

The Conflation of Male Homosexuality and Femininity in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*

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Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* features five gay men, the "Fab Five," skillfully making over unfashionable heterosexual men. The successful program,¹ follows homosexual and heterosexual men bonding over fashion and facial products, but this seemingly uncommon union strays very little from the typical mainstream representation of gay males. Rather, the program continues the Hollywood tradition of defining homosexuality in opposition to masculinity (Vito Russo 1996).

With their focus on issues of grooming and culture the Fab Five may move past typical representations of gay male characters as AIDS-stricken or as ostentatious sidekicks, but they continue to represent gay men as "feminine." We argue that in its first season, *Queer Eye* reifies public definitions of gay men as "feminine" in three primary ways including the neutralization of homosexuality, the choice of men to be made over, and the focus on the Carson as the program's primary source of humor. We end with a brief discussion of the "metrosexual," a term rising from the ashes of rigid definitions of masculinity in response to the success of *Queer Eye*.

Representations of marginalized groups typically reflect the biases and interests of the powers that define the public agenda (Helene A. Shugart 2003, p. 68). In the case of *Queer Eye*, heteronormativity is protected by a representation of the Fab Five in a manner that neutralizes their sexuality. By ignoring the sexuality of homosexuals *Queer Eye* works to "enrich and strengthen specifically heteronormative social and political sensibilities" (Shugart 2003, p. 70), a phenomenon that has been noted regularly by other scholars (Bonnie J. Dow 2001; Fred Fejes & Kevin Petrich 1993; Larry Gross 2001; Nikki Sullivan 2003; Suzanna D. Walters 2001). In representing the Fab Five as fairy godmothers (no pun intended) sent to revamp heterosexual relationships and de-sexualizing its stars, *Queer Eye* genders the Fab Five as feminine, as homosexuality is disciplined through focusing on heterosexual relationships while simultaneously ignoring any serious notions of homosexuality.

Queer Eye also genders the Fab Five as feminine through the stark comparison of the stars to the heterosexual men they are sent to transform. Scholars have noted that homosexual characters often provide a measure against which lead characters appear more masculine, thereby affirming the definitions of masculinity as necessarily heterosexual (Kathleen Battles & Wendy Hilton-Morrow 2002; Larry Gross 2001; James R. Keller 2002; Suzanna Walters 2001). *Queer Eye* ensures that the masculinity of the men being made over is emphasized through their choice of "projects." The Fab Fives' professions are

typically associated with femininity, whereas the majority of the men that undergo makeovers often have more “masculine” jobs such as police officer, Navy Seal, and personal trainer/kick boxer. Additionally, the men of the program’s first season often tower over the Fab Five in terms of height and body mass, thereby physically framing the Fab Five as *not masculine* and therefore feminine. The expertise of the Fab Five is utilized also to aid the heterosexual men in their romantic conquests. The majority of the heterosexual men on *Queer Eye* want to impress their female companions and are seemingly only willing to undergo a makeover to improve their relationships. The Fab Five play a Cyrano role and as is typical in representations of homosexuals on television, the Fab Five exist as a means by which the heterosexual characters grow by virtue of their relationship with homosexuals.

Finally, *Queer Eye* also reifies notions of gay men as feminine by focusing on the Fab Five’s “Carson.” Carson, much like *Will and Grace*’s “Jack,” is the catty and flamboyant member of the Fab Five. Carson is perhaps most appreciated for his gay male stereotypical humor and “come-ons” aimed at making the heterosexual men feel uncomfortable. However, even though many people laugh at such behaviors they help sustain a heteronormative society because the humor on which the jokes (gay men making heterosexual men uncomfortable) assume heterosexuality as the norm, thereby focusing attention back on heterosexuality and away from any true subversive notion of homosexuality separated from femininity. Carson’s behaviors further aid in the detrimental representation of the Fab Five (and thus gay men in society at large) by a form of reluctant testimony—Carson is the member of the group who most often gives credence to the stereotypes that are at the root of these jokes by playing to the stereotypes of gay men obsessed with sex. In addition, as Kathleen Battles and Wendy Hilton-Morrow (2002) note with regard to *Will and Grace*’s “Jack,” another problem with such humor is that we cannot be sure if audiences are laughing with or at Carson (and therefore the “homosexual” he represents). Carson’s performance of “gayness” maintains the legitimacy of heterosexism as his character, like Jack, fits into the media tradition of making homosexuality the focus of humor (Battles & Hilton-Morrow 2002, p. 98).

Of equal importance to the issues noted above is the word “metrosexual,” a new term stemming from *Queer Eye* to designate heterosexual men who are comfortable partaking in rituals typically associated with gay men—primping, preening, and product consumption. With the emergence of the metrosexual, attention is again moved from the gay men on the show to the brand new, refined and “improved” heterosexual men. Put simply, metrosexuals enjoy all of the outward “benefits” of being gay without having to suffer the social, political, and economic consequences of being homosexual in a heterosexist society. A sort of “gay lite,” metrosexuals on *Queer Eye* entertain Americans with their newfound love of “product” (the feminine) without threatening to challenge the boundaries of masculinity (their “success” is usually defined in terms of success in romantic conquests and business success). The political, social, and economic privileges extended to heterosexuals and typically denied to homosexuals are thus reified as homosexuality is defined as a “lifestyle” rather than as a legitimate and “normal” sexual orientation. Moreover, the gendered definitions of femininity and masculinity stay intact. This phenomenon seriously impedes the ability of *Queer Eye* to challenge public definitions of homosexuality.

So if in *Queer Eye* heterosexuality and masculinity are trumpeted while popular notions of homosexuality as feminine are maintained, who “wins” due to the success of

the program? We suggest that the real winners here are the capitalists behind the products that *Queer Eye* promotes—important parts of the power structure in the United States that seeks to protect its power base of white, middle-aged, upper class, and heterosexual males, who also “win” as their definitions of gender and sexuality remain hegemonic. *Queer Eye* does little to change the public vocabulary used to define gender as it relates to sexual orientation. This should come as no surprise, however, as mediated representations of anything typically considered “abnormal” must also be made sense of within the discourses of the dominant culture (Bonnie J. Dow 2001; Eve K. Sedgwick 1990; Michael Warner 1993). Most importantly, we must remember when discussing the effects of homosexual visibility on television on changing definitions of sexuality and gender that “one of popular culture’s most salient characteristics is that it is ephemeral—it’s dependence on the power of personality, hot topics, and quickly shifting tastes makes it a fragile basis of social change” (Dow 2001, p. 137). With that in mind, we should be very cautious in assuming that *Queer Eye* offers the public any foundation necessary to change assumptions about gender and its relationship to sexuality.

NOTE

1. According to realityworldtv.com, “In total viewers, the episode reached an average of 2.8 million persons,” making it the number one advertising-supported cable program in that time slot (Reality World 2003).

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