

THE CULTURE OF  
QUEERS

*Richard Dyer*



London and New York

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## THE CULTURE OF QUEERS

For around a hundred years up to the Stonewall riots, the word for gay men was 'queers'. From screaming queens to sensitive vampires and sad young men, and from pulp novels and pornography to the films of Fassbinder, *The Culture of Queers* explores the history of queer arts and media.

Richard Dyer traces the contours of queer culture, examining the differences and continuities with the gay culture which succeeded it. Opening with a discussion of the very concept of 'queers', he asks what it means to speak of a sexual grouping having a culture and addresses issues such as gay attitudes to women and the notion of camp.

Dyer explores a range of queer culture, from key topics such as fashion and vampires to genres like film noir and the heritage film, and stars such as Charles Hawtrey (outrageous star of the Carry On films) and Rock Hudson. Offering a grounded historical approach to the cultural implications of queerness, *The Culture of Queers* both insists on the negative cultural consequences of the oppression of homosexual men and offers a celebration of queer resistance.

**Richard Dyer** is Professor of Film Studies at The University of Warwick. He is the author of *Stars* (1979), *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film* (Routledge 1990), *The Matter of Images* (Routledge 1993) and *White* (Routledge 1997).



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# INTRODUCTION

All people in all societies inherit and bequeath frameworks of understanding and feeling about themselves and everyone else. These frameworks include various kinds of categories of persons. We find and refuse to find ourselves in these categories, live with, within and against them, but never actually without them. They provide locations and a vast set of codes wherein and with which we can speak, create, doodle, in short, make culture. The essays in this book deal with aspects of the culture produced by and/or about men in the category queer.

## Queers

Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in Western society, there was a notion of sexual attraction between men characterised by three features: that such attraction indicated a sexual category to which a man either did or did not belong, that it went along with other, non-sexual qualities and that it was humanly (morally, medically, socially) problematic. Men of this kind were queers (or fags, froci, poofs, Schwule, tapettes, etcetera).

We could identify the period in which this conceptualisation held sway as 1869–1969. In the earlier year, the Hungarian Károly Mária Benkert published in Leipzig a pamphlet calling for the repeal of laws against sex between men, in which he used, it seems for the first time anywhere, the term ‘homosexual’. In 1969, denizens of the Stonewall bar in New York City resisted a police raid, sparking a riot. Dates, especially when they so prettily embrace a century, are never more than vivid emblems of the much more ragged processes by which ideas come to prominence and ebb away. Benkert was one of several people developing ideas about homosexual persons in the 1860s, ideas that themselves have roots in Romantic and Enlightenment thought, and earlier still, and that are related to the development of actual homosexual social groupings, both elite and otherwise, in probably all developed urban societies. Equally, the Stonewall events, par excellence a phenomenon of urban homosexual grouping, also gained their

force both from the growing homosexual campaigning of previous decades and the concurrent development of ideas and publications about queerness and sexual freedom more widely. Moreover, while Stonewall is felt by many to inaugurate, symbolically, a new era, of gays rather than queers, the establishment of that era has been uneven and insecure, even in North America, Western Europe and Australasia – it's by no means clear that we're entirely out of the age of queers and into that of gays. Yet with all these provisos about the flaky boundaries of periods, I am concerned in these essays with culture produced in a rough hundred year period under the sign of queerness.

The point of looking at the historical boundedness of a notion is not that of periodisation for its own sake but rather because having a sense of other ways in which something has been thought and felt about allows us to see the specificity of the way we think about any particular manifestation of it. In the process of doing this with sexual attraction between men, there is a danger that one may overstate a claim for the utter uniqueness of the concept of queers (and an even greater one of assuming that because there was not the concept there was not the reality). Nonetheless, it does seem probable that without this era, while sexual attraction between men is universally known, the three characterising features of the notion of queers are less commonly found, if at all. In most periods we can find examples of men whom everyone knew to be habitually attracted to other men but it is less clear that people in other periods necessarily, commonsensically, extrapolated from that to the idea that such individuals belonged to a type of man defined by these tastes. Again, the accounts of certain men in the past – the outrageous Monsieur at the courts of Louis XIII and XIV, for instance, or, at the other end of the social scale, the *fanchonos* persecuted by the Portuguese Inquisition or the mollies in male brothels in Elizabethan England – seem to evoke a queenly type rather familiar to us, whose non-sexual manners and mannerisms nonetheless indicate a type of sexuality. It is certainly reasonable to see such men as part of the pre-history of queers, but it's not so certain that, as the notion of queers requires, they were taken to be representative of the generality of men having sex with men or that having sex with men was presumed to entail being like that. Finally, in relation to the third characteristic of queers – that they are humanly problematic – it seems to be the case that the overwhelming official view of sex between men in Western tradition has been that it is something monstrous (even if it has been, to various degrees, in practice tolerated and even found amusing, and in probably rare instances idealised). However, though a language of monstrosity does persist in the age of queers, it expresses a view much more terrible than modern notions of queerness, which are more inclined to speak of moral weakness, mental sickness or personal inadequacy. In particular, the notion of queers stresses an idea of impulses that the individual has no choice over having (though he may have choice over acting on them), which

