

**Queer Cuttings on YouTube**  
**Re-Editing Soap Operas as a Form of Fan-Produced Queer Resistance**

## Introduction

Nowadays it has become commonplace to say that gay<sup>i</sup> representation in television fiction has evolved from homophobic to emancipatory. The dominant stereotype of the pitiful, lonely and asexual character (see Barrios, 2003; Buxton, 1996; Russo, 1981) has been replaced by a variety of main characters that ‘happen to be gay’. As regards soap opera, until the 1990s the genre was reproached for representing homosexuality as an issue and attaching a gay identity only onto secondary characters (Fuqua, 1995). In contrast, contemporary Western television soap operas feature several gay characters as main characters. Furthermore some of these characters’ relationships have established a notable international (gay) fan base (cf. *infra*). This national and international popularity has not been neglected by producers and writers of these soaps who up to the present day invest in creating new plot developments for these characters and their ongoing relationships. However, not all of these fans are just waiting in front of their television to see new gay storylines unfold. Next to eagerly sharing their likes and dislikes about the gay characters in online and other fan communities, fans are producing cultural products based on the original series. In this article I ~~want to~~ elaborate on a particular form of fan production, viz. the practice of re-editing videos of popular gay love stories of soap operas<sup>ii</sup>. The videos consist of scenes that feature or revolve around the gay characters, and are uploaded on user-generated video websites (e.g. YouTube). Most often, each uploaded video functions as a ‘webisode’. The sequence of webisodes then mirror the ongoing storylines of the original soap opera.

Nevertheless, despite the growing interest of soap operas in gay characters and gay-related themes, it should be stressed that soaps are part of a popular media culture dominated by the discourse of heteronormativity (Avila-Saavedra, 2009: 8, 19). Scholars engaged in queer theory (e.g. Butler, 1999; Halberstam, 2005; Sedgwick, 1985; Warner, 1999) interpret heteronormativity as the discursive power granted to the compulsory heterosexual matrix in

Western society. The matrix relies upon fixed notions of gender, sexuality and identity and veils its constructedness and anomalies by feigning universality and rendering the heteronormative discourse hegemonic. In this way, it succeeds in depreciating, despising, or excluding those who do not comply or conform to the demands of the heteronormative discourse which are materialized in institutions (e.g. marriage), practices (e.g. reproduction), and a rigid set of norms and values (e.g. stability, monogamy, longevity). According to several scholars (Avila-Saavedra 2009; Chambers 2009; Needham 2009; Provencher 2005), these heteronormative ideals are constantly portrayed in popular television series. Likewise, Michele Aaron (2009: 69, 70) underscores how television narratives are geared to “the realm of everyday life”, with normative storylines that “promote (heterosexual) coupling and commitment invariably in the form of marriage and reproduction.” Within these series, both gay and straight characters are represented as reiterating and consolidating these heteronormative norms and values. Specifically with regard to gay characters, Guillermo Avila-Saavedra (2009: 5, 19) argues that the progressive potential of a gay presence in popular television series is often downplayed. Instead of disrupting the hegemonic supremacy of heteronormativity, the gay characters are portrayed as reiterating and consolidating patriarchal and traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Hence, these representations are considered anything but ‘queer’, a queer theoretical concept that refers to identities and desires that subvert and resist what is discursively constructed as normal in heteronormative institutions and practices. Yet, drawing on Stuart Hall (2005, p. 71) who ~~considers popular culture a site that~~ argues that popular culture both embraces and resists hegemonic culture, popular television fiction may embed gay representations that ~~can be considered~~ are queer. Popular series may thus represent gay characters or gay-related themes that on the one hand expose how the discursive practices of heteronormativity function, or on the other, transgress social and cultural assumptions about gender, sexuality, and identity and thereby function as

queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living. These articulations of queer resistance in popular television fiction have already been pointed at by a few scholars (e.g. Chambers 2009). ~~Samuel E. Chambers (2009: 1-25), for one, illustrates how popular television participates in queer politics that aim to expose or resist heteronormativity. For instance, he argues how *Six Feet Under* (USA) exposes how the closet functions for gay men and women in a heteronormative society, or how it explores queerness through a character who averts labelling his own sexuality.~~

