First Contact: Queer Theory, Sexual Identity, and "Mainstream" Film

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This paper begins by raising questions about the role of queer theory in media critique, centering on a discussion of four recent "mainstream" mass-circulation films with significant lesbian and/or gay content. It is asserted that these films operate within accepted discourses on sexuality that require both the notions of public self-disclosure and of the "truth" of the hetero/homo binary. The methods used by media productions to disseminate that discourse from a lesbian/gay point of view are discussed in terms of the implications of such mass-circulation films being for many persons a "first contact" point with that discourse.

KEY WORDS: identity; binaries; film.

In most discussions of the development of sexual identities among youth—particularly those focusing on non-heterosexual sexualities—a large emphasis is placed on the availability of resources and the visibility of other lesbian and gay people. As Steven Harsin (1991) put it in discussing male youth sexuality:

Most young men who are homosexual are not raised in an environment in which homosexual development is even recognized, much less encouraged. It is not unusual for men who have recently identified themselves as gay to not have any idea what being gay is all about (p. 31).

A claim is made for an over-riding "need" for resources that describe non-heterosexuality and provide material from which to construct a sexuality that differs from the heterosexual (for which there is a great proliferation of material throughout film, televised media, family, and institutionalized education). That those who construct non-heterosexual sexualities "learn" about homosexuality (Harsin, 1991, p. 31) is an important point. As Willie Edwards (1996) pointed out: "Homosexual identity formation may be less traumatic if information that explains or gives some rational explanation to the adolescent's homosexual feelings and behaviours is provided".

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known as "queer theory" have an important role to play in understanding the production of sexuality. The particular strands of queer theory that appeal to me here are those developed by Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Throughout the work of both theorists is an element of questioning regimes of the normal, the dominant notions of the natural, and a will to critical investigation of sexuality and gender categories. For Butler (1990), identities (including sexuality-related identities) are the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses, regulatory fictions that are reiteratively produced and sustained through a series of social performances (pp. 40–41). Sedgwick, in her canonical work Epistemology of the Closet (1990), seeks to show the political and discursive stakes in the establishment of a sexuality-based binary of hetero/homo in order to suggest that this binary, likewise, can operate as a regulatory fiction. Queer theory is beneficial for understanding the construction of notions of sexuality that go beyond ideas of "the natural"—ideas of a genetic and fixed set of sexual categories in opposition—and for understanding and actively opposing notions of sexuality and sexual labeling that are simplistically and discursively reduced so as to ignore the role in sexuality-based description and identity construction that are played by means of time, space, need, material condition, and class demarcations—in other words, desire not grounded in gender-object-of-choice. The anti-foundationalist, essentialism-questioning stance of this strand of queer theory is well-placed to make a valuable contribution to a re-reading of the understanding of mainstream media "invisibility" and "partial visibility" of non-heterosexual sexualities that emerged from within Lesbian and Gay Studies.

Queer theory as a textual reading practice risks making its explorations into media productions that evidence too clearly a disruption of established sexual categories and the accepted notions of identitarian coherence within the terms of a dichotomy of sexuality. This is strikingly similar to the approach taken by Screen Theory, in which cinema productions that appeared to be disruptive of "natural" taken-for-granted notions of subjectivity came to be the dominant field of exploration. While this is a useful task for queer theory, I suggest there is a more urgent need to explore the "mainstream" production of discourses of sexuality for two reasons: (1) in the case of youth sexuality development these films are more likely to provide the iterative sources for the production of sexuality-based identities, and (2) avant-garde film—which is where a viewer will find evidence of disruption of those categories of identity—attract a very specific audience made

3The set of Lacanian-based psychoanalytic theories developed within the journal Screen, which implied the ultimate hegemony of media discourse on "audiences." In its development, the theory held a belief that avant-garde strategies were the only proper means of ideological intervention in the cinema and, hence, explored those films that appeared disruptive of the hegemonic construction of language and subjectivity. O'Shaughnessy 1992, pp. 12–15.

4An example being, perhaps, Gregg Araki's Daze Generation, which he subtitled "a heterosexual movie." The film openly questions the production of identity and the fluidity of the hetero/homo binary through its road-movie style exploration of the relationship between two young male characters and one female character.
up of those who have the cultural knowledge to make the necessary interpretations such non-"realist" viewing requires. Instead, what needs to be asked by queer theory is how, in general, can we understand the ways in which high-circulation films construct and maintain the very binaries and identities that queer theory seeks, as praxis, to deconstruct and de-naturalise. Such an exploration should provide not only new ways of understanding the role of mainstream media in the construction and normalisation of "minoritarian" identities, but strengthen the role of queer theory as an academic discourse by opening new subject areas for its explorations.

