Queer Television Studies: Currents, Flows, and (Main)streams

by Lynne Joyrich

At a recent workshop at the 2013 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference, a number of scholars discussed "queer television studies today," focusing particularly on the intrinsic tensions in inhabiting a location, as the workshop title put it, "Between the Queer and the Mainstream." Elaborating the terms of this tension, Julia Himberg and I, as workshop co-organizers, stated:

> Despite pronouncements of the "death" of TV . . . television continues to be a crucial part of the media landscape. Indeed, television remains the most popular medium, with viewers— including, of course, queer and other "minoritarian" viewers—spending more hours watching television than they do engaging with any other form (even if they now do so on various kinds of screens in various locations). Yet for this reason, TV has maintained its place as the most "mainstream" of US media institutions, dominated by programming and advertising designed for mass audiences. It is also for this reason that TV has had an intensely political history; as a domestic medium, located in the home, it has long provoked concerns about its influence on politics, social dynamics, and cultural values as well as its impact on the more minute politics of everyday life, personal relations, and intimate relationships. For queer media scholars, television thus presents a unique object of study. As a "mainstream" medium, TV tends to reflect, refract, and produce dominant ideologies, which tend to be the focus of television studies. Queer studies, in contrast, are committed to challenging and troubling ideological norms, offering powerful sites of cultural and political resistance. Queer television studies then produce a tension between the articulation of the mainstream and the unsettling of the mainstream, both framing and displacing a televisual logic as it attempts to take queer viewers, texts, and issues into account even as it aims to undermine TV's usual accounting. [We] will focus on this tension and its implications for

contemporary scholarship, generating a conversation about the current and future possibilities of this field of study.[1]

In other words, what motivated this conversation are the inherent paradoxes of queer television studies that emerge from the simultaneously constitutive but countermanding position of "the mainstream" in this nexus. Indeed, it is just such unavoidable—yet, I hope, enabling—contradictions that I would like to explore further here.

Television has, for decades, been taken as the very determinant of the mainstream, and it is still typically seen as the most ordinary, everyday, and commonplace of our media forms. Conversely, *queer* is defined precisely as the subversion of the ordinary, as the strange, the irregular, which would seem to necessitate some sort of disruption to "our regularly scheduled programming." Does this then make the very notion of queer television—and, perhaps by extension, queer television studies—impossible, or does it make this nexus particularly productive, since this combination is itself defined in and as contradiction, thus making it necessarily queer? Might that implicit queerness then help to explain some of the shifts in TV, including the shift toward incorporating more LGBT characters? Or is that the very opposite of "queer" because it indicates only assimilation (those LGBT folks framed for tolerance and inclusion)—only an acceptance of the status quo; only a logic of, precisely, "incorporation" that profits media corporations and brands, not those who historically have been branded for their corporeal acts? In summary, when LGBT folks "make it" on television, streamed into the dominant currents within televisual flow, are they no longer quite queer, that "mainstreaming" undoing the force of disruption and negativity that makes "queerness" to begin with?[2]

This argument about the fatal compromising of queer negativity as LGBT subjects become integrated into the televisual mainstream may seem (sadly) quite convincing. Yet before going too far with it, it is useful to remember that, for television, the label "mainstream" has been a source of aspersion, not approval. It is this that has marked TV as banal, lacking both the stature of cinema and the sexiness of new digital forms. According to well-worn images, we put the TV set on because it's there, even if we don't do it with much excitement: we tolerate what's on as much as ask for tolerance from it, slumping in front of the set as antisocial couch potatoes who simply go with the flow—the mainstream current—rather than gearing up for a night out socializing (like dinner and a movie) or even for the social networking we do online. Television's mainstream—or as it's often disparaged, "lamestream"—status has thus, in a curious

2 I use the phrase "make it" to TV with an eye toward *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970–1977), which assured us through its theme song that single gals like Mary could "make it after all." As that example suggests, the notion of making it to and on TV yields its own paradoxes, as it articulates the goal of individual advancement within the terms of neoliberal culture while also reminding us that such advancement is not quite individual, depending as it does on the affective bonds of what might be seen as some rather "queer" groupings.

reversal, worked as a badge of disdain and dismissal, yielding a kind of TV bashing that perhaps curiously aligns it with other bashed subjects.[3]

