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AUTHOR Moritz, Marguerite J.
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ABSTRACT

Several forces are allowing, for the first time in the history of television, the creation of prime time texts with lesbian characters. Chief among these forces are the relatively marginalized position of broadcast television brought on by increasing cable penetration and home video ownership, liberalized censorship guidelines on the part of the networks, the demonstrated commercial viability of gay-themed material in other mass media, the appeal of emerging social issues in general as a backdrop for broadcast productions, and an increased public awareness of homosexuals triggered by the AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) epidemic. In order to examine these changes as they influence the portrayal of lesbians and to offer insights into a male-dominated industry, a study identified and explicated some of the external forces that affect the development of prime-time texts and their choice as prime-time programs. Seven interviews with media activists from the gay community and with network executives were conducted, and television programs with lesbian characters were analyzed. The analysis revealed that lesbians are generally portrayed in a way that will reinforce mainstream cultural values, although there are exceptions on occasion. Findings suggest that before texts will be permitted to take more risks with the audience, television executives will have to be convinced that the potential financial payoff in terms of ratings makes such actions worthwhile. (Fifty-four notes are included, and 25 references are appended.) (MS)

COMING OUT STORIES: THE CREATION LESBIAN IMAGES ON PRIME TIME TV

MARGUERITE MORITZ

In her writing about Hollywood cinema and feminism, Annette Kuhn has pointed out that text and context never operate independently. Although much of the scholarly work about women and film has tended to separate the two elements, often focusing on messages embedded in texts, the interaction and effect of institutional forces on the final film product can never be ignored. Indeed Kuhn herself writes about text and context separately, but cautions against any notion that they are autonomous. "It cannot be emphasized too strongly, however, that in concrete situations institutions and texts do not operate in isolation from one another, but are interrelated in any and every specific form taken by dominant cinema."[1]

This interaction is similarly significant in the creation of broadcast television programs. Context and text here are also intertwined with institutional forces frequently driving the creation of television texts. In the case of lesbian portrayals, institutional forces that together comprise the context in which television programs are created and produced, may in fact be playing a decisive role.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the forces that are now, for virtually the first time in the history of television, permitting the creation of prime time texts with lesbian characters. Chief among them are the relatively marginalized position of broadcast television brought on by increasing cable penetration and horne video ownership, liberalized

[1]Annette Kuhn, Women's Pictures: Feminism ano Cinema, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 22-23.

censorship guidelines on the part of the networks, the demonstrated commercial viability of gay-themed material in other mass media, the appeal of emerging social issues in general as a backdrop for broadcast productions, and an increased public awareness of homosexuals triggered by the AIDS epidemic.

Examining these changes as they impact on the portrayal of lesbians offers insights into a male dominated industry that might not be as apparent in an examination of homosexual portrayals in general. It also recognizes distinctions between the male and female homosexual communities that may have significant implications for mass mediated communications about them, communications which have increased dramatically in the last few television seasons.

In terms of actual numbers, of course, relatively few prime time shows depict lesbians, certainly not anything in proportion to their size in the population. While this paper will present some evidence regarding frequency of depiction, it will not focus on numbers of portrayals nor on messages embedded in those texts, both significant and distinctly different areas of inquiry. Instead, the aim is to identify and explicate some of the external forces that impact on the development of these texts and on their suitability as prime time programs. Much of the material for this paper was derived from interviews with media activists from the gay community and from network executives.

EMERGING LESBIAN STORIES

American television has never had a fondness for minorities. From its inception, its fictional world has been overwhelmingly white, male, middle-class, heterosexual and professional. Doctors, lawyers and detectives appear in numbers that defy national statistics on their actual presence in society and in portrayals that depict them as idealized, romanticized and frequently infallible character types. Since television reflects what is valued by the institutions that produce it, its world shows life not as it really is so much as life as the people who shape the industry would like it to appear.

While overrepresentations and idealized representations of social groups signify their high social status, underrepresentations and negative portrayals, of course, carry the opposite message. In addition to constituting a systematic devaluation, this lack of positive representation deprives group members themselves of heroes and role models with which they could strongly identify. It also withholds from the entire audience a valuable source of social knowledge. As Stuart Hall has pointed out, in an increasingly fragmented society, the mass media, and particularly television, are increasingly responsible for "providing the basis on which groups and classes construct an 'image' of the lives, meanings, practices and values of *other* groups and classes."[1] When any of these *other* groups are ignored, however, the opportunity to educate and inform is lost.

Few minority groups have been as underrepresented on television as lesbians have been. They have been shut out by a system that reproduces and reflects a dominant ideology and simultaneously stifles or ignores challenges from minority voices. When those minority voices refuse to be silenced, however, the system typically responds by co-opting the challengers and in effect removing their threat to the existing dominant order. In this sense, the dominant culture is constantly being redefined and renegotiated, constantly reassessing its stance toward dissenting voices.

