

8. What Is Wrong with This Picture? Lesbian Women and Gay Men on Television

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The Medium and the Message

The mass media provide the chief common ground among the different groups that make up a heterogeneous national and international community. Never before have all classes and groups (as well as ages) shared so much of the same culture and the same perspectives while having so little to do with their creation. In a society that spans a continent, in a cosmopolitan culture which spans much of the globe, the mass media provide the broadest common background of assumptions about what things are, how they work (or should work), and why. Television in particular has achieved a scope unequaled by any other medium in modern society.

Representation in the mediated “reality” of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. Those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their place in part through their relative invisibility; this is a form of symbolic annihilation. When groups or perspectives do attain visibility, the manner of that representation will itself reflect the biases and interests of those elites who define the public agenda. And these elites are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle- and upper-middle class, and (at least in public) entirely heterosexual.

Mainstream film and television are nearly always presented as transparent mediators of reality that can and do show us how people and places look, how institutions operate; in short, the way it is. These depictions of the way things are, and why, are personified through dramatic plots and characterizations that take us behind the scenes to the otherwise inaccessible back stages of individual motivation, organizational performance, and subcultural life.

Normal adult viewers, to be sure, are aware of the fictiveness of media drama: no one calls the police when a character on TV is shot. But we may still wonder how often and to what extent viewers suspend their disbelief in the persuasive realism of the fictional worlds of television and film drama. Even the most sophisticated among us can find many components of our "knowledge" of the real world that derive wholly or in part from fictional representations.

Finally, the contributions of the mass media are likely to be especially powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little firsthand opportunity for learning, particularly when such images are not contradicted by other established beliefs and ideologies. By definition, portrayals of minority groups and "deviants" will be relatively distant from the real lives of a large majority of viewers (cf. Gross 1988). Thus, in the case of lesbian women and gay men we might reasonably expect that the media play a major role in shaping the images held by society, including in many cases by gay people ourselves. As an important case in point, the media played a major role in magnifying the tragedy of AIDS.

AIDS and the Sexual Counter-Revolution

In the late 1970s America was confronted with the specter of the epidemic spread of a seemingly incurable disease contracted through sexual contact: genital herpes. The media were quick to point out that the causes of the epidemic were to be found in the so-called sexual revolution: "Health officials say that genital herpes became a growing problem only during the mid-1970s, after sexual codes had loosened in American society" (*New York Times Magazine*, February 21, 1982, 94). Despite all the attention it received, the panic was short-lived and the fear of herpes did not ring down the curtain on the sexual revolution. Perhaps the extent of the "epidemic"

was exaggerated, or perhaps herpes, while incurable at present, wasn't a sufficient deterrent to play the role it was assigned as the chief weapon of the emerging sexual counter-revolution of the 1980s. But the stage was set for the arrival of a much more potent and deadly threat: AIDS.

AIDS provided mainstream society and the media with a double-edged opportunity and challenge: here was the truly frightening specter of a deadly disease that could be associated with sexual permissiveness, but it was showing up among a group that the media have consistently defined as being outside the mainstream.

The first accounts of AIDS in the media emphasized its apparent link to gay men's sexuality (there were also at that time two other outsider "risk groups," IV-drug users and Haitians, and the first "innocent victims," hemophiliacs). The first story on AIDS aired by NBC News began with Tom Brokaw framing the issue in a fashion that remained constant in much subsequent coverage: "Scientists at the National Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta today released the results of a study that shows that the lifestyle of some male homosexuals has triggered an epidemic of a rare form of cancer" (June 17, 1982).

By 1983 nearly all mass media attention to gay men was in the context of AIDS-related stories, and because this coverage seems to have exhausted the news media's limited interest in gay people, lesbians became even less visible than before (if possible). Already treated as an important medical topic, AIDS moved up to the status of "front page" news after Rock Hudson emerged as the most famous person with AIDS.¹ At present AIDS stories appear daily in print and broadcast news—often with little or no new or important content—and the public image of gay men has been inescapably linked with the specter of plague (in the context of television drama, Netzhammer and Shamp adroitly illustrate the subtle and not-so-subtle ways homosexuality and AIDS are linked rhetorically, this volume, chapter 5).

