

Editorial

Thomas Brassington, Debra Ferreday, Danielle Girard

It has been more than two years since the editors of this special issue of *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* began the project resulting in this collection of articles exploring the many ways in which queer identities are represented in contemporary popular television. Initially, this project took shape as a series of events intended to bring together scholars and activists to engage in sessions which circulated knowledge and practices between cognate, but often disparate parts of queer communities and the wider general public. When the COVID pandemic began in March 2020, our hopes for an in-person celebration bringing together academic, activist and evolving queer cultures were dashed.

We revised our ideas to better suit the circumstances that were our new reality. We narrowed down the focus from new directions in queer studies to a journal special issue on new representations of queerness on the small screen. This narrowing of focus mirrored a similar narrowing and closure of IRL LGBTQIA+ spaces. At the same time that opportunities for IRL connection disappeared, television and digital media opened up new spaces of queer representation and belonging, as well as exposing them to intense scrutiny from newly captive audiences. In a sense, then, this felt like a particularly fitting moment to consider the role television plays in shaping queer in/visibilities, despite the multiple challenges to maintaining spaces for queer scholarship that the pandemic exposed. From the outset, this project was informed by a need to rethink questions of marginality. Throughout this special issue, we seek to challenge a common tendency within queer scholarship to prioritise queerness' marginality (Sedgwick, 1990; Halberstam, 2011). Although these landmark scholars offer significant and foundational

contributions to queer studies, we nevertheless find such a positionality at odds with queerness as it has been televised over the last decade. The queerness we see often is neither marginal, nor wholly assimilated by the augur of homonormativity. Contemporary queer representation on television, we assert, has an entirely alternative figuration to these positions: one where queerness is distinct from straight life, but a central aspect of mainstream popular culture. To that end, this special issue presents a broad variety of queer lives, experiences and voices from across a range of scripted televisual genres and shows which productively reconsider the marginalisation of queerness in the twenty-first century.

Representation of queer identities in popular television has undergone massive shifts in the last decade. Dynamic representations of queer identities in popular media now are at odds with the queer theoretical positioning of queer subjecthood as necessarily defined by marginality and transgressive potential. This is not to say that the work of LGBTQIA+ civil rights organizations is done; indeed many of the contributions in this issue draw attention to the way that inequalities popularly seen as ‘past’ continue to shape the present. Rather, we argue that it is important to draw attention to the queer theoretical overreliance on marginalizing specifically white, cisgender and middle-class gays in American and Eurocentric cultures, and to the further marginalisation this creates.

Since contemporary queer media no longer is directly emergent from the political fire of the Gay Rights Movements or the AIDS crisis, it can no longer be said to occupy these same spaces of resistance. Despite this, shows like *Pose* (2018-2021) and *It's A Sin* (2021) are still explicitly located within these histories of protest, meaning that there is clearly still importance to be found here. Whilst contemporary TV builds on a queer tradition that recognises histories of struggle, the

fact of an overall contextual shift in which these shows are consumed cannot be ignored. We argue that this shift therefore demands new theoretical frames beyond simply transgression/marginality.

The articles presented in this special issue confront these emerging discourses by drawing on key televisual milestones. Debra Ferreday's article, 'From Dorian's Closet to Elektra's Trunk: Visibility, Trauma and Gender Euphoria in *Pose*', performs an exploration of these complex themes through a close reading of season 2 episode 'Butterfly/Cocoon', examining the relationship between this storyline and its real-life inspiration, the life of New York drag legend Dorian Corey. She argues that that unpacking Elektra's trunk allows us to see beyond the expected narratives of glamour and trauma of television depicting queer life in 1980s New York City, towards a more nuanced and affirmative model of queer creativity.