What I believe we are witnessing today is a reassessment by the dominant culture in general and by television in particular of lesbianism and homosexuality. In the last three television seasons lesbian characters and story lines began their fictional coming out, the result at least in part of a changing institutional context in which what was once taboo is now potentially viable and sellable. These changes should not be overstated: they are neither sudden nor sweeping but rather subtle and designed to contain a minimum

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[1]Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media, and the Ideological 'Effect,'" in Mass Communication and Society, eds., James Curnan, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott (London: Sage Publications, 1977) p. 340.

amount of risk. Thus these emerging lesbian characters and story lines, like all other characters and story lines, are designed to be acceptable to the larger audience. These texts are created for mass consumption to reflect mainstream cultural values and to satisfy economic imperatives. In this sense, broadcast television programs operate very much as does dominant Hollywood cinema whose representations often "appear to be quite ordinary and obvious," leaving to the critic the job of "making visible the invisible," pointing to what is absent as well as to what is present.[1]

Lesbian characters, virtually invisible in the past, are now being created for prime time television in significant numbers. Golden Girls, Kate and Allie, LA Law, Hill Street Blues, Moonlighting, Hunter and Hotel -- some of the most popular shows on tv -- all have had recent episodes (since 1985) with lesbian parts. My Two Loves, an ABC Monday Night Movie, explored in uncommonly explicit visual detail two women involved in a love affair. In addition, ABC introduced a series in the spring of 1988 which presented the first recurring lesbian character in prime time history. HeartBeat, an hour-long drama about a women's medical group, featured actress Gail Strickland as Marilyn McGrath. Her role as an older woman, a nurse-practitioner, a mother and a lesbian no doubt gave her considerable demographic appeal. After its initial six-episode spring run, ABC renewed the show and put it on its fall 1988 schedule.

THE NUMBERS

The Alliance for Gay and Lesbian Artists (AGLA) is a Hollywood-based group composed largely of actors, producers, writers, directors and technicians. As part of its effort to secure positive television portrayals of homosexuals, AGLA's Media Watch Committee monitors both network and local programming. The following statistics come from AGLA's Media Watch Committee.

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[1]Kuhn, Women's Pictures, p. 73.

In the category "Movie of the Week and Mini-Series" in 1986, AGLA reported seven programs with homosexual portrayals, six with gay male characters, one (My Two Loves) with lesbian characters. During the first part of the following year, it reported five such programs, four with male gay characters, one with lesbian characters.

Four programs were cited for regularly featuring a gay character in 1986; two were reported in the first part of 1987. All of these characters were male. As for gay characters featured in a single episode on entertainment shows, it recorded 21 such shows in 1986, six with lesbian characters. Eight single episode shows have been cited in the first half of 1987, three with lesbian characters.[1]

Category	Year	Number	Men	Women
1) Movie of the Week	1986	7	6	1
and Mini-series	1987 *	5	4	1
2) Series with regularly	1986	4	4	0
recurring gay character	1987 *	2	2	0
3) Single episodes	1986	21	15	6
	1987 *	8	5	3

*1987 are partial year figures

These figures are not cited as definitive, but rather as indicators of the very small number of both male and female homosexual characters and of the relative dominance of male gay portrayals over female. The same imbalance is seen in AGLA's reports on non-fiction accounts of gays.

[1]Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Artists, Media Watch Committee Reports, 1986-1988.

THE BARRIERS

Why has there been such a limited number of lesbian characters on television and why are male gays portrayed two or three times as frequently as their female counterparts? The answer comes in several parts. First, there is the historical tendency in all mass media to relegate women generally to what E. Ann Kaplan describes as "absence, silence and marginality" and to omit "the female experience from dominant art forms."[1] If women as a group have been framed less prominently than men, lesbians have been virtually invisible. Not only has lesbianism challenged social and religious notions of morality, on a cultural level it stands as an ultimate threat to patriarchy. If the notion of "genuine collectivity" among any women has been regarded as unacceptable by "a system in which men dominate"[2], how much more intolerable must the idea be of women who are bonded not only politically, economically or emotionally, but also sexually.

Of course a significant part of the answer to the question of lesbian invisibility on television is also found in the industry itself. Not only is the industry as a whole male dominated, top program executives and screen writers are by and large male. After years of dealing with television executives, AGLA member David Thursdale comes to the following conclusion: "Prime time is dominated by heterosexual males so television's view of the world is their view of the world."[3] One AGLA member maintains that a network executive indicated he didn't realize homosexual women existed[4] and that another said the idea of creating a lesbian character had never crossed his mind.[5]

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[1]E. Ann Kaplan, Women and Film (New York and London: Metheun, Inc., 1982), p 2.

[2]Janet Walker, "Feminist Critical Practice: Female Discourse in *Mildred Pierce*, in Film Readers: Feminist Film Criticism (Evanston, IL: School of Speech, Northwestern University, 1982), pp. 170-171.

[3]David Thursdale, board member of Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Artists, interviewed by telephone from Los Angeles, Ca., Oct. 25, 1987.

[4]Steve Bryant, AGLA board member, interviewed by telephone from Los Angeles, Ca., Oct. 25, 1987.

[5]Rick Henderson, AGLA Media Watch Committee, interviewed from Los Angeles, Ca., July 20, 1987.