Media coverage of AIDS is very likely to reinforce hostility to gays among those so predisposed—there is abundant evidence of growing anti-gay violence in many parts of the country (Gross, Aurand, and Addessa 1988; Comstock 1991)—and to further the sense of distance from a strange and deviant "subculture."

Ironically, these very homophobic attitudes may prevent audiences from understanding and absorbing media information about the nature of AIDS and the ways in which it is transmitted. Studies are beginning to suggest

“that anti-gay attitudes foster exaggerated beliefs about AIDS transmission and prevent accurate information in the media from being accepted by substantial proportions of the population” (Stipp and Kerr 1989). As Netzhammer and Shamp argue, “Framing AIDS as a ‘gay disease’ reduces its salience for others who are at risk, and such framing could inhibit preventive behaviors.”

A further irony is provided by the finding of Reardon and Richardson that gay men at risk for AIDS often reject media warnings concerning high-risk behaviors because they see such reports as exaggerated and intentionally biased against gays (1991).

A heritage of homophobia can thus be seen as a threat to the reception of accurate information about AIDS by both gay and straight audiences; the former because they have come to distrust the motives and thus the honesty of the media, the latter because their prejudices permit them to maintain a dangerous sense of distance and a false sense of security. Netzhammer and Shamp correctly note that “providing the medical facts about AIDS is only a first step in truly educating the public about AIDS.” The responsibilities of the media as they face the threats presented by AIDS must, therefore, begin with an attack on the homophobic attitudes and pervasive heterosexism that may well be the most serious impediments to the educational efforts now recognized as the most critical line of defense.

It would be misleading to focus primarily on news and documentary programming if we wish to understand television’s role in helping or hindering the fight against AIDS. For most Americans television drama is a far more potent teacher, and thus we must ask how television drama has dealt with AIDS and gay men: which stories have been chosen and which stories have been ignored?

Victims and Villains

As with many other minorities gay people have almost always seen themselves reflected in the media in one of two roles: as victim (of ridicule or violence, or both) or as villain (Gross 1989). AIDS stories have featured both of these stereotypes. Victims, as in the family-centered dramas *An Early Frost* (NBC, 1985) and *Our Sons* (ABC, 1991), are objects of pity, and when treated well by the authors they end by being tearfully reconciled with their families.

Programs that are less family-centered, such as the ones discussed by Netzhammer and Shamp, are more likely to show us the AIDS carrier as villain, threatening the health of innocent victims. An egregious example of the villain scenario occurred on the episode of the NBC series *Midnight Caller* in December 1988, which Netzhammer and Shamp analyze. The story focussed on Mike Barnes, a bisexual man who knows he is infected with HIV but continues to be sexually promiscuous. The hero of the series, a San Francisco radio talk-show host, learns that his former lover (a woman) has tested HIV+ after an affair with the man, and he uses his radio show to track the man down. In the original version the woman kills the bisexual man at the end, but after protests from AIDS groups who saw the script, he is saved by the hero, and some conciliatory additions were made to the script. These include a brief scene in a gay bar that "carefully lets the bartender emphasize that 'Mike Barnes is an exception, an aberrant' in sexually active circles" (O'Connor 1988).²

The other concession was more interesting. As John O'Connor of the *New York Times* put it, "One of the most sympathetic characters turns out to be Ross Parker, Barnes' abandoned lover, who is dying of AIDS. 'It's nice just to talk to somebody. I don't get a lot of company these days,' " he says to the hero, who visits him while hunting for Barnes. O'Connor ends his review with the thought that "perhaps a future episode can focus primarily on a character like Ross, a decent person with AIDS who finds himself abandoned by friends, family and society" (O'Connor 1988). Here O'Connor unwittingly touches upon a truly important point: the AIDS stories that television has assiduously avoided. But these are not the stories of pathetic abandonment that O'Connor urged on programmers.

