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Wer Viewership and Queer Imag(in)ing: Thai Soap Opera *Shadow of Love* and Boys Love Media

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Abstract

This article brings film/media theory into Southeast Asian research through a revisionist queer approach. It contains two goals: addressing some recent developments about queer imag(in)ing in Thai media whilst reappraising the fundamental question of spectatorship via screen theory. Taking into account the more general issue of media specificity and the particular textual device of identity/gender-switch in several recent Thai television serials, we propose the notion of *wer* viewership: a mode of viewing practice that features viewer-text interaction through the perceptual-cognitive processes, and is characterised by *wer*/excessive aesthetics, multiple meanings, and diverse pleasures. Resonant with camp reading, *wer* viewership underlines how the viewer actively makes sense of the ambiguities about gender, particularly those along the extra-/diegetic interface. We use Thai soap opera *Shadow of Love* to illuminate the *wer*/excessive aesthetics rendered through its identity/gender play bordering on the extra-/diegetic divide, and the enhanced pleasures and meanings thus available to its extradiegetic active viewers. We stress, though, the expanded queer imag(in)ing in *Shadow* is not of total free interpretation, but is animated in relation to both the evolving discourses about gender/sexuality in Thailand, and the popularising homoerotic Boys Love (BL) media across Asia in recent years.

Keywords: Thailand; television; queer; *wer* viewership; Boys Love; *Shadow of Love*

Thailand in recent years has seen a drastic increase in the production of homoerotic Boys Love (BL) television dramas, alongside the decades-long presence of transgender (*kathoey*) characters mostly for comic relief in popular soap operas (*lakhon*) (Cornwel-Smith 2019: 253–257; Jooyin 2019). More recently we have also witnessed a proliferation of television serials that feature the plot involving identity- *and gender*-switch across both BL genre and soap opera. Some more high-profile titles of this include *Cupid's Last Wish* (2022, GMM 25), *The Shipper* (2020, GMM 25), *Shadow of Love/Sorn Ngao Ruk* (2020, Channel 3), and *Great Men Academy* (2019, GMM One & Line TV). Whilst current and, admittedly, still limited English-language scholarship on Thai queer television tends to focus on issues of representation, along with their social and (trans)cultural ramifications (e.g., Amporn 2023; Baudinette 2019; Chan 2021; Chao 2022; Jooyin 2019; Zhang and Dedman 2021), what has been left aside, from a film studies standpoint, includes the foundational issue about *how exactly the viewer looks at and makes sense of* certain televisual texts characterised by gender-bending subjects. With both the more general issue of media specificity of television and the particular textual device of identity/gender-switch in mind, we go beyond conventional film studies, addressing the issue of television viewership marked by an emphatic appeal to excessive (over-the-top or *wer* in Thai) aesthetics that, we stress, is facilitated along the interface between diegesis and extradiegesis. Due to its particularly complex identity/gender play bordering on the extra-/diegesis, *Shadow of Love* will serve as the principal text in testing our conceptualisation of *wer* viewership, illustrating the potential of queer imaging/imagining set in motion by the text-viewer interplay characteristic of *wer* viewership. Because our emphasis lies in *wer* viewership and, in particular, the conceptualisation of such text-viewer interplay animated by the character's identity/gender-switching along the

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extra-/diegesis *throughout the viewing*, this project differs from the fast-expanding scholarship on androgyny in Asian pop cultures that notably takes a fan studies approach to how certain androgynous idols (like China's tomboyish Li Yuchun) or character-types (such as Korea's soft-masculine "flower-boy") take meaning and effect through the fans' derivative activities *beyond the viewing* (Kwon 2019; Lavin *et al* 2017; Zhao 2023). For our shared concern to address genderqueer on an international and intercultural scale (Eguchi 2021), our project and the fan-studies approach, we consider, supplement each other nevertheless.

This article comprises two main sections. The first section situates the "viewer" *among* three approaches: screen theory, media audience research, and media fan studies. It provides a definition of "*wer* viewership" as a mode of viewing practice that features viewer-text interaction through the often-neglected perceptual-cognitive processes (by way of cognitive psychology), and is characterised by excessive aesthetics, multiple meanings, and diverse pleasures. By diverse pleasures, we highlight the dimension of extratextual pleasures that are boosted by the textual device of identity/gender-switch, as found in the aforementioned TV serials. The article's second section, then, zooms in on *Shadow of Love*, a soap opera featuring the theme of identity/gender play with a heightened appeal to the extratextual pleasure that is activated along the extra-/diegetic interface. Addressing the text's interplay with the viewer not only through identity/gender-switch, but also through the popularising Boys Love formula, this section further pays vital attention to the evolving local discourses surrounding gender identities, against which queer imag(in)ing takes shape and meaning in and through the viewing of *Shadow of Love*.

Towards A Conceptualisation of *Wer* Viewership

Situating the viewer: Screen theory, media audience research, and media fan studies

Amidst an increasing concern with the relationship between moving images and socially structured forms of inequality, film theory during the 1970s and the 1980s directed focal attention to film as a complex system of representation and the way its specific formal techniques reinforce the dominant ideology. Informed by Althusserian Marxism (about society and ideology), Barthesian semiotics (about signification), and Lacanian psychoanalysis (about the subject), screen theory has demystifying and deconstructing cinema and its ideological functions as its agenda (McDonald 2022: 100; Plantinga 2009b: 249; Stam 2000: 169). In *Cinema and Spectatorship*, Judith Mayne (1993: 17–20) usefully identifies two broad trends at the time that sought to analyse cinema as an institution, each conceptualising cinema's positioning of the spectator and its assumed alignment of the spectator with dominant ideology. First, "apparatus theory" examines how the physical conditions of the cinematic space and its machinery encourage the spectator to (falsely) imagine themselves as the author of meaning. A second, more text-based trend of theory investigates how the specifics of Hollywood's visual and narrative systems help "interpellate" (Althusser 2006 [1971]) the spectator. Overall, the spectator in screen theory is conceived of as a "subject-position" produced by the cinematic apparatus and the text, and the spectatorship – hereby understood as "institution" (Mayne 1993: 31–52) – is characterised by abstraction and passivity, as well as homogeneity.