Lack of visibility inside the industry is clearly one reason lesbians have gotten such little attention. While many homosexuals do work in the industry, here too males predominate. Not only are gay men more prevalent, they are also more "out," something that may in part account for their higher visibility on TV, both fiction and non-fiction. One AGLA member claims that gay women in television entertainment are "ten times more closeted" than gay men.[1]

If gay women working inside the industry are closeted, straight women may feel similarly threatened by coming out in favor of lesbian stories. Newton Deiter, Executive Director of the Los Angeles-based Gay Media Task Force, says women in top level positions at the networks are extremely reluctant to support lesbian portrayals. "Women who have made it to the executive level fear they will be tagged (as gay) and they get very, very nervous. Once you get out of the creative stream, there is not a lot of tolerance. A creative person can be a fag or a dyke, but not someone with the big money responsibility."[2]

Homophobia inside the television industry may of course be more than matched by similar feelings outside the industry. Representatives of gay activist organizations in Los Angeles say homosexuality is not a popular issue now because of AIDS. "We face just as much of a battle as ever. There is increasing opposition in society against homosexuals and as the networks see this, they will be affected."[3] Ironically, lesbians are among the lowest risk group for the disease, yet this distinction is frequently ignored: the vast majority of information about AIDS links it to "homosexuals" in general. As a result, lesbians may have gotten inaccurately represented as transmitters of a disease that rarely afflicts them. Indeed a 1986 Gallup Poll for Newsweek supports the contention that AIDS has created an increasingly negative climate for all homosexuals and simultaneously illustrates the

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[1]Bryant interview.

[2]Newton Deiter, Executive Director, Gay Media Task Force, interviewed by telephone from Los Angeles, Ca., Oct. 25, 1987.

[3]Thursdale interview.

point that lesbians can be incorrectly implicated as carriers. At no point in the survey questions and in the nationally published results does the magazine distinguish male from female homosexuals. (see table)

TABLE #2

ACCEPTING, AVOIDING[1]

Do you think homosexuality has become an accepted alternative lifestyle or not?

	July 1986	July 1983	June 1982
Yes	32%	32%	34%
No	61%	58%	51%
Don't know	7%	10%	15%

Have you personally, or have people you know, taken any of the following precautions to try to reduce the chances of contracting AIDS? (Percent saying Yes)

	1986	August 1985
Avoid people you know or suspect of being homosexual	25%	13%
Avoid certain places where homosexuals may be present	44%	28%

IMPACT OF AIDS

The impact of AIDS on television portrayals of lesbians is complex, having both positive and negative implications. Gay activists are unanimous in saying that AIDS has resulted in far more television coverage of homosexual men than would have been the case had the disease never existed. This increased visibility, not only in television but in all mass media, has

[1]"A Newsweek Poll: Sex Laws," Newsweek, July 14, 1986, p. 38.

resulted in increased public awareness of gays as a group and of gay rights.

Most television AIDS portrayals have been sympathetic. Comments such as "very well handled," "extremely well done," "to be commended for its support of the gay relationship," are typical in the AGLA Media Watch notations that accompany listings of shows about homosexuals suffering from AIDS. In the case of An Early Frost, AGLA members actually passed out leaflets urging people to watch the show after NBC showed them an advance screening. Following the regular broadcast, more than 7,000 letters of support were sent to the network.

Yet the AIDS coverage has its negative side particularly for gay women. Portrayals of homosexual men now are almost routinely linked to an AIDS story line. The tendency is "to equate stories about AIDS with stories on gay life generally."[1] The networks can now argue that they are meeting their responsibility to the entire gay community when in fact their coverage is heavily weighted toward gay men and largely focused on AIDS.

Meantime, the gay community itself is becoming less and less involved in media portrayals, precisely because of AIDS. The Gay Media Task Force says activism focusing on TV images dropped off just when progress was being made.

> ...the networks were listening. We got more and more ability to give them input. Always our concern was for television portrayals. Today, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (based in New York) doesn't have the money for a media campaign. There is not as much focus on the national level for a joint New York-LA (media) effort because people (in the gay community) are more concerned with AIDS. Image isn't as high a priority. It's gone far beyond that.[2]

The negative implications for lesbian portrayals on television are fairly obvious. First, intense focus on AIDS has effectively

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[1]Bryant interview.

[2]Deiter interview.

captured center stage and taken the spotlight away from other issues which might relate more directly to lesbian lifestyles. In addition, the consequent linking of AIDS to homosexuality in general has created a negative social climate for lesbians perhaps just as much as for gay men, even though lesbians constitute a very low risk group for the disease. In addition, the gay community as a whole has shifted its emphasis to health and legal issues and away from image concerns. Yet this shift in emphasis comes at a time when the image of homosexuals in society appears to be under attack. Gay activists working for improved television representation say the greater fear is not from society at large as much as it is from the religious right.

