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**“Just too... pink”: Visual Culture, Absent Homosexuality and Identity**

**Abstract**

It has been contended that absent homosexuality is the dominant form of relations between men in contemporary culture<sup>1</sup>, and that it is certainly the most easily discernible form of masculine relationship in mass visual culture. While the dominance of absent homosexuality may be open to question, for many Gay men the discussions around this concept hold many important resonances. In this paper I will examine some of the ways in which absent homosexuality manifests itself in mass culture, and discuss some potential and actual results of both the dominance of and the absence inherent within this cultural formation, particularly in relation to identity.

**Biography**

Born in 1963 in Perth, WA, Jonathan Hodgkin's first post-secondary degree was a TAFE Diploma of Fine Arts (Sculpture) from Claremont School of Art in 1984. He gained his BA (Hons) in Printmaking from RMIT in 1994 and completed his Masters Degree at the same institution in 1997. Jonathan was awarded an Australia Council Studio Residency in Milan in 1998. The title of his Masters thesis is 'Manspace: Constructed Masculinities and Bodies', and he has continued his research in the areas of gender, particularly masculinity, and sexuality. He has had an extensive exhibition history with solo exhibitions in Perth, Melbourne and Sydney. Jonathan is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Tasmania's School of Art in Hobart.

**“Just too... pink”: Visual Culture, Absent Homosexuality and Identity**

Henning Bech's exhaustive discussion<sup>2</sup> of the consequences of separating 'homosexuals' out as a specific category proposes that the dynamic that results from this separation may be called 'absent homosexuality'. This appellation indicates that this dynamic both produces a discernible presence and at the same time an absence or absences. Bech suggests that absent homosexuality is a fundamental structure embedded within contemporary Western masculinity, with wide-ranging effects on all men, and particularly on Gay men. Some of these effects, which manifest themselves in visual and popular culture, will be discussed in the course of this paper. "In absent homosexuality, there is a triad of oppositional poles: being/absence, knowledge/ignorance, desire/denial."<sup>3</sup> These binaries contribute to the slipperiness of this concept, and also to its applicability in many instances. This paper, and indeed my whole research project - which is primarily a visual, object-based response, is about the ways in which 'homosexuals' interact with, are affected by or read visual culture.

To begin with, an exemplar of how absent homosexuality shows itself in popular culture. The movie musical, *The Sound of Music* would ostensibly seem to be an extended *paean* to the triumph of heterosexuality over both Catholicism and Nazism, yet floating around within the text is an absent homosexual presence, embodied in the character of 'Uncle' Max Dettweiler. Max is introduced in a scene with Captain von Trapp and Baroness von Schraeder in a car, where they overhear a choir singing, prompting Max to remark that he's looking for some new talent to exploit, to which the Baroness replies "Oh Max, you are outrageous". Throughout the film similar kinds of interactions happen, usually between the Baroness and Max, which code Max as superficial, lacking in political convictions, avaricious and generally associated with the 'sophisticated' society life of Vienna, in contrast to the Captain's 'simple' life in Salzburg. This subtle coding of Max as different and therefore readable as not-straight, culminates in a coded 'coming out' scene, in which the Baroness and Max offer the Captain some lemonade –

**Scene:**

**Captain von Trapp:** ...What have we got here?

**Baroness von Schraeder:** Pink lemonade.

**Max Dettweiler:** Laced with...lemonade.

*The Captain shudders*

...**Captain**: ...I think I'm brave enough to try some of that.

...**Baroness**: (*pouring lemonade*) Not too sweet, not too sour.

**Max**: Just too ... pink.

What is going on in the above example? There is never any direct reference to sex in any form throughout the narrative; it is after all a G-rated family entertainment. And yet it is somehow easy to interpret this Uncle Max character as different from the three main protagonists involved in a heterosexual drama which culminates in two of them, Maria and the Captain, marrying. We can read the explicit meaning of Max's difference in the above scene, particularly through the significant pause before the word 'pink'. Here we have a perfect example of the presence of absent homosexuality; the utter absence of sex in any form throughout the whole story, passion abounding between the heterosexual protagonists, and a character who is slightly...pink, through whom the narrative flow is maintained. Here it is useful to quote Bech:

homosexuality does not exist, nevertheless it exists-

1. in the form of the unmotivated, the inappropriate, the rupture in relation to conventions, norms, contexts, etiquette governing what is allegedly the issue: nothing where something should be; something where nothing should be; something where there should be something else; too much; too little – e.g. interest, shame, arousal, confusion; furthermore, it exists
2. by being neutral – non-erotic, non-sexual, non-passionate – yet placing itself near something non-neutral, thereby appropriating meaning;
3. by coming out yet letting itself be negated;
4. via a word, a theme, a prop loaded with some special significance referring to the universe of homosexual existence;
5. by virtue of the indication itself of absence.<sup>4</sup>

