

## Quality TV and Pedagogy: Formalism, Contextualism, and Productive Tensions Melanie Kohnen

The B(l)inding Effects of Quality TV: Sexual and Racial Diversity in *Brothers & Sisters* and *The Wire*

“Quality TV” catches our critical attention due to its innovative takes on TV form and cultural context. However, what exactly do we overlook by disregarding programs that seem to deliver “more of the same,” especially regarding the representation of racial and sexual diversity? I argue that veneers of conventionality deflect our attention away from the ideological work that makes mundaneness possible in the first place. “More of the same” TV might appear as yet another iteration of TV’s racial and sexual defaults—mostly white and mostly heterosexual—but how are these defaults maintained? At the same time, what are the implications of associating innovative representations of racial and sexual difference (only) with Quality TV programming? Does this encourage the idea that non-quality TV necessarily offers limited visions of diversity and that Quality TV offers innovative representations of diversity because it transcends “ordinary” TV?

Starting off with “more of the same” TV, ABC’s *Brothers & Sisters* appears to be just another prime-time drama about a white American family, in this case the Walker family from Pasadena, CA. The series’ conventional generic structure enables an idea of everyday life that naturalizes white domesticity for both straight and gay couples (an idea we also see in the ABC sitcom *Modern Family* and the NBC drama *Parenthood*). *Brothers & Sisters*’ Kevin Walker and Scotty Wandell (and their stable, monogamous relationship) often function as the glue that holds the family together. While gay and lesbian characters used to be relegated to the margins of TV narrative, Kevin and Scotty are central to *Brothers & Sisters*’ diegesis. Their inclusion functions simultaneously as an outward sign of televisual and social progress and as a reaffirmation of longstanding norms, such as whiteness and heteronormativity, that regulate and restrict questions of cultural citizenship.

The importance of critically interrogating an “unremarkable” program about an “everyday” American family that blends into the television schedule is apparent: *Brothers & Sisters* may appear unremarkable, but actually depends on a careful construction of everydayness. This everydayness places white domesticity of the straight and queer variety at the center of televisual family life. Considering how easy it is for this insidious vision of diversity to go unnoticed because it doesn’t break any televisual molds, I want to challenge us to both look beyond Quality TV and to interrogate what lurks beneath that label.

At the same time, I also want us to look at the implications of setting programs apart from “normal” or “everyday” television via the discourse of Quality TV. The label of Quality TV implies that something new or different is at work. While these innovative qualities are frequently attached to genre or narrative complexity, they are also applied to the issue of diversity. In response to my analysis of *Brothers & Sisters*, and, more broadly, of the interdependence of queerness and whiteness in contemporary TV, people have frequently suggested *The Wire* as a series that handles the representation of race and sexuality differently from supposedly banal network TV such as *Brothers & Sisters*. As I’m catching up on *The Wire*, I agree that there is a greater range of racial representations—the series features complex white and African American characters in leading roles, and it also reminds viewers that “whiteness” still fractures into ethnic identities in certain contexts. Moreover, *The Wire* features two queer characters of color. Kima Greggs works as a detective for Baltimore’s police department and Omar Little lives as a bandit with a moral code who steals from drug dealers. Both Kima and Omar are central to *The Wire*’s narrative arc and have complex personal lives and intimate relationships.

Perhaps we should expect complex portrayals of queer characters of color from a Quality TV show such as *The Wire*. After all, Quality TV supposedly is more innovative and takes greater risks than “regular” TV. But does this evaluative comparison imply that complex representations of diversity can only exist in quality TV, and not elsewhere? Do we consider the type of diversity introduced on *The Wire* as yet another marker of innovative quality TV, or do we consider it as example of how to reimagine diversity on TV in general?

Considering *The Wire's* complex representations of diversity only as marker of quality does not encourage the idea that similarly diverse representations of race and sexuality should be possible across the board on TV. Rather, from this point of view, innovative representations of diversity only exist in (and are thereby confined to) the privileged world of Quality TV. Moreover, while the label of “more of the same” TV discourages an inquiry into *Brothers & Sisters'* blandness, does the discourse of quality attached to *The Wire* make us turn a blind eye to questioning its supposedly innovative representations of race and sexuality? For example, does *The Wire's* portrayal of dysfunctional domesticity challenge the centrality of family life to television?