LACK OF MATERIAL

Perhaps the greatest barrier to more frequent portrayals of lesbian characters is lack of good script material. AIDS has provided a dramatic, highly visible theme on which to develop material about gay men, but lesbian issues have not made a similar emergence. Made-for-TV movies routinely take on socially relevant topics, but because lesbian issues are also rare in non-fiction mass media, their stories tend to remain undiscovered. "Networks want to know how topical something is. There's just not much that's lesbian-related that makes the headlines."[1] Fictional portrayals that do emerge tend to be "less provocative and therefore less likely to get the attention of the network executives. Coming out stories are always male. And gay men are either funny as in La Cage aux Folles or tragic as in AIDS stories. It's hard to equal that in lesbian stories."[2]

One technique for building dramatic appeal into the lesbian characters that made rare TV appearances before the 1985 season was the spider woman approach. Writing in Esquire, Richard M. Levine described how the process worked in the early 70s to create texts which relied on negative sterotypes for impact:

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[1]Thursdale interview.
[2]Thursdale interview.

> One of the worst of these shows, an episode of Police Woman called "Flowers of Evil," about three lesbians who murdered patients in their old age home ('I know what a love like yours can do to someone,' Angie Dickinson told the trio when she busted them), prompted one of the first organized gay 'zaps' at the networks. A group of lesbians, one a mother with her children, held a sit-in at the offices of the NBC top brass, during which the little tykes expressed their sentiments by parading through the executive washroom. (Coincidentally or not, after that, gay groups generally found NBC more receptive than the other networks to their image-improving suggestions.)[1]

Nonetheless, a 1986 episode of Hunter in which two lesbians play man-hating murderers offered a similarly negative portrayal and engendered another gay protest at NBC. "The networks realized why (we protested) and afterwards came to us and asked us to submit scripts."[2] Other gay activists question the network contention that they simply don't have good lesbian material. "I've seen good scripts submitted where the executives say, 'Change the two dykes into a man and a woman and we'll do the story.' ...The networks say they don't think people will accept these shows. They say they get far more negative mail on them. But I think they themselves just are not comfortable with the whole topic."[3]

Even shows that pair two straight women can make network executives nervous. CBS twice considered and even announced the cancellation of Cagney and Lacey for poor ratings. In an effort to save the program, the network tried the show in different time slots and began market research on how the main characters were being received by the audience. The results, according to network executives, showed that viewers felt actresses Tyne Daley and Meg Foster, (originally cast in the role of Cagney) had a relationship that was "far too intense," lacking in softness and humor. Trade press reports at the time were more blunt, saying that Foster was

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[1]Richard M. Levine, "Family Affair," Esquire, March, 1984, p. 226.

[2]Bryant interview.

[3]Deiter interview.

rejected for her "lack of femininity."[1] Deiter of he Gay Media Task Force says that claim was never substantiated and that the real objection to the Meg Foster character came from network executives themselves who saw the pair as "too strong and too dykey."[2] Cagney was re-cast in the person of Sharon Gless.

FORCES FOR CHANGE

Given barriers to change that pervade the television production system, is it realistic to expect any significant departure from the dearth of lesbian characters on prime time? Gay activists themselves are divided on that issue, although all agree that continued, organized pressure tactics are essential. Beyond that, however, there are other developments that are already working toward change: liberalized censorship policies, successes with homosexual themes in other mass media, the commercial viability for the networks in exploring emerging social issues and the need to generate new material or at least to give a new twist to old themes.

TV STANDARDS

Looking at cinema, Kunn has pointed out that censorship is one point of intersection between a text and the institution that produces it.[3] In other words, censorship policies can be expected to have a direct impact on what can and cannot be portrayed. Certainly in broadcast television, that interaction of text and context is clear and has had significant implications for the portrayal of lesbian characters and for the absence of lesbian characters.

The television networks do not have explicit policies dealing specifically or exclusively with homosexual portrayals. When the Gay Media Task Force first began working with the networks 15 years ago, television executives asked that such rules or standards be written, but gay activists refused. "We said no. Each show must

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[1]Susan McHenry, "The Rise and Fall--and Rise of TV's 'Cagney and Lacey,'" Ms., April 1984, p. 24.

[2]Deiter interview.

[3]Kuhn, women's Pictures, p. 27.

be judged in its own context. What's okay for late night is not okay for after school. Once you have written policies, that's what people take refuge in."[1]

What exists instead are guidelines that are applied generally to homosexuals as well as to other minority groups, and, of course, precedent. At NBC, for example, an internal publication called "Program Standards for Entertainment' discusses the treatment of all minorities, stating: "Representation of ethnic and social minorities in dramatic material proposed for television will be carefully reviewed to avoid portrayals that insight prejudice, promote stereotyping, or offend legitimate sensitivities."[2] Just how this is put into operation is determined by the Standards and Practices Department of the network, home of the so-called program censors. Diana Borri, manager of standards and practices for NBC in Chicago, describes the way it works.

> The rule is that public taste considerations should be your guide. In the 50s, they couldn't use the word pregnant when Lucy was expecting a baby (on I Love Lucy). Today, I've heard ass, bastard, tits, bitch---all words that were never allowed in the past. Saturday Night Live broke a lot of barriers. St. Elsewhere and LA Law get away with a lot.[3]

Along with a more liberal attitude toward language a more liberal attitude toward story line also has evolved. Homosexuality was implicitly banned during the first quarter century of television programming. That changed 15 years ago with a made-for-TV movie, That Certain Summer, starring Hal Holbrook as a gay father coming out to his son.[4] Since then, several other shows have had homosexual themes, peaking in the late 70s, the "era of issue-oriented shows (where) homosexuality provided the perfect, liberal

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[1]Deiter interview.

