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## Cloned This Way: Emphatic Dissonance and Mixed Messages in the Representations of Non-Heterosexual Sex Acts in Three Television Series

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## Cloned This Way

### Emphatic Dissonance and Mixed Messages in the Representations of Non-Heterosexual Sex Acts in Three Television Series

*Vincent W. Youngbauer & Joseph R. Jones*

#### Abstract

The United States has experienced increasing social and political acceptance of LGBTQ culture. This increasing acceptance has been accompanied by increased representations of LGBTQ in popular culture, particularly television, and, in the case of this work, fictional narratives. While there are certainly representations that are worthy of the term “trailblazing” in their treatment of LGBTQ relationships, many seem to be included in plotlines for shock value. This article discusses and explores three questions: First, what impact might media representations have on heteronormative understandings of LGBTQ culture? Second, does acceptance of LGBTQ culture follow any sort of historical trajectory that is similarly evident in other examples such as with changes in the representation of race over the history of television? And third, how might the representations reviewed in this article affect the struggle for LGBTQ rights?

#### Introduction

The United States has experienced an increase in social and political acceptance of LGBTQ culture. In fact, the Supreme Court of the United States has declared that same-sex marriage is legal in all 50 states (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Increasing

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acceptance has been accompanied by representations of LGBTQ in popular culture, particularly television, and, in the case of this article's focus, fictional narratives. Representations of non-heterosexual identities have come far since Billy Crystal's portrayal of the first openly gay (or bisexual) character in the situation comedy Soap on ABC between 1977 and 1981. Representations of LGBTQ in television are at an all-time high. While there are certainly representations that are worthy of the term "trailblazing" in their treatment of LGBTQ relationships, many seem to be included in plotlines for shock value. These representations provide heterosexual viewers a voyeuristic gaze into a world about which they may know little; in this sense they may be framed as *educational*, whether that education is intentional or not, and whether that education is *accurate* or not. What kinds of messages are being sent and how are they being received? Furthermore, what is the impact these representations might have on viewers in their general understanding of LGBTQ culture, and their specific understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation?

This article discusses and explores three ideas. First, media messages have an effect on people's beliefs whether they portray accurate representations or not, and are independent of intended outcomes. Therefore, we ask, what impact might media representations such as the ones reviewed here have on heteronormative understandings of LGBTQ culture? Second, is there a chronology of understanding—described here as *emphatic dissonance*—an acceptance of LGBTQ culture that follows any sort of historical trajectory that is similarly evident in other examples such as changes in the representation of race over the history of television? Finally, how might the representations reviewed here impact the struggle for LGBTQ rights?

This article critically analyzes and troubles three contemporary television series in which representations of LGBTQ are woven into the plotlines—BBC America's *Orphan Black*; Showtime's *Penny Dreadful*; and NBC's mini-series *Aquarius*. Although not exclusively about LGBTQ identity or culture, the presence of these representations in these shows has varying impact on the main storylines. What is interesting to note is the disparate nature of the representations, and what they may hold for the LGBTQ civil rights movement in general. While not a subject of this work, it is worth mentioning that these shows exist in three different censorship *divisions*—that is there are different censorship requirements for network television (NBC's *Aquarius*) than there are for the expanded cable shows (BBC America's *Orphan Black*), and premium cable (Showtime's *Penny Dreadful*).

We are not interested in discussing the intent of producers, screenwriters, or directors, nor is this work concerned with discussing whether or not these shows intended to be culturally accurate. We argue, rather, that having grown up in heterosexually dominated or heteronormative culture, the writers and directors simply had no choice but to perpetuate the narrative in which they were submerged, as products of the system of perpetuation of the cultural norms and assumptions that are in turn, promoted in their respective narratives. While these shows are all works of fiction, and again, do not claim to be authorities on LGBTQ

representations, they nevertheless have impact on viewers' understanding of real life LGBTQ relationships.

The shows discussed in this article were chosen for their variance in genre and levels of censorship. The authors recognize that it is likely that exceptions to the categorizations that we use do exist, and that a larger, more thorough examination of other existing popular culture representations of LGBTQ would be worthy of further study. We do argue, however, that these shows continue to perpetuate a hegemonic masculinity, which continues to inform how society views non-heterosexual identities. As such, we postulate these shows, and other popular culture venues, help aid in the construction of what we call *empathetic dissonance*, which is discussed later in the work.

