Mike J. Pence

Book Review:
{Sean Griffin, Ed., Hetero: Queering Representations of Straightness
State University of New York, 2009

Utilizing Judith Butler’s *Gender Troubles* and Richard Dyer’s works on representation, *Hetero: Queering Representations of Straightness*, edited by Sean Griffin, an associate professor in the Division of Cinema-Television at Southern Methodist University, is a unique exploration of cinematic representations not meant to be coded as homosexual, though queered that way regardless. In *White*, when Dyer analyzed whiteness in relation to blackness he discovered that, as Griffin paraphrases, “part of whiteness’s power is its practical invisibility” (4). Similarly, Griffin’s goal in this collected work is to show that “queer theory needs to draw out the bland, white bread, vanilla, missionary position, monogamous, married, patriarchal form of heterosexuality and point it out as much a social construct as any minoritized sexuality” (4). Heterosexuality is argued throughout the book as being represented monolithically in cinema, presenting itself as being the normal course of life, yet when analyzed deeper is fraught with complex issues, exposing the façade and anxieties that accompany heterosexual representation.

Arranged chronologically, and with varying degrees of success, *Hetero* provides as much useful historical background as it does critical analysis. The opening essay, “Stop the Wedding: William Haines and the Comedy of the Closet” by Victoria Sturtevant, is the most thoroughly informative and engaging essay in the collection. Gaines, an early silent film star, continually cast and represented as being the pinnacle of ideal masculinity, was also one of the first “openly gay” film stars. Sturtevant discusses how Gaines’ performances, which were at the time lauded for their idealized, if somewhat overblown, depictions of masculinity, were actually in their hyper-heterosexuality and “aggressiveness” (32) critiques of the heterosexual façade. Conceptually, Sturtevant is not bringing anything new to the conversation or reading into new representations of masculinity, and she instead relies on concepts that have been passed on from the likes of Butler, Dyer, et al. Analyzing this essay in an historical framework, however, reveals its most important contribution, highlighting the importance of the hetero/queer conversation throughout film history and not relegating the subject to an issue of modern cinema.

Diane Negra, in “Time Crisis and the New Postfeminist Heterosexual Economy,” skillfully chronicles the concept of “time panic” in women arguing that in a woman’s many life stages — childhood, “tween” years, marriage, and midlife — “Crisis and fulfillment…center on the discovery of personal destiny, the securing of a heterosexual
romantic partner and motherhood and the negotiation of the problem of paid work” (173).

Women, Negra observes, constantly under pressure to continually satisfy these demands, “fortify male heterosexual desire as the cynosure for women's concepts of self and their consuming behavior” (174), and a woman’s perspective of age “recasts the pleasures and interests of adolescent boys as culturally universal” (180), forcing women into a situation with an impossible expectation. Focusing on an obsession with youth, Negra notices a trend of time-traveling romances such as *Kate & Leopold* (2001) and *The Lake House* (2006) that actively try to stifle or turn back time and reclaim it so that the limits of time become irrelevant. While not actively queering any representations of heterosexuality, Negra nevertheless uncovers a potent source of anxiety women face in attempting to assimilate to patriarchal society, ultimately concluding that “the various manifestations and permutations of postfeminist hegemony with regard to time and aging proscribe heterosexual female identity in punishing and heavily regimented ways” (186).

Closing out the volume is “A Straight Cowboy Movie: Heterosexuality According to *Brokeback Mountain*,” by Harry Benshoff, who discusses this film contrary to popular analysis and frames it within the parameters of a heterosexual film, and rightly determines that *Brokeback Mountain*’s risqué and resonance comes not from its depictions of homosexuality, but rather how the “constitutive traits of heteronormativity – rigid and hierarchical gender roles, silence, and the threat of violence – construct and maintain compulsory heterosexuality” (238). In other words, *Mountain* resounds not because of the gratuitousness of homosexuality or sentiment of love, but in how it subverts gender roles defined by patriarchal society. Juxtaposing this with Sturtevant’s essay allows for an intriguing historical analysis. Where homosexuality as a character trait was repressed by patriarchal society to the point of being withheld in Gaines’ films, homosexuality is now explicitly represented, but is determined to still be under the oppression of dominant ideology, allowing homosexuality a place only on the fringes of society where it can be locked away, hidden, and forgotten. Benshoff’s essay adroitly furthers the conversation on heteronormative anxieties, arguing that patriarchy’s repression affects not just the expression of “non-normative” sexualities, but also that “traditional heteronormative patriarchy constructs a culture of silence for both men and women because speech is potentially challenging to the rigid roles of compulsory heterosexuality” (233). Benshoff convincingly argues that patriarchal society represses all people regardless of gender, sexuality, etc. With a well-structured argument, and a good bookend to accompany Sturtevant’s opening essay, this is a strong essay to finish the collection.