In the above example, Max is placed next to the passions of all the main characters, yet remains neutral throughout, even in situations where one might expect some reference to at least nominal or disguised passion. And of course, his use of the word pink in that context (in this scene, the Captain is working himself up to telling the children that he and the Baroness are engaged to be married), in that way, must refer to its homosexual implications.

Let us assume for the moment that such a thing as absent homosexuality exists, and that it is specifically absent and also specifically homosexual. In a culture where such a thing as a homosexual person has been invented, how does this subject interact with this thing that is absent homosexuality. Let us agree with Bech that absent homosexuality is

...potentially omnipresent and tendentially (sic) ever-expanding and ever-intensifying, materially embedded and embeddable in social spaces and bodies, relations and institutions. It is *the* typical form of sexuality among non-homosexual men in modern societies.<sup>5</sup>

Given these assumptions, how does the homosexual subject exist in a world in which his selfhood is both absent and so clearly specified?

“It is by a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified.”<sup>6</sup> In a section on male constitution, Bech suggests that fundamental to being a man is a social relationship with another/all other men, that in order to become (more of) a man, men must somehow identify with either a specific man or the concept of Man as embodied somewhere<sup>7</sup>. In order to have a sense of subject-hood, to construct a self-identity, one must develop a relationship with another, either an actual person or a category. If masculinity as a subject position is created by a series of identifications, so too is the sense of oneself as a gay/homosexual person built on such a foundation.

What we've posited is a dominant culture in which homosexuality is both absent and omnipresent; and subjects within that culture whose self-identity is founded on a relationship with that absent-omnipresent trope. One of the ways that we (homosexual/gay/queer people) relate to this dominant paradigm is to learn to read culture for the absences, within/from which we can make explicit the homosexuality inherent within the culture's own structures.

**Scene:**

**Big Red Guy:** (*looking over his shoulder, wearing the front half of a dragon costume and, as usual, no pants. To I.M. Weasel*)  
OOOOH! What are you going to do with that sword??

*I.M. Weasel pokes Big Red Guy in the bottom with his sword.*

Some of the ways in which we make this explicitness happen have to do with ways in which we read mass/visual/popular culture. The example with which I began this paper is one case in point. It is an addition to the extensive list of films described by Bech<sup>8</sup>, encompassing films as diverse as *Dead Poets' Society*, *St Elmo's Fire* and *A View To A Kill*, which he characterises in his analysis as being indicative of the presence of absent homosexuality. Throughout my research project, I have had many occasions to use the 'Lemonade' scene to explain what I mean by 'absent homosexuality'.

An alternative to, or perhaps a nuance of this absent-presence model is provided by Alexander Doty, in his study *Making Things Perfectly Queer*<sup>9</sup>, which discusses a range of Queer readings possible within, particularly, mass-cultural production. Doty suggests that there is a range of Queer pleasures available embedded within many, if not all forms of mass culture. These include Gay men's pleasure in identifying (with) Gay texts; Lesbian women's pleasure in identifying (with) Lesbian texts; and also cross-gender and -sexuality pleasures in reading these same texts, the results of which find Gay men enjoying the 'Lesbian' relationship between Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds*, or my non-Gay women friends and I sharing pleasure in the narratives of *Queer As Folk*. I'm inclined to agree with Doty that

...the queerness [he] point[s] out in mass culture representation and reading ... is only "connotative", and therefore deniable or "insubstantial" as long as we keep thinking within conventional hetero-centrist paradigms, which always already have decided that expressions of queerness are *sub*-textual, *sub*-cultural, *alternative* readings, or pathetic and delusional attempts to see something that isn't there – after all, mass culture texts are made for the "average" (straight, white, middle-class, usually male) person, aren't they? I've got news for straight culture: your readings of texts are usually "alternative" ones for me, and they often seem like desperate attempts to deny the queerness that is so clearly part of mass culture.

