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## **Kids, Rock and Couples: Screening the Elusive/Illusive Bisexual**

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*This essay comments on the simultaneous foregrounding and erasure of bisexuality in contemporary cinema and television, arguing that the treatment of bisexuality as an impossibility or enigma (which bisexual theorists can and often do treat in productive ways) is related to the hegemony of the couple in the dominant heterosexual culture and homosexual subcultures.*

**KEYWORDS** *bisexuality, invisibility, cinema, television, 30 Rock, The Kids Are All Right, the hegemony of the couple*

In the third season of *30 Rock*, (2009) the Emmy-winning television comedy show about a television comedy show, head writer Liz Lemon develops a catch phrase that unexpectedly catches fire. Liz, played by series creator and nerd hipster Tina Fey, offers relationship advice to women using a forceful postfeminist adage: “That’s a dealbreaker, girls.” A book deal and a talk show soon develop, bringing Liz fame and fortune and eventually financing her purchase of two Manhattan apartments.

When confronted with a litany of questions during an appearance on an Oprah-like program, Liz fields the requests with rapid-fire gusto. “Dealbreaker,” she shouts out, before telling a woman that her fiancé, standing next to her at the microphone, is gay. (She turns out to be right; it’s a classic case of what Liz calls “fruit blindness”). As the pace of the questions accelerates, Liz responds to another male/female couple before the television audience even hears the question. In reply to their unvoiced (and possibly unvoiceable) query, Liz spansks them with a sassy reprimand: “There’s no such thing as bisexual. That’s just something they invented in the 90s to sell hair products.”

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Liz is a committed heterosexual; having rejected an opportunity for a lesbian relationship in Season One, she avidly pursues relationships with deeply flawed men in subsequent seasons. But in the rarefied atmosphere of *30 Rock*, the joke is on anyone (including Liz) who believes in unproblematic sexuality or scenarios of happy coupling, whether the duos are straight or gay. No character on the show remains immune from comic scrutiny related to gender, sexuality, race, class, region or religion. In Season Four, a star on Liz's show, Jenna Maroney (Jane Krakowski) falls in love with a straight man who works as a female impersonator; he impersonates Jenna but secretly desires to impersonate Cher as well, which deeply offends Jenna. The resolution to this dilemma—the boyfriend will perform as half Jenna/half Cher—represents a both/and (rather than an either/or) outcome that seamlessly blends narcissism, identification and desire, not to mention gender categories and hair color; all working in the service of preserving the male/female couple.

With subplots like these, the show clearly has the potential to ratify David M. Halperin's (2009) proposal that crises in contemporary sexual definition can be productive rather than debilitating, a view he advances in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Bisexual." *30 Rock's* strategy of equal opportunity ridicule might help us to negotiate a world "in which we cannot make our sexual concepts do all the descriptive and analytic work we need them to do, but in which we can neither manage to live without them" (Halperin, p. 454). Defying categories and embodying contradictions with anarchic humor, *30 Rock's* characters, including stalwart straights Liz Lemon and her boss Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin), routinely confront us with the "necessary and irreparable incoherence of our own thought" (Halperin, p. 454).

Given this comic mayhem—reminiscent of the work of Mel Brooks and often just as juvenile—why would the show repudiate 'bisexual' (persons? acts? identities? relationships?) so vehemently, banning it (or them) from the proceedings prior to even the posing of the question? The dealbreaker joke's use of history makes mockery of a number of charged cultural issues. Blaming the creation of 'bisexual' on the 1990s conjures up Clinton-era sexual hi-jinks and puritanical discourses of repression (the two are often indistinguishable), not to mention the birth of the metrosexual (a term that first appeared in print in 1994) and one 1980s leftover—the hair bands with their macho posturing and backcombed pretensions to gender fluidity.

But the decade of the 1990s means something more to this bisexual: it's the most recent in a long line of odd-numbered decades in which 'bisexual' emerged as an issue for public debate. Bisexual subjects, desires and acts somehow seem to be readily locatable within the decades of the 1930s, 1950s, 1970s, and 1990s, and, perhaps, now the 2010s. The 1990s witnessed the publication of a number of important popular, sociological and theoretical books in bisexual studies, including Loraine Hutchins and Lani Ka'ahumanu's *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (1990), Marjorie Garber's *Vice*

*Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life* (1996), and Paula Rust's sociological study, *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty and Revolution* (1995). The publication of the *Journal of Bisexuality* commenced in 2000. This flurry of scholarly and creative activity almost seemed to have been instigated by the Spring 1992 *Out/Look* magazine cover story "What Do Bisexuals Want?"; but of course, all of this work, emanating from diverse locations and perspectives, had been carefully cultivated during the 1980s: not exactly nurtured by the most prominent strands of queer theory and activism thriving at that time but certainly energized by them.

