on domestic soaps, which are explicitly devised as a 'mirror of society'. In Flanders, there are currently two domestic soaps, *Thuis* ('At Home', 1995) on the public channel Eén, and *Familie* ('Family', 1991) on the commercial channel VTM. Both are broadcast in primetime and have a faithful following of up to 1 million viewers (of a population of approximately 6 million). Domestic soaps are a central genre for this research, as they contain many nationally specific elements such as stars, settings, iconography (Moran, 1998: 91-2) and of course language (O'Donnell, 1999: 20). Soaps are a central genre in the everyday imagining of the nation, as indicated by Franco:

By addressing the national/regional audience in its own language, speaking about domestic situations/matters and communicating values/commonsense assumptions and understanding, soaps engage in a process of enculturation that promotes a sense of community and identity among a particular group of viewers within a national territory. (Franco, 2001: 453)

By their emphasis on ordinariness and everydayness, soaps are the ideal vehicle for the 'ordinary' nationalism mentioned earlier (see also Turner, 2005).

This project is inspired by earlier research identifying soaps as an important genre in relation to ethnic identity formation. In an influential ethnographic study, Gillespie (1995) explored the role of media in the

identity formation of young Punjabi Londoners. She describes how the Australian soap *Neighbours* is a source of identification and everyday talk. Young viewers use soaps to reflect on their own problems and family situations, and in the process they become more culturally aware and they negotiate between cultures. In his research on Dutch girls, de Bruin (2005) adopts a similar view on identity formation as a complex, contextual process of constructing multiple identities and he explores how these girls use media as 'a cultural tool kit' to form (ethnic) identities. He concludes that domestic soaps, for this age group, certainly form a shared frame of reference for the formation of identity (for a similar conclusion, see Barker, 1999). One factor of difference concerns the more critical stance of ethnic minority viewers towards the representation of ethnic minorities, which was also found by de Leeuw (2005) researching the media menu of Dutch ethnic/minorities. Her respondents criticized the underrepresentation and unfavourable portrayal of ethnic minorities in Dutch television fiction, a finding we return to in our own research.

Television in the lives of ethnic minority viewers

Television is an omnipresent medium in the lives of the Flemish Moroccan and Turkish interviewees, most of whom live in a multi-set household and have their own personal set in their room. A large majority (27) has a satellite dish, giving access to channels from the home country, in contrast with the Flemish interviewees, who seldom own one. This is in line with quantitative research by Devroe et al. (2005), who found that these groups have equal (or even greater) possession of and access to television than 'Flemish' adolescents, and that about 80 percent of ethnic minority (as opposed to 15 percent of Flemish) respondents have a satellite dish (see also d'Haenens et al., 2004: 132–6). In terms of viewing patterns, the ethnic minority viewers are very similar to the Flemish interviewees. Most state average viewing times of between two and three hours a day, like their Flemish counterparts.² Quite a few say they used to watch more, which confirms the aforementioned transitional nature of emerging adulthood: they are increasingly out of the house, involved in higher education and other activities.

In terms of channel preference, most respondents mention Flemish channels, particularly the youth-oriented commercial channels VT4 and Kanaal2 (now 2BE) as opposed to the public channels. This preference for commercial channels is consistent with earlier findings (e.g. d'Haenens et al., 2004: 135; Sinardet and Mortelmans 2006: 443), and it is ironic given that public broadcasting makes much more effort to accurately represent the multi-ethnic society. Although the wide spread of satellite dishes suggests

diverging media menus, it does not make for a world of difference: not many of our (mostly Moroccan) interviewees watch channels from their country of origin. A few occasionally join their parents who do, although their limited knowledge of Arabic is an impediment (see also d'Haenens et al., 2004: 123). The inclusion of more Turkish respondents would probably have led to slightly different conclusions: their knowledge of the parental language is better, so they use more Turkish media (Devroe et al., 2005: 53). As it is, the viewing patterns of our ethnic minority and Flemish respondents are very similar, suggesting they do belong to the same viewing community.

