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Momin Rahman, 2004. 'David Beckham as a historical moment in the representation of masculinity.' In *Labour History Review*, vol 69, no 2, pp219-233, August 2004.

### Abstract

There can be no doubt that David Beckham is a public figure of intense media interest in contemporary Britain. This paper is the first stage in a project which aims to explore the circuit of representation and reception of Beckham in current culture. I use a grounded theory approach to generate and categorise the ways in which representations are constructed. The empirical focus is on the discourses around Beckham which are apparent in magazines from May to October 2002. This six month period covers some extremely significant events in his private and professional lives; from his injury just before the World Cup; his recovery and subsequent captaincy of England during the tournament; his on-going fashion and celebrity career with consecutive cover spreads for major magazines, to the arrival of Romeo - his second child. As such, this time-span provided ample and diverse examples of how he is represented in this particular form of lifestyle media. The conceptual categories generated through the grounded theory approach are analysed using ideas drawn from queer theory. My aim is to explore whether queer ideas of discursive resistance, disruption, or destabilisation, are useful explanatory frameworks when discussing the modes of representation which are deployed to construct David Beckham as a working class heterosexual subject. I suggest that queer theory does allow an appreciation of new elements being coded into working-class masculinity. However, current changes in the representation of masculinity may be more usefully understood as expansions of the 'sign' of masculinity operating as a commodity form.

## Introduction

He's England's Captain Fantastic. He's Manchester United's dead ball dynamo. He's the man who made Argentina cry and – in the process (and from 6000 miles away) – transformed a rainy English Friday lunchtime into an impromptu outpouring of pride and delirium. He's as rich as Croesus and humble like Jesus. He might just be the most fashion conscious man in Britain.

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This extract is one of innumerable examples of the media fascination with David Beckham in newspapers, website news, celebrity weeklies and monthly lifestyle magazines. It is not difficult to argue that our common experience in Britain suggests that Beckham is a quantitatively significant figure in contemporary popular culture. Moreover, the interest in his transfer to Real Madrid in the summer of 2003, and his commercial promotional tours of the Far East, demonstrate the international reach of Beckham culture. My aim in this essay is a more qualitative exploration of this significance; an attempt to discern and understand the different modes of representation through which Beckham's identity is constructed and rendered accessible to us. The example above offers a fairly comprehensive list of assertions about why Beckham is important to the male audience of this magazine: he is the ultimate working class boy made good, keeping it real by playing football (leading his nation, no less!) but remaining ever so humble, and becoming very rich in the process. Moreover, as Ellis Cashmore argues in his book, 'Beckham would simply not have happened in another era'<sup>2</sup> because contemporary celebrity culture is a product of the current commodification of every realm of society:

A whole industry has grown up around trying to access our desires and shape them and convert them into spending habits. In other words, potentially anything can be made into a commodity. This includes people. Footballers. Beckham is<sup>3</sup> evidence of this process and of the culture that has advanced it.

Whilst I do not doubt the importance of such arguments, they are largely based on assumption and assertion in the case of journalism. Furthermore, although Cashmore's book on Beckham is solidly researched on the impact of media finance on football, and contains a sound argument about the significance of consumerism, he relies rather too heavily on generalisations about transformations in masculinity and celebrity culture. This article is more closely focused on an empirical analysis of representations of Beckham from lifestyle and celebrity magazines covering a seven month period of 2002, which included some extremely significant events in his private and professional life - from the anticipation of the football World Cup in South Korea and Japan; to Beckham's injury prior to the tournament; some remarkable magazine fashion shoots; the typically English bewilderment at defeat, and the birth of his second son, Romeo. Using a grounded theory approach – which produces and explores hypotheses based only on the sample data – I argue that masculinity is a primary category of representation – one which both subsumes and connects other salient modes of representation. For example, the paragraph quoted above from *Gentleman's Quarterly* ends thus: 'He is, surely, the only heterosexual male in the country who could get away with being photographed half-naked and smothered in baby oil for GQ and still come over as an icon of masculinity.<sup>4</sup> He's loved, lampooned and lusted after all at the same time.'

Our assumptions may have suggested as much. Beckham is a public figure of some controversy and contradiction, captain of the England football team (with a mohican hairstyle on appointment) and international model (for Police sunglasses until 2003), fashion dandy and sarong wearer, and extravagant, even by footballer and/or celebrity standards, whilst hailing from good working-class roots. He is also represented as a doting father and apparently downtrodden husband but also an aggressive and petulant world-class footballer. Much of the controversy and contradiction is specifically around his masculinity, and the data presented here suggests it is profitable to explore the representation of Beckham in terms of cultural shifts in public discourses around heterosexual and working-class masculinity.

Using the hypotheses generated from the grounded theory procedures as my starting point, I explore the evident discourses on gender using a queer theory interpretive framework. This not only provides a way of thinking about the cultural resonance of

Beckham but also opens up a consideration of his representation as a potential subversion of common discourses of gender. Whilst a queer theoretical approach is useful in thinking about David Beckham as a gendered cultural icon, I go on to suggest that it lacks a purchase on historical specificity and, as such, requires the corrective of a more historical analysis. To this end, I combine queer theory with Baudrillard's conceptualisation of the shift in late capitalist societies to the era of the 'sign' – the era of commodification and

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consumer society. Using this perspective, I explore the extent to which the current cultural fascination with and constant mediatised reproduction of David Beckham is a 'sign' of convergence between the historical shift in the public discourses of masculinity and the assumed dislocation of masculinity from its traditional referents.

