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Rahman, Momin (2004) *Is straight the new queer? David Beckham and the dialectics of celebrity*. M/C Journal, 7 (5). ISSN 1441-2616

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Is Straight the new Queer? –David Beckham and the dialectics of celebrity

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. (GQ, October 2002. Article on Beckham as GQ's Sportsman of the Year, p264)

Indeed.

Let us tear our thoughts away from the image of David basted in oil and consider the extract as one of innumerable examples of the media fascination with Beckham. Given his penetration in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa, we can take as self-evident that Beckham is a quantifiably significant figure in contemporary global popular culture. By any measure of celebrity and any taxonomy of fame (Turner 2004:15-23), Beckham qualifies as a striking example. He has inevitably appeared in a number of recent academic publications as an exemplar of celebrity and sports culture (Whannel 2002, Turner 2004, Cashmore and Parker 2003) and, more notably in Cashmore's book, as the focus of a social biography (2004).

In his book, *Understanding Celebrity* (2004), Turner provides a comprehensive overview of the vast literature which has developed on issues of celebrity and fame, painting a broad picture of concerns divided between the significance of the apparent explosion in celebrity 'culture' and the focus on celebrities themselves.

Within the literature on the social significance of celebrity culture, we can discern two key themes. First, celebrity culture is a manifestation of globalised commodity consumerism in advanced capitalism and second, its social function as a system of meanings and values which is supplanting traditional resources for self and social identities in late modern culture, including structures such as class, gender/sexuality, ethnicity and nationality. Whilst the authors mentioned above both draw on and contribute to these arguments, their focus remains broad, citing Beckham as a key manifestation of the complex interdependence between globalised sports and media industries, and transformations in gender and consumption. For example, although Cashmore's book is solidly researched on the impact of media finance on football and has a sound argument on the significance of consumerism, he is prone to generalisations about the transformations in masculinity and celebrity culture which he suggests are central to understanding Beckham's significance.

Turner suggests that there needs to be more focused empirical work on the specific construction of celebrity since 'modern celebrity...is a product of media representation: understanding it demands close attention to the representational repertoires and patterns employed in this discursive regime' (Turner 2004: 8). This is how this short piece offers a contribution to the literature - drawing on a qualitative analysis of articles on Beckham, my discussion focuses on the meanings of Beckham's celebrity and whether they can tell us something about the way the culture of fame operates.

I have drawn selectively from my data, but a fuller discussion of both the data and grounded theory methodology can be found in a previous article (Rahman 2004). Out of the six categories of meaning established through the grounded theory procedures used in the study, my contention is that masculinity is a core nexus in 'cultural

circuitry' (Hall1990) - making the stories relevant, understandable, and often controversial. Moreover, the accompanying photo spreads often create a tension with the text, emphasising dissonant/controversial images which testifies to a dynamic of **respect/ridicule** in the representations.

To be more precise, there is a construction of deference to Beckham's professional status and to the Beckham family as the premier celebrity unit in the UK. Deference to and respect for their status is evident not only in those magazines which have paid for the privilege of access, but also the more gossip orientated celebrity weeklies such as *Heat* (18-24 May, p6-8): 'those lucky enough to be asked to join David and Victoria enjoyed one the most extravagant soirees in recent memory. The sheer scale of the £350000 shindig was stunning, even by the standards of Celebville's most extravagant couple'.

Coupled with this respect is a sense of ridicule, often in discrete publications, but also within the same magazine and even sometimes the same article. Ridicule undercuts the celebrity credentials of extravagance and glamour with an implication of tackiness and vulgarity, and this gentle undercurrent becomes stronger when linked to Beckham's fashion icon status:

'We've supported David through the highlights and lowlights of his various haircuts: the streaked curtains, the skinhead and his travis bickle style mohican. But this latest look is a 'do too far =- more village idiot than international style icon...
(*Heat* 13-19th April, pp24-25)

This dynamic of respect/ridicule relies heavily on another dynamic; that of **queer/normative** invocation and recuperation. It is not only his fashion icon status being ridiculed here but also his status as a heterosexual masculine icon:

