

## Research Article

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# The Case of John and Juliet: TV Reboots, Gender Swaps, and the Denial of Queer Identity

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**Abstract:** This article deals with issues of diversity and “visibility politics” in contemporary American middlebrow television. The focus here is specifically how the reboots of *Hawaii Five-0* approach these issues. This article uses the gender swap *Magnum, P.I.*, where Higgins (John Hillerman/Perdita Weeks) is rendered female, as an example to explore how feminism and queer visibility are pitted against each other, while being rendered politically mute. While contemporary US middlebrow TV features a lot of racial, gender, and body and ability diversity, many of these issues are approached as visual rather than political. Drawing on different theories on representation and visibility of marginalised groups, this article argues that middlebrow TV reboots aim for a higher degree of inclusion than original series, without fully responding to the political agendas linked to equality and civil rights. Reducing political issues to questions of visibility results in a “flattening out” of goals White maintaining an ideology of “political neutrality.”

**Keywords:** middlebrow TV, gender swap, visibility politics

In the *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, NBC, 2018–) episode “A Bullet Named Fate” (2/09), Kumu (Amy Hill) leads a protest to protect Hawaiian indigenous lands from developers. When the police arrive to arrest the protesters, she ensures that escalation is avoided by pointing out that the police is there for everybody’s safety. She deals with indigenous policemen, making the conflict appear intra-racial. When a White teenager is arrested with her, the teen’s mother gets angry. Kumu tries to explain to her (and the audience) the value of indigenous lands by comparing it to Christian Church and the idea of “sacred spaces.” The series formulates a political position, especially as the events from the Standing Rock protests to protect indigenous lands, 2 years prior to the airing of the episode, would have still been on viewers’ minds. But it also works to “neutralise” the politics of such protests. It makes clear that the conflict is

- 1) not racial as such, as all involved are indigenous Hawaiians,
- 2) the protest is against individual land developers, who act badly, rather than functioning as an example or structural bias, and
- 3) the audience is understood to be White and Christian.

This also encompasses an important aspect of the series: visibility usually comes with a specific perspective on *who* is made visible and *how*. Visibility, rather than representation, is the act of showing those who are structurally disadvantaged without addressing the barriers that create disadvantage. We are not given the broader context of exploitation of indigenous cultures in Hawai’i that led to the land being sold in the first place. The way the series explains racial struggle via Christianity articulates a specific idea of who is watching,

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and how, while also assuring viewers the series is interested in racial diversity. What is implicit is a political perspective that neither fully takes the side of the protesters nor that of the police.

This article deals with the way this kind of political “neutrality” is formulated in relation to racial, gender, or body and ability diversity as what I term “visibility politics.” I am particularly interested in how action TV reboots function as part of middlebrow US TV, specifically *Hawaii Five-0* II (CBS, 2010–20), *MacGyver* II (CBS, 2016–21), and *Magnum, P.I.* II and *The Equalizer* II (CBS, 2021–). The trouble with writing about reboots is, of course, that there are too many series, sometimes even films, of the same title. I will, thus, refer to the TV reboots with the Roman numeral II (so, *Magnum, P.I.* II, etc.) for reasons of clarity. Reboots invite the comparison to the original, however vague or distorted cultural memory might be, but also offer specific readings and interpretations of the original. All of the reboots discussed here feature both gender and race swaps of characters from the original series and add on characters to ensure greater gender, race, and disability visibility on screen. One clear omission in this is visibility of queer characters. Only *The Equalizer* II features a queer character: Vi (Loraint Toussant), who is aunt to main character Robyn (Queen Latifah), lives with her and helps care for Robyn’s teenage daughter. Her queerness was only revealed almost half-way through season 2, which only recently concluded. I focus here on the gender swap and the omission of queer characters in the majority of contemporary middlebrow TV reboots. I discuss the reboots together, here, as a “grouping” of middlebrow TV texts, linked by genre and the recycling of culture. As such, they produce a network of meanings that helps us understand how the middlebrow is formulated via engagement with older properties.

What is worth noting is that *Hawaii Five-0* II, *MacGyver* II, and *Magnum, P.I.* II are all series produced by Peter Lenkov and initially aired on CBS (with *Magnum, P.I.* II continued by NBC from season 5 onwards). Lenkov was fired by CBS in 2020 due to allegations of abusive behaviour on set. On first sight, Lenkov’s series are highly diverse, more so than much “quality” TV today, though this is problematised in Ryan’s in-depth investigation of Lenkov’s abuses for *Vanity Fair* (2020). In the piece, Ryan quotes the (now fired due to sexual abuse) CBS CEO Les Moonves as saying *Hawaii Five-0* II constitutes “a billion dollar franchise.” Based on Lenkov’s role, this franchise can be understood as a network of reboots rather than series with the same title tied together by the method of detection (as with the *CSI* series) or institutional setting (as with the *NCIS* series) (for both, see Jenner 124–44; 144–65). However, this also brings to the surface that these series are reboots of older network series: *Hawaii Five-0* (CBS, 1968–80), *Magnum, P.I.* (CBS, 1980–8), and *The Equalizer* (CBS, 1985–9) are all CBS series, with the original *MacGyver* (ABC, 1985–92) an ABC series. They, thus, point us towards a proud tradition of CBS and American network TV. Loock provides useful distinctions when it comes to the various ways culture is recycled:

While both reboots and spin-offs are derived from old media texts, they are essentially future-oriented and invested in creating a new media product. This is not exactly the case with reruns, reunions, and revivals, however, which are structured around the repetition or renewal of canceled shows and involve more complex temporal negotiations of past, present, and future. (303)

Thus, we can understand the reboot as essentially forward-facing, developing stories that are independent from the original series. All series recycle character names, or feminised versions thereof in gender swaps, as with *MacGyver* II’s Patricia Thornton (Sandrine Holt), who initially takes on the character function of Pete Thornton (Dana Elcar). Most series also include visual signifiers from the original series, as the house or dogs in *Magnum, P.I.* II, where the main character also drives an updated model of a red Ferrari. *Hawaii Five-0* II and *Magnum, P.I.* II also replicate character dynamics. *Hawaii Five-0* II also paid tribute to the original series by replicating episodes from the original. For example, “Ka owili oka’i” (09/01) repeats plot and imagery from the pilot episode from the original series. *Magnum, P.I.* II also repeats themes and imagery in the season 1 episode “Blood in the Water” (01/19), which, though in many respects different, emulates the seminal *Magnum, P.I.* episode “Home from the Sea” (04/01), in which Magnum (Tom Selleck) is lost at sea after his kayak overturns. Nostalgia as well as many winks and nods to the original series are common in the reboots. Reboots are commonly theorised via concepts of nostalgia, often in combination with other approaches (see, for example, Pallister 5–16). This is an important element of understanding the recycling of older media

properties, but hardly the only aspect to consider in thinking how they function as expressions of contemporary culture Klein and Palmer (60–460). What I want to focus on here is the politics of representation and a distinct formulation of middlebrow television.

This requires a number of clarifications. Hence, this article starts out by positioning the different series as middlebrow culture. This article theorises the reboots specifically via the middlebrow and the way values of diversity and non-racism/non-sexism or non-abelism are expressed (as opposed to anti-racism or active opposition to other forms of discrimination). In a second step, this article deliberately differentiates between visibility politics and representation. Both are linked issues, but visibility relies on difference or otherness as visual signifier, while representation also invokes political projects that identify structural barriers and aim to ease them. The visual signifier can be critiqued and used as a reference to the political project that underpins it, but only representation explicitly links the image to the positioning that shapes identity. This also includes dealing with the different barriers that shape marginalisation, which are often structural. Issues around visibility have frequently been theorised, for example, by Hall (83–94) around race or Weiss (4–8) in relation to queer culture. More recently, Banet-Weiser (236–975) analyses many of the problems with visibility politics in relation to feminism, and Warner (32–7) invokes a similar problem in her concept of plastic representation regarding the representation of race. Similar problems also emerge in many representations of disability (see Darke 100–4). Essentially, issues of diversity and representation are reduced to visibility. Thus, being made visible is presented as a “solution” to the problem of disadvantage, not the removal of barriers. This emphasis on visibility renders different political projects “the same” and ignores the way political projects are often at odds with each other. Because all marginalised groups demand visibility in some way, this is treated as an endgame, not a step in a broader political programme to achieve equality. Denying underlying political projects renders different marginalised and oppressed groups “the same” and solutions to issues of visibility, rather than cultural change.

The gender swap is a common strategy to signal social progress in reboots (see, for example, Perkins 157–70). On television, this usually means that one male character in an ensemble cast from the original series is rendered female. This is part of the visibility politics enacted specifically in reboots and the comparison they invite between original and contemporary text. In visibility also lies the potential to criticise and make obvious what is omitted. Queerness, however, is not rendered visible in spite of the various legal and social advances LGBTQIA+ groups have made over the past decades. In a last step, this article will consider the gender swap as strategy to omit queer visibility in *Magnum, P.I.* II. The original series features complex negotiations of masculinity with an exclusively male core cast. The relationship between John Higgins (John Hillerman) and Thomas Magnum is decidedly queer, as explored in more detail later on. Thus, the gender swap into Juliet Higgins (Perdita Weeks) and the will-they-or-won't they dynamics, and later romantic coupling, between her and the Thomas Magnum (Jay Hernandez) of the reboot works to “straighten” the relationship. Thus, the gender swap serves to increase White, female visibility, but also to disperse queer subtext, thus pitting two groups against each other.

Thus, the following article first outlines central tenets of middlebrow TV, then moves on to conceptualise visibility politics as part of middlebrow culture, and, in a last step, considers the gender swap in *Magnum, P.I.* as a strategy of visibility politics.