enables notions of pity, cure and toleration, as well as resignation and defiance, to come into play.

The queer, then, is an historically bounded notion, albeit trailing clouds of glory and ignominy back into at least the late Middle Ages, and still with us, maybe even hegemonically, today. Its first characteristic, that there is a male sexual type that consists in being attracted to other men, has always been affirmed in a context where, in fact, a vast range of other instances of sex (to say nothing of sexual attraction) between men occurs. Just to indicate the sheer range and fluidity of human experience, consider the following cases: men whose lives divide into first a queer and then a straight period (or vice versa) and who variously understand this in terms of their changing (being first one thing then another), having really all along been one thing without knowing it or being permanently bisexual, but choosing to live exclusively as either hetero or homo for reasons of, for instance, convenience or a commitment to monogamy; men who have one intense sexual relationship with a man or a woman at a certain point in their lives but are sexually involved otherwise only with, respectively, women or men; men who see themselves as bisexual, but then in various proportions between the impulse towards men and towards women; men who have only had or ever wanted to have sex with either men or women.

Actual sex with another man can thus be for the individual man exclusive or occasional, permanent or temporary, and this is likely to be even more complex, fluid and variegated, fleeting and even unnoticed, in relation to sexual attraction, fantasy and speculation. A strong notion of queers runs counter to this – queer is something you are, constitutively, rather than something you might do (have done), feel (have felt), mainly, sometimes, once, maybe. It is this latter range and fluidity (which goes far beyond another fixing notion, the bisexual) that analytical notions of homo-eroticism and Queer seek to address (and throughout my discussion capital letter Queer will indicate the latter conceptualisation). Both attempt to capture the wide range of impulse and feeling beyond the fixed and exclusive sexuality posited by queer, but with different emphases and implications.

Homo-eroticism tends to stress libidinal attraction without sexual expression, sometimes even at the level of imagination and feeling. While in some usages homo-eroticism can be a wider term which includes homosexuality, or can be a euphemism for homosexuality, it importantly indicates a sense of male pleasure in the physical presence of men, or even sometimes in their spiritually or ethically masculine qualities, which cannot be contained by (or, discourses of homo-eroticism would tend to say, reduced to) the idea of queerness. The notion of homo-eroticism may thus connect queers to a broader sense of attraction between men and it is often so used with a polemical force (queers are just part of a continuum that includes contact sports, stag nights, all-male clubs and best friends). However, it may also be put to exactly the opposite end, to distinguish queers from this higher form

of attraction (relations of mateyness and brotherhood, bonding and veneration, have nothing to do with sex). The emphasis on a higher affectivity has been interpreted as a way of accommodating libidinal attraction between men, by giving it expression while simultaneously limiting and containing it. Equally, in certain periods, such ideas might be used to argue for a preferred form of homosexual expression, as is notably present in some *mann-männlich* (man-manly) German imagery in the early twentieth century or in the homophile discourse in 1950s France (see Chapter 9).