#### The Material of Culture

The study of culture has a long tradition in social science and I use the magazines in my sample primarily as cultural documents which can tell us something about the ways in which frameworks of social meaning around masculinity are constructed through the representation of Beckham. Let me make clear some of my theoretical assumptions, which draw both from cultural studies and from a more traditional sociological perspective. Culture is a site of social meaning making, transmission and reception, and so it is valid to explore whether there are dominant cultural meanings in the modes of representation around such a significant cultural figure as David Beckham. How Beckham is constructed and transmitted in our culture is an interesting question in itself, given his pervasive presence. Furthermore, although I can make no claims of evidence about how these meanings are received and decoded, I am able to discern assumptions about how meanings will be received, precisely because these representations are produced in a consumer context, with the images and words about Beckham deployed to stimulate interest and then convert that interest into an economic transaction. The focus of my sample - cover stories - is an obvious example of this strategy, but even when items on Beckham are not the main focus of the edition, their inclusion is still evidence that Beckham stories add value to - or at least do not detract from - the currency of attraction and interest that converts to sales.

I am therefore treading a fine line within the somewhat quarrelsome debate between those who prioritise either materialist or cultural analysis. Furthermore, I weave an even more delicate path within cultural studies itself, combining an interpretive framework in queer theory which prioritises culture as text with the more semiotically inflected ideas of Baudrillard, but which is also contextualised within discussions of power and inequalities – more the remit of the socio-cultural analysis developed by the first wave of cultural studies in Britain<sup>6</sup>. I have argued previously that the material/cultural opposition, often mapped onto a structural economic/discursive binary, lacks the sensitivity to answer the important questions of what is effective in constituting gendered and sexual formations and identities<sup>7</sup>. This emphasis on effectivity – in the sense of bringing into being and sustaining patterns of social life and experience - can be discerned across a broad range of contemporary feminist materialist and post-structuralist work<sup>8</sup>, and it is this theme that guides my analysis in this essay. Therefore, whilst I do not adopt a strictly post-structuralist position that suggests culture is autonomously effective, I do argue that a strictly materialist analysis of the celebrity economy does not take us very far in terms of understanding. The organising principle of this economy of constant mediated representation is not money – that is more a guiding principle – but rather, the construction of effective meaning. This meaning is constructed and deployed within a social context where divisions of power and equality construct identifications with representations. The cultural pieces in my sample are representations which are organised, negotiated, planned, selected, constructed, often re-cycled and then deployed across a wide range of different media, based on an assumption of effective, resonant, meanings, which will then accelerate more demand in the consumer/media feedback loop.

As Nixon argued in his study of the development of 'New Man' imagery in lifestyle magazines in the 1980s and 90s, an analysis that prioritises political economy does not attend astutely to the ways in which cultural practices and representations organise and construct markets interdependently with economic processes<sup>9</sup>. Beckham as subject matter may certainly sell but this begs the question of why this particular subject matters - what is it about David Beckham that creates enough resonance so that his symbolic capital can be converted by others into their economic capital?<sup>10</sup> As I suggested in the introduction, is it easy to answer this question with generalised assumptions, my own included. We do, after all, exist within our cultural

history and make sense of it on a daily basis. Indeed, whilst Cashmore suggest the importance of social changes – in the place of sports in culture, in the technologies for interpellating the self as consumer, in the expectations of masculinity and family life – he delivers a focused analysis only in the first two areas, relying on an implicit understanding that masculinity is in crisis and transformation to underpin his chapter on ‘Sex, Masculinity and the Temptation of Gay Men’.<sup>11</sup> In an attempt to avoid such prejudice, I adopted a grounded theory methodology, since it allows for the generation of categories of analysis strictly from the data used. Let me turn now to explaining my use of this procedure and the hypotheses it generated in the section below.

There’s only six David Beckhams...

Forgive the grammatical violence in my tribute to the classic football chant. Cashmore also acknowledges this cry from the terraces in order to put forward his view; that there are actually two David Beckhams – the gifted soccer player and ordinary husband and father, and ‘the icon, the celebrity, the commodity, the Beckham that exists independently of time and space and resides in the imaginations of countless acolytes.’<sup>12</sup> Although Cashmore is correct to identify the division between the professional and celebrity, I would suggest both that this division is more permeable, or necessarily interdependent, and that the iconic/celebrity/commodity catch-all does not do justice to the nuances of Beckham’s significance evidenced in the complexities of modes of representation around Beckham. The data analysed in this project suggest six putative categories of meaning: family man, first family, total love, gender/sexuality, footballer and fashion icon. Before I discuss the hypotheses these generated, let me briefly illustrate the grounded theory procedures used to arrive at this statement.

The initial sample was drawn from lifestyle magazines from the period immediately before the World Cup – late April to May 2002. This focus provided a preliminary way of exploring emergent themes without precluding the identification of other themes in the subsequent magazines published from May to October. Lifestyle and celebrity magazines were used rather than newspaper stories since the latter are often recycled from the magazines, or they are often focused on day to day football news. Since my interest is in the wider cultural purchase of Beckham – how he has moved



from the back pages to the front, so to speak, - a focus on exclusive sports news was deemed unnecessary.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, only those editions with pictures and/or headlines about Beckham on the cover were sampled, on the basis that the presence of items on the cover is evidence of an assumed market for the representations contained therein. The magazines articles were then ‘fractured’ – broken into the relevant extracts – for coding. Coding of these fragments proceeded by identifying words/phrase/image from the fractured text which directly implied concepts (associated ideas). For example, from the cover of Heat magazine: ‘how I told david I was pregnant’ and ‘he even talks to the bump on the phone’ and ‘David talks lovingly about his wife’. This cover has a photograph only of Victoria Beckham but does trail David in the headlines with a photospread inside, on pages 10-11, with a full page of Beckham and quotes ‘she’s really attractive, it’s one<sup>14</sup> of the sexiest times in a woman’s life.’

