"Fantastic Bodies and Where to Find Them": Representational Politics of Queer Bodies in Popular Media

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Abstract

As we transition into a cybersocial world of infinite 'glocal' intersections, much of our perceptions about beauty and body have come to be regulated by the reductive standards of the popular global media, mediated mostly in the US, that seek to gratify specific heterosexist, hypermasculine/ hyperfeminine notions about body image. To create stringently specified standards for men and women is to automatically confine the body into the duality of the masculine and the feminine, thus repressing the self-expression of alternate sexualities and genders. Situating our discourse within the critical paradigm gender performativity, this paper will navigate the processes involved in the visualization and performance of the queer body in Hollywood and American show business and chart the evolution of LGBTQ representations in media. Amidst the pervasive politico-cultural preoccupation with the body, can gender performance through queer bodies truly reach their full potential and self-expressivity, specifically in societies that impose normative regulations and restrictive labels on standards of beauty? Where, then, is the queer, transgendered body situated within the predominantly masculine culture of visual narcissism and cisgender body hysteria? The de-objectification of traditional body images in media, thus, becomes a vital agenda in queer studies. This paper will further interrogate the possibility of a postgender representational mode that can subvert the traditional binaries of the body and accommodate sexual/gender alterities within, what Habermas calls, the "media-steered subsystems".

Keywords: Queer stereotypes, Hollywood, Non-binary body, Heteronormativity, Gender performance

The Terror of the Non-Binary: Investigating Queer Stereotypes in Hollywood

In the incessant human quest for meaning, we have, historically, exhibited a reductive tendency to lapse into restrictive binaries. Even in our postmodern technosocial world, certain stereotypes continue to persist in popular media which attempt, for the most part, to "naturalize" conventional gender roles and preserve institutionally prescribed heterosexism. (Kosut, 2012) Perhaps the most pervasive of them is the dichotomized male-female oppositions, relegating the feminine as private/ silent/ subordinate and the masculine as public/ vocal/ dominant.

The imaging and imagining of bodies in popular US media, to a significant extent, remain entrenched within these dualities: the female body is sexualized and choreographed to satisfy typically heteronormative standards of beauty and body, specifically targeted for the visual pleasure of a predominantly heterosexual male audience, as noted by feminist critics like John Berger (1972) and Laura Mulvey. (Mulvey, 1996) There is no room in this traditionalist paradigm for the queer body, nor does it indicate any significant effort in mainstream media to satisfy the queer gaze. However, this postulation has drawn considerable criticism from theorists such as

Richard Dryer and Steve Neale, who question the unilateralism of the male gazer and female object. Critics like Coraline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, on the other hand, have advocated a visual framework that would accommodate the mutual reciprocity between the male and the female gaze as well as the polemics of queer viewing. (Evans and Gamman, 1995)

The queer, in all its etymological transgressiveness, typically distinguishes itself against the "normal", rather than the "heterosexual". Having shed its original derogatory taint, the term has appropriated itself to encompass the multifarious heterogeneities subsisting within the LGBT communities. (Ott & Mack, 2013) Despite the significant gender-fluidity in avant-garde and experimental cinema, much of the mainstream media persistently continues to polarize queer bodies into certain recurrent stereotypes. The most prominent among them is the cultural positioning of the queer within an indefinable, pervasive grey zone of "gender in-betweenism, [sexual] inversions, androgyny", that not only qualitatively subsume the diversities and distinctions within queer communities into a generic category of enforced homogeneity, but also fail to acknowledge them as different genders in their own right, existing separately beyond the male-female binarism. (Dyer, 2002, p. 97)

For instance, the recent trend of the highly commercialized icon of the 'Gay Best Friend' has become a new faddism of American media, propagated by global entertainment supplements such as *Teen Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* etc, specifically following the immense popularity of TV shows like *Sex and the City*, *Glee* and *The New Normal*. Incidentally, the TV series *Happy Endings* has brilliantly satirized this detrimental trend by highlighting the inherent politics in such reductive conception of the exaggerated femininity in gay men and their representations as over-dramatic, hysteric fashion divas. The over-worn, flamboyant "gay best friend" trope in romantic comedies mainly relies on the appropriation of queer masculinity as slightly ridiculous, feminine and, therefore, ultimately non-threatening to the heterosexual hero who competes for the sexual ownership over the straight female heroine.

