Queer Recalibration

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by QUINN MILLER

Two songs come to mind when I think about queer methods. Joni Mitchell's "A Case of You" (on the album *Blue*, 1971) and Wilco's "Sunken Treasure" (on the album *Being There*, 1996) delve into the queer quality of the medium I think about most: television. In these songs, the iconic blue light of television emission represents everyday antinormativity, the basis of queer difference. In the Jeff Tweedy–penned "Sunken Treasure," the blue glow from the set "run[s] parallel" to the inner wavelength of a protagonist named and "tamed" by culture, in this case by rock and roll, perhaps instead of by parents or a spouse. In Mitchell's piece, also, television's blue light, an immersive and melancholy referent of televisual simultaneity, transmits the artist's empowered detachment from traditional family norms. Like Tweedy's refrain of being "so out of tune," Mitchell's contemplation of identity over a "cartoon coaster" in the semipublic, semiprivate space of a bar figures "blue TV screen light" as the quintessential backdrop for queer experiments with perception, and for movement—evident throughout *Blue* and *Being There*—from decorum to the counterpublic.[1]

In the context of my research, the "blue" character of television expresses the haze of institutionalized gender and sexual normativity. A prime site of hegemonic struggle, television often figures into artistic renderings of radical disaffection from bourgeois sensibilities. As a camp critic obsessed with questions of legitimacy, and one whose varying forms of LGBT experience have consistently been inflected by queer affects of and drives toward unintelligibility, I use queer methods to reveal noise, akin to the sonic dissonance in the Wilco and Mitchell songs, within a particular archive of industrially authored art. Through research into comedy of the early TV era, I've developed strategies for using obscure "meta" critique within television texts to access and redeploy anti-queerphobic interpretive contexts from the post–World War II US archive. These methods evolve out of my intersectional reworking of historical accounts by scholars like George Chauncey, Joanne Meyerwitz, Lynn Spigel, Bret L. Abrams, Daniel Hurewitz, Vincent Brook, Herman Gray, Sasha Torres, John Howard, Susan Stryker, Victoria Johnson, Jonathan Gray, Sean Griffin, Shaun Cole, and Susan Sontag. My methods show, among other things, that

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1 As Michael Warner has argued, media circulation routinely facilitates oppositional forms of self-invention. *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

TV is much queerer than people generally recognize. Although television appears to epitomize the mainstream, it also aestheticizes antisocial agitation, circulating what Juan A. Suárez refers to, in *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday*, as the profound static of camp textuality, a queer phenomenon whose contours—unlike various actions on the side of media reception—academics have yet to map.[2]

Television comedy history provides a distinct reference point for the small screen's "blue" atmosphere beyond the aura of betrayal many outsiders experience in relation to TV. In the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s and 1960s, commercial artists working in the television industry synthesized bold, "off-color" queer humor from radio, theater, print, and a range of ethnic performance traditions, repackaging it for a new medium as the major players in government and finance fought, as corruptly as ever, for power in the conventional sense. The intellectual history of camp proliferated as artists working first in New York City and then in Los Angeles began to experiment with the unfamiliar canvases, palettes, platforms, genres, modes, and production contexts that newly accessible TV technology presented. Material known as blue humor (and by other euphemisms) to censors, gatekeepers, and critics indicates an alternate history "running parallel," as Tweedy sings, to the "megatext" of misrepresentation that is television.[3] Over the course of the postwar period, the US television industry attempted to replace popular comedians loved for their sexually risqué, ethnically diverse, working-class, gender-variant, and vaudeville-inspired approaches to production with white, upper-middle-class nuclear families and normative gender roles. Camp thrived within this ongoing cultural conflict, preserving, post-standardization, traces of the rebellious erotic and intellectual energy that fueled TV comedy initially. Queer sensibilities inhered in popular representational systems as "the terms of the cultural field through which homosexuality is habitually lived and understood" changed.[4]

Attention to sitcom form and the content of sitcom programming demonstrates that camp and queer representation were central to the routine process of sitcom production in the 1950s and 1960s. As Paul Attallah has explained, sitcoms are founded on "the encounter of dissonant or incompatible discursive hierarchies," which collide and scramble together within the minutia of sitcom texts.[5] As producers established the genre discourse of sitcoms, they elaborated gender and sexual nonconformities in most characters. Seemingly conventional characters commonly emerged as an assemblage of idiosyncrasies. Any character could, at times, channel the reflexive insights of writers and crew. Within the general queerness of the sitcom diegesis, or what Horace Newcomb calls each sitcom's "particular way of ordering and defining the world" according to an "unreal," or "special," sense of reality, sitcoms generate characters that

2   Juan A. Suárez, *Pop Modernism: Noise and the Reinvention of the Everyday* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 117.