While the authors employ the term *emphatic dissonance* as a heuristic, or a foil, by which to analyze the media representations discussed here, we certainly do not think that emphatic dissonance is a desirable outcome. That is, we view emphatic dissonance as a possible historic fact—something that *is*, not something that *should be*. In a perfect world, there would be no need for such paths to acceptance. One of the authors identifies as a heterosexual baby-boom- aged male and the other a GenX, non-heterosexual male. Our analysis takes place from the point of view of a heterosexual viewer for a specific reason that was the impetus for this work. We argue that most heterosexuals do not seek education centers to learn about the *other*. They receive information and knowledge from media representations such as those discussed here and from numerous others in an aggregate manner. Their understanding of the other is a more product of media exposure than any other source, and therefore, analysis of such media representations is logical.

Lastly, we discuss television; we do not wish to downplay the actual struggles that occurred in the real world during the time periods of this article. Whether art reflects reality or influences it is unimportant for this discussion, although both can be legitimately true. Nor do we claim that any media representations are accurate reflections of real life, a significant point of this discourse.

### Popular Culture and Social Constructions

To premise our discussion, we briefly discuss the reality of an existing LGBTQ culture in United States society. LGBTQ culture is a set of beliefs, values, and acknowledgments among the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community (Tierney, 1997). It is a culture with a self-constructed set of social norms that members of the community have established, through which one must navigate to function appropriately within LGBTQ community (Tierney, 1997). For example, during the 1970s, gay men who wore handkerchiefs in specific pockets revealed attributes of their own sexual preferences. Moreover, LGBTQ is a culture that maintains a history of oppression and hatred, civil rights, and community activism. According to Nowlan (2007), LGBTQ culture can be traced throughout history, and included

events such as the Stonewall Riots, the AIDS epidemic, and the modern gay rights movement. In addition to the historical aspect of culture, Nowlan (2007) argued that LGBTQ individuals live and function within a community that has established a distinct culture with contributions to literature, art, film, history, and language.

As with other cultures, if one is not a member of the LGBTQ culture, it may be difficult to fully understand and function within the culture. As such, we posit outsiders construct their understandings of the LGBTQ culture through representations in popular culture. In modern Western society, popular culture plays a tremendous role in the social constructions of individual's reality concerning other cultures. We also understand that LGBTQ is not singular and that within the community there are great variations of how identities are constructed. Exposure to cultural artifacts informs how individuals construct meaning about others. In fact, Wineburg (2001) discussed how repeated exposure to the film *Forest Gump* gave a high school student a skewed understanding of how Vietnam veterans were treated when returning from the war. This type of repeated exposure may be more effective in creating a collective national memory than any inculcation provided by nationalized public schooling. What we experience through popular culture blends with what we learn from formal schooling until we cannot be sure why we know it or where the information came from. Regardless, we are willing to accept the information a priori appealing to a universal sense of reason that is comfortable for the individual or for the group.

All of these considerations lead to what media effect scholars label as *cultivation processes*. According to Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorielli (2009):

Cultivation analysis focuses on television's contributions to viewers conceptions of social reality...those who spend more time watching television shows are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the television world. (p. 34)

This is of course important when addressing issues of representations of race, ethnicity, gender etc., and even of institutions and social issues. White and Black Americans, for example, are typically over-represented in media, representing 73-80% for Whites in primetime television and 14-17 per cent for African Americans while constituting 69% and 12% of US population respectively (Mastro, 2009). Crime investigations are typically "solved" within 60 minutes on a television show, but typically take longer in real life, or are never solved at all.

It is apparent to us that popular culture, especially television, can be the conduit that creates different understandings of a culture, whether those understandings are true or false. We postulate, therefore, that the three television shows discussed herein aid in three different social constructions of LGBTQ culture; thus, the construction opens up a cognitive space that promotes empathetic dissonance, which can create a more tolerant community. We again stress that "tolerance" is certainly not a *ne plus ultra* in terms of a societal goal; by definition the word implies that

one learns to live with something with which one does not agree or like. To obtain the more altruistic goal of societal acceptance, however, the authors believe that a stage of tolerance may be an unfortunate necessity in the process of acceptance. We discuss historical examples regarding race and popular culture but first describe the methodology employed in this analysis.

### Critical Hermeneutics

The hermeneutical tradition is concerned with both the processes of understanding meaning of various texts and the production of strategies for textual interpretation. Central to the hermeneutical method is an appreciation of the complexity and ambiguity of human life. (Steinberg, p. 191). Hermeneutics can be used to trace the ways in which these TV shows position audiences politically in ways that not only shape their political beliefs but also formulate their identities (p. 195).