However this article ~~wants to focus~~focuses on the potential of fan-produced texts for queer resistance. Bearing in mind that soap operas often engage in heteronormative narratives, the aim of this article is to study how ~~the~~ fan-produced re-edits of gay love-stories negotiate and resist aspects of heteronormativity. Therefore, I ~~will~~ not only draw on the fruitful insights of queer theory, but I ~~will~~ also take into account some general specificities of fan-produced texts. First, I ~~will~~ elaborate on how articulations of queer resistance within a fan-produced text depend upon the text's negotiation of the popular. Secondly I ~~will~~ argue that the resistant imagery of the fan-produced text only becomes resistant through processes of production and reception. Hereafter, I ~~will~~ approach the fan-produced texts as illustrations of subversive practices within the popular. ~~In particular~~Particularly, I ~~will try to~~ illustrate how the resistant potential of the 'gay webisodes' lies within their renegotiation of the soap opera conventions. Although several fans recaptured the gay love stories of soap operas such as *Coronation Street* (UK) and *As The World Turns* (USA)<sup>iii</sup>, I ~~will~~ restrict my discussion in this article to the webisodes on ichglotzube, a YouTube channel that distributes re-edited videos of *Verbotene Liebe* (DE) entitled *Christian & Oliver*. First, this channel has been chosen because of the international popularity of the gay male characters, even though the original series has not been broadcast on other networks than the national channel Das Erste<sup>iv</sup> (Hellekson, 2009; Schmitt, 2008). Secondly this channel allows to elaborate on notions of fandom, popularity

and the relation between the fan-produced text and the original series. The channel is the work of a devoted fan who manages a channel that is exclusively focused on Christian and Oliver. In comparison to the recaptured videos other fans made of the love-story, the channel stands out with 328 webisodes and counting, constructed as an ongoing soap itself<sup>v</sup>. Furthermore the channel's webisodes have a loyal audience. The channel's popularity can also be assumed by its increased international popularity, which can be partially explained by being referenced on popular LGBT blogs (e.g. AfterElton) and the user's engagement in subtitling the German dialogues into English.

### **The Fan-Produced Text and the Popular**

Fan-produced texts have become more and more situated at a crossroad between the popular and the margins. Even though fan fiction or fan art is still produced within the realms of the margins, the spread of the Internet eased the distribution and popularization of digitalized fan productions (see Jenkins, 2006). However, where the margins allow more freedom, the popular is submitted to social and cultural conventions established within heteronormative institutions. In this respect, Stuart Hall (2005: 71) regards the popular as a site where meaning can be made and unmade, consented and contested. Such an argument urges to accept the popular as a potential site for queer resistance. However, since the popular is regulated by heteronormative institutions, practices, norms and values, resistant acts and strategies within the popular most often are compromises. Where the margins allow more room for blatant disruptive strategies, the popular makes potential articulations of resistance subject to the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity and will thus rather take the shape of subversions. Drawing on Judith Butler (1999: 127, 198-201), subversion is understood here as a set of strategies aimed at destabilizing common notions of gender and sexuality and

questioning their hegemonic positions from within dominant social and cultural systems. It can deconstruct the consolidation of gender and sexuality into fixed, binary, and hierarchical categories, as well as the privileging of those who comply with heteronormative norms and values (Seidman, 1995: 125; Sullivan, 2003: 51). For instance, Chambers (2009: 105-125) illustrates how the popular mainstream television series *Desperate Housewives* (USA) subverts heteronormativity from within, by introducing transgressive sexual desires and rearticulating traditional norms and values into upper-class, white, nuclear families.

With regard to the practice of online re-edited fan videos of popular culture products, the dimension of the popular is at play at the level of production, distribution and reception. At the level of production, the popular enters the re-edits through the encompassed source material. Videos that use scenes or fragments from popular television series are incorporating aspects from its original series' popularity. As such, the resistant potential of the fan-produced text is shaped in relation to the original content that may or may not already embed articulations of resistance. The fan production can thus resist through encompassing resistant scenes of the original series. It should be noted that this implies as well a limitation to articulations of resistance, since the re-edited material can also portray original non-resistant material. Secondly, resistant spaces can become articulated through cutting and re-editing, which allows to change the original text into a subversive text. At the level of distribution and reception, the choice of a major user-generated website, a successful promotion and a significant fan base may impel the fan-produced texts into the spheres of the popular. Consequently, the range of acts and strategies will be subjected to social, cultural and institutional conventions of the popular.