## TV Reboots and Middlebrow Culture

Middlebrow TV is an interesting category in television culture. It is defined largely in the negative as neither high-brow “quality” TV nor low-brow, usually synonymous with entire genres like soaps or reality TV. The middlebrow is, thus, an in-between space that is often thought of as “normal” TV. This space includes a number of series that fail to qualify as “quality” TV, though conceptualised as such, as well as low-brow TV that is considered higher “quality” than, for example, fellow reality TV programmes. But the idea of “the middle” also dominates other areas. For example, “quality” television often needs high budgets for screen and writing stars or location shoots. Meanwhile, “low-brow” TV is often characterised by low budgets, due to, for example,

repeated use of sets and almost conveyor belt-like production. Middlebrow TV is marked by middling budgets and is often scripted, fictional TV that not only relies on star power to a limited extent (*The Equalizer II*'s Queen Latifah is a notable exception) but also relatively stable sets.

The idea of a cultural middle equating to an economic middle is also relevant in other ways. Janet Radway positions the middlebrow according to conditions of production when she argues in relation to the book-of-the-month club in the US:

The category of the lowbrow was [in 1926, when the club was founded] understood to include all cultural objects that were generated through corporately organized mode of production, including moving pictures, radio programs, and pulp novels. The space of the middlebrow was occupied by products that supposedly hid the same machine-tooled uniformity behind the self-consciously worked mask of culture. (221)

Of course, mass production is the norm for television and one of the reasons the medium is often denigrated. Cultural politics shift, meaning that, for example, many TV series like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1998–2005) are now considered high culture. This example shows also that factors like age or changing parameters of “quality” and “art” influence cultural hierarchies. For television, the idea of “quality” television and increasing address towards niche audiences from the 1970s onwards work to solidify cultural hierarchies that accompanied the medium from its early days. Especially, the way HBO established itself as the home of American “quality” TV in the early 2000s and the adoption of similar strategies by other cable channels led to a broader legitimization of television, as outlined by Elana Levine and Michael Newman (1–13). HBO also highlighted an emphasis on artistic processes in production and built marketing around this (Akass and McCabe, 62–75). Of course, access to HBO is restricted by its position as subscription cable channel in the US, and streaming is governed by similar cultural politics. Lowbrow television highlights mass production, which becomes visible in low production value, but also visual stability through the reuse of sets. Middlebrow television, then, is often targeted at a mass audience (as much as this is possible in a fragmented media landscape), but at the same time its mass production is at least partially hidden through production values or settings. The natural beauty of the O’ahu setting of *Hawaii Five-0 II* and *Magnum, P.I. II*, for example, can serve to hide, at least partially, the conditions of mass production. This was also true for the original series.

The middlebrow, in the US context, is also often understood as a geographic middle. In her article on Lenkov’s abuse, Ryan clarifies something about class distinctions at work here, which draw on geographical location and food cultures to clarify hierarchies:

The shows that Lenkov made are rarely the subject of cocktail-party chatter or critical adoration. Yet they’re the kind of meat-and-potatoes procedurals that have made CBS an enormous amount of money over the past decade or two. ... The reboots of *Magnum P.I.* and *MacGyver* are less well known, but they’re the kind of TV comfort-food shows that do well among my neighbors here in what some coastal folks call “flyover country.” (2020)

The string of synonyms Ryan uses here are instructive: comfort food, meaning not requiring much attention or analytical depth; meat and potatoes as opposed to cocktail parties; and, importantly, “flyover country,” as one travels from coast to coast. Johnson theorises this part of the US via the Heartland as mythological ideological and geographical “middle” US television uses as a guiding concept:

Unlike other regions of the country that have been singled out analytically for their perceived exceptionalism, the Heartland is typically represented as *unexceptional* locus of consensus. (*Heartland TV*, 29, italics in the original)

This space is constructed as a “middle,” a place of “neutrality,” and an ideological construct. The space of the “middle” encompasses a specific value system made up of cultural reference points where consensus is assumed.

An important aspect of this space is an American version of protestant Christianity, as the introductory example shows. Howell deals with this idea further in her book on how Christianity shaped US programming between 1996 and 2016. Howell positions Christianity as “default” of American television: “Christian tropes are known, recognizable, and generalized beyond denominational schisms” (8). Howell discusses and analyses overt representations of Christianity, and Johnson clarifies:

The power of the middle (ideologically/politically and geographically), in fact, is its foundational American iconicity: “true” Americans do not ally with “extremes”; “real” Americans are presumed to gravitate toward a healthily neutral wherein the family and self are the basic self-reliant units by whom decisions are made on a case-by-case, not party-line basis. The political strength of popular artifacts of the “middle” ... is, therefore, their very apoliticalness. (45)

In other words, even though there is an assumed “default” Christianity, this avoids extremes. This goes to other value systems. Even in a heavily politically divided USA, the cultural “middle” is assumed to be politically “neutral,” meaning maintaining the *status quo* rather than interrogating it. This essentially means maintaining a system of neoliberal capitalism and self-reliance and, importantly, government institutions. Racism or sexism are less understood in this ideological middle as structural, but often embodied in almost comically overdrawn characters who use slurs, making the more tempered middlebrow position appear “reasonable.” Of course, “reasonable” is an ideological construct that shifts depending on how extremes and the “middle” are understood.

