

ON OBJECTS AND AFFECTIONS: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS
OF THE GAY MAN/STRAIGHT WOMAN DYAD IN POPULAR FILM AND
TELEVISION

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This project explores the representational strategies used to depict a gay male/straight female dyad across a variety of popular media. The study problematizes and critically evaluates how the narrativization of the dyad both challenges and reinforces stereotypes of gay men and at the same time circulates a troubling image of femininity in the figure of the straight woman. This line of argument is extended to the context of “Lifestyle Television” to demonstrate how the dyad implicitly structures two particular programs. It is suggested that the prevalence of the dyad is in part indicative of an assimilation of a particular gay identity into mainstream culture. The ideological implications of the dyad are discussed throughout this thesis.

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CHAPTER ONE

ON OBJECTS AND AFFECTIONS: CONTEMPORARY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GAY MAN/STRAIGHT WOMAN DYAD IN POPULAR FILM AND TELEVISION

*Maybe you're the next best thing to happen
All the things we might have been*

-From "Time Stood Still" by Madonna from The Next Best Thing Soundtrack

In The Next Best Thing (2000) best friends Robert (Rupert Everett) and Abby (Madonna) share one night of passion after a day of Martinis in celebration of Independence Day. Not only does the act produce a small, temporary wrinkle in their friendship, but Abby becomes pregnant. The announcement of her pregnancy instantly brings the two back together, and they make plans to raise the child together. But the film is far from over. Robert is a gay man and The Next Best Thing becomes the most recent film to direct its attention on the relationship between a gay man and a straight woman. The following excerpt from an early scene in the film highlights the fantasy that is promised (but rarely delivered) by the curious dyad. In the scene, Abby is having lunch with three girlfriends and has just explained that "gay" Robert is the father of her child:

Abby: Robert is moving in with me and we're going to raise the baby together.

Girlfriend One: Are you sure you know what you're doing?

Abby: Look, Robert is the most incredible man I've ever met. And he's hung in there when my boyfriends haven't.

Girlfriend Two: That's true.

Abby: We're always gonna love each other and be in each other's lives. And we're never getting married so we can't get divorced.

Girlfriend Two: You know, there's a certain crazy logic to this. And Robert will do everything a husband will do.

Abby: Exactly.

Girlfriend One: Include not sleep with you.

Abby: Yes, but I will be bitter and resentful about it.

Girlfriend Two: Well, at least the kid will be gorgeous.

Girlfriend Three: Will he be gay?

Abby: God! Will your kids be stupid?

I begin this chapter with this scene because it ties together so many of the issues I raise throughout this thesis. Embedded in this conversation are key ideas that continually recur in subsequent chapters. Here we see the belief that the gay male is better equipped to satisfy the straight female because their relationship is built upon an enduring and deep level of intimacy ("We're always gonna love each other"). A problematic aspect of a heterosexual relationship (the idea that it will come to an end) is solved by the permanence of the gay male figure ("We can't get divorced"). The question is raised about a sexual relationship between the gay male and straight female. Here the desire for physical intimacy is initiated by the female and becomes a source of tension for the dyad ("But I will be bitter and resentful about it")¹.

Finally, the last part of this conversation requires further commentary. Girlfriend Three's question regarding the sexual orientation of the child underscores the necessity of studying the gay male/straight female dyad as a structure utilized in popular culture. Her

¹ This romantic tension is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

comment which is comically dismissed by the film, is representative of a cultural fear of homosexuality, particularly in relation to children. The line invokes a disease model of homosexuality—the idea that gayness is genetic or can be spread, especially to the young. So while the conversation is overwhelmingly celebratory of the gay male, there remains a thread of uneasiness. By studying the representational strategies used to depict the gay male/straight female dyad across various films and television programs, one can come to a better understanding of the ideological underpinnings of such a couple.

This chapter works to situate this thesis within several contexts. Several discussions are started here which are then carried out in subsequent chapters. I begin by arguing for a critical position in order to situate the thesis and myself within the context of a gay critical perspective. Next, I outline my usage of the terms *gay* and *queer* which are used throughout the thesis in ways that are different from conventional usage. A discussion follows which connects the thesis to the work of others who have considered the representation of homosexuality in relation to film history. Concurrent trends in advertising circulate images and ideas of gay men similar to those discussed in subsequent chapters. An awareness of these trends is a useful context since advertising, along with film and television, is at the heart of popular culture. Finally, I reiterate the focus and purpose of this thesis and show how I formulated my criteria for selecting texts. I conclude with a preview of subsequent chapters.

Assuming a Position: Responsibilities of This Gay Film Critic

“Only with ideas can we confront ideology.”

Robin Wood (654)

My intention in this first section is to make explicit both my critical and personal investments in this thesis. I absolutely agree with Robin Wood who believes that the personal and the critical are intertwined and that “the critic should be aware of the personal bias that must inevitably affect his choice of theoretical position, and be prepared to foreground it in his work” (652). Wood’s contention immediately cuts through a core value of academic or social “scientific” research by ‘outing’ the issue of objectivity. Unlike some social “scientific” research (and I intentionally use scare quotes because I want to problematize standard definitions of social science) which has clearly borrowed a model and method of conducting research from the physical sciences, my discussion and acknowledgement of subjectivity or personal bias will not be reduced to a sentence or two under a section in my work labeled “Discussion” that comes at the end of this thesis under the rubric of “Limitations.” Even work that acknowledges “limitations” rarely mentions personal bias. These discussions in “Discussion” sections, almost always limit the shortcomings of a given study to issues of method, sample size, and/or statistical procedure. Instead, I take a pro-active stance from the outset and explicitly acknowledge (1) my status as a gay man and (2) the influence of this gayness in the critical interventions made throughout this thesis. Not only do I see this as honest, or as Wood might say, responsible, but by not participating in a myth of objectivity, I am able to situate my thesis within a humanities oriented tradition whose goals are inclusive of description, interpretation, and criticism, rather than a narrowly defined social science whose aims are theory reduction, prediction, and control.

I mean to cast suspicion on objectivity in part because I believe it is philosophically problematic, but also because I want to underscore the role my gayness no doubt plays throughout this thesis. Robin Wood sets two types of gay critics in binary opposition to one another. The first, which Wood himself admits to being in the past, is a “self oppressor.” That is, he “resists the public revelation of his gayness, arguing (either as defensive self justification or as a sincerely held principle) that it has nothing to do with his view of art—the view conceived as ‘objective,’ and art conceived as something Out There that one can be objective about” (651). In all fairness, Wood is writing in the early 1980s, where an uncertain, even hostile social climate would certainly make one consider the degree of openness one would want to show. Still, if I were to proceed under this self oppressor model of criticism, my objectivity would almost certainly be called into question anyway, due to the very social forces my thesis will consider—the ideological and cultural imperatives on masculinity. Even in contemporary and academic culture, would not my sexual status or masculinity be called into question simply by being a male who has devoted an entire thesis to the pleasures and problems of images of gay men in popular culture? Would not the topic selection and texts I have chosen to investigate at least raise a rainbow flag or perhaps a sculpted eyebrow in the minds of some, probably many? I believe these are important reasons for being “out” from the outset, and I am only thankful that I live in a time and place where I can be out in life and on paper.

Wood identifies a second type of gay critic, this one “concerns himself strictly with works that have direct bearing on gayness, approaching them [films] from a

political-propagandist view point: do they or do they not further the gay cause?”(p. 651). Wood believes this type of criticism will be dismissive of important films that may advance gay issues without explicitly appearing to do so. I do not subscribe to this model either, although at times it may appear as if I do. For instance, I will spend much time with each text and discuss the problems associated with popular depictions of gays in specific ways. I do this, because as each chapter will show, different texts present similar depictions. Nevertheless, I want to say more about Wood’s second model. The “do they or do they not further the gay cause” criterion is a bifurcation which in my opinion undermines the potential complexities of even the most apparently banal film. Similarly, I do not situate myself nor this thesis within any clearly defined political movement. Some moments from the films and television programs I consider absolutely cutting edge, progressive, liberational, while other moments, often within the same program, are deeply troubling. It is this unraveling of complexity that marks my purpose and the importance of this thesis.

On Gay and Queer: Some Terms to Get Straight

“I’m going to make a wild guess here and say that you two are more than friends, but less than lovers. You’re gay and she’s straight.”

-Ben Doucette (Gregory Hines) to Will Truman (Erick McCormack) in “Will and Grace”

“God, I should’ve seen this coming the minute I met you. Everybody knows your kind can’t be trusted. Fucking queers, you make me sick.”

-Ceasar (Joe Pantoliano) to Corky (Gina Gershon) in Bound (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1996)

I begin with these two quotes to highlight the dominant usage of the terms gay and queer. Regardless of the tone of each comment, the two terms are equated here to

specifically reference a homosexual sexual orientation. While certainly keeping this meaning intact, I want to argue for a broader sense of these terms, because I use both of them throughout this thesis to reference much more than sexual orientation. In identity politics discourse, Judith Butler's (1999) critique of the use of the term 'women' as the subject of feminism, shows how it works to exclude some women and thereby undermines feminist initiatives to liberate all women. I want to be sensitive to and acknowledge this same exclusionary tactic that occurs when one begins to define the subject of one's study. Unlike usage of the terms gay and queer used in the quotes above, I do not equate the two. When I use the term gay, I am using it to reference both a homosexual sexual orientation as well as an identity based on this orientation. Using the term gay in this way, while retaining sexual orientation and sexual desire also captures the notion of lifestyle or the life that goes with this orientation. While my usage will then be significantly broader than the formulation used in the quote above, like Butler's critique of women-as-subject, my usage will no doubt be exclusionary. Without exception, all of the gay and queer images analyzed in this thesis are those of white gay men. Similarly, although I borrow a moment from the lesbian cult film Bound, which is itself worthy of study particularly as it dramatizes gay desire among many other gay issues,² I do not address or even pretend to speak on or for gay women's representations or issues.

The word queer is used throughout in a much different way than it is used by Ceasar in the quote above. I agree with Alexander Doty who says, "I like those uses of

² For an insightful reading of this film in relation to these and other issues see Noble, 1998.

queer that make it more than just an umbrella term in the ways that ‘homosexual’ and ‘gay’ have been used to mean lesbian or gay or bisexual, because queerness can also be about the intersecting or combining of more than one specific form of nonstraight sexuality”(XVI). So the term queer can include, but also expands the term gay. Like Doty, I want the term queer to capture ambiguity. I use it to apply to qualities of both the persona of an individual or as a property of a text. Specifically, I use queer when I find examples of non-straight expression that the text never explicitly acknowledges as gay.

From the Margins to the Center: Opening the Closet Door on Film History

“But the orthodox commercial cinema still does not take kindly to the sympathetic treatment of homosexual relationships. If attitudes change, that may well offer a major breakthrough, providing a screen outlet for hitherto untapped theatrical and literary works, and biographical studies. With that possibility in mind, this whole book may seem quaintly outdated in a few years. But by that time, perhaps we’ll have made contact with other planets, established working relationships with outer-space archives, and we’ll all be busily delving into other galaxy genres and investigating the careers of Saturn’s equivalent of D. W. Griffith and Clara Bow.”

-From the introduction to W. K. Everson’s Love in the Film

It is within and only within this introduction that William Everson mentions homosexuality in relation to film history, albeit in a dismissive and offensive manner. Clearly his book whose cover features production stills of men and women in embrace from such film classics as Gone With the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939), A Place in the Sun (George Stevens, 1951), and The Way We Were (Sydney Pollack, 1973) is a survey of *heterosexual* love in the film. A book that would come out only two years later, Vito Russo’s (1981) The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies, surveys roughly the same time period and finds homosexuality and homosexual love running throughout the history of American film and television movie production. My endeavor here is not to

recount this entire history, for this work has been done³. It is because of the pioneering work of scholars like Russo that this history has been traced. That those who engage in this type of historiography produce book length analyses and surveys with filmographies that span multiple pages, only attests to the prevalence of and by extension, fascination with cinematic representations of gay and queer identity. This thesis shares the same fascination.

I start this section with Everson's quote because I want to connect the films dealt with in this thesis to the notion of romance. It should be obvious that Hollywood films have always been invested in the romantic interests of heterosexuals. But what Russo's work demonstrates is that in other venues (independent, experimental, and foreign films), films have dealt with romance between homosexuals. Even a film like Philadelphia (1994) gestures toward the loving relationship between Andy (Tom Hanks) and Manuel (Antonio Banderas). However, this is easily overshadowed by the film's central focus on AIDS, discrimination, and death⁴. And this is generally the case in Hollywood films. When gays have appeared as major characters it has never been within the context of romance⁵. This is a distinguishing feature of the texts considered in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. All of these texts specifically structure the dyad as couple with very strong emotional bonds. In short the gay male/straight female love each other. And this

³ See for examples: Paul Burston (1995), Tyler Parker (1993), and Boze Hadleigh (1993).

⁴ Philadelphia is an important film in my opinion precisely because it forces a mainstream audience, in a powerful way, to identify with a gay character who is suffering from not only AIDS, but from homophobia in the work place. Other critics disagree and suggest the film presents harmful images of gay people. For a discussion of both sides of the argument see Corliss (1994).

⁵ In the film In and Out (1997), while a developing romance is hinted at between Kevin Kline and Tom Selleck's characters, this too is minimized. The film's central issues are coming out and job discrimination.

is what make the dyad so unique. It is not quite heterosexual romance, but it is the next best thing.

We're in the Money, We're in the Moment: Mainstreaming in the Context of Advertising Trends

An important context to consider for the purpose of this thesis and the films and television programs considered herein are recent trends within the advertising industry. These trends, which I will review below, increasingly target a gay and/or gay friendly demographic. Some of the ads directly acknowledge a gay audience whereas others are more ambiguous. These ambiguous ads are considered gay friendly or 'gay vague' because they work on two levels. One level plays to gays, yet the text is subtle enough to cater to heterosexuals. To achieve this, typically advertisers will use the same ad, but with different copy. The addition of text reconstructs the ad for the gay audience. A good example is an ad for Waterford Crystal which features two men walking with a woman, all three carrying glasses of champagne. The meaning of the ad was significantly changed when the text "It's time your crystal came out of the closet" was added when the ad appeared in Out magazine (Hamilton F1). This trend is important to consider because the ads featured within it actively target a gay consumer. How this gay consumer is imagined by advertisers is not unlike the gay or queer men represented in the films and television programs considered in this thesis. A line of argument that I will begin to advance below and then develop throughout the course of subsequent chapters, is the double-edged nature of imagining gay men as a particular demographic, namely as white, upper middle class hyper-consumers.

At the end of the 1990s more and more companies began to tailor advertisements for gay and lesbian consumers. Michael Wilke reports a significant increase in advertising revenues by gay publications which jumped from \$73.7 million in 1996 to \$117 million in 1998 (30). This increase is attributed to the success experienced by “big advertisers” such as Philip Morris, IBM, and American Express who were some of the first major companies to create gay specific ads. Stuart Elliot discusses a twelve page advertorial for Levi-Strauss Dockers which ran in Out magazine featuring ten gay men and lesbian women each sporting Dockers pants. Elliot’s article is telling because Levi-Strauss’ primary motive becomes clear. Mark Malinowski says, “First and foremost, we’re trying to reach 25 to 34 year olds whom we call ‘urban modernists.’ When we looked at who made up that group, gay men and lesbians are a large part of it” (C11). This notion of the urban modernist is important because it signifies not only a particular type of gay man and lesbian, but also a specific type of heterosexual. The texts considered in this thesis seem to target this same demographic. Obviously because of their subject matter, and the centrality of a gay figure in these narratives, the movies and programs will be of interest to some gay and lesbian people simply because they are novel. But the degree to which they appeal to this straight, “urban modernist” viewer is even more provocative. Does this type of programming and advertising sell the idea to heterosexual people that by aligning themselves with the marginal, by taking pleasure in the consumption of these texts, that they are able to make statements about themselves, namely that they are progressive or “hip” urban modernists? Has a certain type of gay culture become chic in mainstream media?