### **The Production and Reception of Fan-Produced Texts**

Secondly, the relation between on the one hand the fan's reception of the original material and the fan production, and on the other, between the fan production and its reception should as well be scrutinized to study the resistant potentiality of texts. To achieve queer resistance, (fragments of) texts need to be read or interpreted as resistant. Contemporary scholarly research on resistance has produced a noteworthy body of queer ~~and other resistant~~ readings of popular culture products (e.g. Doty, 2000; Sinfield, 1994). Nonetheless, Frederik Dhaenens, Sofie Van Bauwel and Daniel Biltereyst (2008) stress that not only scholars are able to produce resistant readings, but that also queer-sensitive audiences are able to read against the grain. Their argument is indebted to Henry Jenkins' work on audiences ~~and fans~~. Through his study on slash fiction and fandom in general, he has shown how fans express concern about issues they are "struggling with" and issues they are "struggling for". In relation to fan productions, he argues that fandom's "cultural products articulate the fans' frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives" (Jenkins, 1992: 283). His study also makes clear that being a fan does not contradict with the practice of articulating critique or re-imagining the original material. It does set fan productions apart from resistant products of individuals or groups that use the popular only for parody or critique to achieve change. Consider for instance the case of the anti-consumption magazine *Adbusters* that aims to resist consumerism culture through the use of critical articles by activists and scholars, and parodic anti-ads (Rumbo, 2002; Sandlin & Milam, 2008). In contrast, fans claim a relationship with the popular. In this respect, it needs to be stressed that not all articulations of resistance within fan productions are intended as resistant. Scholars may succeed in reading slash on the internet as acts of resistance, but this does not always correspond with the intention of the fan who produces slash fiction or other fan art. Similarly, cultural productions that set out to resist depend upon audiences to read the productions as resistant. Furthermore, even when the cultural products are not intended as a

societal critique or an exposure of heteronormativity, its inherent resistant potentiality will only be uncovered through a process of reading. As such, fan productions may be produced as critiques against their original material, nonetheless they can be read by audiences as non-resistant, and vice versa.

In relation to the online re-edited videos, the same dynamics are at play. Whether or not the fan intends on creating a critique or subverting the original content, his or her fan-produced text will function as an original text. The intentions of the fan-produced text may become enunciated in commentaries or statements that accompany the video, but even then, it is up to the audiences to interpret the new content. In addition, the way these audiences read the fan-produced text also depends upon their familiarity to the original series, and/or upon an individual or social gay sensibility that may enhance reading the new meanings created by the text as resistant or not.

### **Queer Cuttings on ichglotztube**

So far, this article has ~~tried to show~~shown how the resistant potentiality of texts hinges on a negotiation between the margins and the popular, and how articulations of resistance only are considered resistant when produced and/or read as such. I am consequently aware that pointing out resistant articulations of specific fan-produced texts may not correspond to the author's intention nor to the audiences' readings. Nevertheless, I agree with Alexander Doty (1993: 102) who argues that revealing the 'queerness' of texts allows to "refuse, confuse, and redefine the terms by which mass culture is understood by the public and the academy." Doty (1993: 102-104) points out that as long as gays are represented in relation to unquestioned heteronormativity, queer reading practices are needed to ~~construct discourses~~ ~~that~~ expose the hegemonic position of compulsory heterosexuality and approach gayness from



a non-heteronormative perspective. An inquiry of the resistant potential of fan-produced texts therefore contributes to the broader study on queer resistance in popular culture.

As argued in the introduction, the YouTube channel *ichglotzutube* presents itself as an ideal case study, in the first place because the channel is exclusively focused on the storylines that feature *Verbotene Liebe*'s Christian Mann and Oliver Sabel. The channel embeds subsequent webisodes that consist of re-edited scenes from the original soap, which are entitled *Christian & Oliver*. Secondly, because the channel is the work of a fan, who presents herself as 'Nanna'. Even though she is sparse on personal details, her fandom is uttered through her weekly investments in re-editing the original material in several episodes, and her written interactions with the videos in which she comments on the gay male characters and the soap in general. These opinions allow to assume that she and her channel are not related to the company broadcasting the original series. Her comments range from criticizing to praising the writers, the actors or the soap. A third factor is that this channel and the webisodes of Christian and Oliver have become part of the popular. The channel uses YouTube as its forum, features 320 webisodes and counting, has ~~286,113500~~ subscribers and can rely on an average of 60,000 screenings per episode<sup>vi</sup>. By offering English subtitles, the channel has succeeded in attracting international audiences. I agree with Karen Hellekson (2009) who considers that part of the series' international appeal stems from Christian and Oliver's story being picked up by international gay bloggers ~~on the one hand~~ and the distribution of the fan-made re-edits on YouTube with English subtitles ~~on the other~~. In addition, its popularity may be assumed by the fact that the webisodes are still being broadcast on YouTube despite a plausible violation of copyright law. It can be argued that the gay webisodes have stimulated the popularity of the series and are therefore being tolerated. Regarding our case of *Verbotene Liebe*, it is most likely that the broadcasting company is anticipating the gay webisodes, by producing extra content. In particular, a weblog is created that presents video diaries of the

two gay male characters<sup>vii</sup>. It is remarkable that also an English version of the weblog is offered, with subtitled versions of the video diaries. As such, the producers of the series are probably anticipating the fan-subbed versions of their locally broadcasted show.<sup>viii</sup>