The codes (in bold), together with the photo images, implied the following concepts: Fatherhood, associated with meanings of being a doting father, communication, involvement,

Matrimonial love, with associated meanings of adoration and togetherness, and Beckham’s sexuality, with sexual love as dissonant since it is associated with pregnancy, but recuperated since desire is in the context of a family man

The widest range of meanings associated with the concepts, and the strategies used to deploy them, were established by fracturing for further examples of an emergent concept. Concepts were then grouped together to form categories and the example above supplied concepts which could be grouped into the categories of total love, family and gender/sexuality. Out of the initial data, I established six putative categories: family man, first family (pre-eminent celebrity status in the UK), total love (romantic, sexual and emotional partnership), gender/sexuality, footballer and fashion icon. From these categories, the following hypotheses about the modes of representation were developed to guide the sampling of the remaining magazines.

1. Family-centred with emphasis on extended family relations, modern matrimonial relations and parenting relations.

2. First family of Britain status is a combination of celebrity and authenticity of their labour. Strategies vary between respect/deference and voyeurism/ridicule.
3. Gender/sexuality is anchored in hetero-family/masculine status but is somewhat dissonant in terms of desires and gay icon status
4. Fashion icon status is connected to all categories but is a keener example of the respect/ridicule dynamic.
5. Footballer status overrides any frivolity in fashion and masculinity and supports deference to first family status.

The sampling proceeded in the same way for the remaining magazines, focusing on cover stories/pictures and following up the content, but included only those examples which yielded new meanings or strategies for a particular concept. When neither of these was emerging, the sampling stopped: this is theoretical saturation in grounded theory procedures, whereby the full dimensions of emergent concepts are established. Reaching the point of theoretical saturation allowed the hypotheses to be refined thus:

1. Masculinity can be understood as the overriding category which includes the concepts of gender, sexuality and footballer status. Each of these have linked meanings and strategies, which suggests that his masculinity is a core dimension of significance in making the crucial connections in cultural circuitry - or making the stories relevant, understandable, and often, controversial. There is a consistent respect/ridicule dynamic operating in this category, often related to an induced sense of dissonance or controversy.
2. Family should be another overriding category which includes fatherhood, matrimony, relationships and celebrity status/first family status. Some meanings of family related to the tensions between family and footballer status. Total love is almost wholly subsumed under this category and so was incorporated within it.
3. Fashion icon status is a valid category but is linked directly to celebrity status and gender/sexuality concepts, and thus is an interdependent category with family and masculinity.
4. There is an emergent dynamic of respect/ridicule, both in gender/sexuality/masculinity and in family/first family status.

5. Photo spreads often undermine the text, or create a tension at least in representations, with over-emphasis on Beckham or dissonant/controversial images/captions.

Out of the six original categories, my contention is that masculinity is the most important one in explaining the modes of representation which are used to construct effective meaning around Beckham. The tensions between the photo-spreads and the text; the concepts contained with the family category, and the respect/ridicule strategy – exemplified in the fashion icon category - can all be linked directly to an induced dissonance around Beckham's masculinity.

....and some of them might be queer

The hypotheses derived above suggest that there is more going on than the inevitable gorging on the minutiae of celebrity existence: these representations become meaningful largely through a dynamic of confirmation and challenge to the dominant understandings of working-class hetero-masculinity. It is this dynamic which suggests to me that a queer theoretical approach may provide some explanatory purchase over and above the claims that can be made using the grounded theory procedures. Whilst queer theory is a relatively loose term for a diverse approach to cultural studies which emerged in the late 1980s, it can be broadly understood as an extension of lesbian and gay scholarship that 'newly corroborated the idea that any form of cultural production is inherently

<sup>15</sup> ambivalent.' Queer critiques often deploy a Foucauldian model of cultural discourses as manifestations of power coupled with a deconstructive emphasis in the analysis of culture

<sup>16</sup> as text. Halperin describes the strategies of queer as three-fold in terms of identities, practices and discourses: creative appropriation and resignification; appropriation and theatricalisation to undermine dominant forms of discourse, and exposure and

<sup>17</sup> demystification of the same. It is with such purpose that Judith Butler analyses 'drag' as an important subversion of binary sexual identities, through which she develops her ideas

<sup>18</sup> of 'performativity' as gender reiteration and subversion. Indeed, Cleto suggests that Butler's work on performativity is the model for queer analytics 'in which that most central of identity defining sites in contemporary culture (as the exemplary case of Oscar Wilde reveals), gender, is the result, the effect rather than the cause, of repeated and

<sup>19</sup> stylised acts of performance....'.

Although Beckham consciously performs for the public crowd, lens, audience, purchasers and stockholders<sup>20</sup>, the data here must be understood as re-presentations of his public performances and persona. Moreover, whilst appropriation, theatricalisation and re-signification all figure in my analysis, these must be similarly understood as consciously constructed, or induced, to generate the respect/ridicule dynamic and the dissonance<sup>th</sup> around his masculinity. An example from Heat (20-26<sup>th</sup> July 2002) acknowledges the controversy of Beckham wearing nail varnish but then describes him immediately as ‘macho and absolutely beautiful’. The cover byline reads: ‘Phwoar! Another new look for Becks.’ There is an inset photograph with a trail for a story on pages 18-20 which has a photograph of Beckham with his nail varnish highlighted and the text:

David sported a new blonde barnet and a fitted black suit, and despite the controversy caused by his pink nail varnish he still managed to look macho and absolutely beautiful

