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Heterosexuality, Homosexuality and Masculinity

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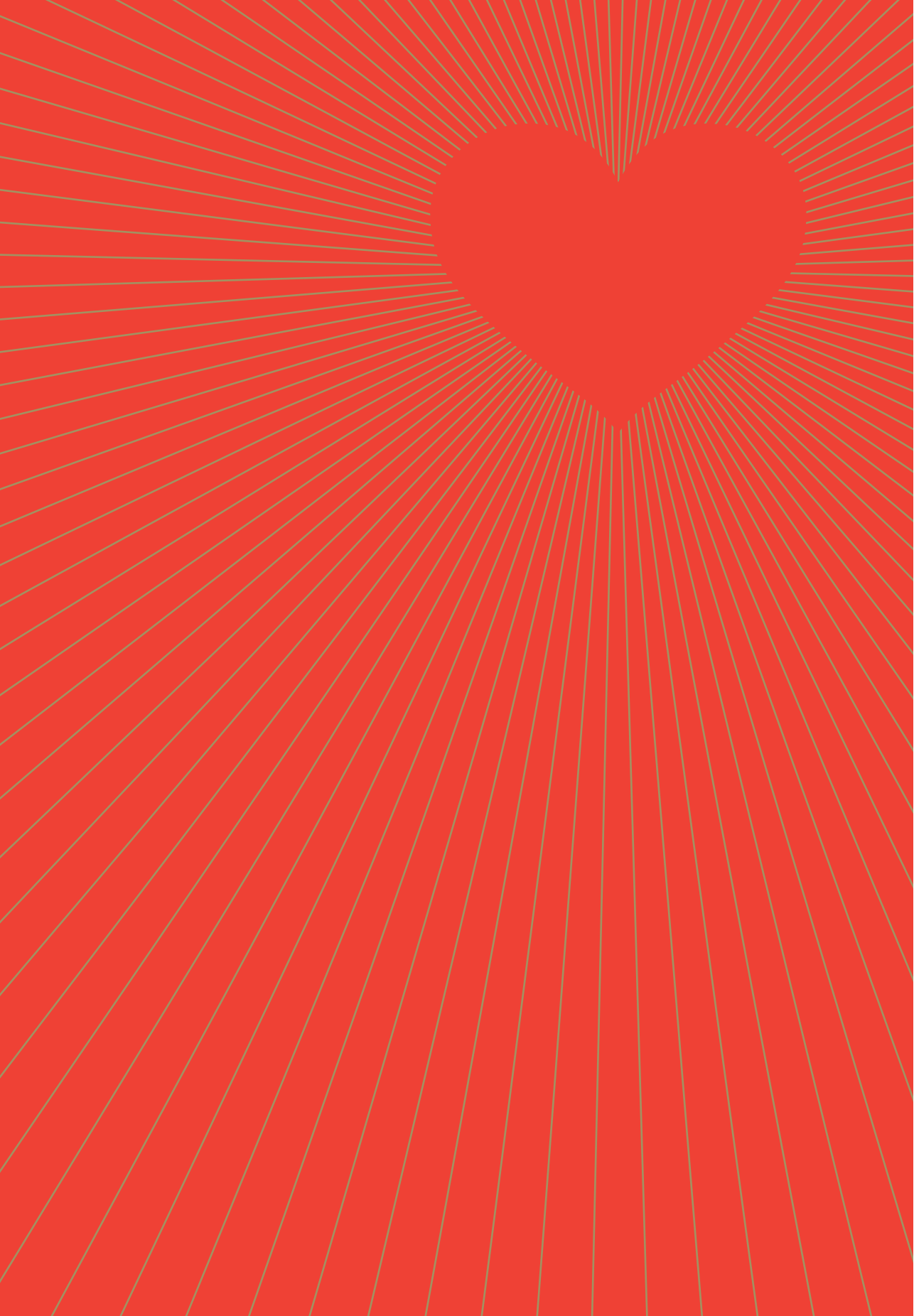
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Heterosexuality, Homosexuality and Masculinity *Evan Johnson* Men's lifestyle magazines, Gauntlett claims, actively engage with and attempt to define what it means to identify as a man or, more specifically, how to be one.¹ The very fact that one must do or justify conventions of masculinity in order to be a man instantly calls into question the validity or authenticity of this identification. A further problem is that these magazines are assumed to be simply men's magazines rather than heterosexual men's magazines. Perhaps the understanding of gender as an institution that relies on heterosexual desire in order to regulate bodies is the naturalised assumption that allows Gauntlett to make his assertion.² Yet he neglects to consider the 'othering' of gay and transgender men that he and these magazines commit. It is apparent that heterosexuality is imperative to this 'doing'

1. David Gauntlett, *Media, Gender and Identity. An Introduction*. 2nd Edition, (London: Routledge, 2010), 152 – 180.

2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).

3. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 30 – 31.

*Editor: The author refers to a full page image of actress Jamie Chung in the “Who Dat?” section of *FHM*, May 2011, 48

4. Gen Doy, *Picturing the Self. Changing Views of the Subject in Visual Culture*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 63 – 88.

of gender in order to construct maleness and masculinity in heterosexual magazines such as *FHM*. For this reason, I choose *FHM* to supply sample images of heterosexual masculinity. But what can be said of magazines such as *Attitude* that are directly addressing an audience of gay men? I will analyse images of bodies that are sexualised through both heterosexual and homosexual lenses in order to question whether heterosexuality is fundamental in assigning male identities. I will argue that heterosexual desire is not fundamental to male identity, but rather conventions of active male sexual desire, whether heterosexual or homosexual, fulfil the contract between male identity and sexuality. Butler remarks that to create a “naturalised heterosexuality” and in order to stabilise an internalised gender identification an emphasis on “woman as object of desire” must be performed again and again.³ A full page from *FHM** practically dedicated to the body of the model, almost promises to subvert the passive female role billing her as what the (male) audience dreams of, an action girl. But she is simultaneously objectified and feminised as the image assures the viewer that she is sexually attractive while performing the stereotypically male role of an “ace pilot.” She is not being celebrated because she plays an active part, nor is it suggested that hers is an empowering role in this film; but rather that she is attractive while doing so, as the short, accompanying text is eager to remind the reader. She is not just an “ace pilot,” she is also a “saucy maid,” so that the readership is reminded of her femininity and sanctioned to continue viewing her as sexually accessible. The use of the term “maid” confirms the presence of a hierarchy; that by virtue of her femininity, which she is obligated to perform, she is a servant to male fantasy. The staging of the image invites the audience to trace the contours of her body with their gaze, as her weapon, the symbol of her supposed independence, coils around her form which allows the eye to trace her, to examine her.

It is said that the centre of the self rests in the head.⁴ In the image just described, Jamie Chung’s head is visually severed by her clothing, dissecting the body and rendering it passive, without visual connection to the centre of the self and subjectivity. This illusionary celebration of active femininity only functions to naturalise female passivity. Her validity as a subject is confirmed only after she meets the conditions of female passivity. Her body

must be sexually available to the gaze; therefore her femininity relies on her sexualisation because this representation of her aggressively emphasises that which is sexually appealing, her body. In conclusion, she is only a woman when met with male approval. That is to say that her success is based on her visual appeal, specifically to that of men.⁵ The abilities of both the actress and her character are rendered irrelevant because she is a woman. Her value and her identity are dependent on her relations with men, not by virtue of her achievements.⁶ Men look or ‘gaze’ at the bodies of women and it is a woman’s duty to watch their bodies being looked at; bodies that are subsequently judged and rendered passive in the heterosexual economy.⁷ This active/passive dichotomy renders superficial the subversion seen in another image from *FHM*, which reverses the conventional role of men as sexually assertive and women as sexually passive or indifferent.*

However, the male form, in the tradition of men’s lifestyle magazines, is sexually unavailable, as his body is largely inaccessible to the viewer, hidden behind clothes, thick framed glasses and a magazine.⁸ It could be argued that his lack of sexual interest is intended to be interpreted as abnormal and ‘unmasculine.’ However, considering Butler’s assertion that that which is outside the realm of the physical body is marked as masculine, his male identity remains stable because he pursues interests outside his sexual and bodily appeal.⁹ The woman’s presence in the image is, in a sense, dominating. She specifically assumes the role of a dominatrix, conjuring a connotative web of heterosexual desire and fetishism. She looks down at the man with a fixed gaze and is physically imposing in the way she carries the whip. But her body, unlike his, is passively available to the viewer, if not to her bed mate. Her body is dissected by her hair, clothing and whip rendering it into fragments. The marks of femininity are violently emphasised; the red stilettos, the red lipstick and a whip that leads the eye to her breasts. Similar to the previous image, her identity as a woman relies on the approval of a male gaze. Gauntlett argues that these magazines no longer depict females as sexually passive, but as “sexual tornadoes.”¹⁰ However, does an image such as this really subvert conventions of female passivity or the male gaze? It ignores the fact that, in the context of these magazines, she is performing an enactment of male sexual fantasy rather than her own sexual subjectivity.

5. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 46.

6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011).

7. Berger. *Ways of Seeing*, 46 – 47.

*Editor: The author refers to the double page spread “Your Sex is Not on Fire” from *FHM*, August 2011, 94 – 95

8. Bethan Benwell, “Ambiguous masculinities: Heroism and Anti-heroism in the Men’s Lifestyle Magazine” in *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*, ed. Bethan Benwell, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 151 – 163.

9. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 7 – 27.

10. Gauntlett, *Media, Gender*, 152 – 180.

Her body must still conform to heterosexual ideals of attractiveness, of femininity and of male approval. She is not awarded her own agency because her relationship with the male viewer is still one of inequality and one where she assumes the role of male fantasy.

It could be said that women in these examples are defined through their fulfilment of male sexual fantasy, but is 'male' identity unachievable if the object of desire is male, as opposed to female? Can the male body really be reduced to an object of desire, or does it have immunity from objectification? In order to construct an image of gay male identity, it must first be noted that masculine or 'straight-acting' gay men are considered ideal and attractive in gay culture.¹¹ The model in Figure 1 conforms to this ideal insofar as his body is trained and is marked with the appearance of physical strength. His form is displayed by visually disrupting the disguise that clothing provides for the body, as it has become translucent after he has been soaked in water. Streams of water roll down his face and lead the eye to the body, revealing the absence of breasts. His jaw is strong, dressed with stubble, 'masculine.' His gaze does not meet or confront the eyes of the viewer, but it is a fixed gaze that hardens his face. His stance is proud, sturdy and it invites the viewer to admire his body. But is it an invitation to objectify him? It has been said that a man's presence suggests what he can do to you or for you, which is not subverted by this image.¹² His presence is one of action performed by him rather than an invitation for an action to be performed to him. His body is not visually dismembered like the above examples of women's bodies were, and instead the display of his torso is simultaneously revealed and protected by his clothing.

Figure 2 presents another male subject with an averted gaze. However, he exhibits a certain softness of expression. His body has been opened to display, with necklaces that encourage the viewer to examine his form. The subject's body is not significantly marked by the lack of breasts or by the presence of the penis, and arguably his body is dissected by the harsh black lines of the necklaces. If his body does not actively reject the male gaze, then can this be construed as sexual passivity? Is it necessary for his body to be evidently sexually active to reject the male gaze? Butler presents the argument that the phallus, both having the phallus and being the phallus,

11. Jane Ward, "Queer Sexism: Rethinking Gay Men and Masculinity," in *Gay Masculinities*, ed. Peter Nardi, (California: Sage Publications, 2000), 152 – 175.

12. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 45 – 46.

Figure 1: Full page image. From *Attitude*, September 2011. Page 54



13. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 28 – 57.

are transferable positions in the sexual hierarchy because the phallus is not a sign for the penis.¹³ The active observer, who has the phallus, and the passive observed, who is the phallus, are not exclusive or static attributes. If, as Butler has argued, the 'male gaze' can be extended to lesbians in the sexual economy on the basis of desire for the female form, then is the status of being the phallus not similarly transferrable? In this sense, the subject of this image can at different moments be or have the phallus in this sexual economy.