For this inquiry into the resistant potentiality of ichglotzutube's gay webisodes, I have departed from the notion that this channel is part of the popular. Even though the fan-produced videos offer a 'queer cutting' of the original soap opera, they nonetheless retain general genre conventions of the soap opera. Hence, these webisodes' queer resistance will rather be subversively articulated from within the genre's traditional conventions. As such, to inquire how the webisodes may subvert heteronormativity, the way soap opera conventions are being renegotiated in the webisodes are studied by a textual analysis that compares a sample of original episodes with the online fan-produced webisodes. First, I elaborate on the differences between the original soap and the fan-produced webisodes. Next, I discuss these changes in relation to practices of subversion as strategies of queer resistance.

### **Re-Editing Soap Opera**

Postulating that the fan-produced webisodes entitled *Christian & Oliver* on ichglotzutube function as a soap opera, devolves on an understanding of genre as a process rather than a static set of rules. Steve Neale (1995: 170) points out that genre conventions and expectations are continuously renegotiated. Each new genre product can include and exclude elements and conventions from the generic corpus of a genre, while simultaneously adding new elements and conventions to that corpus. Laura Stempel Mumford (1995: 30-31) agrees with Neale's conceptualization of genre as a process, but argues that nonetheless a certain combination of specific characteristics can signify a genre. In her study on soap opera, she assembles soap opera's specifics into one definition:

A soap opera is a continuing fictional dramatic television program, presented in multiple serial instalments each week through a narrative composed of interlocking storylines that focus on the relationships within a specific community of characters. (1995: 31)

Her definition points out significant narrative characteristics such as continuity and a broad range of interrelated characters and storylines. However, elements of production, reception or cinematography are not included. Other soap opera scholars (Spence, 2005; Allen, 2004; O'Donnell, 1999; Geraghty, 1991) also suggest that soap operas share a set of specific narrative characteristics, whereas other variables (e.g. audiences, production values, distribution) more often vary. As such, the narration and the narrative can be considered decisive aspects of the soap opera. Thus, the consideration that ichglotztube's *Christian & Oliver* is a soap opera, mostly draws on the attribution of narrative genre conventions. Therefore, our subsequent discussion will be centred on the changes made to the narration and the narrative of the original soap opera.

A first significant aspect of soap opera is its specific form of narrating (Allen, 2004: 250-252; O'Donnell, 1999: 6; Mumford, 1995: 39-40). Several stories are told at the same time while continuously intercutting each story with another. Most often, only few stories get resolved at the end of the episode. In this respect, soap opera's major feature is its open-ended structure and repetitious use of cliffhangers, shaped as questions that will only be answered in subsequent episodes. *Christian & Oliver* adapts these conventions only partially. As the webisodes focus on Christian and Oliver, storylines that do not feature Christian and Oliver are cut out. As such, the suspense that is being built up in one scene is immediately resolved by pasting the subsequent scene onto the other. For instance, in episode '3424', Christian is rushed into the hospital after fainting in the shower. Whereas the original episode splits this event into six scenes and intercuts it with other stories, webisode 'part 174'<sup>ix</sup> re-edits these six scenes into four subsequent sequences, making the narration less complex. Nonetheless, the

webisodes stay loyal to the use of cliffhangers. Since the webisodes are nearly always uploaded on the day of broadcasting the original episode that featured Christian and Oliver, the original cliffhangers involved in their storylines function as cliffhangers in the webisodes. However, some episodes do not feature Christian and Oliver while other episodes only feature the men as supporting characters. Consequently, it occurs that there is no material to edit into a webisode. ~~Therefore T,~~ to safeguard a certain continuity, the webisodes portray those storylines that feature Christian and Oliver as minor or supporting characters. For instance, *Christian & Oliver* has captured the storyline on Christian's brother and his upper-class girlfriend (see webisode 'part 176'<sup>x</sup>). ~~As such, their~~ Their romantic struggle functions as a side romance in the online soap opera. Remarkably, the retelling of their story is defined by the role of Christian and Oliver. Scenes with crucial plot elements that do not feature Christian or Oliver are excluded. In this way, the embedded storylines are reduced and altered in comparison to the original episodes, and the role of Christian and Oliver in these storylines is enlarged. Finally, the webisodes have no standard length. Where a regular episode is timed at 24 minutes, the webisodes vary between two and eight minutes. Mostly, the length depends upon the assembly of daily or weekly material. As such, the continuity is much easier to accomplish since a webisode may take about just two minutes. To conclude, in *Christian & Oliver* conventional narration is preserved through maintaining continuity, the use of cliffhangers and the integration of other storylines. On the other hand, the exclusion or reduction of other storylines and a straightforward narration in contrast to a complex narration are significant changes to soap opera conventions. Before elaborating on the narration's potential to resist, I will first discuss the changes made to the narrative, in particular to distinctive genre aspects of characters, time and space, and themes.