[2]"Program Standards for Entertainment, NBC.

[3]Diana Borri, Manager of License and Standard, WMAQ-TV, Chicago, interviewed by telephone from Chicago, Oct. 21, 1987.

[4]William A. Henry, "That Certain Subject," Channels, April 1987, p. 43.

one-shot in the familiar some-of-my-best-friends tradition."[1] By 1980, a conservative mood had returned, buttressed by the Moral Majority, Anita Bryant, and shortly thereafter, the discovery of AIDS.

PRESSURE TACTICS

When the Moral Majority mounted a campaign against television shows with too much sex and violence in 1981, they demonstrated their ability to organize and get action. The Coalition for Better Television (CBTV) launched a consumer boycott of companies that advertised on shows CBTV had singled out for criticism. At the time, the head of Procter & Gamble Co., with a TV ad budget of $486 million, said, "I can assure you that we are listening very carefully to what they say."[2]

> ...The Moral Majority kept reminding the networks that, to use Jerry Falwell's favorite phrase as the time, 'Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden, not Adam and Steve.' It was duck and cover time at the networks: ABC shelved a planned takeoff on La Cage aux Folles called Adam and Yves (shades of Adam and Steve); CBS canceled at least three 'gay-themed' movies in development; and NBC reduced the homosexual past of the Tony Randall character in Love, Sydney to a discreetly placed photograph of his former lover. It became apparent that any recurring TV character with even a suggestion of a homosexual past was going to have to be both non-practicing as Sydney Shorr was and Steven Carrington soon became, and the staunchest proponent of traditional family values and squeaky-clean sexual mores, as both of them were from the beginning.[3]

The gay community itself is no stranger to pressure tactics aimed at the networks. Organized efforts have been taking place for

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[1]Levine, "Family Affair," p. 226.

[2]Gerald Clarke, "Sanitizing the Small Screen," Time, June 29, 1981, p. 83.

[3]Levine, "Family Affair," p. 226.

15 years. In the same year the Moral Majority launched its product boycott, a study in the Journal of Communications concluded:

> Spokespersons from all three networks reported that gays were the most effective and well-organized of the special interest groups who lobby the television entertainment industry...As a special interest group, the gay activists appear to have achieved a significant degree of success in influencing network television decision makers.[1]

Activists themselves, however, say their efforts have not been linked with the kind of grass roots support that the religious right has tapped into. "Network executives say we hear from you when you don't like something, but never when you do. The gay community does not encourage the networks. They see this programming as their due."[2] At the same time, media activists say the networks have no accurate gauge of the size of the gay audience. "They think they are playing to a small audience and they are not."[3]

By the second half of the1980s, attitudes appeared to be shifting once again, this time toward a more liberal approach to language and story themes. In an interview after the 1987 Emmy awards presentations, the producers of LA Law were asked how they successfully push the limits of what is acceptable with the censors. They responded by saying that there are very few limits left. The censors, they said, "are no fun anymore. They let us do things and rarely challenge us."[4]

In the midst of these attitude shifts, the written language by which network censors judge program acceptability has stayed the same. Interpretation of those standards, however, has become more liberal and that has had a direct effect on the portrayal of lesbians. "The network's premise," explains NBC's Borri, "is that it reflects

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[1]Kathryn Montgomery, "Gay Activists and the Networks," Journal of Communication, Summer 1981, p. 50, 57.

[2]Deiter interview.

[3]Bryant interview.

[4]NPR, "Morning Edition," Sept. 20, 1987.

societal trends, it does not set them. Therefore, as gays become more accepted, there is less resistance by Standards."[1]

The clearest example of this with respect to lesbian portrayals was seen in the April 1986 ABC Monday Night Movie, My Two Loves. Although the show did not win raves from reviewers, gay activists called it "a breakthrough," citing several areas in which the script made significant departures from previous portrayals. The story concerns middle aged Gail (played by Mariette Hartley), whose husband has died, leaving her to raise their teenage daughter alone. In an attempt to create a new life for the two of them, Gail moves into an apartment, begins working as a chef and starts dating her deceased husband's best friend, Ben (played by Barry Newman). The romance disturbs the daughter and doesn't fully satisfy Gail either. In the midst of this, she meets Marjorie (Lynn Redgrave), a lesbian who offers Gail a kind of companionship, understanding and sexual attraction that she apparently hasn't found with Ben. Yet that relationship too proves problematic. There is her daughter to think of. And when Gail's mother encounters her in an embrace with her girlfriend, she makes no pretense of her disapproval. All the while, Ben is waiting in the wings offering security and the comfort of a conventional lifestyle. Confused and torn, Gail winds up seeing a psychiatrist. Just how she will resolve her conflicts remains unclear. At the end of the TV movie Gail is uncommitted to either Ben or Marjorie. Ultimately she may decide to reject them both.

