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Media and Cultural Studies

KeyWorks

Edited by

Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner

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Note

1   There are films with a woman as the main protagonist, of course. To analyse this phenom-
    enon seriously here would take me too far afield. Pam Cook and Claire Johnston's study of
    The Revolt of Mamie Stover in Phil Hardy (ed.), *Raoul Walsh*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Film
    Festival (1974), shows in a striking case how the strength of this female protagonist is more
    apparent than real.

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Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media*

Larry Gross

In a society dominated by centralized sources of information and imagery, in which economic imperatives and pervasive values promote the search for large, common-denominator audiences, what is the fate of those groups who for one or another reason find themselves outside the mainstream? Briefly, and it is hardly a novel observation, such groups share a common fate of relative invisibility and demeaning stereotypes. But there are differences as well as similarities in the ways various minorities (racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, political) are treated by the mass media. And, given important differences in their life situations, members of such groups experience varying consequences of their mediated images.

In this chapter I will discuss the general question of minority perspectives applied to the study of mass media content and effects, and I will elaborate in greater detail the situation of sexual minorities (lesbian women and gay men) as members of the mass media audience.

Sexual minorities differ in important ways from the "traditional" racial and ethnic minorities; they are, in an interesting sense, akin to political minorities (so-called radicals and "fringe" groups). In both cases their members typically are self-identified at some point in their lives, usually in adolescence or later, and they are not necessarily easily identifiable by others. These two groups also constitute by their very existence a presumed threat to the "natural" (sexual and/or political) order of things, and thus they are inherently problematic and controversial for the mass media. These characteristics can be seen to affect the way members of such groups are depicted in the media (when they do appear), and also suggest ways to think about the effects of such depictions on the images held by society at large and by members of these minority groups.

Before turning to the discussion of minority audience perspectives, it would be helpful to characterize briefly the role of the mass media, television in particular, in our society.

The System is the Message

First, the economic, political, and social integration of modern industrial society allows few communities or individuals to maintain an independent integrity. We are parts of a Leviathan, like it or not, and its nervous system is telecommunications. Our knowledge of the "wide world" is what this nervous system transmits to us. The mass media provide the chief common ground among the different groups that make up a heterogeneous national 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.

Second, representation in the mediated "reality" of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that non-representation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. That is, while the holders of real power – the ruling class – do not require (or seek) mediated visibility, those who are at the bottom of the various power hierarchies will be kept in their places in part through their relative invisibility. This is a form of what Gerbner and I have termed symbolic annihilation.[1] Not all interests or points of view are equal; judgments are made constantly about exclusions and inclusions and these judgments broaden or narrow (mostly narrow) the spectrum of views presented.

Third, 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 entirely heterosexual (at least in public).

Fourth, we should not take too seriously the presumed differences between the various categories of media messages – particularly in the case of television. News, drama, quiz shows, sports, and commercials share underlying similarities of theme, emphasis, and value. Even the most widely accepted distinctions (i.e. news vs. fiction programs vs. commercials) are easily blurred. Decisions about which events are newsworthy and about how to present them are heavily influenced by considerations of dramatic form and content (e.g. conflict and resolution) that are drawn from fictional archetypes; and the polished mini-dramas of many commercials reveal a sophisticated mastery of fictional conventions, just as dramatic programs promote a style of consumption and living that is quite in tune with their neighboring commercial messages. More important, the blending of stylistic conventions allows for greater efficacy and mutual support in packaging and diffusing common values.

Fifth, the dominant conventions of our mass media are those of "realism" and psychologically grounded naturalism. Despite a limited degree of reflexivity which occasionally crops up, mainstream film and television are nearly always presented as transparent mediators of reality which 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 which take us behind the scenes to the otherwise inaccessible backstages 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 television 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 which derive wholly or in part from fictional representations. And, in a society which spans a continent, in a cosmopolitan culture which spans much of the globe, television and film provide the broadest common background of assumptions about what things are, how they work (or should work), and why.

Finally, the contributions of the mass media are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of groups and phenomena about which there is little first-hand 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.

Television as the Mainstream

The average American adult spends several hours each day in this television world; children spend even more of their lives immersed in its "fictional reality." As I have already suggested, the mass media, and television foremost among them, have become the primary sources of the common information and images that create and maintain a world view and a value system. In a word, the mass media have become central agents of enculturation. In the Cultural Indicators Project we have used the concept of "cultivation" to describe the influence of television on viewers' conceptions of social reality.[2]

In issue after issue we find that assumptions, beliefs, and values of heavy viewers of television differ systematically from those of light viewers in the same demographic groups. Sometimes these differences appear as overall, main effects, whereby those who watch more television are more likely – in all groups – to give what we call "television answers" to our questions. But in many cases the patterns are more complex. We have found that television viewing, not surprisingly, serves as a stable force differentially integrated into and interacting with different groups' life situations and world views. In our recent work we have isolated a consistent pattern which we have termed "mainstreaming."[3]

The mainstream can be thought of as a relative commonality of outlooks and values that television tends to cultivate in viewers. By mainstreaming we mean the sharing of that commonality among heavy viewers in those demographic groups whose light viewers hold divergent positions. In other words, differences deriving from other factors and social forces – differences that may appear in the responses of light viewers in various groups – may be diminished or even absent when the heavy viewers in these same groups are compared. Overall, television viewing appears to signal convergence of outlooks rather than absolute, across-the-board increments in all groups.