Both Bech's and Doty's readings above are engagements with cultural fictions of the present; they are explications of the largely subconscious strategies that we adopt in our engagements with 'straightgeist'<sup>10</sup> cultural product – strategies that enable us to create some kind of identification and therefore some kind of identity.

There are also the fictions we make, and have previously made of the past, in which we read into and out of the absences embedded throughout history. We learn to scan these hiatuses and read some kind of relationship to the protagonists of these stories, whether or not the things that we feel that we have in common would have actually existed. It is therefore possible for me to read about the Greeks, and although the ways of being, the very thought categories may be absolutely dissimilar<sup>11</sup>, I am able to make a connection to a culture that, however codified and with whatever restrictions, seems to have been able to find a place for my people's presence. And so, my knowledge of the homosexuality/queerness inherent within legends of Ganymede, the love of Hercules for Iolaos, the story of Achilles and Patroklos, means that I create a sense of the continuing history of my people. I would therefore argue, in answer to Scott Bravmann's rhetorical question "Why is Greece still "ours" and ... who are "we" anyway?"<sup>12</sup>, that "we" are precisely the people for whom Ancient Greece still provides a place of identification, for whom the knowledge that at least some kind(s) of homosexual expression had a place in the culture is a point of pride

and hope. While the connections and relationships that I or any modern Les/Bi/Gay person make with the culture of Ancient Greece may be fictional; and the connections that sodomites in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, or the homosexuals of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, made may be equally fictional; I would contend that they are also absolutely necessary fictions, if we are to have and maintain a sense of our continuing individual and collective presence within the dominant hegemony.

My awareness of the presence of absent homosexuality, particularly in tele-visual culture, has become more acute since I moved from living in inner-urban Melbourne to Hobart. The move from what was effectively the heart of the ghetto, where Queer culture - bars, bookshops, cafes, other Queer people - was visible on the street, to a much smaller community, in which the habit of living a closeted life is much more ingrained, has meant that my awareness of the ways in which absent homosexuality manifests itself in popular culture has grown. Small-town television offers a distillation of what is on offer elsewhere. We enjoyed, along with the rest of Australia, the absolutely unique presence of *Queer As Folk*, which, despite the differences in attitudes and lifestyles, at least felt like we were finally present. Apart from that, the presence of out Gay characters is limited to *Will and Grace* - which could be characterised as 'Gay people for Straights' or 'Look at the funny homosexuals' - or to the single Gay man on both *Big Brother* 1 and 3. Other than these instances, we are left to make the usual interpretation of the code under which we read a homosexual presence. So that when the character James in the *Pokemon* series puts on a Firebird costume, prompting his offsidiers to say to one another "Where did he get that costume from?" - "Out of his closet", one has to read this as another example of our coded absent presence. The episode of *Smallville* titled 'The Stray', hinged throughout on the question of whether Clark Kent's secret would be revealed by the young runaway who also hides his own secret, is another perfect example of this dynamic. Bech's final analysis of his list of films describes aptly the pattern of these stories: "homosexuality can be shown *camouflaged*, or it can be shown blatantly, but then only as *clearly separated* (that is, as 'homosexuals') or *clearly denied*: it is pulled out only to be conjured away, thrown up, put down, kicked out, led away or blown off."<sup>13</sup> Or where there is an out Gay person shown, there is only one, thereby precluding any possibility of actual interaction.

In the visual research component of this project, I have adopted some strategies to respond to various parts of the problem. My initial impulse was to simply make absences in things. In its first incarnation, this took the form of making a largish hole in twenty-five books; chosen fairly randomly from various second-hand bookshops and encompassing for example, an atlas, a couple of 'bodice-ripper' novels, *The Jungle Book*, a book on New York City, a catalogue of an exhibition of Egyptian antiquities; thereby attempting to make manifest the absence inherent in many areas of culture. Individual pages from these books turned out to be more interesting than the whole books, and I have subsequently used twenty-five pages in another work. While thinking about the idea of absence and doing research on other artists, I came across many references to Jasper Johns' silence or absence in relation to his work, which prompted me to research his work more closely. In another instance of making a connection that is important to my self-identity, I felt that many of the formal strategies that Johns had employed were also present in my own work. Johns' use of the body print in his *Skin* drawings, his 'hatching' in the *Cicada* paintings and others, are two examples of where I felt that our methods had coincided. The two impulses - using the individual pages with holes and the connection with Jasper Johns - came together in the work *Dutch Wives Speaking About Me and Jasper*. Another response to the thought of making absence manifest was to make a weathervane, in the form of a large pointing male figure, painted green on one side and pink on the other so that it disappeared and reappeared depending on the wind, which when installed in the landscape metaphorically pointed out the sites that homosexuality had been or been erased from.