As much of the current Flemish research on ethnic minority media use focuses on (culturally specific) information needs and news media, part of the picture gets lost because most interviewees state they generally watch television for entertainment. Confirming this orientation, the majority names 'comedy' as their preferred genre and serials like *Lost* and *Prison Break* as their favourite programme. Quite a few also mention *My Wife and Kids*, a sitcom about a black family hardly mentioned by Flemish viewers. Although they don't explicitly refer to the black cast, this preference is in line with the aforementioned finding that 'coloured' characters appeal more to ethnic minority viewers (Brown, 2006). Particularly striking is the paucity of references to Flemish programmes, with the meagre exception of the sitcom *FC De Kampioenen* mentioned by a few. The limited appeal of this extremely popular all-white sitcom could be attributed to its failure to address the multi-ethnic society, although Flemish interviewees hardly mentioned it either. When asked about their favourite *fiction* genre, once again ethnic minority viewers state 'comedy', soaps evoking the most negative responses. De Bruin (2005: 102—5) also found negative evaluations of soaps despite their popularity, which he interprets as a way for young (ethnic minority) viewers to show they have good taste. Clearly, the stigma of soaps, as discussed by Alasuutari (1992), is not a thing of the past, and it is definitely a factor to take into account when reviewing the responses to (domestic) soaps.

The preference for American fiction is clear: only one respondent prefers Moroccan fiction, some (10) prefer Flemish fiction and most (27) prefer American fiction. Most comment on the higher quality of American fiction, which is deemed to have better images, better acting, larger budgets, better humour, more suspense, etc. Correspondingly, many think Flemish fiction is boring, uninteresting and always the same, containing too little action and humour:

Flemish series don't interest me at all. What can I think of. ... *Thuis* and *Familie* and such. I really can't watch that, I don't know why. . . . Maybe it is because I like more action, because they are really boring. (Kareem, 25)³

This response is telling because it conflates Flemish fiction with soaps, a tendency I return to later. The preference for American fiction could indicate that Flemish fiction does not manage to captivate ethnic minority audiences, but some caution is necessary in this interpretation as Flemish respondents share these views. This confirms findings by Biltereyst (1995: 196), whose interviewees found American fiction well-made, with good stories and acting, while they found Flemish fiction less well-made but easier to identify with. At least for this age group, American fiction constitutes a kind of *lingua franca*, shared by Flemish and ethnic minority viewers alike.

While most of the respondents prefer American fiction, a minority does prefer Flemish fiction. For instance, Mouloud (18) sees it as a way to learn about Flemish society:

Interviewer: What do you like about it?

Mouloud: Just to see how they . . . Yes, it is fiction, but just to see how things are, how they go about in society.

Int.: Do you mean the characters as such, how they live, or also Flemish society?

Mouloud: Yes, Flemish habits really. Really studying them is perhaps putting it too big, but just to see them, and to understand them.

Some refer to the language being easier to understand, confirming the importance of language in forming imagined communities. Others state that Flemish fiction is closer to their own life: 'I think it is closer to my world than foreign fiction. I think that foreign series are so remote, I don't like watching them' (Yasmina, 18). Although most prefer American fiction, some think Flemish fiction is more realistic and they experience it as closer to their own experiences, which suggests some degree of cultural proximity.

As mentioned earlier, many respondents spontaneously refer to the socially realist soaps when talking about Flemish fiction, while they associate American fiction with the more entertaining and escapist action series and comedies. Most state they don't watch Flemish soaps, or at least not often, many adding that they used to watch them more often. This may be a way to take a critical distance from such an 'objectionable' genre, but it also confirms the exceptional nature of emerging adulthood. It suggests that domestic soaps may have been equally crucial in adolescence, as found by de Bruin (2005) in the Netherlands, but that other things take priority in emerging adulthood, an interpretation confirmed by Alja (19):

Alja: When I was younger I used to watch *Thuis*, but that began to . . .