The questions posed above can be answered in consideration of the trend in advertising known as ‘gay vague’ advertising. In an article in The New York Times, William Hamilton surveys a variety of ads for a variety of products which rely on same sex innuendo. Rather than explicitly acknowledge a gay consumer, these ads seek a broader target. According to Hamilton, these ads “are designed to reach both gay and mainstream audiences” (F1). Here, as with Levi-Strauss’ desire to hit urban modernists, the emphasis of the gay vague pitch is to attract gays and straights alike. Because this a rather new development within advertising, I suggest that the vagueness here (which is often not vague at all) works to position straight people in relation to a trend that sees gayness as cutting edge and/or progressive. Conceptualizing a gay vague sensibility is important precisely because it emphasizes the target of both demographics: “Gay vague advertising aims at what many companies believe is an affluent gay dollar, while also displaying a casual, inclusive attitude toward same sex issues that advertisers hope will capture younger, hip mainstream consumers” (F1). So this merging of gays with a chic straight audience, especially within this context of consumerism will be important in future discussions in subsequent chapters. At this point, I mention it to provide one social context for the ideas I raise throughout this thesis.

Another point I want to address regarding advertising directed at gays is a double edged sword phenomenon that emerges. First, I want to applaud companies who as Gluckman and Reed point out have realized that “the profits to be reaped from treating gay men and lesbians as a trend-setting consumer group finally outweigh the financial risks of inflaming right-wing hate” (3). While the profit driven motive should and does

remain suspect, this trend is certainly positive for gays in the sense that it helps to make a certain type of gayness visible. Still, another problem emerges for Gluckman and Reed:

But most straight Americans have harbored few ideas about whether gay men and lesbians were rich or poor, spendthrift or frugal. Past gay invisibility has proved a blank slate of sorts, a slate that is rapidly filling up with notions that have more to do with marketing than with reality. (4)

The contention here should not go unnoticed. The ads, through their depictions of gays promote only that segment of the gay population, which is white, upper-middle class, and male. It is important to realize that it is seldom prosaic commodities such as dish soap or laundry detergent being sold to the gay audience. The majority of ads are for luxury items like designer clothing and expensive furniture or prescription drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes. Gluckman and Reed's piece helps to explain how this trend developed by arguing that gay marketing groups and gay publications, in their attempts to secure advertisers, inflate gay incomes or conflate their readers' incomes with those of all gay people. What happens is this "data" makes it appear as though gay people earn more than two times more than the national average.⁶ This demographic, if as wealthy as thought, would be of obvious interest to advertisers. However, these inaccuracies regarding incomes become ammunition for antigay groups in the political arena. Gluckman and Reed point to several significant instances where escalated income figures were used to deny gay people civil rights. The group Colorado for Family Values, Justice Antonin Scalia of the Supreme Court, and Jonathan Rauch, a gay social critic

writing in The New Republic, believe that because gays possess this much earning power, they could not possibly be oppressed. This logic is homophobic and flawed if one agrees that sexual orientation transcends social class. This is the nature of the double-edged sword, and an issue we will revisit as contemporary images of gay men are considered throughout this thesis.

A Match Made in Hollywood: Gay Men and Straight Women

The primary focus of the chapters in this thesis is an examination of the relationship between gay men and straight women as depicted in recent Hollywood film and television. When I began to conceptualize this project I observed the prevalence of gay men as central characters in films like The Bird Cage (1996), To Wong Foo: Thanks for Everything Julie Newmar (1995), and In and Out (1997). These films appeared to promote an ideology of acceptance or tolerance of gays for mainstream audiences. But then a series of films began to emerge which exclusively focused on the relationship paradigm identified above. By looking at the straight woman and gay male as a dyad that structures the narratives of certain films and television programs, arguments concerning acceptance/tolerance ideology can still be advanced. The gay figures depicted in the films above are central. This centrality is important because it forces exposure and to some degree, identification with gay characters for mainstream audiences. But investigating the gay male in conjunction with the straight female goes beyond raising questions about acceptance/tolerance ideology. As with the scene from The Next Best Thing described at the beginning of this chapter, the dyad as a structure provides a space

⁶ For a thorough explanation of the statistical and sampling errors incurred on estimates of gay incomes see

where discourses on gay men, straight women, and perceived problems with heterosexual men merge. This couple becomes a rich source for dialog between text, critic, and popular culture.

Formulating a basis for text selection for this project has been difficult, in part because many contemporary films and TV programs feature elements of the gay male/straight female couple. Another difficulty, which I believe is ultimately a strength of the project, is that films that feature the dyad are still being produced. That is to say, finding a starting point is less difficult than finding an end point, because currently the end does not seem to be near. With this in mind, I chose popular Hollywood films and a popular television show in which a gay male character is figured in a prominent, if not leading role. Similarly, the focus of the texts' narratives needed to be on the relationship between the gay male and straight female. My Best Friend's Wedding (1997) is striking, not only because of its success, but because of the importance that a gay male plays throughout the film and especially at the film's conclusion. The couple formed in this movie become a paradigmatic example of the dyad. The Object of My Affection (1998) and "Will and Grace" were chosen because the dyad literally structures both narratives, and both feature a leading gay man. The Opposite of Sex (1998) represents a slight departure from the criteria outlined above. While featuring a leading gay male, the dyad here is only one of several narrative trajectories. But the film should still be included because none of the narrative threads takes precedence over another. The dyad remains a significant aspect of this film. Other films that include a gay male/straight female dyad

might come to mind such as Clueless (1996), As Good As It Gets (1997) or In and Out (1997). In each case the film fails to feature a leading gay male character (Clueless) or the narrative focus is on something other than the gay male/straight female relationship⁷. The home design shows I examine in my last chapter were chosen exclusively because of the flamboyant persona of the host and my assumption that the predominant audience for these two shows is female.

In Chapter Two, I examine My Best Friend's Wedding (1997) as the first in a line of recent texts that holds the gay male up as an ideal companion for the heterosexual female. Threads of virtually all of the themes visited and revisited by all the texts considered in future chapters, can be found in this film alone. This chapter pays special attention to the ideological work the film accomplishes by tracing the female protagonist's transgressions against traditional gender roles. The film's instantiation of a gay male confidant is outlined with an emphasis on his supportive role throughout the film, as well as his elevation to a central figure at the film's point of closure.

Chapter Three extends arguments initiated in Chapter One by taking up questions of desire and romance in the gay male/straight female dyad. Because the texts (both filmic and televisual) considered in this chapter move the gay male to center stage (rather than as primarily supportive as in My Best Friend's Wedding), they are analyzed for stereotypicality. Questions such as "What has the stereotype of the gay male become in the late 1990s?", "What similarities and differences exists across these depictions of gay men?" ,and "How do these depictions challenge or reinforce stereotypes of gay men?"

⁷ In As Good As It Gets the heterosexual romance between Melvin (Jack Nicholson) and Carol (Helen

drive this chapter. Chapter Four is a significant departure from the previous chapters. Here I use Queer Theory to argue that the dyad structures, albeit in an implicit manner, two home design shows. The extension of the gay male/straight female in this context provides for a fuller understanding of the dyad as well as illuminating contemporary ideas of domesticity, the home, femininity, and the tenuous status of queer men on television.

CHAPTER TWO

MY BEST FRIEND'S WEDDING AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE GAY MALE CONFIDANT

Lauded by its theatrical trailer as “a story about finding the love of your life and deciding what to do about it,” My Best Friend's Wedding (1997) invites viewers to witness a romance. Exactly what romance entails for this movie is revealing on several levels. I begin this thesis with this film for substantial reasons. First, its popularity can be noted in a preliminary box office gross in excess of \$125 million (Jacobs 22). Also, similar films that were subsequently released appear to borrow themes, if not characters, from My Best Friend's Wedding evidently banking on their predecessors' success¹. The film provides viewers with George, in a star-making role for Rupert Everett, as an important character who is a gay man². Exploring his relationship to the narrative and with Julianne, the protagonist, helps untangle the film's ideological investments in romance, gender, and sexuality. At the same time, the film, seen in conjunction with a host of other texts that I deal with in later chapters like “Will and Grace,” is a part of an

¹ Here I am suggesting that the film initiates a trend, whereby a heterosexual female is paired up with a gay male. The trend is picked up by recent texts and considered in other chapters like The Object of My Affection (1998), The Opposite of Sex (1998), and “Will and Grace.”

² Critical reviews of the film, whether the author favored the film or despised it, praised Everett's performance. For some examples see Hunter, Ansen, Kempley, Maslin, and Sarris. Mark Peyser devoted an entire article in Time to Everett's performance in the film called “The Life of the Party: Making Off With My Best Friend's Wedding.” The article asserts that the film has brought Everett into the American spotlight, naming him the “Gay Cary Grant.” The piece is accompanied by a photo of Everett followed by a caption that reads “The Best Friend.”

ambitious larger cultural project which is attempting to assimilate gay men into the dominant, mainstream culture. Questions such as “How do these texts do this?” “Why now?” and “Why in such highly qualified ways?” deserve to be answered. The results, which this thesis will begin to tease out, should shed light not only on cultural constructions of gay men, but on those of heterosexual women and men as well. The apparent pleasure provided by a gay male/straight female couple seems in part responsive to a kind of crisis in the traditional heterosexual couple. This “new couple” is celebrated in My Best Friend’s Wedding and in films and television programs that follow in its footsteps. I want to begin my analysis of this film by first situating it within its broader generic context—the romantic comedy. In addition, a discussion of the wedding as a cultural phenomenon will help to contextualize the film’s generic status, narrative structure, and popularity. Before turning to the film’s narrative, I explicate these two contexts.

The Rules of Engagement: Romantic Comedy and Cultural Obsession With Weddings

My Best Friend’s Wedding announces its status as a “romance” via publicity and textual gestures which showcase its attempt to tap into a predominately female audience³. The producers seemed to hit their target as women drove nearly seventy-five percent of

³ The theatrical trailer includes the narrator “inviting” viewers to witness a romance. The poster for the film, picked up by its video cassette cover positions Julia Roberts adjacent to a large wedding cake, removing the figurine of the bride from its top with a smirk on her face. The film’s generic status as romantic comedy/woman’s film is telling of its intended (female) audience. See Doane and Rowe for compelling arguments suggesting that the primary audience for these classical genres was female.

the film's opening weekend grosses (Jacobs 23)⁴. Yet its popularity with women should remain suspect as the film overtly cherishes the traditional female and offers a harsh critique of the single, educated, working woman. In light of these issues, Catherine Preston has sought to explain the increase in romance films during the 1990s⁵. The central purpose of her essay is to characterize the state of the romance film during a time period when "romance films often seem to be hybrids, a *mélange* of different, already recognized and theorized genres" (228). For Preston, My Best Friend's Wedding is a strange breed. She maintains that it fits the model of the screwball sub-genre because of the slapstick situations the protagonist finds herself in⁶. Similarly, Preston says, "My Best Friend's Wedding is entirely built around another convention of all romantic comedy, including screwball comedy, which focuses on the idea that one of the characters is engaged to the wrong person" (232). The operative word here is "built *around*" rather than "built *on*." As the film unfolds the viewer learns that the engagement in the film is between the right people. So while My Best Friend's Wedding flirts with conventions of the romance but significantly reverses them, Preston concludes and I agree, that the film is an "antiromance" (233). Preston also connects the film (and many other romance films in the 1990s) to a "New Traditionalist" political agenda that seeks a

⁴ Preston also argues that romance films are "typically aimed at women" (228). She points out that they are often referred to as 'chick flicks' which again speaks to an intended female audience (228).

⁵ Preston's data indicate that from 1960-1969 an average of seven romances were released each year, five during the 1970s, and 20 during the 1980s. However, "between 1990 and 1996, the annual average rose to 26, peaking at 40 in 1991" (229).

⁶ Preston is careful to make distinctions between classical screwball comedies and the conventions of the screwball found in the romance films she discusses. For instance, she says of My Best Friend's Wedding, Addicted to Love (1997), and French Kiss (1995), that "in none of these is there as much physical humor as one would find in the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s" (230). Similarly, she argues that the convention of having the protagonist in pursuit of lost love is unique to these 1990s screwballs rather than those from the Classic Era.

“return to the idealized values of the 1950s in which the gender roles are clearly defined...” (242). My reading of the film will expose how this conservative ideology of gender is supported by the film.

The title My Best Friend's Wedding should call to mind other popular films of the 1990s, such as Four Weddings and a Funeral (1994), Father of the Bride (1991), The Wedding Singer (1998) and Runaway Bride (1999). These titles, and there are many more, attest to a contemporary cultural fascination with weddings and bridal culture. “A Wedding Story,” a documentary style program on The Learning Channel, “follows one couple through the happy nervous days before their wedding, then down the aisle, and into the reception, capturing every tearful moment” (A Wedding). Julia Chaplin writes that “Weddings are a 70\$ billion annual business, up 230 percent from 1982, according to a Bride magazine study” (B8). Clearly, weddings have taken on great importance in recent times. While the union of a couple is still important, weddings have risen to the level of spectacle. In order to foot the bill for this expensive ritual, Chaplin describes a new trend—the sponsored wedding. Here, prenuptial couples (usually the bride as the designated representative of domestic consumption), spend months soliciting companies to make donations to their wedding in exchange for advertising space at the event. In my mind this practice parallels product placement in feature films. Sponsored weddings become more and more similar to these films listed above which romanticize the wedding. Weddings have literally become a production.

The wedding films and programs identified above which focus on and romanticize the wedding raise important questions for female consumers of these texts. Chrys Ingraham argues that the romanticizing of the wedding is highly problematic:

The consequence to women can be profound, manifesting in a form of anti-intellectualism where women are concerned, reducing their expectations in life to one moment of spectacle, rendering their talents and desires to the domestic sphere, trivializing their interests in the world around them, and situating them as the standard bearers of traditional femininity and the heterogendered division of labor. (157)

As I examine the roles of women in My Best Friend's Wedding, a film that certainly romanticizes and fantasizes the wedding, this argument made by Ingraham will be brought into sharper focus.

My Best Friend's Wedding

The film opens as food critic Julianne Potter (Julia Roberts) falls in love with Michael O'Neal (Dermot Mulroney), her male best friend of nine years, the day he announces his plan to marry Kimmy (Cameron Diaz). Invited by a scared and needy Michael to Chicago for the four day nuptial extravaganza, Julianne launches her scheme to break up the new couple in order to have Michael for herself. Employing sabotage and deception to achieve her mission, Julianne finally manages to split the couple apart but only momentarily. Her efforts are ultimately met with failure. Having learned her lesson and ashamed at her own behavior, Julianne concludes in her toast to the newlyweds, "That the world is as it should be. My best friend has won the best woman."

Julianne's relation to the narrative trajectory of this film is two-fold. As the main character, we are called upon to identify with her as the protagonist. On the way to the airport with George, her gay friend and editor, she succinctly states her primary goal: "I can't lose him George, I'm going to bring him back." The film poses the following central question: Will Julianne be successful in her attempt to marry Michael despite his engagement to Kimmy? As the film progresses and Julianne's tactics increase in cruelty and dishonesty we begin to realize that the answer is a resounding "no." At first, Kimmy appears to be the film's antagonist. She's twenty years old, rich, "irritatingly nice," and stands in the way of Julianne's mission. But Kimmy's endurance, sincerity, honesty, and loyalty to Michael make her difficult to dislike. Every blow Julianne deals Kimmy only brings the prenuptial couple closer together. As in a classic Greek tragedy, Julianne becomes her own antagonist and fails to achieve her goal. Julianne appears to have come to the same realization regarding her status when she tells Michael during her confession at the train station that, "I'm the bad guy."

