

# The Portrayal of Gays and Lesbians on TV, and How Viewers React

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There are several ways in which gays and lesbians are portrayed on television, many of which, arguably, create problems both for the programme maker and for the viewer. Homosexuality is still not fully accepted in today's society and traditional patriarchal portrayals of both men and women are still dominant, with few exceptions to such images. This is, perhaps, particularly true of men. Whilst patriarchal images of the weak, male-dominated woman remain, in many respects such limited views have begun to change within our society. However, men are still seen to be powerful, successful and rational in thinking. It is still uncommon for a man to appear emotional and sensitive. As a result of this homosexuality is rarely seen on network television, and representations of sexuality have been severely restricted and largely confined to the cinema.

When homosexuals do appear as characters on television programmes, they are usually depicted as negatively as "villains or victims of ridicule" (Gross 1989 cited in Craig 1992, p195). The portrayal of homosexual characters on television is complex in that gayness is, essentially, invisible. Therefore, it is difficult to identify gay or lesbian characters. As a consequence of this, programmes have adopted signs of gayness in order to portray characters' sexualities as quickly as possible. Such signs include certain gestures, clothing and even codes of language adopted in order to visualise an individual's homosexuality. This categorisation of homosexuals is in itself complex. All societies categorise as it enables us to make sense of our environment. However, it has been argued by Dyer (1993, p19) that whilst categorisation may be an activity common to all societies, the categorisation of sexuality is not. Gays and lesbians have been categorised negatively, often being seen to be morally degenerate. This has led to negative stereotypical portrayals of both gays and lesbians which have become so well recognised that certain homosexual organisations such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD), have challenged such views, arguing that although they may perform homosexual acts, gays and lesbians are, in every other

respect, the same as heterosexual people. However, whilst such categorisations of homosexuals on television may have furthered negative stereotypical views it is, although wrong, important to recognise the need for such categorisation when portraying homosexual characters due to a lack of physical differentiation from other characters.

When homosexuals are portrayed on network television they are usually presented in a negative stereotypical way. They are rarely presented in a sympathetic manner, and even when this does occur plots tend to focus on heterosexual characters' acceptance of homosexuality. In many cases gay characters are completely defined by their "problem", and homosexuality is often constructed to appear morally wrong. Homosexuality on television is limited to a few plots or subjects such as AIDS and heterosexuals' attempts to come to terms with gayness. As a result of such portrayals, homosexuality is widely viewed as a negative symbol of masculine identity. As seen in the American programme *Thirtysomething*, homosexual characters are often portrayed and involved in stories concerning friendship with single, female characters whom we know to be heterosexual. In the case of this programme, a female character was associated with the arts and this portrayal merely furthers the stereotypical view that only those involved in the world of art form friendships with homosexuals.

Stereotyping provides instant recognition for the viewer, and in this respect it is an important tool for programme makers who require viewers to draw upon commonly held impressions of certain groups of people within society in identifying various characters' lifestyles.

Perhaps, an exception to this production of the stereotypical homosexual appeared in the soap opera *Dynasty*. The character of Steven was, in many respects, the sort of gay man homosexual movements in North America wished to see portrayed on television. His character was not stereotyped in any particular way and, to a great extent, he was imply an individual who happened to be gay. His character's lack of "typing" was made more apparent due to the programme's form of melodrama and because a large number of the cast did, in fact, play stereotyped roles. However, despite this lack of visual stereotyping, the storylines revolving around Stephen centred upon his father's homophobia and unwillingness to accept his son's sexuality and can, therefore, be seen as a stereotypical plot convention concerning the portrayal of homosexuality.

The portrayal of gays and lesbians in soap operas is different to that of other television genres. As is the case with *Dynasty*, it is often unnecessary for the viewer to immediately identify a character as being homosexual, as the programme is an ongoing drama with regular viewers who are aware of the histories of individual characters and, therefore, characters are allowed to develop in a way not possible in many other forms of television. Therefore, there is not the need for the characters' lifestyles to be made immediately identifiable as is the case with one-off dramas or films, for example.

This point has been particularly evident in British soap operas in recent years. The Channel 4 programme *Brookside* featured a plot concerning the character Beth Jordache who became a lesbian, whilst *Eastenders*, shown on BBC1, includes a similar storyline involving a gay couple, Tony and Simon. None of these characters appear different to those who are heterosexual in their visual appearance and they are not confined solely to plots concerning their sexuality, and in this respect it could be said that homosexuals are being portrayed in a sympathetic manner. As is the case with *Dynasty*, these British soap operas have a regular audience which enables characters' identities to develop slowly and also to change if scriptwriters wish them to.