A major intervention vis-à-vis the institutional mode of spectatorship came with the "empirical model" aided by ethnography, in conjunction with the ascent of cultural studies (Mayne 1993: 54; Stam 2000: 223–29). Distinguished from the theory of subject-positioning, this empirical, "culturalist trend" maintains that its research objects are neither the apparatus nor the texts, but rather "the *uses* made of texts" (Bordwell 1996: 10, emphasis original). Research on *real* spectators' responses to and reception of different types of films and, more often than not, of television programmes, thus gave rise to what has become known as media audience studies (e.g., Hansen 1991 and Stacey 1994 on film; Ang 1985 and Morley 1992 on television). In film audience research in particular, an emphasis has been placed on "more material conditions and how individuals' cultural context[s] or diverse identities" impact upon their differed reception (Aaron 2007: 43), wherein the individuals' agency through "oppositional" or "negotiated" readings (Hall 2019 [1973]; hooks 2015 [1992]) precisely attests to the factors beyond the regimes of the texts. As Harry Benshoff notes, against screen/apparatus theory's proposition that sees the spectator as "a position in the cinematic machine, into which the flesh-and-blood human agent was interpellated," the notion of the "passive and undifferentiated 'ideal viewer' is replaced in cultural studies by the study of actual human beings … whose race, class, gender, nationality, etc.,

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render them – and their viewing practices – diverse, multiple, and perhaps most importantly, *active*" (Benshoff 2016: 198, emphasis original). Cultural studies' legacy to help reframe the spectator as real, "active" audiences marked by "diversity" (Fiske 2011a: 62–83, 332–330; Morley 1992; Stacey 1994: 36–47), so to speak, has laid the defining foundation of audience research on television and on media in general.

The shaping of media audience research through the cultural studies discipline also intersects with the development of media fan studies from the 1990s. Beyond the general perception of fans as "the most visible and identifiable of audiences" (Lewis 1992: 1), what characterises the pattern of fans' consumption of media texts? How can we understand this pattern in comparison with screen theory and media audience research? Broadly, although screen theory and media audience research differ in their approaches to the spectator (along the hypothetical/real axis), they still share an interest in the spectator's relationship to the audiovisual texts (though gravitating to film and television, respectively). Whilst media audience research and media fan studies both deal with the responses or activities of actual human beings, media fan studies usually goes *beyond* the individuals' responses to the audiovisual texts to (also) cover the individuals' activities extending from the original texts as integral to the community-based fan cultures. Unlike (abstract) spectators or (actual) audiences, whose activities are largely characterised by either passive or active consumption of audiovisual texts, fans of audiovisual media usually *further* engage in producing and circulating "transformative fan works (such as fan fiction, fan vids, or fan art) in order to establish and strengthen fan communities of practice" (Click and Scott 2018: 2). Media fan studies shows "how some *consumers* can be simultaneously audiences of a television programme and yet *producers* of a fan text, or audiences of both a television programme and a fan text" (Gray and Lotz 2019: 74, emphasis original). As Henry Jenkins notes, "one become a 'fan' not by being a regular viewer of a particular programme but by translating that viewing into some kind of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the programme content with friends, by joining a 'community' of other fans who share common interests. For fans, consumption naturally sparks production, reading generates writing, until the terms seem logically inseparable" (Jenkins 2006: 41). We may say that from media audiences to media fans, a main distinction hence lies in their differed emphases of being "active," with media audiences mainly on their modes of consumption (e.g., forms of "audience experiences" and "emotions" involved [Gorton 2009; Hill 2019]; different reading strategies by, say, queers or black women [Doty 2000; hooks 2015 [1992]) whilst media fans largely on their *further* engagements in production and participation (e.g., Booth and Williams 2021; Click and Scott 2018). Equally important, whereas the activities of abstract spectators, due to their conceptual reliance on psychoanalysis, foremost refer to the psychological ones based in the unconscious, the activities of audiences and fans as flesh-and-blood human agents, we stress, patently involve mental or cognitive processes at the level of consciousness (Allen 1995: 4; Branigan 1992: 12; Plantinga 2009b: 256). This is pivotal to our reservation about a direct resort to the notion of (cinematic) "spectatorship" whilst proposing instead the idea of (media) "viewership" – "*wer* viewership" in particular – to more adequately address the activities and pleasures in reading Thai television serials like *Shadow of Love*.

Viewership: Viewer-text interaction through perceptual-cognitive processes

Our take on the idea of "viewership" can be approached from two aspects: "viewer" and "-ship." We choose the term "viewer" to reflect our shifted focus from film to television, on the one hand. Not only is the term applicable to television audience (as in our everyday use), but it is arguably also a more proper referent of television audience than the spectator, given the latter's theoretical affiliation with the particular cinematic apparatus. On the other hand, and more importantly, we choose "viewer" over spectator to highlight the real and active properties of actual audiences as stressed by cultural studies in general, in contrast to the abstract and passive qualities of the hypothetical spectator as developed from screen/apparatus theory. As noted, a consideration of *active*ness in reference to media audiences/viewers must also go beyond the focus on the unconscious (privileged by psychoanalysis-informed screen theory) to attend to the realm of consciousness, in particular the vital precinct of mental or cognitive processes in the viewing activity. In opposition to "all passive notions of spectatorship," film viewing is, for David Bordwell, actually "a complicated, even skilled, activity" (1985: 33).

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In *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Bordwell offers an examination of the sorts of mental activities elicited by narrative forms – inferences, anticipations, gap-filling, and so forth. Informed by perceptual and cognitive psychology (as opposed to psychoanalysis), his "perceptual-cognitive approach" (49) to the viewer's active engagement in the meaning-making involves both the "bottom-up perceptual processes," which surround "the identification of a three-dimensional world [onscreen] on the basis of cues" in a fast, involuntary manner, and the "top-down processes" that are "more overtly based on [the mental operations of] assumptions, expectations, and hypotheses" (31). Pertaining to the top-down cognitive processes, in Bordwell's formulation, are the different schemata: "clusters of knowledge [that] guide our hypothesis making" (31). They comprise an existing repertoire of prototypes and templates (Bordwell 1985: 36), as well as "culturally specific" models (Smith 2022: 49) that are incumbent for the viewer to comprehend narrative and "make sense of media" (Nannicelli and Taberham 2014). Against the guidance and constraints of schemata, the interactive, dialectical processes continuous during the viewing nonetheless indicate that perception itself can also be construed as a cognitive process. Seeing, in Bordwell's perceptual-cognitive account, ceases to function as merely the passive reception of sensory data or visual information. It is rather "a constructive activity, involving very fast computations, stored concepts, and various purposes, expectations, and hypotheses" (Bordwell 1985: 32). This emphasis on the cognitive processes, along with its account for the interactive, dialectical relationship between perception and cognition, is fundamental to our take on the viewer as an active consumer of the televisual media, and in particular (see below) how the viewer makes sense of the ambiguous cues surrounding genders played out along the extra-/diegesis interface.

