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Inside Out: Queer Theory and Popular Culture

Mark McLelland

Introduction

I'm sure that all will agree that the last decade has seen an explosion in the visibility of gay characters, notably in film and television, albeit still within very limited parameters. Given that the portrayal of homo*sexual* interaction, even hugging and kissing, is generally avoided in mainstream media, homosexuality must be marked in other ways, by the portrayal of clearly recognizable homosexual 'types'. This is nothing new. Vito Russo, for instance, in his encyclopedic review of representations of gay men and lesbians in Hollywood, *The Celluloid Closet*, provides many instances of how a homosexual identity could be hinted at in movies even though express articulation of that identity was forbidden by censorship. Unfortunately, the codes designating homosexuality, until the early 1970s at least, largely relied on gender nonconformity, that is, homosexuals, to the extent that they existed at all in Hollywood's imaginary, were frequently reduced to images of the sissy man or the butch woman.

The largely negative, psychologically troubled and self-destructive images of gay people as 'gender inverts' once prevalent in the media have now been replaced by 'positive', up-beat images of happy, healthy gay *consumers*. Lesbian activist and author Sarah Schulman (1998) refers to these images as 'the A-list,' of white, buff, male, wealthy stereotypes that have become, for many, the image of the average gay person. As Schulman argues, despite the proliferation of a wider repertoire of images of gay men (and less so, lesbians) in popular culture in recent decades, these images still speak to mainstream ideological agendas and fail to represent the diversity of gay life.

While I am sympathetic to Schulman's concerns, in this paper, I want to explore the implications of queer theory for lesbian and gay representation by doing two things. Firstly I want to interrogate the idea that the 'problem' of lesbian and gay visibility can be easily resolved simply by producing, as if from a hat, a greater variety of lesbian

and gay men and allowing them a voice in the media. I also want to look at how queer theory problematises the notion that homosexuality as a theme is, in fact, relatively absent in popular culture. Using ideas deriving from Henning Bech's important book *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*, I suggest that homosexuality is actually a major preoccupation of a wide range of media texts despite the apparent absence of recognizable gay and lesbian people. The purpose of the paper is not to offer new insights into queer theoretical approaches to popular culture but rather provide an introduction to ways in which queer theory is being used by researchers to interrogate representations of both homo (and supposedly) heterosexual characters and thus highlight issues of sexuality which are buried in seemingly innocuous scripts and scenarios.

The rise of new gay stereotypes

Recently, the rise of two new types of gay man - what I call the 'girl's best friend' and the 'lifestyle gay' - has been conspicuous. Gay men as girl's best friends have appeared in movies, to name just a few, such as Julia Roberts' and Rupert Everett's *My Best Friend's Wedding*, Madonna's and Rupert Everett's *The Next Best Thing* and Jennifer Anniston's and Paul Rudd's *The Object of My Affection* and, perhaps with the most impact, in the TV series *Will and Grace* - which offers best friend relationships not just between Will and Grace but also between Karen and Jack.

In these cultural products, gay men are overwhelmingly associated with fashion, style and consumption - characteristics which render them of interest to women (who 'naturally' share these interests) and whose best friends they become. The gay men in these media rehearse both what we already 'know' about gay men while simultaneously reinforcing received notions about what it is to be 'a homosexual' - that is, particular looks, movements, patterns of voice, manner of dressing, lifestyle choices and consumption patterns which are coded as homosexual are offered up as evidence of a character's homosexuality. For instance, you may remember how Reese Witherspoon in *Legally Blonde* solves the murder mystery. She realizes that the wife could not have been in a sexual relationship with the Latino pool boy as alleged by the stepdaughter since the pool boy is, in fact, gay. She deduces this from the fact that he

recognizes the label of her designer shoes - something which a heterosexual man would be, apparently, incapable of doing.

So strong is the association of good taste, fashion consciousness and flair for interior decoration with homosexuality that this 'knowledge' was recently taken advantage of in Ikea advertisements in Australia. A series of girls, upon being taken back to a young man's apartment for the first time, walk out on him. The young man in question is clearly disappointed and obviously heterosexual. He desperately tires to impress new girls by making over his room with more and more Ikea furniture but this is, in fact, the problem, the constant makeover of the room and the good taste evinced by choosing Ikea suggests to the girls that he is gay. In the final advert in the series - an 'obviously gay' man (he is carrying a poodle) cruises past the open apartment door and tells him that he 'loves the décor' - at this point the penny drops and we are led to believe that the heterosexual man has apprehended the source of confusion. An interest in 'interior design' has, then, become a code for homosexuality as can be clearly seen in the new US makeover program *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy* - in which a group of homosexuals completely makeover a straight man's appearance, wardrobe and apartment - ironically to make him more successful with women.