This does demonstrate some feminisation of Beckham as an object of desire, but is counterbalanced by the very masculine anchor of ‘macho’. It seems to demonstrate ambivalence about representation in terms of gender coding but also a recognition that this ambiguity is potentially disruptive or controversial and hence it is recuperated – ‘he still managed to look macho..’ The GQ cover and story from June 2002 repeats the play on gender and sexuality with a cover photo of Beckham lying down, bare torso but in a suit and hat, with one hand showing a ring and nail varnish, and the other in the waistband of his trousers. The banner headline reads ‘World exclusive! Beckham “my style? It’s from another planet” His most revealing interview. His most outrageous shoot.’ Inside, on pages 142-155, there follow 7 full pages of photos and interview questions beginning with fashion, moving to football then family and fatherhood. The interview is conducted by David Furnish, Elton John’s partner and therefore one of the most visible celebrity gay men on the planet and, of course, a family friend of the Beckhams. However, Furnish is careful to sound all the right notes of masculinity in his line of questioning, and rather than any danger of queering by association, the presence of Furnish seems only to enhance the mega-celebrity status. Rather, it is the photospread which induces the queerness in

this example, with 4 of Beckham's naked torso in baby oil, of which one is him in unbuttoned cut-off denim shorts on a weights bench – very 1970s gay - and a further 2 of him in a burnt England t-shirt in a crucifixion pose. These self-consciously queer and iconic images are literally contextualised with inset fact boxes on football interspersing both photos and the text.

Whilst theatricalisation and appropriation are at work here (Beckham in a very retro gay outfit of denim shorts, at the gym, and wearing the St. George cross on his t-shirt whilst standing, Christ-like), we cannot ascribe a clear agency to these representations. Clearly Beckham and his agents agreed to the interview and photo-shoot, but the final construction of the piece may not have been in their control. and thus assigning intent to play with, or subvert gender, is not possible. The ultimate queer aim of resignification is not necessarily achieved, and although a queer reading by the audience is clearly possible, such claims are outwith the evidence available from my analysis. Moreover, in the previous example the agency of constructing the performative – of resignifying and then recuperating masculinity - is clearly with the magazine editors. Indeed, the problem of who has agency within the analytic of performativity has been a consistent focus of

<sup>21</sup> interrogation of Butler's work in particular, and queer theory more generally. However, both those above and other examples from the data demonstrate that representing aspects of Beckham's masculinity is a favoured mode of constructing effective meaning. What is interesting in this mode of representation is that there are both reiterations and subversions of traditional codes of masculinity within one 'essence', thus suggesting a focus on ontology – as the parameters of essence or being – may be a more productive path of exploration. The aims of theatricalisation and appropriation central to queer strategies are keenly focused on the exposure and demystification of essentialised

<sup>22</sup> ontologies of gender and sexual identity. Therefore, as Hood-Williams and Cealey Harrison explain, it is the deferment of ontology which is a major premise of queer:

[Butler] asks, what produces the effect of a stable inner core of gender? What gives the idea of a gendered ontology, foundation, fixed, real but actually fictional, produced, chimerical? Her answer is that, performatively, acts, gestures, enactments, do this work. ... Hence, gender shifts from being a

substantive ontological or foundationalist notion to one in which the attributes of gender are performative, socially temporal but re-iterated and, as Goffman might

say, 'giving off' the appearance of interiority.<sup>23</sup>

The elaboration of ideas which propose that subjecthood is an unstable and arbitrary construction, forged out of multiple and historically contingent intersections of ways of thinking about self-identity (race, sexuality, gender) significantly extends the sociological

gaze of disenchantment to 'naturalised' aspects of human character<sup>24</sup>, thus rendering as

social the hetero-gender hierarchy<sup>25</sup>, which depends on naturalist beliefs for so much of its legitimacy. As a cultural subject location, it is possible that Beckham renders visible the myth of an essential masculinity. The appropriation and theatricalisation of his authentic heterosexual masculinity is achieved through resignification of ontology: representations of Beckham contain a dissonance which defers the essence of traditional masculinity - heterosexual, viewer, subject, authentically physical without adornment, unemotional – thus potentially destabilising the dominant hetero-gender/sexual culture through exposure and demystification

Beckham is, after all, the ultimately authentic working-class male icon; engaged in physical labour for his profession, and not just any profession, but captain of his national football team (who heroically secured England's place in the World Cup with a last-minute trade mark free kick goal). Whilst we can no longer simply identify the multi-million pound media-driven business of soccer as an exclusively working-class pursuit – as fans, amateur players or owners – there is undoubtedly an iconic cultural understanding of footballers as 'real' men, or, to put it another way, working-class heroes. In his own rare media interventions, Beckham is consistent in his discussion of

his 'ordinary' working-class upbringing.<sup>26</sup> Of course, Beckham is now a handsomely paid 'Real' man, having signed for one of the richest clubs in the world, in part, to further their commercial operations in the Far East. However, whilst he may be part of the soccer super-rich, this wealth underlines – rather than undermines – his working-class footballer credentials. He is an aggressive and successful footballer with the trophies associated with success in that profession since the 1960s expansion in wages – fast cars, a glamorous wife, a fancy wardrobe and working-class 'roots'. Many of the representations serve to confirm this iconic

masculinity whilst simultaneously containing dissonant codes within the concepts. For example, a cover story in Hello! July 2, 2002, on Beckham leading 'England's world cup heroes home' after their exit from the World Cup tournament trails a 7-page spread inside, which has a photograph of him on every page and text as follows on page 85:

Beckham's gorgeous looks can't help but endear him to women. Then there's his willingness to show his 'feminine' side – for example his unashamed interest in fashion and his hair.

Similarly, an Attitude June 2002 cover headline: 'to dye for, Beckham world exclusive' trails an interview and photo shoot inside pp32-43 which has 9 pages of photos (fully clothed bar one of torso) and introductory headline:

And God created David. Soccer star. Style saviour. International icon. For the first time ever in a gay magazine, meet David Beckham.