As for the "-ship" in our take on viewership, we underline the significance of the primary text and the dimension of the intrapersonal psychology. In contrast to certain tendencies in audience research and fan studies that, to varying degrees, sideline the primary text to either examine "the *practice* of watching [a television serial] as its own text, and as an entity unto itself" (Gray an Lotz 2019: 70, emphasis original), or to focus instead on "secondary texts" – all materials that help promote, publicise, spread, and merchandise the programme (Fiske 2011a: 85; also Geraghty 2015 and Ng 2017 on media paratexts) – and even "tertiary texts," namely "objects, activities, and original texts created by the fans themselves" (Benshoff 2016: 228), our conception of viewership means to recentre upon the part of the primary text. Our interest in the *relationship* between the viewer and the primary text is manifested in our attention to the dynamic perceptual-cognitive processes continuous throughout the viewing. Indeed, the inquiry of "how viewers respond to [audiovisual media texts]" (Bordwell 2009: 362; Nannicelli and Taberham 2014: 8) and the "viewer-text interaction" (Plantinga 2009b: 252) has been foundational to cognitive media theory. With its focal attention to the cognitive and perceptual aspects of audiovisual media viewing, cognitive media theory, as an alternative to the psychoanalytic framework, lays great emphasis on the viewer's conscious and preconscious work (Bordwell 1985: 30 and 48; Smith 2022: 48–50). Audiovisual media viewing from a cognitive perspective, so to speak, is characterised by "a dynamic psychological process" (Bordwell 1985: 32) that involves assumption, inference, memory, and hypothesis vis-à-vis an array of rationales and schemata (Bordwell 1985: 34–37). This psychological investment of the viewer, meanwhile, echoes a recent call in fandom research for (re)acknowledging the approach of "individual psychology" and the significance of the fans' "*intra*personal pleasures and motivations" alongside their collective, interpersonal connectivity and productivity (Sandvoss *et al* 2017: 8 & 6, italics original). Our integration of cognitive and perceptual elements into viewership thus means to shed light on individual viewers' interaction with the primary texts and the intrapersonal psychology at play.

Wer *viewership: Excessive aesthetics, multiple meanings, and extratextual pleasures*

Wer viewership, then, represents a mode of viewership inflected by *wer* aesthetics. Our use of the word "*wer*" in the Thai cultural context follows Nguyen Tan Hoang (2018): "As a transcultural derivative of the English word *over*, *wer* is popular slang that signifies an over-the-top quality" (139, italics original). Drawing attention to *wer*'s emphatic appeal to excess, artifice, and performativity vis-à-vis Thai public culture's insistence on "face (*na ta*)" (as a discourse [e.g., Kang 2014: 412–414; Persons 2016; Vorng 2017]) and its "premium on appearance" (140), Nguyen conceptualises a Thai "*wer* aesthetics" by way

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of American camp (146). Indeed, camp, as Susan Sontag (1966) notes, is "one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon," in terms not of beauty but "the degrees of artifice, of stylization" (277). Privileging style over content, camp shows the penchant for "a particular kind of style" marked by "the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (279). The essence of camp, so to speak, is "its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" and "theatricality" (275 and 288). For Nguyen, the American "camp aesthetics of excess – engaging ironic incongruity, artificiality, and theatricality – resonates with *wer*'s over-the-topness and too-muchness" (Nguyen 2018: 147–148). Nguyen then zooms in on the ways in which *wer* aesthetics has been strategically employed by contemporary Thai queer filmmakers alongside their foregrounded figuration of transgendered performances in questioning the Thai state-sanctioned, heteronormative public imaginary. Whilst Nguyen's analysis highlights the *wer* expressions as a creative strategy performed by Thai queer artists, *wer* aesthetics, like its camp counterpart, notably involves "both the cultural production and reception" (Chao 2020: 146; also Benshoff and Griffin 2006: 69). In fact, camp – as variously characterised as a taste, sensibility, aesthetic, appreciation, response, and impulse (e.g., Chao 2020; Dyer 1986; Klinger 1994; Sontag 1966) – is also deemed an important reading or viewing strategy, often associated with queer-identified audiences for queer pleasures (Doty 2000: 82–85; Staiger 2006: 124–132). As Staiger (2006: 127) points out, camp viewers are productive, parodic readers of a text, "creating puns [and] allusions," and "reveling in stylistic and generic excess," with their assumed reading positions marked as "hypergendered" – more often hyperfeminine than hypermasculine due to the practice's historical affinity with the gay subculture. In large part, *wer* viewership resonates with camp reading through their shared interest in the aesthetics of excess, artifice, and performativity (as indicated both by *wer* and camp), and in particular, how the viewer actively, even parodically makes sense of the ambiguity or ironic incongruity surrounding gender as rendered by certain textual devices.

Imperative to *wer*'s "aesthetics of excess" (Nguyen 2018: 148), alongside camp/*wer* viewer's "appreciation of the excessive" (Doty 2000: 50), is notably a consideration of the textuality of television that has been both characterised as "flow" (Williams 1975), which highlights the movement of the televisual text as "discontinuous, interrupted, and segmented" (Ellis 1992; Fiske 2011a: 105), and has been marked by *polysemy* (literally "many meanings"), which has been used in reception studies to help define "the kind of textual openness that allows different readers to actualise different meanings from a text" (Schrøder *et al* 2003: 129–130). In his various writings on television and popular culture, John Fiske (1989, 2011a, 2011b) has argued that television is an inherently polysemic medium that invites a diversity of audience readings. He has advanced the idea that within the basic social constraints of cultural production under capitalism, viewers have a relative autonomy to act as members of a "semiotic democracy" (Fiske 1989: 67, 2011a: 95). Broadly, for Fiske, the televisual text is the "site of a struggle for meaning," wherein the hegemony of the text is "never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against [the] diversity of meanings that the diversity of audiences [may] produce" (Fiske 2011a: 93). Against the structure of the text that typically tries to limit its meanings in accordance with dominant ideology, that is, "the polysemy sets up forces that oppose this control," where, though, this polysemy is also "not anarchic or unstructured" but admittedly conditioned by "the differential distribution of power" in the text as much as in the larger society (Fiske 2011a: 93). In this formulation of, say, *structured polysemy* (Dyer 1998: 3; also Benshoff 2016: 34), "[a]ll meanings are not equal, nor equally easily activated, but all exist in relations of subordination or opposition to the dominant meanings proposed by the text" (Fiske 2011a: 93). Despite this, Fiske insists, there is always too much meaning on television to be controllable by the dominant ideology, and there are always "traces of competing or resisting discourses available for alternative readings" (Fiske 2011a: 91). He considers this "excess of meaningfulness" characteristic of television in general, and calls it the "semiotic excess" of television (Fiske 2011a: 91–92). More to the point, he differentiates this semiotic excess (characteristic of all television) from another form of polysemy for television: "*excess as hyperbole*, which is a specific textual device, a form of exaggeration which may approach the self-knowingness of 'camp' as in *Dynasty* [1981, ABC] or self-parody as in Madonna's music videos" (Fiske 2011a: 90–91, italics original). So the kind of primary televisual text *wer* viewership deals with is polysemic: it is, though, not only characterised by semiotic excess but, more importantly, marked by excess of hyperbole. In Fiske's formulation, this quality of excess is but one form of device that joins other "textual devices" such as irony, metaphor, jokes, and contradictions