OUTDATED SCRIPTS: MEDIA INVISIBILITY

The useful and powerful contributions to the field of understanding lesbian/gay sexualities in relation to mainstream media made by Larry Gross and Vito Russo in the 1980s and early 1990s are, in light of the recent proliferation of large-scale films with lesbian/gay content, requisite of re-readings. Gross (1991) was once able to claim that there is a relative invisibility of lesbian/gay persons in mainstream media in terms of representation in mass culture media as power itself (p. 21). It is no longer possible to make a claim to "invisibility" of lesbian/gay subjects, particularly in light of the increasing inclusion by Hollywood film producers of lesbian/gay characters as either support or central. Vito Russo, in his important book The Celluloid Closet (1981), explored the production, or more specifically the inclusion, of non-heterosexuality in mass-circulation film. In terms of the 1968 over-turning of the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code5 that banned the "obvious" portrayal of lesbian/gay characters, themes, or sexual practices, Russo showed the way in which homoeroticism and non-heteronormative sexualities can be viewed as "hidden" interpretative-reliant elements in early films, and as based in "negative" stereotypes in post-1968 productions. Both Gross and Russo fail to provide adequate accounts for this media-relative invisibility or negativity in their failure to deconstruct the notion of a lesbian/gay identity. Such identities are presented as "natural," existent if hidden, minoritarian, and fixed. Further, Russo presents the film industry and the notion of media production as a reflection, however inadequate, of the real (Russo 1981, pp. 188-189)—a notion that has been much problematised since. Finally, when Gross states that "we continue to press upon the media our claims for equitable and respectful treatment" (1991, p. 45), he relies on a notion of a collective "we" made up of fixed, coherent identifications of "sameness," and on the idea that there would be some sort of "progress" if there were greater lesbian/gay visibility in mainstream film.

What is evident is an important difference between the understanding of film media from the lesbian and gay studies perspective clearly advocated by both Gross and Russo and that which can be posited through queer theory is that it is no longer possible to see submerged or interpretable homoeroticism or negative stereotyping as applicable to fixed notions of lesbian/gay identities. We can no longer suggest that such-and-such a character was, perhaps, really lesbian, because we are no longer able to rely on a naturalised category of "lesbian."

However, the increasing "visibility" of characters that are portrayed as fixed in their lesbian/gay sexuality and identity evidences, perhaps, a will to display and educate a mass audience of a "truth" of lesbian/gay identity: that is, the productions produce an easily-read fiction of fixed sexual categories and identities. Rosemary Hennessy (1994) argues that any current increased visibility of lesbian/gay portrayals in the media has a great deal more to do with a newly sanctioned set of representations based in a middle-class urban fascination for the other (p. 88). While this fascination might appease the appetites of a particular segment of the audience, it is my over-riding concern for the "young" audience in the process of developing ways of understanding their own sexuality, and those who are likely to "learn" through the iterative performances provided on the big screen, particularly when the filmic representations of lesbian/gay subjects are now increasingly touted as both visible and positive.

RECEPTION

But how do potential lesbian/gay subjects receive mainstream mass culture? Is it possible to suggest a coherent way of understanding the presumed message of lesbian/gay reiterated identitarian performance on-screen? Theories of reception and audience have been much problematised over the past two decades (Moore, 1993). Where Screen Theory's textual determination method in which audience members were reduced to a set of textually inscribed "subject positions" with no room for resistance or negotiation of understanding has been strongly discredited, the understanding of textual reception proposed by Stuart Hall (1993) in his "encoding/decoding" essay has prevailed for a much longer period. Hall, working with the Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, suggested that media messages can be explained as coded by media producers and decoded by audience recipients according to their various social, cultural, educational, class (etc.) backgrounds. Further, this influential essay suggested that there are three specific reading positions that permit, firstly, a hegemonic-dominant or preferred meaning in which the audience member takes the message directly and decodes it in terms of the reference codes in which the message was encoded (Hall, 1993, p. 101). The second position is a negotiated one, in which decoding involves a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements—it "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, if
a more restricted, situational (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule" (p. 102). This position permits decoding to be oppositional for some elements, while other, specific, and logical elements are decoded in terms of the preferred code. An example might be a viewer who reads a call to "come out" as a necessary global step for lesbian/gay political practice, but not in his or her own local case. Finally, the purely oppositional code permits the viewer to de-totalise the message and re-totalise it in a purely contrary way (p. 103). In this case, a viewer might read every mention of an essentialist homosexual/heterosexual binary not as information about a natural order but as a hegemonic attempt to control and separate specific sexual practices.