To The Margins: The Straight Woman as Outsider

Julianne's antiheroic status on one level becomes the source of the film's biting, but comic moments. Viewers are given the opportunity of siding with the "bad guy." On another, even more tragic level, Julianne can be read as an indictment of a modern woman, her tragic flaw consisting of hubris and desire⁷. In fact, consideration of her personal and professional goals combined with her "bad guy" status reveals the film's feelings towards women who aggressively pursue their desires. Julianne is always the

outsider. As I will show, the film ultimately supports a traditional, conservative view that links the happiness of women to their dependence on men. We learn the power of Julianne's career in the film's first scene when Julianne and George are having dinner at a restaurant whose food she is sampling for review. The chef and the wait staff anxiously await her first bite, hoping she will give them a positive review. Coupled with this sense of professional power is her lack of control over her romantic life. Julianne's conversation with George in the restaurant alludes to her promiscuity. George says he will not set her up with any more men because she does not know what to do with them. As she explains Michael to George, she insists that he is not "the man of the moment." Both of these comments imply that she has had temporary male lovers. Also, as she recalls her previous break up with Michael, she tells George that this caused her to cry for the third time in her life insinuating an apparent lack of emotion on her part. Her callousness and the allusion to her numerous momentary boyfriends are both issues revisited in later moments of the film. These qualities work to reinforce a stereotype of working women who are often endowed with a lack of emotionality that renders them less "feminine."

The film's concern with Julianne's emotions and femininity becomes more evident as she is constantly masculinized by other characters and by other narrative elements. As Julianne is fitted for her Maid of Honor gown, Kimmy tells Julianne that Michael described her as not wanting anything in life that is conventional or "assumed to be a female priority," such as romance or marriage. Other characters in the film

⁷ I use the term "Modern Woman" loosely to signify Julianne as a single, urban female with a substantial

repeatedly refer to Julianne in masculine terms. For instance, Julianne is told by Michael's father, "I told him to make you his best man." Michael echoes his father when he gives Julianne the wedding ring to hold onto and tells her, "You're practically the best man." When Julianne comes to pick up Walter (Kimmy's father) from his office, she refers to herself as "the unofficial best man." At the pre-wedding brunch Julianne yells at some boys who are inhaling helium and singing. As she shouts at the boys to be quiet they reply with a "Yes sir!" Finally, in her confession to Michael she says, "I'm the bad guy." With a brief aside to the ongoing elements of Julia Roberts's stardom, it seems strange that her femininity is at stake in this film⁸. This masculinization is one of the ways that the film positions Julianne as an outsider to the possibility of heterosexual couple-hood. Two scenes in the theatrical trailer that do not make the final cut play into this notion. One of these omitted scenes shows Julianne smoking a big cigar, stereotypically a masculine act. In another moment of this preview Julianne's sexuality is questioned as one of Kimmy's cousins says that she believed Julianne was a lesbian. All of these moments are consistent with and seem directly implicated in the film's general uneasiness with working women and the possibility of romance for them. In this way, the film suggests that part of the reason Julianne and Michael are incompatible is precisely because she is not feminine enough.

career.

⁸ Roberts will always be remembered for Pretty Woman (1990) which paired her with Richard Gere launched her career as a major female star. Her heterosexuality and femininity are always secure as she plays opposite some of Hollywood's most macho men in I Love Trouble (1994) (Nick Nolte), Michael Collins (1996) (Liam Neeson), Conspiracy Theory (1997) (Mel Gibson), Notting Hill (1999)(Hugh Grant), and most recently Runaway Bride (1999) (Gere). Wedding makes a significant departure from her previous roles as her masculinization appears to keep her from the leading man.

Whether she rarely cries or whether she is addressed as a man, I have pointed to moments from the film that render Julianne as less-than-feminine, and because of this deficiency, it is implied that she is unworthy of romance. The film's status as a romantic comedy further problematizes Julianne's emotions, but in a different direction. Now, set off by Michael's announcement of marriage, Julianne becomes hysterical. Assessing changes in the male hero of post-classical romantic comedies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Kathleen Rowe notes a lack of irony surrounding the male figure that was found in earlier incarnations of the genre (187). She asserts that if a male lead suffers in films such as When Harry Met Sally (1989), Sleepless in Seattle (1993), and Green Card (1991), "we understand and sympathise, for he is not neurotic, merely sensitive" (187). The same is not true for women who suffer in these films who are "simply neurotic"⁹. Similarly, Mary Ann Doane's work finds that in the woman's film "there is an almost obsessive association of the female protagonist with a deviation from some norm of mental stability or health, resulting in the recurrent investigation of psychical mechanisms frequently linked with the 'feminine condition' - masochism, hysteria, neurosis, paranoia" (36). A connection between psychopathology, suffering, and Julianne surfaces in both her aggressive pursuit of Michael and in popular discourse regarding Julia Roberts' performance. Note the references to hysteria and irrationality in the language used to describe Julianne/Julia Roberts in the following excerpts:

"It is theoretically O. K. to put the woman in the terminator role. And Roberts, the realest of nice girls, much of the time makes us believe that her insanity is temporary" (Schickel 78).

⁹ Rowe reads the main female characters in Broadcast News (1987), Green Card (1991), and Frankie and Johnny (1991) as "hard driven," "order-obsessed," and "alienated" respectively.

“...Julianne’s motives are riddled with neurotic and ambiguous undertones” (Ansen 76).

“All’s fair in love, so they say, only what Michael and Julianne share is not romantic passion or even real kinship, but a neurotic attachment” (Kempley).

“In these early scenes, Roberts alternates hilariously high spirits, as Julianne cooks up underhanded schemes to awaken her beloved’s ‘true’ feelings for her, with the absurdly low spirits that follow every small defeat. The manic-depressive rhythm of her performance is disarmingly funny” (Rafferty 108).

These references to Julianne’s psychology work in tandem with her masculinization to position Julianne outside of the possibility of romance. Her obsession with breaking up the marriage fuels her own suffering.

In contrast to Julianne, Kimmy’s brand of femininity is rewarded with romance and its logical conclusion—marriage. As the film’s “best woman,” Kimmy has put her future career on hold in order to be with Michael as he follows sports teams around the country. At the age of twenty, Kimmy prepares to drop out of college, telling Julianne that she’s “already been everywhere” and now wants to be with the man she loves. But even Kimmy does not seem quite content with her state of affairs. An argument erupts between Kimmy and Michael, fueled by Julianne’s intervention, regarding Michael working for Kimmy’s father Walter¹⁰. Julianne’s plan disintegrates when Kimmy rhetorically and angrily asks Michael if she’s just supposed to leave her career behind.

¹⁰ Walter is played by the actor Philip Bosco, who is no stranger to assuming the role of the patriarchal, ultra-rich corporate tycoon. In *Working Girl* (1988) he plays Oren Trask, the wealthy business man Melanie Griffith’s Tess Magill is able to infiltrate at his daughter’s wedding. *Working Girl* shares (albeit in different ways) *My Best Friend’s Wedding*’s concern with romance, women who work, and the presumed threat these women pose to the status quo. Tess Magill’s childlike qualities and femininity make her an ideal candidate for romance. However, Sigourney Weaver’s Katherine Parker is demonized, shown to be incapable of love, and booted out of her office by Oren Trask for her willingness and desire to succeed in the business arena. For a thoughtful discussion of *Working Girl* in relation to these ideas see Elizabeth Traube’s article.

Michael acts as if the issue had long been decided. Sarcastically relieved to find out about Kimmy's feelings, Michael's behavior indicates that their marriage is not possible unless Kimmy comes with him. At his implied threat of leaving, Kimmy immediately breaks down, weeping and apologizing profusely. Here it seems the ultimatum is clear: If the marriage is to materialize, then Michael will continue to work and Kimmy will travel with him.

My Best Friend's Wedding takes no issue with the differences in Michael and Kimmy's ages¹¹. The film wants to present them as an ideal couple, yet Michael is eager to break off the engagement at the first sign that his needs and desires will not be fully accommodated. Kimmy's interests are only important as they pertain to Michael. In fact she appears to have no interests of her own except Michael. In a very telling moment Kimmy tries to make sense of Michael's erroneous belief that Walter wants Michael to work for him. Not realizing Julianne's involvement, Kimmy makes her own confession to Julianne. Kimmy admits that she really wants Michael to work for her father, she wants to complete her degree in architecture, and she really wants a life of her own. These desires are never revealed to Michael, and as the two newlyweds disappear to their honeymoon destination (Michael's next job assignment), we are left to believe that it will be a while before Kimmy attains her college degree.

¹¹ By not addressing the considerable differences in their ages (a twenty year old college dropout and a twenty-eight year old with an established career), the film reinforces a double standard whereby older men are permitted to couple with younger women, but a couple consisting of an older woman and a younger man is viewed as taboo.

David Shumway's work on the screwball comedy genre is relevant to a discussion of My Best Friend's Wedding¹². Within the genre Shumway sees romance functioning as a "complex and tenacious ideology" which is used to mystify marriage (381-84). Essentially, Shumway argues that romance in these classic films structures the narrative in such a way so that marriage always becomes the end goal of romance and of the film. However, he notices how the genre is revised by a much later film like Desperately Seeking Susan (1985), which again is structured by romance, but does not end in the marriage of the two lovers. My Best Friend's Wedding's pairing of George and Julianne further revises the genre by eliminating the possibility of romance and marriage for Julianne altogether. For this film, it is as though romance and the working women personified by Julianne are incompatible.

As I have argued, Julianne is depicted as masculine, lacking emotions, obsessed, and even promiscuous—an outsider to 'true' romance by the film's logic. When Julianne flirtingly serves up beer at the ballpark to the groomsmen in a halter-top, Michael calls her an "imposter," as though her attempt to be physically appealing is out of character. In a conversation that follows shortly after this, Michael explains to Julianne that he loves Kimmy because he can hug her in public and she just lets him. Michael reminds Julianne that she would always let go first when he and she were together, leveling what is in effect a complaint regarding her ability to demonstrate intimacy. These moments work to position Julianne outside of a traditional, intimate femininity which then becomes

¹² Released at a time when genres are less discernable, the film borrows many of the conventions of the screwball. Terrence Rafferty calls My Best Friend's Wedding "a classic screwball-comedy situation, most reminiscent, perhaps of His Girl Friday" (1940). Similarly, Richard Schickel connects the film to other canonical screwballs such as It Happened One Night (1934) and The Philadelphia Story (1940).

embodied by Kimmy. In the elevator with Julianne, Kimmy lists all of Michael's irritating traits. Kimmy concludes her list by telling Julianne, "But he sure can kiss," which seems to make up for all that is wrong with him. So relationships according to this film are connected to notions of romance as being driven to a large degree by physical intimacy. Men can work and still be viable romantic partners, whereas women appear to lose their romantic appeal if they are embarked on a career or are otherwise independent.

To The Center: The Gay Male Confidant

The film's treatment of romance and love becomes even more complicated as George, Julianne's gay editor and "best friend these days" is considered. Appearing in key sections of the film, George acts as the moral voice of reason for Julianne, and ultimately replaces Michael as her new best friend. I suggested at the beginning of this chapter that My Best Friend's Wedding is innovative in terms of its positioning of a gay male in relation to a heterosexual female protagonist. A discussion of George's function in this narrative reveals the film's interests in maintaining certain stereotypes of gay men. At the same time, his centrality and likeability minimize the marginal sexual status that allows him to be easily assimilated into the world of the narrative and by extension into the mainstream of popular culture. The film employs a host of strategies from the generic to the ideological in order to both contain and celebrate this character. These same strategies will be utilized again and again as producers continue to tell similar stories with a straight female/gay male couple at their center.

George is introduced in the opening scene with Julianne at the restaurant as Julianne catches him up on her nine-year relationship with Michael. She tells George

that Michael is nothing like herself and underscores this point by saying, “He is nothing like me. He’s like you actually. Only straight.” But Michael and George seem to have nothing in common except that they both are males and both care for Julianne. By comparing Michael with George, we realize that in many ways George makes up for what Michael lacks. While Michael calls on Julianne for support during the days leading up to his wedding, it is George that plays the role of Julianne’s support. At moments in the film when Julianne is down on her luck or in need of quick advice, it is George she calls back in New York City. For instance, Julianne calls George begging for his help after Kimmy fails to persuade Michael to work for her father at Julianne’s direction. George’s generous response to her request is to fly to Chicago in person. Because of his dependability and high level of commitment to Julianne’s needs, George is presented as an ideal companion. This film’s ending offers George as a kind of consolation prize to Julianne, and implies through their relationship that an alternative to marriage exists. This is in stark contrast to the traditional screwball comedy. Shumway contends, “That the major cultural work of these films is not the stimulation of thought about marriage, but the affirmation of marriage in the face of a growing divorce rate and liberalized divorce laws”(381). Shumway is theorizing the classical screwball of the 1930s, but even those according to him, seem in part responsive to a crisis in heterosexual marriage (divorce) which must be reaffirmed to preserve the status quo of patriarchy¹³. While marriage is certainly venerated in My Best Friend’s Wedding, Julianne, the threat to it, is

¹³ Preston argues that the divorce rate is probably not an explanation for this reassertion of marriage in these much later films since the divorce rate has been level for some time. She believes that conservative Right Wing rhetoric such as New Traditionalism with “family values explain the reassertion of marriage, at least in the romantic comedy” (233).

still recuperated by forming a couple with George that is neither romantic nor marriage bound. Hence, the film is an antiromance.

Although intimacy is lacking in the relationship between Michael and Julianne, it is central to the relationship between George and Julianne. Julianne and Michael can not surpass their (her) problem with intimacy as evidenced in their conversation regarding her letting go first when they embraced. When George drops Julianne off at the airport in New York, she leans over and kisses him. In the next scene at the Chicago airport, Julianne searches for Michael in the crowd. As she spots and runs up to him, the two slam into each other in a quirky, awkward kiss. In contrast, George flies to Chicago in response to Julianne's plea for help, and he appears at her hotel door and the two embrace. Having passed out the night before with a mud mask on her face, George, in a sweet and intimate gesture, washes Julianne's face off with a wash cloth. Similarly, he and Julianne have a long conversation where George advises Julianne that she should tell Michael the truth about her feelings. This discussion takes place in her hotel bed, both of them lying down, their faces close. George is continually supportive and has the ability to compensate for Julianne's lack of physical intimacy with heterosexual men like Michael.

Julianne's problem with intimacy is further highlighted as she forces George into a heterosexual masquerade. In her attempt at Michael's tuxedo fitting to follow George's advice and finally tell Michael the truth, she backs out at the last minute and instead tells him that she and George are engaged. Her plan is to make Michael jealous. While she had no problem kissing George at the airport, hugging him, and being physically close

with him in her hotel bed, once they are a “couple,” she begins to have intimacy problems even with him. As they leave Michael’s fitting session and the three walk down the street to get into a cab, Julianne incessantly pushes George away from her as he tries to hold her hand and move in close to her. Inside the cab, he playfully grabs her hands and breasts as she forcefully pushes him away. It is as though once someone is capable of becoming a viable mate for her, even if it is a fantasy, she cannot cope with physical contact.

George and Julianne’s masquerade is also interesting because together they perform a parody of a heterosexual romance. Surprised that Julianne is planning to marry George, Michael asks why he has flown down to Chicago. Mocking the level of passion in Michael’s relationship, Julianne remarks that George flew down for the sole purpose of having sex with her. Michael had believed George was gay based on what Julianne had previously told him. George claims he pretends to be gay to attract women. This comment is telling as Julianne admits that the line worked for her, and implies that other women have an affinity for qualities in gay men. The trio then rides in the taxi to the chapel to meet up with Kimmy and the rest of the wedding party. Here George tells Michael’s father that he came down for a “pre-conjugal visit” with Julianne, again assuming that heterosexual romance is fueled primarily by sexual attraction. Throughout this entire tirade George and Julianne repeatedly call each other pet names like “pumpkin” and “sweet pea” in a sarcastic, tongue-in-cheek fashion. By playing up their mock sexual relations, the two support the film’s view of romance as heavily invested in the realm of the physical.