First, soap operas can rely on an extensive cast of characters who are personally related to one another, who live in the same community and can be described as familiar and

ordinary (Spence, 2005: 114; Allen, 2004: 252; Mumford, 1995: 40). In *Christian & Oliver* the depicted characters can be recognized as typical soap opera figures, or according to Louise Spence (2005: 114) as familiar, "...in the sense that we have seen them on soap operas before and in that they have traits that are not too dissimilar to people we know or know about from real-life stories (news reports, a friend's account, or community gossip)". The community is also retained, but only a small group of characters is present in the webisodes, in contrast to the original twenty-something characters. Also, where original soaps feature no main characters and depict the lives of all characters with equal attention, the webisodes are prominently constructed around Christian and Oliver. In particular, the relationship and personal lives of the men are brought to the fore while other characters are partially or fully erased. Characters who are partly included will thereby rather function as supporting characters. As such, the only characters that are fully depicted are Christian and Oliver, making them the most complex and layered characters in the fan-produced text.

Next, narrative time and place are subjected to change. Christine Geraghty (1991: 10-13) argues that in soaps narrative time dictates the stories rather than vice versa. Soap operas try to mirror the audiences' experience of time. Sometimes, this link with 'real time' will be made explicit by integrating time-marking events. Given that *Verbotene Liebe* follows the seasons and cultural holidays, the same progression of time is mirrored in the weekly uploads of the webisodes of *Christian & Oliver*. However, within a single webisode, abrupt changes in time occur. As the non-related intercut storylines are left out, certain scenes may be re-edited into one sequence. As time has elapsed between scenes, this assembling of scenes may be experienced as a violation of continuity. For instance, in webisode 'part 45'<sup>xi</sup>, the erasure of intercut scenes evokes a brusque jump in time. In this webisode Oliver confronts Christian. He expresses his love and keeps knocking at the door of Christian's room until Christian

opens the door and admits his love (and queer desire) for Oliver. By removing scenes that separated the scene of Oliver arriving at Christian's door from the scene in which Christian confesses his love, both scenes come across as being separated by a jump cut. The sudden jump in time shortens the stubbornness of Christian and speeds up the long-awaited union of the lovers. It also makes audiences aware of the fan-produced interferences in relation to the original soap opera text. Besides these changes of narrative time, alterations of narrative space also reveal the practice of re-editing. Arguing that narrative space in soaps often functions as a setting that allows to present a community of characters entangled with one another, soaps often position their characters in a village or city. Only a few domestic, professional and recreational settings are used to represent the spatial environment of that community (Allen, 2004: 253; Geraghty, 1991: 13-14). In *Verbotene Liebe* all locations are set in Düsseldorf. The most prominent settings are the domestic homes of the characters, the Königsbrunn castle, the Lahnstein Holding office, the stylish bar Schneider's and the trendy bar No Limits. In the webisodes, the role and importance of these locations change. The apartment shared by the couple with two friends can be considered the only manifest domestic environment, while Oliver's No Limits bar functions as the dominant public space. In contrast to the original soap opera, the Königsbrunn castle is only scarcely represented. This has implications on class presence. The original soap offers perspectives of middle class, upper class and aristocratic characters whereas *Christian and Oliver* focuses on its main title characters who are middle class. They have friends from other classes, but the middle class perspective is preserved. In relation to these other spaces, upper class spaces will only become visible in the webisodes when Christian and Oliver enter these spaces. ~~In this way certain recurring settings of the original soap will encompass a minor space in the webisode, as for instance the Lahnstein Holding or the living rooms of the castle. Thus, when~~ When Christian and Oliver ~~enter~~ visit these locations, these spaces are often not introduced to the audiences of the webisodes. While

this spatial knowledge is most often not essential to the storylines, the lack does underscore the re-edited status of the fan-produced soap opera.