The Greatest Stories Never Told

There are some truly dramatic and important AIDS stories that we never see enacted or even reflected glancingly in TV drama, but they aren't stories of villainous AIDS carriers or abandoned victims who may finally be accepted back into the arms of their families. These are stories of how the gay community responded to an unparalleled health crisis with an unprecedented grassroots movement of social service and medical organizing; of sex and public health education; of research-backed militant agitation for reforms in the testing and approval of drugs; of coalition building with

other marginalized groups suffering from disproportionate AIDS risk; and pushing the issue of health care and health insurance onto the national agenda.

The consistent feature of all TV dramatic programming on AIDS (and most news, public affairs, and documentary programming as well) has been to focus on individual people suffering from AIDS and, if the angle of vision is widened at all, it will then include (straight) family members and possibly a lover (as long as they barely touch) and perhaps one or two friends (more likely to be straight than gay). What is wrong with this picture?

What's wrong is that it not only leaves out all of the important—and dramatic—achievements of the gay community noted above, but that it falsely suggests that gay people with AIDS are alone and abandoned, unless and until they are taken back into the bosom of their family. Even the best of the TV AIDS stories fall into this pattern.

An episode of *L.A. Law* (May 16, 1991) includes a gay lawyer dying of AIDS who sues his health insurance company to obtain payment for an experimental drug that might prolong his life (he wins, with the assistance of *L.A. Law* regular Victor Sifuentes). The ailing lawyer is shown as a strong and principled person who is willing to fight for his rights, and for the rights of others in his situation. But viewers of the program would never know—from this episode, or from any other prime-time TV drama—about the significant efforts and dramatic achievements of the militant organization Act Up in forcing the medical establishment, the FDA, and drug companies to deal more equitably and openly with patients. It has been widely acknowledged by medical scientists, such as Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health, that Act Up has wrought substantial changes in the way the medical community relates to the populations it serves. These successes were not brought about by lone individuals, however courageous and eloquent, and thus the *L.A. Law* episode, for all its good intentions, continues the tradition of isolating the gay person as a lone victim.³

For Whom the Heart Beats

In 1972, just a few years after Stonewall, network television's first (relatively) sympathetic portrait of a gay man appeared on the ABC made-for-

TV movie *That Certain Summer*, in which two gay men actually were shown touching (on the shoulder), and none of the gay characters had to die at the end of the story.⁴ This “breakthrough” was something of a false spring, however, as it did not herald the blooming of a hundred (or even a dozen) gay and lesbian characters. True, gay and lesbian characters did begin to appear from time to time for one-shot appearances on network series, and in 1978 ABC produced *A Question Of Love*, a TV movie based on a real lesbian mother’s child custody case (the women never kiss, but one is shown tenderly drying her lover’s hair).

The slight increase in gay (and less often lesbian) visibility in the mid-seventies was quickly seized upon by the political right as sign of media capitulation to what in the eighties came to be called “special interests.” The apocalyptic tone of their jeremiads is well represented in a nationally syndicated column by Nicholas Von Hoffman, who noted that the “old-style Chinese have the Year of the Tiger and the Year of the Pig,” but the “new-style Americans are having the Year of the Fag” (April 11, 1976). Von Hoffman charted the decline of the American character as beginning with a “presentable gay” in the *Doonesbury* comic strip and “from there it was but a hop, skip and a jump to television where the flits are swarming this year.” Hoffman plaintively asks, “Is a new stereotype being born? Is network television about to kill off the bitchy, old-time outrageous fruit and replace him with a new type homo?” Among the horrors he foresaw were “*The Six Million Dollar Queer* or *The Bionic Fruit*.”

But although the right wing attacked the networks for what they considered to be overly favorable attention to gay people, gay people were in fact usually portrayed in news and dramatic media in ways that served to reinforce rather than challenge the prevailing images.⁵ Rather than *The Six Million Dollar Fruit*, television viewers were treated to gay characters who tended to be so subtle as to be readily misunderstood by the innocent (as in the case of Sidney in *Love, Sidney*, whose homosexuality seemed to consist entirely of crying at old Greta Garbo movies and having a photo of his dead lover on the mantelpiece), or confused about their sexuality and never seen in an ongoing romantic relationship (as in the case of Stephen Carrington in *Dynasty*, whose lovers had an unfortunate tendency of getting killed).

