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The representation and commodification of sexuality in US television

This study uses critical discourse analysis to conduct an examination of the reality television program *Queer Eye*. *Queer Eye* is a makeover show and each of the five main characters --Ted Allen, Kyan Douglas, Thom Filicia, Carson Kressley and Jai Rodriguez—has an area of specialty (fashion, home design, culture, food and grooming). The first two seasons of the show entitled *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* gave makeovers exclusively to straight men. However, after season three the Fab Five, as they are commonly called shortened the title and expanded their makeovers to couples, a gay man and a transgender man.

The purpose of this study is to help understand the manner in which the representations of queer culture in the show reinforce the binaries of sex, gender and sexuality. By investigating the evolution of *Queer Eye* (all four seasons), this study provides insights into popular culture's understanding and depiction of sexual difference and evidences the strong link between these representations and the commercial interests of the producers.

Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of the show, I argue that the Fab Five serve as normative figures within the structure of the capitalist system because: their performance reflects the intrinsic values of a materialistic society and ignores social responsibility. Moreover, consistent with the stereotypical representation of gay males in American culture the queerness of the Fab is depicted as asexual and a form of aestheticism. Ultimately, the program and the main characters support a narrative of heterosexual reproductive romance.

Queer Representation on Television

In an effort to account for the significance of *Queer Eye*, I turn to the literature on the representation of gays in American media. In his groundbreaking work, *The Celluloid Closet*, Vito Russo explains how the representation of homosexuality in American film is directly related to a history of censorship. He explains that in the 1930s, the Motion Picture Production Code was established. The Code represented part of the industry's effort to avoid formal regulation. This self regulating policy restricted, among many other topics, the representation of sexual images of any kind in film. Most illuminating is his discussion of the three main types of depictions of queer characters that survived the regulations in American film: "the sissy," "the villain," and "the tragic hero."

For Russo, the "sissy" is the effeminate, flamboyant, asexual gay men. For him the sissies became symbols of failed masculinities, weakness and the things men secretly dread (homosexuality). In representing the dangers of being homosexual, films used the images of "the villain" and the "the tragic hero" to show the boding consequences of their "perversion." These two representations represented homosexuals as killers or as victims of tragic deaths.

Russo further explains that filmmakers used cues to suggest a character's sexuality without breaking the Code. In their book, *Queer Images*, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin argue that unlike other identity markers, sexuality is not easily identifiable and therefore filmmakers rely on connotative means to suggest that a character is queer. Benshoff and Griffin categorized the cinematic resources used to convey the queerness of a character: dialogue (e.g., a male character who likes flowers); delivery (e.g., a male character who flips his wrist); name (e.g., a woman named George); and costume makeup and hair (e.g., women wearing plain shoes, women with short or pulled back hair) (15).

Benshoff and Griffin summarize the salient criticism regarding the representation of queer identity in film (251-6):

- Most films are made from a heterosexual perspective, and when there is an attempt to tell a story from a queer perspective, efforts are made to change the plot in a way that will not "offend" straight sensibilities.
- There is a conscious effort in Hollywood to minimize queer plotlines and characters from films and scripts (e.g. film *Fried Green Tomatoes*).
- Gay intimacy, romance and community are often marginalized. Producers often resort to flamboyant images as a way of avoiding addressing issues of sex.
- When gays are presented, producers use straight characters as points of audience identification; thereby making queer characters secondary.
- Most representations rely heavily on stereotypes.
- Films that address queer topics minimize gay struggles or the contributions of queer activists (e.g. film *Philadelphia*);

Interestingly most of the criticisms of queer representation in film are also evident in the portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in television. Like film, the characters represented in television rely on stereotypes, usually play secondary roles in the plotlines and are stripped from any sexual desire.

Stephen Tropiano undertakes a critical study of the history of gays and lesbians on television. He explains that some of the first representations of homosexuality in television can be traced back to 1950s talk shows where the topic was introduced as a taboo. During that time, the medical discourse in regard to sexuality (mental illness, cures, and psychoanalysis) dominated the discussions of homosexuality. The author asserts that during the mid 50s the topic of homosexuality was discussed in one of two ways: as a social problem or as a target of sensationalism. Tropiano cites "Homosexuals who Stalk and Molest Children" and "Introduction to the Problem of

Homosexuality” as examples of the overall mood and topics that dominated the discussions (3-4). He also asserts that lesbians were often excluded from these discussions.

During the 1960s, networks started to address issues of homosexuality in selected episodes on dramas such as a 1967, N.Y.P.D episode titled “Shakedown” where New York detectives, helped by a closeted homosexual, try to solve a case of blackmail. Homosexuality was also addressed in news programs such as the CBS report “The homosexual, the first major network news special about homosexuality” in 1967. After the 1969 Stonewall Riots the representation of homosexuality gained popularity in television (Tropiano 12). Shows like *All in the Family* (1971) and the television movie *That Certain Summer* (1972) addressed the subject of homosexuality while the ABC show *The Corner Bar* (1972) incorporated a regular gay character into the plotline (Tropiano).