However, the homosexual characters in both *Brookside* and *Eastenders* are to some extent stereotyped in the plots concerning their homosexuality in that the programmes portray homosexuality as a moral problem, and, as in *Dynasty*, deal with the issue of heterosexuals coming to terms with gayness. It is also significant that the characters concerned have histories of family problems and it is these problems that we, the viewer, are reminded of when people are trying to come to terms with the issue of homosexuality. Although such programmes appear to be sympathetic to the portrayal of gays and lesbians on television they still rely, largely, upon the stereotypical plot conventions adopted by television programmes in portraying homosexuality to a mainstream audience.

Despite network television's reluctance to portray gays and lesbians to a mass audience, some 1970's dramas explored homosexual issues in a very subtle, indirect way. One such programme was the American police show *Starsky and Hutch*. Although neither character was gay, the programme exhibited certain aspects of male bonding which, it can be argued, displayed signs of a gay relationship. The men were bonded by their jobs, yet they also spent time together

on a social level. However, as Fiske notes, "Their physical and emotional intimacy was not, in itself, a source of satisfaction and pleasure to them. Their fulfilment came from the goals that their relationship enabled them to achieve, not from the relationship itself" (Fiske 1987 p213, cited in Craig 1992 p104). Clearly, their relationship was not a homosexual one and the two characters usually only showed emotions towards one another when confronted with danger. It is unlikely that the programme would have been so popular had a wide audience seen signs of homosexuality in their relationship, and although both characters do appear to be heterosexual, the series does not portray traditional heterosexual types. It is unusual that whilst network television is so often reluctant and cautious in its portrayal of homosexuality, such a programme, which is essentially an action drama, should have certain signs of gayness and male bonding.

The visualisation of homosexuals has, to a great extent, led to negative stereotypical portrayals on television. However, as previously mentioned, some form of representation which is immediate and economical is required in order to show gayness to an audience. It is often impractical to portray a character's sexuality through narrative and, therefore, programmes rely on typification. The importance of gay typification is that it makes people visible to the viewer and keeps the homosexuality of a character present throughout the text. There are clearly both advantages and disadvantages to this form of typification. In typing certain characters we reduce everything about that character to sexuality. However, despite this, it allows homosexual perspectives to be ever present and gives gays and lesbians something to identify with clearly in the text. Typification compacts an abundance of social knowledge into a limited number of distinct signs, but is likely that many homosexuals never relate to the various gay types portrayed on television, and most gays and lesbians remain invisible for most, if not all their lives. Whilst typification leads to negative, stereotypical views of homosexuality, it is important to note that in many cases such types are used by homosexuals themselves. Gay sub-cultures have developed in such a way that many homosexual people have adopted lifestyles which are different to heterosexuals in many ways. Certain sections of the gay community have used various stereotypical gay signs quite willingly as a form of resistance to the negative categorisation of homosexuals.

One of the most widely used gay types of television is that of Camp. Dyer defines it as "A characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialisation, theatricalisation, and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable" (Dyer 1986, cited in Finch, 1990 p75). Camp is popular in portraying homosexuality on television as it takes segments of the mainstream culture and in many ways can be seen as humorous by both homosexuals and heterosexual viewers. It is particularly evident in comedy series such as the character of Mr Humphreys in the British comedy *Are You Being Served?*, and is also used by comedians who may or may not be homosexual, such as Julian Clary and Lily Savage. Camp appears to be more acceptable to a wide audience compared to many other gay types due to its irony and humour. However, although it is widely recognised amongst viewers, it is limited and used mainly within the genre of comedy.

Camp is a form of "inbetweenism", a popular form of gay typology. It reinforces negative views of gay sexuality by being somewhere in the middle of male and female. By being inbetween sexes, inbetweenism rejects the notion of a strict gender role differentiation. Two other common forms of inbetweenism are the Queen and the Dyke. In *The Killing of Sister George* (1969) lesbianism is portrayed through the use of the Dyke. Two homosexual characters, June and Mercy, portray different versions of this type. Both have cropped hair and wear mannish clothes, yet they portray different notions of masculinity. One wears tweeds, suggesting a traditional, rough masculinity, whilst the other wears a more feminine red dress which suggests a modern professionalism (Dyer 1993 p31). The Dyke is traditionally used to portray lesbians in a very mannish manner, whilst the Queen is traditionally associated with femininity. Both are instantly recognisable to an educated television viewer who is able to identify such images as being homosexual, and are often seen as tragic or pathetic for neither of them fit into traditional categories of femininity or masculinity.