It's easy to speculate about the historical reasons for this cyclical interest in bisexuality: 70s sexual liberationist rhetoric and practices were quelled by the AIDS blame game in the 1980s (when bisexual men were not only dying but also being vilified for transmitting the disease to straight people); ACT UP and queer theory arrived near the end of the 1980s, offering tools to move us beyond gay/straight and gay/lesbian binaries—but moving us only so far, in the eyes of bisexual and transgender thinkers. Bisexual writings in the 1990s identified monosexual practices and categories, just as transgender theorists and activists complicated gender and its relation to sexuality, notably in relation to visual culture, and specifically in the documentary film *The Brandon Teena Story* (Muska & Olafsdóttir, 1998) and the narrative feature film *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999).

In the last decade, however, the political movement toward granting legal recognition of same-sex couples became the visible centerpiece of gay and lesbian politics. Mobilization in response to the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act gained momentum when Vermont became the first state to recognize same-sex civil unions in 2000. Legally sanctioned coupling and child rearing is a vital matter to my queer comrades, and, though I support legalizing same-sex marriage, I know I am not alone—among queers of all stripes—when I say it's not a cause that speaks to me or for me.

To invoke 'bisexual' as a Derridean trace—knowing full well that I risk being told that the 1980s are on the phone and they want their theory clichés back—is to continue to believe in 'bisexual' as a mode of deferral, a circumvention of fixity and closure. I read Halperin's comments as endorsing this view as well: he suggests that the "perpetual crisis of bisexual definition" (p. 454) might help us all to understand the contradictions and complications in sexual definition more broadly. Of course, that can happen only if 'bisexual' can be thought and spoken aloud, even in the midst of awkward or hostile circumstances.

I appreciate the way *30 Rock* refuses to pose the question, even if I am amused and alarmed by Liz Lemon's response. But it does seem appropriate to me that 'bisexual' would dwell in a space where one can address an unasked question if one wants to—the space (to quote Derrida quoting Jean Catesson) of "the void which re-empties itself and marks itself with imprints" (Derrida, 2001, p. 378). I'm content with the reemptying void of

'bisexual'—and with its singularity. But I do remain perplexed as to why 'bisexual' continues to be a dreaded site of denial in popular culture texts, both mainstream and alternative.

I don't think it's accidental that *30 Rock* could manage to utter *bisexual* only in relation to a couple of apparently straight people. To me, the couple itself lies at the heart of crises of sexual definition. It's also not accidental that the bisexual question arises—similarly as a negation—in relation to a couple of apparently lesbian people in Lisa Cholodenko's *The Kids Are All Right* (2010). Cholodenko's previous projects (*High Art*, 1998, a film I have written about in this journal; *Laurel Canyon*, 2002; and *The L Word*) grapple with intimate relationships and family configurations in complex ways. By contrast, *The Kids* emphasizes the desire to construct, destroy and preserve a nuclear family, albeit one organized around a lesbian couple. This conventional formula appealed to a broad spectrum of audiences, garnering widespread accolades and did well enough at the box office that an HBO series based on the film was announced in October 2011.

*The Kids* explores well-trodden territory—a couple in an increasingly unsatisfying union face the realignment of the family as their oldest child prepares to go to college. The two moms—one professionally driven and controlling (Nic) and the other inarticulate and resentfully dependent (Jules)—drift apart as Jules embarks on a sexual relationship with Paul, the man who donated the sperm for the couple's two children and with whom the teenaged children have made contact.

The film's contemporary touches join familiar narrative conventions—the sexless marriage and the damaging affair—to make a lesbian coupling not only visible but also 'relatable,' to use that strange and possibly ungrammatical Hollywood term. The *San Francisco Chronicle's* reviewer Mick LaSalle (2010) wrote "it's a movie about basic things, about the meaning of family and the vulnerability of families, with the suggestion that the ones most subject to bombardment are the families least protected by custom and tradition." On *Salon.com*, Andrew O'Hehir (2010) took pains to assure potential viewers that the film has a claim to universality, writing defensively that the film is "not attached to a set of talking points about gay marriage and sexual identity, it's not advocating some revolutionary artistic or social paradigm and it's not a seminar in LGBT self-esteem" (n.p.). Moreover, he continued, "[i]f some queer-radical types object to the film on political or ideological grounds, there's a sense in which they're right to do so. This movie definitely isn't aimed at them" (n.p.).

On the one hand O'Hehir (2010) may underestimate the film's advocacy of a revolutionary social paradigm. In 2011, the idea that the law should treat all couples equally remains a controversial notion. As of late 2010, President Obama's position on gay marriage was still evolving. Whereas a poll in March 2011 indicated for the first time that a majority (53%) of Americans

support the legalization of gay and lesbian marriage (Langer, 2011), 44% remain opposed.