Choices or echoes?

The mainstream which we have identified as the embodiment of a dominant ideology, cultivated through the repetition of stable patterns across the illusory boundaries of media and genre, and absorbed by otherwise diverse segments of the population, nevertheless has to contend with the possibility of oppositional perspectives and interpretations. What options and opportunities are available to those groups whose concerns, values and even very existence are belittled, subverted, and denied by the mainstream? Can the power of the mass media's central tendencies be resisted? Can one avoid being swept into the mainstream? The answers to such questions depend in large part on which group or segment we are discussing; while many minorities are similarly ignored or distorted by the mass media, not all have the same options for resistance and the development of alternative channels.

In general the opportunities for organized opposition are greatest when there is a visible and even organized group which can provide solidarity and institutional means for creating and disseminating alternative messages. There are numerous examples of groupings that have sprung up, as it were, along the right bank of the mainstream. Most organized and visible among these are the Christian fundamentalist syndicated television programs. These programs provide their (generally older and less educated) viewers with an array of programs, from news to talk shows to soap operas to church services and sermons, all reflecting perspectives and values that they quite correctly feel are not represented in mainstream, prime-time television or in the movies.[4] As one of Hoover's conservative, religious respondents put it, in discussing network television:

> I think a good deal of it is written by very liberal, immoral people... Some of the comedies, the weekly things that go on every week, they make extramarital affairs, and sex before marriage an everyday thing like everybody should accept it... and they present it in a comic situation, a situation that looks like it could be fun and a good deal of these weekly shows I don't like go for that.[5]

The religious sponsoring and producing organizations are not merely engaged in meeting their audiences' previously unmet needs for a symbolic environment in which they feel at home; they are also attempting to translate the (usually exaggerated) numbers of their audiences and their (constantly solicited) financial contributions into a power base from which they can exert pressure to alter the channel of the mainstream and bring it even closer to where they now reside, up on the right bank.

At the moment, and for the foreseeable future in the United States, at least, there is no comparable settlement on the left bank of the mainstream. There are many reasons why the organized left has been unable to match the right's success in harnessing the available resources of media technology. It is not hard to see that some minority perspectives are in fact supportive of the dominant ideology, however much the media's need for massive audiences might sacrifice or offend their interests, while other minority values are truly incompatible with the basic power relationships embodied in that mainstream.

Minority positions and interests which present radical challenges to the established order will not only be ignored, they will be discredited. Those who benefit from the status quo present their position as the moderate center, balanced between equal and opposing "extremes" – thus the American news media's cult of "objectivity," achieved through a "balance" which reflects an invisible, taken-for-granted ideology. As a CBS spokesman explained it, when dismissing attempts by Jesse Helms and Ted Turner to take over the network:

> Anyone... who buys a media company for ideological reasons must be prepared to pay dearly for that conviction. The right-wingers and the left-wingers in this country are vociferous but small in number compared to the ordinary citizen, who, when it comes down to it, is a centrist.[6]

The fatal flaw in the credo of centrism and moderation is that how one defines the "responsible" extremes will determine where the center will fall. In the United States the mass media-legitimated spectrum runs a lot further right than it does left, which puts the "objectively balanced" mainstream clearly to the right of center. Jesse Helms can be elected and re-elected to the Senate and can embark on a public campaign to take over CBS; his opposite number on the left, whoever that might be, couldn't conceivably claim or receive that degree of visibility, power, and legitimacy.

Yet, in the final analysis, neither flank can avoid serving in one way or another to buttress the ramparts of the status quo, and to keep the truly oppositional from being taken seriously. American presidential politics recently featured a matched pair of Christian candidates, but neither the minister of the left, Jesse Jackson, nor the minister of the right, Pat Robertson, could hope to do more than exert some small pressure on their respective branches of the Property Party, whose two official divisions – the Democrats and the Republicans – offer an illusion of choice within the political mainstream.

Homosexuals and Television: Fear and Loathing

Close to the heart of our cultural and political system is the pattern of roles associated with sexual identity: our conceptions of masculinity and femininity, of the "normal" and "natural" attributes and responsibilities of men and women. And, as with other pillars of our moral order, these definitions of what is normal and natural serve to support the existing social power hierarchy.

The maintenance of the "normal" gender role system requires that children be socialized – and adults retained – within a set of images and expectations which limit and channel their conceptions of what is possible and proper for men and for women. The gender system is supported by the mass media treatment of sexual minorities. Mostly, they are ignored or denied – symbolically annihilated; when they do appear they do so in order to play a supportive role for the natural order and are thus narrowly and negatively stereotyped. Sexual minorities are not, of course, unique in this regard.[7] However, lesbians and gay men are unusually

vulnerable to mass media power; even more so than blacks, national minorities, and women. Of all social groups (except perhaps communists), we are probably the least permitted to speak for ourselves in the mass media. We are also the only group (again, except for communists and, currently, Arab "terrorists") whose enemies are generally uninhibited by the consensus of "good taste" which protects most minorities from the more public displays of bigotry.