Sarah Schulman (1998) refers to this circulation of a restricted repertoire of male homosexual characters as the 'fake, public homosexual' - a kind of sanitized version of the gay man made acceptable for direct dissemination into straight people's living rooms. Here we may think of Warren and Gavin, the 'gay couple' in the makeover show *The Block* which screened at 6.00 pm on a Sunday evening. The 'lifestyle gay' is safe for public view since he has been divested of his sexuality - he displays only surface homosexuality - that is, he is associated with good taste (in interior decoration, personal grooming, fashion and food and wine) - in a sense he becomes an arbiter, a producer but also, importantly, a *consumer* of middle-class lifestyle. The previously illicit subject position of 'the homosexual' is now granted a place at society's table, not through activism or banner waving, but through purchasing power - which has become an important emblem of citizenship in capitalist societies. Likewise, gay men as girls' best friends are rendered safe for mainstream consumption through the focus on their non-sexual relationships with women (not their sexual relationships with other men). Both images recuperate homosexuality in a safe and non-threatening

manner, thus making it possible to view such figures even in the domestic sphere at times when children may be watching. It could be argued that the increase in these kinds of representations of gay men is not a strategy for inclusion but for containment.

I am not suggesting that the 'girl's best friend' or 'lifestyle gay' are necessarily negative stereotypes or that there has been no advancement in media representation of gay men since the parodic and reductive caricatures performed by John Inman and others in shows such as *Are You Being Served?* in the 1970s. However, representations of any abject population - whether they be sexual or racial minorities - are always overdetermined since any individual portrayed is made to symbolically stand in for wider communities. David Halperin puts this eloquently when he states:

> To come out is precisely to expose oneself to a different set of dangers and constraints, to make oneself into a convenient screen onto which straight people can project all the fantasies they routinely entertain about gay people, and to suffer one's every gesture, statement, expression and opinion to be totally and irrevocably marked by the overwhelming social significance of one's openly acknowledged homosexual identity (1995: 30).

Given these provisos, it is difficult to be 'a homosexual' in any public medium without performing a stereotype since, in an environment where heterosexuality is naturalized and normative, viewers need to be offered some kind of visual proof of homosexual identity. Since portrayal of overt homosexual conduct is still largely forbidden, this must be done in other ways. In Judith Butler's (1990) terms, homosexuality must be 'performed' by the iteration of codes and practices which signify 'homosexuality'. These are acted out *with* the body in certain stances, gestures, vocal intonations, glances and looks, *on* the body through hairstyle, grooming, fashion and accessories and *around* the body through the styling of habitat.

The problem with stereotypes

In the case of the movies and sitcoms discussed earlier, the homosexual characters are scripted by writers who need to create clearly recognizable and digestible 'types' but the same is no doubt true of Warren and Gavin, a 'real' gay couple. Take their

performance of 'the gay couple' on *The Block* - we must ask why precisely *this* couple was chosen - they clearly had the required 'look'; also, to what extent did their awareness of being on camera affect their performance of gayness and to what extent was that performance scripted by the show's producers and created by judicious editing to replicate the stereotype - what we already 'know' about gay men?

How does a stereotype function? Cover suggests that a stereotype, 'whether harmful and negative or harmless and positive, will reduce a set of ideas into an easily communicated and culturally intelligible image, stemming the flow of signification and constraining the possibilities for diverse subjective performances' (2004: 84). Sara Schulman's anxiety about the circulation of 'fake' homosexual images suggests that these images depict or connote narrowly commoditized notions of homosexual life and of an openly gay identity. Despite the upsurge in representations of a certain type of gay man (less so of lesbians), Schulman claims the majority of gay and lesbian people still have little or no representation of their lives in the media. Yet, there is little space in queer theory for distinctions between 'real' and 'fake' homosexuals.

Queer theory and the problem of 'identity'

Queer theory is not about advocacy - it does not argue that the portrayal of a more diverse range of gay men and lesbians in public culture would somehow solve the problem of representation - the image of the 'fake' homosexual is not challenged by the production of more 'real' ones. Nor is queer theory related to psychoanalysis, it does not look for 'causes' of homosexuality in either the individual or collective psyche and does not seek to liberate an individual's 'true' sexuality. Queer theory instead offers, to borrow a term from Foucault, a genealogical critique which refuses to search for an origin of an individual's sexual orientation, a genuine or authentic sexual identity that repression has kept from view; rather a genealogical critique investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices and discourses operative within the wider society.

Queer theory concerns itself with the *effects* which arise from modern societies' preoccupation with consigning individuals into two opposite and mutually opposed

camps on the basis of the gender of their preferred sexual partners. As Eve Sedgwick comments:

> It is a *rather amazing* fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained as *the* dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation' (1990: 8).