Of course, many would state that these are old, retrograde images, and it is no longer the case that TV can be so readily dismissed, rejected as a dull and disposable waste of (prime)time. Today, television is much more interesting (or, maybe more accurately, publicly acknowledged as interesting)—more intriguing in its concepts and politics, complex in its story structure and visuals, multiple in its address and mediations.[4] Thus, at the same time that more queers are making it to television, television itself is being remade, some might say, as more queer: more eccentric and playful, more connective and transformative, with more stand-out strangeness than just stand-up straightness. Yet those textualities and sexualities need not—in fact, often do not—go together in quite that way. That is, the point that some televisual forms may be becoming, in a sense, more queered doesn't necessarily mean that more queers appear in them—that *queering* as a verb (the process of playing, transforming, and making strange) lines up with *queer* as a noun (identifying people who are "recognizably" LGBT). Indeed, usually such recognizable characters are in the most ordinary of texts (a domestic sitcom, a sex-crime-filled police procedural, a fashion advice or competition show), whereas more unconventional, complex, and variously "fantastic" texts often have (and precisely because of that unconventionality, complexity, and fantasy) a dearth of characters who are "identifiable" through the terms and types that we commonly use as categories of recognition. Thus, we find ourselves back to the demand for more gay characters and plotlines and then back to the critique of the conformity of that goal, and on and on, in a sort of vicious circle (with the demand for "negativity" now being a positive requirement in queer theory and politics, and the demand for "positive" representation now being treated as a negative, until these poles—both oversimple, I'd say—recall, reverse, and repeat each other again and again).

Does this, then, just short-circuit the current of queer television studies? Or rather than a dead end, might this be seen as a matrix of generative productivity? Of course, the very notion of a generative productivity is one that must be treated carefully and with critique—a point that both queer theory and television theory have taught us. Much scholarship in television studies has discussed how TV's ongoing textuality is necessarily based on a kind of endless generative productivity (whether a text generates story lines via series' internal repetitions or serials' expanding reverberations)—a productivity designed to yield profit for networks even as it also yields pleasure for

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3   The varied disparagements of television are too numerous to cite but intriguingly include right-wing talk radio and TV programs, which have popularized the term *lamestream media* and often aligned it with what they label "a homosexual agenda."

4   An example of a scholarly argument regarding the complexity of current TV is Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming), available in progress in a prepublication 2012–2013 edition from MediaCommons Press, at http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org /mcpress/complextelevision/. For an analysis of television's status (and the changes therein), see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012). For an argument in the popular press, see Emily Nussbaum, "When TV Became Art," *New York Magazine*, December 4, 2009, http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/index1.html.

viewers.[5] Queer (and, I'd add, feminist) theory has its own critique of this kind of "generation," interrogating not only how it ties pleasure to capital and domestic relations to exploitative exchanges but also, even more central in queer theory today, how it implies an entire logic of "reproductive futurism"—a logic of linearity that can only "breed" a heteronormative (or homonormative) vision centered on the privileged figure of the Child.[6] Given television's narrative and economic reliance on futurity and on "reproducing" itself—on spurring ever more textual production so as to incite ever more viewing and consuming, with television's endless worlds perpetuating television itself as a world without end—it is important to think about how this implicates TV (not to mention the TV viewer, also often figured as child, infantilized by television consumption).

Yet while television is certainly based institutionally on certain modes of both reproduction and futurity (in its production not only of plots and profits but also, importantly, of such new "offspring" as spin-offs, tie-in merchandising, digital media content, and so on), these come together in unique ways. Indeed, televisual temporality and narrativity hardly adhere to a linear model of simply positive progression. Rather, television operates via restarts and reversals, iterations and involutions, branchings and braidings. Its imaginary is thus one of futurity without direct forward thinking, involving propagation without necessarily measurable progress and generation without necessarily clear continuity. Thus, with both problems and potential, TV offers a model of proliferation—of multiplications, hybridizations, disseminations—beyond and besides teleological, Oedipal conceptions of a linear track from past to future. Just, then, as queer theory helps us to interrogate television (with its typically still-overly-simplistic binary categories of "gay-straight," "masculine-feminine," "normal-abnormal," "us-them," and so on), might television help us think outside the binaries of queer theory itself—binaries like those of being (or criticized as being) too straight-forward-looking or too stuck in the past, too focused on the positive or too mired in negativity, too mainstream or too oppositional, too socialized or too antisocial, too commonsensical or too dismissive of the commons? In other words, can the odd operations of televisual logic—even if this logic is harnessed to the mainstream—give us hints about a queer logic, thus letting us think through the collisions and contradictions of "queer TV" in new ways?