Marie Claire June 2002 cover of Beckham and, Inside p69-76

Interview follows with questions 'People say you're vain. Do you think so?',
'You can see why people might think you're a bit of a big girl's blouse, because you have manicures, sunbeds and bleach your hair.'
'You're also one of the few footballers to become a gay icon'

His gender/sexuality is anchored in hetero-family/masculine status but is somewhat dissonant in terms of vanity/grooming and gay icon status. 'Queering' Beckham is not just a technique of ridicule (how very old fashioned that would be!) but also a deliberate destabilisation of ontological anchors which induces a sense of dissonance: An example from *Heat* (20-26th July 2002) has the cover byline: 'Phwoar! Another new look for Becks.' 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 demonstrates some feminisation of Beckham but is counterbalanced by the very masculine anchor of 'macho'. There is a recognition that the highlighted ambiguity in gender coding is potentially disruptive or controversial and hence it is recuperated - 'he still managed to look macho'. *GQ* 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. Inside, on pages 142-55, there follow seven full pages of photos and an interview conducted by David Furnish, a family friend of the Beckhams but also Elton John's partner and so one of the most visible gay men in celebrity culture. However, rather than any danger of queering by association, the presence of Furnish seems only to enhance the mega-celebrity and hetero status, since he is careful to sound all the right notes of family, football and fatherhood in his questions in the text. Rather, it is the photospread which induces the queerness in this example, with four of Beckham's naked torso in baby oil, of which one is him in unbuttoned cut-off denim shorts on a weights bench – very retro 1970s gay.

In his history of male sports celebrities, Whannel suggests that Beckham is an exceptional figure, both because he is one of the few footballers in the UK to achieve full celebrity status, but also because he transgresses the discipline and work ethic associated with sporting bodies, indulging himself through conspicuous and narcissistic consumption (2002: 212). Whannel notes Beckham's emergence during the development of a men's style press in the UK, documented thoroughly in Nixon's study of men's magazines, which provides an account of the historical moment from 1984-1990 which saw the emergence of 'new man' imagery. Drawing on Mort's (1988) contention that this is the first period which showed men being sexualised - a representational strategy previously applied only to women – Nixon concurs with Mort that this moment marks the beginning of men being addressed as a specific gender. However, these images of Beckham push at the boundaries of 'new man' constructions and 'respectable' images of sporting bodies, suggesting that the deliberate, indelicate and delicious sexualisation of Beckham's body derives its power from the 'danger' this presents to sporting masculinity as well as simply heterosexual masculinity. Thus we need 'family, fatherhood' *and* 'football' to anchor the 'queer' Beckham.

Given these and more recent images (*Vanity Fair* cover in July 2004, for example), we might be tempted to agree with Cashmore and Parker (2003) and Whannel (2002) that Beckham is indeed a 'postmodern' or 'hybrid' celebrity, appearing singularly able to float free of context and to signify many different meanings to many different groups. But the brief examples of the queer/normative dynamic presented here suggest that this is too glib an answer, precisely because there seems to be an explicit recognition of this dynamic: the editor of *GQ* says of Beckham that '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 pp36-39). The deliberate induction of dissonance suggests a reflexivity about the constructedness of these representations; a knowing indication that queering Beckham's masculinity is not the reality of Beckham, but rather that the queering is perhaps a hyper reality as Baudrillard might have it. Beckham does not float 'free': dialectical signs are precisely mapped onto him. Dyer argues that film stars could be read as signs for specific versions of individuality, but crucially, that these signs reflect the dominant ideological constructions of class, ethnicity and gender/sexuality. In one example, he demonstrates how the sexually transgressive and potentially lesbian elements of Jane Fonda's star persona are recuperated through the emphasis on her nationality and ethnicity, her 'all-Americanness' (1998: 81). Similarly, Beckham's queerness is deliberately deployed as a sign, to be neutralised by heterosexual signs, thus recuperating the ideological dominance of a heteronormative culture.