Although Sedgwick mentions the category of 'sexual orientation' is now ubiquitous - it is not so in all societies - research into South American sexualities (Carrier 1995) show that male-male sexuality, particularly among the working classes, is still structured around an active/passive binary, not a hetero/homo one. In this system, what is significant is not the *gender* of sexual object choice but the *role* a man chooses to play - so long as he is the penetrative partner (and not the one penetrated) he is free to pursue both same- and other-sex partners. This mode of differentiating between sexual interactions (and apportioning status or stigma to participants) has much in common with classical Greco-Roman paradigms (Cantarella 1992). My own research on Japanese sexuality also suggests that the hetero/homo binary was not clearly articulated in popular culture until well into the postwar period (McLelland 2000). That 'sexual orientation' designates orientation solely in terms of male or female object choices, as opposed to orientation toward certain kinds of act is, then, historically contingent and by no means universal.

Queer theory contends that the modern 'homosexual' is not produced by genetics, family background or unresolved psychological tensions but is constituted in and through certain discursive formations which assign specific roles and meanings to same-sex desire within a broader system of knowledge about what people are. The implication of this is that homosexuals can never be adequately integrated into public discourse and culture because their differentiation and denigration is essential to the maintenance of a heteronormative public sphere.

Accordingly, David Halperin argues that 'the homosexual' is not a *natural* category - it functions more symbolically, as the opposite of the heterosexual. In the hetero/homosexual binary the second (subordinated) term exists only as a category of persons who are differentiated from normal, unmarked people - so the marked (subordinated or abject) term functions not as a means of denominating a real class of persons but as a means of delimiting and defining - by negation and opposition - the unmarked term. The homosexual defines the heterosexual by offering up a set of categories which the heterosexual knows that he is not.

So, what do we know about homosexuals and heterosexuals? According to Halperin 'the homosexual' is 1/ a social misfit; 2/ an unnatural freak of nature; 3/ a moral failure and 4/ a sexual pervert. This means that the heterosexual must be, by comparison, 1/ a social norm; 2/ a perfectly natural condition into which everyone is born and into which everyone grows up unless some catastrophic accident interferes with this normal development; 3/ a highly laudable state and 4/ a frighteningly unstable and precarious state that can easily be overthrown by coming into close contact with a lesbian or gay role model at an impressionable age, being seduced by a member of the same sex, hearing homosexuality spoken of positively or having a gay man as a school teacher - or I might add bishop - hence heterosexuality needs to be 'militantly protected, defended, and safeguarded by a constant mobilization of social forces' (1995: 46).

The growing representation of gay men on the screen does not contradict this insight since such representations simply offer an expansion of the official limits - the acceptable parameters - within which homosexuality can be portrayed, as opposed to overturning a system in which the most overdetermined 'fact' about an individual is *still* the preferred gender of his or her sexual partners. 'The homosexual' must still be excluded from particular time spots (when children might be watching - note Jerry Falwell's concerns about Telly Tubbie Tinky Winky's pink fur and red handbag, or the Christian campaign waged against 'co-habiting gay couple' *Sesame Street*'s Ernie and Bert) and homosexuals must still be excluded from playing particular kinds of roles - try to imagine, for example, a working-class *Will and Grace* where Will is a refuse

collector and Grace a check-out girl - or a sitcom in which the homosexual character is a preschool teacher or a vicar.

Absent homosexuality

So far homosexuality has been discussed in terms of problems with stereotypes when an openly gay man is represented, particularly on the screen. However, deriving from observations made by Foucault in *History of Sexuality* volume 1, Queer theory is as interested in homosexuality's *absence* as in its presence. Henning Bech, for instance, argues that homosexuality performs important cultural work in modern western societies - indeed that it helps keep the basic sex/gender systems of those societies working. When not able to sanitize 'the homosexual' and make him acceptable for public consumption in figures such as the 'girl's best friend' or the 'lifestyle gay', popular culture deals with homosexuality by constantly presenting it in such a way that it can be denied - a strategy Bech terms 'absent homosexuality'. Looked at from Bech's point of view, 'Modern society…appears to be a gigantic, homosexually desiring and repudiating machine' (1997: 41).

Two illustrations, one from a recent film and the other from a major television sitcom illustrate this process. Bech asks why, in the original *Bat Man* movie, is Robin the Boy Wonder absent? Not until *Batman and Robin* - the fourth and least successful of the movies - does Robin appear. This movie also involves Bat Girl so as to provide a love interest for Robin, and also a fiancée for Bat Man himself, at great cost to the efficiency and coherence of the plot. Moreover, they fight a *female* enemy - Poison Ivy (played by the luscious Uma Thurman) - all measures to contain the potential homosexual subtext of having an adolescent youth living in an isolated all-male household with Bat Man and his butler - not to mention their leather uniforms and codpieces. However, anyone who has read Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* will appreciate that having both Batman and Robin fall in love with Poison Ivy is hardly a remedy for any homoerotic tensions that might arise between them. As Sedgwick points out, such love triangles are a means of mediating homoerotic feelings between men, not of abolishing them, which is, in fact, what happens in the movie.