I hope that this strikes readers as a stimulating—if still rather vague—prospect. So, to make this a bit more concrete, let me turn to one TV text to consider: *The New Normal* (NBC, 2012–2013). This is a text located exactly at the crossing of the queer and the mainstream, the convergence of gay characters and straight-up television tradition, the connection (and clash) of reproductive futurism and the "no future" arguably inherent in old-school, repetitive sitcom form. Indeed, that generic TV form depends on a regular return to the defining situation, thus constituting an iterative practice that, with whatever hijinks, hilarities, and even relative changes to the character group

5 For foundational work that theorizes series' repetition and serial continuity, see Jane Feuer, "Narrative Form in American Network Television," in *High Theory / Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 101–114; Feuer, "Genre Study and Television," in *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 138–160.

6 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

ensue in weekly episodes, impedes the possibility of straight-forward, linear futurity. Of course, one might argue that *The New Normal* breaks with the traditional reset-to-zero sitcom structure, given the change that distinguishes this narrative: the program's premise demanded that the characters prepare for a baby to be born, and then the series ended (the network canceled it, which some saw as untimely and others as only too perfectly timed) in the season finale with that birth. But should this necessarily be seen as a genre-shifting change? After all, this sitcom has always been about family (like, paradigmatically, all sitcoms, whether they focus on a biological family, an extended family, or a family of friends or colleagues), with, therefore, family enactment and/or expansion already characterizing the program through the familial relationship that the gay male couple establishes with their "surrogate mother," her child, and assorted other family members, friends, and coworkers.

It is this televisual repetition and/or revision of the meaning of family that, as stated earlier, puts this series right at the intersection of the queer and the mainstream—though, in many assessments, the program stands at these crossroads in the worst way. As Alex Doty wrote of the similarly "liberal" gay-inclusionary shows *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009–present) and *Glee* (Fox, 2009–present), such programs "put the normative back into their homo(s)," highlighting "'good' gays who keep their 'place at the table' by striving to be just like their straight middle class counterparts, living in a monogamous relationship and building up a (mildly dysfunctional) family."[7] This is one marked as "good" in *The New Normal* precisely by its spot-on mimicry of the standard heterosexual-sitcom-textual model with the proper class, race, and gender enactments that allow the family to present itself as "just like everyone else's"—by, of course, actually contrasting that family to less privileged others.[8] While Bryan (Andrew Rannells) and David (Justin Bartha) maintain a standard "girly" versus "boyish" gendered polarity (made evident not only in many of the series' jokes but even in its promotional image, in which David is pictured shaving while Bryan is doing his hair), they are marked as deserving parents precisely through their contrast to the heterosexual yet "hick" and "white trash" failed couple of Goldie (the "surrogate mother" for Bryan and David's baby, played by Georgia King) and her cheating husband Clay Clemmons (Jayson Blair). Rounding out *The New Normal* family is Goldie's daughter Shania (Bebe Wood), who is sophisticated beyond what her age—and, the program suggests, her class and region as well—would lead us to expect; Goldie's clichéd, bigoted, conservative grandmother Jane (Ellen Barkin); and Rocky Rhoades (NeNe Leakes), who works with Bryan on his diegetic (and reflexive in-joke *Glee* reference) TV show *Sing*. The function of the latter two characters, in terms of the program's positioning of the white, upper-middle-class, gay, "normal" couple is interesting: given her excessively

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7   Alexander Doty, "*Modern Family, Glee*, and the Limits of Television Liberalism," *FlowTV* 12, no. 9 (September 24, 2010), http://flowtv.org/2010/09/modern-family-glee-and-limits-of-tv-liberalism. This is only one of the much-missed Alex Doty's pieces in queer TV studies, a field he helped formulate in such books as *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) and the collection he coedited with Cory Creekmur, *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

8   For one of many critiques of *The New Normal*'s homonormativity, see Russell Saunders, "'The New Normal'—Trying to Prove Rupert Everett Right," *The League of Ordinary Gentlemen* (blog), September 26, 2012, http://ordinary-gentlemen.com/russellsaunders/2012/09/the-new-normal-trying-to-prove-rupert-everett-right/.

offensive quips, Jane serves as a site for locating (and condemning) racism and ho-mophobia, thus inoculating the program as a whole from the critique that it is racist and sexually normative. Meanwhile, as the "sassy friend," the African American Rocky is located in the place typically given to gay male characters on TV, thus again allowing the program both to maintain and yet disavow that sexist and racist trope as well.