Kathleen Montgomery observed the efforts of the organized gay movement to improve the ways network programmers handle gay characters

and themes. In particular she describes the writing and production of a made-for-TV network movie that had a gay-related theme, and involved consultation with representatives of gay organizations. And the result?

[T]hroughout the process all the decisions affecting the portrayal of gay life were influenced by the constraints which commercial television as a mass medium imposes upon the creation of its content. The fundamental goal of garnering the largest possible audience necessitated that (a) the program be placed in a familiar and successful television genre—the crime-drama; (b) the story focus upon the heterosexual male lead character and his reactions to the gay characters rather than upon the homosexual characters themselves; and (c) the film avoid any overt display of affection which might be offensive to certain segments of the audience. These requirements served as a filter through which the issue of homosexuality was processed, resulting in a televised picture of gay life designed to be acceptable to the gay community and still palatable to a mass audience. (1981)

Acceptability to the gay community, in this case, means that the movie was not an attack on our character and a denial of our basic humanity; it could not be mistaken for an expression of our values or perspectives. But of course they weren't aiming at us, either; they were merely trying to avoid arguing with us afterwards.

As Hantzis and Lehr (this volume, chapter 6) and Moritz (this volume, chapter 7) document, the pattern established in the seventies continued through the eighties and into the nineties: occasional one-time appearances by gay or lesbian characters on series, with the story line largely focused on the responses of the heterosexual regular characters (episodes of *Golden Girls*, *Dear John*, and *Designing Women*, among others). Although they have appeared from time to time on daytime soaps or cable channels,⁶ continuing lesbian or gay characters on network series are still nearly nonexistent. Interestingly, two of the series that have included continuing gay characters (both on ABC)—*Hooperman* and *Heartbeat*—did not survive very long. But while they lasted, they did provide a glimpse of how network television construes “positive” characterizations of gay people.

No Sex Please, We're Lesbians

The papers by Hantzis and Lehr and by Moritz both focus centrally on the depiction of the lesbian physicians' aide Marilyn McGrath on *Heartbeat*,

played by Gail Strickland, and they agree that behind the superficial feminism of the program beats a familiar patriarchal heart.

Hantzis and Lehr unmask the sexism lurking behind the feminist front of *Heartbeat* and raise the important question of whether portrayals intended to be "positive" within television's terms are in fact constructing images of lesbians and gays that are "nonthreatening to heterosexuals" through the erasure of lesbian and gay sexuality. Moritz's analysis of *Heartbeat* supports this conclusion with examples of lesbian characters on other series: "with the exception of the conspiring [lesbian] murderers in *Hunter*, none of the these lesbian characters is permitted to be sexual or even romantic." As both analyses demonstrate, although *Heartbeat* often presents detailed accounts and images of the heterosexual characters' romantic and sexual involvements, the lesbian character has a lover who is rarely shown, and they are never permitted to express desire or passion. The desexualization of Marilyn McGrath thoroughly demonstrated in these papers did not, however, deflect the wrath of Reverend Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, whose massive campaign against the program may have contributed to its cancellation after one season.

In this context we should not be surprised at the furor aroused in February 1991 when two female attorneys on NBC's *L.A. Law* engaged in the first lesbian kiss on network television. Predictably, Rev. Wildmon geared up his fundamentalist letter-writing battalions to "brow-beat the networks and advertisers into censoring such acts by threatening them with product boycotts" (Enrico 1991), and equally predictably, NBC began hedging its bets: " 'We were not attempting to create a lesbian character in that episode,' said NBC spokeswoman Sue Binford. 'It was much more of an attempt to add texture to C. J.'s character. It was a minor part of the overall story line' " (ibid.).