The reason for this vulnerability lies in large part in our initial isolation and invisibility. The process of identity formation for lesbian women and gay men requires the strength and determination to swim against the stream. A baby is born and immediately classified as male or female, white or black, and is treated as such from that moment, for better or worse. That baby is also defined as heterosexual and treated as such. It is made clear throughout the process of socialization – a process in which the mass media play a major role – that one will grow up, marry, have children and live in nuclear familial bliss, sanctified by religion and licensed by the state. Women are surrounded by other women, people of color by other people of color, etc., and can observe the variety of choices and fates that befall those who are like them. Mass media stereotypes selectively feature and reinforce some of the available roles and images for women, national minorities, people of color, etc.; but they operate under constraints imposed by the audiences' immediate environment.

Lesbians and gay men, conversely, are a self-identifying minority. We are assumed (with few exceptions, and these – the "obviously" effeminate man or masculine woman – may not even be homosexual) to be straight, and are treated as such, until we begin to recognize that we are not what we have been told we are, that we are different. But how are we to understand, define, and deal with that difference? Here we generally have little to go on beyond very limited direct experience with those individuals who are close enough to the accepted stereotypes to be labeled publicly as queers, faggots, dykes, etc. And we have the mass media.

The mass media play a major role in this process of social definition, and rarely a positive one. In the absence of adequate information in their immediate environment, most people, gay or straight, have little choice other than to accept the narrow and negative stereotypes they encounter as being representative of gay people. The mass media have rarely presented portrayals which counter or extend the prevalent images. On the contrary, they take advantage of them. Typically, media characterizations use popular stereotypes as a code which they know will be readily understood by the audience, thus further reinforcing the presumption of verisimilitude while remaining "officially" innocent of dealing with a sensitive subject.

But there is more to it than stereotyping. For the most part gay people have been simply invisible in the media. The few exceptions were almost invariably either victims – of violence or ridicule – or villains. As Vito Russo noted recently, "it is not insignificant that out of 32 films with major homosexual characters from 1961 through 1976, 13 feature gays who commit suicide and 18 have the homosexual murdered by another character."[8] Even this minimal and slanted presence, however, seems to be so threatening to the "industry" that gay characterizations and plot elements always come accompanied by pressbook qualifications and backpedaling. In his survey of the treatment of gay people in American film,[9] Russo presents a

sample of the predictable distancing that gay themes evoke from directors ("*The Children's Hour* is not about lesbianism, it's about the power of lies to destroy people's lives," William Wyler, 1962; "*Sunday, Bloody Sunday* is not about the sexuality of these people, it's about human loneliness," John Schlesinger, 1972; "*Windows* is not about homosexuality, it's about insanity," Gordon Willis, 1979), and actors ("*The Sergeant* is not about homosexuality, it's about loneliness," Rex Harrison, 1971). It is easy to imagine how comforting these explanations must have been to lesbian and gay audience members looking for some reflection of their lives in the media. But it is not only the audiences who appear to require protective distancing from gay characters and themes. We are frequently treated to showbiz gossip intended to convey the heterosexual bona fides of any actor cast in a gay role, as when the actor playing the swish drag queen Albin in the stage version of *La Cage aux folles* told several interviewers that he had consulted with his wife and children before accepting the role.

The gay liberation movement emerged in the late 1960s in the United States, spurred by the examples of the black and feminist movements. Consequently, media attention to gay people and gay issues increased in the early 1970s, much of it positive (at least in comparison with previous and continuing heterosexist depictions and discussions), culminating (in the sense of greater media attention – in the pre-AIDS era) in 1973, with the decision by the American Psychiatric Association to delete homosexuality from its "official" list of mental diseases. By the middle 1970s, however, a backlash against the successes of the gay movement began to be felt around the country, most visibly in Anita Bryant's successful campaign to repeal a gay rights ordinance in Dade County, Florida, in 1977. Since then the gay movement and its enemies, mostly among the "new right," have been constant antagonists (right-wing fund-raisers acknowledge that anti-homosexual material is their best bet to get money from supporters), and television has often figured in the struggle. But, although the right wing has attacked the networks for what they consider to be overly favorable attention to homosexuals, in fact gay people are usually portrayed and used in news and dramatic media in ways that serve to reinforce rather than challenge the prevailing images.

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-television network movie that had a gay-related theme, and involved consultation with representatives gay organizations. And the result?

Throughout 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.[10]

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 were not aiming at us, either; they were merely trying to avoid arguing with us afterwards. In Vito Russo's words, "mainstream films about homosexuals are not for homosexuals. They address themselves exclusively to the majority."[11] However, there will inevitably be a great many lesbians and gay men in the audience.