And from a Marie Claire (June 2002) cover, trailing a lengthy article inside which has a full page photo of a side profile head shot with full page headline text opposite:

father, lover, icon, hero... When it came to putting a man on Marie Claire's cover for the first time, there was only one candidate. David Beckham. No other person so captures the public imagination, whether for his free kicks, celeb lifestyle or devotion to family life.

Beckham's iconic status is important as a concept only in so far as it relates to his masculinity in various ways. This is most evident in the examples above, which describe him as the only choice for the first male cover star of Marie Claire (a monthly lifestyle magazine aimed at women) and his decision to appear for the first time in a gay magazine (Attitude). Taken with the extract quoted at the beginning of the essay (from a monthly lifestyle magazine aimed at [straight] men), and the fact that the weekly celebrity magazines also focus on his iconic status – as in the example from Hello!), we can safely assert that his iconic status is linked to a rounded sense of masculinity – one which incorporates traditional referents of

physical prowess and duty, in terms of his profession, and solid heterosexual family credentials, but also one which is intersected with celebrity lifestyle and fashion interests. Since the concept of icon is often related to his fashion sense, it perhaps adds something new to well the established properties of heterosexual masculinity – a role model status for men in promoting a self-regard normally associated with femininity - ‘his unashamed interest in fashion and his hair’. I would argue that the ontological possibilities of masculinity are being resignified through the deployment of meanings around Beckham, even as the specifically subversive representations are recuperated through traditional hetero-masculine contextualisation.

Iconic status is also a concept which links together this category of fashion icon and masculinity through the representation of Beckham as an object of desire for both women and gay men. Beckham is regarded as an object of desire for women but in a somewhat tame way, with the use of phrases like ‘gorgeous’, ‘cute’, ‘endearing’ which are deployed with images of him with his ‘adorable’ son. For example, the Heat 1-7<sup>th</sup> June cover has a photograph of Brooklyn and Beckham inset at the top with the headline: ‘Phwoar! Becks (and Brooklyn) pics’ and a text bubble ‘cute dad alert’ trailing inside photos (p24-25) of Beckham and Brooklyn playing on the beach with captions:

Wet swimming shorts do cling. Shame isn’t it?...Last week gorgeous father and adorable son enjoyed a special afternoon playing on the shore at the luxurious Jumeirah Beach Club in Dubai.

In the Attitude spread mentioned above, his status as a gay object of desire is not detailed in a sexual way, but rather assumed (this may be the context of an interview where it would seem impolite to be too explicit). Instead, the focus is on his masculinity as rounded because he is comfortable with this adoration:

Footballers, you see, are not supposed to talk to ‘the gays’. ‘Theirs’ is testosterone fuelled world light years from our little homosexual enclave, where the men are men and a dropped soap in the shower is a hoot a minute.....we talk for a moment about fans. About you. The gay ones. How much male attention is in the Beckham fan pile? [I get a lot of letters. Each



week there's more. I've got a big fan zone in the male area] (There are knowing smiles between David and Victoria).

And?

[I think it's a good thing.] (said absolutely straight, no pause.).....

He is the bridge between two supposedly separate streams of masculinity that met a long time ago, though many had trouble noticing. So he has become emblematic of the thoroughly modern male. And he does men proud. All of them.

Whilst there are codes to establish Beckham's credentials as an icon, these are mostly related to an established understanding of heterosexual masculinity as a concept which includes his footballing prowess, family life, and matrimonial status. The 'style icon' code expands these conventional properties to include an interest in fashion as a legitimate and endorsed part of his rounded masculinity, much in the same way that his comfort with being a gay object of desire is presented as the same. However, these expansions are interesting precisely because they are always presented within the context of confirmed heterosexual masculinity, suggesting that there is a recognition that they may present a challenge to, or subversion of the dominant effective construction of masculinity which is used to render these representations meaningful to the reader/consumer. This is clearly demonstrated in the GQ piece from June 2002 quoted above, which discusses fashion then football, fatherhood and family but does so alongside the most sexually ambiguous images in this sample. The editor of GQ, quoted in Hot Stars (2-8 November 2002) explicitly acknowledges that his solid heterosexual credentials are precisely what permits dissonant representations of Beckham when discussing how Beckham became a style icon:

He often gets pilloried for the things he wears, but he has a huge influence on men's fashion' says Dylan Jones, editor of men's fashion bible GQ, ' he is in touch with his feminine side, but he is so obviously heterosexual that he can afford to be

(Hot Stars, 2-8 November 2002 - free with OK! magazine and modelled on Heat - with a cover photo of Beckham and byline on 'Becks' appeal, how David became a style icon' with a photo feature inside on pp36-39 of his fashion styles).

Even Attitude concludes their piece on his significance as gay/masculine icon with a reiteration of his hetero-masculinity ..'the golden couple flee into the night.' Despite the evident recuperation of the subversive dissonance around his masculinity, I think we can conclude that Beckham is a queer subject location within contemporary culture in the sense that 'those who knowingly occupy such a marginal location, who assume a de-essentialised identity that is purely positional in character, are properly speaking not gay

but queer'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, I am not trying to assign this 'knowing' agency to Beckham, but rather I would argue that the representation of controversial elements to Beckham's masculinity is not accidental, but rather it is induced, often trailed (as in the GQ cover) by the magazine authors and editors, precisely because there is a reflexive or knowing assumption that his subject location can contain both resonant and dissonant elements of masculinity.

It seems that traditional working-class identity is re-marked, or at least expanded, precisely because the newer elements located within Beckham – self regardingly 'vain', feminised aesthetics as 'beautiful', 'unashamed' of both vanity and homosexual adoration – present no fundamental destabilisation of the traditional referents of heterosexual masculinity. Indeed, one might argue that in these days of white-collar work and unstable relationships, Beckham is an almost hyper-traditional symbol of masculinity; footballer, happily married, devoted father and extravagantly wealthy in the best traditions of working-class boys made good. Thus the resignifications deployed within constructions of Beckham are easily recuperated before they effect a subversive destabilisation of masculine or heterosexual culture. Whilst queer theory has been useful to explore theatricalisation, appropriation and resignification, the ultimate aim of resignification – subversion – is open to question and, in conclusion, I suggest that we need to look beyond queer analytics to a wider historical context to understand this dynamic of resignification and recuperation.