Int.: And what did you like about it?

Alja: It's just that, at that age I thought it was interesting but getting older I thought it was . . . Getting older I started to be more involved with friends and other things.

This response is similar to that of the Flemish interviewees, which again suggests that emerging adulthood may be an important shared experience.

When talking about Flemish soaps, interviewees make many references to realism and everyday life. Soaps are said to deal with real problems, real life, things that can happen. Although they claim not to watch often, the soap world is very familiar and 'normal' to most interviewees: 'You follow it from a young age, you empathize with these people, you know? And then you see them almost every day. . . . That's pure reality, people who live through all kinds of things' (Abdelahmed, 21). On this general level, at least, these ethnic minority viewers do not distance themselves from the everyday world that is portrayed. They talk about recognition, in particular in relation to the public broadcaster's soap *Thuis*, which contains the most actors and characters of foreign origin, like the Moroccan plumber Mo: 'That's more to my liking because I can recognize myself in it, among other things because there are more allochthonous people in it. I think it is a realistic account of reality' (Samira, 21). This is a clear illustration of the aforementioned tendency for ethnic minority viewers to look for similar characters.

Recognition, realism, Flemishness and ethnicity

The comments on recognition bring us to the core of this research: are ethnic minority emerging adults part of the 'imagined community' of viewers watching domestic fiction? Based purely on their (expressed) viewing behaviour, the answer would be negative. However, despite not regularly watching these programmes, most are familiar with them. Moreover, the presence of ethnic minority characters is appealing to many, which is relevant in view of the aforementioned finding that ethnic minority viewers are generally dissatisfied with their representation on television. This question is explicitly addressed further on in the interview, as are the issues of recognition, realism and Flemishness.

First, the interviewees were asked about *recognition*. Almost all recognize the world portrayed in soaps, agreeing that they show 'common' or 'normal' everyday life. For instance, when asked if she recognizes things in *Thuis*, Alja (19) answers: 'Yes, some things, it's all very much based on

common life I think and you do recognize certain situations. Not necessarily things you have experienced yourself but things that other people have experienced. It's quite realistic.' They mostly recognize the portrayal of life in Flanders: 'The routine, really. Having a beer, going out with the friends, business life, private life' (Khalid, 23). However, this does not mean they recognize themselves in it: most say they don't. While the same is true for Flemish interviewees, this lack of recognition is motivated differently here as cultural identification is also part of the equation. When asked whether Flemish soaps are recognizable, Samira (21) answers:

Not directly for me, as an allochthonous student, not at all. Just a little when Mo joined *Thuis*, but in other series that's not the case at all. You sometimes watch it and then you know how they live on the other side of the world, so to speak, but to say that I recognize myself in it, no.

If ethnic minority viewers do recognize elements from their own life in soaps, it is only the Belgian or Flemish aspects of it: 'Yes, you recognize yourself sometimes, but not completely, because I think we are rather a mixture of two different cultures, and you recognize yourself partly in one culture and partly in the other' (Rabiye, 21). Overall, the portrayal of everyday life in soaps is familiar to these viewers, but it is mostly Belgian life.

A similar pattern occurs when the ethnic minority viewers are asked about *realism*. Many think Flemish soaps give a realistic account of everyday life: 'It's really things that happen in a day, those also happen there. There's always something happening in the family or with friends, a fight or something. That's also the case in everyday life' (Amal, 18). The persistent references to reality and realism indicate a referential reading — the term coined by Liebes and Katz (1990) to indicate readings comparing fiction with the real world. Although this research does not allow for quantitative generalization, it is remarkable that more ethnic minority viewers consider soaps to be a realistic account of Flemish society than do Flemish viewers (17 as opposed to 7). Flemish viewers have more reservations concerning the exaggerated nature of soap portrayals, which they are comparing more to their own life, while ethnic minority viewers consider it more as a representation of other people's lives. What they do find unrealistic is the absence of ethnic minorities: 'No offence, but they're almost all Belgians acting in that and hardly ever a Moroccan or a Turk, while there are many of them in reality. That should be addressed more' (Salirna, 18).