The rules of the mass media game have a double impact on gay people: not only do they mostly show us as weak and silly, or evil and corrupt, but they exclude and deny the existence of normal, unexceptional as well as exceptional lesbians and gay men. Hardly ever shown in the media are just plain gay folks, used in roles which do not center on their deviance as a threat to the moral order which must be countered through ridicule or physical violence. Television drama in particular reflects the deliberate use of clichéed casting strategies which preclude such daring innovations.

The sterotypic depiction of lesbians and gay men as abnormal, and the suppression of positive or even "unexceptional" portrayals, serve to maintain and police the boundaries of the moral order. It encourages the majority to stay on their gender defined reservation, and tries to keep the minority quietly hidden out of sight. For the visible presence of healthy, non-stereotypic lesbians and gay men does pose a serious threat: it undermines the unquestioned normalcy of the status quo, and it opens up the possibility of making choices to people who might never otherwise have considered or understood that such choices could be made.

The situation has only been worsened by the AIDS epidemic. 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 media's limited interest in gay people, lesbians became even less visible than before (if possible). AIDS reinvigorated the two major mass media "roles" for gay people: victim and villain. 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 the disease. 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. Television dramatists have presented the plight of (white, middle-class) gay men with AIDS, but their particular concern is the agony of the families/friends who have to face the awful truth: their son (brother, boyfriend, husband, etc.) is, gasp, gay! But, even with AIDS, not too gay, mind you. In the major network made-for-television movie on AIDS, NBC's *An Early Frost*, a young, rich, white, handsome lawyer is forced out of the closet by AIDS. "We know he is gay because he tells his disbelieving parents so, but his lack of a gay sensibility, politics and sense of community make him one of those homosexuals heterosexuals love."[12]

An Early Frost is thus another example of the pattern discerned by Montgomery, although this time the familiar and successful genre is family- not crime-drama, the

focus is still on the heterosexual characters and their reactions. As William Henry notes in a recent overview of television's treatment of gays (or lack of same) during the past fifteen years,

when TV does deal with gays it typically takes the point of view of straights struggling to understand. The central action is the progress of acceptance – not self-acceptance by the homosexual, but grief-stricken resignation to fate by his straight loved ones, who serve as surrogates for the audience. Homosexuality thus becomes not a fact of life, but a moral issue on which everyone in earshot is expected to voice some vehement opinion. Just as black characters were long expected to talk almost exclusively about being black, and handicapped characters (when seen at all) were expected to talk chiefly about their disabilities, so homosexual characters have been defined almost entirely by their "problem."[13]

Being defined by their "problem," it is no surprise therefore that gay characters have mostly been confined to television's favorite problem-of-the-week genre, the made-for-television movie, with a very occasional one-shot appearance of a gay character on a dramatic series (examples include episodes of *Lou Grant, Medical Center* and *St. Elsewhere*). Continuing gay characters tend 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 the 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 the off-again-on-again Steven Carrington in *Dynasty*, whose lovers have an unfortunate tendency to get killed).

Despite their greater freedom from the competition for massive mainstream audiences – perhaps because of their need to compete for the primary audience of teens and young adults – commercial films are no more welcoming to gay characters than television. In fact, as Vito Russo shows in the revised edition of his 1981 study, *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), recent films are awash with gay villains and victims once more.

The use of the word faggot has become almost mandatory. Outright slurs that would never be tolerated in reference to any other group of people are commonly used onscreen against homosexuals. . . . Anti-gay dialogue is most often given to the very characters with whom the audience is supposed to identify.[14]

Films offer their makers a degree of license which isn't available to television producers – an opportunity to use language and depictions of sexuality that go far beyond the limits imposed on television – but as far as gay people are concerned, this mostly takes as a hunting license.

Colonization: The Straight Gay

There are several categories of response to the mainstream media's treatment of minorities; among them are internalization, subversion, secession, and resistance.

To begin with, as we have already noted, we are all colonized by the majority culture. Those of us who belong to a minority group may nevertheless have absorbed the values of the dominant culture, even if these exclude or diminish us. We are all aware of the privileging of male-identified attributes in our patriarchal culture, and the dominance of the male perspective in the construction of mass-mediated realities. Similarly, the US media offer a white-angled view of the world which is shared with people of color everywhere. In a study of Venezuelan children in which they were asked to describe their heroes, the hero was North American in 86 per cent of the cases and Venezuelan in only 8 per cent; English-speaking in 82 per cent and Spanish-speaking in 15 per cent; white heroes outnumbered black heroes 11 to 1; and heroes were wealthy in 72 per cent of the cases.[15]

Sexual minorities are among the most susceptible to internalizing the dominant culture's values because the process of labelling generally occurs in isolation and because:

> We learn to loathe homosexuality before it becomes necessary to acknowledge our own.... Never having been offered *positive* attitudes to homosexuality, we inevitably adopt *negative* ones, and it is from these that all our values flow.[16]

