

Symbolic annihilation

Larry Gross and James Woods note that visibility of lesbian, gays, and other sexual minorities were rare in the early history of the mainstream U.S. media. Minor gay characters did appear from time to time, but usually only as short-lived plot devices slated to be eliminated as soon as their usefulness to a particular storyline was served. When presented in mainstream films or television, gay characters were almost exclusively portrayed negatively, as either villains or victims. In both cases, gay characters were to appear as problems of sexual deviance from the heterosexual normalcy that need solving, and they nearly reflected gendered stereotypes that characterized gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine. Also in the 1980s and early 1990s, programs that dealt with HIV and AIDS were so pervasive, with panic of then-unknown disease and its serious symptoms of illness, that they seemed to be the only outlet for television producers could introduce gay issues into their shows. HIV/AIDS was equated with gays. Also gay viewers in the earlier history of media needed to look for a gay subtext in programs like *Star Trek* and *Batman*.

Ellen DeGeneres and explosion of gay visibility

It is the incident that Ellen DeGeneres came out both as an actor and as the lead character on her sitcom *Ellen* in the mid 90s which marked the significant change in gay and lesbian visibility in the mainstream U.S. media, scholars, in particular Susanna Walters, seem to agree. It was a case that illustrated the growth of gay visibility, especially considering that it was the first prime-time program with a main lesbian character) but also the limits of queer visibility. The show was cancelled shortly after Ellen came out, because the show was “too gay.” Ironically, as James Allan and Hellen Shugart point out, NBC’s *Will & Grace*, a show whose central theme is

a duo of a gay man and a straight woman and their friendship, launched within a year of the cancelation of *Ellen*, and became a huge success with a longer run. Allan and Shugart argue that the acceptance of *Will & Grace* into the mainstream media was due to this gay-man-straight-woman coupling that desexualized Will, the leading gay character in the show, in a non-threatening way. In a way, the visibility of gay characters on the shows like *Object of My Affection* (film), coupled with woman best friends, instead of with straight men, lesbians, or other gay men, did not push the envelop for radical gay rights. However, there were also elements of camp and queer family and community that should not be easily dismissed upon such conditional queer visibility of *Will & Grace*, which I will discuss later.

Joshua Gamson locates another case of explosion of queer visibility in day-time trash talk shows. Phil Donahue in his talk show accidentally found the formula of audience participation and the talk show genre became popular. Then, the talk shows shifted from the rational style of Donahue to the therapeutic style of *The Oprah Show* where Oprah heavily focused on interpersonal relationship, with women as the main audiences of the show, where the best policy was honesty and the talk was a therapeutic treatment that solved problems. Still these early talk shows were middle-class oriented and conservative. Then, *The Rickie Lake Show* marked another shift in the talk show genre, which Gamson calls “staged democracy of troubled lives.” *The Rickie Lake Show*, *The Jerry Springer Show*, and others in the 90s began to frequently host gay men and women as guests. In these programs, homosexuality appeared normal as long as gays confirmed gender normativity and respectability of class (e.g., good, middle-class, white gays wanting a heterosexual-like, monogamous relationship, except with people of the same sex). Gamson argues that this normalization was at the expense of bisexual and transgendered people. Talk shows routinely treated bisexuality as excessive sexuality. That is, bisexual people would

refuse to be categorized in the hetero-homo dichotomy. And transgender people were in a similar way vilified for refusing the apparent truth of the “real” gender (i.e., genitalia). In Gamson’s view, this acceptance of gays and lesbians in trash talk shows is conditional, however, defusing any challenge gay men and lesbians pose to the gender and sexual order and weakening the possible alliance among bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians and gay men as gender and sexual nonconformists. However, the popularity of talk shows gave opportunities to sexual minorities, even with exploitation by the talk show producers (because the guests are recruited at low costs, manipulated to act out, and eventually, along with audiences, sold out to advertisers), who otherwise would not have had any platform to have any visibility. And the talk shows blurred the categories of public and private, truth and lies, and others.

Conditions of visibility

This new queer visibility in the media was not a natural evolution towards greater diversity, but instead it reflected to at least two broader social trends. One is gay and lesbian civil rights activity and the other is an increasing awareness of the gay market.

First, in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* in 1986, the Supreme Court rejected a constitutional challenge to sodomy laws brought by a man who had been arrested, but was not prosecuted, for engaging in oral sex with another man in his house. In contrast to *Bowers vs. Hardwick* that denied rights of privacy, the *Lawrence* decision in 1999 provided recognition to homosexuals in coupled relationships as visible subjects that can be managed, governed, and afforded the liberty of certain intimate conduct. (*Lawrence*, an old white man, and *Garner*, a younger black man, were also arrested for engaging in a gay sex in *Lawrence*’s house.) The *Lawrence* decision overruled the *Bowers vs. Hardwick* decision and built a base for gay marriage.

Through gay right movements and publications (e.g., Human Rights Campaign and Andrew Sullivan's publication of "Virtually Normal"), gay marriage became a phenomenon that gained an enormous exposure in the mainstream media. For instance, in the recent presidential campaign, the gay marriage issue was one of the dominant themes for debates until the economy discourse took over. Then, Proposition 8 in California and other similar ballot questions in Arizona and other states received some press coverage. The public were exposed to and became used to seeing two people of the same sex declare love and commitment to each other, whether they agree with same-sex marriage or not.

Nayan Shah, and many other queer theorists, has noted that this gay marriage, upon the ruling over sodomy law, only embraces a segment of queers under policing and government regulations. They note that gay marriage as the sole option ignores the heterogeneity of how people live in social relations, cultures, etc. The Lawrence decision keeps intact the public sphere idealization that protects the liberties of those who possess a recognizable home. Upon this, homeless people, temporary habitants, foreign, racialized immigrants (in particular, illegal immigrants) may not be protected of their privacy and further marginalized from the acceptance. Shah further argues that queer politics must destabilize the assumptions of personhood and citizenship, whether heterosexual or homosexual.