In a case of unfortunate formatting, the essays immediately following and preceding the strong opening and concluding essays are the weakest in the collection. Mary Beth Haralovich’s “Flirting with Hetero Diversity: Film Promotion of A Free Soul” is a disappointing follow-up to Sturtevant’s opening essay, and begins an unfortunate trend of inconsistency that continues throughout Hetero. A case study of the one-sheet advertisement of the 1931 film *A Free Soul* is meant to look “deeper into the heterosexual impulses of classical Hollywood film promotion to explore the quality of desire and the diversity of available heterosexuality”(37), but this never fully gels. Haralovich rightly address the representations of heterosexual masculinity and their sexual implications, stating that the engagement between Jan (Norma Shearer) and Dwight (Leslie Howard) is white-bread, homogenous, and boring, while the affair between Jan and Ace (Clark Gable), a character represented as hypermasculine, darker, and exotic, is exciting and “dangerous”(41). While these conclusions are insightful, they are not new, and what Haralovich fails to do in this essay is situate her arguments and analysis within larger contexts and explain why her conclusions are important. Haralovich is ultimately restating, not furthering, an argument which has been made before. “Fuck Boy Meets Girl: Heterosexual Aspirations and Masculine Interests in the World of Quentin Tarantino,” by Allan Campbell, is a problematic entry preceding the strong closing essay by Benshoff. Attempting to queer heterosexual representations in Tarantino’s work and his celebrity persona, Campbell’s argument quickly dissolves into a mix of academic writing and gossip column, where he discusses Tarantino’s sexual relationships with filmmaker...
BOOK REVIEW

Alison Anders, actress Mira Sorvino, and comedienne Margaret Cho, which by all outward appearances were normal, heterosexual couplings, therefore confusing and muddling his argument. Campbell notices an unusual trend in Tarantino’s work of the near exclusion of a primary or secondary love story, and he uses that observation to attempt to queer Tarantino’s heterosexual representations, though he is ultimately unable to support his claim with any substantial evidence. The homosexual subtext Campbell attempts to elicit from Tarantino’s work continually fails to delve far below the surface, leaving him grasping for straws.

Despite the inconsistencies of *Hetero* there is much to be gained by reading this collection. The majority of the essays complicates and extends the conversation about heterosexual representation, especially in pinpointing cases of male heterosexual anxiety, not just towards homosexual subtexts but also toward female competence and influence. Adrienne L. McLean’s article, “Putting ‘Em Down Like a Man: Eleanor Powell and the Spectacle of Competence,” chronicles the career of Powell, a notoriously virtuosic dancer, whom McLean argues never achieved the level of stardom she deserved because her tenacity and independence did not mesh with the image of female subordination to men and love that so characterized classical Hollywood cinema. As McLean writes, “(Powell’s) very inability to become something other than herself – a virtuoso dancer who did not need male partners for support, for pleasure, or for inspiration – ultimately reduced her value” (102). Powell was therefore a source of anxiety for male audiences who were unwilling to accept an independent and competent female star. For those interested in issues of representation, and are intrigued by masculinity, (post)feminism, or queer theory, *Hetero* is a useful contribution to the field, containing articles with unique concepts and arguments. *Hetero* is also an excellent place to begin a study of gender and sexual representation, providing solid historical background to the field and written in an accessible and engaging style.

---

Mike J. Pence is a first year Critical Studies M.A. in the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts. His current area of interest involves exploring the complexities of masculine representation in American comedy.