Beckham's masculinity can be read as a 'sign', divorced from traditional referents and re-marked into a queer sign, specifically to promote consumption through the heady mix of respected status and apparently exciting transgression as a key aspect of this status. But this is a simulation, not indicating any 'real' queering of either the subject, or indeed of the assumed audience who have to make sense of the sign. Rather, the potential to remark Beckham as 'queer' seems to indicate that whilst heterosexual masculinity can be a sign, so perhaps too does queer itself become a sign, similarly divorced from its traditional referents. The 'reality' is thus simulated through pre-determined codes of representation, and one such code seems to be that gender transgression is culturally significant. Dialectical signs are mapped onto a **reality/hyper reality** dynamic, with queerness presented knowingly as the hyper real – after all, the reality is that Beckham is 'so obviously heterosexual...'

It is possible to argue that the dynamics at work in making these representations effective can be understood as dialectical since there are opposing momentums at work in the construction of celebrity and fame. The respect/ridicule dynamic demonstrates that constructions of celebrity cannot be uncritically deferential. The gentle and knowing ridicule is a collusion between the media (tors) and the audience: an indication that this relationship is the true romance of celebrity culture rather than that between fans and icons. And why should this be so? Precisely because the media needs to continue to feed the desires of the audience but there is no guarantee that the desire will continue when an icon's star wanes – unless of course, watching the decline is as much part of the romance as building the respect. Marshall argues that celebrity legitimises the individuality central to the lock between consumer capitalism and liberal democracy (1997) and the respect/ridicule dynamic exemplifies this function. The necessary continuation of consumption produces a dialectical dynamic, wherein both respect and ridicule exist to permit easy shifts in *emphasis* whilst maintaining the *attention* on the celebrity, which promotes continued consumption. Beckham's own demonisation and rehabilitation in the wake of France 98 testifies convincingly to the necessity for continuity of producing items for consumption, no matter what the spin. Furthermore, the recent scandals over alleged infidelities has generated a production spike in the amount of images and words produced, whilst this time, not directly attacking Beckham.

The queer constructions of Beckham amplify respect/ridicule along a specific dimension, supplying a dialectic of its own. The modes of meaning surrounding Beckham do indicate a shift in the possible effective constructions of masculinity, with the incorporation of a feminised interest in fashion (hairstyles, nail varnish, presentation in general) and the affirmation of gay icon/object of desire. It is in these constructions of dissonance that the de-essentialising of masculinity occurs, which may be the productive moment of disruption for those receiving the images and texts, and incorporating them into their own meaning systems around Beckham, footballers, masculinities, heteronormativity. The fact that these queer moments are possible may be testament enough to Beckham's social significance; he is in the right place at the right time (with the right body and profession) to be our cultural lightning conductor for contemporary anxieties around gender/sexuality.

However, the dialectic of queering Beckham has a synthesis which suggests that the route into queerness is not as important as the route out. These are only fleeting materialisations of the queer David Beckham – flashes of fleshy dissonance glimpsed briefly before the recuperation into the heterosexual subject, coded by footie, family

and fatherhood. The newer dissonant properties of masculinity are literally contextualised within ideological codes of heterosexuality. The evident theatricalisation and appropriation may appear to signal a productive route into queerness – from heterosexual to queer (the pink nail varnish, the oiled fashion shoots, the gay gym denim cut offs shot), but what if it is actually working in reverse? What if the cultural effectivity is achieved by appropriating and theatricalising from gay/transgender to heterosexual? – de-essentialising ‘queer’ for productive dissonance and amusement, but safe in the knowledge that there is a secure and policed route out of ‘queerness’ – the encoded red carpet of heterosexual masculinity.

The possibilities of a queer visibility are thus denied through the recuperative effects of the dialectics at work. The ridiculing of his gender transgressions may be necessarily gentle, in order to walk the tightrope of respect/ridicule, but they nonetheless assume that transgressions are problematic. Furthermore, the reality/hyper reality dynamic deploys queer as a ‘sign’ precisely in order to effect a recuperation of a normative version of ‘reality’. It seems that the weight of a predominantly heteronormative culture reinforces the dialectics in celebrity culture, making the unproblematic visibility of queer subjects improbable. After all, in these examples - focused one on the world’s premier celebrities - ‘queer’ itself is not actually cool - it seems that only the simulation of queer is cool. Within contemporary fame, perhaps straight is really the new queer?

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