Internalization and colonization can also result in the adoption of assimilationist strategies which promise upward (or centerward) mobility, although at the cost of cutting off one's "roots." Gay people by and large know how to "pass"; after all, it's what they have been doing most of their lives. But the security attained is fragile and often illusory, and certainly will not provide support in resisting the inferiorizing pressures of the straight culture they attempt to blend into. And all too often, there really isn't any resistance anyway, as the process of internalization has achieved the desired goal. The Zionist polemicist Ahad Ha-Am drew on a biblical analogy to describe this phenomenon, in his essay on Moses: "Pharaoh is gone, but his work remains; the master has ceased to be master, but the slaves have not ceased to be slaves."[17]

The supposedly liberal and tolerant domain of the media does not necessarily permit homosexuals (or other minorities) to overcome the burdens of self oppression:

> When it comes to keeping minorities in their place, the entertainment industry continues to divide and conquer. For all the organizing that women have done, for instance, in their attempts to break down the barriers, well-placed women executives say they've received very little mutual support from their equally well-placed peers. The old-boy network rules, and the individual women, gays, blacks, or hispanics who attain some degree of success usually have to camouflage themselves in the trappings of their masters.[18]

Similarly, gay writer Merle Miller recalled that, "as editor of a city newspaper, he indulged in "queer-baiting" to conceal his own homosexuality."[19] Openly gay actor Michael Kearns speaks of "a gay agent who makes it a habit to tell "fag jokes" at the close of interviews with new actors. If an actor laughs, he's signed up; if he doesn't, he

isn't."[20] Working backstage, it would seem, does not exempt one from falling under the spell of the hegemonic values cultivated and reflected by the media. However, as Raymond Williams has suggested, hegemony "is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society."[21]

Resistance and Opposition

The most obvious form of resistance, but possibly the most difficult, would be simply to ignore the mass media, and refuse to be insulted or injured by their derogation and denial of one's identity and integrity as a member of a minority group. Unfortunately, although some of us can personally secede from the mass-mediated mainstream, or sample from it with great care and selectivity, we cannot thereby counter its effect on our fellow citizens. We cannot even prevent our fellow minority-group members from attending to messages which we feel are hostile to their interests (this is, of course, a familiar dilemma for parents who feel that commercial television is not in the best interests of their children). Given the generally high levels of television viewing at the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder, it can be expected that large segments of the population consume media fare that serves to maintain their subordinate status. In the United States, black households are disproportionately heavy television consumers: "Black households, which represented about 9 percent of all television households surveyed, accounted for about 14 percent of all household viewing. According to the United States Census Bureau, blacks constituted 12 percent of the population last year."[22]

We might expect self-identified ideological minorities to be better able to resist the siren's song of the mass media; and we have noted that the religious right has developed alternative channels to provide their adherents with a source of value-congruent media fare. We've also noted the absence of equivalent programming on the left bank of the mainstream. Leftists, it seems, are faced with fewer choices, and they experience the ambivalence of being aware of the central role the media play in consensualizing a dominant ideology and yet not wanting (or being able) to pull completely out of the mainstream themselves. In an ongoing study of American leftists' relationships to the mass media, Eugene Michaud has encountered many expressions of such hostility and ambivalence, despite which the respondents interviewed continue to watch television:

> Frankly, I detest TV. It's the source of many family disputes. I really find TV obnoxious and really intrusive on whatever you're trying to do.... For most people, I think TV is a way of relaxing – it's a distraction... life is hard – so it's very easy to watch TV." (Male, 36)

> I have a lot of trouble with the TV news. I get upset and I want to run away. Or I get obnoxious and start sneering at it, and my wife gets upset because she's trying to listen.... I realize that there's this vast treasure trove of ideas and images from TV which most people are plugged into." (Male, 44)

"I hate watching the TV news and having someone give me the straight administration line.... The way I watch TV is if I don't have anything else to do and I'm bored." (Female, 32)

"We watch network news sometimes, but I feel like it's junkfood news. I find it very frustrating. They never analyse anything.... It's also so easy to turn on TV, and there's all this visual stuff. It's so effortless." (Female, 32)

"I do watch *Nightline*, but it pisses me off to no end...the way they manipulate things to put forth a certain point-of-view. It's total set-up." (Male, 32)[23]

Observers of the current television scene will not be surprised to learn that there are one or two shows that do manage to appeal to Michaud's leftist respondents. Most frequently praised is *Hill Street Blues*, although it's generally judged to have declined after its first few seasons. Its spin-off, *St. Elsewhere*, receives similar reviews. The decline is often interpreted in ideological terms:

"I used to watch *Hill Street Blues* regularly, but I mostly don't bother any more...it used to try to demonstrate the ambiguity people felt towards each other and towards their work. Now, it's just the traditional good guys against the bad guys. I think it's a reflection of the Reagan era." (Female, 34)

The ratings smash hit *Cosby Show* is popular among some leftists, despite its upscale values, because it features a black family and because "there's a lot of love, which is appealing, and it does capture the real dynamics of family life in a funny way" (Male, 30).

