Bryce J. Renninger

Book Review: Samuel A. Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*

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With *The Queer Politics of Television*, Samuel A. Chambers, Associate Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University is on a mission to make the seminal texts in gender and theory relevant within his own field. In his previous work, Chambers has applied Judith Butler, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics* (Routledge 2008) and novel approaches to temporality, *Untimely Politics* (NYU Press, 2003) to contemporary political theory. For Chambers, making political theory “relevant” is a concern not to be taken lightly. Justifying his use of the term “cultural politics” to frame his readings of television texts, Chambers says:

> Cultural politics also proves much broader than the mere analysis of cultural artefacts for their political dimensions... No doubt, culture is political in this way, but to say that culture is political cannot be the end of the analysis. And not all cultural artefacts are worthy of study: merely being in the matrix does not mean much when one recognizes that everything is in the matrix.1

This is indeed a scholarly tradition that has proven to have merits. While Chambers proves that he has read the canonical texts by making passing references to the foundational theorists of culture, he also smartly recognizes that there are those who question the meaning or the possibility of a “cultural politics.”2 From his awareness of the field as it stands, one would expect Chambers to provide an analysis of queer television that was aware of the academic work in the field of television studies, which has been especially strong in critical analyses of the texts with which he engages, like *Six Feet Under* and *The L Word*, as well as those he virtually ignores, like *Ellen*, *Will & Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.

In discussing his methodology, Chambers notes that his approach lies with scholars who focus on the interpretation of the cultural artefact as text, relying on the popular understanding within cultural studies of the “continuity between television as a meaning-making artefact and other literary forms.”3 With a nod towards the three elements of cultural studies research (political economy studies, textual analysis, and audience studies), Chambers commits to the primacy of textual analyses in studying contemporary queer TV images. He does concede, though,
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“I sometimes elucidate controversies surrounding the shows or analyse the political context in which they appear. Nonetheless, my overall concern lies more with the political possibilities of the reading I offer and less with the historical impact that the text may or may not have had upon its original publication (or airing).”

Thus, Chambers sets himself up to be driven by his personal analyses of the shows; this becomes problematic in such cases as his analysis of The L Word, where he slips in and out of properly framing citations from the lesbian entertainment blog AfterEllen.com as coming from an entertainment news blog with a broad “fan” audience.

In foregrounding the textual analysis of television shows, Chambers engages in a methodology that privileges his own perspective as analyst of popular culture over that of the perspectives of the cultural actors involved in the production and reception of the shows: producers, audiences, and publics alike. This particular approach both strengthens and weakens Chambers’s assessment of the queer politics of TV. For example, in Chapter 1, “Telepistemology of the Closet,” Chambers uses Six Feet Under to explicate the ramifications of Eve Sedgwick’s central arguments about the closet in her landmark book The Epistemology of the Closet. In so doing, Chambers looks at not only how the show portrays David (Michael C. Hall), the show’s featured “gay” character navigating the boundaries of the closet but he also looks at how the show portrays other characters living with part of their lives shrouded behind “closet” doors. Not much is gained, however, by looking at these questions through a retrofitting of the structures of Sedgwick’s closet onto Six Feet Under. Rather, this examination provides a reappropriated reading of the closet. As a result, it is less of an original study and more of a useful critique for those who, just approaching Sedgwick’s text, find it hard to unpack or to understand as a full critique of the culture surrounding identity politics.

In his two chapters about the concept of heteronormativity, Chambers is charting similarly well-worn territory. In Chapter 3, he does well to critique the two demands made by The L Word’s audiences: first, that the show be more representative of the greater community of queer women and, second, that it be an accurate or believable representation of lived lesbian life for the types of characters involved. While these critiques have been put in other terms before, especially within fan communities and amongst producers of LGBT media, Chambers’s analysis of identity politics and pop culture proves he is an able voice for a concise discussion of these issues. This chapter is particularly effective because he adds the voices of the show’s online fan communities. As noted before, his presentation of these citations is problematic, but they work to present the political reality of being a spectator of the show, presenting an opportunity to see a perspective beyond political potentiality. Chapter 4, on the other hand, which is situated more in the political economy of the production and marketing of Desperate Housewives, is less persuasive because it is predicated on understanding the straight women of Wisteria Lane as queer characters, an argument made with limited evidence.

Finally, in his chapters on queerness and family, Chambers treats Joss Whedon as auteur of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, but his analysis of that show becomes a didactic one, based on a straightforward discussion of the author’s intention. Chambers ignores the rich body of fan texts surrounding the series because he chooses as his site of analysis an episode which held great importance for Whedon but did not provoke much discussion by the fan communities he researched. Chambers’s final chapter starts off as a promising comparison of marriage rights discourse in lived reality and the rhetoric of polygamist marriage in Big Love. However, all that is mustered is a comparison of queer politics with that of the fundamentalist politics represented in the show. Lost in this analysis is a more complete understanding of the show’s producers, epitomized by the show’s frequent writer, the Oscar-winning Dustin Lance Black, a gay-identified ex-Mormon, and a comparison between the fundamentalist politics in the show and that of real-life religious polygamists.

Chambers has written a book that asks compelling questions, but ultimately, is too
inconsistent in methodology and scope to be useful for one broad audience. While there are arguments well suited to undergraduates in courses on sexuality and media studies, there are arguments whose limits prevent them from being useful beyond introductory television and queer studies students because they resist making use of the wide variety of scholarship in these disciplines, a task that many in an array of fields writing in this realm are taking the care to do.

Bryce J. Renninger is a Ph.D. student at Rutgers University. He is also a contributing writer to the independent film trade website indieWIRE and a programmer for NewFest: New York’s LGBT Film Festival.

Endnotes

2 Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, 5
3 Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, 19
4 Chambers, *The Queer Politics of Television*, 20