Tropiano explains in the comedy genre that the character of the sissy was the leading recurrent portrayal of homosexuality up to the 1970s. Furthermore, he explains that during that time, comedy sitcoms addressed the issue of homosexuality in the plotlines through: coming out episodes; shows of mistaken identity; programs where the characters pretend to be gay to escape a situation; or special episodes that addressed some specific social problems like AIDS (191-236). These plotlines were solidified in the 1980s in the narratives of shows like *21 Jump Street*, *Designing Women*, *Mr. Belvedere* among others (Hart). Moreover, the link between homosexuality and AIDS is still prevalent in more recent years. A commonly cited example is the *Seinfeld* episode of mistaken identity, “The Outing” that aired in February 11, 1993. During that episode, the main characters, Jerry and George, were identified as gay and they continuously denied it by adding “Not that there is anything wrong with that” (Tropiano).

According to Ron Becker, TV was dominated by three main networks (NBC, CBS, and ABC) during the 1970s. He explains that over 97% of American households had televisions (81). Additionally, about 90% of audiences were watching one of the three networks, and therefore networks had little interest in reaching a smaller demographic or investing in risky programming that could potentially split their audience (Becker 82). Yet, two important events changed the way that television content was designed: a move towards niche advertising and cable.

Becker argues that at that in the 1970s the industry gained interest in targeting special demographics. The media environment was also changing, as signaled by the growth of cable and independent broadcast stations. These two changes combined with political pressures for inclusiveness in the media made gay material more appealing to the networks.

In the 1980s, shows started presenting gay and lesbian characters as part of the ensemble of the programs (Tropiano). However, ABC reported losing more than one million dollars in advertising revenues when an episode of *Thirtysomething* showed two men in bed having a post-coital conversation (Tropiano x). Suzanna Danuta Walters explains that the increased exposure of gay characters in the media during the 80s also elicited great opposition from conservative groups, and often resulted in lack of support from advertisers.

It was not until the 1990s that television saw an increased number of gay characters on primetime programs such as *Friends*, *Roseanne*, *Spin City*, and *Mad About You* as well as the daytime soap opera *All My Children*. However, in most cases these characters were only supporting characters (Tropiano; Becker; Kessler; Walters). Danuta Walters, however, points that while the popularity of gay characters increased in the nineties, the representation of intimacy (kissing, caressing, stroking) was still not accepted between characters.

In the late nineties, the gay and lesbians gained more cultural visibility. The infusion of gay characters was described by Tropiano as “GAYCOM.” For him, “GAYCOM” refers to situational comedies featuring one or more queer characters involved in their plotline: “A situation comedy that tries not to reduce gays and lesbians to second class citizens” (245). *Will and Grace* is one of the examples provided by the author to explain this phenomenon.

In April 30 1997, Ellen DeGeneres made history when her character came out during her TV show (Benshoff and Griffin 251). The episode was named, “The Puppy Episode,” because ABC, concerned about Ellen’s lack of a love interest on the show, had suggested for DeGeneres to get a puppy (Tropiano 248). The coming-out episode was heavily promoted by ABC which charged premium rates for 30-second spots. ABC was a sellout, the advertising slots sold for 20% over the show’s usual \$ 170,000 and was the network’s highest-rated episode program in three years (Grover). However, a year after the airing of the episode the show was cancelled. The last episode of *Ellen* aired in May 13, 1998, a year after the cited episode (Hontz).

The coming out episode of the television show *Ellen* generated strong reactions from audiences. Several religious groups organized bans against ABC, its parent company Disney, and the marketers with media properties on the show. On the other hand gay activists also organized to prevent companies from canceling their placements on the program.

The show *Ellen*, was seen by many as a milestone for queer representation in television, however it also generated much controversy as many grew critical of the new found “gay chic” aesthetic. For many, the popularity of gay and lesbian characters responded to a trend in the medium rather than a rupture with previous stereotypes. The type of representation did not change, mostly the character of the sissy is represented (e.g. Carson from the Fab Five, Will and Jack from *Will and Grace*) thereby perpetuating the status quo. Yet, more programs seem to successfully incorporate the sissy into their story lines.

Also, Kelly Kessler explains that in the case of television programs such as *Friends*, and *Mad About You*, the characters behave in a manner that minimizes their lesbianism while highlighting their roles as mothers from their previous heterosexual relationships. Robert B. Bateman also cautions not to confuse visibility for acceptance. He explains that while more representation might mean acceptance, the type of representations and characters are

also important. For him more representation could respond to an increased interest to see homosexual identity as an object of amusement.