Contemporary middlebrow television further formulates a positive attitude, if not fetishization, of the US military. Like Christianity, this is particular for the American version, though this fetishization is specific to post-9/11 TV. Many legal dramas, like the 1990s series *JAG* (CBS, 1995–2005), itself inspired by the success of *A Few Good Men* (Reiner 1992), take a more critical stance on the military and its hierarchies. *NCIS* (CBS, 2003–) started as a spin-off from *JAG* and spawned its own franchise. The *NCIS* franchise, starting in 2003, the same year as the US invasion of Iraq took place, displays a relatively uncritical perspective of the military and command structures. In the earlier seasons of the long running *NCIS: Los Angeles* (CBS, 2009–), policies around torture are more or less embraced under the guise of patriotism. What is visible is that the Bush era rhetoric around foreign conflict is adopted, and with it, similar attitudes surrounding patriotism which is very much organised around US military.<sup>1</sup> For the reboots, especially those set in O’ahu close to the historic Pearl Harbor base, similar attitudes apply.<sup>2</sup> The original *Magnum, P.I.* did already adopt a nostalgic view of the military and Vietnam War, in line with Reaganist ideology. The original *Hawaii Five-0*, however, started in 1968, which would be counted as the year with the most US casualties in the Vietnam War. The series takes a critical view on war and the military, frequently highlighting sadism of those higher up in military hierarchies, for example, in episodes “King of the Hill” (01/13) or “Hostage” (07/22) (see also Faucette 47–60). This highlights the changeability of how the middlebrow is formulated. In the contemporary CBS series, a general admiration for military is visible, including *The Equalizer II*, which in many ways is more critical of institutions.

Television plays an important role in formulating an understanding of the middlebrow and emphasising what concepts are important in a specific hegemonic moment. As much as myths about an ideological “middle” persists, the idea of what this is shifts and changes. Thus, middlebrow television does not only need to respond to a cultural landscape but ultimately also formulates an ideology of what it means not to be “extreme,” what is “normal,” and what constitutes a political and ideological *status quo*. Importantly, the various reboots I discuss are reboots of series that constituted middlebrow culture from 1968, when the original *Hawaii Five-0* started until 1992, when *MacGyver* ended. Thus, a comparison of original and reboots is instructive in the ways culture does shift and, importantly, how this is formulated in middlebrow TV.

## Visibility Politics and Queerness

Middlebrow culture, among other things, formulates attitudes towards racial, gender (including LGBTQIA+), or ability and body diversity. Arguably, network television features more gender, racial, and ability diversity than some “quality” television. At times, in the ensemble cast of *Hawaii Five-0 II* of around seven recurring characters, only the two leads (one of whom did not occur in every episode) were White and male. *MacGyver II*

<sup>1</sup> A broader history of the way action and crime drama and the representation of institutions interlinks with political discourses cannot be given here, but is explored in Jenner 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Pearl Harbor is the US military base attacked by Japanese troops in 1941, prompting the US entry into WWII.



and *Magnum, P.I.* II both feature recurring disabled characters played by disabled actors, who, especially in the former case, are depicted extremely powerful and capable. Every episode of *Hawaii Five-0* II is named in Hawaiian and the series makes an effort to engage with indigenous Hawaiian culture. And yet, the introductory example shows how this diversity is formulated in a specific way. Minority groups are commonly rendered invisible by virtue of not being included in stories and on screen. Traditionally, this is the case especially for Black characters, women and queer characters, where themes are often assigned to subtext. When characters are included, they are usually depicted in stereotypes and/or less powerful and subordinated to White men. Thus, visibility has long been a goal of various social movements to formulate its platform in narratives on screen, with the motto “you can’t be what you can’t see.” However, as it turns out, visibility is possible without formulating a social cause, project, and platform.

Problems of visibility have been explored in much detail going back to the 1970s and 1980s, for example, by Hall (83–94) about representation of Black people on the BBC or Weiss, who identifies what she calls “happens to be gay syndrome.” Weiss discusses an increasing visibility of gay characters on TV, but their queerness seems incidental and is not something that shapes a character:

It’s not so much that gays never appear as characters in films as it is a question of how they appear, how they function within the film and how they are predominantly positioned in heterosexual terms. (4)

Weiss actively compares this to colour blindness and the way this does not serve to combat racism, as it ignores racial identity. In other words, in visibility politics, the experience of barriers does not fundamentally influence identity. As Weiss puts it: “‘happen to be gay’ says whatever you do in bed is your business as long as we can deny that there’s a gay culture, identity or history beyond the bedroom” (5–6). In disability studies, scholars like Darke (100) differentiate between disability and impairment to highlight the difference between what I call representation (disability) and visibility (impairment). More recently, visibility has been analysed in regard to racial representation by Warner (1–31 and 32–7) and in feminist theory by Banet-Weiser (236–974). Warner identifies an increasing amount of Black characters on US TV, but heavily criticises practices of colour blind casting (2015) and, linked, what she terms “plastic representation” (32–7). Banet-Weiser explores what she terms “popular feminism” and its use of the term empowerment in various media forms. In both cases, visibility politics comes without the discussions representation brings: of an underlying political project with specific aims and methods to reach them; however much different branches of the movement may differ and disagree. I want to highlight that the underlying political projects of racial, gender and LGBTQIA+, or ability and body diversity intersect, but are not the same. However, they are rendered “the same” by visibility politics, which ultimately puts an image of diversity on screen, but no “substance” is generated. In other words, visibility becomes a signifier for diversity without the signified, meaning the underlying political project.