When talking about realism, some refer to the specific *Flemish nature* of domestic soaps. Most agree that these soaps are typically Flemish as they give an accurate image of everyday life: 'I think that they try to live as much as possible like in everyday life in these soaps, so that people can

follow that and see "ah, the same things happen there as well" ' (Amal, 18). This was also the general assessment of the Flemish viewers, but there are two main differences: the ethnic minority viewers consider themselves less as part of this 'everyday world' and they have, fewer difficulties in describing what is typically Flemish about it. Because they (partly) feel like outsiders, they contrastively define Flemishness by referring to their home culture. Beside the typically Flemish accent, they often refer to food and drink, in particular the habit of going to a bar and having a beer. Bachir (21) explicitly refers to the national stereotype of Flemings (and more broadly, Belgians) as 'Burgundian': 'They say that Flemings are Burgundian. They love to live, to eat and drink. And I think this aspect of the Flemish is often shown in the series. They are always in a restaurant or a cafe and Belgian beer is known everywhere.' Another recurring comment is related to Flemish family values, which are deemed to be inferior to the values of the more close-knit Moroccan families. Some describe the Flemings as selfish and individualist, while others refer to the lack of respect for older family members:

They're not really family-oriented. That's the difference I see with us. For instance: saying 'here she comes again', we couldn't say that when our grandmother visits or other family members, we are much attached to each other. And I see that's not the case in Belgian culture, and that really irritates me. (Soumia, 22)

While they do recognize the portrayal of Flanders and are able to identify its typical features, most ethnic minority respondents are not happy with this image. When asked whether soaps gave an accurate representation of actual Flanders, quite a few answer negatively, stating that soaps do not represent multicultural society but rather the social elite. Talking about *Familie*, Tarik (22) says:

Multiculturalism isn't represented in that. It's always very limited. It's elite people, in *Familie*. . . . You hardly see multicultural reality. You can see that in the actors, it's mostly Flemish figures and characters, while that doesn't really correspond to reality. I live in Antwerp, and Antwerp is really diverse in terms of population.

In the process, the respondents also point to the conflation of class and ethnicity, ethnic minority characters never being part of the normalized middle and higher classes.

This brings us to a final point, the *representation of ethnic minority characters*, which came up throughout the interviews but was also explicitly addressed at the end. Predictably, almost all say there are too few images

of ethnic minorities, which most think is a pity. Confirming the findings of the Diversity Monitor, Soumia (22) notes that ethnic minorities are mostly shown in news programmes, less in 'everyday' entertainment: 'It's mostly in the news that you hear something, but in soaps or game shows . . . I have never seen an allochthonous woman participate in *Blokken* [a popular game show] and I think that's bad.' For most, the presence of ethnic minorities is a matter of realism: 'We all know there's a particular division in society, so I think that if you want to attract a large audience, you have to put enough allochthonous people in your series to make it realistic' (Samira, 21). This is consistent with the aforementioned tendency to referentially read domestic soaps, comparing them to reality.

As also found in other research (e.g. de Leeuw, 2005; Ogan, 2001), most are dissatisfied with the representation of ethnic minorities, saying it is outright negative (here they are often referring to the news) or at least not realistic. There is an interesting tension here, which illustrates the burden of representation put on the few ethnic minority characters. Mo, the Moroccan plumber in *Thuis*, is deemed to be too 'typical' by some, as he speaks Dutch with a heavy Moroccan accent; but others think he is quite modern. His daughter Aisha is considered as 'too integrated' by some, although she does appeal to others. Hassan (24) comments on the impossibility of getting it right as there are obviously all kinds of Moroccan fathers: 'You have differences, you have fathers who are that way [like Mo], others who aren't.' Indeed, it is important to point out that *Thuis* makes a conscious effort to accurately represent cultural diversity, which explains the quite tempered criticism it receives from ethnic minority viewers. Nevertheless, partly because there are so few of them, ethnic minority characters tend to be strongly 'othered', or 'singletons' to use the term coined by Geraghty (1991: 142) to describe single black characters introduced in soaps to address black issues. Most respondents would like to see more images of well-adapted ethnic minority characters:

Someone who's born here, who works here, someone who's perfectly autochthonous but still has the appearance of an allochthonous, Moroccan person. . . . Someone who's adapted. Not the allochthonous person with problems at school and not getting a job and not being supported by his parents, who gets into criminality. Someone who has studied, who is of a good family and who has a nice job. (Kareem, 25)

Sterk (2006) found a similar frustration among Dutch ethnic minorities, who do not find enough space for identification with single Moroccan characters in such dramas and who plead for a greater diversity of roles and functions, which would take away the burden of representation from single characters.

The dissatisfaction of ethnic minority viewers is only partly shared by the Flemish viewers. While the latter agree that there are too few ethnic minority characters, most think they are positively represented. To them, ethnic minority characters like Mo are represented as a normal part of society, which indeed is the producers' intention. Ironically, quite a few are actually irritated by the overly positive and therefore unrealistic portrayal of ethnic minority characters as very well integrated.

Conclusion

Returning to the question of whether emerging adult ethnic minority viewers are part of an imagined viewer community for domestic fiction, the answer is mixed. To start, ethnic minority audiences are diverse, so the very fact of isolating them as a group and contrasting them to Flemish viewers may lead to homogenization and essentialism. Although we did look for patterns within our group of respondents, it is important not to simplistically ascribe all findings to ethnicity. Indeed, although ethnic minority viewers tended not to watch or like Flemish soaps, they are very similar to Flemish viewers in this respect, which suggests that the life stage of 'emerging adulthood' is an important commonality. These ethnic minority viewers do not belong to a national viewing community, but to an age-based community of (male and female) emergent adults preferring American fiction.'

Although they do not belong to a national 'imagined community' of viewers, the ethnic minority viewers are familiar with the representations in Flemish soaps, which they consider as pretty accurate representations of reality, as do the Flemish viewers. They may not feel connected to the 'imagined community' as it is represented in soaps, but they do recognize it. They equally prefer American fiction as a source of entertainment and escape, while for Flemish fiction recognition and realism are more important. Ethnic minority viewers are very similar to Flemish viewers in that they mostly read the soaps referentially, comparing them with the real world and linking them to their own life.

When discussing fiction in general terms, for instance when talking about favourite (American) series, ethnicity is not spontaneously mentioned. This suggests that ethnicity is not a salient category all the time, which questions the usual opposition between native majority and minority audiences in this field of research. As they share a love for the same media products, the cultural gap between Flemish and ethnic minority viewers (at least in this age group) is not as unbridgeable as is often assumed. By focusing on differences between ethnic groups and by explicitly, addressing the flawed representation of ethnic minorities, researchers in this field may unwittingly

magnify the very oppositions they seek to address. At least in this research (which was not introduced as research *about* ethnicity), ethnicity did not come up as an issue before it was explicitly raised and respondents, although critical, did not report a great deal of frustration.