Homo-eroticism can be a generous and inclusive notion, but its tendency to contain and desexualise also made it problematic, both for queer but also for Queer. The latter, notably as manifest in Theory, also looks beyond an exclusive and fixed sexuality (being a queer), but in order both to stress the continuity with anyone who is only homo and to retain the dangerous, troubling dimension of the genital. Queer Theory is especially interested in manifestations of male–male sexual attraction where you wouldn't expect to find it, where it's been diverted or repressed or else obliquely expressed or unknowingly sublimated, but it does not focus on these to separate them from queerness and nor does it buy into the notion of an erotic that is distinguishable from a sexual. In some versions, homosexuality is discovered to be so pervasive as to constitute a defining element of all sexuality, of the very notion of sexuality – that's what's Queer. In Queer rhetoric, this process of sexual constitution tends to be viewed as always in some manner dissonant, disturbing, subversive, transgressive – while the notion of the homo-erotic points to the way male–male attraction may nourish the affective life of society as a whole through accommodation to and by it, Queer is more likely to find such attraction stimulating the social construction of affect by pricking and unsettling it.

The focus of the essays here is on queers, but in at least five cases I have been interested in Queer-related issues: the awareness of the constructedness of queer identities in avant-garde film (Chapter 2), the problem of reading homosexuality in film noir (where obvious queers may be married and straight guys may be queer on occasion), the uneasy discourse of homophilia and friendship in *L'Air de Paris*, the way knowing about Rock Hudson's homosexuality may allow one to see the unsettling of heterosexuality in his films, and the putative straightness of male porn stars who live by having sex with men under the eyes of men. Even focusing, as most of the essays do, on queers proper involves looking at a range of expressions and representations, since there are historical variations and specificities even within this less fluid category.

As soon as we consider those expressions and representations, it is also clear that we are talking about something more than sexuality in the most literal sense. This takes us to the second feature of the notion of queers, namely that this homosexuality goes along with other personality traits. Primary among these is the relation to gender. If a queer is not like a hetero-

sexual man in terms of his sexual object choice, then he must not be like one in other ways. From this stems the commonest form of obvious queerness: being in some way or other 'like' a woman, fey, effeminate, sensitive, camp. Nearly all the examples discussed here are informed by this, from the screaming queenliness of camp taste and Charles Hawtrey to the so-sensitive vampires and sad young men. However, queers' relation to women is complex. On the one hand, you cannot discuss male queer culture without reference to both femininity (cf. 'politics', camp, clothes, Hawtrey, Fassbinder) and relations with and attitudes towards women (cf. misogyny, noir, the sad young man, *L'Air de Paris*, Rock Hudson, heritage movies). On the other hand, there is a structural ambiguity in queers' relation to women – they are more despicable or derisory than women (of whom, misogyny notwithstanding, there are proper, accepted and idealised ideas), yet at the same time, as men, they are more privileged. The treatment of queers may acquire its more vicious or contemptuous forms from the degree to which queers are not real men, from the cognitive dissonance between masculinity and queerness – and yet in practice queers can practice an exclusionary or domineering masculinity, often control those woman-centred sectors of employment that make space for them (hairdressing, fashion, dance, some clerical work and caring professions), are by no means free from misogyny, in short, can be men, be perceived to achieve manhood, in spite of being queers.

Less common than the perceived femininity of queers is the opposite assumption, that two men together constitute an intensified form of manliness. One may find this in some versions of 'Greek love' (referenced in *Maurice*, discussed in Chapter 14), in the virile bonding canvassed by some in Germany before the 1930s, in the contrast between the central male couple and the obvious queen in *L'Air de Paris*, in the hyper-masculine imagery of post-1960s homosexual fashion and pornography (touched on in Chapters 5 and 13). Some of these examples overlap with instances of homoerotic and Queer men, because, while a queen or a sissy is at once distinguishable from a regular man, virile queer guys are not. However, even where no gender inflection or exaggeration is involved, no sissiness or man–manliness, relations between men always take place in a world where distinctions are drawn between men and women – it is virtually impossible to live, imagine or represent sexuality between men as if it is not informed by awareness of the difference between men and women.

Where there is no explicit gender reference, notions of the queer still entail other non-sexual characteristics that are held either to account for or flow from a different sexuality. These are much more various and diffuse than the gender constructions, but include ideas of body type, physical and mental weakness, decadence, attitudes of irony, disdain or 'attitude' *tout court* and propensities towards superficial performance and display.

Many of these notions (weakness, irony, display) have femininity concealed within them but they also have class and ethnic connotations. The

notion of queers has tended to be associated with elite and white men. The traditions of proletarian and non-white queer sub-cultures and lifestyles are indisputable and, as already noted, were foundational for the development of idea of queerness, yet they keep disappearing from view in dominant constructions of queerness.