As Warner (32–7) argues (though more specifically in regard to Black actors), more jobs for actors who are othered in some way are laudable. However, the series do not serve to advance an understanding of otherness and marginalisation. As Warner clarifies in her article on plastic representation:

An operational definition of plastic representation can be understood as a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny. Utilizing this concept, I locate two types of minority visibility that exist both in front of and behind the camera: a plastic representation that approximates a superficial “visual” diversity and another that supplies a culturally specific contextual version.<sup>3</sup> (*In the Time of Plastic*, 35)

Banet-Weiser gets to a similar point in her exploration of the visibility of female empowerment in what she calls “popular feminism” and its insistence on empowerment without clarifying the political goals this empowerment serves (236–974). This especially emerges in popular television, where female characters are often

<sup>3</sup> Maryann Erigha (1–21) describes how directors of colour often turn towards big budget films with largely White characters, following the false assumption that these films do better at the box office, while films with largely Black actors are treated as “flukes.” This process describes plastic representation behind the cameras.

depicted as physically strong and capable, though it is not clear how this allows them to navigate or change patriarchy. Similarly, especially *MacGyver* II invests the character of Mattie (Meredith Eaton), who is a little person, with enormous authority and power, though we never see how this serves to navigate a world built for able-bodied people.<sup>4</sup> Accommodations or adjustments are never made for her, such as height adjustable furniture, despite her power in the workplace. Thus, making characters visible does not equate engaging with the barriers they face. As much as middlebrow TV rivals other TV in making diversity visible, visibility politics renders this diversity politically mute. This understanding links in with middlebrow television's concept of political "neutrality" and affirmation of the *status quo*. If all barriers have been removed and "reasonable" adjustments made, then visibility is the only "problem" to solve. This is how different political projects are rendered "the same" by the surface-level visibility politics formulated by middlebrow TV. Thus, visibility politics becomes a way middlebrow TV can embrace the *status quo* while defending against culturally denigrated forms of discrimination (overt racism, sexism, or ableism).

What tends to be absent, other than in queer readings of texts like *Hawaii Five-0* II, is queer culture. As Alexander Doty notes:

'Uncloseted' or brought forward by equal attention to producers and readers, ... however, the queerness in and of mass culture might be used to challenge the politics of denotation and connotation as it is traditionally deployed in discussing texts and representation. In this way the closet of connotation could be dismantled, rejected for the oppressive practice that it is. (xii)

Visibility means that depictions beyond what Doty describes as connotation can be criticised and critiqued, but in its absence, or only suggestion through subtext, only gives cultural critics a way to see it or not. Doty understands this process as "the closet of connotation": the queer reading comes with a sense of "plausible deniability" that ultimately reinforces heteronormativity. This also becomes visible in the practice of "queer-baiting," which knowingly creates this subtext, even uses it in promotional material, to attract an audience that seeks queer representation (see Brennan 1–23). For example, *Hawaii Five-0* II has generated a vast amount of fan engagement with the so-called McDanno relationship between its two White, male main characters. Archive of Our Own, a popular fan fiction website, features 11,830 fics with the "Steve McGarrett/Danny 'Danno' Williams" relationship tags at the time of writing. The straight relationship tag "Steve McGarrett/Catherine Rollins," a relationship featured in the text, is a far-flung second with 441 fics. Of course, fan fiction writers (and readers) are not necessarily representative of the whole audience, but the text itself uses this reading. Especially in later seasons, Danny Williams (Scott Caan) is not present in all episodes and when he is, episodes emphasise bantering between both male leads, or moments of intimacy. For example, in "Kuleana" (06/11), Steve (Alex O'Loughlin) and Danny attend a resort for state-mandated counselling for work partnership and book into a couples counselling retreat on Maui instead. They take part in therapy sessions, in which they are forced to hold hands and confess their feelings for each other, do exercises to help their relationship, and open up emotionally. The episode plays with the subtext of the relationship, while the text constructs it solidly as straight. Steve even goes on a date with a woman he meets on the plane, while Danny emphasises that he has a girlfriend. The episode still ends with both men holding hands as Danny invites Steve to feel how soft his hands are, due to the hotel soap. Ultimately, the text never fulfils the promise of LGBTQIA+ representation. The episode features a lesbian couple (who do not have speaking roles) as part of the counselling in one of the extremely rare occasions queer characters appear in the series at all. The absence of queer representation and relegation to subtext points to the way queerness remains an embattled site, even for the superficial visibility politics. The middlebrow TV discourse of the reboots constructs the mere presence of LGBTQIA+ characters as political, while the mere presence of a woman or character of colour means only denouncing the most culturally denigrated versions of sexism and racism. Sexist and racist characters can appear overdrawn, usually use some of the worst slurs and easily resort to violence (for example, in "Ponui I Ke Aloha" 07/16 or "Ikiiki i ka la o Keawalu" 09/14), as if only the most extreme versions of hatred and discrimination are objectionable.