George carries the masquerade to its fullest potential when he breaks into song at the rehearsal dinner. The film is certainly not a musical, but borrows some of the conventions of that genre by imposing “musical numbers” at certain points in the narrative. At the rehearsal dinner, George recounts his fictitious meeting with Julianne in a mental institution while he was visiting an old friend. Employing a campy, sentimental tone, George tells the family that he saw Julianne, and he immediately fell for her. Parodying the idea of love at first sight, George breaks into the Dionne Warwick song “I Say a Little Prayer.” Spontaneously, Kimmy’s mother picks up the next verse. With the exception of Michael and Julianne, the entire table and restaurant join in and sing the song in its entirety. Rick Altman reminds us, “Indeed, we will not be far off the mark if we consider that the musical fashions a myth out of the American Courtship ritual”(27). And at this moment in the film George and Julianne are in the midst of their faux engagement, and so this song functions as a parody of the musical’s insistence on couplehood and community. Nonetheless, the musical has strict conventions especially regarding those characters who do not sing. Julianne and Michael do not fit into the sense of community demonstrated at the dinner table because neither of them sing, but are sung to. The possibility of her coupling with Michael now seems highly unlikely. A later scene at the reception parallels this musical number at the restaurant. This time the idea of courtship is not mocked. George and Julianne come together and dance as the hired band performs the same song. In a sense, they become united as a “couple,” and we have every reason to believe that their relationship will continue.

As I have tried to show, George is a central figure in this film for the supportive role he plays for Julianne, and as a contrast to Michael's heterosexual masculinity. Still, as a homosexual male he is presented in specific ways that forward certain stereotypes of gay men. It's important to remember that only two characters in the film know George's sexual status: himself and Julianne. Even when Julianne tells Michael that her engagement is not real, she never reveals George's sexuality. She instead claims that George is a former lover who is unable to get over her and that she just went along with his masquerade. After this conversation with Michael, Julianne never speaks of George to anyone. We can assume the remainder of the wedding party still believes he is her fiancé. So George's homosexuality is never made an issue of by the film. While the other characters treat him with open arms they believe he is a heterosexual. Therefore, his favorable reception by Kimmy and her family should be treated with some caution because we have no idea of their feelings toward homosexuals.

Like the images of gay men in the texts that I look at in subsequent chapters, George possesses specific qualities that help render him non-threatening as a gay man. First is his asexuality. While we understand that he is gay, he never refers to men in a sexual manner nor does he have a significant other. His sole function in the narrative is always tied to the supportive role he plays to Julianne that I have outlined above. We only come to know him in this capacity. He appears solely in scenes with her or directly connected to her as when she calls him on the telephone. He is depicted as incredibly in tune with the feminine, able to accommodate a high level of intimacy with Julianne and even Kimmy and her mother. In addition, he is given an uncanny ability to read

heterosexual relationships and their outcomes. With this in mind, George can be seen as an extension of the male hero in the post-classical romantic comedy, who Kathleen Rowe argues has become “melodramatized” and therefore “feminized.” While she is looking to heterosexual male protagonists in films from the late 1980s and early 1990s, parallels between these men and George are striking¹⁴. In these post-classical romantic comedies, Rowe finds that the male heroes “use their feminisation to bolster their own authority, which they then invoke to ‘instruct’ women about relationships, romance and femininity itself”(187). George acts in this mentor capacity as he continually urges Julianne to give up her ploys and to tell Michael the truth. He accurately predicts the result of Julianne’s exploits as well as the final outcome of the film, by telling Julianne early on that Michael will ultimately choose Kimmy. George also acts as a moral voice of reason, coaxing Julianne to mend the problems she has caused between Michael and Kimmy. Another film genre comes to mind when we examine some of the secondary characteristics of George.

Richard Dyer examines the history of Hollywood film as well as independent films and outlines four predominant “types” of homosexual characters. Identifying “queens and dykes” as the most common, Dyer then examines the “macho man,” “the sad young man,” and finally the “lesbian feminist”¹⁵. None of the types that Dyer mentions

¹⁴ Rowe is particularly interested in the character(s) Woody Allen plays especially in *Annie Hall* (1977) and Billy Crystal’s Harry in *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) (187).

¹⁵ Dyer’s assessment of the dyke and queen types as examples of “in-betweenism” constructs homosexuality as “in between” genders. Films such as *Suddenly Last Summer* (1959), *Car Wash* (1976), and *Queen Christina* (1933) are noted examples. The macho type refers to the portrayal of gay men as “macho men” in films like *The Boys in the Band* (1980) and *A Different Story* (1978). The “sad young man” is exemplified in Kenneth Anger’s performance in *Fireworks* (1947). Finally, Dyer points to the film *Word Is Out* (1977) and a book of photographs entitled *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* and alludes to the connection between the women’s movement and lesbianism.

quite capture the type of homosexual that is embodied by George; however when Dyer turns to the film noir, similarities emerge. Mapping out “gay” male characters and their traits from only nine films noir (Dyer insists that he has perhaps missed only two or three other films), the characters of Brandon and Phillip from Alfred Hitchcock’s Rope (1948) have much in common with George. As gay men, Dyer lists their traits as consisting of “fastidious dress, love of art, music, and cuisine”(60). While Brandon and Phillip further an association between gay men and a homicidal impulse, the qualities they share with George are amazingly similar¹⁶. Like Brandon and Phillip, George is coded as a wealthy, intelligent man. When Julianne leaves a crazed message on his machine during a dinner party, we get a look at his expensive, well decorated apartment. The guests at this party are chicly dressed in suits, not unlike the apartment and party featured in Rope. Later in the film, Julianne calls George on his cellular phone. He answers while at a book club meeting during an intellectual discussion- - a sign of education and sophistication. Both men in Rope are well read intellectuals. Similarly, one can deduce that George has disposable income as he flies instantly to Chicago to aid the fledgling Julianne. After the masquerade he flies back to New York, and then appears again in Chicago two days later for the wedding and reception. George is apparently a gay man with serious cultural and financial capital. Yet his sexuality is evaded throughout the film.

I have examined My Best Friend’s Wedding as an initial popular culture text that brings the gay male to a central position. By pairing him with a heterosexual female,

¹⁶ Brandon and Phillip seem at least partially contained by the film’s status as a film noir. Even though they are the protagonists, they are antiheroic and punished by the film’s ending. Dyer contends that homosexuals become a defining feature of the film noir, simply because of their absence in other types of

depicting him as a defender of the privileged heterosexual couple, and virtually ignoring his sexual orientation, the film minimizes his status as Other. Instead, the film suggests that he himself becomes an object of desire for the straight assertive female- - a substitute for love. The film revises previous genres like the romantic comedy and subgenre of the screwball comedy revealing its commitment to the affirmation of marriage. The film's depiction of women and feminine desire, which is always linked to romance and at least the possibility of marriage, supports a conservative patriarchal ideology. This film is key as future films mirror many of the same concerns over romance and marriage. The next chapter looks to texts that carry the notion of romance and the formation of this gay male/straight female partnership further. Despite the gay male's abilities to function as an ideal companion for the female, can romantic love flourish between this "new couple"?

films (60). As of 1948, other types of genres which might have favorably portrayed gay men such as the romantic comedy, were not ready to celebrate or deal with these types of characters.

CHAPTER THREE

GAY MEN, STRAIGHT WOMEN, AND THE QUESTION OF ROMANCE

If My Best Friend's Wedding (1997) brought together the gay man and straight female as a platonic alternative to the heterosexual couple, more recent texts have carried this new couple to the next logical step. What happens when the line between friendship becomes blurred when one of the members of the couple begins to fall in love with the other? Can the new couple hold together despite a presumed lack of sexual chemistry? Is this new couple a disguise for or a reformulation of the traditional heterosexual couple? Can true love conquer even sexual orientation? These questions are taken up in several forms in the films The Object of My Affection (1998) and The Opposite of Sex (1998). The former film's entire premise is based on the possibility of romance between the new couple, whereas the latter film presents a female supporting character whose attachments to gay men has led to her own problematic heterosexual love life. The sitcom "Will and Grace" premiered on NBC in the fall of 1998 bringing the new couple to television in the form of best friend roommates homosexual Will and heterosexual Grace. Over the course of the first two seasons, several episodes have suggested that the title characters will eventually cross the sexuality divide and consummate their relationship either through intercourse, marriage, or both.

This chapter seeks to understand the questions posed above as well as explore implications that arise from films and television programs that again find this new combination of man and woman so pleasurable. Like My Best Friend's Wedding, these texts circulate suspicious versions of femininity and feminine desire. In each film, as I will show, the conflict is always initiated and maintained by the female. The title The Object of My Affection, refers to the female protagonist's quasi-obsession with the gay male she falls for. The Opposite of Sex shows Lucia's world crumble as she is continually met with failure in her attempts to surpass friendship with Bill, her deceased gay brother's lover. Both of these films position the desire to extend the friendship into the realm of sexuality, on the shoulders of women. Tuning to "Will and Grace" provides yet another troubling depiction of femininity as Grace is highly dependent on Will for his ability to make decisions for her. As with Julianne and George from My Best Friend's Wedding, Grace's emotionality is countered by Will's stability. The question of romantic love between the two is often posed yet never answered. Like My Best Friend's Wedding, all of these texts reveal a troubling figure in the form of the traditional heterosexual male. The texts seem to offer an overt criticism of his ability to serve as a feasible mate for a heterosexual female. The representations of gay men in these texts are diverse, complex, perhaps accurate at times, yet still plagued with problems in many ways.

The Visibility of Gays in Recent Media

Fictional representations in popular culture depict gays in very specific ways, and while this is true of other marginal groups and even dominant groups on some occasions,

it is especially true of homosexuals. For example, cultural critic Bruce Bawer reads The Bird Cage (1996) as a prime opportunity to help “overcome the public’s presumed distaste for gay protagonists” (15). He reads the film as less than subversive, as “mocking” homosexuals, and as completely lacking in authenticity. He points to moments in the film where the gay family comprised of Robin Williams and Nathan Lane is devalued for the sake of the heterosexual union of Williams’ son. Bawer sums up his view of the film’s message: “A straight couple’s wedding is more valuable than a gay couple’s dignity” (15). While I do not fully agree with his reading of the film, I think his comments are important to consider in relation to issues of visibility and authenticity¹.

The Birdcage was important as a vehicle for the exposure of gays to mainstream audiences especially considering casting, but this visibility comes with a price. The gay men in the film share similarities with other recent depictions of gays in the media. Despite the film’s status as a comedy which is typical since gays are often featured as literally “funny,” the men in The Birdcage are depicted as flamboyant, affluent, and asexual. This type of depiction becomes a thread that will run through each text considered in this chapter.

Larry Gross traces depictions of gays and lesbians on television with an emphasis on stereotyping. Noting a general absence of this “sexual minority” from television, he asserts that “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” (150). The natural order Gross refers to is founded on the ideological imperatives of heterosexual gender relations.

¹ Bawer’s points are well taken, but I believe that some exposure is better than none. Also the gay couple

Because of this, the representation of the gay male as a supportive figure is curious but not surprising. As I argued in my analysis of My Best Friend's Wedding, films and certain television programs in the late 1990s move gays to the center of the narrative. However, the gay male still adheres greatly to a supportive role, particularly in relation to heterosexual women. At the level of ideology, Gross articulates what would be at stake if gays were portrayed in non-stereotypic ways. He says, "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" (154). So while visibility helps ease fears of Others (in this case homosexuals), on television and in popular film, the image captured is often distorted, and as Gross points out, there are vested interests in the continuance of portraying gays in these very specific and reductive ways. Similarly, Fred Fejes and Kevin Petrich in their concise historiography of homosexual representation in film, television, and in the news, contend that gay images in the 1990s have "moved to a higher level of subordination and domination" (412). They suggest that heterosexism as an ideology pervades society and the media:

It [heterosexism] subsumes difference within a larger heterosexual narrative about identity, personal relations, sexuality, and society. Aspects of gay and lesbian identity, sexuality, and community that are not compatible or that too directly challenge the heterosexual regime are excluded. This heterosexism is endemic in all aspects of society and its media, including the media of the gay and lesbian

in the film willingly chooses to participate in the charade while other options exist.

community. (412)

In synch with this notion of heterosexism are contemporary films where gay characters are increasingly portrayed favorably, yet continually rendered “safe” within the dominant system of heterosexuality. The character of George from My Best Friend’s Wedding is a prime example. The ideological and social consequences of this “safe” rendering must continue to be investigated.

Stereotypes and the issue of representation in the mass media demand investigation for a variety of reasons. Richard Dyer forcefully points out the underlying power in media representations of social groups in the following passage:

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of that group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. (1)

Dyer’s assertion suggests that representation, and by extension stereotypes, have the power to influence individual members of social groups. Similarly, Dyer goes on to contend that these representations influence how others view these groups which in turn determines how the groups are ultimately treated by society at large. It is not until one examines and questions representations that the possibility for changing them can occur.

Drawing on the work of Walter Lippmann, Dyer has furthered our understanding of the functions of stereotypes. He extends Lippmann’s conception of stereotypes as an

ordering process, a shortcut, and as a referent to reality (11). Dyer's discussion of the stereotype as an expression of social value and belief is provocative and useful. He challenges the notion of the stereotype as a form of social agreement about a certain group, and instead argues that "it is from stereotypes that we get our ideas about social groups" (14). In other words, social understandings of groups come from stereotypes. These understandings do not arise independently of the stereotype (14). Dyer's discussion of the stereotype and its insistence on the imposition of boundaries is highly relevant when one considers popular and stereotypical images of gay men. He illustrates how stereotypes mark boundaries or make the invisible visible (16). This point is well taken when the issue of homosexuality is considered. One cannot tell just by looking at a person about his or her sexual preference. There are signs, derived from the stereotype, which mark that meaning. So under this view, the stereotype becomes indicative of the culture at large because of the meanings it attributes to something, generally a person, that would not otherwise have those meanings.

Ron Becker connects the increase in gay characters on television to the need for the television networks to reach a more liberal, quality audience. Because of intense competition from cable channels, network television has had to rethink its constituency for its most sought after audience members—those spectators from eighteen to forty-nine years of age, who are college educated, presumably more politically liberal, and with large amounts of disposable income. Based on survey data, the networks see gays as more educated, in higher level job positions, and earning significantly more than the average heterosexual couple. Since gays typically do not have kids, the costs associated

with children such as medical bills, college, etc. are non-existent (41). This gives gays a larger disposable income and makes them as an audience a highly desirable target. This pigeonholing of gays as ideal consumers and as asexual is continually reflected in the texts that I examine in this thesis. The stereotype now becomes “images of white, affluent, trend-setting, Perrier-drinking, frequent-flier using, Ph.D.-holding consumer citizens with more income to spend than they know what to do with” (43). This view of homosexuals is equally troubling because it assumes a connection between sexuality and class, an assumption that obviously excludes many. Throughout these texts, this conception of the gay male will continually surface. This chapter seeks to further the ideas raised thus far by exploring the ways in which gay men, presented as protagonists, are both positively and negatively stereotyped. Additionally, the pairing of the gay male with a straight female in each narrative warrants further scrutiny, and as I will argue serves two purposes: To mainstream a specific type of gay male identity and to point to a crisis in traditional heterosexual relations. The emergent implications are considered throughout.