Irony, decadence, fashion and 'attitude' can all be understood as signs of a vein of snobbism in the queer personality, whether by virtue of birth or aspiration. The core term 'queen' evokes social superiority (or the performance of it), and although the prime instance in these pages, Charles Hawtrey, is in fact utterly without middle- or upper-class associations, still the queen is more usually upwardly mobile in pretension. The image of queers as upper class and white is seldom utterly secure but nor is it often dislodged from centrality. Oscar Wilde, the queer par excellence, was a socialist but this is eclipsed in the popular imagination, perhaps rightly, by his flaky Irish aristocratic origins, social climbing and aesthetic snobbery. In their different ways, two who have subsequently carried the Wildean flame, though both in fact of lowish class origin, Noël Coward and Quentin Crisp, have moulded queer personalities through refinement of accent and condescension of attitude. Not for nothing did Crisp, a pauper most of his life, still play on the snob resonances of queerdome by calling himself one of the 'stately homos of England' (evoking thereby not only the National Trust but a Coward song). In the widespread image of aristocratic and white men pursuing working-class and/or Latin, Arab, Indian and Africano men, it is the former who tend to be thought of as the queers, not the latter.

These class and ethnic associations are not fixed and inevitable. The fact of a Hawtrey, Wilde's socialism, the way class origin is implied in the aspiration beyond it, the enthusiasm of bourgeois white men's non-bourgeois, non-white lovers, all unsettle the primary identification of queer as upper class and white. Just as there were Black Nationalist discourses saying that queerness is a white problem, so there were white racist theories seeing homosexuality as a sign of the inherent weakness or inferiority of other races, citing notably the effeminess of Indian cultures and the acceptance of the berdache in Native American nations. In short, while the relation of queerness to gender, and especially the feminine, is inescapable, the class and ethnic associations are weaker and more contradictory but, all the same, still there.

Most of the secondary queer characteristics are negative: effeminacy, sickness, attitude, superficiality, snobbery. This is the third feature of being a queer – that it is a bad thing. As already noted, the language of monstrosity has by and large disappeared, but notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos were all part of the notion of queerdome. Queer Theory and politics have sought to reclaim the word queer, not so much to cleanse it of its negative associations as to challenge the assumption that these

associations are in fact negative – thus immorality may be a challenge to repressive morality, deviance a rejection of the straight and thus narrow, and what is considered sordid and disgusting may in fact be exciting, risky, a life lived to the full on the edge. The case is selective – I don't sense a desire to reclaim weakness, inadequacy and pathos, for instance – but Queer does resist a view of queerness as unrelieved frightfulness.

What Queer is turning on its head – the negativity of queer – was already being challenged throughout the age of queerness. The notion of homosexual was, after all, an invention of queers, just as were the long, albeit intermittent traditions of urban sub-cultures. These were defiant assertions of male–male sexuality, refusals of pathology, enthusiastic embracings of difference. Just as queerness was always jostling with the range and fluidity of actual sexual practices and with the fact that men attracted to men did not necessarily display the secondary, non-sexual characteristics of queerness, so too the age of queers was not one of unmitigated misery and subjection, of men simply believing and accepting they were awful. Yet this negativity was, I'm suggesting, the dominant attitude, the one you had to deal with and fight against. The theory of Queer tends to overplay notions of transgression, resistance and the ludic in the age of queers; while other, often older commentators lament the passing of the age of queerness, when suffering brought intensity to love and secrecy demanded indirection, ambiguity and elaborate double entendre in expression. It is not that any of the elements indicated in the last sentence are untrue, that there was no subversion, play, passion or irony, but that they may either mask the reality of the oppressiveness of the category queer or accept too high a price in the name of intensity of feeling and refinement of expression.

The essays that follow were not written to redress the balance, to put back the negativity in queer. However, allowing for the different contexts for which they were written (see p. 12), they should be judged on how well they manage to hold together a sense of oppression *and* resistance, negativity *and* play. When I say that, for instance, noir queens are seen as sick deviants but are also a lot more fun than the straight heroes, or that the melancholy of the sad young men could be transmuted into sexy romanticism, I hope I have not appeared to say that the fun and the romance make up for the sickness and sadness or that they had equal power under the sign of queerness.