Lesbian women and gay men do not constitute an ideological minority in the same way that American leftists do (although those gay people who are part of the "movement" certainly tend to be left-identified), and they are less likely to condemn the mass media in the way the left does. However, few lesbian women and gay men could remain unaware of how they are treated in the media – when their existence is even acknowledged – and their relationship to the media is likely to be colored by this awareness. Just as racial and ethnic minority groups pay close attention to programs which feature their members, so too gay people will tune in regularly to any program which promises an openly or explicitly lesbian or gay character (or even a favorite performer assumed to be gay). The images and messages they will encounter will not, as we have already noted, provide them with much comfort or support. More typically, they will again be marginalized, trivialized, and insulted.

While working on this paper I went to see the latest film written and directed by Woody Allen, *Radio Days*, and was irritated, though not surprised, by the inclusion of a gay character whose only function is to evoke a laugh at his own expense, and to further underline the hopelessness of a woman who would fall in love with him. My irritation was caused not only by Woody Allen's gratuitous insult – I've come to expect these from him – but also by the hilarity it produced among the audience. The experience of having one's status as "fair game" emphasized in this graphic fashion while sitting in a movie theater is familiar to gay people, just as it is to people of color and to women. Even when a gay characterization is intended to be sympathetic (as in the wildly successful *La Cage aux folles*), the gay members of the audience may wince

at the falsity of the image, and find themselves laughing at different times from the straight audience. There can be a perverse pleasure in this perception – Elizabeth Ellsworth describes lesbian feminist reviewers of *Personal Best* (a film written and directed by a straight man, which includes a lesbian relationship as a central theme, despite the usual pressbook obfuscation) who "expressed pleasure in watching the dominant media "get it wrong" in watching it attempt, but fail, to colonize "real" lesbian space."[24]

It can be argued that the best stance for gay people to adopt *vis-à-vis* the mass media would be to repay them with the same indifference and contempt they reveal toward us. Unfortunately, while this might be a gratifying and appropriate individual solution, it is not realistic as a general strategy. One may be able to reduce one's own irritation by ignoring the media, but their insidious impact is not so easily avoided. What cannot be avoided, however, can be better understood, and studies of lesbian and gay audiences and their responses should be included in the emerging research agenda.

Subversion

A second oppositional strategy is the subversion and appropriation of mainstream media, as well as the occasionally successful infiltration. The classic gay (male) strategy of subversion is camp – an ironic stance toward the straight world rooted in a gay sensibility:

a creative energy reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream; a heightened awareness of certain human complications of feeling that spring from the fact of social oppression; in short, a perception of the world which is coloured, shaped, directed and defined by the fact of one's gayness.[25]

This characterization would, of course, also fit many other minorities who experience oppression, but the gay sensibility differs in that we encounter and develop it at a later stage in our lives; it is nobody's native tongue. Moreover, while sharing much with other minority perspectives, camp is notably marked by irony and a theatrical perspective on the world which can be traced to the particular realities of gay experience:

The stigma of gayness is unique insofar as it is not immediately apparent either to ourselves or to others. Upon discovery of our gayness, however, we are confronted with the possibility of avoiding the negative sanctions attached to our supposed failing by concealing information (i.e. signs which other people take for gay) from the rest of the world. This crucial fact of our existence is called *passing for straight*, a phenomenon generally defined in the metaphor of theatre, that is, playing a role: pretending to be something one is not; or, to shift the motive somewhat, to camouflage our gayness by withholding facts about ourselves which might lead others to the correct conclusion about our sexual orientation.[26]

Camp offers a subversive response to mainstream culture, and provides both in-group solidarity and an opportunity to express distance from and disdain for the roles most gay people play most of the time. Exchanged in private settings, camp is a mechanism of oppositional solidarity which repairs the damage inflicted by the majority and prepares us for further onslaughts. As a restricted code used in public settings, camp can be a way to identify and communicate with other "club members" under the unknowing eyes of the straight world – in itself an act of subversive solidarity (as well as self-protection). Camp can also be a form of public defiance, and a risky expression of a difference which dares to show its face.

Camp is also the quintessentially gay strategy for undermining the hegemonic power of media images.[27] The sting can be taken out of oppressive characterizations and the hot air balloons of official morality can be burst with the ironic prick of camp humor. Most importantly, by self-consciously taking up a position outside the mainstream, if only in order to look back at it, camp cultivates a sense of detachment from the dominant ideology.

> The sense of being different ... made me feel myself as "outside" the mainstream in fundamental ways – and this does give you a kind of knowledge of the mainstream you cannot have if you are immersed in it. I do not necessarily mean a truer perspective, so much as an awareness of the mainstream as a mainstream, and not just the way everything and everybody inevitably are; in other words, it denaturalizes normality. This knowledge is the foundation of camp.[28]

Camp can also be seen in the appropriation of mainstream figures and products when they are adopted as "cult" objects by marginal groups. Camp cult favorites are often women film stars who can be seen as standing up to the pressures of a male-dominated movie industry and despite all travails remaining in command of their careers (Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Mae West), or at least struggling back from defeat (Judy Garland[29]).