The Opposite of Sex

The Opposite of Sex introduces sixteen-year-old Dedee Truitt (Christina Ricci) as the film’s protagonist and narrator. Faced with the death of her stepfather, a man she claimed had sexually abused her, she flees Louisiana for Indiana, to stay with her gay half brother Bill (Martin Donovan). The viewer learns that Bill’s former lover Tom had died of AIDS and left Bill well cared for financially. Upon arrival at Bill’s large home, Dedee meets Matt (Ivan Sergei), Bill’s new lover who is nine years his junior. Bill

agrees to let her stay. Dedee quickly sets her sights on Matt, who even though he is gay, gives in to Dedee's seduction. Enter Lucia (Lisa Kudrow), the sister of the deceased Tom, who has remained friends with Bill, since they both teach at the local high school. Dedee becomes pregnant, talks Matt into stealing \$10,000 from Bill, and flees with Matt to California. As if this was not enough, Bill is introduced to Jason, a former student from his school, who is also Matt's secret lover. Jason is desperate to find Matt, and tells Bill that if he does not help him locate Matt, he will tell the police that Bill had sexually assaulted him when he was a student. Tipped off that Jason has brought up charges by Carl (Lyle Lovett), a long time friend and police officer, Bill and Lucia head to California to locate Dedee and Matt.

The relationship between Lucia and Bill is one incarnation of the female/gay male couple. As Dedee narrates the story even when she is not present in scenes she provides viewers with background character information. One account of Lucia's past reviews her relationship with her brother Tom. The film's narrative is ruptured as a montage composed of home movie footage flashes back to Lucia, her sisters, and Tom as children. Not only are the little girls adorned in dresses and make up, but Tom is also shown wearing a dress, wig, and makeup. This scene ends with their father spanking Tom. Next, Dedee takes viewers to a later time in the lives of Lucia and her brother at a wedding reception for one of the other sisters². Here, the young adult Lucia is shown to be overweight, and sitting alone amongst the wedding party. In the garage searching for more drinks, she finds her brother having sex with the best man in the family car.

Flashing back to the recent past, Dedee tells of Tom's financial success in the 1980s. Tom shows his love for his sister by buying her a home as a present. This brief voyage into Lucia's past is an attempt to make sense of her apparent bitterness (at one point she tells Bill that she has a death wish but she "directs it toward others") and to maintain the importance her brother played in her life. The significance of her brother's death is directly related to her romantic feelings for Bill. Rebecca Nahas and Myra Turley's ethnographic and psychological study The New Couple: Women and Gay Men, sheds light on Lucia's initial treatment by this narrative:

The woman attracted to or involved with a gay man has fared no better; She is usually regarded as a latent lesbian who does not really want a man, a social renegade who cannot fit into the conventional scene, a frigid female afraid of sex, or an overweight, unattractive woman desperate for male companionship. (3)

This view is stereotypical, and the authors acknowledge that, but with the exception of lesbianism, it seems quite applicable to Lucia. She appears to have no friends or interests except Bill. With Dedee and Matt out of the picture, Lucia (according to Dedee's voice-over) is having the time of her life. Lucia and Bill make dinner together and watch movies, apparently living out a fantasy romance in Lucia's mind. The moment that Matt calls Bill from California and Bill decides to bring him and Dedee back, Lucia's fantasy is shaken and she quickly denounces Matt and Dedee, trying to persuade Bill not to go. She loses the argument and decides to go with Bill who seems unaffected by any of her comments.

² Again the wedding takes on significance as a key ritual of social hierarchization and works to position

After finding newlyweds Matt and Dedee in California, Lucia and Bill learn that Dedee is not pregnant with Matt's child, and she is also carrying Tom's ashes for ransom until Bill shells out more money. Matt comes to his senses and decides to return to Indiana with Bill and Lucia, but Dedee steals what is left of the original \$10,000 and runs off to San Diego with the real father of her child. Matt persuades Bill that the right thing to do is to find Dedee since she is really just a child. In the meantime, Dedee has accidentally shot and killed the baby's father in their motel room just as Matt, Lucia, Bill, and Carl show up. Matt and Dedee disappear together and Lucia and Bill are held at the motel for questioning by the police. Frustrated by Bill for listening to Matt's advice on tracking Dedee, Lucia stands scrubbing her bra in the sink of the motel as Bill knocks on her door. In a telling conversation, Lucia holds her bra up to Bill and asks if it does anything for him. His nonchalance irritates her and she reveals her disdain for physical intimacy. Her lack of sexual relationships is directly implicated in her brother's death. Because he died of AIDS, she rhetorically asks Bill, "Didn't sex kill Tom?" So her fear of sex, and by extension romance, is connected to her deep feelings for her brother. Here she accuses Bill of pretending to be standing up for noble causes by chasing Matt across the country, but tells him to be honest and admit that he is really only interested in Matt sexually. Lucia's assertion is confirmed once Bill finds Matt and Dedee living in Canada with Jason. Matt and Bill's conversation reveals that Bill had tried to replace his former lover with Matt, a mold that Matt could not live up to. Overhearing this conversation,

Lucia as an outsider to romance. She literally does not "fit" in.

Lucia seems to come to an understanding that she too was guilty of replacing the memory of her brother with Bill.

The film's narrative trajectory is complex, but its portrayal of the homosexual male is striking. It is the only text dealt with in this essay that takes on the issue of AIDS in a serious manner and presents a gay man whose mourning process and love for another man becomes a moral lesson that teaches everyone the devastating effects the virus has on those the deceased leave behind. Bill is different from other depictions of homosexuals in recent films. For example, in the film In and Out (1997), high school teacher Howard Brackett (Kevin Kline) is prematurely outed by his former student turned actor at the Academy Awards. He soon realizes that he is in fact a gay man. However, as Keller and Glass point out, Howard's gayness never comprises an attraction toward men, but rather "his homosexuality is determined entirely by his cultural interests in such things as Broadway musicals and Barbara Streisand films" (139). In contrast to Howard, Bill is shown to have a definite attraction to Matt. Twice during the film he kisses Matt, and his entire motive for tracking down Dedee is derived from his desire to bring Matt back home. Keller and Glass notice that films like In and Out and a host of others "neuter" gay men in order to solve the problem of "heterosexual revulsion to homosexual passion" (140). The Opposite of Sex directly comments on this popular textual maneuver by having Matt and Bill kiss each other one last time in Canada. Dedee's voice over tells women viewers that if they are watching this film with a man and he "groaned or made some kind of crack during that little kiss, you're with what we call a closet case, that's

the number one tip off.” So the film acknowledges its primarily heterosexual audience, and chastises those (men) who cannot accept some level of homosexual intimacy.

Bill’s status as a teacher is also important as was Howard Brackett’s in In and Out. The issue of job discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is visited in both films. While Brackett was suspended just for being gay, Bill is actually charged with a crime. Immediately after learning from Dedee’s voice over that Bill is gay, we see him clearing boys from a bathroom at his school. He keeps one boy in there after the bathroom has cleared. The boy has written an offensive message on the wall regarding Bill’s homosexual interests. Instead of punishing the boy, or worse, he corrects the grammar of the boy’s graffiti³. While I mentioned above that Bill is shown to have an interest in men, it is certainly not a main feature of his personality. For the most part, with the exception of the kiss scenes mentioned above, Bill is shown to be quite asexual. Interestingly, Keller and Glass find that there are positive aspects in rendering gay men in this asexual manner. By presenting a gay man who has no apparent interest in sex, stereotypes that see gay men as sexual predators, sexual addicts, “natural pedophiles,” or recruiters of children to a homosexual lifestyle become dismantled (140-41). While fully recognizing this portrayal of gay men as somewhat positive, I agree with Keller and Glass’s assertion that this type of depiction, “in the long run, only perpetuates a lie: that gay men do not have sex and desires” (141). While these authors are specifically theorizing In and Out, I think The Opposite Of Sex further dismantles this lie by showing a man who does have some sexual desire, who expresses it to some degree, and

is still able to maintain a job teaching young people, and eventually acting as the father of Dedee's newborn baby.

The Object of My Affection

The Object of My Affection brings the prospect of romance between the straight female/gay male couple to center stage as its major narrative premise. Time's Richard Schickel reviews the film simultaneously with City of Angels (1998) reading both as films that employ sexual orientation (Object) and mortality (City) as obstacles that keep the romantic couple apart, instead of bringing them together (81). Object introduces George (Paul Rudd) as a first grade teacher at a private school that caters to the New York elite. After being dumped by his long time boyfriend, George takes a room in Nina's (Jennifer Aniston) Brooklyn apartment. The two instantly hit it off, and become best friends. When Nina turns up pregnant, she offers George the opportunity to act as the baby's father, in place of Vince (John Pankow), the actual father. Nina does this because she comes to realize through her relationship with George, that she does not really love Vince, who is quite self-serving and inattentive to her needs and desires.

Perplexed by Nina's request, George eventually accepts her offer, and the two begin to live together as a traditional couple minus sexual relations. As Nina and George grow closer shopping for baby clothes, and virtually spending all of their time together, the nature of their relationship begins to change. Once Nina finds out that George had lost his virginity to a woman, she begins to desire him sexually. One afternoon while the two are chatting in bed, Nina kisses him and they begin to become very intimate. Having

³ Temporary dramatic tension is built in anticipation of Bill's response to the homophobic comment. Alone

made her way to the zipper on his pants, Nina is interrupted by the ringing of the telephone, as George's ex-boyfriend Joley calls inviting George away for the weekend. Deciding to go with Joley, George leaves a jealous Nina behind anxiously awaiting his return. While away for the weekend, George ditches Joley, and meets Paul, a young actor who he immediately falls for. Upon returning from the weekend to Nina, George senses her jealousy and her feelings of romantic love for him. He decides not to tell her about Paul, and begins spending time out of the apartment. Animosity builds between the two, and they finally have it out. They decide it is better for them to live separately as friends. Nina will raise the baby on her own.

Nehas and Turley identified three primary types of female/gay male couples.

Two of the types, "marginal" and "new" seem especially useful in relation to The Object of My Affection:

The essence of the marginal relationship is that the woman and gay man are social and/or professional friends, not lovers. The man is openly homosexual and the woman both acknowledges and accepts him as a gay man. Neither the man nor woman is threatened by the relationship because there is no primary love commitment between them. Some marginal relationships may even include casual sexual involvements...The new couple has evolved directly from marginal relationships, with the added dimension of a primary love commitment between the man and woman. What we term "new couple" consists of a self-proclaimed gay man and a woman who understands and accepts the man's homosexuality.

in the bathroom with the boy, the question arises: Will Bill assault the boy? This is quickly resolved.

They may or may not engage in sex; they may or may not live together.

However, the amount of intimacy and time spent together, along with other variable factors make this relationship special. That is, the man and woman of the new couple are more than casual friends, even more than close friends to the extent that their lives intermingle and their psychological and emotional bonds, whether within a sexual context or not, qualify them as lovers. (11-12)

Whereas Bill and Lucia seem most closely related to the marginal couple their relationship built on friendship, Nina and George seem, at least momentarily, in synch with the new couple. George's sexuality is continually acknowledged by all of the characters in the film, including one of his students who is Nina's niece. George and Nina's high level of intimacy is played to the hilt during extensive sequences laced throughout the film of the two at dancing lessons. At the apartment, the two lie in the same bed watching television and eating ice cream, always in close physical proximity. While the quasi-sex act, initiated by Nina seems to be the downfall of their relationship, prior to this moment, they act as a full-fledged couple, neither of them dating anyone else, remaining emotionally committed to each other.

The Object of My Affection situates the desire for romance with George, entirely within Nina. The other men in the film flounder in comparison to George. The film's presentation of Vince as an arrogant, obnoxious, self centered lawyer, leaves the viewer and Nina realizing that Vince is not the right man for her. Similarly, George's heterosexual brother is shown to be a womanizer, who has a different fiancée each time he is in a scene. When he is finally ready to marry, the woman can not trust him without

close supervision. Sidney (Alan Alda), Nina's stepsister's husband, cannot even remember his wife Constance's name, presumably because he has been married multiple times. So none of the key heterosexual men in this film are presented favorably when it comes to women.

The film is fairly conservative when it comes to the presentation of gay men. For the first half of the film George is shown to have no sexual desire, until he meets up with Paul. He is briefly shown getting out of bed with Paul which is a fairly big step for a such a mainstream film. Still, the stereotypes abound. Joley, George's original boyfriend, is banished by the narrative for leaving George and taking up with a young man that has left his girlfriend. The young man returns to his girlfriend, and Joley is left behind by George in favor of Paul. Also, the world of Object is a very tolerant world, free of disease, where gay men are welcomed with open arms into schools and into family life. No one makes an issue of George's sexuality except Vince, and then only out of anger.

"Will & Grace"

"Will and Grace" works off the same premise of the straight female/gay male couple. Grace Adler (Debra Messing) and Will Truman (Eric McCormack), best friends, move in together after each has just come out of substantial relationships. As a character driven sit-com, the show focuses on the daily mishaps of the ensemble which in addition to the title character includes Will's best friend Jack (Sean Hayes), an unemployed flamboyant gay man, and Karen (Megan Mullally), Grace's narcissistic, bitchy, secretary. Like Nina and George, Will and Grace are a cozy couple, often lounging around their

chic New York apartment watching television together or playing board games. Like many television shows which present a supposedly platonic couple, the question of romance between Will and Grace is posed at moments during the series, most notably in an episode when Grace's mother, played by Debbie Reynolds, visits. Worried that her overly critical mother will think that she is wasting her life by living with a gay man, Grace braces for her mother's visit and forthcoming condemnation. To Grace's surprise, her mother thinks the two should get married. When Grace reminds her mother of Will's sexuality, her mother contends that what really makes a marriage last is friendship, not sex. When Will hears about the idea, he laughs, and states that even if he were straight, he would not marry Grace. This infuriates Grace, who wonders what is wrong with her if she can't even get a gay guy to hypothetically marry her. The episode ultimately restores unity between the two roommates and teaches Grace that she should be herself.

The first season finale is noteworthy because of its portrayal of intimacy within the dyad. Karen is determined to keep her cleaning lady, an illegal alien, from being deported. She enlists the help of Will, since he is an attorney. Will says that the maid must marry a U.S. citizen. Jack agrees to do the dirty work and a wedding is held⁴. After the ceremony, Will and Grace return to the chapel. Grace talks about how she longs to be married. Will admits that he is preoccupied with her romantic life. The two passionately kiss each other in the chapel, and decide that they are both stuck in a rut. The season ends as the two decide it is best for both of them to move away from each other. As with any typical television cliffhanger, it is impossible to uncover exactly where this is going,

but the notion of romance seems just around the corner for the two. The opening of the second season reifies the closeness of the dyad. Grace has moved, but only across the hall. And while the second season has provided several episodes where Will and Grace date other people, the notion of romantic tension between the two still lurks beneath the surface. In an episode from the second season called “He Come Undone,” Will seeks the help of a therapist because he has vivid dreams of having sex with Grace. In the episode, viewers are privy to these nocturnal fantasies, and NBC used the scenes out of context as teasers prior to the airing of the episode. Viewers were encouraged to tune in to see if the dyad had elevated their relationship.

“Will and Grace” is the most conservative of the texts discussed here in its attempts to present a gay man to a mainstream audience. Much of the gayness in this text is pushed onto Jack, who embodies the stereotypical, flaming gay guy. Jack mentions desiring men, but as a supporting character, whose primary role seems to be to invoke laughter, his desires are easily dismissed. Not only does Grace have boyfriends and even sex, but Will never has anyone stay the night, which again suggests that he has feelings for Grace. Any time she is dating someone, the episode will invariably be based on some kind of jealousy issue between the two. Stephen McCauley theorizes that the pairing of the gay male with the heterosexual female is particularly attractive for television networks. He asserts that a focus on such a couple, helps the network(s) get around controversial subjects such as the gay male’s sex life or other love interests (31). As in Object, “Will and Grace” depicts a world where homosexuality is tolerated, if not

⁴ Though the wedding here is a charade, it is still significant. Instead of bringing the dyad together as it did

celebrated, as long as it is not based on attraction. Similarly, to date, an episode which even mentions AIDS is nonexistent.