At last, the fan-produced series represent only a selection of themes often associated with the soap opera genre. It is argued that soap operas draw on a broad repertoire of themes. Mumford (1995: 75) mentions 'family', 'romance', 'sexuality', 'community' and 'women's identity' as recurring subjects of the soap opera genre. These themes are often translated into character-related stories that involve conflict and reconciliation. Regarding the fact that relationships are positioned at the centre of soap opera (Spence, 2005: 105; Allen, 2004: 254; Mumford, 1995: 31), stories that foreground issues of family, kinship, sexual or social relations are ubiquitous. In *Verbotene Liebe*, issues involving community and family are present in daily episodes. For instance, in episode '3424' a woman claims to be Francesca von Lahnstein, the assumed-to-be death mother of Ansgar, Carla, Leonard and Constantin von Lahnstein. Ansgar finds out the truth about the woman, but bribes her to pretend to play the role of mother on the condition of forsaking her rights of the family holding to Ansgar. This plot device ~~can be considered~~ is illustrative to similar plot lines that involve heritage, fatherhood, class descent, marriage or birth. In *Christian & Oliver* these interpretations of the traditional themes are largely excluded. On the other hand, notions of true love, sexuality, desire, honesty, jealousy and guilt are represented in the storylines on *Christian & Oliver*. Since the original set-up of the webisodes was to recapture the blossoming romance of Christian and Oliver, the viability of their ongoing relationship now functions as a main theme in the webisodes.

### Queering Soap Conventions

It has thus far been postulated that on the one hand, the fan-produced series *Christian & Oliver* incorporates general narrative conventions. On the other hand, traditional conceptualizations of these conventions are being reinterpreted. This brings forth questions of how and where these changes to conventions ~~can be considered as resisting~~ can resist heteronormativity. To elaborate on the resistant potential of the alterations made to genre conventions, the relation of soap operas to heteronormativity should be clarified. According to Allen (2004: 253), soap operas do not attempt at making clear-cut ideological and moral stances. However, he argues that soap operas are embedded in normative discourses, which are translated in the soap operas as “those values, attitudes and behaviors implicitly or explicitly believed by producers to be held by the core group of intended viewers” (Allen, 2004: 253). Scholars point out that soap operas profit from the narration’s open structure to introduce timely controversial, moral and social issues (Spence, 2005: 81; Allen, 2004: 253). Aside from the fact that these themes may be motivated as social agenda setting, the viability of certain themes hinges on audiences’ response. Since the narration’s structure is open, new characters that embody otherness can easily be written back out if audiences turn out to react negative (Allen, 2004: 254). In regard to gay characters, the representation of gays and gay-related themes in 1990s’ soap operas is illustrative for these strategies. For instance, Joy V. Fuqua (1995: 204-205) argues that gay-related themes were treated as peripheral while the characters who came out as gay were always supporting characters. She considers these strategies as contra-generic, as general ‘issues’ in soap operas were always inflicted upon main characters. It thus appears that by using supporting characters, gayness could easily be kept in the margins or written out. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (2009: 7) consider this typical for the way soap operas use gay characters. They argue that the only narrative merit of a gay character is the disclosure of his or her gay identity. Aside coming out of the closet, soap operas refuse their gay characters “the queer aspects of their lives (sex, love, queer



friends and spaces, homophobia)”. In a similar reflection on 1990s’ soap series’ integration of gayness, Mumford (1995: 131) postulates that only a thorough integration of gay characters into the soap’s main cast would defy “the show’s basic (heterosexually centered) conceptions of love, romance, and family.” In her opinion, the very presence of gay main characters would enforce a reconsideration of fixed notions of kinship and family.

Looking at the late 2000s’ seasons of *Verbotene Liebe*, gay characters are no longer supporting characters. Next to Christian and Oliver, the series features other main gay characters (e.g. Stella, Carla, Rob) and engages the gay characters in stories that focus on gay identity, same-sex desire, and homophobia as well as stories that are not related to gayness. However, the soap opera does not question the dominant presence of heteronormativity. Most of the heterosexual and gay characters are portrayed as aspiring after heteronormative norms and values such as monogamy or stability, and express a desire to marry and have children. Furthermore, where the soap initially has avoided to fixate sexual identities, for instance by letting straight-identifying Christian or Charlie discover their queer desires, latter episodes are doing the opposite. Charlie has remained a straight-identifying woman, while Christian states only being attracted to men. For instance, in episode ‘3592’ Christian confesses to Oliver that he kissed their mutual friend Rebecca. Even though Oliver himself recently kissed another man, Oliver is shocked. His main worry is why Christian kissed another woman. Christian explains that he and Rebecca kissed to find comfort. He strongly states that he is not into women again. At first sight, the possibility of shifting his attraction between men and women without labelling himself a bisexual would make him ‘the perfect queer’. However, both Oliver’s fear that Christian might turn straight again and Christian’s strong denial of such a reversal imply a fixed and binary perspective on sexual identity.