Yet this minor texture added to the character of C. J. Lamb continued to attract attention from right-wing media watchdogs, lesbian and gay media viewers and activists, and the "infotainment" industry. Actress Amanda Donohue, who plays the apparently bisexual C. J. Lamb, tirelessly appeared on shows ranging from *Today* to *Entertainment Tonight* to *Arsenio Hall* to discuss her controversial character. Although she declined to identify C. J. Lamb as a lesbian, she also refused to distance herself from the role; and while she made a point of saying she "had many gay friends," at least we were spared an account of her boyfriend's response to the "kiss." In the last few episodes of the season the recipient of the famous kiss,

Abby Perkins (played by Michele Green), seemed eager to push things even further, only to have C. J. hold back and declare that Abby wasn't really ready. Viewers would have to wait to find out if network television is ready to permit two women to express sexual desire for each other.

Where Do We Go from Here?

By now we have sufficient documentation of the simple fact that Hollywood is not interested in depicting the reality of lesbian and gay lives. Although, as Vito Russo noted in the second edition of his pioneering study *The Celluloid Closet*, "homosexuality is no longer in the closet either on or off screen" (1987, 248), it is also true that "mainstream cinema is incapable of giving to members of any minority the kind of films that truly touch their lives and experiences. . . . Mainstream films about homosexuality are not for gays. They address themselves exclusively to the majority" (ibid, 322, 325). This is even more true of network television, which is more constrained by public pressure and advertiser timidity. The resulting images range from old-fashioned victims and villains (see discussions of *Midnight Caller* and *Hunter* by Netzhammer and Shamp and Moritz), to well-meaning approaches that plead for tolerance by representing gays as no different from heterosexuals, a "liberal" strategy that dictates complete asexuality.

What should be the agenda for lesbian and gay research on the mass media? Although it is obviously essential to continually monitor the mass media's presentation of lesbian and gay characters and to decode their "hidden" meanings, as researchers and as activists we face challenges beyond surveillance and analysis.

We know something about the ways in which the networks have dealt with external pressure from gay groups. Kathleen Montgomery (1981, 1989) shed some light on this territory in her analysis of the efforts of advocacy groups to influence television programming, and Moritz (1989) extended this analysis in a more recent study of how network television dealt with lesbian characters in the late 1980s. When Montgomery conducted her study of advocacy groups in the late 1970s, gay pressure on the networks was exercised primarily by the National Gay Task Force (now the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force), then located in New York, and by one man (psychologist Newton Deiter) in Los Angeles operating under the impressive title of the Gay Media Task Force. By the time Moritz

spoke to network executives and gay activists in the late 1980s, there was an Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Artists' Media Watch Committee. In addition, the current scene includes increasingly active and effective New York and Los Angeles branches of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), which issue reports and alerts encouraging lesbian and gay responses—both positive and negative—to counter the campaigns organized by the right. In other words, the stage is set for an updated study of the battlefield on which the current struggle over lesbian and gay images is being fought.

Beyond the responses to outside pressure groups, we need studies of the backstage workings of the Hollywood dream (and nightmare) factories that manufacture the images absorbed by millions around the world. The factory image is not inappropriate: we need to be aware that most of what shows up on the screen is dictated by industrial processes of “mass production” rather than the imagination of individual artists. The decisions about whether two gay *thirtysomething* men will be allowed to touch each other, or whether C. J. and Abby will ever go beyond that famous first kiss, will be debated and resolved at the highest levels, but many of the images of gay people that we encounter are determined at much “lower” levels. This is often true of the familiar and infuriating characterizations that lurk in the background of the media landscape. As Turow has shown, “stereotypes are vehicles for getting work done quickly, efficiently, and with a lower risk of individual failure,” because they capitalize on “what the audience can buy instantaneously” (Turow 1984, 169, 174).

Although there is a small body of research on the inner workings of the media (e.g., Gitlin 1983; Turow 1984), there has yet to be an account of the lesbian and gay component of the film and television industry. It will not be an easy task, however, to explore beneath the surface. As the “outing” controversies have revealed to any who might not have known already, Hollywood is rife with closeted gay and lesbian executives, producers, directors, writers, and actors who have assiduously avoided becoming part of the solution, and have thus become part of the problem (cf. Gross 1991).