Implications and Conclusions

At some level all of these texts function as strange coming-of-age narratives for heterosexual women who through their relationship with the gay male are taught a life lesson. The lesson is usually that it is acceptable to be alone, although some of the films' methods of closure undo this reading by suddenly having the female find the right heterosexual male. This is generally unconvincing because it usually happens in the last ten minutes of the film if it happens at all. A good example of this is the ending of The Object of My Affection. The film appears to end and then flashes forward several years in the future. In this ending, Nina has married a marginal character that had been introduced only briefly in an early section of the film. In fact, all of the main characters are now paired up with an appropriate mate, but only in these last few minutes of the film. So the greatest good in all of the films (not "Will & Grace" where this remains to be seen) comes from traditional heterosexual coupling. The gay male will not work as a substitute for a heterosexual relationship. The women must find love on their own.

The gay men in these texts are practically asexual with few exceptions. Stephen Holden calls these new positive portrayals of homosexuals and Hollywood's sexual attitudes towards gays "Faux Liberation" (A20). Holden refers to these gay male characters as "poster boys for the socially acceptable notion of nice gay men- - trustworthy, sexually unthreatening adjuncts to heterosexual women" (A20). He also

in My Best Friend's Wedding, here it moves them apart.

notices how the characters have no apparent partners past or present. There are other gay men in some of these films and television shows that are sexual, and they are quickly branded as the bad guy or dismissed in other ways. Along with this lack of sexuality is a general absence of any discussion of AIDS, with the exception of The Opposite of Sex. The gay men are continually positively represented as intelligent, wealthy, career oriented, socially charming, etc. Another curious feature of these texts is the manner in which they cast the gay male in relation to children. In both Opposite and Object the main gay male characters are teachers who are given the possibility of fatherhood. Contemporary notions on the ontology of the family and family values are continually revisited in these texts.

I want to argue for the importance of these texts with respect to the ways that they function as a corpus of popular works that speak to similar issues. Not only do they provide popular instances of representations of gay males, but they also open up a new discourse on romance, sexuality, and family life. I see the strong relationships formed between the gay male and the heterosexual female as simultaneously commenting on heterosexual males and suggesting what I call a revised masculinity. In other words, what is it about heterosexual men and their relationship with women that make these homomale/heterofemale relationships so desirable? One answer would say that these texts constitute a challenge to the idea of the “perfect heterosexual couple.” Each appears to problematize both heterosexual romantic relationships in general and the female protagonists’ desire for one. Baz Dreisinger has analyzed both The Object of My

Affection and “Will and Grace.” She argues that these texts circulate the fantasy of “safe eroticism” in the gay male figure:

A fantasy about the knight in shining armor, the ideal man, seems to have been projected onto the figure of the gay confidante, and implicit in this projection is a deep anxiety about heterosexual love. Better than romance, better than same sex friendship, is the safe eroticism offered by the ever-loveable gay man. (11).

The gay male accommodates a high level of intimacy without ulterior motives, and possesses an uncanny ability to listen and communicate with the female on an emotional level. The gay men generally act as the voice of morality, give excellent advice, and in addition are able to understand and surpass the ways of heterosexual men. Each film offers at least one traditional heterosexual male who is incapable of meeting the main female’s needs. This suggests to me that the texts call for a revision of traditional masculinity, namely that the heterosexual male should appropriate some of the qualities of the gay male.

A segment from a recent episode of the NBC drama “E.R.” ties together several ideas that run through this paper. In the scene, a young doctor named Dale is walking down the stairs of the hospital with his intern girlfriend Lucy. She is trying to coax him into watching the film Titanic (1997). Along the way, the two are joined by Carter, Dale’s colleague and friend. The conversation goes as follows:

Dale: Have you ever seen Titanic Carter?
 Carter: No. Chick flick.
 Dale: That’s what I said. Lucy just rented it. Wants me to watch it with her.
 Carter: Leonardo DeCaprio, hoop skirts, and tragic love is kind of my idea of hell on Earth.
 Lucy: You guys are Neanderthals. Whatever happened to the sensitive

Nineties male? The ones who love romantic dinners and candle lights?
 Dale: They're all gay. Aren't they Carter?
 Carter: Every last one of them.

As Lucy exits into the emergency room the two men continue their conversation. Carter asks Dale how his relationship with Lucy is progressing. Dale's answer implies that Lucy sees their relationship as "serious," but he does not. Still staring at Lucy through the glass in the swinging door of the emergency room, Dale informs Carter that Lucy wears "thong" underwear, and explains that this fact can be witnessed by looking through her medical scrubs. The scene comically reveals the dissonance between heterosexual men and women. Here, Lucy desires the sensitivity embodied in the notion of the romantic, sensitive male. Her boyfriend will not even watch a film at her suggestion and apparently is only interested in her insofar as she is able to satisfy him sexually. Stephen McCauley comments on this "condescending machismo" and argues that many programs continually portray heterosexual men as "offensive or ineffectual"(31). The implication of the "E.R." conversation seems to be that if a female wants romance or an emotional relationship then she needs to look elsewhere. If she wants a physical relationship, she need look no further than the swinging door of the emergency room.

This moment from "E.R." as well as at the heart of all of the texts considered above, particularly the films, seems to be a concern over traditional heterosexual relationships. Future research should consider the ways that these and other texts criticize heterosexual males either directly or through implication. As with virtually all popular culture texts, these too are laced with contradictions particularly at their points of closure. Exploring this is revealing because such forms of closure seem to trivialize the

questions the texts raise, but they ultimately implicate the producers and the audiences, as if the pleasure of the texts still comes from traditional forms of coupling that have been held up as problematic for the duration of the films. Lastly, all of the representations focus upon bourgeois whites. Discussion of white ethnicity and its relation to sexuality and class should be considered in future research that examines gay stereotypes. All of the texts explored here are inflected with a strong white, upper middle class-consciousness.

Finally, I have worked from the assumption that the texts discussed are popular, certainly representational of gay men, and at the same time, still deeply invested in circulating contemporary ideas of traditional love and family. Michael Bronski sees popular culture as a site for subcultures to become visible and assimilate themselves into the dominant, mainstream culture. Engaging in reality/appearance distinguishing, he notes some of the problems associated with this assimilation process. Bronski thinks that these instances of manifestation give rise to a false sense of tolerance on the part of the dominant culture and he coins the term “fake visibility”(47). By this, he means “a tolerance that selectively promotes visibility without necessarily providing complete citizenship...”(46). So the issue of visibility and these popular representations of gay men must be treated with caution. Careful consideration must be given to the ways in which these men are constructed, but it is equally, perhaps more important to consider what is missing from these representations.

CHAPTER FOUR

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: ESCAPING INTO THE HOME AND THE QUEERING OF “LIFESTYLE” TELEVISION

“For all of you out there who can’t relate to Martha Stewart because she’s so perfect and your house will never look like hers, and anyway you don’t have that kind of money to spend, enter Christopher Lowell, stage left.”

-Elizabeth Large on Christopher Lowell, host of “Interior Motives” (Large)

“He’s not a male Martha Stewart, he’s a male miracle.”

-John Doyle on Nik Manojlovich, host of “Savior Faire”(“About”)

The purpose of this chapter is to extend my argument on the relationship between the gay male and straight female in contemporary popular culture forms. Here I examine two home design television shows, both with male hosts. By reading these men as queer, and in consideration of a female at-home viewer, I argue we are left with the same dyad that has been articulated and analyzed in previous chapters. The extension of the argument in this context provides for a fuller understanding of the dyad as well as illuminating contemporary ideas of domesticity, the home, femininity, and the tenuous status of queer men on television.

I begin by accounting for the popularity and presence of home design shows by looking at the success of domestic maven Martha Stewart as well as changes and trends within the cable industry. I close this discussion by addressing the escapist qualities found in the programs and their ability to fantasize the idea of the home. Next, I work to

establish the existence of the dyad by performing a queer reading of the two home design shows mentioned above. I defend the claim that the shows' hosts are rendered safe through an examination of domesticity as a form of containment. I conclude this chapter on two tracks. First, I discuss audience interactivity as a means to further connect the male host with the at-home female viewer via each show's web site. Second, I raise the possibility of a female backlash by considering the perception that these men are invading female space.

“It’s a Good Thing”: Martha Stewart and the (re)Birth of a Genre

I finally managed to catch an episode of “Martha Stewart Living” on television. Although I had certainly heard about her, I had never actually watched her show. On this particular episode she was making a simple apple pie. This became mesmerizing for me as I watched her roll out sheets of dough, and sprinkle cinnamon, as if it were a magic powder on the apples that she had delicately sliced. The pie went into the oven and I waited through the commercial break for her return to witness the fruits of her labor. I was not disappointed. The pie looked incredible. It was at the end of this episode that I began to take account of my own pleasure in this program. I attributed part of its appeal to tapping into my sense of voyeurism. I was already familiar with the Food Network’s “Two Fat Ladies” and “Essence of Emeril” and connected the pleasure of watching others prepare food to a similar pleasure featured on this episode of “Martha Stewart Living.” But Martha Stewart significantly moves out of the kitchen and takes viewers into other areas of the home.

The financial success and popularity of Martha Stewart has spawned numerous imitators all with their own twist to the home improvement/cooking show hybrid. James Ryan comments on the economic success of Stewart when he asserts that she has “built a multimedia empire worth \$200 million, by one conservative estimate” (F1). Ryan’s article chronicles seven “home decorating gurus” who are following in Stewart’s footsteps. Each of the seven seek to capitalize on the genre which had apparently been monopolized by Stewart. Ryan casts these imitators in direct connection to Stewart, using descriptions such as “The African American Martha,” “The Country Martha,” “The Sunnier Martha,” and “The Rococo Martha” (F1). In a tongue in cheek fashion, Ryan suggests that there is still room for a “Latina Martha, a “Sporty Martha,” and a “Rock ‘n’ Roll Martha” (F1). Ryan’s remarks are appropriate as he notices the abundance of these shows, and as he suggests, each has a connection to Martha Stewart as she has become the exemplar of the genre.

Stewart is not going unnoticed by the academy. Maragalit Fox in an article in The New York Times, declares that “Martha Stewart has become a text” (B7). Fox discusses several proposals by cultural studies scholars whose manuscripts are currently searching for publishers. While admitting that this line of inquiry is dismissed by more traditional scholars in the academy, Fox alludes to the cultural and historical significance of a figure like Stewart, naming her “a modern custodian of social norms” (B7). Fox, as well as the scholars she writes about, see Stewart as continuing a legacy of domesticity that has its roots in the domestic manuals geared towards women which appeared in the Victorian Era. These domestic manuals were significant because “they helped foster a collective

identity for the newly emerging middle class, defining its members as distinct from working people” (B7). Historian Josh Tosh makes a similar connection between 19th century British women’s advice literature and the idea of middle classness. Tosh deemed this a zeitgeist which he calls “the bourgeois cult of home.” On one level these manuals can be seen as a precursor to Stewart in that they provided advice and instructions in the realm of the domestic. Similarly, on a broader social level, Stewart, like the manuals, is tied to social class. As Fox aptly observes, “If these early taste makers helped construct bourgeois identity, Ms. Stewart, the daughter of lower-middle-class Polish American parents, is helping to maintain it in today’s anxious age, where social roles are more ambiguous than ever” (B7). Similarly, Tina Lyons compares Stewart to Madonna and says Stewart “has reclaimed the image of the homemaker in much the same way Madonna has subverted the role of the sex object” (8). It is the resurrection and celebration of the homemaker as “omnicompetent” and this ability to ease anxiety and reduce ambiguity that seems in part responsible for the popularity and pervasiveness of not only the show, but the Stewart persona. This persona creeps onto other television shows such as “Good Morning America,” and The Food Network’s “From Martha’s Kitchen,” and pervades bookstores on magazine racks, Stewart’s syndicated newspaper column, and even her own radio show. References to Stewart continually surface in the public discourse related to the two shows discussed in this chapter as my opening quotations indicate.

Imagine What You Can Do: Cable Television and Narrowcasting

A new line of shows, banking on the success of Stewart, driven by a host (usually hostess), focus exclusively on the idea of home, home entertaining, and home improvement. These more recent spin-offs, such as the two I will analyze below, depart from traditional home improvement shows such as Bob Vila's "This Old House" in that the nature of the improvement takes place primarily inside the home, the space traditionally allocated to the female. In contrast, shows like "This Old House" and "The New Yankee Workshop" feature men (male hosts) working on home improvement projects such as adding on rooms, building decks, or making furniture. Here the male hosts are shown in exterior, outdoor locations. If they are shown inside the home, it is because the room is being completely remodeled, rather than redecorated.

The growth of cable networks in the 1990s has been remarkable. Considering The Golf Channel, The Travel Channel, The Sci-Fi Channel, and The Game Show Network, to name only a few of the entries in what seems to be an unlimited list, one need only think of a general area of interest and a corresponding cable channel can usually be found. With such a large range of channels offered, the audience for a given channel will be relatively small, and to capitalize on this, cable networks such as the ones mentioned above, narrowcast, or "provide specialized programming for diverse and fragmented groups" (Campbell 163). These groups can and do represent a variety of demographics. John Caldwell calls this niche marketing trend "the corporate cult of diversity." Caldwell suggests that these "niche networks" are lucrative because they appeal to corporate sponsors. A product aimed at a specific audience, such as a golf club,

can now be advertised directly to a presumably golf oriented audience on The Golf Channel. It is precisely within this landscape of “niche networks” that these shows centered on the home find a home.

Home and Garden Television (HGTV) is an entire cable network aired in the United States and Canada which is solely dedicated to this type of narrowcast programming. Consider HGTV’s mission statement: “Home and Garden Television is the only network devoted to providing information to inspire the home enthusiast” (About HGTV)¹. The idea of narrowcasting is apparent in its specificity and in its insistence on its singularity. Caldwell makes a provocative point when he reminds us of the monopolistic nature of media corporations. He refers to the prevalence of these “niche networks” as a diversity that is vacuous. He says “many of the same corporate players diversify across niches for multiplying audiences aware of their individual differences” (256). Interestingly, HGTV tells readers directly beneath its mission statement, that it is owned by the same company which operates The Food Network and DIY (Do it yourself), two other networks of this same niche variety.

The Discovery Channel appears to be involved in narrowcasting, particularly during the afternoon. The Discovery Channel’s weekday afternoon lineup, literally called “Lifestyle Television” is filled with home improvement shows that exhibit an interest in a female audience by competing with soap opera watchers. The shows fill the entire day-time slot starting in midmorning and run through the early evening hours. It is within this television landscape that I want to position and then focus attention on two

shows that fit this into this home improvement niche. First a discussion of some of the textual features of these types of shows is helpful in accounting for their prevalence.

On Escapism and Desire: The Fantasy of Home

“In our present day culture the house often plays the role of lover, partner, significant other- the dream date and dream mate- the one who will realize our desires and give purpose to our plans and days.”

- Marjorie Garber (25)

As I have just suggested, one approach to understanding the pervasiveness of home design shows is to look from a production standpoint to trends within the cable industry, which is increasingly geared toward niche audiences. Another approach is to examine what the shows offer from the perspective of viewers. In an article in The New York Times, the programming chief for HGTV offers insight on this perspective when he explains the increase in viewers, rather than an expected decrease, during the televised grand jury testimony of President Clinton. The executive attributed the phenomenon to the allure of “informational escapism” and said, “People want something safe and apart from what’s out there” (Ryan F1). James Ryan, in the same piece asserts that “home decorating shows are soothing- like those devoted to fishing or golf” (F1). The notion that these shows are escapist in nature is worth further scrutiny. After all, the shows’ purposes would appear to be to engage viewers in some type of activity. The hosts of these shows act as though the at home viewer is following along with the demonstration. Care is taken to clearly identify the steps necessary to complete what ever task is at hand. Concurrently, elements of the mise-en-scene work to create an atmosphere of tranquility.