One further term, used a couple of times already, needs addressing: 'gay'. In fact, the notions of 'queer' and 'gay' are often not far apart. Both – queer by design, gay in practice – designate persons rather than acts or aspects of personality. 'Gay' is more flexible – to speak of a gay man does not always imply that a whole other set of personality traits comes in the train of his sexuality. However, the difficulty 'gay' has had with 'bisexual' is instructive. Quite apart from elements of political resistance on both sides (gays seeing bi as a dilution of homosexuality, bis seeing gay as a diminution of their



heterosexuality), it is telling that one solution for organisations and events has been to add 'bisexual' (and 'transgender') on to 'gay'. This both preserves gays and bis as separate categories and also retains both as categories of persons, defined by their sexual choices – like queer.

The real difference between 'queer' and 'gay' is that of negativity, though even this has to be formulated with some care. It would in fact be perfectly possible to write the history of the age of queers as that of the slow birth of gay. Benkert, after all, was affirming the rights of homosexuals and we can chart other such heroic moments and trends leading up to Stonewall: Wilde's 'love that dare not speak its name' speech at his trial in 1895; the development of homosexual rights organisations, beginning in Germany with the foundation of the Humanitarian Scientific Committee in 1897 and taking off again from the 1940s on; Radclyffe Hall's publication of *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928 (with indubitable implications for her queer brothers); the 1948 Kinsey report on male sexuality; the making and publishing of homo-eroticia; the outrageousness of queens throughout the period and at all levels of society (think Barquette, Quentin Crisp, Antonio Iacono, José Sarria, Sylvester, Ernest Thesiger, to suggest only some with a foot in show biz<sup>1</sup>). The negativity of queer was always resisted, contested, evaded or flouted. However, the notion of queer always had an awareness of negativity, had always to bear the weight of it. 'Gay' sought to think and feel without a consciousness of negativity.

### Culture

The culture of queers dealt with in this book belongs within a somewhat narrower definition of culture than that sometimes deployed. Thus there is no discussion here of, for instance, scientific discourses or patterns of behaviour, of the geographies and codes of cruising, the negotiation and playing of roles in relationships or the presence of queerness in business or sport, and I only touch lightly on language (in the discussion of camp). There are discussions of clothes, as actually worn and as they figure in representation, and of misogyny and camp as attitudes, but by and large my focus is on culture in the sense of the arts, from the popular (pulp novels, Hollywood, a French melodrama, an English comedian, pornography) via the middle (heritage cinema) to the high brow (avant-garde and arthouse cinema).

The essays are about culture, in this narrower sense, produced by men who were queers. Queers of course produced a great deal of culture that, while readable as Queer, was not in any evident sense queer. The essays here though are about queer made culture that is in some sense explicitly queer, whether, as with camp, insistently deriving from a queer perspective on the world, or, in clothes style, signalling the fact of queerness, or, mostly, representing queers and queer relations. There are also a couple of cases concerned with culture less evidently produced by queers but which does represent

them, such as film noir and the heritage film. All these constitute a number of queer frameworks of understanding and representation of queers. What I want to consider here is the status and value of such frameworks in regard to what we may take them to tell us about actually being a queer.

Culture is not for the main part done in order to say something or make a point, and queer culture is in this no exception. The processes of cultural production in Western society are primarily concerned with pleasure, with making things that are enjoyable and giving vent to the need to speak, to express and communicate; they are also most often undertaken to make a living. Moreover, all such processes are, for the most part, a not much reflected on reproduction of ways of doing things, languages, habits and conventions that carry production along, only gradually altered by the needs of the moment or where this or that detail feels like it doesn't work. You have to include all that in the account before you start assuming queer cultural production is about things like self expression and representation. Like all other cultural production, only occasionally is queer cultural production done in order to say something about queers and the world in which they find themselves, though inadvertently it may suggest ways of making sense of these.

Queer cultural production – like queers – can only exist in the society and culture in which it finds itself. Queer culture had to occur in the institutional spaces available and certain spaces were more propitious than others for queer cultural production. I have not traced this for every case discussed, but I do address it in relation to the film avant-garde, fashion and film noir, instances of places where there was a bit of give in the cultural system. Equally, some men – a Clifton Webb, Marcel Carné, Rainer Werner Fassbinder – acquired a certain amount of cultural clout that allowed them to do queer things within the straight inclined structures they perforce worked within.