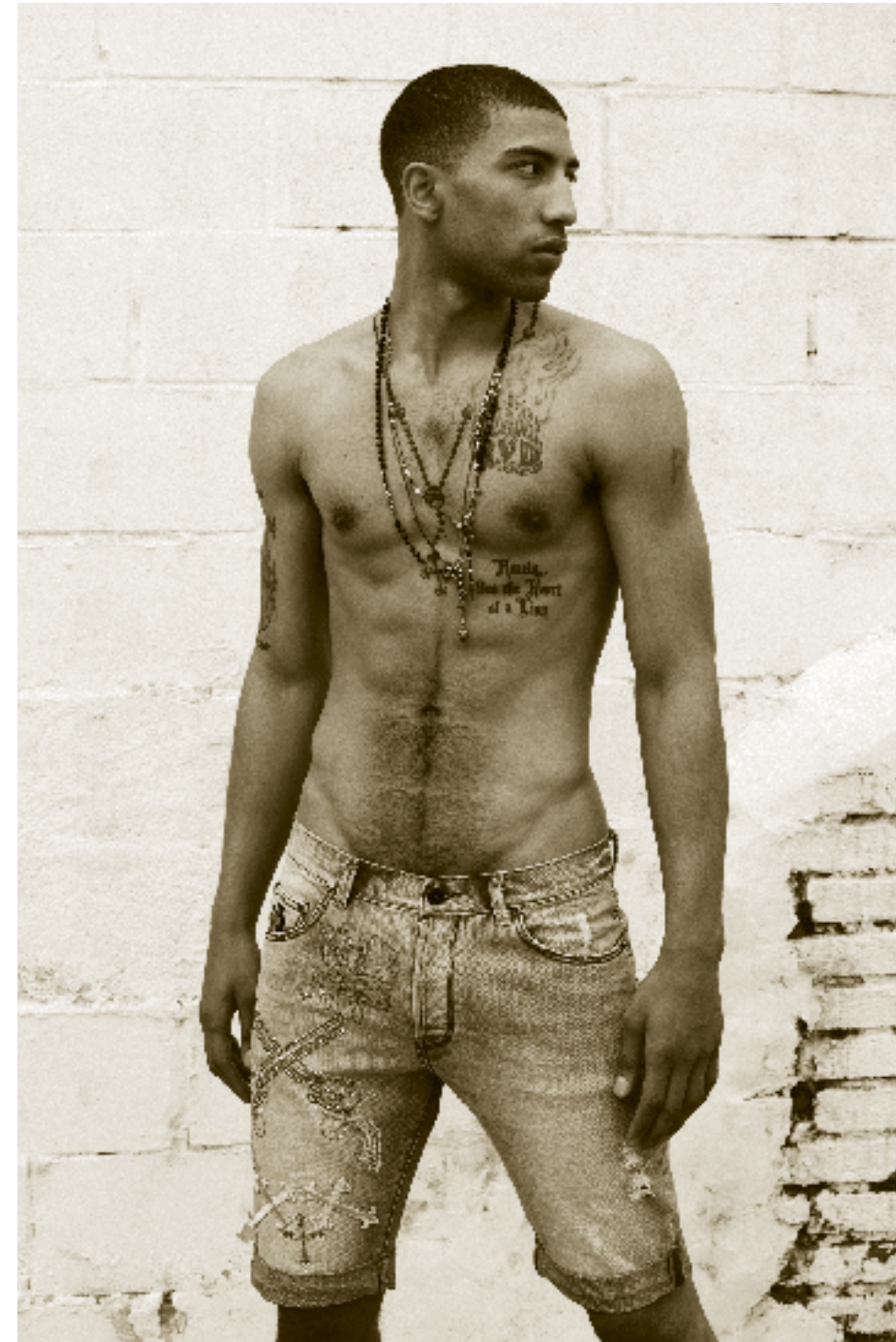
14. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 8 – 10.

Would it not be reasonable to suggest, rather than assuming heterosexual desire informs male identity, that active sexual desire, having the phallus, fills that void? Therefore, if heterosexual desire is as constructed as homosexual desire, and both meet conditions of hierarchical sexual desire, homosexual and heterosexual masculinities both exist on the same plane.¹⁴ Rather than suggesting that masculinity is specifically constructed through the exclusion and ridicule of homosexuality, it would seem to be more appropriate to describe it as the adaptation of 'active' traits and the othering of 'passive' traits.¹⁵ Masculinity is the sum of specific conditions of active sexual, physical and mental competence. This subject in Figure 2 is, therefore, still read as masculine because he exhibits evidence of trained flesh, a practical hair-cut and supposed disregard for acts performed purely for the sexual gratification of an onlooker; which is to say that his body shows that he does not remove his body hair, wear make-up or dress his hair for the purpose of transforming his body into an object for the pleasure of another. He does not seek the approval of the viewer.

15. Tim Edwards, 'Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, style and Men's Magazines,' in *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, 132 – 146.

To conclude, this text made a number of claims inspired by the idea, as presented by Judith Butler, that heterosexual desire informs conventional standards of masculinity and femininity. It was argued that the category of women, according to the two images adopted from *FHM*, heavily relies on heterosexual male fantasy and approval. But masculinity and male identity of neither the viewer nor the subject automatically rely on heterosexual desire, demonstrated by the presence of the sexually uninterested male in the second image. What becomes significantly evident, however, is the lack of visual access to the male body. Even gay men's magazines do not automatically provide passive, readily available bodies there solely for the

Figure 2: Three-quarter page image. From *Attitude*, July 2011. Page 94.



enjoyment of the onlooker. In fact, gay media presents an equally stable vision of masculinity for both subject and viewer without denying the potential homosexual gaze of the viewer. Therefore it is mistaken to say that heterosexuality is the economy of normative gender performance. More accurately, it is a matter of being the aggressor. Masculinity now becomes the reward of very specific conditions of active, rather than passive, sexual, physical and mental prowess.