Hollywood is where a gay director makes anti-homosexual films so that he can continue to work with the big boys. Hollywood is where gay screenwriters churn out offensive teenage sex comedies and do it well because there isn't anything they don't know about pretending to be straight. Hollywood is where a lesbian rock

singer arrives at the American Music Awards on the arm of a gay superstar. Hollywood is where Joan Rivers obligingly asks gay actors how many girlfriends they have and proceeds to tell fag jokes. (Russo 1987, 322–23)

Clearly, these aren't conditions conducive to candid confessions and illuminating interviews, but that should not prevent researchers from trying to chart this largely unexplored territory. One promising approach is historical research, using the abundant archival resources of USC, UCLA, and the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences Library, among others. A fine example of what can be done with such documentary data is George Custen's account of Hollywood's reconstruction of Cole Porter's life in *Night and Day* (1992).

Finally, in addition to studies of the people and the institutions responsible for producing the images of lesbian and gay people that are absorbed by millions in this country and beyond, we need more studies of how actual audience members, gay as well as nongay, interpret and respond to these messages. It is by now a commonplace of fashionable postmodern theory to argue that audiences are not "cultural dupes" who passively absorb and parrot the messages of the mass media (cf. Fiske 1987), but we have little direct evidence of how images of lesbians and gays are responded to. I happen to believe that the optimistic assumption that audiences routinely engage in "oppositional readings" which shield them from the hegemonic impact of "dominant codes" has not been supported by very much empirical research, or even common sense. Simply put, if audiences are being all that resistant, why don't we see signs of actual resistance?

In the case of lesbian and gay characterizations in the mass media, there is even less reason to assume that "general" audiences would be moved to adopt oppositional decodings, but this is an empirical question worth asking. In the case of lesbian and gay audiences we have even less research evidence available, but these are questions well worth pursuing. Among those who have investigated the responses of female spectators of film and television (cf. Pribram 1988), Chris Straayer (1985) and Elizabeth Ellsworth (1986) have specifically focused on the readings of the film *Personal Best* by lesbian viewers. The challenge of understanding the responses of lesbian and gay viewers to network television and to other media as well—MTV, independent lesbian and gay film, pornography—should provide more than enough *terra incognita* to tempt adventurous explorers.

Notes

1. Ronald Milavsky, then Vice President of NBC, described the coverage of AIDS.

The most striking thing . . . is the low level of reporting until Rock Hudson's illness and the rather continuous high level after that. AIDS did, after all, have a focal event, like the Tylenol poisonings, the death, after thousands of others, of a famous person who most people did not think of as being homosexual. Rock Hudson's illness, death, and his admission that he was indeed dying of AIDS was a very unusual combination that was big news and stimulated the public's interest. From July to December 1985, NBC broadcast over 200 stories on AIDS—three times as many as during the entire 1980 to 1984 period. The other news media reacted similarly. (Milavsky 1988)

Note the implication that it was the low level of public interest which was responsible for the lesser amount of coverage before Rock Hudson.

2. The inclusion of such brief scenes, or the addition of brief disclaimers at the beginning or the end of a program or movie, are familiar "concessions" wrung by protestors from producers of bigoted dramas. There is little reason to believe that these effectively counteract the primary messages of the programs, nor any evidence that many people even read the fine print of crawling disclaimers.
3. This isolation is heightened by a scene in which the gay lawyer stumbles into the private wedding ceremony of Sifuentes and lawyer Grace Van Owen and is asked to stay as a witness; his disease ravaged face is dramatically contrasted with those of the joyfully united couple and the jocular judge who marries them.
4. It is worth noting, however, that the main character, a gay father who comes out to his son, says that if he were given a choice he would not choose to be homosexual.
5. In a response to an inquiry about their policy regarding homosexual characters, an ABC official wrote, "We want to assure you that the portrayal of homosexuals on television will not be a very common occurrence but when depicted and appropriate to a particular story line or plot, such characterizations in ABC programs will be governed by standards of good taste" (Dan Rustin to Leland Mellott, April 1, 1977).
6. Soap opera queers included a lesbian psychologist who was briefly included among *All My Children* and a gay man who came out on *As The World Turns* and then left to take care of his lover who was dying of AIDS off camera. The longest continuing gay characters were the seemingly straight Cliff and the hyper-camp (but sympathetic) Donald on Showtime's *Brothers*, now in syndication.

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