It is of course not just a matter of institutions but also of the languages and forms available. These delimit and deform what can be done, culturally – but they are also what makes doing possible at all. To understand queers in film noir or heritage cinema, say, we have to understand noir and heritage more generally. This means that there is no pure expression of queeritude, uncontaminated by an equally unalloyed straightness surrounding it. Thus camp in its many variants, clothes style, irony, the masculinities of homosexual porn and heritage movies all work with and within the wider culture, of which they are an ineluctable part. This with and within is even true where there is little or no question of marginality within a sector of cultural production, of heterocentric market presumptions or of hostility built into the very forms deployed: none of these apply to the self-consciously queer/gay and artistically independent films discussed in Chapter 2, yet they too do not float free from the mesh of queer and straight cultures in which they find themselves.

However, if there is no pure queer culture, straight constructions of queerness are also not so easy to find, if at all. At one level, it turns out to be hard to identify straight imaginings of queers in which no queers had a hand. The texts looked at in these essays are often situated within mainstream cultural production: *L'Air de Paris* is in many ways a run of the mill 1950s French movie drama, the *Carry On* films that provided Charles Hawtrey's main claim to fame were a huge national box office success story with a long afterlife on television. Yet the director of *L'Air* and Hawtrey were homosexual. Equally one would not wish to underestimate the importance of James M. Cain, Clifton Webb or Cornel Woolrich to film noir or of Merchant-Ivory to heritage cinema. Even when producers in the mainstream were not homosexual, leave alone queers, and often of course we just don't know such matters, they were nonetheless basing themselves on what some other queers had produced or assented to as their culture.

Just to make matters yet more complex, even saying what is mainstream is difficult and perhaps especially with texts featuring queers. Film noir for instance has some partially valid claim to being, as I discuss in the essay on it, an alternative cinema within Hollywood production; cheap paperback fiction of the type that featured sad young men is low both in critical prestige and in the best-seller stakes; heritage movies are at once nationally popular, internationally middle brow and critically despised. These examples suggest that the mainstream has many outer or insecure tributaries. On the other hand, some queerish production has its own form of mainstreaming – gay porn is a huge business, perfectly respectable within the confines of all porn's contested respectability, while Fassbinder is the defining figure in the international arthouse success New German Cinema.

The analysis of the relation between queer and straight traditions involves much fine tuning in every given instance, both in relation to questions of personnel and in relation to the languages and cultural frameworks available. Just as queer traditions were bricolaged in part out of straight, so straight culture was indelibly structured by queer. This does not mean that it's all mixed up and everything is everything. There is a felt difference – of weight, emphasis, tone, rather than sharply drawn contours or rigid formal differences – between queer and straight cultural production, and straight retains the prestige of normative sexuality, its felt centrality and taken for grantedness.

All this means that culture does not give us unmediated access to an uncontaminated queerness, because no culture is there to do that about anything and because queer and straight are neither exclusive nor equal categories. Culture does however tell us what was available to be thought and felt about being a queer.

All culture is always produced by relatively few people and of that only a tiny proportion gets even moderately wide circulation or has any staying power. Although part of the idea of queers was that they all tend to be artis-

tic, the culture of queers too was, in fact, the product of a handful. At the same time, it was the available face of queerness, it was what was identifiable as queer. It did not actually represent all queers (as indeed nothing can actually represent all of anything) – but it was the public representation of queerness, it was what could be taken to be speaking for queers, expressing their/our perspective and sensibility, showing their/our lives and ways. Again, as it did not actually represent all queers, a fortiori it did not represent all men attracted to men – but it was available to be taken as doing so and probably was the dominant understanding of sexuality between men in the period.

There is no starting point in the processes of cultural construction. The culture of queers drew on the lifestyle, language, geographies and traditions of queers without being the only or full expression of these, and these things were themselves developed and moulded in response to the public representation of queerness. In some measure queers acted in certain ways because that's how the cultural imaginings of them proposed they/we act, but at the same time those imaginings were based on actual practices. Again, if queers acted, and even felt and thought, to some extent like the culture suggested they should, it was only to a certain extent, and the ways in which they broke with, undermined and played with the culture became, in turn, part of the raw material from and with which they handed on queer culture and others produced imaginings of them.