Cult movies like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* provide occasions for meeting others with the same perspective, and turning a media product into the pretext for communal interaction. In a study of patrons waiting to see *Rocky Horror* outside a Rochester, NY, movie theater, it was learned that, excluding the first-timers, the mean number of times respondents had seen the movie was eleven.[30] The audience members are there to participate in a ritual and a social event which create and reinforce a solidarity of non-mainstream identification. The *Rocky Horror* cult has served all over the United States as an opportunity for lesbian and gay teenagers to meet and support each other in the coming-out process.

In Our Own Voice

The most effective form of resistance to the hegemonic force of the dominant media is to speak for oneself. At one level this means attempting to be included in the category of recognized positions and groupings acknowledged by the mass media.

Achieving this degree of legitimation is not a negligible accomplishment, and it is not to be despised or rejected as an important minority goal. The success of various minorities in exerting pressure on the media can be seen in the care with which images of these groups are balanced and presented. In fact, the television networks have taken to complaining about the difficulties they face in finding acceptable villains.

> "In their desire to avoid stereotyping, I think broadcast standards and practices sometimes goes to an absurd extreme," said Bruce J. Sallan, ABC's vice president in charge of motion pictures on television. "There are almost no ethnic villains on television. We can't do a Mafia picture at ABC, because broadcast standards won't let us deal with Italians involved in organized crime."[31]

A recent ABC-TV film, *The Children of Times Square*, was allowed to have a black villain after he was balanced by sympathetic black characters: "We had instructions from the network that if a black is shown in a bad light, we must also show a black in a good light."[32]

Gay people have not yet achieved the degree of social power and legitimacy which would permit them to demand the same self-censorship on the part of the media, and consequently we are still treated to gay villains and victims unbalanced by gay heroes or even just plain gay folks. As we have seen from Kathleen Montgomery's research, gay pressure can hope at most for a limited success: a story which offends neither minority nor mainstream sensibilities too much. Could we hope for much more? Probably not, since the numbers simply are not there to put sufficient pressure on the media – and numbers are the bottom line. We might exact concessions along the way, forcing some respect for our humanity, but we cannot expect the media to tell our stories for us, or allow us to do so through their channels.

The ultimate expression of independence for a minority audience struggling to free itself from the dominant culture's hegemony is to become the creators and not merely the consumers of media images. In recent years lesbian women and gay men have begun – although with difficulty – to gather the necessary resources with which to tell our own stories.

There have always been minority media in the United States; various immigrant groups supported newspapers, books, theater and occasionally movies in their native languages. But these immigrant voices were stilled as succeeding generations were assimilated into mainstream culture, losing touch with the language and culture of their grandparents. The black press has survived and occasionally flourished alongside the mainstream media, and black culture (music and dance in particular) has been the source of much inspiration and talent which have crossed over into the mainstream (sometimes in whiteface).

Since the 1970s a lesbian and gay alternative culture has offered a range of media forms and products – press, music, theater, pornography – which are unmistakably the product of gay people's sensibility. Here, too, there is the occasional cross-over, when Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* wound its way from off-off-Broadway

to a Tony Award for best play on Broadway. But crossing-over is no guarantee of protection from the dominant culture. Even speaking in his own voice – quite literally, as when Fierstein starred in his play – the gay author may find that straight audiences do not see beyond their preconceptions. *Torch Song Trilogy* was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Walter Kerr, the "dean" of Broadway theater critics, and the review is both patronizing and simply wrong.[33] Much of the action in the third act centers on the fact that Arnold, the protagonist, has adopted a gay teenager, and on the "return" of his former lover who is in the process of leaving his wife. The play ends with clear intimations of an emerging gay "nuclear family" – with Arnold as mother, his returned lover as daddy, and their adopted gay son. What does Walter Kerr do with this? He misunderstands – or at least misrepresents – it so badly that I must assume bigotry blinded him to plot details so obvious no tyro critic could miss them. He implies that the adopted son is a "kept" boy Arnold has picked up. The former lover is described as "also sharing the flat, though not yet the boy." When the boy tells the former lover, "I'd be proud to call you daddy," Kerr detects "possible betrayal, sensual shiftings" – that is, he thinks the boy is seducing the man!

One clue to Kerr's stupidity – astounding in so veteran a critic – may be found in his comment about "this rambling and, because it can only move in circles, repetitive plot." Why, we might ask, can it only move in circles? The answer is not to be found in the theory of drama, but in the tired homophobic clichés of psychiatric theories about gay people. Kerr "knows" that we are all caught up in narcissistic repetition compulsions. The truth is, of course, that Kerr is the one who is handicapped by a repetition compulsion, sitting there on the aisle wrapped in the old miasmal mist.

When mainstream critics do not blame gay artists for things which they have themselves misread into the works they are reviewing, they may still find fault with them for not rising above their parochial concerns, that is, for addressing themselves to the concerns of their fellow gay people. In a letter to the *New York Times Book Review*,[34] justifying his negative review of Edmund White's *States of Desire: Travels in Gay America*, Paul Cowan assures us that,

> it's crucial to communicate across tribal lines. Good literature has always done that – it has transformed a particular subject into something universal. Mr. White didn't do that; in my opinion it's one of the reasons he failed to write a good book.