After making some works which address the notion of absence, I began to explore the notion of 'between'. This follows from Bech's assertion that absent homosexuality may best be characterised as "interest between men in what men can do with one another"<sup>14</sup>. It seemed appropriate to think about this absence as a *meme* that passes between men. The resulting work *Henge Between*, also aptly makes concrete Bech's description of the shape of the absent homosexual closet, "...closets are often square in shape as well as structured around a spectatorial and specular axis..."<sup>15</sup>. I have also subsequently become interested in the notion that the relationship that exists *between* the 'straightgeist' and Les/Bi/Gay people is of great importance.

Some of the works made began as an assertion of 'there' – in direct contradiction to absence – however, one of the problems is that I wonder what is beyond the statement 'There I Am',<sup>16</sup>.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to describe a cultural formation that simultaneously creates and denies a presence in many kinds of popular and visual culture, that I believe can be usefully described as 'absent homosexuality'. This appellation asserts both the *production* of this presence, whether consciously or subconsciously, by the 'straightgeist', and its simultaneous denial and disappearance. It seems to me that both Bech and Doty agree that this presence is absolutely and inextricably embedded in the texts they discuss, and the difference between their approaches is in the ways in which this presence is read. However different the approaches, they nevertheless articulate ways of interacting with dominant culture that indicate some of the strategies that we use to identify ourselves, or something like ourselves, within that culture. If we agree with the assertion that self-identity is formed through a series of identifications, and that these identifications happen in our engagements with all of culture, including popular culture, for non-straight people these identifications have to at least partly be with the absent presence described. It is not outrageous to say that most Les/Bi/Gay people do not grow up in Les/Bi/Gay families, and that our first identifications are largely with tele-visual representations of an absent presence. Unlike many other subcultural groups, Les/Bi/Gay people come into contact with our subculture as adults, or at best in late-adolescence, after the identity we have formed has been shaped by these engagements with 'straightgeist's' representations of us. For many Les/Bi/Gay people, the experience of feeling utterly alone in the world is still strong, and although representations of us appear more frequently in popular culture, this experience is still part of our psyche. It has been my concern in this paper, and throughout the research process, to explicate some of the interactions that we make, and to make some kinds of objects that represent these interactions. It has been strategically useful for me to speak in terms of 'we' and 'us', however I do recognise that the identifications that any of 'us' make are 'strategic essentialisms' or 'necessary fictions',<sup>17</sup> that enable us to function as members of a subcultural group in a dominant culture. However provisional, strategically temporary or fictional these identities we form are, they are some of the ways in which we make a place for ourselves in the world, so that we do not need to feel as if we are a minority of one.

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<sup>1</sup> Henning Bech. *When Men Meet: Homosexuality and Modernity*. 1997, Cambridge. Polity Press

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p81

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p39.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p 82

<sup>6</sup> Laplanche and Pontalis p205, quoted in Robert Lang, *Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Film*. p190.

<sup>7</sup> Bech, pp49-55

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, pp56-65.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Doty *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. 1993, Minneapolis. University of Minnesota Press

<sup>10</sup> I use straightgeist in a similar sense to Alan Sinfield, as shorthand for the dominant normative heterosexist sex-gender system which we all grow up and live in. Alan Sinfield *Gay and After*. 1998, London and New York. Serpent's Tail

<sup>11</sup> David Halperin 'Sex Before Sexuality: Pederasty, Politics, and Power in Classical Athens' in *Hidden From History*, Duberman, Vicinus and Chauncey, eds.

<sup>12</sup> Scott Bravmann *Queer Fictions of the Past*. 1997, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press

<sup>13</sup> Bech, p65.

<sup>14</sup> Bech, p47

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p66

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Cooper quoting Andy Warhol in *The Sexual Perspective*. 1986, 1994, London and New York. Routledge

<sup>17</sup> Sinfield, p40