In his Propaganda Model, Chomsky has highlighted the existence and effectivity of certain strategic "filters" which serve to perpetuate politicized agendas and ideological institutional standards by controlling, limiting and determining the flow of discourse. (Chomsky and Herman, 1988/2002) Within this critical praxis, the queer in mainstream visual media, therefore, can be pertinently seen as the non-categorical, gendered 'Other', which can only be defined through stereotypes that somewhat mimic the normative dualities the exist within hegemonic institutional paradigms. LGBTQ representations in popular media continue to rely on recognizable, typified caricatures of fetishized bodies: gay men as urbane, effeminate, oversexed "twinks"; lesbians as masculinized "butch" women, or conversely, as eroticized figures subject to body standards determined by the fetishism of a pornographic male gaze; transsexuals and transvestites as grotesque, and at times, psychopathic caricatures of the drag, a figure often inextricably linked in popular films and media with prostitution and the horror of abjection. (Ross, 2011) This demonization of the drag is directly indicative of the pervasive socio-cultural fear of the gendered "other". Given its extremely subversive bio-cultural position, as Judith Butler has theorized, the transsexual 'drag' becomes a physical embodiment of the "lesbian phallus", signifying the transference of phallic power from the traditional paternal authority to a choric space of abjection and power reversal where hierarchies of masculinity and femininity are actively rejected and the body vocally, exuberantly celebrates its deviance. (Ussher, 2006)

The exhibitionist, consumer-driven image of the eroticized male queer body has become prominent in the American media, with the growing popularity of muscle magazines and physique photography, since its inception in the mid-1940s with the establishment of Bob Mizer's

"all-male erotic magazine" *Physique Pictorial* in Los Angeles and the opening of the first all-male model agency, called the Athletic Model Guild (AMG). (Padva, 2014) Following the sexual revolution in the 1960s, the gay male body in Hollywood became a potent, politicized battleground. The queer visual subcultures proliferated through the underground cinema of Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Paul Morrisey and John Waters, which began to infiltrate the popular media of 1960s and 70s. (Summers 2005) Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), for instance, combines unabashed and pornographic sex scenes with quirky role-plays where male and female bodies become virtually indistinguishable.

The image of the athletic, muscular gay icon, revived from the physique culture of the '40s, constituted a significant aspect of the emergent queer counterculture of this time. The "physique films" engaged in a power-play with the dominant heteronormative representational modes by creating a distinct coterie of visual material that celebrated the gay male body, satisfied the queer gaze and, at same time, appealed to a generation born of the 1960s sexual revolution. It facilitated a Foucauldian appropriation of the "sexed" gay body, marked, trained, commercialized and ritualized for the voyeuristic pleasure of the consumerist American media. (Padva, 2014) Thom Fitzgerald's 1999 film *Beefcake* is a tribute to the 1940s-1960s muscle culture and celebrates Bob Mizer's subversive work by explicitly documenting the sexualized gay body, carefully manipulated and rigorously regimented to satisfy a specific body image. However, whether the docudrama successfully manages to convey the inevitable body politics, inherent in the mass commodification of a specifically queer subculture and risqué, hyper-masculine standards for gay models, set by the commercial requirements of the growing body business in early Hollywood, remains questionable.

Eve K. Sedgwick, in her book *The Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), highlights this preponderance of binarism and "hierarchical oppositions" in Western culture and claims that this dichotomy of either/or automatically positions homosexuality as the perpetual, unmentionable 'Other' to heterosexuality, effectively abolishing any separate queer space for bisexuality, transsexuality, transgenderism etc. (Benshoff, 1997) In the classic Hollywood horror genre, the conception of the queer as a transgression against the binary gender morphology has bred a variety of negative icons, beginning as early as 1930s, as is evidenced in the figure of the bisexual monster in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), or the figure of the male creator who bypasses the process heterosexual intercourse, interesting with the help of another male aid and gives a perverse "birth" to an unnatural, monstrous progeny in films such as *Frankenstein* (1931), *Island of Lost Souls* (1932) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). The secondary male characters like the Fritz in *Frankenstein*, Montgomery in *Island of Lost Souls* along with the respective protagonists, create an atypical, truncated queer family unit that threatens and disrupts the traditional familial structure.