The script writers themselves seem aware that the love triangle is not sufficient defense of the main characters' heterosexuality - homosexuality *must* be explicitly articulated in order to be denied. In the movie, both Batman and Robin are affected by Poison Ivy's pheromones which make them compete with each other for her affections. However, after their mutual infatuation with Poison Ivy has worn off, Robin says to Batman 'I can't believe we both fell for the bad *guy*' to which Batman replies 'Bad yes, *guy* no'. The choice of *guy* in this context is superbly overdetermined and seems a self-conscious opportunity for Batman to negate the possibility that either he or Robin could be in love with a *guy* or, by implication, each other. In Bech's terms, this is an instance of 'absent homosexuality' - a compulsive need to draw attention to the possibility of homosexuality only to subsequently deny that possibility. This process is, however, fraught with problems, since 'when one wishes to repudiate homosexuality through an express denial (in words or behavior), one ends up emphasizing it in the selfsame act, thereby also subjecting oneself to suspicion' (1996: 81) - especially when dressed in leather and wearing a cape.

Yet, it could be claimed that Batman is just crying out for queer appropriation and, indeed, he features in the title of a recent book: *Men in Love: Male Homosexualities from Ganymede to Batman*. Yet, Bech maintains that absent homosexuality is a structural feature of almost all cultural products that feature strong relationships between men. As such we should be able to find it anywhere - even in the midst of a family drama such as *Everybody Loves Raymond* - and we can.

Everyone Loves Raymond is a TV sitcom in which, given its subject matter and timeslot, one would not expect to find any homosexual subtext - but there are constant references to homosexuality - albeit, as in this scene, it is not mentioned by name. In one episode, Ray and his wife Deborah are staying over at his parents' house while their own home is treated for termites. After a nighttime argument with Deborah, Ray storms out of the bedroom and asks his brother Robert if he may sleep with him in his bed. Once Ray gets into bed, however, he realizes that Robert is naked, a fact that causes him to panic.

There are numerous ways in which a scene where two brothers share a bed could be made funny without reference to homosexual tensions. Yet the homosexual subtext is

emphasized throughout. Raymond is clearly uncomfortable with the fact that Robert sleeps naked and by his refusal to put on pants. Raymond's statement 'When a guy gets into bed with you, you wear pants' begs the question - Why? What might happen if you do not (even if they *are* brothers)? Robert's rejoinder 'if you don't want to sleep with me, go back to your wife' seems to further underline the homosexual subtext in that 'sleep with' can also designate 'have sex with' and the sentence sets up an equivalence between Robert, Raymond's brother and Deborah, Raymond's wife. Needless to say, these tensions are too much for Raymond who announces that he will 'not be able to sleep *ever*' under these circumstances - again begging the question why? Is he afraid of Robert taking advantage of his prone body or perhaps that his own physiology may betray him and his desires while sleeping? How, for instance, would he handle the sight (or merely the presence of Robert's morning erection - which, if in proportion to the rest of his body, would no doubt be formidable?) The latter point is not facetious - the 'issue' of morning erections is actually discussed by Robert Bly, Men's Movement founder, in his book *Iron John* where he encourages groups of heterosexual male friends to bond with each other in camps in the forest. Male nudity is *always* fraught with complications - even between brothers. The homosexual subtext apparent between the onscreen brothers is also carried over into the offstage rivalry between actors Ray Romano and Brad Garrett - when both won Emmies at last year's TV awards, Ray commented 'Brad, I think mine's a little bigger'. All this begs Bech's question - *Why is homosexuality incessantly dragged out when it is going to be negated anyway?*

Conclusion

This paper has given a very brief outline of some applications that can be made of queer theory to popular culture. Rather than a mode of analysis, like psychoanalysis, which attempts to discern a hidden 'reality' behind media representations - that 'everyone is really gay', for instance, queer theory is a heuristic approach which enables questions to be asked about why we choose to emphasize some and not other aspects of an individual's life when trying to give an account of who they are. As John Phillips (this volume) shows, queer theory is not interested in investigating the largely anachronistic question of which composers are 'really gay', or of elucidating how their same-sex desire can be decoded from their compositions. Just as feminism has

problematized the notion of gender, looking at how society is fractured along the lines of perceived gender difference, queer theory takes the notion of sexuality, and inquires what the consequences are of placing a person on one side or the other of the hetero-homo binary. Rather than searching for *the* meaning in sexual orientation, queer theory encourages us to consider how sexual orientation is *made to* signify a range of meanings about the self. In so doing, queer theory is able to ask more productive questions than who, in the literary or musical canon is, was or might be gay.

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