More recent theories of reception have suggested there is no definable effect or influence of media examples on any given audience, that meanings are reconstructed to such an extent by audience members that we are unable to analyse potential effects or potential responses to a media production (Allor, 1995, p. 55). Tony Bennett (1983) takes meaning as something that can only be produced in its reception, and suggests that Hall’s three-tiered decoding relies unnecessarily on the notion that texts have meaning that can be interpreted. He is critical of the media theorist’s methods of first analysing the text for its possible meanings, and going on to examine how audiences interpret those meanings variably. This and other recent theories have led to, for example, populist views of audience as re-construing, resisting, and recycling any or every media example for a viewer’s own purposes (e.g., see Fiske, 1989)—extreme views that jettison the political implications of diverse readings (e.g., homophobic ones) from a particular text. While Bennett’s theory makes a cogent point about whose meaning we refer to when we discuss a text, it does not take into account the multiple levels of communication and coding that might occur in a text. Readings are always open to the possibility of resistance to what we might understand as a preferred code. In the case of sexuality and sexual identity in mass-circulation film, it can easily be inferred that a large portion of perceived audience, and particularly that which we might call the "youth audience," have had very limited prior contact with ideas and knowledges of non-heteronormative sexualities and are thus less likely to make a resistant or oppositional reading to the closed discourses of sexuality that operate as information or resource on the big screen. In other words, and in line with the cultural studies understanding of reception, memory and experience are necessary for any oppositional reading of a text—if these are not present, and diverse experience is less likely among majority youth audiences (though, of course, not completely absent)—a simplistic preferred reading of the discourses communicated in a film is more likely to be made, taking those discourses as unquestionable information rather than as one specific and particular understanding of sexuality among many.

In the case of the construction of sexuality and sexual identities, a matter to which I will return, it is important to be careful not to make the assumption that sexual identities, as an "inner" construction, are the social positions from which mass-entertainment media are read, with media’s role being to influence the adaption of a particular “outer” stereotype. This “inner” and “outer” constitutes a binary distinction that, as Judith Butler (1990) suggests, stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject (p. 134). When Larry Gross (1991), Vito Russo (1981), and other film critics suggest that media portrayals of lesbian/gay subjects are “positive” or “negative,” they are relying on that which is the coherent identity of audience members who respond to or “receive”, (or “learn”) the stereotypes as social performances. Both identities and stereotypes are performative, and while one may lead to another (in multiple directions), it needs to be clearly understood that “stereotypes” are not a simple overlaying of traits on an already fixed identity. Likewise, it is necessary to avoid imagining that there are fixed lesbian/gay identities in the audience that are waiting for the necessary information or resource in which they can come out; in which to “be honest” as it were.

In the recent proliferation of Hollywood films that portray lesbian and gay themes or characters, one of the most recent is My Best Friend’s Wedding, which includes a gay male character, one who seems to have been his sexuality, able to provide support and concern for the women with whom he mixes. As in many other similar cases, characters are so fixed in their own “homosexuality” that the question of sexuality in their relationship with women is humorously played with, but proven to be, in the film’s finality, taboo. This, I suspect, will remain a standard for some time in films that include a “gay” character in a support role. The three other films discussed here are productions that attempt some sort of explanation of sexuality in what is often a demeaning, anthropological style: In and Out, Chasing Amy, and The Object of My Affection. In these three films, I found two disturbing elements: one was a thoroughly-preached insistence that non-heterosexual characters have a responsibility to be “honest” about their sexuality in a highly public way, the other was a binary divide of sexuality into two—heterosexuality and homosexuality—which dismissed any notion of a real or latent bisexuality, or, alternatively, of a sexual fluidity or a sexuality that might be understood along lines other than gender-object-of-choice. Unlike My Best Friend’s Wedding, these films actually go either cross the binary by permitting characters with a self-declared sexual identity to question their identity or even to cross that binary via sexual experience, though each, as I go on to argue, uses certain tools, codes, and generic traditions to recuperate any displacement of the binary. The films also suggest an avoidance of sexual experimentation and fail to acknowledge that sexualities are social constructs understood only within the dominant social discourses of the West. In some readings, it is possible to suggest that these films were establishing themselves as authorities on human sexuality while reinforcing the maintenance of sexual categories. While such films might assume they are providing entertainment for a straight audience, it is important to note that in such audiences, there are those people seeking vital information resources for the building of an understanding of sexuality—that I do not by any means want to suggest that this is a "conscious"
act” requiring the agency of the audience member. It might also be noted that the non-heterosexual characters in almost all Hollywood films are white, middle-class and predominantly male, though there is little room here to discuss the ways in which audience members positioned outside of those constructs might “receive” the media samples differently. More importantly is the way in which these three films establish themselves as communicating the “truths” of human sexuality—an element of mass-circulation media’s portrayal of non-heterosexuality that is traditional (Russo, 1981, p. 170). Given the semiotic codes that indicate “truth” of content in a realist-based drama or dramatic comedy, I would suggest that these elements are most often received as true by an audience predominantly unaware of alternative, resistant, academic, or textual-reading discourses.