In contrast to the idea of a biological inbetweenism, homosexuals are also portrayed by what is known as the "macho" look, which relies upon an excess of masculinity. It is similar to camp in its exaggeration, yet is an openly sexual look in that it transforms practical male clothing into clear signs of eroticism. Although not restricted to the genre of comedy in the same way as camp, the macho type is often used to depict homosexuality in comedy, as seen in the film *Police Academy* in which two police officers find themselves trapped in a

downtown gay club surrounded by men, all of whom are portrayed by the macho image. Although portrayed as a humorous type it is, perhaps, seen to be a more threatening image of homosexuality than camp, for it is concerned with the exaggeration of masculinity rather than femininity.

Mainstream audience television allows few images of men that male, heterosexual viewers may find threatening (Goldstein, 1990, cited in Craig 1992 p203). As a result viewers are rarely subjected to portrayals of people which are not deemed to be publicly approved models within society. The process of Socialisation within society leads parents and peers to provide ideas and images indicating what we must not become and what is deemed to be desirable by mainstream culture. Such actions can result in prejudice against behaviour seen to be stereotypical of homosexuals. There are many different representations of people within society. However, some are seen to be more acceptable than others and, therefore, it is these versions of what is considered to be the norm in society which are held in high esteem and are, as a result, more widely used and publicised on our television screens. To a large extent, such images and ideas concerning how people are meant to be and act are already made and constructed. Such ideas enable us to place ourselves in relation to others and recognise images as similar or different from the way we lead our lives.

Although audiences vary according to programme genre and time-slots, representations are directed at the majority, middle-class heterosexual, and therefore texts are made to be pleasurable and acceptable in accordance with this majority's point of view. People outside the majority often have to position themselves in order to gain pleasure from certain programmes. Because people find different things acceptable or entertaining, viewers react differently to various portrayals on television and reactions to images of homosexuality are no different.

Societies construct a number of characteristics and assumptions relating to the biological sexes, with certain qualities laid out to define what is acceptably masculine and feminine. Sexuality is, as Swanson indicates (Swanson, 1991 cited in Lusted p127) a cultural construction, and therefore as viewers we react to images based upon such constructions. We act negatively, perhaps, without realising when we encounter something which contradicts such formations.

The teenage programme *Framed Youth* contrasted stereotypical assumptions made about gays and lesbians with images which did not categorise them in certain types or view them to be a "social problem" (Swanson, 1991, p141). Instead it raised the issues of diversity and explored the pleasures homosexuals got from their relationships. The programme is important in that it illustrates that viewers can react differently to media portrayals of homosexuality and emphasises the point that when portrayed in a stereotypically gay way, viewers react negatively to such images.

Channel 4 recently dedicated a whole evening of programmes to lesbianism under the heading "Dyke TV". Although positive for homosexuals in that the programmes featured raised many issues and was, essentially, made for lesbians, it can be argued that the evening distanced homosexuals further in that they can only be truly portrayed on television especially designated to them, giving the impression that they are totally removed from mainstream society.

Viewers clearly react differently to images of homosexuality depending upon their individual points of view. In order to assess audience reactions, I asked six people questions concerning their feelings and opinions of portrayals of homosexuality on television. The viewers were between twenty and twenty-five years of age and came from a variety of social backgrounds. All six viewers watched the drama *The Two Of Us*, which was part of the BBC's "Scene" series produced for pupils between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. The programme was concerned with homosexuality and bisexuality, and involved a character named Phil who had feelings for his gay friend, Matthew, but also loved his girlfriend, Sharon. The questions asked related to their reactions to this programme and also to other portrayals of homosexuality, such as those found in *Eastenders* and in comedy regarding the use of various types.

The six viewers watched the programme together in a normal, relaxed atmosphere and talked throughout the showing of the programme, as they would when watching television generally. Viewer A made jokes and remarks constantly. These remarks were sometimes encouraged by other viewers either because they found them amusing or interesting. I simply observed their responses whilst watching the programme and later asked each viewer questions on an individual basis so they would feel more relaxed in giving honest answers.

Viewer A did not openly describe himself as being homophobic, but did express feelings of prejudice towards homosexuals. He believed homosexuality to be "unnatural" and admitted to being uncomfortable when confronted with images of homosexuality on television. He found lesbianism more acceptable than male gayness and said "The last thing I want to see on TV when I've had a hard day is two blokes having a snog". This comment was a reference to the characters Simon and Tony in *Eastenders*. When asked whether he found comedians such as Lily Savage funny, he responded with a surprised "Yes". The viewer did not find camp imagery offensive and did not even consciously see such characters as being "gay". He felt less comfortable with the image of the "macho man", yet was unsure as to why this was.