Nonetheless, the question remains how and where the fan-produced webisodes create spaces of queer resistance. Obviously, some scenes in which the gay characters are

represented as aspiring after heteronormative norms and values remain in the webisodes. Both gay male characters value loyalty and monogamy, decide to get marry, consider their accidental kisses with other characters as major flaws, and label their sexual identity as exclusively homosexual, even though prior relations and kisses may have been with women. These notions are reiterated in the fan-produced text. However, certain alterations of the narration and the narrative allow to be read as articulations of queer resistance. Leaving the editor's intentions aside, I consider three sets of resistant strategies at play in the fan-produced text. These strategies are mainly used to tease out the different mechanisms that heteronormativity uses to maintain its hegemonic discursive position. In particular, they expose how heteronormativity fixes sexual identities into binary and hierarchical categories, and how it privileges institutions and practices that reiterate and consolidate a rigid set of prescribed norms and values.

The first set of strategies aims to deconstruct the hierarchical and binary relationship between gays and heterosexuals. First, the soap opera convention of treating gays as sexual minorities is being defied in the webisodes. Where the original series represents the straight-identifying majority as the normative majority, the webisodes construct Christian and Oliver as the only main characters and rearticulate the role of the other series' main characters. Several regular straight-identifying characters are excluded out of the webisodes, while the few other gay characters (Stella, Carla and Rob) are put to the fore. As such, their inclusion aids to create a gay majority in the re-edited soap opera community, and reverses the hierarchical relation between the gay and straight characters. Second, the webisodes emphasize the paradox of a fixed sexual identity. Even though I have argued that the series fixes the sexual identity of potentially queer characters, for instance by stressing that they identify as either gay or straight, the webisodes underscore the frustration and/or confusion of fixed sexual identities: straight Charlie falling in love with gay Stella; straight Christian

falling in love with gay Oliver; gay Christian kissing straight Rebecca; straight Rebecca falling in love with gay Christian.

The second set of strategies aims to evoke the original series as 'provider' of the webisodes through the process of re-editing, as a reminder of and challenge to the omnipresence of straightness and heteronormative narratives in the original series. To this end, it subverts one of soap opera's major characteristics: continuity. To create a continuous gay presence on the screen, the webisodes retain the use of an episodic structure and cliffhangers but leave out the scenes with no gay significance. As such, to achieve a gay continuity, discontinuities in time, space and characters are necessary. This leads up to sudden jump cuts, traces of badly cut scenes, depictions of situations or locations never mentioned before, or unannounced appearances and disappearances of supporting characters. These queer cuttings however make audiences aware of the re-edited scenes' 'former' presence, and allow to reconsider an ongoing soap opera community where gay characters do not function in a minor storyline among major heteronormative storylines but produce their own diverse and ongoing storylines.

A third set of strategies concerns the queering of soap opera themes. First, side storylines that tackle gay-related themes are being promoted to being the main storylines of the webisodes. The stories that focus on homophobia and queer desire are no longer side stories but function as main stories in the webisodes. Second, because of the exclusion of certain storylines and characters, certain heteronormative interpretations of conventional themes such as family, sexuality and romance, or heteronormative practices as marriage are being subversively resisted. For instance, even though the webisodes feature few marriages, the wedding of main characters Christian and Oliver is not omitted. At first sight, the narrative of them getting married may be interpreted as heteronormative. However, it can also be read in terms of resistance. Since German same-sex couples can only get a registered partnership

for now, the representation of the marriage reads as an exposure of the way many institutions, such as marriage, are still defined by heteronormative notions on gender and sexuality. Hence, in letting Christian and Oliver name their registered partnership a marriage, by representing the wedding as a church wedding, and by making a joke of who gets to be the bride, the representation of both the wedding and marriage at least mocks the way marriage is still interpreted as a hierarchical and exclusive civic ritual. This resistant mockery is especially underscored in the re-edited webisode<sup>xii</sup> of the original episode where the guiding subtext informs us that the priest who officiates the wedding is played by Dirk Bach, an out gay comedian. In emphasizing the cultural paradox of a priest played by a flamboyant gay actor, the wedding becomes a bit more queer. Next, the theme of family is subtly challenged. Belonging to a family is important to both characters. However, in spite of a few blood-related characters, they form their own varying families. In contrast to more traditional ways of living, the gay couple shares its home with several other characters throughout the series. Even after they “marry”, they keep on living together with friends in the same home. Furthermore, the composition of their family changes, with friends leaving the home and new friends entering the domestic space. Finally, representations of sexuality and romance are abundant but are also rearticulated as resistant. Since gay characters are put to the fore, gay desire and romance is represented as the dominant form of sexual desire. Furthermore, the integration of aunt Charlie’s questioning of her sexuality, the many failed relationships of their straight friends, and the gay couple’s recurring role as romantic and sexual advisors, aid to represent gay sexuality as desirable.