THE SAFE BEST FRIEND

When Julianne Potter (Julia Roberts) is having trouble winning back her male ex-lover, Michael (Dermot Mulroney)—who has for years been her “best friend”—through attempting to disrupt his impending wedding to another woman, she calls on the services of her close friend and editor George Downes (Rupert Everett). Flying to Chicago to be with her, he poses during a number of scenes as her new lover. In what is probably the most memorable scene in the film, he initiates a sing-along at a restaurant with the bride’s family—leading them in Burt Bacharach and Dionne Warwick’s I Say A Little Prayer. While being “camp” and yet present as Julianne’s lover, George plays with the gay male stereotype in a way that obscures his sexuality from all but Julianne and Michael. George is able to play with stereotypes in this scene, but the film overall recuperates any hint of stretching of boundaries. The other characters might wonder about his sexuality, particularly since his claim that he “pretends to be gay” in order to attract women is cast as a very fragile justification. But any question over his true sexuality is not relevant for long to the story-line: the audience knows he is gay, not just because of pre-stated elements early in the plot or by what is an easily identified stereotype, but also by the public “outness” of the actor Rupert Everett.

George has information about how to get by in life, though Julianne does not necessarily take it. Like many other or marginalised characters in films, he understands and sees the truth, and the future, advising from a perspective of alienation. Usefully, this marginalisation is disrupted from the very opening scene, in which we learn of George’s sexuality: Julianne describes her ex-lover to him as, “He’s like you, only straight.” She thus objectifies the “straight male” as other, as the marginalised. Effectively, this is what we can describe as a positive depiction of a gay male character—a “safe” depiction.

But what of their friendship? In a scene set in the back of a cab in which George and Julianne attempt to convince Michael that they are lovers, George performs his heterosexuality and his romantic interest in Julianne to an extreme: touching her breasts, kissing her, holding her tightly. Although she struggles, she treats his physical proximity as pest, not as problem. This is starkly contrasted to her reactions to Michael’s physical proximity in several scenes that disturb her and serve to remind her both of their past and the potential for re-kinding any previous sexual relationship. The gay male’s physical proximity is never a threat—a gay man is “safe”; he can touch her, fondle her, but this is not, and can never be, sexual.

The closing scene of the film at the reception of the wedding that has now gone ahead, has George re-appearing, though obscured by the crowd but talking to Julianne on their mobile telephones. He says:

Suddenly a familiar song, and you’re off your chair, one exquisite movement. Wandering, searching, sniffing the wind like a dappled deer. Has God heard your little prayer? Will Cinderella dance again? And then suddenly the crowds part and there he is: sleek, stylish, radiant with charisma. He’s on the telephone, but then so are you. And he comes towards you, the moves of a jungle cat. And although you quite correctly sense that he is gay, like most devastatingly handsome single men of his age are, you think, what the hell, he goes on. Maybe there won’t be marriage, maybe there won’t be sex (grimmace) but by God, there’ll be dancing.

The importance of this statement is carried by the fact that these are some of the last spoken words in the film. And thoroughly, the sum of what was the entire problem of the film: that a best friend is not someone with whom sexual expression is a possibility: that it is difficult and perhaps impossible to be best friends with a former lover. But with George, she can be best friends, because sex and love and romance are not part of the equation. Dancing: yes. Sex, marriage, romance: impossible. By depicting the gay male and straight female friendship as a “safe” one, as one in which dancing is for amusement and fails to carry connotations of romance, the film asserts a certain fixity to sexual binaries. By characterising the friendship as safe and productive, and by answering the problem of the best friend in the final scene, it suggests that any play with sexual identities, any crossing of the heterosexual/homosexual divide would be not only problematic, but would rock the boat, as it were.

My Best Friend’s Wedding operates at a very “safe” level. By pushing any “play” with boundaries into the realm of the stereotype—as if stereotypical behaviours were, as I have remarked, to be seen as an “outer” level to a true and fixed sexual identity—it leaves sexual identity and the heterosexual/homosexual binary as unquestioned. The three films I discuss below in fact do attempt some questioning of the binary, either in their treatment of coming out, or in the actual depictions of sexual expression that crosses the gender divide.

IN AND OUT, AND THE “HONESTY” SYNDROME

While the film In and Out breaks an important code of Hollywood production of lesbian/gay characters—that they could not be the “hero” of the text (Russo 1981, p. 134)—it contains some questionable stereotyping and sexuality-based “information” that, although received by critics as “positioning”...
remains, in the light of a queer theory reading, questionable. The film describes the coming out process of a thirty-something small-town male teacher, Howard (Kevin Kline), which is sparked during the Academy Awards ceremonies as a former student "outs" him, presuming Howard is gay on the basis of his tastes and relative rejection of the small-town masculine role. This outing, only days before Howard's impending marriage to a female teacher, causes him to question his sexuality, as journalists from national media press him for explanations. In a scene in which Howard attempts to reject the possibility of non-heterosexuality, he listens to a self-help tape that promises to establish his masculinity. The tape dialogue goes:

Welcome to our series on exploring your masculinity. This is audio tape number one: "Getting a Grip." Are you dressed in suitably masculine attire? Are you in control? Are you ready to take charge? Are you a man? Stand up. Stand straight and tall. Excuse me—are we a little teapot? Untuck our shirt, just one side. You hate this don't you? You want to be neat. You want to be tidy? Adjust yourself. Not there—the package, skinny-man, the family jewels. Grab 'em. You're in the bar-room. Repeat after me. "Yoo-Hot-damn! What a fabulous window-treatment." That was a trick. We have come to the most critical area of masculine behaviour. Dancing (one Ceylon, disco track). Truly musty men don't dance, under any circumstances. This will be your ultimate test. At all costs avoid rhythm, grace, and pleasure. Whatever you do, do not dance. Can you hear it? Can you hear the demon? "Dance," the demon whispers. Everyone else is dancing, they're getting lucky. Having fun... Men don't dance. They work, they drink, they do not dance. (Howard dances excitedly around the room.)

There are two elements suggested by this tongue-in-cheek scene that might infect attitudes on sexuality and sexual identity. The first is that sexuality is inherent, genetic, and physical, that the physical capabilities of the body are inextricably linked with sexual preference or orientation. If you are able to do one, you are likely to do the other. This, I suggest, is positing a certain and unfair confusion to any audience member in the process of question sexuality. What might it suggest to adolescent viewers—that if one dances, then one is clearly gay and not straight? Or that if one prefers not to dance, then that clearly indicates a heterosexual sexuality? The conflation of sexuality and other bodily pleasures here is not necessarily grounded in any contemporary sense of logic, but appears to be an act of stereotyping that relies on older, now often dismissed, notions of a link between an old-style masculinity and sexual choices. Although it provides entertainment for an audience, it also risks communicating conflicting informational resources for the young person developing an understanding of sexuality. The second element in that scene is the conflation of questioned masculinity with questioned sexuality. Likewise, this is a confused linking of gender and sexuality that provides, perhaps, too much misleading information on which a person can draw for the development of a sexuality. This scene, however, is open to a variety of meanings, meanings that are activated at their point of reception by an audience member. At one level, it seems quite obviously to operate as parody. However, parody itself relies on significant knowledge of that which is being parodied. This is a prime example of where the dynamic between Hall's (1993) preferred reading in the dominant-hegemonic code, and resistant reading in an oppositional code can be seen to occur. Without prior knowledge of that rhetoric, which is parodied by the tape, the preferred meaning—parody—cannot be taken. The social and experiential background of a youth audience member might well mean that such rhetoric is not available for the scene to be understood as parody, and an oppositional code, in which the message is de-totalised as parody and re-totalised as information occurs.

Running throughout the film is a theme that deals with "coming out" as honesty. In a great deal of lesbian/gay discourse, there is an implied pressure to "come out"—to state one's sexuality clearly and precisely—as if there is a responsibility to the self and "the community." This is problematic: the pressure for young people to come out and state a definitive sexuality commonly leads to homelessness, educational and social problems, violence, and—as we have seen fairly recently in the case of murdered University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard—death. On the basis of such experiences, what should instead be advocated by a lesbian/gay discourse—one grounded in a concern for youth, safety, and so on—is the idea that a person should state her/his sexuality only in strategic ways, and that there is no moral compulsion towards some mythical sense of honesty or social responsibility or necessary visibility. Such a "moral" has been part of lesbian/gay culture for almost three decades. In his Homosexual Oppression and Liberation (1971), Dennis Altman suggests that to come out means defying the most basic and deep-seated norms of a society that sees itself as based exclusively on the heterosexual family structure (p. 27). Altman, however, also describes it as essential for those practicing non-heteronormative sexualities to come out as "gay" in order for the development of a sense of community (p. 141) for the sake of the personal as well as for the political in a bold move, as the rhetoric once suggested, "out of the closets, into the streets" (p. 237). Although the former proponents of "coming out"—the Gay Liberation movement and its related discourses—are no longer part of a lesbian/gay culture, which has moved into a "civil rights" political mode, the lesbian/gay discursive construction of community is reliant on a policing of its borders through the necessity of its members being out about their sexual identity. Recently, the idea of coming out has been criticised, and most evocatively (if humorously) by Mark Simpson (1996) who rejects the idea that:

Coming out is thus a moment of revelation and redemption: I was blind, but now I see; I was lost, but now I found... And it has to be the case; doesn't it? If coming out isn't a coming home, then it would mean that homosexuals were still lost souls who have to face the universe alone. And that would be a bit of a downer, really (pp. 5, 6).

