Title
Lesbian "Femininity" on Television

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7mg0s9c4

Author
Himberg, Julia

Publication Date
2008-05-01
Lesbıan “Femininity” on Television

Over the past five years, lesbian images on TV have generated a multitude of headlines like these. The L Word, Work Out, and South of Nowhere have triggered battles among critics, scholars, and members of the TV industry about the implications of lesbian femininity on television. Each show predominantly features stereotypically feminine lesbian characters. Showtime’s soap opera The L Word follows a closely-knit web of lesbian friends and lovers living in West Hollywood. Bravo’s reality series Work Out stars openly lesbian gym owner and personal trainer Jackie Warner, and shows the daily lives of Warner, her entourage of personal trainers, and their clients. The N Network’s South of Nowhere is a teen drama about a family dealing with charged issues like teen pregnancy, interracial families, and the daughter’s coming out experiences.

Academics’ and critics’ debates about femininity run the gamut from a progressive new visibility to an old voyeuristic pandering. Some argue that femme characters debunk the notion that femininity requires heterosexual male appreciation. A recent Advocate article by columnist Guinevere Turner touted The L Word as “shifting the aesthetic of actual lesbians and the way lesbians in general are perceived.” Queer theorist Eve Sedgwick’s review of the show for The Chronicle of Higher Education places high hopes on The L Word to “make a real and unpredictable difference in the overall landscape of the media world.” Sedgwick’s praise for the show is tempered however by her claim that “Edgy is not the word for the series’s relation to reality or political process….” Critics in this camp argue that femininity sanitizes, depoliticizes, and even de-homosexualizes lesbian characters. As lesbian comedienne Marga Gomez quips about The L Word, “you only see plain dykes in the background when the hotties go to a dance.” Gomez and others, such as New York Times reporter Alessandra Stanley and Salon.com’s Hillary Frey, contend that while femme images may challenge traditional viewers’ sense of what being lesbian looks like, these same images are constructed for the pleasure of the straight male. Stanley’s New York Times review of The L Word calls the show “a manifesto of lesbian liberation and visual eye candy for men.” These criticisms are concerned with the way that TV as a business commodifies images to sell...
to the mainstream public, without regard for political implications. Such business practice seems particularly ignorant of pornography debates, which have raged for decades among feminist media scholars such as Michelle Citron, B. Ruby Rich, Chris Straayer, and Linda Williams, to name just a few.

While debates about lesbian femininity have a deep history, I want to quarrel with critics who neglect to consider class or the economics of the TV industry when writing about lesbian femininity. These shows depict a particularly class-based expression of femininity that relates directly to cable structures, especially its requirements for and methods of targeting audiences. I argue that discussions of lesbian femininity need to incorporate a critique of class which, in addition to race, is crucial to the ways gender and sexuality play out on television. Rather than debate the veracity or authenticity of these images, seeing the characters as desirable to mainstream audiences because they’re stereotypically feminine, I urge critics and scholars to see these images as being involved in the production and maintenance of social reality itself, particularly embedded in issues of class relations and shifts in the television cable market. Building on the work of Communications scholars such as Katherine Sender and Larry Gross, Film Studies scholars such as Patricia White and Kara Keeling, as well as critics in the popular press, I hope to nuance critical understandings of the relationships among the cable market, niche audiences, and lesbian femininity. While queer theory has clearly shown the importance of deconstructing essential identity categories, I use the terms “lesbian” and “femininity” because they are still relevant categories in the sense that they take into account the cultural forces that play upon TV characters in experiences of coming out, identity formation, and sexual style in everyday, material culture.
From their marketing campaigns to their title sequences to the characters’ clothing, jobs, and education, TV shows also foreground high-class lifestyles and aesthetics. The characters are usually white-collar professionals, who make references to canonical literary texts and paintings, know a fine wine when they see it, and understand that the handbag must always match the shoes. Furthermore, femininity in these shows normalizes and adheres to white standards of taste in beauty, education, and physical fitness. While they tend to include characters of color, and directly address timely discussions of race, the characters’ high-class look is a distinctly white aesthetic.