Actually living as a queer was always more than what was culturally constructed as queer. The latter always, like all imaginings, fell short of the complexity, fluidity, sheer extensiveness of reality. Yet just as it is wrong to think either that culture sets about telling you about life or that there is nothing outside culture, no nature, no givens, still it is the case that there is nothing cultural outside of culture. What is beyond culture is glimpsed and sensed, but the moment we even think about it to ourselves, leave alone speak, frame, perform it, it becomes cultural. The glimpse and the sense are the reasons culture is always being revised, toyed with, given fresh performances – culture never 'gets' life but it's also the only means we have to make any kind of sense of living at all.

For all the richness and complexity of queer culture, then, it also has to be seen as limited, partial, impure. In other words, typical culture.

In putting these essays together, I was drawing on essays that dealt either (the majority) exclusively with male homosexual culture or with male and female combined. I have retained the lesbian aspects of the essays on authorship, vampirism and Fassbinder, but I have not wanted to pass off the collection as a whole as dealing equally with lesbian culture in the age of queers. Much of what has been said above could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to lesbians, though, as my discussion of queers and gender has averred, no sexuality exists independently of constructions of gender and thus discussions of

lesbian queer culture could never be collapsed into discussions of an overarching, ungendered queerness.

The book is organised as follows. The first three essays deal with general issues: the contours of queer culture, bringing out the differences and continuities between it and later gay culture; the theoretical issues raised by talking at all in terms of a person's sexuality in relation to the culture he or she produces; the ways in which gay men are misogynistic. The next three are about topics (camp, fashion, vampires) that run throughout the age of queers. Thereafter the essays are presented in roughly chronological order according to subject matter. The last two deal with culture produced after Stonewall. One, on self-reflexivity in gay pornography, though I guess you could make arguments about its roots in the days of queers, is included because I would like to make it available to a wider audience. The last, on the other hand, on homosexuality in European heritage cinema, is a discussion of films made after Stonewall about gay/queer life before Stonewall and thus seems a nice way in which to conclude essays themselves written about queers in the light of the movement towards gay. It will be readily apparent that there is no claim to complete coverage and nor are the particular topics covered meant to be cases of some overarching philosophy or map of the culture of queers. (Film features disproportionately because that is what I know most about.)

At least two different ways of organising the book offered themselves. One was according to the kind of publication they were written for. In practice the assigning of each to particular categories of publication and deciding the order in which to present them would have entailed all sorts of invidiousness. However, it is important to say something about it, for the essays are certainly very different in terms of tone, address and scholarship. The publishing contexts range from popular gay journalism (the 1970s soft porn magazine *Playguy* (camp), the 1990s lifestyle magazine *Attitude* (misogyny, Charles Hawtrey)) through gay political publications (the Canadian monthly *The Body Politic* (Rock Hudson), a book produced by the Gay Left Collective ('Politics') and another coming out of the 1990s campaigning organisation Stonewall (fashion)) to more strictly academic contexts (vampires, noir, sad young men, *L'Air de Paris*, Fassbinder, pornography, heritage). These distinctions though don't work perfectly. Many of the academic articles, for example, were also either originally developed for or else presented at lesbian and gay film festivals (noir, sad young men, Hawtrey, Hudson, porn, heritage), while the vampires were discussed at a lesbian and gay writers' festival. The essays on camp and Hudson have been reprinted in scholarly collections and one might characterise the Gay Left and Stonewall publications as trying to operate on the cusp of scholarship and politics (a cusp not to be confused with impenetrable academic work advertising its own political transgressiveness). It has been increasingly difficult for British academics to operate on this cusp because of the pressures to

produce work that 'counts' according to particular notions of intellectual respectability, but the ideal is still to bring scholarship to bear on popular writing and to allow the virtues of plainness and vivacity to inform academic writing.