Regardless of such criticisms, "coming out" is a major element of lesbian/gay discourse and its subsequent rhetoric as found in lesbian/gay community media publications. Similarly, it is the message in such mainstream films as In and Out. And...
if it is not about a coming out to oneself (the realisation that one is lesbian or gay), it is about being public about one’s sexual identity. Contemporary Western culture shuns the idea of leading a double-life—the accusation frequently made about people expressing non-heteronormative sexual behaviour who fail to self-proclaim a sexual identity as “gay” or “lesbian.” Educated through film (Russo, 1981, p. 192) as well as through religion and education is the oft-repeated notion that those leading a so-called “double life” are not to be trusted, or that they are in some ways defective as “normal” or “ethical” persons (q.v. also Altman, 1971, p. 49). During In and Out, Howard talks with journalist Peter Molloy (Tom Selleck) who explains his own coming out:

HOWARD: Why am I talking to you? You couldn’t possibly understand what this is like.

PETER: Howard, I’m gay. I’m gay. I came out. . .

HOWARD: To whom?

PETER: To everyone—my folks, my boss, my dog. One day, I just snapped. I got tired of switching pronouns and lowering my voice. I couldn’t take lying to the people I loved.

Later, as the wedding between Howard and Emily precedes as planned, the moment of self-questioning for Howard finally comes as the honesty myth is reiterated once more during the marriage vows:

PRIEST: A marriage is truly a blessed event. It must be a union based on deepest love, total kindship, and absolute honesty. Let us begin.

Howard “comes out” at this point to his bride. What is disturbing in this element of the film is the unquestioned nature of “honesty.” It might be read as a suggestion that being “out,” being “honest” is an ethical responsibility for a young person questioning her or his sexuality, forcing both a decision without experience, and an articulation of that decision without fore-thought towards the social, economic, and educational effects. This will to honesty is complex and has conflicting elements. As the debate about gay and lesbian persons in the United States military and Australian armed forces has confirmed, society is willing to give a non-heterosexual person equal opportunity, but only as long as that person is (a) open about their sexuality if questioned, and (b) makes that sexuality invisible if so required (Bersani, 1995, p. 67). This is a double-bind that, I believe, leads to dangerous territory for the young person exploring her or his sexuality; a question-mark remains over how and where to find that middle-ground between honesty and invisibility that is a social requirement.

More importantly is the question placed over the coping strategies of “non-heterosexual” youth. Among the methods of “coping,” discovered by Willie Edwards (1996) is that of “passing” (“remaining closeted”) (p. 338). C. A. B. Warren (1974) referred to character management and social presentation of one’s self as a necessary coping strategy, referring to this as “avoidance without hiding” (p. 94). R. R. Troiden (1988) likewise referred to it as “blending,” suggesting that people in “coping” situations “blend act in gender-appropriate ways and deny their homosexual identities to nonhomosexual others” (p. 56). None of these strategies are the equivalent of invisibility. With the pressure that films such as In and Out create by correlating passing or blending with dishonesty, one of the important coping strategies becomes both tainted and taught as unacceptable. And we should remember that the unacceptable of passing is one that comes from both Hollywood films and from the discourse of the lesbian/gay community as well.

An alternative to this problem of being “in” or “out” is to take a key term from Judith Butler’s (1993) theory. Conscious acts of “performance” have often been mistaken as equivalent to Butler’s use of performatively, an equivalence she forcefully rejects (p. 2). However, “performance” might be a means to providing useful ways in which to conceive of “coming out” away from issues of honesty. Given the potential dangers I have cited in being out within certain frames, it would seem probable that a more appropriate communication of advice to younger persons in terms of being out is to perform outside within certain strategic frames and not in others. This serves to make a necessary disruption to the binary categories in which one can be gay or lesbian in a particular social setting, and not in others. This would not necessarily imply a dishonesty; instead it is merely a different performance in those risky spaces.

IN/OUT AND OTHER BINARIES

Both In and Out and Chasing Amy establish sexuality as a binary, divided solely and simply into “heterosexuality” and “homosexuality,” with any cross of the border a mistake, an unacceptable transgression doomed to failure, or an impossibility. In the case of Howard in In and Out, he has not had a bodily sexual experience with his future bride, and this is later justified by his non-heterosexuality. But it is also used to justify his non-heterosexuality. In other words, it is further evidence of his “gyneness” : if he cannot consummate with a woman, then automatically he belongs in the “other camp.” Chasing Amy actually permits the crossing of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, but only as a temporary measure while Alyssa discovers the “true” objects of her affections.

In an important scene in the second film in Kevin Smith’s trilogy, the audience is taught the dangers of assuming that a person can “change” their sexuality. As Holden (Ben Affleck) confesses his “love” to Alyssa (Joey Lauren Adams), she leaves the car to run away. Chased, this exchange follows:

ALYSSA: Fuck you. That was so unfair. You know how unfair that was.

HOLDEN: What is unfair, that I’m in love with you?