With his disdain for “queer-radical types,” O’Hehir seems to want to protect *Kids* from the gay, lesbian and queer viewers that he refers to at one point as Cholodenko’s “constituency.” And his instincts are correct; members of that constituency were dismayed by what they saw in the film. On an IMDB.com message board titled “Shame on Lisa,” a number of posts object to the affair between Jules and Paul as implausible—arguing that no lesbian would cheat on her wife with a man and viewing that plot choice as reiterating a dangerous stereotype that implies all lesbians secretly want to sleep with men. On the same board, one poster laments the continued tension between lesbians and bisexual women: “Good gawd. I am so sick of lesbian hostility toward bisexuals. \*beep\* off” (kn-21; November 25 2010). Another post, written by “dontquoteme,” expresses thoughts about the problems arising from the conflation of coupling and sexuality.

‘Women in gay relationships’ is not a lesbian . . . you are describing a bi-sexual which is COMPLETELY different than a lesbian. I believe many lesbians are pissed at this movie because they are under the impression that Julianne’s character is a lesbian and many straight people don’t understand she is actually a bi-sexual who has been in a gay relationship for the last 20 years. This was not ‘explained’ to the viewers probably because bisexuals themselves want to be called gay or lesbian rather than the true term ‘bi-sexual’. (August 15, 2010)

The film itself hesitates to ‘explain’ this to viewers in the very scene in which Nic confronts Jules’s infidelity. Nic asks Jules whether she is ‘straight’ now; I remember cringing during the scene, waiting for her to say *bisexual* and then becoming a little angry that she hadn’t. Jules’s sexual romance with Paul can only be understood by Nic and by the film as a shift from a lesbian to a straight identity, which is disappointing to say the least. One reviewer manages to put the word in print, yet also adopts the convention that links ‘bisexual’ to dishonesty: “Jules is flabbergasted by her bisexuality (how much easier to be a wholehearted lesbian!) as well as her own capacity for deception” (Alleva, 2010).

Here, as dontquoteme implies, the film misses an opportunity to investigate the way that sexuality is inextricably linked to the couple form—and therefore, I would argue, to reproductive sexuality, regardless of whether the couple contains one or two or more sexes or genders. In an interview, Cholodenko attempts to address the issue but manages only to foreclose alternatives to heterosexual and homosexual.

I see sexuality as much more fluid. I believe people can have sexual desire for people of the opposite sex and the same sex, but that

emotionally they can be whatever, homosexual or heterosexual. There are people who see sexual identity as bound forever, and that there's no continuum at all. I find that thinking, and the critique that comes from that, really dated. (O'Hehir, 2010, n.p.)

Tellingly, Cholodenko differentiates between sexual desire, which is fluid ("people can have sexual desire for people of the opposite sex *and* the same sex") and emotional (orientation or identity [?]), which is an either/or proposition (homosexual or heterosexual).

The continued and frankly perplexing inability to see or to speak *bisexual* in films and television programs that devote themselves to plurality of all kinds seems to me to be the logical outcome of a compulsory cultural regime that understands the couple as the only type of sexual relationship, as the cornerstone that organizes society, and perhaps, as the very emblem of personhood. Michael Cobb's (2007) essay "Lonely" speaks to the hegemony of the couple form, which has been held up as "the logical leap away from loneliness" but which, instead, is "one major method of making the 'body politic' full of terror" (p. 449). Cobb considers same-sex marriage as "the plea for participation in state-sanctioned coupleness, state-sanctioned 'freedom' from the terror of being lonely" (p. 451). His goal in interrogating singleness is to consider whether isolated figures "might just want to relate to others outside the supreme logic of the couple, which has become the way one binds oneself to the social" (p. 455).

Although I wouldn't want to conflate the isolated figure and 'bisexual,' I would propose similarities in choosing to relate to others outside of the coupled logic that has come to define straight, gay and lesbian sexualities in recent years, through both the defense of marriage and the movement for marriage rights. Perhaps *30 Rock* and *The Kids Are All Right* are expressing something valuable in their refusal to credit the existence of 'bisexual' within the context of straight and same sex coupling. Perhaps the retrenchment of the politics of sexuality with the continued rise of the Right and the narrow focus of the Left on gay marriage help to explain why, in 2011, bisexual theorizing remains, to my mind, unduly invested in queer theory's erasure of 'bisexual' rather than interested in investigating the ways that the bisexual lacuna or void can be made productive, along the lines that David M. Halperin began to map out. It's not a matter of moving toward visibility or valorization, but developing a mode of employing bisexual concepts and practices to productively engage with sociality to reshape not only the realm of sexuality but also family, work, economics, government, politics and culture.

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