### *Synopsis of Shows*

BBC America's *Orphan Black* (Fawcett & Manson, 2013) is a science fiction story about a young woman named Sarah, played by Tatiana Maslany who finds out that she is one of several clones through a series of events; at our focal point there are eight clones, all played by Maslany. These clones are the work of a secret corporate/government project—the intent of which is part of the mystery of the plot. The clones were all placed in various environments in various geographical locations as infants and monitored throughout their lives. With the help of friends and three of the clones she has made contact with, Sarah and the others are trying to unravel the mystery of their existence.

One of the clones, Cosima, is openly lesbian, and thus far in the series has had two love interests. The show has included multiple love scenes between her and her lovers ranging from small acts of affection as kissing, hugging, and cuddling to more intimate sexual acts. It is clear that Cosima is not *curious* about same-sex relations as she considers herself lesbian and it is just as clear that so far the other clones are heterosexual; therein lies the conflict. If gender identity and sexual orientation are something one is born with, i.e., something that happens at a genetic level, how can this theory be supported in the world of clones? Should not all of the clones share the same gender identity and sexual orientation? One could criticize this observation as something the viewer has to “let go of” to enjoy any work of fiction; for example one must “let go of” known understandings of physics to enjoy a film or show that involves space travel across the galaxy. However, while these representations are arguably included for shock-value, the effects are subtle and cumulative and add to a larger understanding of the human condition, just as representations of family life with two parents are seen as normative. Also interesting, and confusing, is that Sarah was raised in a foster home and that her foster brother is gay. So, if she grew up in an environment with a gay male, and is

heterosexual, and her clone, Cosima, who shared the same genetic make-up is gay, why did nurture play a role in Cosima's gender identity and not Sarah's?

Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (Logan, 2014), is a horror/ fantasy show in which the plot centers on a group of people brought together through circumstances to battle vampires (season one) and a group of satanic witches (season two) determined to initiate the biblical end of days. Set in Victorian England, the characters include creatures from folklore such as werewolves and vampires and from 19th Century literature such as Dr. Victor Frankenstein, and Dorian Gray. While this trope is not new (see the film and graphic novel series, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*), the creators' muse was the penny dreadful stories of the 19th century—a genre known for serial fiction that used lurid narratives of violence, murder, sex, occult and generally any topic despised by mainstream Victorian-era England whose market was the semi-literate lower classes of the time. There are also references to historical events such as discussions about the Jack the Ripper killings in 1888.

The character Dorian Gray played by Reeve Carney is central to this work and is based on Oscar Wilde's novel *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Through some work of the occult Dorian Gray has become immortal—the instrument of this immortality is an artist's portrait of Gray. As years pass, the image of Gray in the portrait ages while the he does not. The story describes Gray's descent into a libertine lifestyle and generally postulates that if faced with immortality, man is more likely to use that gift for bad than good. In the plotline of *Penny Dreadful*, Gray's character is *irresistible* in beauty and charm to women and men alike. He lives a decadent lifestyle having numerous sexual partners, and is wealthy. In season one, he has a sexual encounter with a male character who has indicated his is heterosexual, and in season two has been in a sexual relationship with cross-dressing male prostitute Angelique, played by Jonny Beauchamp, whose gender identity is as a woman and who is sexually attracted to men. Angelique reveals that she has always been this way and has suffered for it. Gray is not concerned about what others may think, and attends public functions with his new lover. *Penny Dreadful* airs on Showtime, the premium cable "status" of which allows for explicit heterosexual and same-sex sex scenes, adding to the voyeuristic shock value.

Throughout these heterosexual and same-sex sexual encounters we are given the impression that Dorian Gray's motives for such behavior are of *boredom*. His motives for sex with any and all partners are that of adventure. As described in Wilde's book, and works that include the trope of immortality, companionship is hard to come by. Your friends age—you do not; your lovers age and will die—you do not. It can therefore be argued that the subtle message here is that one may experiment with all types of sexual encounters simply out of boredom, i.e. a box that has not been "checked" on some sort of a life-experience card or bucket list. This representation is situated outside of what we assume about gender identity or at least outside of a *permanent* gender identity, and therefore raises interesting questions about the understanding of gender identity by the creators of, and con-

sumers of, such representations. It should be mentioned that discussion of Oscar Wilde's intentions and allusions to homoerotica in his original book is outside the scope of this work. An Internet search will reveal ongoing discourse about those intentions and allusions.