These early homosexual representations, thus, were under the constant scrutiny of a panoptic, normative gaze which tried to confine the queer body within explicable binaries of active-passive, effete-butch, master-slave, dominant-submissive, normal-queer etc. In *Dracula's Daughter*, for example, there are specific visual clues suggestive of the sadomasochistic subcultures, which invariably position the queer bodies in terms of the masculine-feminine binary. This refers, not to the physicality of genders, but to the notions of power and powerlessness culturally associated with each gender, as evidenced in the subversive role-reversal in the representation of the "butch" lesbian vampiress Marya Zaleska (Gloria Holden), and her submissive manservant Sandor (Irving Pichel), who helps his mistress to acquire her female preys, such as Lilli (Nan Grey). (Benshoff, 1997) Homosexuality, thus, acquired a visual association with

the "horror of the flesh" and gay characters in the Hollywood horror culture became typified as cannibalistic predators. In fact, *Dracula's Daughter* proudly advertised the tagline "Save the Women of London from Dracula's Daughter". This legacy of the lesbian vampire would continue globally in the 1960s and '70s with such films as Roger Vadim's *Blood and Roses* (released in France in 1960; distributed in USA in 1961) and Jose Ramon Larraz's *Vampyres* (released in England in 1974). (Russo, 1995)

The assigned space of queerness within the visual horror culture has, often, effectively served particular heteronormative agendas. It has succeeded in creating the widely consumed iconography of the queer killer/ monster whose monstrosity stems, not from psychiatric aberrations, but from the pathological anxiety of the non-normative, semiotic body submerged in pre-lingual hysteria that resists the culturally appropriate language and paternal authority of the phallic Father. For instance, thriller films involving transsexual and drag figures, typically locate the transgendered body as a heterotopic site of destabilization where the "transferable phantasm" of the phallus defies normative functionality, power and performance of gender, and is, therefore, categorically labeled as monstrous. (Butler, 1993/2011) The contemporary thriller culture makes explicit use of transgender/ transsexual characters as either disposable victims or, more frequently, deranged killers.

In Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), Bobbi, a transgender woman, spirals into a psychopathic rage and proceeds to kill several people, after being apparently rejected as a viable candidate for the transformative sex change by her therapist, Dr. Elliot. She is later revealed to be suffering from split personality disorder, Dr. Elliot being her masculine alter-ego, who had originally "halted" the sex change process. The complexity of the transgender experience is, thus, binarized as simplistic male-female dialectic, where the male half subconsciously tries to sabotage the female self. Similarly, in Jonathan Demme's adaptation of *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), Ted Levine plays 'Buffalo Bill', a gay serial killer, who starves, brutally murders and skins overweight women to make a body suit out of them, since he was not psychiatrically qualified for transformative gender reassignment surgery. This violent hijacking of women's bodies out of the greed to occupy one – to become one – is presented with convincingly sensationalized psychobabble and has created one of the most iconic queer serial killer figure in Hollywood.

As these examples demonstrate, most of the popular queer stereotypes do not make allowance for the complex nodal intersections of sexuality suggested by the defiant non-binary bodies or acknowledge the dissociation of desire from the gendered body through a radical subversion of normative gender performance. (Ott & Mack, 2013) Such subtle marginalization, conditioned and sustained by the prolific production of repetitive images, leads to distorted cultural myopia that create and disseminate false social perceptions about the LGBTQ communities, which is achieved by limiting and controlling the visual fodder of the majority population.