For ethnic minority emerging adults watching fiction, ethnicity is an issue only in some specific respects. An important difference between Flemish and ethnic minority viewers is that the latter do not consider the soap world as a representation of their own reality, or only partly. This reflects their position in between cultures. When asked to what culture they considered themselves to belong, many situate themselves between at least two cultures, mostly Moroccan and Flemish and/or Belgian: 'I don't focus on one culture. I think I have a little of everything: I'm raised in a Moroccan home, in Belgian society and with American TV (Bachir, 21). A related difference with the Flemish viewers concerns their appreciation of the portrayal of ethnic minorities. In spite of the attempts of programme makers to provide positive images, most ethnic minority viewers are dissatisfied. This shows that they read these images referentially by comparing them with their own reality, looking for role models and confirmation. At the same time, it also illustrates the problem of token representation: only a multiplicity of images could accurately represent the diversity of situations of ethnic minority viewers and therefore provide satisfactory 'self-images'. Therefore, a lot more work needs to be done on the level of representations of diversity before all Flemings, 'old' and 'new', can be part of the same imagined community. The 2007 Diversity Monitor shows an increase in portrayals of ethnic minority characters in everyday situations, and this may be the best way forward. If domestic soaps are mostly dealing with everyday life, the inclusion of more ethnic minority characters in 'banal' storylines may be the strongest signal of the normalization of ethnic diversity.

Notes

This research was supported by the Fund for Scientific Research Flanders. I would also like to thank the students of the research seminar 'Flemish TV Fiction and Cultural Identity' (University of Antwerp, 2007) for help with the interviews, and An Kuppens for the methodological support.

1. For reasons of clarity I use the term 'Flemish' to refer to persons of Flemish descent and 'ethnic minority' to refer to others, although this last group is also Flemish in certain respects, so they could be called 'new' or Moroccan or Turkish Flemings.

2. Devroe et al. (2005: 54) come to a similar conclusion, stating average viewing times of 170 minutes (Turkish youngsters), 155 minutes (Moroccan) and 155 minutes (Flemish).
3. All quotes are literal translations by the author. To respect the original phrasing, the Dutch terms *autochtoon* and *allochtoon* are translated as 'autochthonous' and 'allochthonous'.
4. For a comparable finding concerning the similar media preferences of migrants and American media as a shared point of reference, see Elias and Lemish (2008).
5. There is no space here to fully discuss the gender dimension, but generally speaking the responses of male and female respondents were very similar. The girls expressed similar likes and dislikes also in relation to soaps (which are traditionally considered to be a 'female' genre). While this requires further research, it suggests that male and female emerging adults share a similar frame of reference in terms of television entertainment, and that ethnicity rather than gender becomes the salient identity category when discussing representations of ethnic minorities.