¹ HGTV’s catch phrase shown as station identification and coupled with images of interior spaces or outdoor landscapes is “Imagine what you can do.”

This is achieved through a variety of ways such as the use of soft lighting and the use of relaxing, instrumental music to divide segments. With the exception of the occasional guest, the only person talking is the host. In a word, these shows are quiet.

Yet another approach to understand the appeal of these shows is to consider their focus on the home and not just the actual building, but the idea of home, that is, any space where one seeks shelter. In the film The Silence of the Lambs (1991) Hannibal Lector's (Anthony Hopkins) words of wisdom to Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) that "We covet what we see everyday" seem very applicable at this point in my discussion. If the claim has merit, as it does in the film since it ultimately leads Clarice to the killer, then it bears noticing that we are surrounded, often times literally, by a home and/or its various incarnations. This is not only true in life, but also in fiction form on television. Think of all the interiors we see in nearly every genre of television programs. A walk past a newsstand reveals a plethora of periodicals dedicated solely to the concept of home². Majorie Garber boldly asserts that "Real estate has become a form of yuppie pornography" (3). While her remark may be incendiary to some, it is not without merit. Pointing to the fervor with which home acquisition is pursued and the sexual discourse which is used to buy, sell, and describe homes, Garber sketches the concept and actual object of home as a deep seated desire, equitable to sexual desire, within contemporary American culture. Garber believes that this desire transcends social class status and evidence for its existence is ubiquitous. She says, "And our fantasy spaces include not only houses themselves but house plans, house magazines, 'home' stores, the movies, and

the Web”(5). Lowri Turner observes a similar trend in Britain claiming, “As the proliferation of interiors and cookery magazines proves, the home is now more than a place to lay your head. It is increasingly fetishised.” It is this trend of the home as fantasy, as the object of desire, which I find most provocative as a means of explaining and contextualizing the shows discussed below.

(Alternative) Lifestyle Television: A Queer Reading

Discovery Channel’s “The Christopher Lowell Show” and HGTV’s “Savior Faire” are both texts that function very much in line with “Martha Stewart Living.” While each show is different in its approach, they both work to construct a view of one’s home or home entertainment as an escape from the outside world. These shows differ from Stewart’s in that the hosts are both men who are experts in interior design. In fact both shows frequently refer back to each man’s previous and current careers as interior designers. Both men will often mention “clients” which works to position these men as both hosts and as experts. A queer reading of these texts reveals the sexuality of Christopher Lowell and Nik Manojlovich (“Savoir Faire”) as gay men offered as figures for identification to a predominantly female, heterosexual audience. Both of these men, read as queer, become a crucial link for understanding the processes involved in the mainstreaming of a particular type of gay man. These shows, invested in the fantasy of private space, specifically The Home, become both celebratory of the gay man and restrictive in wanting to contain him in this sacred space out of public view. I begin with a general description of each show to tease out their subtle differences. Then I look to

² Common example of this type of periodical, often referred to as shelter magazines, are Architectural

specific episodes of each show to examine the ways that the men are continually coded as queer. The issue of domesticity, private space, and the containment of these men, in conjunction with a consideration of their target audiences, are all issues worthy of scrutiny as they relate to the roles of women, and gay men, in the home and on television.

“Savoir Faire” is a thirty-minute show filmed in Toronto, Canada. Host Nik Manojlovich begins each episode by announcing the show’s title which is indicative of that episode’s central focus: “Life Imitates Art,” “High Tea,” “50’s Redux,” “En Francais,” and “Cocktails At Eight.” The show is divided into segments that include Nik setting a table, discussing that day’s theme with some type of expert guest who furthers our understanding of the theme, a special feature related to that day’s theme such as napkin folding instructions or go-go dancing lessons, and finally preparing a meal and/or drinks. The show’s catch phrase, “Make every day entertaining,” is evidenced as each episode concludes with the arrival of guests for the dinner party based on that day’s theme. The order of the segments changes from episode to episode. Taped inside a loft, the mise-en-scene of the show is quite intimate. It appears to be a functioning apartment, and since most of the show features only Nik, one can quickly forget that it is also a studio. We begin to believe it is actually his own apartment, complete with living room, dining area, and kitchen. Nik’s performance is captured on video as he directly addresses the viewer adding to the level of intimacy, using pronouns like “you,” “yours,” and “we.”

“The Christopher Lowell Show,” formerly called “Interior Motives” is Discovery Channel’s number one rated afternoon show. According to a programming executive at

the Discovery Channel, “Lowell gets about one million viewers a day primarily women 25 to 54” (TV Decorator). Similarly, the show’s website receives two million hits per month (Williams). The renamed show is identical to its predecessor except that it is no longer taped in front of a studio audience. The show begins in much the same way as “Savoir Faire” as host Christopher Lowell dressed in full costume performs a brief skit that introduces the show’s title which captures the day’s topic. Titles include: “Closet Solutions,” “California Dreaming,” “Hollywood Glamour,” and “Nooks and Crannies.” The outlandish nature of the opening skit is apparent. For instance, Lowell dressed in drag and transformed himself into Scarlett O’ Hara to introduce one of his shows on window treatments. After the opening credit sequence, Lowell enters the studio which, on “Interior Motives” was complete with a live audience. Currently, he simply addresses the at home viewer. Whereas Lowell used to sit center stage in an obvious television studio, the show has moved locations to a bona fide “home” on the back lot of Universal studios. Most of the show is comprised of him sitting on a stool by a monitor and reviewing location footage of homes or conducting interviews with guests. Guests include experts on that day’s topic and/or viewers of the show that have been invited to appear on the show. After visiting outside locations via the monitor, Lowell will at some point perform a demonstration inside the studio that follows a “How To” format, intended for viewers to follow along at home.

Lowell frequently begins with an elaborate manifestation of the day’s topic by visiting homes or businesses that make use of whatever the featured decorating element may be. His attention to price is close as he always presents a way to achieve a similar

look for those viewers who are watching their budgets. His style is very personal and motivational. His catch phrase is “You can do it,” which is seen by some critics as more inspiring than Martha Stewart’s “It’s a good thing,” read by some as “quasi- judgmental” (Sultan). When Lowell was in a studio he would often sit among the audience, ask members questions by name, and even touch members on the shoulder. The studio audience was composed of mostly females with one or two men sprinkled about here and there.

The conservative nature of television problematizes a queer reading of these two shows, but only in part. Since both shows target heterosexual women, any announcement of the sexuality of these two hosts would seem to undermine the shows’ larger investments. After all, both shows are not part of nor do they intend to contribute to a public discourse on sexuality in the manner of a talk show like “The Jenny Jones Show” or “Jerry Springer,” but rather each is a commodity seeking to hold a quality daytime audience. The shows’ relationship to their sponsors is evident, as certain materials are necessary to complete tasks that the shows are trying to promote. That is, one will need to buy certain items in order to successfully complete any project either show is undertaking. Lowe’s Home Improvement Warehouse, as well as the makers of household cleaning products, bathroom fixtures, and even lawn care products buy spots on these shows. Still, the flamboyant personalities of these two men are overdetermined by the very nature of their expertise in interior design. A scene from the film In and Out illustrates the connection between gay men and interior design. The prematurely “outed” Howard Brackett seeks to prove his masculinity and by the film’s logic his

heterosexuality. Brackett enlists the aid of a self-help tape entitled “Exploring Your Masculinity.” He follows the commands of the tape’s narrator: “Stand up straight,” “Don’t dance,” “Truly manly men don’t dance.” In a deep voice, Brackett then parrots back at the narrator’s request :“Yo!” and “Hot damn!” The narrator then slips in, “What a fabulous window treatment.” The unsuspecting Brackett instantly switches his tone of voice to a softer register and repeats the phrase. He realizes his error as the narrator commands, “That was a trick!” The idea here is simple: Window treatments, and by extension, home design, is not masculine. Situated within this narrative about a man trying to deny his homosexuality by underscoring his masculinity, connects window treatments, and all they connote, to the level of queerness.

Other factors contribute to a queer reading of Lowell and Manojlovich and their respective shows. Alexander Doty discusses the issue of connotation as a process by which popular texts become “queered:”

Notorious for its ability to suggest things without saying them for certain, connotation has been the representational and interpretive closet of mass culture queerness for far too long...The concept of connotation allows straight culture to use queerness for pleasure and profit in mass culture without admitting to it. (xi-xii)

Because queerness tends to remain in this realm of connotation, Doty believes that queer readings can be dismissed as alternative readings, “therefore deniable or ‘insubstantial’” (xii). On one hand this seems to be true of these two programs, as neither Lowell nor Manojlovich ever mention the status of their sexual orientation. Yet, due to his

profession, affinity for traditionally feminine objects, flamboyant, if not prissy personalities, each man seems obviously gay. At the same time, each show is targeted toward a mainstream, heterosexual, female audience. By never announcing the sexuality of these two men, their gayness can be subverted to this connotative level of each text. Yet, I suspect for reasons I will soon describe, that a queer reading of these shows is part of a dominant reading, making the shows on some level a source of queer pleasure for heterosexuals, particularly women as mentioned above by Doty. The perceived threat gayness presents to the status quo is contained by the nature of the programs (TV-G rated) and other textual features. I want to look now at an episode from each program to argue for the constant presence of a queer position maintained on each show.

“In The Pink” is the title of an episode of “Savoir Faire” from its first season. As its title suggests the episode is dedicated to the color pink. The first segment finds Nik sitting on the sofa in the living room area of the loft with a female stylist/color expert. He says that a line from the Fred Astaire/Audrey Hepburn film Funny Face (1957) inspired the episode when Hepburn proclaims: “Think Pink.” The idea of queerness arises as a brief history of the color is plugged by the expert guest. Interestingly, she talks about how the color is split between the sexes with women possessing the ability to wear the color at any time without any sanctions. In contrast, she claims a pink Brooks Brothers shirt under a blazer is perfectly “mainstream” for a man, but warns that a pink sweater will surely cause the same man to be labeled “eccentric.” Her use of euphemism thinly disguises her suggestion that the man will be considered gay. The association with gay men and pink has a long history as both the color and gay men are traditionally

considered feminine. That the entire episode centers on pink further plays into a queer reading of the show as Nik remarks in each segment on his fondness for the color connecting him with the aforementioned “eccentric” man.

The next segment finds Nik sitting at a table preparing flower arrangements as centerpieces for his pink table. Not only is he adept at arranging flowers, but he places the arrangements in various containers including some pieces of a dinner service. We learn that these pieces are from his personal collection of dinnerware. As he begins the next segment we are back at the table, this time setting places with plates and learning to fold pink napkins. He looks right into the camera and addresses the viewer: “I wish you had been there when I found this china- - I was like a kid in a candy store.” As he comments on the history of the china, noting its time period and country of origin, he directs our attention to its “gorgeous detailing.” He ends the segment by placing tiny china flowers around the table as decoration that he claims adds a “lovely, whimsical touch” to the place settings. This close attention to detail, his working knowledge of china, and the intricacy of folding the napkin all present a very different view of masculinity. His word choices such as “lovely ribbon,” as well as other moments mentioned above, work to feminize him. When Doty uses the word queer, he uses it in a highly qualified way, with many possible meanings. But essentially, he uses the term for referencing “a range of nonstraight expression in, or in response to, mass culture” (p. xvi). Here I want to argue that “Savior Faire” is queered, precisely because it presents viewers, through Nik, with a male whose interests and expertise are antithetical to a traditional domestic masculinity whereby men view the home as the site of leisure and

relaxation, but leave such decorative details as flowers and place settings to women. Convention holds that the home is a workspace for females and both Nik and Christopher lean more towards the feminine as the home is a literal workspace on these two shows. The episode closes as Nik prepares a pink pasta dish, and his guests are seated at his well planned table. The viewer can only see the guests, comprised of two women and one man from a distance. Given the queer subtext of the episode, and the order of the seating arrangement, it is plausible to read the dinner party as composed of a lesbian and a gay couple. Who would be more appropriate for a pink dinner party? Now I want to look at an episode of “Interior Motives” because it serves to further illustrate my discussion of queerness.

At the beginning of the episode, dressed in a toga and spitting water out of his mouth, Christopher Lowell, with his lispy speech, announces that “Interior Motives” will be “Designing With Water.” As mentioned previously, this introduction is not unique to this episode, as every episode begins with Lowell dressed in full costume performing a parody of whatever that day’s topic is. After the show’s introduction, which is apparently taped prior to the beginning of the show, Lowell enters the studio audience area of the set. Now he is dressed like a traditional host, wearing a button up shirt tucked into a pair of slacks. It so happens that on this day his shirt is pink. The show promises to take viewers to elaborate custom-built swimming pools, to teach viewers how to make their own water ponds in their yards, and finally how to build various indoor water fountains. This show as a queer text does not stem from the subject matter as it did on “Savoir Faire.” Instead, the queerness here is literally embodied in the persona of the host. His

use of camp in the beginning Greek fountain sequence is complemented by his feminine mannerisms throughout the entire show. When speaking to the audience and to the viewer he often throws his hands down in a stereotypically queer gesture. He often uses language which accesses a queer discourse employing phrases such as “Don’t go there” or “Fabulous.” Like Nik Manojlovich his enthusiasm for and expertise with commodities like window treatments, fabric swatches, layers in architecture, furniture, fabrics, etc. cast him into the realm of the feminine, the inside of the home. His TV-G rating ensures that guests bring their children on the show, and many episodes include the redecoration of children’s rooms. So, as in “Savoir Faire” Lowell’s sexuality is not explicitly acknowledged by a dominant reading of the text, instead it is inferred through Lowell’s persona. One critic directly acknowledges a queer reading of Lowell’s persona:

He is also someone who seems to fulfill every expectation we have of a gay interior designer. But Lowell rejects that, describing himself as androgynous. “What I hope I stand for is a very non threatening sexual presence,” he says. (Sultan).

Lowell’s remark is revealing, not only because it supports my own contention of his asexuality, but his own rejection/denial of his sexuality altogether works as a type of containment device. Still, his rejection also works to strengthen a queer reading of his persona. When presented with this quasi-accusation Lowell could easily have said, “Gay? I have a wife and two kids at home.” Or, “Gay? My girl friend will be surprised!” And perhaps even better, “Gay! Yes, I am and my lover and I have a fabulous house in West Hollywood.” My point is that by neither affirming his heterosexuality nor

homosexuality and instead proceeding with a degree of caution to minimize his sexuality altogether, he leaves his sexual status an open text, to be read at will.

Both of these shows are texts that extend the idea of the gay male/heterosexual female dyad I have outlined in previous chapters. The manifestation of this couple might seem vague here, but if we see these shows as interpolating a heterosexual, predominantly female audience as noted by time slots, commercials, guests, subject matter, etc., and we read the host as queer, then we do not have to make an interpretive leap. Recall the characters of George and Julianne from My Best Friend's Wedding. George is able to accommodate a platonic, yet high level of intimacy with Julianne and at the same time he offers heterosexual romantic advice as if he were an expert. With these home improvement shows, the gay male functions in the same way. Instead of displaying a working knowledge of romance, the gay male here is an expert in and of the home. Intimacy is established in his method of address to the imagined (female) viewer. One critic believes that "Lowell is helping women overcome paralysis that someone like (Martha) Stewart, with her perfectionism, historical accuracy and excruciating attention to detail can inspire" (Sultan). This is a provocative point because it suggests that gay men are able to connect to some women better than another woman, at least in the case of Martha Stewart. While Stewart uses the same, personal method of address, she is read by many as condescending and/or snobbish. On "Interior Motives" Lowell called his audience members by their first name and often made physical contact with them. Similarly, Manojlovich tells viewers while he is preparing the pink pasta cream sauce, "You're going to love this." Earlier in the episode he looks right into the camera and

says, “I’ve really enjoyed planning this table in pink, and wait till you see what I’ve come up with.” On an episode inspired by planning a Greek themed dinner party, Nik tells the home viewer while preparing Greek coffee, “Don’t be surprised when a fortune teller wants to read your coffee grounds.” His use of the inclusive and understood second person works to establish intimacy and help viewers engage in the fantasy. It is as though the viewers themselves are soon to depart on a trip to Greece. During this same episode, while preparing the dessert baklava, he says, “You know I’m not a trained chef, but I’m telling you right now, you, yes you, can do this.” So his performance suggests a level of intimacy, as though he is actually engaged in a personal conversation with a single viewer. Interestingly, one viewer of the show writes, “*Savoir Faire* is great, every show is interesting. I enjoy a glass of wine while I watch so I really feel like a guest” (About *Savoir*). What follows is a discussion of domesticity and private space which can further our understanding of this new couple and its relation to these home improvement shows as well as larger cultural movements.