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(2011a: 85–90) to help "open [the text] up to polysemic readings," and even to facilitate "the possibility for resistive readings" (2011a: 85 and 98).

And finally, *wer* viewership is first and foremost characterised by *pleasure*. Involving a consideration of "pleasure" informed by a strand of audience and fandom research, our take on the idea echoes the call for an avoidance of "over-rationalizing" pleasure (Hills 2002: 74). As has been pointed out, the application of some critical theories or political agendas to appraising mass-produced pleasures vis-à-vis the latter's relationship to the dominant ideologies or consumption patterns tends to "destroy" (Storey 2018: 109–111), "convert" (Real 2001: 176), or unwittingly "explain away" pleasures (Harrington and Bielby 1995: 120). What is missing from all this is, ironically, enjoyment itself: a legitimate treatment of "pleasure *as* pleasure" (Ang 1996: 88, emphasis original) and the recognition of "pleasure for pleasure's sake" (Harrington and Bielby 1995: 120). Without overly rationalising pleasure, our concept of *wer* viewership thus appeals to an understanding of pleasure *pace* cognitive media theorist Carl Plantinga. In the light of screen theory's formulation of cinema (as apparatus) that allegedly generates its ideological effect by enticing the audiences into passive psychological states through spectatorial pleasure, Plantinga sees such a "wholesale," "unequivocal position" as "reductionistic" (Plantinga 2009a: 20). For him, not only is the spectator's viewing experience "more complex and contradictory than screen theory allowed," but "[n]o unified theory of movie pleasures is possible" (2009: 20). Arguing for "the diversity of pleasures" of the cinema (together with his detaching of such ideas of pleasure, desire, and fantasy from the technical terms of psychoanalysis), Plantinga identifies five essential sources of audience pleasure in mainstream films: cognitive play (with plot designs), visceral experience (of audio-visual effects), character engagement (through sympathy and antipathy), narrative scenarios (that invoke emotion in satisfying ways), and extratextual pleasures (2009a: 21–39). Whereas the first four sources are "*intratextual* pleasures" by nature, the pleasures of film viewing, as Plantinga points out, go beyond the intratextual: audiences also enjoy "*extratextual* pleasures of film viewing, critical appreciation, and fandom" (Plantinga 2009a: 36, emphases original). Extratextual pleasures, we contend, are crucial to our appreciation of the ambivalence surrounding gender play along the extra-/diegetic interface. The following section introduces *Shadow of Love* by highlighting its queer ima(in)ging, along with its enhanced extratextual pleasures and meanings that are precisely facilitated by this gender play bordering on the extra-/diegetic interface. Further, we emphasise that these enhanced extratextual pleasures and meanings are not free interpretations but are in dialogue with the local discourses concerning gender/sexuality and the popularising homoerotic BL media.

Watching Shadow of Love – *Queer imag(in)ing, extratextual pleasures, and a BL interplay*

Comprising seventeen episodes with each ninety-minutes long, *Shadow of Love* was aired in early 2020 on Thailand's major TV channel, Channel 3, best known for its soap opera (*lakhon*) productions targeting urban and younger audiences (Cornwel-Smith 2019: 256; Farmer 2015: 80). The series features a twin brother and sister, Kwanoei/"Aoey" and Kwanma/"My", with the brother being raised as a girl by their mother, Piangkwan, who hid the family from the abusive father from a wealthy Sino-Thai family that is desperate for a male heir. When growing up, the twins both fall in love with the same young man, Neua. Whilst Aoey tries to deny his budding affection for Neua due to some homosexual prohibition, Neua's love at first sight has always been Aoey, who, under a girl's guise, showcases remarkable football skills. Neua mistakes his love for the look-alike twin sister My. The father, Tan, then tracks down the family after two decades of separation. The son, Aoey, is immediately welcomed back to the paternal family (episode four) dominated by the ruthless grandfather, where Tan's official wife, Yonlada, and their daughter, Dao, also reside. Before relocation, Aoey (in a man's look) actually had a brief relationship with Dao, whose managerial status in the family business is now also marginalised due to Aoey's return. Piangkwan, to protect Aoey and to continue her revenge (on her own forced marriage and pregnancy, alongside her mother's death), then brings My to join Aoey, staying in a side house on Tan's property. Whilst My is soon married to Neua (at Piangkwan's request, so as to consolidate her children's place in the new family), Aoey is then match-made with Rida, daughter of another rich Sino-Thai family, in both patriarchies' hopes of prolonging their family lines and mutually strengthening their family businesses. Not only is Piangkwan determined to derail Tan's plan for male heirs, but Aoey cannot let go his love for Neua…