The historical moment(um) of masculinity

I speculated earlier as to whether the modes of meaning surrounding Beckham indicate or reflect a putative de-prioritisation, or indeed destabilisation, of hetero-culture and masculinity in particular. The use of a queer analysis does not allow a definite answer to this question, but it has produced a clear understanding that there is an expansion of cultural possibilities around masculine identity which incorporates

elements previously antithetical to working-class masculinity: the modes of representation around Beckham suggest new meanings around how it is possible to be, and be seen as, a masculine figure in our culture, provided that the core elements of hetero-masculinity are securely anchored. You can argue therefore that the constant media fascination with Beckham derives from the knowledge that representations around him centre on an attractive and controversial dynamic of masculinity; he can be made to represent the dislocation of masculinity from its traditional moorings but simultaneously to shore up traditional masculine identity. Whilst exploring a specific audience response is not the remit of this work, we can say with some certainty that, across a range of different readerships (gay, straight men, straight women), the focus on Beckham's masculinity is a productive mode of representation, precisely because it permits both reassurance of traditional heterosexuality and its audience, and allows the excitement of pushing at the boundaries of heteronormativity, which similarly appeals to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences.

However, these modes of representation depend on reaffirming the dominant social power of heterosexuality, both in the respectful presentation of Beckham's hetero-masculinity, and in the use of gay and transgender images to create tension and excitement, since the 'tension' derives its power from the 'controversial' status of such identities. None the less, whilst the representations studied here ultimately reaffirm the social privilege of heterosexuality, the expansion of possibilities in the ways of representing masculinity also suggests a wider historical shift which permits such complex representations within one 'subject'. The ways in which Beckham becomes meaningful may be a reflection of wider social transformations and anxieties around the traditional gender order. Indeed, Cashmore contends that Beckham's popularity is convergent with the shifts in masculinity evinced by the rise of men's style press (such as GQ) and thus suggests both a receptive male audience, and a symbolic weight to

Beckham as a reflection of social change.<sup>29</sup> Whilst I agree that the historical moment is one of change in masculinity, the changes cannot be characterised uniformly progressive in terms of the equalisation of gender divisions or heterosexual/homosexual divisions.

Let me return to Nixon's work on men's magazines, which provides a very detailed account of the historical moment from 1984-1990 which saw the emergence of 'new man' imagery. Drawing on Frank Mort's contention that this is the first period which showed men being sexualised as men (a representational strategy previously applied only to women), Nixon agrees with Mort that this moment signifies the end of masculinity being taken as the universal norm, and marks the beginning of men being addressed as a

specific gender.<sup>30</sup> However, Nixon also documents the backlash against 'new man' imagery, evident in the 1990's change in editorial policy which saw the return of very traditional heterosexual scripts and representations encapsulated in the 'new lad' imagery<sup>31</sup>

(in which football was a major code). In this light, one could suggest that representations of Beckham do not reflect progressive social change but rather, they push at the boundaries of it, moving beyond even 'new man' constructions but mindful to return to the security of heterosexual legitimacy.

I think it is more useful to understand the social change in masculinity as one of flux. Whilst there is an abundance of research which documents the dislocation of masculinity from traditional class occupations, positions of public power, and gendered positions within families and culture, one common theme in this academic scrutiny has been the re-trenchment of traditional heterosexual masculinities in various ways; through the emergence of men's movements, the continuation of sexual exploitation in violence and prostitution, and the commodification of hetero-masculinity along some very traditional lines. In a recent book on the current state of academic work on masculinity, Bob Connell argues that we have a better understanding of the complexities of masculinities at present than was demonstrated in the early academic where 'most of the critics thought that

masculinity was in crisis, and that the crisis itself would drive change forward.'<sup>32</sup> He goes on to suggest that the current range of work which demonstrates the experiential and social complexities of masculinities, within and against hierarchies and hegemonic forms, does suggest social change in gender orders, but attunes us to the often contradictory nature of change with the remaking of masculinities hand in hand with the persistence of traditional gender hierarchies and identities. For Connell, the contemporary 'historical moment' is unique, not because we are at a crisis point, but precisely because the reflexivity of knowledge about the fact that gender does change provides the current context to speculations and explorations, whether these are academic,

political or cultural. In this context, is it understandably tempting for Cashmore to speculate on Beckham's social significance in relation to masculinity, but I feel more comfortable making a limited claim; that the evidence presented here sits well with an understanding that traditional cultural hegemonic forms of masculinity are transforming, but do not necessarily indicate a significant or completed shift in the social gender order. The broader socio-historical arguments about transformations in masculinity support the idea that representations of Beckham will be complex and contradictory in this historical moment but, somewhat similarly to queer theory, they do not allow any further understanding of the momentum of these changes – the direction if you will, of social change. Perhaps such specific connections are impossible in the study of human societies and culture, but I want to indulge in one final, brief, speculation on Beckham, and that is to consider the representations as constructions of effective meanings around a commodity form. Whilst the discussion above provides a broad socio-historical context for why Beckham makes new meanings around masculinity possible, let us not forget that the data analysed here is specifically geared towards provoking and completing acts of consumption, both economic and cultural. Indeed, as the work cited above on lifestyle magazines demonstrates, the historical shift towards focusing on masculinity has, in large part, been played out through the expansion of commodification – masculinity has become a commercial identity.