NBC's *Aquarius* (McNamara, 2015) offers yet another version of what gender identity and sexual orientation may encompass. Set in 1960s Los Angeles, *Aquarius* is a cop drama that centers on a police detective played by David Duchovny who is searching for the missing daughter of a former girlfriend who is now married to a high-powered attorney. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the daughter has "joined" a hippie commune headed by Charles Manson, played by Gethin Anthony. We discover that this is not a coincidence as the attorney once defended Manson in a case that led to Manson serving prison time for a drug possession charge. The father defended Manson because they had a previous relationship where Manson supplied drugs and young girls for powerful political figures at parties hosted by the father's law firm, and thus Manson received a lighter sentence for his silence so-to-speak. The implication is that, unknown to the daughter, Manson is using her in a revenge plot against the attorney father.

Representations of LGBTQ in *Aquarius* are complicated by the time period as is *Penny Dreadful*. There are numerous scenes of Manson's "girls" kissing one another and having bisexual sexual encounters with him. While restricted by network television censorship rules, there is a viewer discretion disclaimer in the opening credits, and again, there is shock-value in these representations. Same-sex and bisexual relations are presented as "sign of the times" in that the hippie culture of the late 1960s was one of *free love* where a human being's expression of love and therefore sex is connected to the universe at large. To Manson and his followers, these sexual acts are *countercultural acts of rebellion* and say more about political and social agency, and say less about personal sexual identity. However, this is even further complicated when it is revealed that the attorney/father had previously engaged in sexual relations with Manson, and, when going to the commune to confront Manson, has sex with him again. We see the well-visited trope of the heterosexual male with latent same-sex desires who, because of the time-period and his social and political status, cannot act on his desires. Manson's actions—whether same-sex or heterosexual—are about "becoming free" and unmooring himself and his followers from the dominant culture. Furthermore, he uses the same-sex encounters with the attorney as fodder for blackmail and revenge.

### *Discussion*

Five different versions of representation of LGBTQ surfaced in the three television shows previously summarized. In *Orphan Black*, a cloned woman is gay, but her clones are not—ergo same-sex attraction may be brought about by environmental variables since they all share the same genetic code. Yet Sarah, the main character



Sarah, grew up with someone who is gay, but she and all of the other clones the story has revealed thus far is not. *Orphan Black* seems to be confused as to whether nature or nurture has an effect on gender identity and sexual preference.

In *Penny Dreadful*, Dorian Gray has same-sex encounters because it is what he wants in that moment. It is a whimsical act that relieves the boredom that comes with immortality. Yet his lover was “born that way” and does not have same-sex encounters out of choice. For Angelique there is no choice.

In *Aquarius*, same-sex acts are represented in multiple ways. First, they are a byproduct of the hippie-peace-love movement of the counterculture of 1960s youth and are presented as natural in the commune organism where everyone shares everything. Second, same-sex acts are latent in all people, since the young girls of Manson’s commune seem to come to it naturally, and the attorney may have been living a lie as a heterosexual male. We might also consider that Manson’s character engages in same-sex and heterosexual acts as a means of manipulation. What is clear in all of these representations is the characters engage in same-sex experiences by *choice*. This is counterintuitive in a society where LGBTQ culture is seemingly more accepted.

### Emphatic Dissonance in Popular Culture

The authors argue that the representations discussed above follow a typical arc in popular culture. Cultural shifts occur when the dominant social structure accept those social structures outside the norm, in this case structures related to LGBTQ culture, and that those shifts follow a seeming step-by-step process that we label *emphatic dissonance*. For any form of cultural shift to occur, representations must first reveal the stereotypes that the dominant culture already attaches to such cultures, i.e. stereotypes with which the dominant culture is comfortable. Later, representations evolve into demonstrating more complex structures that more closely represent the reality exhibited by those cultures. When these shifts take place, the dominant culture viewer—in this case, the heterosexual—can achieve a level of empathy and possible acceptance of what was previously an unaccepted culture. While some Queer Theorists may believe that sexual minorities should not be concerned with how dominant cultures view them, perhaps they should. Furthermore, the same logic follows that without those early stereotypical representations—albeit abhorrent—the evolution to emphatic dissonance would not take place.

The process of emphatic dissonance is not necessarily a clean process. In fact it is likely that the process includes considerable tensions and friction as viewers grapple with the new information presented in such representations. However, emphatic dissonance may be a positive process in that there seems to be a favorable impact on the cultural acceptance of subordinate cultures—albeit a seemingly time-consuming process.