He generally had no "problems" with characters who were visually typed as homosexual but found characters with no visual indications of gayness more uncomfortable and "unwatchable". When asked why this was, he responded by saying, "It could be two of my mates on Eastenders because they appear normal". He did not enjoy watching *The Two Of Us* for this reason and felt sympathetic for the character of Sharon and for Matthew's parents when they discovered his homosexuality.

Viewer C felt the video to be unrealistic and called it "a typical education programme", yet did admit to finding the issue of bisexuality on television unpleasant to watch. With the exception of Viewer F, all found the issue of bisexuality difficult to watch and did not enjoy seeing it on television. However, Viewer C, along with Viewer A, differed in his reasons for he found it "disgusting", whilst the others did not have a problem with actually being bisexual, they simply considered it to be potentially harmful to other people. They saw nothing wrong with it providing the person was honest with their partners about their sexuality.

Viewer F had no problems with any imagery of homosexuality on television except for the fact that she felt certain stereotypes such as the Dyke were most probably offensive to homosexuals themselves. The viewer said she had a friend who was a lesbian and that she appeared like any of her heterosexual friends. When asked if her friend would find the Dyke type offensive to watch on television, Viewer F believed that she would not, but that she would not wish to be associated with such imagery herself because her sexuality was something



private and not an issue that needed either to be hidden or visualised.

Viewers B, D and E felt they did not have any particular reactions to imagery of homosexuality on television. They said they had never really considered it an issue. However, Viewer D said she would find scenes of open homosexuality offensive, but this comment was not related to homosexuality as the individual stressed that she found any images of open sexuality unnecessary.

This evidence is, of course, limited in exploring viewers' reactions to portrayals of homosexuality in that all the participants were of a similar age. However, it is interesting in that Viewers A and C were male and had the most negative reactions to images of homosexuality, whilst the other viewers were all female. There appears to be little relation to parental influence and individual's reactions. Viewer A, who was by far the most negative in his reactions and comments concerning gay and lesbian imagery, was from a family who were not themselves opposed to homosexuals, whilst Viewer E described her father to be "a little homophobic".

Clearly, in the light of these findings, there is little real evidence to suggest that typing homosexual characters leads to negative stereotypical views of gays and lesbians in that none of the viewers found such types to be particularly offensive or difficult to watch. This may, however, be due to the fact that all the participants are young and have, therefore, grown up at a time when sexuality is, perhaps, becoming more acceptable in certain areas of society.

It is apparent that the portrayal of gays and lesbians on television is problematic due to the existing prejudices within society. Television is sensitive to images of open homosexuality and is constantly concerned in providing acceptable programmes to a mainstream, heterosexual audience, leaving portrayals of homosexuality largely confined to cinema and specialist programmes. As discussed, the development of stereotypical characters and plot conventions occurs for many reasons and, to a great extent, results in negative portrayals. Although such categorisation is negative in that it affects viewers' reactions to gays and lesbians, it is essential to the programme makers in order to visualise individual characters. As the evidence suggests, there are exceptions to the visualisation of gays and lesbians within the genre of soap operas where characters can develop over a period of time.

The use of typification leads us, the viewer, to make assumptions about gay characters and, to an extent, reinforces society's preconceived images and ideas of homosexuality making gays and lesbians appear different and abnormal through the use of imagery such as the dyke and the camp male. Different types produce varying reactions from viewers. Camp is confined largely to comedy programmes, and because of the humour associated with it is seen to be non-threatening to the heterosexual viewer, whereas images of the dyke or macho man can often make heterosexual audiences feel less comfortable with homosexuality and arguably appear more threatening.

Viewers' reactions to homosexuality are clearly influenced by their gender socialisation and we are affected by prejudices developed at an early age when interpreting images of homosexuality on television. Although portrayals of gays and lesbians on television are dominantly negative, there have been clear exceptions. Despite television's reluctance to portray homosexuality, programmes such as *Starsky and Hutch* explored certain areas of homosexuality and male bonding, whilst programmes such as *Framed Youth* and "*Dyke TV*" attempted to educate audiences by offering different portrayals of gay and lesbian people. However, despite such exceptions, the majority of television portrays homosexuality in a negative, stereotypical manner with no images of explicit sexuality, which is, perhaps, ironic in that gays and lesbians are being defined by everything but the one thing that makes them different to heterosexual people.

The results of research carried out by myself do, to a large extent, confirm such findings in that we are influenced by socialisation in what we consider offensive or unnatural on television. However, different people have different reactions to images of homosexuality on television depending upon their own opinions regarding homosexuality in general. People who do not have any problems concerning the issue of homosexuality do not appear to have any particular feelings towards portrayals on television, whilst those who do react more negatively to gay and lesbian imagery on our television screens.

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