3   Nick Browne defines the television "megatext" as the sum total of all TV content. "The Political Economy of the Television (Super) Text," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9, no. 3 (1984): 174–182.

4   Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 14–15.

5   Paul Attallah, "The Unworthy Discourse: Situation Comedy in Television," in *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader*, ed. Joanne Morreale (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 105.

reject the norms from which they spring. The people who crafted sitcoms as part of an industrially organized, assembly-line-style collective often used a range of unselfconsciously unconventional and exceedingly extreme characters to explore the experience of being out of sync, in a discursive sense, with social hierarchies and the very concept of social static in the abstract.

With these conventions, sitcoms hyperbolize miscommunication. The medium tends toward Dadaistic formal riffs combining tableau vivant with *mise en abyme*. Characters speak—as if to one another—but what they articulate are their abstract differences from one another and the conflicting planes of signification they inhabit. In an episode of Ellen DeGeneres's second sitcom vehicle *The Ellen Show* (CBS, 2001–2002) titled "Vanity Hair" (October 12, 2001), the producers cultivate a comic scenario in which DeGeneres's character can self-reflexively comment to her mother, Dot (Cloris Leachman), "It's almost like we're having two separate conversations." This line at once represents the sentiment of a fictional character and the repercussions of censorship. It not only resonates as a potential punch line for any number of other characters, conversations, and ongoing "situations" within and beyond this series text but also collapses distinctions between form and content in a way that represents both sitcoms as a whole and this specific sitcom moment. Satirizing feel-good directives to "be yourself," "Vanity Hair" makes copious references to the contextual specificity of queer craft (cameo: Herb Ritts) within various regimes of normativity operative in show business. To instigate the exchange in question, Dot directs Ellen to observe the "workmanship" of a plastic version of kung pao pork and other window-display Chinese-food items she purchased, through dialogue invoking camp relations to consumer culture and that blue history of queer irreverence to TV. "Vanity Hair" contains a highly displaced thread comparing television labor to sex work in addition to its implicit allegory for the disparaged field of sitcom production maintained by the series' premise: Ellen is demoted from a "hot-shot" LA dot-commer to the naive and at times much-maligned guidance counselor at a public school in middle America.

Countless sitcoms use the culture industries' vast repertoire of self-reflexive techniques to represent discursive conflict, particularly around taste and class, through mise-en-scène and performance as well as through the poetics of plot and dialogue. The standardized "eccentric" characterization, dictated by sitcom production manuals and industry norms, invariably demonstrates the pleasures, power, and artistic rewards that make queer life worth social disadvantage and discrimination. The appeal of queer life is embedded in most of the post–World War II era telefilm texts that I teach, many of which demonstrate an understanding of the Cold War assimilation discourses around gender, sexuality, race, nationality, ethnicity, and ability that precipitated their production as potentially profitable properties. Amid the conservative representation of "women drivers" in "Jane's Driving Lesson" (January 20, 1963), an episode of *The Jetsons* (ABC, 1962–1963), and "Driving Is the Only Way to Fly" (March 25, 1965), a 1965 episode of *Bewitched* (ABC, 1964–1972), producers contested the foundations of US patriarchal dominance. With their respective gender-queer driving instructor characters, Mr. Tweeter and Harold Harold (Paul Lynde), the carsick bank-robber character of "Jane's Driving Lesson" and Agnes Moorehead's diva Endora, a backseat driver in "Driving Is the Only Way to Fly," these episodes broadly ridiculed,

in a camp mode, what Sue-Ellen Case calls, in an article theorizing "butch-femme aesthetics," "the ruling powers of heterosexist realist modes."[6]

The aesthetics of queer characterization play out across oeuvres and across media, as well as within texts. I study sitcoms because, high or low, they excel in intertextual modes of queer production. In sitcoms, casts of characters, which are collectively executed by teams of producers, circulate queer culture in forms that elude assimilation, doing so in a satirical manner exemplified by Scott Thompson's Buddy Cole character in *The Kids in the Hall* (CBC, 1988–1994) and Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier's Blaine Edwards and Antoine Merriweather of *In Living Color*'s "Men on . . ." sketches (FOX, 1990–1994). Self-referential series, which channel the ways in which producers may feel out of sync with their line of work and with one another, present a fascinating archive for scholars interested in comparative work across the camp TV of fluff sitcoms and other forms of (queer) avant-garde television, ranging from *An American Family* (PBS, 1973) and talk-TV protests to Andy Warhol one-offs and Whitney Houston videos.