### **Conclusion**

Despite representing main characters as gay, contemporary soap operas still hinge on heteronormativity. To resist the dominant representation of gays as appropriating

heteronormative norms and values, queer readings of popular culture are needed to question the heteronormative hegemony. With the online proliferation of user-generated content, new sites of resistance are created. In this article, fan-produced videos based on soap operas are argued to embed resistant potential to both expose heteronormative practices and emphasize the articulations of queerness on the small screen. In particular, the webisodes on the YouTube channel ichglotzutube that recapture the stories of gay lovers Christian and Oliver are considered able to resist. Since resistance within popular culture products will rather be articulated by subversions, queer resistance within the fan-produced re-edits of soap operas is assumed to devolve on subversive alterations of narrative conventions of the soap opera genre. Regarding *Christian & Oliver*, three sets of resistant strategies are distinguished. First, the webisodes challenge the hierarchical and binary relationship between gays and heterosexuals. Second, they expose and challenge the omnipresence of straightness and heteronormative narratives in the original series by bending narrative continuity to obtain a continuous gay presence on screen. Third, they represent queered versions of the conventional soap opera themes (e.g. family, sexuality, romance), which subvert the dominant heteronormative interpretations of these themes. Nevertheless, these webisodes retain scenes that portray heteronormative practices, norms and values (e.g. stability, monogamy).

~~Therefore~~Hence, it should be acknowledged that the resistant potential of this illustration mainly aims to expose the discursive practices of heteronormativity. For fan-produced re-edits to function as sites of resistance that offer queer and viable alternatives to the heteronormative way of living, soap operas will have to represent storylines that are ‘queer’ rather than ‘gay’, and/or the editors of fan-produced webisodes will have to add queer footage to the original scenes. Finally, this article has emphasized how fan-produced texts are produced and read. For these texts to be produced and/or read as resistant, depends upon the producer’s intentions and/or audiences’ sensibility. Therefore, further research could

incorporate actors of production or focus on online audiences. For instance, an in-depth analysis of fan comments would probably offer some insights on how these videos are interpreted.

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Within the context of this article, the concept of gay will be used as an umbrella-term for gay, lesbian, and bisexual desires and identities.

<sup>ii</sup> Even though the focus of this article is on gay love-stories, it should be noted that the practice of re-editing has as well been used for straight love-stories on soaps.

<sup>iii</sup> Up to this day, the love story of Todd and Karl on *Coronation Street* can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/towasil2> and the story of Luke and Noah – often called ‘Nuke’ – on *As The World Turns* can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/LukeVanFan>.

<sup>iv</sup> Das Erste is the main television channel of the German ARD, a consortium of independent broadcasting corporations summoned with the task to provide radio and television to the public in the Federal Republic of Germany (Augustin & Weismüller, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> Ichglotzutube can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/ichglotzutube>. Some older episodes have been relocated to a sister channel that can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/ichglotzgerman>.

<sup>vi</sup> Even though most episodes are viewed around 60,000 times, certain popular episodes succeed in being viewed around 100,000 times. For instance, the webisode entitled *Christian & Oliver 04.04.08 English Subtitles Part 45* has been viewed nearly 891,000 times.

<sup>vii</sup> The video diaries of Christian and Oliver can be watched at <http://www.chrolli.de/>.

<sup>viii</sup> Copyright issues only seem to prevail concerning the soundtrack. On-screen songs are being kept, but off-screen songs are often replaced by other songs (sometimes accompanied with a message that says: “Due to copyright issues”).

<sup>ix</sup> Full title of the webisode: Christian & Oliver 09.07.09 English subtitles Part 174.

<sup>x</sup> Full title of the webisode: Christian & Olli 13. – 17.07.09 English subtitles Part 176.

<sup>xi</sup> Full title of the webisode: Christian & Oliver 04.04.08 English Subtitles Part 45.

<sup>xii</sup> Full title of the webisode: Christian & Oliver 03.09.10 / 3 English Subtitles Part 319.

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