3The earlier two being Clerks and Mallrats; this one receiving the widest distribution and critical interest.
that traditionally the film genre relies on brief and-to-the-point justifications if they are to be accepted) indicates the instability of the justification. Secondly, and more importantly, this justification is dismissed by a certain meta-level operation of temporal beginning-end in line with the film-as-genre. The final scene depicts Alyssa, some time after the end of her relationship with Holden (which occurs, in fact, as a result of his discovery of her overall sexual permissiveness with both men and women), with another woman whom we can presume to be her new and current lover. She begins as a lesbian, she ends as one. That communicates a great deal more when taking the film in its entirety as a resource for the circulation of discourses of sexuality. Crossing the binarid divide is possible, but the happy ending occurs only when one crosses back to the true and proper sexual identity. Her promiscuous behaviour as a schoolgirl—temporarily prior to her lesbianism in the film’s retrospective analysis—is recuperated as teenage experimentation. I don’t here wish to dismiss the openness of this text to its interpretation as one that authorises the crossing of the sexuality binary, but when understood in its entirety and as a resource for knowledges on sexualities taken by a young audience with no previous contact with such discourses, it would seem likely that it communicates a message suggesting that the sexuality binary is something not to be displaced. In other words, several meanings are possible in the film, the one which is taken will depend on the overall emphasis given by an audience member to the generic production code of "happy ending" via restoration; a code that can override any displacements indicated in smaller portions of the text.

The film, Object of My Affection, has a highly similar discursive production of fixity and categorisation. The plot deals with George Hanson (Paul Rudd), a young white gay male teacher who moves in with Nina Borowski (Jennifer Aniston), a young white female straight social worker. Nina is pregnant, and rather than choosing to raise her child with the biological father or with another male in a monogamous coupled relationship, she decides to bring up the child with George. At first rejecting Nina’s invitation to play the fatherly role, George claims he would be content as an “uncle” to the child. After seeing the ill-treatment Nina receives, however, from the over-bearing biological father, George agrees that he is the suitable choice for “Dad.” After reassuring George that there is no problem for him to bring other men back to the apartment (in their attempt to “make new rules” for family life), Nina lies with him on her bed, chatting as was their custom. Happy, they hug.

GEORGE: Do you think most married couples are as happy as we are?
NINA: I hope so. Because we’re pretty happy.

GEORGE: I guess sex is just... no big deal

NINA: Not even with Lucy June? Her high-school girlfriend, his “phase”?

GEORGE: I just adore your Nina.

They kiss briefly on the lips. Another kiss, slower, eyes fluttering. She puts her hand inside his shirt, undoes it, kisses his stomach working upwards. He smiles.
fleeting. They kiss passionately, his hand heading down the back of her jeans. She undoes his pants, her head in the vicinity of his crotch… the phone rings. It is his ex-boyfriend Dr. Joley. They are literally saved by the bell. The “moment” is gone by the time the phone-call is over.

Increasingly infatuated with her housemate, Nina spends time away from him with her older sister, Constance (Allison Janney). Although Constance is characterised as a high-bourgeois wealthy mother whose only goals in life are making certain she maintains her privileged position mixing with the well-to-do, she imparts some advice to her sister:

CONSTANCE: Read my lips: George is G.A.Y. GAY! That means he never sleeps with women.

NINA: He has slept with a woman! Lucy Jane Farrell.

CONSTANCE: Oh please, don’t tell me, in high school? They all try women once in high school. But you’re nuts enough to believe that based on that experience, you can bring him to his senses...

After George begins a relationship with a young male actor, after Nina experiences pangs of jealousy, the two realise that their re-writing of family rules is unworkable, and the film ends with a four-year old daughter addressing George as “uncle,” and Nina living with a heterosexual male lover.

What can be understood in the logical paradigms established within this film’s discourse is the danger of attempting to break or manipulate what might be considered the “natural laws” of family, sexuality, and relationships. Although their “moment” indicates a possibility that George and Nina could experience the sort of experimental, non-fixed, or contingent sexuality that, it could be said, would be advocated by a queer theoretical approach to sexuality, it occurs in the midst of the film. Given the genre (dramatic comedy), the event is cast as the film’s “problem,” as the “hurdle” that either must be surmounted or turned away from for the “good” of all characters involved.

Older sister Constance (whose name symbolically suggests the on-goingness of good advice and common sense) communicates to Nina the “truths” of human sexuality: that anyone who believes they can become sexually involved with someone of the “other” sexual persuasion is a fool. Both Chasing Amy and Object of My Affections recuperate either the potential for crossing the heterosexual/homosexual binary, or the actual events through the use of genres, codings, characterisations, and temporal sequencing. Both films place any crossing of the binary in the temporal centre of the scenes. Given the plot operations of most films in terms of the conventional genre in which the problem occurs just before the middle and a return to some sort of stability is necessarily the end despite what might be learned-on-the-way, these two films permit a recuperation of any displacement of the sexuality binary—whether potential or experienced—by the restoration of characters to the sexuality positioning at which they began.