References

- Alasuutari, Pertti (1992) '“I'm Ashamed to Admit it But I Have Watched *Dallas*”: The Moral Hierarchy of Television Programmes', *Media, Culture and Society* 14(1): 561–82.
- Abrams, Jessica R. and Howard Giles (2007) 'Ethnic Identity Gratifications Selection and Avoidance by African Americans: A Group Vitality and Social Identity Gratifications Perspective', *Media Psychology* 9: 115–34.
- Algemene Directie Werkgelegenheid en Arbeidsmarkt (2008) *De immigratie in België: Aantallen, stromen en arbeidsmarkt. Verslag 2007*. Brussel: FOD Werkgelegenheid, Arbeid en Sociaal Overleg.
- Anderson, Benedict (1991) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edn. London: Verso.
- Arnett, Jeffrey J. (2004) *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barker, Chris (1999) *Television, Globalization and Cultural Identities*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Billiet, Jaak (2006) 'Attitudes towards Ethnic Minorities in Flanders: Changes between 1989 and 2003 and a Comparison with the Netherlands', pp. 34–56 in L. d'Haenens, M. Hooghe, D. Vanheule and H. Gezduci (eds) *New Citizens, New Policies? Developments in Diversity Policy in Canada and Flanders*. Ghent: Academia Press.
- Billig, Michael (1995) *Banal Nationalism*. London: Sage.
- Biltreyest, D. (1995) *Hollywood in het avondland: Een analyse van de afhankelijkheid en de impact van Amerikaanse televisie in Europa*. Brussel: VUB Press.
- Brown, Jane D. (2006) 'Emerging Adults in a Media-Saturated World', pp. 279–99 in J. Arnett. and J. Tanner (eds) *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Centrum voor Gelijkheid van Kansen en Racismebestrijding (2003) 'Geschiedenis van de migraties'; at: www.diversiteit.be/NR/rdonlyres/7D36E046-1D09-4BCD-9D87-37145E6355C3/0/migratiegeschiedenis.pdf
- Creeber, Glen (2004) '“Hideously White”: British Television, Glocalization, and National Identity', *Television and New Media* 5(1): 27–39.
- de Bruin, Joost (2005) *Multicultureel drama: Populair Nederlands televisiedrama, jeugd en etniciteit*. Amsterdam: Otto Cramwinckel.
- de Leeuw, Sonja (2005) 'Television Fiction and Cultural Diversity: Strategies for Cultural Change', pp. 91–111 in L. Højberg and H. Søndergaard (eds) *European Film and Media Culture*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Devroe, Ilse, Dieter Driesen and Frieda Saeys (2005) *Beschikbaarheid en gebruik van traditionele en nieuwe media bij allochtone jongeren in Vlaanderen*. Antwerp and Limburg: Steunpunt Gelijkekansenbeleid, Universiteit Antwerpen and Limburgs Universitair Centrum.
- d'Haenens, Leen (2006) 'Media as Managers of Diversity', pp. 137–57 in L. d'Haenens, M. Hooghe, D. Vanheule and H. Gezduci (eds) *'New' Citizens, New Policies? Developments in Diversity Policy in Canada and Flanders*. Ghent: Academia Press.
- d'Haenens, Leen, Cindy van Summeren, Frieda Saeys and Joyce Koeman (2004) *Integratie of identiteit? Mediamenu's van Turkse en Marokkaanse jongeren*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Dhoest, Alexander (2003) 'Reconstructing Flanders: The Representation of the Nation in Flemish Period Drama', *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* 28: 253–74.
- Dhoest, Alexander (2004) 'Negotiating Images of the Nation: The Production of Flemish TV Drama, 1953–1989', *Media, Culture and Society* 26(3): 393–408.
- Dhoest, Alexander (2007) 'The National Everyday in Contemporary European Television Fiction: The Flemish Case', *Critical Studies in Television* 2(2): 60–76.
- Edwards, Lynne (2001) 'Black Like Me: Value Commitment and Television Viewing Preferences of US Black Teenage Girls', pp. 49–66 in K. Ross and P. Playdon (eds) *Black Marks: Minority Ethnic Audiences and Media*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Elias, Nelly and Dafna Lemish (2008) 'Media Uses in Immigrant Families: Torn between “Inward” and “Outward” Paths of Integration', *International Communication Gazette* 70(1): 21–40.
- Franco, Judith (2001) 'Cultural Identity in the Community Soap: A Comparative Analysis of *Thuis* (At Home) and *Eastenders*', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4(4): 449–72.
- Fujioka, Yuki (2005) 'Black Images as a Perceived Threat to African American Ethnic Identity: Coping Responses, Perceived Public Perception, and Attitudes towards Affirmative Action', *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 49(4): 450–67.
- Geraghty, Christine (1991) *Women and Soap Opera: A Study of Prime Time Soaps*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gillespie, Marie (1995) *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*. London: Routledge.