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As the "male" protagonist (*phra ek*), Aoey's relationship with Neua comprises four phases: a) Aoey's confusion of his gender identity (episodes one to three), b) Aoey's competition with My over Neua (episodes four to eleven), c) Aoey's concession of Neua to My whilst marrying Rida (episodes twelve to seventeen, and d) Aoey's final acceptance of Neua's love (the latter half of episode seventeen). Regarding the first phase of the triangular relationship that features Aoey's dis- and re-orientation of his gender identity, five vignettes merit attention. The first vignette takes place when the unattended twins, at the age of roughly four, must change clothes after being pulled out of water by the uncle, Chit. Whilst Chit is startled to find out that Aoey, under a girl's disguise, is actually a boy, the twins began crying when they notice the difference of their lower bodies. "Why aren't we the same?" "Am I sick or are you sick? I am scared," cry out the twins. The second vignette occurs years later when the twins just enter puberty. In place of My in menstrual pain, Aoey is allowed to run errands with Mum. Despite his girl's guise, Aoey is noticed for his verbal exchanges that disclose a masculine identification (Kang 2014: 416). Against Piangkwan's command, Aoey protests, "I am a boy, so I should talk like a boy." Aoey even challenges Piangkwan by pointing out his morphing physical condition, "I am a boy. Don't you see this thing [below]?" Demanded then by Piangkwan to take medicine to counter his morphing physique, Aoey still insists, "I am a boy. I won't take birth-control pills." Aoey, though, gives in in protection of My from Mum's punishment. The third vignette happens when the twins reach eighteen (with My starting in college, whilst Aoey remains home schooling by Piangkwan). This vignette comprises two chance encounters between Aoey and Neua: first in the rain before a café and then at Neua's family business. Both times Aoey, under a girl's disguise, finds his heartbeat racing. He tries to attribute the syndrome to the weather at first, but he wonders why, without the weather factor, this happens again: "Is it because of him? It's impossible. How can my heart race for a man?" After a private conversation with Uncle, Aoey decides to discard the birth-control pills to avoid them messing up his mind. He concludes, "I'm not a woman, and I'll never like a man." Taken together, these three vignettes mark a trajectory of Aoey's gender identity that starts with an awareness of sexual difference in childhood, followed by an insistence on that difference ("I *am* a boy") through gendered expressions reinforced through puberty, and that gendered identification is finally met with homosexual taboo when the male subject tries to deny his awakening same-sex attraction.

The fourth vignette happens after My finishes college and lands in a job in Neua's family firm. My is automatically enrolled in the company's soccer team, because Neua mistakes My for her sibling, who – in a girl's guise – has impressed Neua for his football skills. When My cannot attend the first practice due to an illness, Aoey volunteers to be her substitute. During the practice, however, Aoey's physical contact with Neua unexpectedly reignites Aoey's repressed affection for Neua. "I haven't had this feeling for a long time [since their last encounter]," Aoey admits in mind, but still, "I'm a man. Don't be like this." This fourth vignette, obviously, remains monitored by the homosexual taboo, but this time Aoey decides to do more. To strengthen his manhood, Aoey, with Uncle's help, starts to sneak out as a "man" and work out at a gym. This incidentally connects Aoey and Dao, and their try at dating ensues. Following some extended drama, what the fifth vignette underscores is, however, both the possibility and exclusion of Aoey as bisexual or *seua bai* (literally bisexual tigers [Jackson 2009: 372]). In his conversation with Uncle, Aoey tries to sort out his feelings for Dao and Neua, "When I'm with Dao, I feel good and comfortable. But when I'm with that guy … I feel excited, my heart beating fast and butterflies in my stomach." Assuring Aoey that his feelings for a man is "not wrong" and that "nowadays there are a lot of men-loving men," Uncle nonetheless advises Aoey to "concentrate on one direction." In his opinion, that is, being gay is no longer considered abnormal or unusual, although being *bi* or "going both ways is [still] not cool," possibly due to *bi*'s persisting "negative connotations of sexual promiscuity" (Prempreeda 2007: 17) in Thai society. What Uncle insists as the perceived universal principle that "you must be sincere to yourself" curiously justifies a gay identity and illegitimates its *bi* alternative at the same time. Whilst Aoey's question "Do I really like men?" seems to linger, his sexual orientation is already re-set towards a gay identification, by way of the foreclosure of bisexuality in the narrative context.

Corresponding to the second phase of the triangular relationship that foregrounds the twins' competition, four elaborate cases involving their identity/gender-switch warrant focal attention. Whilst Aoey by now has been subjected to Mum's command to disguise as a woman, and a relatively recent instance (the

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abovementioned fourth vignette) involves Aoey voluntarily replacing My to practice football, all the gender-switches this far differ from those that follow: those to be animated by Aoey's growing affirmation of his same-sex attraction to Neua, and to be met by My's increasing unwillingness to cooperate at the same time. The first such case comes with Aoey's intervention into My's wedding to Neua (episode five), where Aoey as My's temporary stands-in unexpectedly meets the abduction of My meant to derail the wedding (with Yonlada behind it). The second case occurs shortly after My's marriage (episode six). Here My must admit Neua's confusion about the twins, and Aoey is called in in emergency to cover up My's incapability at football, in exchange for his overstay with Neua. The third case takes place after Aoey is suspected by Grandfather of being a transvestite, and Aoey, to prove his normative gender identity, is to be married off (episode seven). To avoid Aoey's marriage to Rida and Rida's potential pregnancy, Piangkwan orders the siblings to switch, which, though, ends badly with My's grudge and the fire incident leaving both siblings facially disfigured. The fourth case follows the siblings' recoveries aided by plastic surgeries (episodes ten to eleven). Though intending to start a new life with a new face distinct from her brother's, My unexpectedly shares an identical face with Aoey due to Mum's meddling. Teaming up with her strange bedfellow Yonlada, Mum even resorts to measures as extreme as drugging and blackmailing My, making the siblings switch again, all for the sake of perpetuating her vengeance.

Here we must call attention to a basic yet pivotal dimension that is characterised by the extratextual. This dimension is basic, due to the very fact that the twin brother and sister are played by the same actresses in correspondence with their different stages of life. When watching the series, the viewers would frequently find themselves intrigued by the paradox of an actress-as-a-male-character. Despite all the great efforts by the producers and performers in making Aoey believable as a man, especially in contrast with the actress's rendition of the female sibling, the viewers may still find some difficulty *simply perceiving* Aoey as a man. This dimension is pivotal, in that much of the pleasure of watching *Shadow of Love* is also premised on and reinforced by this paradox. Due to the viewers' extratextual positioning, a pure look at the character itself has become a more complex act, literally a *perceptual-cognitive processing* in the case of watching Aoey being performed by actresses: Wasita Hermenau (the teenage twins), Oranate D. Caballes (the adult twins until the fire incident), and Sadanun Balenciaga (the twins with new faces after fire). Of course, this is complicated further by all this serial's identity- *and gender*-switches, with variegated pleasures and meanings abounding.

The following table illustrates the different scenarios surrounding the protagonist's gender identity, which, notably, is facilitated by an emphatic reference to the *extratextual*, processed by the *extradiegetic* active viewer key to our conceptualisation of the *wer* viewership. We want to stress, the aforementioned "excessive aesthetics" characteristic of *wer* viewership involves two levels of gender-bending: one involving the androgynous expression of the character on the screen, and the other engaging the perceptual-cognitive processing of the former by the viewer. In response to the cross-dressing along the extra-/diegetic interface (as in the noted case of an actress-as-a-male-character), say, the viewer most likely must simultaneously adopt some sort of "cross-dressing" viewing strategy to cognitively make sense of what she or he sees in accordance with the diegesis. Whilst both levels of gender-bending are imperative to the notion of *wer* viewership, we must foreground the significance of the additional, "excessive" work needed beyond simple perception of the character's gender on the part of the viewer – thus the enhanced text-viewer interplay in the *wer* viewership.