The Body is a Wonderland: Hollywood and Queer Body Positivity

The performance of the queer through non-binary bodies, behaviors and identities, thus, becomes a deeply political act, deviating from socially and culturally contingent generic gender codes that entrap individual subjectivity and transform it in accordance to the predetermined expectations of a dualistic 'somatic society'. (Turner, 2012) The historically-situated queer self has been reduced to a 'spectacle; - a pathologized, hystericized body politic, defined by the regulatory codes of various institutional forces (scientific, social, cultural and political) acting upon it, conditioning it

in accordance to heteronormative, patriarchal parameters that effectively cauterize ideas of agency and autonomy.

However, in the last two decades, however, we have seen a concentrated effort towards more inclusive and sensitized queer representation in Hollywood and the American media as a whole. From the psychopathic genderqueer in the classic Hollywood Horror culture to the over-sexualized gay stereotypes of the '70s, from the representation of the abject, diseased queer bodies as pathologized extensions of the homophobic hysteria born of the 1980s AIDS epidemic to the more body-positive and pro-gender films of recent years such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013). Similarly, TV series like *Glee* (2009-2015), *Modern Family* (2009-) *Happy Endings* (2011-2013) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013-) provide us with a distinctive cartography of the progressive evolution of queer bodies and identities in mainstream media.

Jonathan Demme's 1993 film *Philadelphia* is arguably one of the first mainstream Hollywood movies to target issues of AIDS hysteria, homophobia and workplace discrimination. In a similar vein, Ryan Murphy's 2014 adaptation of Larry Kramer's 1985 play *The Normal Heart* visualizes with great sensitivity the panic and pathos of the 1980s infamous AIDS epidemic as Ned Weeks, a gay activist tries to raise AIDS awareness among the population of New York while countering the widespread stigma and homophobic repulsion associated with, what was then sensationalized in American media, as the "gay cancer". The opening sequence of overt sexual exploits on the beach and the queer subcultures in gay clubs of New York is climactically contrasted with the abject, lesion-ridden bodies of gay men struck down by the fatal unidentified disease. The personalization of tragedy through the doomed romance between Ned Weeks and Felix Turner, a New York Times reporter who contracts AIDS, is beautifully portrayed by Mark Ruffalo and Matt Bomer. The transference of focus from the titillation of forbidden homosexual relations to the universal pathos of loss and grief, along with awareness-raising, is the specific political imperative of the New Queer Cinema. Films like *Normal Heart*, therefore, mark the "epistemic shift in gay culture" where sexual identity and awareness is conflated with the pathology of the AIDS epidemic, which became the driving force behind the artistic/ cinematic queer propaganda in the 1980s and 90s. (Hallas, 24)

In Ang Lee's 2005 adaptation of Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain*, Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal brilliantly showcase the understated agony of Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist who are trapped between their explosive love for each other and a socially-conditioned negativity towards queer self-identification in the deeply homophobic cowboy culture of the American West. In a particularly significant scene, after their first night of sexual intimacy and a frantic bout of lovemaking, Ennis and Jack look out at an expansive vista of the rugged mountains in the gloom of twilight. Ennis says: "It's a one-shot thing we've got going on." Jack agrees, "It's nobody's business but ours." Then comes Ennis' resonant, anguished claim: "'Know I ain't queer", to which Jack quietly replies: "Me neither." Directly challenging the Western cultural insistence on verbalizing sexuality and quietly rejecting the Foucauldian confessional realm of libidinal discourse which at once celebrates and forbids sexual expression, they remain life-long lovers who create their own queer space of self-identity on the solitary ranges of the Brokeback Mountain, until Jack is lynched to death by a homophobic mob. The film does not attempt to normalize the queer experience through implicit ideological propaganda; instead, it provides a timeless story of survival, love and loss.