Domesticity, Queer Masculinity, and the Issue of Containment

“As social life in the cities has in many places become less civil and less open, public space becomes a threatened, unstable realm”

-Lynn Lees (445)

“Public space, in an electronic age, is space on the run. Public space is not *in* the city, but the city itself. Not nodes but circulation routes; not buildings and plazas but roads and bridges. Public space is leaving home and giving up all the comforts of cluster-places that substitute for the home.”

-Vito Acconci (911)

Christopher Lowell picked up “the retreat back into the home” trend by noticing billion dollar industries with “the home” at their centers in the mid 1990s (Christopher).

The issue of home is increasingly important as these shows are considered, because both attempt to romanticize and to some degree fantasize the home. Lowell's show often takes viewers into the homes of others. For instance, the water episode transports viewers into a man's home with a water wall inside the living room. The same episode plays soft instrumental music as a swimming pool shaped by natural rocks is renamed a "waterhole" by Lowell's voice-over, negating the surroundings of a suburban neighborhood. Other moments take viewers into exotic homes, such as a three story floating home or a water tower that has been converted into a dream home. This show offers the home as a desirable commodity and as an escape from the public world. "Savoir Faire" works in a similar way because through the topic, the show creates a fantasy dinner party. Even though the show is primarily concerned with entertaining guests, the parties are small, and all take place inside of the home. This emphasis on the home and private space is important and curious when we think about these men read as gay.

The authors quoted at the beginning of this section describe the contemporary state of public space. Its negative characterization begs the question, what of private space? If public space is seen by Acconci as "life on the loose," what of private space, the domestic, the home? Is it this realm of the private, the home which becomes the site of stability, of order, and of comfort? Marjorie Garber would answer in the affirmative, contending the home "is the place where we stage the life we wish we had time to live" (207). Not only are these shows presumably consumed in the home, but they locate the center of life within the home. If one considers having a dinner party a form of public

life, then these shows work to position the public within the private, within your home. For this very reason, Kevin Melchionne explains the tenuous relationship between domesticity and feminism. On one hand, domesticity functions as a significant form of labor, however “feminists recognize the importance of entering public life for the emancipation of women, and the role of inordinate domestic responsibility in sabotaging women’s efforts to do so” (196). This same line of argument can be advanced to these two shows. I argue that the queer masculinities discussed above should be viewed under the same “shadow of suspicion” with which feminists view attempts to idealize the home. On one level the idea of home functions to contain these men exactly for the reason suggested above- they are out of public space so their ability to affect public/social policy and/or the status quo is diminished. On another level, the same idea works to highlight another aspect of these men which renders them non-threatening, even supportive of dominant ideology. By idealizing the home, and by acting as a mentor figure to women, the men work to maintain and celebrate female domesticity. Could this be the reason that the queer masculinities featured on these design shows are relegated to the realm of the domestic, and so cease to be subversive? Their celebration of home, of the private, requires us to consider the degree to which these shows maintain traditional gender roles and use the home to contain both gay men and straight women.

Audience Interactivity and the Colonization of Female Space: Some Concluding Remarks

I have briefly alluded to the notion of voyeurism, but I think more needs to be said. Marjorie Garber’s discussion of open houses, which she calls “cruising,” of

walking through someone's lived-in home, is deeply pleasing because of its voyeuristic nature. It is for this very reason that she suggests many people go to open houses even when they are not in the market to buy a home. Clearly, a show like Lowell's, which often transports viewers into the homes of others has some voyeuristic appeal. Still, there is another level at which voyeurism operates which bridges the at-home viewer directly with the host of the show. This is audience interactivity.

When I discuss interactivity, I am moving away from the concept as employed by critical theorists such as John Fiske who use the term to categorize reading strategies that are potentially liberating for audiences. Instead, I use the term as Caldwell defines it: "A way for programs to seal a relationship with viewers"(26). It is with this use of the term that I want to discuss the websites for both "The Christopher Lowell Show" and "Savoir Faire." Both work to link individual viewers to these shows and their respective hosts. The implication of voyeurism abounds as the websites reveal the personal and professional lives of the two hosts. I have already shown that both men's method of address is personal and functions to connect viewers to them, but the websites go a step further. One can browse the biographies of these men, look at photos, email the host, and participate in scheduled on-line chat sessions with the host. Lowell's site even features a down loadable screen saver so "you'll be able to see Christopher all the time." A virtual tour of the "Christopher Lowell House" where the show is taped is at one's finger tips. So these websites function to bring the host and the at-home viewer together in a more personal way. The sites are voyeuristic because they propagate a fantasy that these men are people viewers know personally, people viewers can have a form of intimate

knowledge about. In short, they are the viewer's friends. This notion of interactivity works to strengthen the connection between the at-home female viewer and the male host of the show.

One could read these shows as a male invasion of female space. In an article in The Sunday Times appropriately titled "The Return of the Housewife" Lowri Turner traces a trend whereby working women are seeking to reclaim the home³. Turner identifies a motivation for the trend when she points to the "colonizing of female territory" by men: "There is nothing that takes the stigma out of so called women's work than men saying they'll have a go." Susan Dundon discusses her disdain for the same male occupation of female space. She says, "There is some conflict, it appears, between wanting a man who can bring a touch of savoir faire to the dinner table and one who can take over your territory"(176). Clearly, the idea of men assuming domestic responsibility is not only contested, but given the language used above, downright threatening. So, why isn't the gay male perceived in this same manner? Or is he? I argue that he is not. It is important to realize that both authors above are referring to a heterosexual male invasion of female space. The notion of competition is absent when we look to the gay male and straight female dyad. He is a mentor and an ally and their relationship is characterized by cooperation. To further illustrate this point, consider the Tim Burton film Beetlejuice (1988). Delia Deitz, (Catherine O'Hara) herself an artist, seeks the help of her friend, interior designer Otho (Glenn Shadix), in redesigning her family's new home. It is not my intention to fully read Otho's character, but let us just briefly notice the queerness in

his prissy-ness, his fastidious dress, and the fact that like Lowell and Manojlovich, he is an interior designer. Delia and her husband Charles (Jeffrey Jones) cannot agree on anything regarding the designing of the house. She is hostile towards Charles since he wants to leave the house in its present state. But when Otho arrives, Delia takes great pleasure as the two walk through the house as she explains her plan for this wall or that. Delia constantly seeks Otho's approval by making a suggestion and then checking his reaction. Like the dyad implied by the two shows analyzed above, these two work as a partnership, not in competition, with Otho as the mentor figure.

I have tried to suggest that although we have to read and explicate the personas of Lowell and Manojlovich, that my reading is not alternative. There are no moves either text makes that would suggest that the men are in fact heterosexual, so reading it in that manner would become even more of an alternative reading. These shows become further instances of representations of gay men. Why is it that this type of show, which is highly invested in the heterosexual home and by extension the family, is so seemingly at ease with these queer men? One answer would certainly underscore the lack of a personal romance narrative for either of these men. On most shows featuring a host, especially ones as candid and personal as these, viewers learn something about the host's personal life. Neither man's romantic status is ever revealed on either show, so each becomes quite asexual, or lacking any kind of sexual presence. Also, even if viewers are convinced that these men are homosexuals and are willing to accept that, these men are situated on these shows in a very non-threatening space: the domestic, the home.

³ Judy Dutton writes about "Housewife Wanna-Bes." These are twenty-something women who fantasize

Someone who does not have a problem with gays as long as they “keep it in the bedroom” will not feel threatened because these men are literally and figuratively contained. Although visible on television, they are rendered experts in the realm of the private, the home, and therefore they do not present a challenge to mainstream heterosexuality, indeed they are not even openly recognized as homosexuals by their own shows, themselves, or their audiences.

about leaving the workplace, and instead maintaining the home. One woman, disenchanted with the corporate world says that the “home is safe, controllable, and women want that power in their lives” (164).

BEYOND TRENDY: AN EPILOGUE

Traditionally, an epilogue or concluding section of a project is a space that ties together the work and provides a sense of closure. My intention is to provide such a synthesis, yet at the same time I see the work this thesis has begun as largely unfinished. Throughout the year and half of my research and writing I have often been pleasantly stunned by the amount of attention the popular press has given to the gay male/straight female dyad. Whether a headline in The New York Times says “He’s Gay, She’s Straight, They’re a Trend” or the cover of Entertainment Weekly features Eric McCormack and Debra Messing from “Will and Grace” with a large caption reading “Gay Men and Straight Women: Why Hollywood Just Loves Them,” the dyad as a popular trope is not going unnoticed. However, as suggested by the headline above, a tendency arises to see this dyad as merely a trend. While there is value in coming to an understanding of media trends, one could be dismissive of such work on the grounds that the narratives and programs analyzed in this thesis which feature the dyad may fade out of the cultural spotlight, and the explanatory power of this thesis would be limited to a brief three year period in media history. This thesis is not an attempt to make predictions about the proliferation of the dyad. In the synthesis that follows, I hope to recapitulate the threads which have run the course of the chapters in order to argue for the viability of this thesis even if another film or program which features the dyad is never again produced.

I began this project by positioning myself as an openly gay critic in order to foreground my selection of texts which were not chosen randomly, but because of their considerable attention to the gay male/straight female dyad. Another intention of acknowledging my critical position is to clearly identify the scope of the study and the ideological frame within which I examined the texts. This thesis is a textual analysis, so at no time am I attempting to speak on behalf of producers of these narratives. It was not my goal to ascribe motive or intent to them. Likewise, this was not a reception study, and I have not made claims here to suggest that I am in some privileged position to understand what any person gets out of these texts. The meanings that I argue for throughout this thesis are meanings that I see as readily available in these texts and while I do raise implications, I do not intend to point fingers. To see this study as a media effects piece, even at the level of implication, would be misguided. Having said this, I believe my thesis makes significant contributions to media studies, gay studies, and any body of scholarship that focuses its attention on representation.

An important observation that this project begins to uncover is the realization of gay culture as a commodity itself. Largely in chapter one, but also in chapter three, I make connections between the emergence and popularity of gay characters in mainstream media with a concurrent trend in advertising. Both industries, while still remaining “safe” or at least vague in their depictions of the homosexual realize the potential and actual profitability in reaching gay consumers, but also a more tolerant, gay friendly, public as well. Both trends are important for gays because they provide positive exposure by depicting gays as successful, wealthy, and as the embodiment of good taste

in the realms of fashion, domesticity, and grooming. What this project demonstrates is the need to proceed with caution in consideration of such trends, because in both industries the bottom line is not to foster social change but rather to increase profits. Also, as I trace throughout each chapter, when only one type of gay person is featured, and this person is an upwardly mobile, likeable, trend setting individual, we risk losing sight of some of the inequities that gay people continue to face.

Throughout this thesis I have presented these texts as paradoxical in the sense that while they are commendable because they favorably portray gay men, I try to introduce a level of suspicion to these depictions because of their treatment of women and their maintenance of a problematic stereotype of gay men. I am not so naïve as to believe that any fully accurate representation of any social group exists in popular media. There are always omissions and exaggerations in any representation. But I do think we can all learn a great deal from these representations in terms of what is and what is not there. This is especially true of minority representations because the representation may be one's only encounter with a member of that particular group.

In Chapter Two I argued that My Best Friend's Wedding was a pivotal film because of its unique ending which leaves the female protagonist without a heterosexual mate, but instead offers her the substitute companionship of the gay male confidant. The film's depiction of both the straight female and gay male acts as an exemplar of both figures and anticipates their construction in subsequent narratives. The analysis of the dyad in this film lays the ideological groundwork for the depiction of the couple in subsequent films because the gay man is the straight woman's literal substitute for love.

The straight female, because of her status as an active rather than passive woman is shown to be an outsider, incapable of heterosexual coupling. But the film is ready to celebrate heterosexual marriage, rather than suggest alternatives, and so it ultimately supports a conservative, patriarchal ideology.

Chapter Three examined the narrativization of romance between the gay male/straight female dyad. By looking at the straight women in The Object of My Affection and The Opposite of Sex, I argued that the desire for romance between the dyad is initiated by the woman. The conflict which results works at two levels. On one, it suggests that sexual orientation is permanent, rather than fluid or a phase that one goes through. This is a positive aspect of these depictions. On a second level, by turning a gay man into the literal object of the straight woman's obsession, the conflict becomes feminized. It is her problem. She has wasted her time and considerable emotional energy only to learn she cannot have what she wants, which according to all of these texts, is romance. Because "Will and Grace" is a television series which currently remains on air, it is a difficult text to write about simply because there is so much narrative material and because the story continues to unfold. Currently the show enjoys prestige because of its placement on NBC's high profile Thursday Night line-up advertised with the tag line "Must See TV." For the past decade this has been the space allotted to only the most successful sit-coms, like "Seinfeld," "Friends," "Mad About You," and "Frasier." Similarly, as of 2000 "Will and Grace" has been elevated to Emmy winning status, as both Megan Mullally (Karen) and Sean Hayes (Jack) both won best supporting Emmys as did the show for best comedy. "Will and Grace" demands careful

attention in the future because it brings the gay male/straight female dyad into millions of American homes every week. My discussion of this show is relevant to the notion of romance between the gay male and straight female because the show uses romantic tension as an ambiguous subtext in most episodes and sometimes directly as in the episodes discussed in this thesis.

Even if the gay male/straight female dyad is a trend that disappears, I argue that this thesis points to broader manifestations of the structure, and what I have done in my last chapter is most significant. In Chapter Four I have shown that even though not explicitly present, the same dyad structures two home improvement shows on cable television. This last chapter works to establish the dyad as more than a trend. The dyad is a trope which appears in various forms in a variety of other popular media. Future studies should look to such media to more fully articulate the dimensions of the gay male stereotype and the versions of femininity that are and are not embodied in the straight female figure. The recent film The Next Best Thing (2000) which explores the issues that arise when the gay male/straight female dyad raise a child together would be an ideal starting place to continue and extend the arguments initiated in this thesis. The notion of the gay male as domestic authority figure outlined in Chapter Four could be extended to several other contemporary contexts. On the internet, the website “Ask A Gay Guy.Com” is a site where people (mostly straight women and gay men) submit questions on topics ranging from entertaining guests to sexual relationships, and the titular “gay guy” posts a response. Interestingly, one of the links on the site is titled “Gay men and the straight women who love them.” Clearly, the dyad has made its way on line, into an

electronic space not confined by the rules of television etiquette. This site is ripe for future analysis. The advice book Sex Tips For Straight Women, By a Gay Man (Anderson and Berman, 1997), is yet another text where the dyad comes into play. The sex manual is co-authored by a gay man and his straight female best friend. The book, in tandem with the home design shows and the website above, is yet another example of the gay male as authority figure. Here, future research should more fully investigate how the gay male acts to reaffirm heterosexual romance. In the sex manual, he literally acts as a mentor to straight women to improve (and by extension reify) heterosexuality. Finally, given the enormous popularity of My Best Friend's Wedding and "Will and Grace," and the prevalence of the dyad in other venues, each text considered in this thesis would lend itself well to a formal feminist analysis given the troubling status of women in these narratives.

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