Gay activists as well as network executives considered My Two Loves a breakthrough for prime time programming. Network censors permitted the two women to have and to display sexual feelings for each other in a way that had not been done before and has not been done since. The two main characters were portrayed by popular actresses who provided significant ratings appeal. The story itself was a complete departure from the typical coming out story. This was about adult choices, not adolescent confusion. The main character was shown to be economically stable and personally

[1]Borri interview.

capable, an older woman facing an exquisitely difficult decision in her life. The very fact that an attractive woman was shown considering another woman over a man made this a prime time benchmark.

The same season, the NBC hit show Golden Girls devoted an entire episode to a lesbian theme. Warren Ashley was the Standards Department rep on the show and says from the censor's standpoint it was totally acceptable. "Basically, we have a policy at NBC that we don't demean or defame any minority group. When it came to the portrayal of a lesbian, we had the same concerns as with a Black or a disabled person... The first script was already very sensitive. I asked for one line change."[1]

That was in a scene when Dorothy and Jean (her lesbian friend from college days) were on the couch and Rose and Blanche were in the kitchen. Dorothy asked Jean if they should tell the other women about Jean's sexual identity. The original script had these lines.

Dorothy: "Should we tell them?"

Jean: "I prefer to be as open as I can, but I'll leave it up to you. If you feel they're sophisticated enough, let's tell them."

Ashley objected to the line about being "sophisticated enough," not, he says, "because it was demeaning to homosexuals but because it might be demeaning to anyone who disapproves of that lifestyle. It's like saying if you don't approve of homosexuality you are not sophisticated. So I asked that it be changed and it was changed to "If you think they can handle it, let's tell them."[2]

Other than that single change, the show required no Standards Department discussion and no specific approval was needed from upper level management. The network did, however, schedule an advance screening with gay media activists in Los Angeles. "When I saw the show and when Lois Nettleton was cast as the lesbian, it was obvious it would get an AGLA award. We scheduled the screening not to let them change it but so they

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[1]Warren Ashley, Program Policy Manager for Golden Girls, interviewed by telephone from Burbank, Ca., July 16, 1987.

[2]Ashley interview.

could see it and be prepared to comment because the industry press would be writing about it."[1]

The show was cleared by every NBC affiliate. An estimated 30-million to 40-million viewers watched it and it did indeed receive an AGLA Media Award. Audience feedback to Ashley's network office was mixed,

> ...with at least as many positive as negative calls, if not more. I got six letters that were serious enough that they required a response. The basic complaint they all had was that we had presented a lesbian who was not a degenerate. I wrote to them all and said we had nothing to apologize for. This was not a case of a show being for or against homosexuality. It was a show about relationships and whether or not you approve of homosexuality, it is a fact that these people do have relationships with lots of other people and that is something that has to be dealt with.[2]

Yet the kind of sympathetic portrayal done in Golden Girls and in a Kate and Allie episode a year earlier does deliver an implicit message of approval to the viewer that apparently still worries the networks. "Let's face it," says Ashley of the Golden Girls show, "by doing that show with Jean as an ordinary, sympathetic, likable person, it says to the viewers, not all homosexuals breathe fire and have a long tail." The question for censors now is are portrayals too positive, "portraying homosexuality as a better way of living. That would be a problem, just as much as demeaning them would be."[3] Presenting an overly positive portrayal of a heterosexual or advancing that lifestyle as superior undoubtedly never surfaces as a legitimate concern. The fact that a network censor would worry about being too positive in portraying lesbians reflects a double standard that may take years to change.

The push for a more liberal policy regarding shows with gay themes and with other once delicate issues has come from some of

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[1]Ashley interview.
[2]Ashley interview.
[3]Ashley interview.

the industry's top producers and writers. It is no mere coincidence that the shows breaking the most new ground are generally ratings hits. Says AGLA's Rick Henderson, "St. Elsewhere" and Hill Street Blues both have had gay characters. They got away with it because Standards and Practices stay off their backs."[1] Today particularly, network censors may be reluctant to mount challenges because their own positions are somewhat in jeopardy. As part of their cost saving measures the networks have cut their standards staffing, in some cases by as much as 30 to 40 percent. Some shows at CBS are now given script approval and sent off to production without any censor on the scene to insure that the script is adhered to.[2] This is not a good time for censors to make enemies particularly not with successful producers.

Since several prime time shows have already established certain precedents with respect to gay portrayals, other network producers and writers, and for that matter censors, can now cite those instances as an index of a changed and acceptable new network standard In this sense, a less guarded approach to homosexual characters tends to be self-reinforcing. NBC's Ashley says the real change has come just in the last two years.

> There has been a tremendous loosening up. It wasn't that it (homosexual portrayals) was never done in the past, but it was extremely unusual...Now, it's just like portraying a Presbyterian or a dock worker or any other group. We're saying we are all in this together. It's not the good guys versus the bad guys. We want to show the rich diversity of America and the ability of the people to respect differences, not necessarily to agree with them.[3]

COMPETITION FROM CABLE, CINEMA

Altruistic values aside, network executives are today more than ever in search of material that can attract and keep an audience. The swift and deep penetration of cable television and of

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[1]Henderson interview.
[2]Borri interview.
[3]Ashley interview.

home VCR systems both have helped shrink network viewership as has mainstream Hollywood cinema. With alternative forms of entertainment becoming increasingly appealing, the television industry finds itself no longer in a situation of unchallenged dominance but instead in a relatively marginalized position. Under these circumstances industry executives are keenly aware of other programming successes.