Given these characters and characteristics, *The New Normal* may not seem like a very promising example of a text from which queer theory (or TV theory, for that matter) can learn anything, as it seems so banal, so assimilationist, so obsessed with familial reproduction, so positively "normal." But it's exactly that supreme—even ex-treme—normality, that obsession with normalness, that I find intriguing. In fact, I'm intrigued by all Ryan Murphy programs—or, more precisely, those that are discussed under the sign of his name, as perhaps today's most successful gay television screen-writer, director, and producer.[9] For if TV textuality generally rejects linearity for other kinds of narrative forms (repetitive, interruptive, cyclical, branching), what seems to me to be most interesting about Ryan Murphy productions is that they almost eschew narrative entirely. Thus, they are commonly critiqued for having no clear character consistency or development; for going all over the place, with no logical motivation; for being all shock and no story; and, in general, for making no sense in terms of narrative credibility.[10] I would not dispute such descriptions—but I also see them as being beside the point, since to me what these programs enact is precisely obsession, not narrative; obvious fantasy, not realist recounting; fetishistic fixations, not coherent plot movement (and, interestingly, a wide range of obsessions, fantasies, and fetishes). So, whether there is utopian fantasy (a kind of obsession with positivity, as in *Glee* and *The Glee Project* [Oxygen, 2011–2012]) or dystopian fantasy (obsessions with negativity, as in *Nip/Tuck* [F/X, 2003–2010] or, most of all, *American Horror Story* [F/X, 2011–], with its truly remarkable excesses and lacks), what we have is a different (dare I say "queer"?) model of "not nonnarrative but not properly narrative either" television programming.

However normative in name, *The New Normal* might be seen as adhering to this "not right–not quite" model as well. That is, like those other Ryan Murphy Produc-tions texts, it is equally a performance of obsession—one that is revealed to be both utopian and dystopian as normality itself becomes a fetish, an excessive fantasy staging rather than a position of narrative coherency or viewer stability. Potentially (though, I'd stress, this is only a potentiality, dependent on viewer receptions as much as, if not more than, authorially performative productions), the mainstream itself might be thus realized, re-viewed, or remade as "queer." This does not mean simply that queers can enter that arena and be included (an entrance that then just yields its own no exit);

9 *The New Normal* was cocreated by Allison Adler and Ryan Murphy and coproduced through each of their production companies (along with 20th Century Fox Television), but discussions of it almost always refer to it as "Murphy's" program (with, certainly, gendered implications). Perhaps this is why Adler's production company is called Ali Adler Is Here Productions—to remind viewers and critics of this very fact.

10 Typical is a comment posted on EW.com: "The problem is Ryan Murphy. He's just not a good showrunner. He doesn't care about consistent characters, continuity, and storylines." Comment by "Crispy" in response to Tim Stack, "'Glee' scoop: Ryan Murphy reveals season 3 secrets, talks 'The Glee Project' winner," *Inside TV*, June 22, 2012, http://insidetv.ew.com/2011/06/22/glee-scoop-ryan-murphy/.

rather, it means that the whole thing is exposed precisely as an arena act—one that is both overly familiar and narratively estranged, social and antisocial in its narcissistic niche, exaggeratedly positive but with alienating negativity in the way it makes a fantastical fetish out of the boringly banal.

Does that really undo the terms of the system—or, to go back to the notion of the mainstream, reroute the current? No. Obviously, the program is troubling in a great many ways (not least of which, again, is its entire story premise of the desire for reproductive futurity). But that defines its plot, not its presentation, which, I'm suggesting, goes even beyond the usual sitcommish "no future," so as to dispense with narrative coherency for full obsessional fantasy. Further, that structural obsession then enables various other obsessions to surface within the diegesis—some alarming, some appealing. Most interesting to me is the actual child character, Shania, who—beyond any narrative justification—is steeped in queer cultural references, affect, and affiliation, performing this in ways that seem to emerge from nowhere, throw others for a loop, and afford her a certain transformational power (as in her amazing assumption of a "Little Edie" persona in one episode).[11] This might be only a "little" thing, but it does suggest that the televisual mainstream is less a "principal course" (as one definition of *mainstream* has it), a just-dominant current (like a river), and maybe more the kind of electrical current that can still give us a jolt. It's the ambivalence, though, of how queerness can be both the electrical spark and the grounding against any possible shock that remains the paradox and the problem—indeed, I'd argue, *the* problematic—for queer television studies today.[12]   ✱

11 This, of course, is a reference to the queer cult classic *Grey Gardens*, the 1975 documentary by Albert Maysles and David Maysles (with Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer) focused on the reclusive mother-daughter team of "Big Edie," Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale, and "Little Edie," Edith Bouvier Beale, in their fabulously decaying mansion Grey Gardens. *The New Normal* includes its references to *Grey Gardens* in episode 2, "Sofa's Choice" (originally aired September 11, 2012), with that episode's play in its title on yet another film—*Sophie's Choice* (Alan J. Pakula, 1982)—revealing the other, deeply problematic side, of the program's cinematic references.

12 For an analysis of TV's "logic of creation/cancellation" in both producing and managing shock, see Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).