The figure of the queer psychopath has been a persistent trope in mainstream media, attracting productive critique from queer scholars. Thomas Brassington's article, 'Show gay people for the often-awful people they are': Reframing Queer Monstrosity' uses *Killing Eve* as a case study to demonstrate a shift in televisual representations of queer psychopath characters, in which queerness and psychopathy are distinct, rather than contingent, characteristics of lead character Villanelle (Jodie Comer). Brassington argues that when monstrosity and queerness are distinct, queerness finds new modes of expression, with Villanelle's queerness becoming apparent through her wardrobe and comic sensibility.

In 'Asexual Disruptions in Netflix's *BoJack Horseman*', Danielle Girard mobilises asexualities for queer theoretical advancement, by considering how non-sexual identity formations work to destabilize and queer the institutions of the relationship and attraction. By examining *BoJack Horseman*'s Todd Chavez, Girard argues that asexualities apply a form of queer pressure

on (compulsory hetero)sexuality and a discursive desire in Western culture for concordant sexual and romantic desire.

Eileen Totter's article, "Star Trek: Lower Decks and Utopian Queer Intimacy," examines the queer utopia of *Star Trek: Lower Decks* as one that wholly rejects previous queer storylines that implicitly define queerness through trauma. Totter argues that the show casts queerness as an assumed default, thus upending heteronormative structures of storytelling.

In 'Messy Queer Familias: Negotiating Desire, Pleasure, and Melancholia in *Vida*', Ruben Zecena explores queer fantasy and racial melancholia through key moments in *Vida* (2018-2020). The article demonstrates complex televisual engagement with racialized sexuality and the backdrop of gentrification present in *Vida*. Zecena's analysis of racialized sexuality aims to create a space in which queer and Chicana subject formations are understood as always already relational.

Sabrina Mittermeier's article, "What's Important Is Being in the Room" – Ryan Murphy's Hollywood and the Politics of Queer Public Memory,' examines the stylistic production design that borrows heavily from the storytelling strategies used in Disney theme parks. The article argues that Murphy's Hollywood uses nostalgia and spectacle to create an almost utopic version of Hollywood that is both inclusive of marginalized voices whilst also upholding an industry that was never welcoming to them.

Katerina Karavodin's article, 'Transforming and Queering Identity: The Influence of Magical Girl Anime on Queer Inclusive Western Animation', traces the influence of the magical girl genre and its focus on the power of self and interpersonal exploration in relation to Western animated television. Considering examples like *Steven Universe* and *She-Ra*, Karavodin argues that the influence of the magical girl anime genre is particularly palpable in notably queer shows

and that the aesthetic conventions of this genre permit forms of queer representation and expression when used in Western animated contexts.

Katherine J Lehman's article, "'Sexuality Exists on a Continuum': *Broad City's* Queer Take on Female Friendship', draws attention to the queer dynamics of the friendship between the show's two main characters. Lehman argues that the series makes important interventions in queer representation by foregrounding the bonds between women, normalizing same-sex attraction, and introducing queer sexual practices. By examining close textual readings, in addition to critical and audience responses to *Broad City*, Lehman argues that the show's queerness works to expand the parameters of acceptable heterosexual activities, be they how women express their bonds with each other or how straight pairings engage in sexual activity.

Finally, Cheska McGovern contributes a thoughtful review about queerness in season three of *What We Do in The Shadows*. McGovern's review contemplates the rich history of the queer literary vampire before applying this logic to the fictionalized 'mockumentary.' She articulates that the vampire narrative uses the queer institution of the 'found family' to great success in the third season of the show.

By focusing on queer representation in contemporary popular television, this special issue will draw attention to how the mainstreaming of queer identities has crafted a dynamic field in which a wide variety of queer identities is put on display. We aim here to challenge pre-existing notions that such mainstreamification necessitates being assimilated by the cisheteropatriarchy. We hope that the articles in this issue lay the groundwork for filling gaps that queer criticism has left open. The desire to produce and circulate cutting edge research remains at the forefront of this project, and we are hopeful that the contents of this issue meet those expectations