<sup>4</sup> Eaton herself identifies a "short-stature actress," according to her bio on [imdb.com](http://imdb.com).

In the current media environment, a broader range of queer representation can be seen, in large parts due to Ryan Murphy's production work. This also includes middlebrow television through Fox's *9-1-1* franchise, where queer identities are not completely reduced to visibility. Different ways to analyse visibility and representation are introduced by scholars from Sedgwick (1–66) to Becker (1–79) to Halberstam (1–43) to Kohnen (1–11). Yet, the middlebrow TV discussed here often works to deny queerness altogether, even just visibility. Thus, when different social groups are granted visibility, even without representation, and rendered “the same,” the exclusion of queerness becomes obvious. As much as Doty is right to argue that queer subtext essentially reaffirms a *status quo* where queerness is denied, its deliberate inclusion offers more possibilities for subversion of heteronormativity. *Magnum, P.I.* II complicates this. In the next section, I will analyse the gender swap in *Magnum, P.I.*, which reconfigures Higgins as female. Given the notable queer subtext of the original series, it would be relatively easy to reconceptualise male friendship as queer. However, instead, the series swaps the gender of a principal character. This measure pits the project of feminism, at least in the form of female visibility, against the project of queer visibility, while not analysing the broader picture of gender politics that can align both.

## The Gender Swap, Visibility Politics, and the Omission of Queerness

The gender swap in reboots functions mostly as a strategy of visibility politics, furthering the presence of women. In the series discussed here, they are regularly occurring action TV characters, meaning they have many fight scenes and are usually integrated into a predominantly male friendship group. In her analysis of the all-female *Ghostbusters* (Feig 2016), Perkins argues,

Most significantly, it [the gender swap] is a deeply ambivalent development; important in making feminism as cause and necessity visible but, by way of its operation at the level of visibility, it avoids considering the issue of patriarchy as a social structure, eliding a meaningful engagement with key terms of historical feminist discussion: equal rights, liberation, social justice and intersectionality. (158–9)

Other than in film, television reboots usually only change the gender of one character in an ensemble, not all. As Perkins argues, including a White woman in a text is not the same as adopting her narrative perspective or formulating a feminist project. In gender swaps in television reboots, changing the gender or racial identity of a character does not mean adopting their narrative perspective or, in fact, making a social platform of feminisms and its intersections visible. Perkins argues:

The promise of revisionism along the lines of gender is kept deliberately vague, operating purely through the image of women in iconic male roles, with all official communication around the film actually focused wholly on its allegiance to the original franchise. At the level of the film's (high) concept, the act is not revisionist but substitutive, aiming to imply, but ultimately reject, the ‘true’ reboot's effect of rendering an original property ‘inert’. (161)

As Perkins notes, much of the discussion around reboots focuses on the comparison between original and reboot (see also Proctor 1–19), even though, as Looock (299–309) argues, reboots are forward-facing.

This article is specifically interested in the gender swap in *Magnum, P.I.* II, which reconfigures John Higgins as Juliet. For reboots, this is not a new strategy: *Hawaii Five-0* II reimagined Hawaiian native character Kono (Zulu/Grace Parks) as female and *MacGyver* II imagined Pete as Patricia Thornton. The later *The Equalizer* II reimagines the White, male, British Robert McCall (Edward Woodward) as Black, female, American Robyn McCall. However, in *Magnum, P.I.* II, this change shifts political implications fundamentally. For this purpose, it is first important to look towards the dynamics of the original series. I insist here on a reading of the original *Magnum, P.I.* as queer, in the sense that it negotiates various concepts of masculinity outside of heteronormative coupling, which includes romantic potentials. However, as Doty (xi–xix) argues, queer readings that suggest sexual or romantic relations between characters are vague and give “plausible deniability” to actors and producers. As such, the queer subtext is deliberately vague and likely will not be seen by every viewer.

In TV narratives, especially episodic drama like both original and reboot of *Magnum, P.I.*, formulaic narratives about a narrowly defined “good guy” and “bad guy” are enacted every week. Unlike in film, this



draws into focus the character dynamics, as they are repeated. Of course, this leaves relatively little room for change as the same characters take on the same function every week. This allows viewers to return, even if they missed episodes or cannot recall what happened before. Some of this has changed with developments towards narrative complexity over the last two decades and streaming's nudging towards sequential viewing (see Jenner, 1–19). Where character changes happen in the original *Magnum, P.I.*, these are relatively minor: characters do not move, or even get married or start serious relationships, as this could disrupt existing dynamics. The original *Magnum, P.I.* centres on the title character's entrepreneurial spirit after leaving the Navy, which goes so far as to subvert the function of the institution of the police. The original text subverts neoliberal ideology as well, as Magnum is housed on the property of the former client Robin Masters, whose house, car, camera equipment, and wine he uses and consumes at will. Thus, while *Magnum, P.I.* employs signifiers of wealth to construct its main character, he does not own any of these signifiers. It falls to Higgins to protect these status symbols. Haralovich (123–34) uses this as a starting point to explore class and nation as elements of the construction of masculinity.