I think it is useful to employ Baudrillard's conceptualisation of the shift in late capitalist societies to the era of the 'sign' – the era of commodification and consumer society post World War Two in the west. There is no space for a detailed exposition of Baudrillard's ideas so let me turn to Poster's comments on his writings: '... the commodity embodies a communication structure that is a departure from the traditional understanding of the sign. In a commodity the relation of the word, image or meaning and referent is broken or restructured so that its force is directed, not to the referent of use value or utility, but to

<sup>33</sup> desire.' Baudrillard develops a position which argues that commodities as signs are the organising system of meaning in contemporary society, whereby the traditional symbolic order of signs referring to specific objects (referents) has given way to an 'implosion' of meaning or reference, which permits signs to circulate widely throughout culture, becoming attached and

divorced in a vortex of ever-changing meaning. Moreover, the meanings have an overriding function; to create 'desire', not just for the commodity, but for the complex of lifestyle within which it is situated. This is not only a radical interpretation of historical changes in the way signs simulate their referents, but also a controversial characterisation of the social since he suggests that in a society based on mass consumption, we can only ever apprehend the mediatised cultural realm of multiple and floating meanings, what he calls 'hyper reality'.<sup>34</sup>

I contend that we can see a convergence between the evidence presented in this essay and Baudrillard's ideas. If the organising system of meaning is geared towards the multiple and shifting signification of commodities, we can perhaps understand the complexity of representations around Beckham as evidence of the expansion and dispersion of the main referents of masculinity. The dispersion of traditional referents (of heterosexuality, viewing subject of desire, homophobia, family) allows space for the induction of dissonance (gay and androgynous images, feminisation, vanity) whilst retaining the core referents needed for productive or effective meaning.

The current cultural fascination with Beckham - and the constant mediatised reproduction of him - is suggestive of a convergence between the historical moment in the public discourses of masculinity (the dislocation of masculinity from its traditional referents) and the emergence of masculinity as a commodifiable identity. The momentum of the historical moment is not, however, necessarily towards a destabilisation of masculinity, but towards an expansion of its parameters for commodification. Beckham as subject matter sells, precisely because he is constructed and represented with reassuring and dissonant elements of masculinity. As a subject location, he is the 'sign' of crisis in masculinity not because he reflects that crisis - the crisis, after all, does not need to exist - but because the putative crisis can be projected onto him. Perhaps it is ultimately masculinity in 'crisis' which sells extra copies of a magazine, not simply David Beckham.

Notes

<sup>1</sup>

Gentleman's Quarterly(GQ), October 2002, pp264-268, in their Men of the Year awards. Beckham is trailed on the cover as sportsman of the year, with this story inside.

<sup>2</sup>

E. Cashmore, Beckham, Oxford, Polity press, 2002, p13.

<sup>3</sup>

Cashmore, Beckham, p15.

<sup>4</sup>

Gentleman's Quarterly, October 2002, pp264-268.

<sup>5</sup>

I realise that by using Baudrillard's ideas I set myself up for severe criticism from those who regard his work as either impenetrable or lacking in sociological relevance. Let me just say in my defence that I agree with the former critique but am interested in investigating the latter question of relevance. I do not want to intervene on the debates around culture/ideology and modernity/postmodernity, although I am more convinced that the social conditions of contemporary capitalist societies are indicative of a late modernity or 'reflexive modernity' as Giddens would have it. See A Giddens, The Consequences of Modernity Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990 and Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.

However, I think Baudrillard's conceptualisation of commodities as always having been signs for social identities or locations allows us to think of the cultural realm as related to, but not determined by, or conflated with material relationships. Moreover, his characterisation of late modernity as a period of hyper reality raises the central question of whether the consumption of signs is necessarily indicative anymore of the appropriation of those identities to which the signs (as commodities) used to refer. See J Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981. and M. Poster (ed). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001

<sup>6</sup> As Renee C. Hoogland argues, one can discern two approaches in cultural studies which map geographically onto North America and Britain. The former is home to the post-structuralist deconstruction bequeathed by thinkers such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, whilst the latter emphasises a more sociological approach which

has evolved from a direct engagement with – and some would say a subsequent rejection of – Marxist theory on culture, ideology and hegemony. ‘Fashionably Queer: Lesbian and Gay Cultural Studies’, chapter 11 in T Sandfort, J Schuyf, J W Duyvendak and J Weeks (eds), *Lesbian and Gay Studies*, London, Sage, 2000, p161-163.

<sup>7</sup> M Rahman and A Witz, ‘What really matters? The elusive quality of the material in feminist thought.’ *Feminist Theory*, Vol.4, No.3, pp243-262, November 2003.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Notwithstanding their epistemological departure points, broadly materialist and broadly post-structuralist paradigms are attempting to access the same ontological terrain - the construction of gendered and sexualised being and relations. And, yes, they approach this terrain from different directions: one from a conventional, yet expanded, materialist-structuralist ontology of the social; one from a post-structuralist position that radically defers the ontological status of 'the material'. Nonetheless, the deployments of materiality as a route to a social ontology of gender and sexuality do share a concern with effectivity: materiality as the 'effects' of discourse (Butler, 1993); materiality as the social context and configuration of discourse (Hennessy, 2000); materiality as the everyday effectivity of social process, practice and experience (Smith, 1988; Jackson 2001); and materiality as the practical effect of corporeality (Bordo, 1998). If we can understand materiality as an attempt to conceptualise and interrogate elements of gendered and sexualised ontological intelligibility and process, then we can begin to understand it across a range of diverse work as an attempt to understand what precisely effects or materialises - in the sense of bringing into being - gendered and sexualised sociality, embodiment and identity’ – Rahman and Witz, ‘What really matters?’, *Feminist Theory*, pp243-262..