Scenarios A and B consist of the "norm" of the twins' gender conditions in the diegesis. Whilst scenario A, with the actress playing a woman, represents a normative match of the performer's and character's gender, scenario B, with the actress performing a man diegetically, is implicated in a paradox in sex/gender along the axis of extra-/diegesis. To cognitively smooth out this discrepancy, the audience's viewing *per se* must involve a kind of *cross-dressing* appreciation. For the most part, though, Aoey appears more like a tomboy (or even *tom* in its Thai referencing of a lesbian butch (Chao 2022; Jackson 2016; Sinnott 2004; Wilson 2004) than a cisgendered man from the viewer's extradiegetic standing. If the actress, in scenario C, plays the brother who then impersonates the sister, the viewer is expected to adopt a "double" cross-dressing viewing strategy to cognitively make sense of what the viewer sees according to the diegesis.

The lead characters' ambivalent gender expressions further "open up" (Fiske 2011a: 85) the perception and reading of their relationships with other characters along the interface between diegesis and

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Table 1. Seven Scenarios of Gender Play along the Extra-/Diegetic Interface

Actress: Wasita Hermenau (teenager) Oranate D. Caballes (adult for the first half) Sadanun Balenciaga (adult for the second half)	Character: Kwanoei/“Aoey” (Twin brother)	Character: Kwanmai/“My” (Twin sister)
		A) Actress performing a female character * No paradox in sex/gender * No discrepancy between diegesis and extradiegesis
	B) Actress performing a male character * A paradox in sex/gender * Diegetic vs. extradiegetic * Extradiegetically, a feminine man or tomboy	
		C) Actress performing a male character who impersonates a female character * A double cross-dressing viewing strategy needed extradiegetically
	D) When paired with Neua * Diegetically, a gay couple * Extradiegetically, a straight couple * Boys’ love (BL) shipping, in a denotational sense	
	E) When paired with Rida or Dao * Diegetically, a straight couple * Extradiegetically, a lesbian couple * Girls’ love (GL) shipping, in a connotational sense	
	F) If “Aoey” (impersonated by My) paired with Rida or Dao * Diegetically, a lesbian couple * Extradiegetically, closer to lesbianism	
		G) If “My” (impersonated by Aoey) paired with Neua * Diegetically, a gay couple * Extradiegetically, closer to straightness * BL shipping, in a connotational sense

extradiegesis. In scenario D, when Aoey is paired with the cisgendered man Neua, their relationship is assumed gay in the diegesis. Yet, from an extradiegetic perspective, it is tinted by the image of a straight couple, given Aoey’s ambiguous gendering projected as a tomboyish woman. In scenario E, when Aoey is paired with the cisgendered woman of Rida or Dao, their relationship (marriage and fling, respectively) is defined straight in the diegesis. From the viewer’s extradiegetic standing, however, it is rather akin to lesbian coupling, given that Aoey assumes foremost the image of a tomboyish woman, if not a same-sex attracted masculine woman locally identified as *tom*. When Aoey and Rida appear together, the picture of an intimate butch-femme duo (or *tom-dee* pairing in Thai discourse [Kang 2014; Sinnott 2004]) readily facilitates the kind of (usually fan-based) “slashing” or “(relation)shipping” practice gravitated to female/female pairing or Girls Love (GL) (Russo 2018; Welker 2006). Its more popular male counterpart, Boys Love (BL), relevant to the preceding scenarios B and D and crucial to the whole series, is to be addressed more fully subsequently. As for both scenario F and scenario G, a layer of cross-dressing is employed prior to the pairing, and their effects can be somehow ambivalent. In the case of

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My-as-Aoey in scenario F, when "he" is paired with Rida or Dao, the couple is assumed lesbian in the diegesis. Extradiegetically, the duo nonetheless *still* looks closer to a lesbian coupling. Despite the viewer's knowledge of the cross-dressing involved in the diegesis, that is, the pair intuitively and foremost looks like a *tom-dee* duo. In the case of Aoey-as-My in scenario G, when "she" is coupled with Neua, their relationship is defined homoerotic in the diegesis. However, it more likely suggests otherwise in the viewer's extradiegetic perception, as the pair intuitively and foremost looks like a female-male coupling, albeit the viewer's additional knowledge of the female impersonation performed in the diegesis.

In tandem with the scenarios that titillate the viewer's perceptual-cognitive processes along the extra-/diegetic interface comes a form of queer imag(in)ing informed by the widely popular genre of Boys Love (BL). Originating in Japan from the 1970s, BL represents a genre largely by and for heterosexual women that centres on the romantic relationships between beautiful male youths known as *bishônen* (Baudinette 2019: 116; McLelland and Welker 2015: 3–4). Since the late 1980s, Japanese BL – usually in the form of *manga* and referred to as *yaoi* or more commonly "cartoon *wai*" (*katun-wai*; *wai* stands for *y*[*aoi*]) – has become increasingly popular among young middle-class Thai women (Baudinette 2019: 116; Poowin 2022: 181–82). Along with the proliferation of Thai BL content both online and in print, Thai BL has also melded into the popular cultural landscape through local movie productions such as *Love of Siam* (2007), and in particular Thai TV serials known as "series *wai*" (*siri-wai*), beginning with *Love Sick, the Series* (2014) (Baudinette 2019; Kongkiat 2020; Poowin 2022: 190–91). As a genre of homoerotic media, Thai BL in film and television celebrates "cute," "soft," and "sweet" young men, and their romantic coupling known as *khu-wai*, literally couple-*y*(*aoi*) (Kang-Nguyen 2022: 197). It largely shares the general principles of BL that is premised on a "happy ending" for the "monogamous relationship" between two male protagonists, whose gender roles are foremost aligned with a masculine, dominant position – *seme* in Japanese or *ruk* in Thai – and a feminine, passive position termed *uke* in Japanese or *rub* in Thai (Jooyin 2019: 72; Natthanai 2023; Poowin 2022: 185). Despite the genre's overall marginalisation of female characters, Thai BL's fanbase, like those in other countries, are predominantly young women (known in Thai as "*sao-wai*": girls into *yaoi*), who notably further show a penchant for the role-type of "*gay-sao*," literally girly gay, as opposed to the "*gay-maen*," literally manly gay (Kang-Nguyen: 2022: 197 & 200). Unlike the female fans in other countries, though, Thai *saw-wai* adopt the shipping practice that has evolved from the conventional shipping of straight or fictional personalities, into the integration of *actual* cute young gay-identified couples (Kang-Nguyen 2022).