One of the most instructive ways to see how class is embodied in these shows is to look at their marketing campaigns and title sequences. Ad campaigns and title sequences are often the first glimpse viewers have of a show, conveying key information to attract audiences. The L Word’s initial ad campaign promoted the show as a lesbian version of Sex and the City, using the tag line, “Same sex. Different city,” hoping to make associations with the show’s bold approach to talking about and having sex. Billboard and print ads frequently feature the show’s cast dressed in elegant gowns and feminine suits, foregrounding their looks above all else. Utilizing fashion photography lighting and runway poses, the show’s cast stand alongside one another, looking directly at the camera, lights accentuating their lean, female figures against a sleek black backdrop. Aside from the show’s name and tag line, the ads have no text, do not promote the show with any actor names, and instead feature only exquisitely adorned, hyper-feminine women. The network also advertised for the show in upscale women’s publications, like Elle magazine, which target consumers interested in “fashion, beauty, and style – with a brain” who are looking for “high-end inspiration,” marking class as central to the show’s identity.

Work Out, which premiered in 2006 following Bravo’s success with programs like Queer Eye for the Straight Guy and Project Runway, presents lesbian sexuality within the context of Beverly Hills beauty culture, where high-end fashion, food, and bodies are the norm. The title sequence immediately draws the viewer into an elite world, first with street signs marking the entrance to Beverly Hills and Rodeo Drive, and then with quick cuts of Warner and her trainers in the gym, on the gym equipment, and shots of their well-toned bodies. Along with the images, the show’s theme song establishes a tone of fame, voyeurism, and exhibitionism that comes from the worked out body: “you can really work it out...Beverly Hills where the rich keep it sexy, work hard, play hard, turn into celebrities...whatever drives your passion, Jackie keeps you motivated, top of your game, your lifestyle will change....” Opening with Beverly Hills culture establishes a tone of an elite world of fitness and beauty that only few attain. Like much of TV, it targets working class or lower-middle class viewers who are aspiring to make it in a white-collar world. There are no signifiers of Warner’s sexuality or lesbianism in general. The show’s title sequence codes itself foremost as high-class rather than as conventionally lesbian.

Contrary to assumptions about U.S. lesbian consumers and audiences, narrow-casting and niche marketing provide fertile ground for representations of lesbian sexuality. Since the early 1980s, cable has been seen as an efficient and relatively inexpensive way to target narrow segments of viewers, offering a remedy for under-represented minorities. Satellites and the
government’s relaxation of cable’s restrictive structures allowed the industry to become a major force in providing high quality television to consumers. In this environment, large networks established numerous niche cable stations aimed at smaller audiences. Targeting niche audiences creates an intimate and loyal relationship between specific groups of viewers and cable channels.

Unlike broadcast channels, which are subject to heavy regulation because they use public airwaves, cable is a profit-driven, private enterprise, one that is less regulated and more diverse in its ownership. Cable’s fewer regulations tend to mean more sex, violence, and profanity, as well as more images of non-heteronormative sexualities, such as lesbianism. At the same time, as profit-driven companies, cable channels still require minimum audience numbers to get the advertising revenue needed to sustain and market themselves. As Katherine Sender notes, “In order to be included in the Nielsen Cable Activity Report, the cable equivalent to the broadcast television ratings, a cable channel has to be available in at least 3.3 percent of U.S. households and to generate a minimum .1 rating in those households (approximately 100,000 homes).” This dynamic forces cable channels to constantly walk a fine line between targeting small, loyal audiences and appealing to a big enough audience to keep advertisers invested. With channel proliferation, this also means maintaining a uniqueness that distinguishes each cable channel from the hundreds of others that target niche markets.

Showtime, like other premium cable networks, courts a loyal customer base through programming choices, advertising in LGBT publications, and sponsoring fundraisers with LGBT organizations such as GLAAD and HRC. These promotional tactics target LGBT viewers who presumably are out, interested in LGBT-directed products, and who actively support LGBT rights. As research by scholars such as Larry Gross, Katherine Sender, and Suzanna Walters shows, a particular consumer image drives these promotional strategies. As Walters says in her history of gay visibility in the U.S., “the image of free-spending, brand-loyal gays has captivated public relations firms, animated corporate headquarters, and excited gays themselves.” These consumers are presumably financially able to be out, to buy print or TV subscriptions, and have the money and time to pay for and attend fundraisers.

Julia Himberg is a graduate student in the Division of Critical Studies, School of Cinematic Arts at USC.

Notes

4. Sedgwick.
5. Gomez, Marga. “Lesbian AWOL: Switching Teams Once in a While is Okay As Long As you’re Hot.” The Village Voice, June 20, 2005.