Contemporary issues in the representation of Sexuality

The representation of homosexuality in Contemporary American culture is quite complex and has been mediated by social, scientific, economic and political interest. Homosexuality has been represented as deviant, has been associated with illness (e.g. HIV/AIDS), has been informed by the medical discourse and has been the target of sensationalism. More superficially progressive characterizations of homosexuality have aligned sexual desire to high culture and consumption. *Queer Eye* is part of a tradition of representing gay men as cultured, witty, classy and lively. The representation of the main characters in *Queer Eye* is consistent with stereotypes presented in popular literature purchased by gay males; the portrayal of homosexual males in film; the marketing research that claims gay men are sophisticated, wealthy and trendsetters; and one urban economic theory.

Marketers have also represented the gay community as a group of affluent and influential trendsetters. Several marketing companies such as Rivendell Media and Community Market Inc. specialize on gathering data for marketers about the gay and lesbian community. Researchers like Gillian K. Oakenfull and Timothy B. Greenlee argue that gay consumers have the highest purchasing power of any minority group in the United States (422). Moreover, publications targeted at the LGBTQ community position the gay market as a group of well educated, trendsetters and a desirable group to reach. In a commentary for *The Advocate*, Bruce C. Steele explains, "It has been and untrumpeted truism for millennia that gays have been the trendsetters and style gurus of Western Culture, from Alexander the Great to Michelangelo to Andy Warhol" (43).

However, such representation of the gay market has been strongly scrutinized. Fred Fejes work, for example, is critical of marketing researchers, as he maintains that the research on the gay and lesbian market has inaccurately represented the demographic profile of the community. He argues that the methodology used to gather the participants of such studies, primarily self identification, affects the validity of the data resulting in research that represents people that enjoy a greater sense of personal, professional and economic security that allows them to be open about their sexual orientation.

The narratives that associate the gay community with wealth are also echoed in Richard Florida's economic theory known as the "creative capital theory." Florida suggests that having a big gay population is one of the factors associated with the economic development of a city. Florida developed a "Creativity Index" that measures the relationship between the creative class share of the workplace and the economic growth of cities. According to Florida, the cities that achieve economic growth also attract the gay population and reflect tolerant environments that are conducive to creativity. In sum, there is an ongoing narrative that associates gay males with urban spaces, a high socioeconomic status, cultural centers and high fashion. The message is consistent and comes from diverse media outlets. Moreover it is consistent with the representation of homosexuality presented in the makeover show *Queer Eye*.

Lee Edelman indicates that as part of the heteronormative agenda there has been an interest to identify and define homosexuality. Heteronormativity has been used to describe heterosexual privilege, and the tendency to interpret heterosexuality as normative (Michael Warner). As noted earlier, queer theory looks at the discursive creation of sexuality. Edelman, for example maintains that both the homosexual advocate and the enforcer of homophobic norms insist upon the social importance of codifying and registering sexual identities. "Homosexuals were not only conceptualized in terms of a radically potent, if negatively charged, relation to the signifying ability of language, they were also conceptualized as inherently textual- as bodies that might well bear a hallmark that could and must be read" (Edelman 1994, p. 6). He further writes that the process of representation of homosexuality as a subject of discourse and a cultural category about which one can think or speak or write, coincides with the process whereby the homosexual subject is represented as being even more than inhabiting a body that always demands to be read, a body on which his sexuality is always inscribed.

McCarthy uses the term "queer pedagogy" to explain the program's mission of guiding or teaching consumers the complexities of developing good taste. Moreover, the Fab Five's role as educators is to teach domesticity and facilitate heterosexual coupling thereby also reconstructing heteronormative gender roles. McCarthy further argues that this queer pedagogy is sexless, as the characters are not educating the public about homosexuality, but are instead the symbols of the emerging neoliberal gay subject. This type of representation, far from contesting heteronormativity, supports the normative and family-oriented formations associated with domestic partnership, and gender-normative social roles and actively embraces the economic agendas that privilege consumer rights over citizen rights.

The coding of the Fab Five as queer is problematic on several levels and subverts the goals of the queer project. First, it equates queer to male gay sexuality. Second, the representation of male homosexuality in the show is limited in scope, the characters are wealthy, flamboyant, hedonistic and prioritize style above any other value. Third, queer is represented in the show as asexual, the program completely censors sexual desire. Moreover, the show claims that the Fab are queer because they have an eye for consumption. Four, the representation of queer in the show makes evident that gay men and straight men live in two very distinct worlds. Finally, the representation of queer is complicated by the flirtation between gay and straight characters. Ultimately, rather than challenge the centralization of heterosexuality, *Queer Eye's* representation helps institutionalize sexuality as an identity by claiming queer as a foundational identity that is in constant tension with hegemonic masculinity.