In *Shadow of Love*, the homoerotic genre of BL is deployed as a kind of schema(ta), "an arrangement of knowledge already possessed by a perceiver that is used to predict and clarify new sensory data" (Branigan 1992: 13). For those who are (getting) familiar with Thai BL TV serials or *siri-wai*, they must find their perceptual-cognitive processes animated in response to the sensory data that are titillatingly coded with BL references (like "queerbaiting" [Brennan 2019; Ng 2017; Zhao 2021]). Additional pleasures and meanings come with the viewer's processing of sensory input through the lens of BL. Here by sensory input, we want to highlight the iconography of the character, the tropes of the characters' interaction, and the discourse pertinent to the BL context. Regarding iconography, the incongruity between the performer's biological sex and the character's social gender (see scenario B above) brings to the fore the character's gender ambiguity from the viewer's extradiegetic perspective. Against the cisgender criterion, Aoey either embodies the tomboyish image kindred to *tom* identity (lesbian butch) in Thai discourse, or a form of male femininity that, through a BL lens, resonates with the beloved image of *gay-sao* (girly gay) preferred by *sao-wai* (girls into *yaoi*), in comparison with that of *gay-maen* (masculine gay). Interestingly, this *gay-sao* image also merges with the young *rub* (feminine, passive) character in BL shipping that basically "looks and behaves like a woman except for his flat chest" (Xu and Yang 2022: 24). Throughout the series, Aoey is, indeed, time and again (episodes one, six, eleven, fifteen and seventeen) emphatically shown with a naked, flat torso, with the aid of computer-generated imagery, in resonance with the BL imag(in)ing.

As for the tropes of the characters' interactions with BL connotations and denotations, they are foremost mediated by the foundational *ruk* – masculine, dominant – and *rub* dynamic. In the first three episodes, the recurring imagery that capture Aoey (in a tomboyish woman's guise) and Neua during football playing, with unintended physical contact, not only serve as a catalyst for Aoey's homosexual desire, but they portray the two in a relative position, with Neua's masculine body over or behind Aoey's feminine

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one, insinuating Neua being the top (*ruk*) whilst Aoey the bottom (*rub*) in the BL imaginary. Later in some post-conference leisure time (episode six), Neua and Aoey are shown playing football on the beach in a way reminiscent of their previous BL moments in the football court (as rehearsed through flashback), and this montage sequence is wrapped up with the pair sitting side-by-side, having ice bars on a dock. At one point, Neua wipes Aoey's mouth with his bare hand (never with tissue paper being an unwritten rule); this, from the Thai BL imaginary, manifests a gesture of homoerotic intimacy. During the said second case of the siblings' identity-switch, Neua in one scene brings Aoey(-as-My) snacks and jokingly suggests to "feed" him, serving another Thai BL trope of sweet cuteness. Unfortunately, the snacks cause Aoey allergy, with Aoey ending up in the hospital. Then *twice* in the hospital, in comforting Aoey(-as-My) and asking him to behave, Neua's face swiftly moves close to Aoey's, followed by Neua gently patting on Aoey's head (episodes six and seven). The gestures of the *ruk* coming fast and "unnaturally" close to the face of the *rub* and patting on the latter's head are commonly seen in Thai BL as well. Then, a number of sequences where Aoey-as-My fantasises *himself* being with Neua, further baits the viewer with BL appreciation, with Aoey, in fantasy, leaning against Neua (episode seven), being kissed by Neua (episode eight), and blissfully lying in bed next to Neua (episode ten). Such imagery momentarily visualises the *khu-wai* (couple-*yaoi*) that has been made possible not without the viewer's shipping from an extradiegetic standing.

After Neua starts pursuing Aoey, BL tropes still abound, although Neua's position is now transformed from the implicit, unwitting *ruk* to the explicit, even aggressive *ruk* vis-à-vis Aoey as the passive *rub*. Whereas the preceding BL imag(in)ing largely operates on a connotational level (with Neua uncertain about his love and Aoey in disguise, in referencing scenario G), the following BL imag(in)ing clearly works on a denotational plain (with the *khu-wai* confronting each other directly, in referencing scenario D). We first witness Neua tenderly stroking Aoey's face and nearly sealing a kiss on Aoey's lips (episode twelve). With Aoey's decision to concede his love to My and move on by marrying Rida, Neua confronts Aoey about the latter's authentic feelings for him time and again, sometimes in a more pleading manner (episode fourteen), but generally also inclusive of forceful measures, ranging from cornering Aoey with one arm (episodes eleven and sixteen), to an attempted forced kiss (episode thirteen), and to a forced embrace from behind (episode fifteen). Whilst the imagery of kiss and embrace, without force and otherwise, are common BL tropes, a heated confrontation between the *khu-wai* that happens in the hospital (episode sixteen) showcases a range of BL tropes, including Neua (as the *ruk*) moving overly close to Aoey (the *rub*) face-to-face, Neua using one arm to corner Aoey against the window, Neua embracing Aoey twice by force, Aoey breaking down in front of Neua (here Aoey's emotional breakdown is rendered through his physical breakdown by way of Aoey's undisclosed deteriorating health condition), and Neua carrying the collapsed Aoey in his arms. Of course, the deep concern and intensive care Neua provides Aoey thereafter epitomises the Thai rhetoric of "taking care" (Sinnott 2004) weighing in the assumed more dominant partner in coupledom that likewise prevails in Thai BL. A pivotal trope hence also arrives with the *ruk* character carrying his *rub* partner on his back, with the latter's arms around the former's shoulders. This trope is featured toward the end of the series (episode seventeen), where Neua lovingly piggybacks Aoey when Aoey gets too weak to walk during his final days.