Popular treatment of gay marriage and the queer family unit can be seen in shows such as *Modern Family* and *The New Normal*. However, a significant level of genderqueer sensitization is

witnessed in Jenji Kohan's TV series *Orange is the New Black*, which premiered in 2013. Set in a women's penitentiary, it visually and vocally disrupts stereotypical iconizations of lesbian and transgender women, by situating them within a panoptic carceral system, where identity, sexuality and the queer body are under constant scrutiny of an authoritative male gaze that confines, regulates and politicizes female subjectivity in accordance to male laws. The homosocial and homoerotic themes of this entertaining and, at times, haunting show, are further heightened by its highly inclusive cast in terms of sexuality, gender diversity and body image. Unlike the other pro-gender Hollywood films such as *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Transamerica* (2005), where transgender characters are played by cisgender, heterosexual actors and actresses, *Orange is the New Black* casts the trans actress Laverne Cox for the role of the transwoman inmate Sophia Burset. Sean Baker's explosive film *Tangerine* (2015) provides us with similar inclusive frameworks where trans actresses Mya Taylor and Kiki Rodriguez play the two firebrand leads in this low-budget film. The narrative radically re-imagines the role of the "gay best friend" as a trans prostitute Sin-Dee and her best friend Alexandra embark on a quest for revenge against the former's cheating boyfriend/ pimp.

The only way popular media can begin to truly accommodate and acknowledge alternate sexualities and experiences is by systematically blasting the stereotypes which confine queer identities into visually unambiguous categories ("the gay best friend", "the queer killer", the "butch" lesbian etc.). These constant negotiations about queer identity and body image in visual media are significant aspects of the ongoing attempt to neutralize the gaps between collective stereotypical perceptions about LGBTQ communities, which are often caused by an instinctive heteronormative tendency towards binaries, and the ultimate cultural acknowledgment of body diversity and the fluidity of gender performance.

'It Gets Better': Online Media and/as Queer Spaces

In 1999, in her study on the political economy of the internet, Korinna Patelis had cautiously predicted an inevitable decentering and de-localization of bodies in light of the nascent digital youth cultures which were beginning to proliferate with the rapid emergence of the 'new media' the last half of the twentieth century. (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003) The fluidity afforded to non-binary bodies and voices through this culture of "internet-philia", has powerfully manifested itself in social media in the last decade. As online media evolves into a dissident and multi-faceted "cyberqueer space", as Nina Wakeford terms it, the construction of identities are necessarily accompanied by a technologization of bodies and voices. (Ibid)

The queer experience of the LGBTQ youth, therefore, has entered a new cybersocial phase where the visibility and viability of non-binary bodies can successfully bypass the censorship of the heteromedia gaze of mass media. With the rise of cyberactivism, the internet and online social media provide comprehensive educational frameworks and trans-national support systems to LGBTQ youth, who often struggle to negotiate a balance between their heteronormative upbringing and their conspicuous lack of what Suzanne Walters calls, a "ready-made identity". These initiatives to create "collective public identities" which would simultaneously accommodate the variations and heterogeneities within the fluid queer subcultures are a distinct feature of cyberactivism in online media. (Pullen, 2014)

Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project (IGBP) is a crucial example of the emergent counter-narratives and reparative measures against cyber-bullying, anti-queer media propaganda and LGBT youth suicide. The IGBP contains hundreds of videos which serve as experiential and

educational stories of survival by LGBTQ adults aimed at young queer viewers who are struggling with homophobia and identity crises. The astounding response to the project created a revolution in social media and received the institutional approval of president Barrack Obama who released his own It Gets Better video from the White House in 2010. (Pullen, 2014)

Such delimiting visual discourses encourage the possibility of a body positive and gender-inclusive media extending beyond the heterosexist and reductive strategies of queer representations in mainstream popular media. In the age of Photoshop, YouTube and Instagram, the physicality of the body is no longer absolute. It is deconstructed and decimated within a matrix of cyber-generic modifications and enhancements. As mainstream show business transitions into these new gender-fluid representative media, popular tends like the "coming out" videos among the current queer youth generation is a vital indicator of the possibility of a body-positive visual mode that can facilitate an uninterrupted vocalization of queer bodies without normative censorship. The future of the visual culture, therefore, is now being determined by a concurrent wave of alternate media which serve as accessible and amenable portals that can properly accommodate and celebrate body diversity and gender fluidity, granting visibility without the panoptic regulation of the heterosexist gender/body images.

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