Multicultureel drama? : populair Nederlands televisiedrama, jeugd en etniciteit

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Dutch popular television drama is one of the favourite television genres amongst young people in the Netherlands. At first glance, this preference is shared by youths from several ethnic backgrounds. In a country where there has been considerable discussion about the flaws of multicultural society, in which differences between ethnic groups are often underlined, such a communal preference is remarkable. Dutch popular television drama could foster connections between different kinds of people. This seems particularly important for youngsters, as they are in a phase of their lives in which they are finding their place in society, and even more so for young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, because they are influenced by several cultural sources. Previous research has stressed that ethnic minorities actively form ‘new ethnicities’ by negotiating between diverse cultural meanings. Media play a paramount role in these negotiation processes, since they provide an ongoing flow of cultural signs.

The central research question of this dissertation is: ‘Which identities do young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds construct in relation to Dutch popular television drama?’ The dissertation does not focus on media effects, yet it analyses ways in which young people actively give meaning to Dutch popular television drama. The main theoretical source of inspiration for this work comes from cultural studies. The central themes of this dissertation have all been addressed by cultural studies scholars in the past. Since the seventies there have been studies regarding youth, while starting in the eighties, popular television drama, especially the reception of soap operas, has been a topic of investigation. In that same period, ethnicity and multiculturalism became major research themes.

Earlier studies have shown that ‘youth’ is a socially constructed term. The concept of youth acquires meaning in public and academic discussions. Young people, supposedly, have the freedom to ‘play’ with different identities, thus finding their place in society. In the process, several identities can be brought to the foreground: gender, sexuality, colour, ethnicity, class, nationality, etcetera. For ethnic minority young people ethnicity is relatively important. Like other identities, ethnicity is constructed in various social contexts: at home, with family, amongst friends, at school and in public spaces.

Because they make a whole array of cultural meanings available, to which young people can refer, media can be seen as a ‘cultural toolkit’ or ‘identity market’. Young people in the Netherlands, regardless of ethnic background,
are heavy television watchers. Popular television drama is one of their favourite genres. It can be divided into a number of sub genres, that each have their own specific narrative structure and history regarding the representation of gender and ethnicity. Reception studies have shown that viewers negotiate between representations and their own positions. In doing so, they construct identities, i.e. they form ideas about themselves and others. Most studies into the reception of popular television drama focus on soap operas. Police series, sitcoms and teen series have less often been the topic of study.

In order to answer the central research question several studies were undertaken. Some of these look at interpretation, i.e. the ways in which young people give meaning to Dutch popular television drama. To be able to comprehend the identity constructions that result from this, studies were conducted regarding representation i.e. meanings that Dutch popular television drama offers to its viewers. The research led to two identities: 'youth' and 'ethnicity'. Presumably, these identities are the most important to young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds. To grasp the identity constructions around youth and ethnicity, it is necessary to look at representations of youth and ethnicity on the one hand, and interpretations of youth and ethnicity on the other. This line of reasoning leads to four sub research questions:

1. How is youth represented in Dutch popular television drama?
2. How is ethnicity represented in Dutch popular television drama?
3. How do young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds interpret youth in Dutch popular television drama?
4. How do young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds interpret ethnicity in Dutch popular television drama?

The research focuses on the four genres of Dutch popular television drama that are the most popular with youth audiences: soap opera, police series, sitcom and teen series. For the studies into representation, 360 soap episodes, 90 police series episodes, 85 sitcom episodes and 10 teen series episodes were analysed. The unit of analysis were young characters and ethnic minority characters. To interpret the results of the analyses, the concept of 'frame' is used. Frames determine how characters are positioned in a series and which meanings are attached to them. For the studies into interpretation, all in all, 239 young people were interviewed about either soaps, police series, sitcoms or teen series. The central concept that was used to grasp the meanings that young people gave to Dutch popular television drama was 'performative style'. This concept is derived from Erving Goffman, who states: 'The self is a [...] product of the performances that individuals put on in social situations' (Branaman, 1997: xlvi). By talking about Dutch popular television drama, young people actively construct different kinds of 'selves'.

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In the analyses of the representation of youth, four frames were reconstructed. Two frames correspond with a dichotomy that is often found in youth research: youth as fun and youth as trouble. The third frame focuses on the psychological development of young people, whereas the fourth frame portrays young people as if they were adults. Soaps, police series, sitcoms and teen series differ in their deployment of the frames. The soaps use all four frames, although the pleasure and the development frame are dominant. Moreover, in soaps, characters shift relatively often between frames. The teen series also use all four frames, yet characters shift less often between frames. The sitcoms display the least amount of diversity: in the series that were analysed, only one frame was used, either the pleasure or the problem frame. Police series categorically represent guest characters in the problem frame and regular characters in the development frame. The use of the pleasure frame in all four genres seems to have increased over the past years. Gender differences are particularly emphasised in that frame. Boys are depicted as being more self-assured and tough, whereas girls are portrayed as being more serious and less self-confident. The civil life of young people, that is their education or work life, is barely represented in Dutch popular television drama. The four frames, each in their own way, create an impressive picture of young people's lives.