In respect to the animated discourses in relation to BL, we would like to first point to the tension between *gay-sao* and *gay-maen*, vis-à-vis the discourses of *gay* and *kathoey*. Whereas the young feminine gays (*gay-sao*), as Kang-Nguyen notes, are the type "most desired and idolised" by *sao-wai*, "*gay-maen* pairings have [in the meantime] become ubiquitous in mainstream gay media" (Kang-Nguyen 2022: 202). More generally, the term *gay* itself was borrowed from English in the 1960s and used to refer to males who had same-sex preferences, but who "did not have a feminine mindset or any desire for feminine gender expression" (Sulaiporn 2012: 111). *Gay* identity thus forms a contrast to a gender identity other than man (*phu-chai*) or woman (*phu-ying*) that Thai society has long been familiar with: *kathoey*, with its general reference to male-to-female transgenders or transsexuals (Sulaiporn 2012). Whilst many Thai people still cannot distinguish the meanings of the words *gay* and *kathoey*, and *kathoey* is oftentimes inseparable from derogatory connotations ("*sao prophet sorng*," i.e., "second type of woman," is now a preferred term in the community [Sulaiporn 2012: 114]), *gay-maen* "sometimes [also] openly ridicule or express disgust for both *kathoey* and *gay-sao*" (Kang-Nguyen 2022: 202), not least because of *gay-sao*'s suspicious affinity with the infamous *kathoey* through their shared male femininity. In *Shadow of Love*,

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Yonlada indeed ridicules Aoey's unmanly comportment (akin to *gay-sao* in BL terms), which she sees as unfit for the heir of the family-corporation (episode six). She further plots two rounds of attacks against Aoey (episodes seven and ten) by raising suspicion about Aoey's gender identity by exactly appealing to the rhetoric of *kathoey*, with visual evidence secretly collected from the early identity-switch cases during the siblings' competition phase. For Grandfather, the accusation of Aoey as *kathoey* engaging in "transvestitism" is disgraceful, and it raises the important question about whether Aoey can handle a straight marriage life and produce an heir to the family. Despite Dao's defence for cross-dressing as a kind of *gender* performance out of personal choice in modern society, the deep concern over Aoey's *sexuality* nevertheless hastens Grandpa's decision to marry Aoey off (in proving the grandson's heterosexuality). Here we see the manifestation of *kathoey* as straddling on the lack of a distinction between gender (*phet-phawa*) and sexuality (*phet-withi*) in traditional Thai "gender/sex (*phet*) system" (Jackson 2012), which to some extent also contributes to the confusion among many Thai people about *kathoey* and *gay*, as *kathoey* historically could include all gender-based and sexuality-based identities that deviated from the heteronormative forms of man (*phu-chai*) and woman (*phu-ying*).

Another interesting discourse pertinent to BL revolves around the homoerotic genre's ambiguous relation to gay identity politics. More generally, BL is "only tangentially connected with the lives of actual gay men" (McLelland and Welker 2015: 3), in part because of the genre's tradition that profoundly involves the projection of a "utopian," "nonheteronormative" fantasy world by and for heterosexual girls and women (Kwon 2019; Otomo 2015; Poowin 2022: 186). More often than not, the good-looking male characters in BL narratives are "incidentally in a relationship," but they notably "do not think of themselves as 'gay'" (Kang-Nguyen 2022: 200; McLelland and Welker: 2015: 3; Natthanai 2023). In Thai *siri-wai* in particular, whilst we have perceived an expanding positivist depiction about LGBTQ rights and a call for marriage equality since 2021 (e.g., *Not Me* [2021, GMM 25] and *Cutie Pie* [2022–23, Workpoint TV]), we nevertheless also find the older, "not-gay-but-incidental" rhetoric in play in a number of popular BL serials, including *Together: The Series* (2020, GMM 25) and more recently, *Hidden Agenda* (2023, GMM 25). Although *Shadow of Love* is not so much a BL drama as soap opera, or rather a soap inflected by BL, what we find rather fascinating is the show's reflexive usage of BL's not-gay-but-incidental rhetoric. In the series, Neua's psychiatrist friend, Chin, is introduced when Neua suspects his wife's identity-switch-induced memory inconsistencies as symptoms of a dissociative identity disorder (episode ten). But when Neua realises his love has been Aoey, he consults with Chin, expressing his "confusion" over the fact that despite his love for My, his heart races when he is with Aoey. In response to Neua's question, "Am I *gay*?", Chin asks if Neua has "similar feelings to other guys." Neua's resolute negative answer affirms that he only loves Aoey. Chin, without mentioning the word "*gay*," advises Neua (curiously, not as a professional but just "as a friend"), "Look deep down in [Aoey's and My's] identities and accept your own feelings." "Heart is more important than gender," Chin concludes. To some extent, Chin's switch of his identity from a psychiatrist to a friend whilst giving Neua advice serves as a gesture to distance his own remarks from any professional diagnoses. This helps reframe the scenario in terms of public understandings regarding *gay*, including one vis-à-vis BL. Through a BL lens, it in effect materialises the discourse underpinning many BL couplings. That is, the male protagonists are not *gay* because they are not interested in guys more generally; still, they happen to fall for each other in one-on-one relationships, where hearts must precede any gender concerns. Not only does the doctor-friend's comment that "heart is more important than gender" register a BL connotation, but it is reinforced through similar remarks with different characters involved in various occasions (episodes six, eight and twelve). Contrary to most BL narratives where the label of "*gay*" remains latent, depicting not so much an identity as homoerotic behaviour, the direct questioning of own's own identity ("Am I *gay*?") in a professional setting (a doctor's office) in *Shadow of Love*, however, calls attention to the generic ambiguity between BL and *gay*, commenting on BL in a reflexive fashion.

Conclusion

This article examines some recent developments about queer imag(in)ing in Thai mediascape by first revisiting the fundamental issue of spectatorship *pace* screen theory in film studies. Attending to the more general issue of media specificity of television and the particular textual device of identity/gender-switch in

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several recent Thai television serials, we have proposed the idea of *wer* viewership: a mode of viewing practice that features viewer-text interaction through the perceptual-cognitive processes (absent from conventional, psychoanalysis-informed screen theory), and is characterised by excessive aesthetics, multiple meanings, and diverse pleasures. Different from conventional media audience research and media fan studies, *wer* viewership also underlines the role of primary text and the aspect of intrapersonal psychology, so much so that textual analysis remains focal (as in conventional film studies) alongside its foundational recourse to cognitive psychology (vis-à-vis psychoanalysis in screen theory). As a viewing practice comparable to camp reading, *wer* viewership highlights how the viewer actively, even parodically makes sense of the ambiguous cues surrounding gender, as boosted by the identity/gender play along the extra-/diegetic interface. We used *Shadow of Love* to elucidate the *wer*/excessive aesthetics in its identity/gender play along the extra-/diegesis, together with the enhanced pleasures and meanings available to its extradiegetic active viewers. We emphasise that this expanded queer imag(in)ing is not so much free interpretation as in dialogue with the discourses surrounding gender/sexuality in Thailand (e.g., *gay* vis-à-vis *kathoey* and *bi*) and the popularising homoerotic BL media across Asia in recent years.

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