A second way of organising the essays would have been in terms of when they were written.<sup>2</sup> However, while I have not interfered with the tone or argument of the essays, I have, where it seemed necessary, brought them up to date (corrected factual errors, incorporated more material) and also added suggestions for further reading. Some of the latter may move the argument on, sometimes in explicit disagreement with me, but I have not altered the essays to answer these points. Nonetheless, for the most part and accepting that all writing is historically contingent, I think the essays stand as valid in their own right and so I have not arranged them in order of composition.

Two essays though are more than usually caught up in the moment in which they were written. One is the essay on Fassbinder, which has not been brought up to date through a consideration of the films he made after the time the essay was written (1979) nor the welter of subsequent scholarship. This does not of itself invalidate the argument, but the essay is perhaps most significant for the account it gives of debates within the gay cultural criticism of the period. These relate to the other essay clearly marked by the moment of its composition, 'The Politics of Gay Culture', whose very title dates it – no-one writes about the politics of this or that nowadays. It explicitly addresses what it refers to as 'traditional gay culture' (the 'culture of queers' of this volume) from the perspective, and in the white heat, of gay politics. The essay was written in collaboration with Derek Cohen, and his contributions in particular (signalled in the essay) convey the excitement and importance then of culture and representations of being gay.

My own contribution to the 'Politics' essay is explicitly written by someone who grew up as a queer but went through gay liberation, and this perhaps indicates the position from which all the essays are written. I hope I have, to the degree to which one can, checked, corrected and tempered my accounts against the textual and contextual evidence of the topic at hand. Nevertheless, the essays are marked but also made possible by this: I remember being a queer and have never been entirely convinced that I ever became gay.

I should like to thank here those who commissioned or encouraged these pieces: Roger Baker, Diana Fuss, Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau, Emma Healey and Angela Mason, Isaac Julien and Jon Savage, Pas Paschali, Susannah Radstone and Tony Rayns. My thanks also to Ann Kaplan, who twice commissioned pieces on women and film noir, which led to the essay here, and very special thanks to Derek Cohen, for allowing me to reprint our joint article, the product of a very happy collaboration.

## Notes

- 1 Barquette was a drag trapeze artiste with the Barnum Circus in Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century, Crisp an artist's model in Britain in mid-century and later a celebrity through the success of the film based on his life, *The Naked Civil Servant*, Iacona is most famous internationally as one of the upfront queens in *La Dolce vita* (1960) but has been a personality on the Roman scene since the 1950s, Sarria was a drag artiste who ran for mayor in San Francisco in the 1950s, Sylvester was the falsetto star of 1970s disco, Thesiger was an actor more famous for doing needlepoint with Queen Mary and other such regal hobnobbing.
- 2 Two – noir and heritage – were written especially for this book. Noir does incorporate one or two passages from earlier writings on the topic.

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# THE POLITICS OF GAY CULTURE

*(co-written with Derek Cohen)*

There are few moments of our lives when we are not assailed by the myriad forms of popular and select culture. Much of this is deemed superficial or a mere distraction, but whether it be television, theatre, music or advertising, culture at once shapes our identity, tells us about the world, gives us a certain set of values and entertains us. The purpose of this article is to examine gay culture and its politics.

Before doing this however we want briefly to consider a prior question – what are the *politics* of culture? All too often this phrase, familiar enough in recent years on the left, simply means drawing up a balance sheet as to how right-on such and such a work of art is. But this still leaves culture inert – an expression that we approve of (or not) from our political perspective, but not something that actually does political work in the world, alongside leafleting, demonstrating, lobbying, picketing and so on. Yet while culture cannot, as some cultural workers fondly hope, by itself change the world, as part of a programme of political work it has certain key functions to perform. To begin with, it has a role that necessarily precedes any self-conscious political movement. Works of art express, define and mould experience and ideas, and in the process makes them visible and available. They thus enable people to recognise experience as shared and to confront definitions of that experience. This represents the starting point for a forging of *identity* grounded in where people are situated in society, in whatever strata. This sense of social identity, of belonging to a group, is a prerequisite for any political activity proper, even when that identity is not recognised as political. This role for culture has perhaps a special relevance for gay people, because we are ‘hidden’ and ‘invisible’. For many of us, reading about, say, David and Jonathan, or seeing *The Killing of Sister George*, is one of the few ways of identifying other homosexually inclined persons. Without that moment of identification, no other political practice is possible

Secondly, culture is part of that more conscious process of making sense of the world that all political movements are involved in. This process is the



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