Haralovich and Sandy Flitterman (42–58), both without the vocabulary of queer studies at their disposal, explore the role of the “feminine” in the text. Haralovich notes, “links between class and gender allow for ‘womanly’ attributes to be present while making women characters unnecessary” (1991, 127). Both theorists look at the way “female” discourses become important in this series, particularly as roughly half of its audience was female even though the series itself is preoccupied with masculinity (Flitterman 42–58, Haralovich 123–34). Of course, part of this appeal may be linked to the objectification of Selleck as Magnum (Flitterman 42–58, Jenner 59–78). Haralovich, however, states: “But there is another discursive construct of ‘woman’ located in another place in *Magnum, p.i.*: in Higgins” (128). Haralovich argues that Higgins is framed as “feminine” in opposition to the muscly Magnum, who personifies American values. This opposition also functions to make the highly empathetic Magnum, who discusses his trauma from the Vietnam War in voiceover, seem more “manly,” as Higgins is visually associated with women and children. Throughout the run of the series throughout the Reagan years from 1980 to 1988, masculinity became more and more narrowly defined (see Jeffords 18–316). Yet, if Higgins really were a woman, his banter with Magnum would be sexually charged, as becomes particularly obvious in the reboot where Higgins is a woman.

The original series centres around four men, Rick (Larry Manetti), T.C. (Roger Moseley), Higgins, and Magnum. Magnum, Rick, and T.C. met as soldiers in the Vietnam War and share this bond of shared trauma, which Magnum refers to frequently in his voiceover as significantly impacting and changing his life. Higgins is older than the others and British and is supposed to have fought in WW II and various colonial campaigns. In a series narrative like *Magnum, P.I.*, a stable equilibrium needs to exist. Some plot points may re-occur, but the heroes cannot lose or quit their jobs every week, battle the exceptionalism of national holidays, or cause massive disruptions to O'ahu by attacking foreign embassies or hunting criminals in expensive car chases. The budget also hardly allows for expensive stunts and special effects each week. At the same time, the series structure also requires a weekly rehearsal of frictions, such as Magnum's and Higgins' haggling over Robin Masters' possessions or the initial reluctance of T.C. and Rick to meet any of Magnum's requests for help in his cases (though these protests seem increasingly feeble as the series goes on). Every episode also results in a showdown where Magnum, often along with his friends, confronts the villain. This is in line with what Fuchs (194–210) calls the buddy politic. In cinema, the “buddy politic” is encompassed by a male friendship that mirrors the norms of representation of heterosexual relationships. The kinds of frictions and the structure of banter is common to romantic comedies where “opposites attract.” The central relationship is the homosocial bonding of two male characters, more than a team. Their heterosexuality may be emphasised through relationships, but the central spectacle of *Lethal Weapon* (Donner 1987), for example, remains the bonding, and in later films the repetition of bonding experiences, of Riggs (Mel Gibson) and Murtaugh (Danny Glover). This may be enabled by the latter's family but exists independent from them. In buddy movies, the closing showdown usually represents a “conspicuous discharge [which] situates the male couple between representational poles of homoeroticism and homophobia, in love with their self-displays and at odds with their implications” (Fuchs 1993, 195). On *Magnum, P.I.*, the central group of four often makes the paralleling of the relationships between the men with heteronormative coupling impossible. The text avoids even the suggestion of domestic bliss by having Magnum and Higgins live on the same estate, but in different houses. They may barge

in on each other at any time, but there appears to be a conscious choice to not have them live in the same house. Even in episodes where other guests are roomed in Robin Masters' guest house, there appears to be no suggestion that Magnum takes up one of the guest rooms in the main house ("Kiss of the Sabre" 05/11). The emphasis on the friendship between four, rather than two, characters means that allegiances can also shift in different episodes, suggesting that the characters never mirror the heteronormativity often implied in buddy movies exactly. And yet, banter usually takes place between Higgins and Magnum and is one of the structural features that is repeated frequently. In a series focused on male friendship, the objectification of Selleck also works to create a sexual subtext. As there are no female characters to banter with to release this sexual energy (as, for example, in *Remington Steele* [NBC, 1982–7]), this is largely dealt with in homosocial bonding. Thus, when Haralovich locates Higgins as a source of "woman," this also works to establish Magnum and Higgins as mirroring a heterosexual couple. Further, this links back to Fuchs' buddy politic and the way sexual energy is discharged in showdowns to release sexual energy as some sort of spectacle. The spectacle may differ for film and TV, where it often consists of displays of commodities (including objectified bodies), fight scenes on a smaller scale than cinema, and banter.