To recognize and preserve the queer and gender queer histories that emerge from within the media industries, we need expansive rubrics through which we can conceive of television camp as art within an oppositional framework. Media environments, with their publics and counterpublics, sustain queer culture at particularly complex planes of representation. To excavate what Anna McCarthy calls the ambivalent "homo heaven" of TV history and to recover, within the "encoding" stage of telecommunications, what Alexander Doty has theorized as "contra-straight" forms of textual engagement, we must counter classifications common in media studies.[7] Research across generic differences assumed to delineate cinema, television, print, music, design, and advertising complements research that cuts across those dichotomies that queer praxis seeks to trouble, including citizen-foreigner, cis-trans, white-racialized, male-female, straight-gay, able-disabled, and married-single. Primary texts serve as scaffolding for a broader array of intertexts, paratexts, extratexts, and auxiliary texts that, in drawing out cross-pollinations and meanings that exceed standardization, draw out the networks of meaning within which representation comes to life in its queerest manifestations.

In spite of TV's rich queer history, scholars routinely suggest that queer media studies hits a dead end with television. In the 2006 roundtable on queer film and media pedagogy in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, Roy Grundmann calls TV "a leveler of identity, not a diversifier."[8] "Its putative queerness," he argues, "is always already the product of nonqueer interests." While Dana Heller's 2011 review essay for *GLQ*, "Visibility and Its Discontents: Queer Television Studies," helpfully critiques the ways in which queer research in television studies confines itself with assumptions about what queer TV studies entails, it also transfers blame from academics to TV

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6   Sue-Ellen Case, "Toward a Butch-Femme Aesthetic," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Harry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 298.

7   Anna McCarthy, "Ellen: Making Queer Television History," *GLQ* 7, no. 4 (2001): 615; Alexander Doty, *Flaming Classics: Queering the Film Canon* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 83.

8   Michael Bronski, Terri Ginsberg, Roy Grundmann, Kara Keeling, Liora Moriel, Yasmin Nair, and Kirsten Moana Thompson, "Queer Film and Media Pedagogy," *GLQ* 12, no. 1 (2006): 120.

itself, stating that "commercial television . . . does not hold up very well to nuance."[9] Grundmann's and Heller's criticisms may strike a chord with researchers interested only in protagonists, "quality" programming, explicit LGBT content, and respectable role models, but there is a lot more to TV.

Television is not merely a collection of programs within which characters appear as either straight or gay. Television presents its own strange representational system full of logics that defy dominant ideologies of identity and visibility, making it a prime site for what Michael Schiavi calls the "war over queer marginality," the fight to expel queer culture from dominant discourse or to expose its centrality.[10] Scholars have hardly begun to engage the queer qualities of TV texts and industry practices, no doubt because television operates through stylistics foreign to the scholarly repertoire. As Amy Villarejo writes, "Programming responds to imperatives other than those valued by academic taste."[11] In ways yet to be explored, queer culture inheres in programming while remaining impalpable outside of the specialized discursive configurations that proliferate its meanings. To cultivate discursive spaces in which it is possible to apprehend these meanings, we need new approaches to hierarchies of medium, genre, and form—methods of the kind that are currently refiguring the field of cinema and media studies. As part of loose-knit and constantly shifting production units, workers with complex relationships to diverse cultural vanguards have created queer histories within television. Queer methods develop analytic tools calibrated to this work and to the life-as-art work and coalition-based social justice campaigns of generations of marginalized queer producers. Combating one blue history with another, queer methods reconstitute and explore the marginalized queer histories that popular media commonly sustain amid ongoing processes of violence, erasure, and commodification. ✳

9   Dana Heller, "Visibility and Its Discontents: Queer Television Studies," *GLQ* 17, no. 4 (2011): 675.

10   Michael Schiavi, "Looking for Vito," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 1 (2009): 59.

11   Amy Villarejo, "Ethereal Queer: Notes on Method," in *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*, ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham (New York: Routledge, 2009), 51.