Secondly, the gay market was cultivated (note that the gay market was not discovered as a pre-existing condition). The media (e.g., *The Wall Street Journal* in 1991) reported gays as a dream market with consuming power. Surveys were used to present gays and lesbians as those with higher income than their counterparts (i.e., straight men and women of the same demographic characteristics such as age and race). However, to M.V. Lee Badgett, this is a myth that leads people to believe that gay people would not need any protection from job

discrimination and that gay rights are special rights. She debunks the myths of high incomes (e.g., double income with no kids) and consumerism by gays and lesbians. She points out the flaws in marketing survey results often cited in the media and finds that the survey samples were skewed toward educated, well-off gays and lesbians.

Yet, advertisers and media producers still cultivated this gay market. Contrary to the popular belief “sex sells”, Katherine Sender points out that advertisers continue to be notoriously conservative, when it comes to potentially alienating a segment of their existing market. The strategy is gay window advertising where images are coded with subtexts intended to be understood by lesbian, gay, and bisexual readers as relevant to their sexual identity, but at the same time which are also assumed to remain innocuous to heterosexual readers.

Sender argues that anxieties about, in particular, gay men’s sexuality in the two stereotypes—one being gay men’s hypersexuality (e.g., possibly pedophile desire) and the other being the discourse of promiscuous gay AIDS victims—shaped the constitution of ideal gay consumers. Through her research on the Advocate (magazine geared towards gay readers) magazine, she contends that the magazine articulated ideal gay consumers as white, male and gender-conforming, in their 30s, and sexually discreet. She notes that both local and national gay and lesbian print media eliminated the overt sexual content in this logic.

Lisa Henderson also links class and queer visibility and observes that in commercial popular culture, the class spectrum is compressed. Wealth in representation is out of proportion. Modest family life is represented as more luxurious than real. Instead, lower-middle-class and poverty are strikingly underrepresented, if not absent. She argues that in commercial media that good queers have moved from the class margins to the middle-class category; on the contrary,

bad queers are even further marginalized and signified by their failure of body; wealth becomes a representation of good taste; and class becomes displaced onto family as normalcy.

The late 1990s saw an explosion in the number of cable channels available to audiences. Subscription cable channels like HBO and Showtime have been particularly successful at attracting gay audiences. Because of the differences in how premium cables and traditional television networks is funded where premium cables are funded by subscriptions not by advertisers, the premium cables were able to take more risks in queer visibility with their programming. They did not have to worry about negative responses or restrictions from conservative advertisers but rather focused on how they could attract audiences who could subscribe. If *Sex and the City* was a cautious step toward integrating gay characters, later shows such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* (a lesbian version upon the success of *Queer as Folk* that featured explicit gay sex) were shows that placed queer sex and community at the center. In these shows, queers were represented in terms of class. Meanwhile, a television program that the most signifies the coupling of market and queer visibility may be Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. Product placements were at the center of the show and gays were coupled with the expertise in how to utilize those products for a quality life. Sender argues that *Queer Eye for the Straight* gave to credit to gay men for their long history of work in the style and taste. And the problem became reversed: gays were no longer the problem to be solved but it was the straight man that needed gay expertise in style and taste for his survival in relationship with the significant other, family, and friends, and career advancement (e.g., promotion at work). And the show represented gays in a communal setting, rather than in isolation with heterosexuals. Henderson compares the Fab Five, the five gay men who train the straight man in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, to a gay man who has cleaned the house and prepared dinner all day for the

visit by his partner's boss and his coworkers and who in the end gets excluded from the dinner and stays in the garage for the evening in James Wood's *Corporate Closet*, a study on gay professionals. She notes that even with this new queer visibility with respect, the Fab Five are still removed from the scene where the straight man, supposedly grown up after a cramp course from the queer eyes, reunites with his significant other, family, and friends, and instead are to watch the scene through a surveillance monitor in a separate room.

Commercial repressive hypothesis and thinking about queerness

As exemplified in cases above, queer visibility entails a certain kind of conditional or limited visibility in commercial media. However, Henderson notes that commercial media's queer sensibility cannot be reduced into a critique that only emphasizes exploitation and marginalization. Building upon Michel Foucault's repressive hypothesis, she coins the term "commercial repressive hypothesis"—the idea that for queer politics, visibility, and sexuality, the history of commerce is a history of repression. Exploitation is not the end of story. There are queer pleasure, softness, camp, and others.

For instance, the visibility of gay-man-straight-woman relationship, while the visibility may limit and desexualize representations about gay men, may offer alternatives about thinking about family relationship. Allan notes that relationships outside the traditional institutions of marriage and family (i.e., father, mother, and children) have transformative power of affection.

While the critics and activists were skeptical and dismissal of the show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* for its stereotypical representations of gay men as effeminate and for the show's blatant promotion of products, Sender argues that the camp elements of the show are worth noting. Camp is defined as playful and anti-serious. It is a way of seeing the world with gay

sensibility that subverts norms and boundaries. The camp elements of *Queer Eye* dislocate the conventional perspectives by straight men, forcing them to see themselves from a different point of view.

Henderson specifically seeks for a new language to move away from the commercial repressive hypothesis and finds the term “queer relay” useful for its articulation and potentials. In her view, relay refers to a cultural process of catching and passing on across the divides of sexual difference and capital where members, not necessarily having to be in the same team, switch roles and pass positions from one to another. The way of thinking steps aside of the familiar anxiety that queers encounter with and instead explores more openly the relations among stories, styles, funding, participants, and production practices and recognizes effects for both queer and non-queer audiences.