Cable television and cinema both are demonstrating that gay themes can be money in the bank, and that alone may make network executives more open to television portrayals. Variety, for example, offered this full page headline in April 1986: "Gay-Theme Features Hot B. O. Stuff." The report said that four films, including the lesbian love story Desert Hearts, were doing "brisk business in the New York market and elsewhere among arthouse audiences."[1] (The other films were My Beautiful Launderette, Parting Glances, and Dona Herlinda and Her Son, all films featuring male homosexual relations.) The report went on to say that the movies all appealed to straight as well as gay audiences.

> Distributors, exhibitors and filmmakers say the turnout for these films reflects mainstream acceptance of homosexual lifestyles and a willingness among audiences to recognize 'universal' elements in gay love stories. The gay-themed pics also demonstrate the ability of filmmakers and distributors to decisively address cinematic subject matter that's avoided or handled cautiously by the Hollywood majors.[2]

An editor of the gay-oriented New York Advocate said widespread support for the films demonstrated a growing awareness of homosexuals and a merging of their concerns with those of the larger community. The director of Desert Hearts, Donna Deitch, said her film's initial robust reception demonstrates that audiences "are

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[1]Richard Gold, "Gay Themed Features Hot B.O. Stuff," Variety, April 9, 1986, p. 5.
[2]Ibid, p. 6.

open to and interested in this sort of relationship and find it interesting to see."[1]

Cable television provides a similar example of success with Showtime's Brothers, a sit-com about three brothers, two straight and one gay, and their efforts to understand each other. The cable company says the show is a hit, one of the most popular programs offered on the service. In May 1986, Showtime expressed its faith in the long-term success of Brothers by ordering 50 new episodes, something TV Guide called "a rare move in an industry that counts a 22-episode order a huge vote of confidence."[2]

In addition, the show has been sold to stations in Australia, England, Italy and Canada. When it began playing in Toronto in February 1 ' ', CITY-TV called the viewer response "phenomenal," generating 100 letters and 200 phone calls with "only about five negative" reactions.[3] This kind of viewer support and accompanying commercial success is unlikely to be missed in the offices of network executives. Indeed, the president of NBC Entertainment, Brandon Tartikoff, cited "lack of predictability" and "contemporariness" as two "essential" ingredients for success in new programs. "The audience now has 35 years of television-watching behind them. TV shows no longer go away. They're just on earlier or later, but they're still on. That audience has seen those story lines over and over again. We have to avoid the predictable; we have to find new wrinkles to the old tales."[4]

EMERGING SOCIAL ISSUES

The networks have already demonstrated their willingness to cash in on new, topical and sometimes controversial themes, including homosexual ones. The script for An Early Frost, for example, reportedly went through 12 re-writes and several production postponements while NBC executives pondered the

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Helen Newton, "Brothers Is Coming Out of the Closet," TV Guide, May 10, 1986, p. 26.

[3]Helen Newton, "Brothers Is Coming Out of the Closet," TV Guide, May 10, 1986, p. 28.

[4]Brandon Tartikoff, "Viewpoints," Television/Radio Age, Nov. 23, 1987, p. 135.

wisdom of doing the show at all. By the summer of 1985, the show was given a January 1986 air date. But that same summer Rock Hudson died of AIDS and NBC's "hot potato was a hot item with hit potential. NBC sped up the production schedule and gave the film a new air date in one of the November 'sweeps' weeks, when vital ratings data are gathered. [1] Since then dozens of dramatic presentations, news reports, talk shows and documentaries have been done by both network and local stations, all on the topic of AIDS.

The viewing public is apparently quite willing to be both entertained by and informed about controversial issues, although clearly it can be argued that presentations are oriented toward the implications of these issues for white, middle-class America. An Early Frost, says gay writer Vito Russo, "gives the impression that AIDS is not happening to the gay son, but rather to the American nuclear family."[2] In dramatic presentations particularly, scripts often rely on ambiguous endings (My Two Loves) in an effort to avoid alienating anyone.

Constructed in this way, television shows can tap into dramatic subjects and capitalize on their currency, getting ratings without risking audience retribution. Audiences by now expect TV to cover social issues. A 1984 Epcot Poll for TV Guide asked 47,000 respondents if sensitive topics such as rape and incest should be covered on TV. Close to 80 percent said yes; seven percent would place no restrictions on TV fare while 46 percent said such shows should carry warnings to parents.[3]

And audiences apparently are backing up those views with their viewership. The Burning Bed, starring Farrah Fawcett as a battered wife, was the fourth highest rated TV movie on record. Movies with homosexuals themes including An Early Frost and Consenting Adult have also scored in the ratings. Both advertisers and network programmers are responding accordingly.

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[1]Vito Russo, "AIDS in 'Sweeps' Time," Channels, September/October 1985, p. 6.
[2]Ibid.
[3]Michael A. Lipton, "Is TV Getting Better--Or Worse?" TV Guide, Nov. 10, 1984, p. 6.