<sup>9</sup> S Nixon, *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship and Contemporary Consumption*. London: UCL Press, 1996, p199.

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu’s social theory posits the concept of interrelated sets of ‘fields’ within the social world. Within these, agents possess various forms of capital, from economic through social (valued social relationships) and cultural (knowledge) through to symbolic (honour and prestige). See George Ritzer’s discussion in G. Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> Cashmore, Beckham, p118-132.

<sup>12</sup> Cashmore, Beckham, p4.

<sup>13</sup> Part of the exclusion was also for reasons of practicality. Sports news articles would have generated a vast amount of data without necessarily providing many concepts about his wider cultural purchase. Instead, it was decided to see how much his football identity figured in the media representations which were primarily not about sport.

<sup>14</sup> Heat magazine, 11-17<sup>th</sup> May 2002. Heat is a celebrity weekly, which includes entertainment guides for television, cinema and music and photo-led gossip stories.

<sup>15</sup> Hoogland, 2000, p164.

<sup>16</sup> As Hoogland points out, although queer theory may seem to belong to the more post-structuralist wing of cultural studies, its preoccupations with culture and power do intertwine with the more sociological tradition, 2000, p162.

<sup>17</sup> D Halperin, Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography. 2000

<sup>18</sup> J Butler, Gender Trouble, Routledge, New York, 1990 and Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of sex, Routledge, New York, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> F Cleto, 'Queering the Camp', introduction to F Cleto (ed.), Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Both in his first book, My World (published by Hodder and Stoughton in 2000), and in numerous television and print media interviews, he expresses his appreciation and irritation with these facts of celebrity and professional life.

<sup>21</sup> See Moya Lloyd's work 'Sexual politics, performativity, parody: Judith Butler' in T. Carver and V. Mottier, (eds). Politics of Sexuality, Routledge, London, 1998. See also the recent essay by Terry Lovell, 'Resisting with Authority: Historical specificity, agency and the performative self' in Theory, Culture and Society, Vol.20. no.1, , February 2003, pp1-18.

<sup>22</sup> Rahman and Witz, What really matters?', forthcoming, 2003. See also S. Seidman, 'Introduction' to Queer theory/Sociology, S. Seidman (ed). Blackwell, Oxford, 1996, p11

<sup>23</sup> J Hood –Williams and Cealy Harrison, 'Trouble with Gender.' Sociological Review, Vol. 46, no.1. 1998, p76

<sup>24</sup> S Seidman, Introduction to S. Seidman (ed.), Queer Theory/Sociology, Oxford: Blackwell.

1996, pp11-12

<sup>25</sup> C Ingraham, 'The heterosexual imaginary: feminist sociology and theories of gender' in S. Seidman (ed.) QueerTheory/Sociology.Blackwell, London, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Beckham, My World and see the latest autobiography (admittedly written with the help of Tom Watt), My Side, published by CollinsWillow, London, in 2003.

<sup>27</sup> In her chapter on social class, Joanne Lacey also points out how the extravagance of the Beckhams' wedding was ridiculed by some British press for its vulgarity and



ostentation – the anti-thesis of ‘good’ (middle-class) taste. Chapter 24 in A. Briggs and P. Cobley (eds), *The Media: an Introduction*. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2002 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), pp340-356.

<sup>28</sup> Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, p62

<sup>29</sup> Cashmore, Beckham, pp129-132. Whilst this chapter is enticingly entitled ‘Sex, Masculinity and the Temptation of Gay Men’, Cashmore provides little in the way of argument on any topic bar his suggestion that masculinity is in transformation and so provides a context for Beckham but also, somewhat confusingly, he concludes by saying that ‘masculinity will never be the same after David Beckham’

<sup>30</sup> Nixon, *Hard Looks*, pp3-5, and see F. Mort, 1988, ‘Boy’s own? Masculinity, style and popular culture’ in *Male Order. Unwrapping Masculinity*, J. Chapman and J. Rutherford (eds), London: Lawrence and Wishart.

<sup>31</sup> See also Tim Edwards, ‘Sex, Booze and Fags: Masculinity, Style and Men’s Magazines’ in B. Bethan (ed.), *Masculinity and Men’s Lifestyle Magazines*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp12-146.

<sup>32</sup> R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*. Polity: Cambridge. 2000, p201. As one of the world’s leading sociologists of masculinity, Connell’s body of work is an excellent introduction and guide to the research on masculinities; from concerns around work, the impact of feminism, male violence, and the consequential remaking and remarking of identities. His concept of ‘hegemonic’ masculinity has proven to be a key analytic for the exploration of the complexities of masculine experience and dominant symbolic expectations of men.

<sup>33</sup> M Poster, ‘Introduction’ to M. Poster (ed). *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001, p1-2.

<sup>34</sup> The work of Baudrillard and others who have focused on the importance of signs in late modern/post-modern culture is useful here, in part because they draw from the same tradition of structural linguistics which has been one of the many threads woven into Queer theory. See, for example, Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*; Poster, *Jean Baudrillard*; Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*; S Lash, *The Sociology of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London, 1990; B Turner, "Baudrillard for Sociologists." Chapter 4 in Rojek, C & Turner, B (eds), *Forget Baudrillard?* Routledge, London, 1993 and B Turner, *The Body and Society* (2nd edition) Sage, London, 1996. However, there is much controversy surrounding Baudrillard’s work and I cannot do justice to either his ideas, or subsequent engagement and critique, in the space here. For an excellent guide to his work, see Poster, *Jean Baudrillard* and Brian Singer's defence of Baudrillard's style and aims. I agree with him that Baudrillard's polemics should not be taken too seriously but understood as a device for throwing out challenging ideas. See B Singer "Baudrillard's Seduction." in the special collection of *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol 15, nos 1, 2 and 3, 1991, pp139-151