- Gillespie, Marie (2007) 'Security, Media and Multicultural Citizenship: A Collaborative Ethnography', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10(3): 275–93.
- Hall, Stuart (1992) 'The Question of Cultural Identity', pp. 273–325 in S. Hall, D. Held and T. McGrew (eds) *Modernity and its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press/Open University.
- Harindranath, R. (2005) 'Ethnicity and Cultural Difference: Some Thematic and Political Issues in Global Audience Research', *Particip@tions* 2(2).
- Hoffner, Cynthia and Martha Buchanan (2005) 'Young Adults' Wishful Identification with Television Characters: The Role of Perceived Similarity and Character Attributes', *Media Psychology* 7: 325–51.
- Hogg, Michael A. and Graham M. Vaughan (2002) *Social Psychology*, 3rd edn. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Liebes, Tamar and Elihu Katz (1990) *The Export of Meaning: Cross-Cultural Readings of Dallas*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lind, Rebecca A. (2004) 'The Relevance of Race in Interpreting a TV News Story', pp. 76–84 in R.A. Lind (ed.) *Race/Gender/Media: Considering Diversity across Audiences, Content, and Producers*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Loobuyck, Patrick and Dirk Jacobs (2006) 'The Flemish Immigration Society: Political Challenges on Different Levels', pp. 105–23 in L. d'Haenens, M. Hooghe, D. Vanheule and H. Gezduci (eds) *'New' Citizens, New Policies? Developments in Diversity Policy in Canada and Flanders*. Ghent: Academia Press.
- Moran, Albert (1998) *Copycat TV: Globalisation, Program Formats and Cultural Identity*. Luton: University of Luton Press.
- Morley, David (2004) 'Broadcasting and the Construction of the National Family', pp. 418–41 in R.C. Allen and A. Hill (eds) *The Television Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- O'Donnell, Hugh (1999) *Good Times, Bad Times: Soap Operas and Society in Western Europe*. London and New York: Leicester University Press.
- Ogan, Christine (2001) *Communication and Identity in the Diaspora: Turkish Migrants in Amsterdam and their Use of Media*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Phinney, Jean S. (2006) 'Ethnic Identity Exploration in Emerging Adulthood', pp. 117–34 in J. Arnett and J. Tanner (eds) *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Provinciaal Antwerpen (2002) 'Het provinciaal minderhedenbeleidsplan'; at: www.provant.be/binaries/minderhedenbeleidsplan2003_2006_tcm7-21361.PDF
- Scannell, Paddy (1992) 'Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life', pp. 317–48 in P. Scannell, P. Schlesinger and C. Clarks (eds) *Culture and Power: A Media, Culture and Society Reader*. London: Sage.
- Schröder, Kim Christian (1994) 'Audience Semiotics, Interpretive Communities and the "Ethnographic Turn" in Media Research', *Media, Culture and Society* 16: 337–47.
- Simon, Bernd (2004) *Identity in Modern Society: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Sinardet, Dave and Dimitri Mortelmans (2006) 'Between Al-Jazeera and CNN. Indicators of Media Use by Belgian Ethnic Minority Youth', *Communications* 31: 425–45.
- Sterk, Garjan (2006) 'Visible Representation and the Paradox of Symbolic Diversity', pp. 159–70 in L. d'Haenens, M. Hooghe, D. Vanheule and H. Gezduci (eds) *New Citizens, New Policies? Developments in Diversity Policy in Canada and Flanders*. Ghent: Academia Press.
- Straubhaar, Joseph D. (1991) 'Beyond Media Imperialism: Assymetrical Interdependence and Cultural Proximity', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8: 39–59.
- Turner, Graeme (2005) 'Cultural Identity, Soap Narrative, and Reality TV', *Television and New Media* 6(4): 415–22.
- Van den Bulck, Hilde (2001) 'Public Service Television and National Identity as a Project of Modernity: The Example of Flemish Television', *Media, Culture and Society* 23(1): 53–69.
- VRT (2003) 'Charter diversiteit'; at: www.vrt.be/vrt_master/over/vrt_overvrt_diversiteit_engagement_charter/index.shtml
- VRT Studiedienst (2004) *Kleur bekennen: Monitor diversiteit 2004. De zichtbaarheid van mensen van andere origine op de Vlaamse televisie*. Brussel: VRT.
- VRT Studiedienst (2007) *Monitor diversiteit 2007: Kwantitatieve studie naar zichtbaarheid van diversiteit op het Vlaamse scherm*. Brussel: VRT.
- Waisbord, Silvio (2004) 'Media and the Reinvention of the Nation', pp. 375–92 in J. Downing (ed.) *The Sage Handbook of Media Studies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.