> Advertisers who once shied away from controversial or downbeat programs (like ABC's nuclear-war movie The Day After,) are increasingly willing, even eager, to sponsor them. Moreover, in the face of growing competition from cable, social-issue dramas take on a new programming significance. Explains Perry Lafferty, a senior vice president at NBC: 'How do the networks fight back against cable? We can't do it by putting on more sex and violence, but we can probe the social issues that haven't been explored.'"[1]

Certainly lesbian lifestyles fall into the "haven't been explored" category when it comes to prime time TV. While there are indications that this is changing, it is important to note that the pace and shape of those changes will be determined by a system that exists to reinforce mainstream cultural values. The picture of social reality created by this system is not designed to accurately reflect subcultures as much as to incorporate them into the cultural framework so that they no longer constitute a challenge. The effect is to mask the contradictions in the system, to fragment the subgroups and keep them from forming a unified force, and to present the illusion of unity within the system.[2]

In short, lesbian portrayals, may be seen more frequently now than ever, but the portrayals themselves are designed by industry image makers for mainstream audiences. HeartBeat is a case in point.

The show is set in a woman's medical clinic which was founded and is operated primarily by women physicians. Yet there is little if anything in their clinical surroundings, in their dealings with patients or in their dealings with each other that reflects any appreciation of real alternatives to the male medical model. Indeed, these young doctors appear to already have reached financial nirvana, living in lavish oceanfront homes and driving luxury sports

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[1]Richard Zoglin, "Troubles on the Home Front," Time, Jan. 28, 1985, p. 65.
[2]Hall, "Culture, the Media," p. 337.

cars. These women are Yuppies, not feminists. Romance, not medicine, is the central focus of their lives.

When, in the fifth episode of the show, it is revealed that one of the women at the clinic is a lesbian, she too is carefully contrived to appeal to the straight audience. Producers, for example, deliberately withheld her sexual identity in the first four episodes so that she could be established as a likeable character. When she is revealed it is in the context of explaining to her about-to-be-married daughter that she had no choice about her sexual identity, i.e., she couldn't help it, and that the daughter should not worry about turning out to be a lesbian like her mother.

Allison: It's not that you're a lesbian, okay? That's not what bothers me. It's--Why did you marry dad? Why did you have me?

Marilyn: I thought I could make a life with your father. I wasn't in love, but I liked him and I wanted children. And I decided I could keep those different feelings buried deep within me.

Allison: But you left me.

Marilyn: I didn't have a choice. It was the hardest thing I ever did, but believe me it would have been more devastating for you if I had stayed.

Allison: No. You left because I was less important to you than this huh-huh- other thing that you wanted to do.

Marilyn: What was I supposed to do? Stay in marriage that was false, to live a lie, to deceive your father, because once I told him the truth he wanted no part of me.

Allison: That's not what he says. He says he wanted you to stay and to see a shrink.

Marilyn: Yes. He wanted to cure me.

Allison: Well you could have tried.

Marilyn: Sexual preference isn't something you cure. It feels like part of one's deepest nature, like being tall or having blue eyes. Honey, no one knows what causes a person to be a homosexual.

Allison: How did you know?

Marilyn: It was in my heart. That's the truth Allison. It wasn't something physical. It was love, a sense of rightness, wholeness. Isn't that what you feel with Jeff?

Allison: I love him so much, but...
Marilyn: What is it?
Allison: (crying) I keep having these doubts.
Marilyn: Everybody has doubts.
Allison: But what if later I find out I'm like you?
Marilyn: Oh Allison, that's not going to happen. I see the way you are with Jeff. I can feel the love and the trust between you. It will keep you steady.

The show concludes at Allison's wedding. Attending, thanks to the daughter's newly found acceptance, are her mother and her mother's lesbian lover, Patti, as well as several doctors from the clinic. After the wedding ceremony, there are three separate scenes during the reception in which the show's professional women link up with their very macho men.

Thus we see the order of patriarchy restored not once but four separate times, beginning with the ultimate restoration of heterosexuality and male dominance, the wedding ceremony. One particularly absurd scene that follows has another couple making love in the bed where the guests have deposited their coats. In the final scene, a recently separated male psychiatrist grabs and kisses the show's provocative and sexy blonde surgeon, then shoves her into his car.

Him: Get in.
Her (getting in the car): So, doctor...where are we going?
Him: You'll know when we get there.

The show ends as he drives off, presumably to a hotel.

The Golden Girls episode offers a similar if considerably more humorous example of this kind recuperation in the text. Thus when two of the Golden Girls, both post-menopausal, meet their first real life lesbian, she is virtually indistinguishable from them in the way she looks and talks. Her femininity is obvious in her dress and in her demeanor. She is not someone who is different as much as she is someone who is the same. In this sense what we are getting more of from prime time television is not lesbians coming out, so much as lesbians coming in.

Whether this too will change as lesbian characters become more commonplace on television remains to be seen. But it seems certain that before texts will be permitted to take more risks with the audience, television executives will have to be convinced that the potential financial payoff in terms of ratings makes it worth their while. Sweeping changes in texts are not likely unless and until the context in which broadcasting operates demands them.

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