The analyses of the representation of ethnicity also resulted in four frames. In the assimilation frame, ethnic minorities are represented as absorbed into 'Dutch' culture. On the contrary, in the exotic frame they are given an abundant amount of 'exotic' traits. In the discrimination frame, they are discriminated against because of their skin colour or ethnicity. In the complex frame, ethnic minorities actively construct their ethnicities by negotiating with meanings from different cultural sources. The sitcoms and teen series turned out to be least diverse in their representation of ethnicity. In the sitcoms that were analysed, few ethnic minorities were featured. Teen series predominantly used the assimilation frame. The police series were the most diverse, by using all four frames. In the soaps, ethnic minority characters shift mostly between the exotic and assimilation frame. Nevertheless, the complex frame seems to be deployed more frequently over the years, leading to a more sophisticated representation of ethnic minorities. A drawback is that the complex frame is more often used for representing men than women. The main reason for this is that it is used mostly in police series, where men are featured more regularly. In the complex frame, characters from all sorts of ethnic backgrounds are represented, whereas the assimilation frame seems to be reserved for people coming from one of the former Dutch colonies, and the exotic frame for people that came to the Netherlands as labour migrants.

During the interviews about soaps, police series, sitcoms and teen series, young people used three distinct performative styles to interpret the series and
their characters. With the deconstruction style, they look behind the reality of a series, thereby showing that they see through the constructed television reality. In doing this, they present a ‘smart self’. With the association style, they talk about the characters of a series as though they were real people. They evaluate the characteristics or behaviour of a character and relate them, explicitly or implicitly, to their own positions. Thus, they present a ‘sensitive self’. Lastly, they perform a ‘moral self’ by morally judging what they perceive in a series. In the process, they define their own stance vis-à-vis moral issues. Although the same performative styles are used in talking about each of the four genres, there are differences in how they are deployed.

Differences between genres are relatively small in the use of the deconstruction style. Regarding all genres, young people talk about the actors, the fact that series are ‘products’, and that they have specific genre rules. More dissimilarities are visible in the use of the association style. Young people utilise soaps and teen series to evaluate what kind of people they like, to empathise with situations in which characters find themselves, and to imagine themselves in these situations by wondering what they would do if it happened to them. The dominant way of associating themselves with police series’ characters is by ‘investigating’ them. The major question when watching police series seems to be: ‘Who did it?’ Solving the puzzle of which one of the suspects committed the crime leads to a pleasurable viewing experience. The use of the association style with regards to sitcom characters is even more uniform, as characters are solemnly judged on the basis of their funniness.

The moralisation style is used to judge either the behaviour of a character, or the way in which this behaviour is represented in a series. In regards to soaps and teen series, young people use this style to express their stance towards the sexual relationships of characters. They judge the behaviour of characters by their own moral standards, thus defining and expressing their own position. Because of this, gender and ethnicity play a crucial role. Girls were more eager to express their opinions than boys, presumably because of a double standard concerning sexuality. For some informants, ethnicity mattered in talking about sex. Young people of Turkish background were especially critical of the ever changing relations between characters. Still, it is important to stress that there were no clear-cut differences between ethnic groups. Since young people give meaning to their ethnicities in divergent ways, they also come to different conclusions regarding moral issues.

When talking about police series and sitcoms, informants used the moralisation style to talk about the representation of ethnic minority characters. On the one hand they talk about features of characters, yet on the other hand they discuss whether the makers of the series have painted an accurate picture of the multicultural reality. In that way, the informants explore the moral boundaries
of the Dutch multicultural society. Again, ethnicity plays a distinctive role in the use of the moralisation style. Young people with an ethnic minority background refer to their own position within this multicultural society when they evaluate certain representations. Their main argument seems to be that they want to recognise themselves in the media. They value the presence of ethnic minorities in Dutch popular television drama, but they want them to be ‘real’. They seem to opt for a representation of multicultural society that exudes naturalness instead of artificiality. However, white informants regularly expressed a preference for ethnic minority characters that seem well integrated and act ‘normally’.

With regard to all genres, young people express a strong preference for young characters. Grownup characters are often dismissed, after which informants turn their attention to the younger characters. The presence of young people in a series seems to be a main reason for watching that series, whereas the absence of young characters seems to be a good reason not to watch it. Overall, young people are active interpreters of Dutch popular television drama. Instead of being influenced by the representations the series offer, they seem, like the informants of a study by David Buckingham: ‘to be able to apply their own moral and ideological frameworks to the programme without feeling that it was encouraging them to adopt different ones’ (Buckingham, 1987: 177). At the same time, linking the interpretation studies to the representation studies reveals that young people are bounded by the frames that Dutch popular television drama offers. The two genres that were most diverse in the representation of youth, i.e. the soaps and teen series, were used to construct ‘youthful’ identities. Furthermore, specific episodes of police series and comedies, in which ethnic minorities are featured, were drawn upon to construct ethnic identities. When a genre or a series does not offer certain frames, young people cannot discuss the meanings that are enclosed in those frames. Therefore, diversity remains important: the more diversity, the greater possibility for identity constructions.

Returning to the question whether Dutch popular television drama could foster connections between different kinds of young people, it is firstly needed that young people from different backgrounds watch the same series. The soap Goede Tijden Slechte Tijden, the teen series Costa and several Dutch sitcoms have, indeed, a multicultural youth audience. However, the police series Baantjer is more watched by white than by ethnic minority youths. Young people of Turkish background are the odd ones out regarding this conclusion. As there is ample supply of Turkish series via satellite, they watch less Dutch popular television drama than other ethnic groups.

Secondly, it is essential that viewers talk about the series or actively engage them in other ways. Informants indicated that they often talk about soaps,
but seldom about police series. Therefore, soaps seem to especially function as a frame of reference for identity constructions that are used in everyday life. Young characters are particularly employed as vehicles for identity constructions. Police series do not seem to have this function. Nevertheless, during the interviews, police series storylines and characters were used to talk about ethnicity and multicultural society. Because soaps have not featured many ethnic minority characters in the past few years, the frame of reference that soaps offer is not very colourful. The soaps could increase their societal meaning by representing more ethnic minorities in diverse ways. In that way, they would truly deserve the classification: ‘multicultural drama’.