The same effect can also be achieved through certain characterisations and character manipulations. A very recent example worthy of brief mention here is The Opposite of Sex, in which the young male lover of the central character’s brother is enticed into an other-sex relationship very briefly. Matt (Ivan Sergei) is characterised initially as the dumb houseboy; his lover’s sister, Dee (Christina Ricci) manipulatively convinces him that he is little more than a hustler, and thereby available to her. His character is thereby conflated with a tradition of hustler film characters who are “bisexual” (Bryant, 1997, p. 36). When she eventually dumps him by manipulatively telling him he’s gay, in dumb houseboy tones he says “so, I really am gay.” As in Chasing Amy and Object of My Affection, the character who crosses the binarial divide is restored to his former homosexual positioning by the end of the film, depicted in a relationship with another male.

**DISCURSIVELY VIOLENT**

I do not want to suggest that a “bisexual” or “cross-sexual” experience is necessarily subversive of the hetero/homo paradigm, since bisexuality has often been used in film to disguise or legitimise homosexuality (Russo, 1981, pp. 230–1), and the notion of a bisexual identity in contemporary discourse becomes “just another” sexuality position that fails to transgress the categorisations. However, a crossing of sexual categories can, or might, indicate the relative instability of the binaral heterosexual/homosexual fiction, and suggest that sexuality-based identities are not only contingent constructs but also normalisation regimes that can be resisted. Each of these films operates to reinforce the binarial separation of hetero/homo, to discredit the idea of sexual experimentation or a sexuality that might be based on something other than gender-objects-of-choice, and to insist on the essentialistic and naturalistic fiction of the fixed sexual identity.

While both heterosexist film discourse and lesbian/gay “community” discourse attempt to uphold this binary distinction between “gay/lesbian” and “straight,” queer theory, as well as some recent analytical research suggest that this may not necessarily be reflective of social reality. In a recent study on sexual identification, Willie Edwards (1996) surveyed thirty-seven black male “non-heterosexual” adolescents (aged 16–21, thirty percent aged 19), asking among other questions the label used to identify themselves. Forty-eight percent used the term “homosexual”; fifty-two stated they considered themselves “bisexual.” In the question asking if they had ever had intercourse with someone of the other sex, forty-one percent said “yes,” fifty-nine percent said “no” (pp. 340–342). One hundred percent, however, said they were attracted to both men and women no matter how they identified (pp. 344–345). Lesbian/gay discourse might suggest that these youth were in a process of acceptance and not able fully to disavow their “false” bisexuality, other researchers might claim that this bisexual desire is a social phenomenon found among African American youth raised in a specific
cultural environment, with alternative codings of sexuality. But to me, this finding indicates a predominance of bisexuality and a need or desire towards experimentation that might be dependent on time, place, and other factors that influence desire. In other words, the categorizations of sexuality into “homosexual” and “heterosexual” found in the above films, plus the exclusiveness of each category, is one that is not co-related in actual human behavior. This leads to questions about whether such films should repeatedly teach such categorizations to youth exploring sexuality.

I do not here wish to suggest that there is a “natural” underlying bisexuality waiting to be re-understood or manipulated along strict and mutually-exclusive codings of heterosexual versus homosexual by such films. Bisexuality— as a term— has already been co-opted by film discourses to serve as a self-explanatory middle-ground (q.v. Bryant, 1997). Rather than suggesting a latent but natural bisexuality, as Dennis Altman did (1971), I am positing instead the point that sexuality is performative—that it is understood and enacted through and by the reiterative language and connotative practices that restrict sexuality into certain binarary divisions that rely on gender-object-of-choice rather than any notion of sexual fluidity that displaces gender as the central determinant in which side of the divide a sexual subject can be positioned. In other words, what is hinted at in the mass-circulation films and constructed through various tools to potentially imply a negative is not necessarily in line with either the strategic deployment of sexuality by youth as suggested in the above surveys or the understandings of constructed and performative sexual identities as maintained by queer theory. While a difference in understanding between the discourses used by film and those elsewhere might not, in other circumstances, be problematic, I predict these films will tend to “enforce” these categorizations with limited resistance by youth in the face of an absence of alternative information promoting sexual experimentation that is non-gender specific.

As Waldner-Haagrud and Magruder (1996) put it:

homosexual identity formation entails increasing acceptance and application of the terms homosexual, gay, lesbian, queer, or dyke to the self despite possible resistance or negative sanctioning from society (p. 314).

What this suggests is that the binary that groups “homosexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “queer,” and “dyke” in opposition to “heterosexual” or “the norm” is one that is learned and accepted by those persons forming an identity that is not in line with accepted “heterosexuality.”

REFERENCES