We can apply this emphatic dissonance to LGBTQ representations in television,

in a show such as *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). Will's (Eric McCormack) friend Jack (Sean Hayes), exhibits most of the stereotypes accepted by normative, heterosexual culture of the non-heterosexual male. His speech is somewhat effeminate as are his body language, gestures, and interactions with other characters, particularly the character of Karen played by Megan Mullally. Both Will and Jack are single in terms of relationship and many of the plotlines explore the trials and tribulations of their dating. The same can be said for the stereotypes present in the Hollywood film *Philadelphia* (1993) in which the main character played by Tom Hanks listened to opera music, hosted costume parties in which many of the male attendants were in drag, and held a white-collar, professional occupation. Those tropes afford a comfort level for heterosexual viewers that lays the foundation for emphatic dissonance to take place.

To follow the logical progression of emphatic dissonance, we can compare *Will & Grace* to *Modern Family* (2009-present). Contra to *Will & Grace*, the gay couple in *Modern Family* (Mitchell and Cam played by Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Eric Stonestreet respectively), are in a monogamous relationship, own a house, and have adopted a child. They wrestle with the expected challenges and celebrations of family life of a heterosexual couple. These storylines are combined with what the dominant non-heterosexual culture would consider normative storylines and dialogue. For example, the couple often refers to each other as "drama queens". These representations could not exist, i.e. be accepted by the dominant culture, without those in *Will & Grace* occurring *first*. Furthermore, we would argue that *Modern Family* could not have existed successfully in the era that *Will & Grace* aired. Interestingly, *Modern Family*'s Gloria played by Sofia Vergara is on her own emphatic dissonance arc although at an earlier point. Gloria is portrayed as the provocatively dressed, broken English-speaking, Latina female stereotype often seen in popular culture (Mastro, 2009). This typical arc is witnessed in other shifts in American popular culture, most notably in representations of African Americans that have taken place over decades (Merritt, & Stroman, 1993). We could argue that the representations in *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977), or *Good Times* (1974-1979), both of which involved African American stereotypes, were necessary on the emphatic dissonance continuum. In *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) the main characters of Cliff and Clair Huxtable are a doctor and a lawyer respectively, contrasting sharply with the occupations of the junk dealer in *Sanford and Son* and the laborer in *Good Times*. Of course, the stereotypical representations go beyond occupations and encompass language usage, portrayal of family life, etc.

To bolster this point, television producer and creator Norman Lear has stated in numerous interviews (see for example his interview with Oprah Winfrey available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_Wo19518jI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_Wo19518jI)) that a meeting with leaders of the Black Panther Party influenced the development of *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). The Jefferson family members were peripheral characters on Lear's hit show *All in the Family* (1971-1979). Lear stated that he had already intended a

spin-off show for the Jefferson family, when he was asked to meet with members of the Black Panthers. Their complaint that while one of Lear's other creations, *Good Times* (1974-1979), was the only show on at the time in which a traditional African American family were the central characters where the father worked three jobs to support the family. Lear changed the setting for *The Jeffersons* title characters from owning one dry-cleaning shop and living in the same neighborhood as the Bunkers of *All in the Family* to owning several stores and living in a high-end area of New York City.

When considering the difference in the trajectory of emphatic dissonance between the examples of race and LGBTQ culture, it seems that the time necessary for emphatic dissonance to take place is abbreviated. This is to say, it seems that the time is accelerated, in that it takes less and less time for the effects to take place. In the case of race, emphatic dissonance did not end, for example, with *The Cosby Show*. Numerous shows have been, and are being produced challenging the dominant cultures understanding of race relations, LGBTQ culture, and now with disability as seen in ABC's *Speechless* (2016- present). *Speechless* is a situation comedy that deals with the daily challenges and celebrations of a family that has a son with cerebral palsy. It is also possible that the process of emphatic dissonance is never-ending. That is to say, full acceptance may never be achieved through the process and it is realistic to view prejudice, tolerance, and acceptance on a spectrum, like it or not. This by no means refutes the theory.

Through emphatic dissonance, individuals grapple with the subculture, often the "other," in society. This grappling causes the individual to question his or her established beliefs about the "other." In doing so, a new set of more tolerant or accepting beliefs emerge. Though the process requires the initial presentation of what can be considered unsettling stereotypes, emphatic dissonance may be necessary for many in the dominant culture to re-examine its belief systems concerning diverse populations.

## Conclusion

Popular culture has increasingly depicted LGBTQ individuals' lives through stereotypical representations. Although such stereotypes can be troubling, they serve a necessary role in engendering more tolerant beliefs about non-heterosexual identities. In the three examples discussed, the disparities in these representations become obvious. These representations can be catalysts for creating a space for education and for understanding and toleration to take place, in the space we label empathetic dissonance.

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