I'm tempted to say, aha, the old universalism ploy! Perhaps good literature has always transformed a particular subject into something universal. But, of course, there's always a double standard in the application of the universalism criterion.

In an essay entitled "Colonialist Criticism," the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe decries those western critics who evaluate African literature on the basis of whether it overcomes "parochialism" and "achieves universality":

> It would never occur to them to doubt the universality of their own literature. In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strive to achieve it.[35]

In the past decade lesbian and gay film makers have been able, with difficulty, to raise the money needed to produce independent documentaries and fictional films which have inaugurated a true alternative channel in the crucial media of movies and television. The pioneering documentary *Word is Out* (1977), and the more recent Oscar-winning *Life and Times of Harvey Milk*, among others, represent authentic examples of gay people speaking for ourselves, in our own words; although even here there have been compromises in order to meet the demands of the Public Broadcasting System – the only viable channel for independent documentaries in the United States.[36] And, even more recently and tentatively, there are the stirrings of lesbian and gay fiction films exhibited through mainstream (art) theaters and becoming accessible to a nationwide gay audience.

> There is, alternatively, a homosexual cinema. It neither concerns itself overtly with issues of gay politics nor does it present gay sexuality as society's perennial dirty secret. The key to gay films, whether they are made by heterosexuals or homosexuals, is that they do not view the existence of gay people as controversial.... These films may reflect the fear, agitation, and bigotry of a society confronted with such truth, but it is not their view that such emotions are rational or even important to explore.[37]

The products of the nascent lesbian/gay cinema find a powerful response among their primary audience, and can easily become cult films of a different sort from the midnight orphans of the mainstream industry. *Desert Hearts* is such a film. Made on a small budget collected in two and a half years of arduous grass-roots fund raising and based on a novel by lesbian author Jane Rule, *Desert Hearts* achieved both cross-over box-office success and a cult following among lesbians.

> "I've waited 25 years for this movie," says Pat, a 47-year-old secretary in San Francisco, California. "I'm sick of seeing only heterosexual love stories. *Desert Hearts* is a movie I can finally identify with. It's like when I was little, we only had "white dolls" to play with, as if all babies were white. Movie makers have done the same thing; they've generally ignored gays until the last few years. This movie is a positive step in making lesbian movies more acceptable to the general public. I've seen it 22 times and am still not tired of it."

> "I think that women are drawn to it, lesbians are drawn to it in the same way that black people were drawn to *Superfly*. It isn't so much the content. It's a matter of the identification with it and the way it's been presented," says screenplay writer Natalie Cooper. "I'm glad that it served – for anyone – no matter how small, something that would make people feel okay, instead of feeling peripheral or put down. Just to say, "Hey, I dig it and I love it; I do that, too." They can say, "This is our movie, this is our thing." It makes them feel, dare I say maybe, not proud but viable."[38]

Finally, then, the answer to the plight of the marginalized minority audience would seem to lie in the cultivation of alternative channels, even while we continue to press upon the media our claims for equitable and respectful treatment. But neither goal will be easily achieved, and each will require overcoming formidable obstacles.

Notes

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3   George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "The "Mainstreaming" of America," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 3 (1980): 10–29; George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations," *Journal of Communication* 32, no. 2 (1982): 100–27; and Gerbner *et al.*, "Living with Television" (1986).

4   See George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Stewart Hoover, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli, Harry Cotugno, and Robert Wuthnow, *Religion and Television* (University of Pennsylvania: The Annenberg School of Communications, 1984); and Stewart Hoover, "The 700 Club as Religion and as Television," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1985.

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6   Murray Roth, "CBS Evaluates Turner Takeover: "Not a Snowball's Chance..."," *Variety*, April 24, 1985, p. 163.

7   See Larry Gross, "The Cultivation of Intolerance," in G. Melischek *et al.* (eds.), *Cultural Indicators: An International Symposium* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1984), pp. 345–63.

8   Vito Russo, "A State of Being," *Film Comment* (April 1986): 32.

9   Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981).

10   Kathleen Montgomery, "Gay Activists and the Networks," *Journal of Communication* 31, no. 3 (1981): 49–57.

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12   Andrea Weiss, "From the Margins: New Images of Gays in the Cinema," *Cineaste* (1986): 4–8.

13   William Henry, "That Certain Subject," *Channels* (April 1987): 43f.

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15   Antonio Pasquali, "Latin America: Our Image or Theirs?," in *Getting the Message Across* (no editor listed) (Paris: The UNESCO Press, 1975), pp. 62f.

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25   Jack Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility," in Richard Dyer (ed.), *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1977), p. 40.

26   Ibid., p. 45.

27   See ibid.; also Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: British Film Institute/Macmillan, 1987).

28   Derek Cohen and Richard Dyer, "The Politics of Gay Culture," in Gay Left Collective (eds.), *Homosexuality: Power and Politics* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980), pp. 177f.

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31   Stephen Farber, "Minority Villains Are Touchy Network Topic," *New York Times*, February 29, 1985.

32   Ibid.

33   *New York Times*, June 27, 1982.

34   *New York Times Book Review*, September 3, 1980.

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