This queer reading of the original series poses problems for the reboot, especially as the larger franchise avoids explicit depictions of queerness. On the one hand, as Doty (xi–xix) argues, subtext is a vague form of argument, as it relies on the reader to recognise something that can easily be denied by producers. On the other hand, the focus on an all-male cast is, in very real ways, anachronistic. Thus, the reformulation of John as Juliet is not obviously homophobic or heteronormative and responds to what Banet-Weiser terms popular feminisms' calls for visibility and empowerment. Where John was a White man older than Magnum, Juliet is a White woman younger than him. Juliet, like John, worked for MI6 and often shows her strength in fight scenes. While actress Perdita Weeks is a petite woman, her arm muscles and abdominals are well defined and a visual marker of her physical strength. The character makes a White woman visible for the camera, but there is no real purpose to this visibility. Her physical strength and power as business owner are not exercised for feminist purposes. Banet-Weiser argues:

The visibility of popular feminism, where examples appear on television, in film, on social media, and on bodies, is important, but it often stops there, as if *seeing* or purchasing feminism is the same thing as changing patriarchal structures. (Kindle location 288, italics in the original)

Thus, even though she has power and displays physical strength, the narrative perspective lies with the male title character (whose narrative perspective is also not shaped by actor Jay Hernandez' Mexican American perspective).

Unlike John, Juliet "only" has a background working for MI6, not in the military. In fact, in the pilot episode, the central friend group is introduced as a group of four vets Magnum fought in Afghanistan with: Rick, T.C., and Sebastian Nuzzo (Domenick Lombardozzi), who is killed later in the episode. As such, she is placed outside of the central group. She shows her knowledge about computers and hacking, which, in the first season, acts in contrast to Magnum's more active approach. However, as former MI6 agent, she also enacts physical fights. In "The Ties That Bind" (01/09), she is drawn into Magnum's PI work to help a young woman remember trauma through yoga, which also places Juliet in a caring position, enacting a sport often framed as female. Yet, the series also characterises her as strict and Magnum accuses her of a lack of loyalty (e.g. in "Blood Brothers" [02/10]). As much as this traditionally female positioning is countered by Magnum and his friends' traditionally masculine positioning, Magnum's often emotional voiceover always muddled the water of gender binaries. Flitterman (42–59) points to this when arguing that he shows "emotional depth". Juliet's "feminine" positioning is mitigated from season 2 onwards by investing her with more power: she becomes a partner in Magnum's PI business in season 2 and owner of the estate in season 3. With season 4, her position as romantic love interest becomes more pronounced and both become a couple in season 5. Juliet often fulfils the same character function as John, who was also often shown with women and children in the domestic sphere. However, where John's positioning subverts gender binaries, Juliet asserts them. Her displays of physical strength work as visibility politics: without political purpose. She is reduced to the image of a strong woman without taking on any causes linked to this. However, Juliet's visibility comes at the expense of "un-queering"

or “straightening” of the text. As queer subtext can be denied, this is not necessarily a homophobic move, as plausible deniability is built into the idea of subtext. The subtext, however, is sacrificed for the visibility of White women. Yet, as visibility politics does not move beyond this, there is also no obvious feminist message attached to her visibility.

Thus, the text places discourses around female visibility and possible gains for feminism at odds with discourses around queer visibility and politics. On the one hand, this reveals a narrow understanding of gender, based around heteronormativity. This also shows a denial of queerness common to middlebrow TV’s formulation of gender and the middlebrow. It shows that, rather than relying on visibility politics to create an image of diversity inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people, the series opts to remain silent. This allows for some conclusions about middlebrow TV: political “neutrality,” as expressed through visibility politics does not include queer characters. This means that even the presence of queer relationships in main characters remains a politically charged topic in a way the presence of Black people or women is not.

## Conclusion

Visibility politics, in many ways, is about the denial of barriers for those of us who are not White, male, cis, straight, able-bodied, and middle class. Middlebrow culture does not interrogate the *status quo* and, thus, is invested in denying the existence of these barriers. Middlebrow television with its investment in maintaining the *status quo*, perhaps quite naturally, is drawn towards visibility politics as a means to make it look inclusive without having to make substantial changes to programming. Hence, much of middlebrow TV, at first glance, appears incredibly diverse, often more so than TV located higher in a cultural hierarchy. Ryan’s story on Peter Lenkov’s abuse also highlights how an abusive showrunner can hide behind the displays of diversity visibility politics offers and, thus, shows its sinister dimensions. Thus, visibility politics helps to maintain the *status quo*, but also helps to cover up bad behaviour, as it allows claims to diversity without showing any support for the political projects or the principles visibility serves (or is supposed to serve).

The gender swap in the reboot of *Magnum, P.I.* II serves the specific purpose to not only increase female visibility, but also to dissolve the queer subtext of the original series. Juliet’s presence, on the one hand, serves to pit feminist and queer goals of visibility politics against each other, but also has no real purpose. As visibility politics, there is no broader investment in the goals of feminism, as diverse and contradictory as they can be. Hence, with the reformulation of John as Juliet, the narrative perspective is not changed, and neither is the character function. The only visible change is that potential queerness is dissolved into heteronormativity. As such, the swap only serves to prop up the heteronormative *status quo*, rather than explore the queer possibilities of middlebrow TV. It would be unfair to middlebrow TV in general, or the massive strides LGBTQIA+ politics has made since the 1980s, to argue that this highlights a conservatism in contemporary middlebrow TV that was not present in the original series. It does not, but it still serves as an example where middlebrow culture, maintenance of the *status quo*, and visibility politics intersect.

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