

JUMP CUT

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The futures of queer televisions

by [Jack Halberstam](#) with Joëlle Rouleau

Jack Halberstam: Good afternoon. I'm Jack Halberstam, a professor of English and gender studies at Columbia University. And I'm excited to be talking to you about queer television today.

Joëlle Rouleau: We are looking at this paradox of queer television about 'what's happening with television?' or 'what's happening with queer and trans identities regarding television?'

JH: If you think back, I don't know maybe 10 years, it seemed like television was going into a decline. Netflix primarily functioned as a service to deliver movies into people's homes, and it seemed possible that people wouldn't go to cinemas any longer. They'd just stay home and watch a range of pre-selected products. Then along came streaming platforms to revitalize TV. This shift has had good and bad implications for the representation of queer and trans bodies.

The technologies through which queer and trans lives have been represented has always been important. Going back to the 1990's if you think about a book like Alex Juhasz *AIDS TV*, we see the confluence between the AIDS crisis and the hand-held camera. For that reason, there were multiple documentaries of the activism associated with the AIDS crisis. Portable cameras allowed in later years for films, but also on-the-spot material to circulate about the kind of political action that people were taking in response to an indifferent government around this health crisis. So, going back some twenty, thirty years, we can see that the platform for representation has had massive implications for the way queers and trans lives are represented.

In the context of television's new era of popularity, we might ask about what difference it makes to turn to the small screen, the private screen, the home-centered screen or even the hand-held screen. Film has always been an ambiguous genre for queer representation—the history of cinema is, after all, the history of censorship. However, queer cinema did emerge in the 1990's as a vital, experimentally rich mode of representation—but just as quickly, it became a route to mainstream representation for LGT figures and stories.

So new format, new representational potential, new platform, good and bad outcomes— that would be of sort of my take away.

Let's continue along this line. One thing to remember is that back in the 70s when TV stepped up its level of popularity as a form of media— electronic media (I guess electric media)—is that a lot of alternative communities hated TV and the television became a sign of corporate dominance. I remember watching *Times Square*, a queer film in the early 80s about two runaway girls who hung out together in NYC and, one of their signature acts of rebellion was to push old TV's off roof tops. *Kill your TV* was a punk slogan in the 1970s. So, in songs like "TV Killed the Radio", the idea is that with each new platform, the old platform is sort of a nostalgically endowed with the warm glow of an earlier era when media was simpler, and we were less manipulated and all of that. So, we might have expected that by now television would have fallen into that happily nostalgic category of a media form that is over and done with and fondly remembered. Instead, what's happened, and this is super interesting, is that radio and TV, older media, have exponentially developed and grown and alongside all of the digital media. Television is an amazingly versatile form that—probably because of the ubiquity and the flexibility of digital platforms— has been reconditioned for a new era.

JR: Let's just jump on that: What are the possibilities offered by series that portray trans-identities and representation? How does this flexibility, offered by seriality, affect how we represent something? Some series experiment with very complex storylines and can do so because they have the time, because they can develop this complex world.

JH: Exactly as you say, television can do something that film can't do right now because it offers longer duration—serialized narratives for example, in which multiple plots lines can develop at once and narratives can twist and turn. In fact, people get deeply addicted to television series in ways reminiscent of the serialized literary forms of early industrial capitalism. The serial form pioneered in the 19th century was designed literally to seduce readership through the use of a narrative structure that would peak, create a cliffhanger, resolve, then build again, peak, cliffhanger, resolve. And truthfully a lot of the TV that we watch now rises and falls to these same rhythms while maybe lacking the courage to really commit to the cliff-hanger—especially in an era of tell-all/spoiler websites. But the drama of serial unfolding is very much a part of contemporary long-form shows, beginning with *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* but continuing to British procedurals like *Broadchurch* and *Happy Valley* and then being given a real work out in fantastic new work such as Michaela Cole's *I May Destroy You*—a truly inventive, daring and, yes, destructive show in which the main

character unravels, hallucinates, collapses and then manages to wreak revenge upon her abuser all while unmaking the genre itself.

In a television series, you can tell much more complicated stories, slowly, and you can avoid being limited to good or bad versions of any given character. In the past, in cinema, as a result of the Production Code era, gays and trans figures were required to be represented within a moral framework; it had to be clear that the film within which they appear considers them abhorrent, immoral, and corrupt figures. You had a kind of moral universe in which the queer or the trans person had to be bad. And then, almost by way of correction, new LGBT films tried to offer impossibly “good” or positive characters. Neither one of those is desirable for the representation of, you know, what we might call complex personhood.

JR: Exactly. There's something to be afraid of in this over-celebrating of positive representation.

JH: Absolutely, and you were mentioning the gender-queer character of Taylor Amber Mason (played by Asia Kate Dillon) in *Billions*. In Emily Nussbaum's great article on *Billions* in the *New Yorker*, she worried that in this representation of the universe of high-stakes banking, even though it seems obvious that everyone is implicated in corrupt practices, Taylor, because they are gender non-binary, they figure as the good guy to the boss, Axe's bad guy. As his name suggests, Axe is the bad version of a capitalism out for money at all cost and Taylor is supposed to represent a human face or some kind of ethical commitment. If Taylor is supposed to represent a more ethical kind of banking, which is dubious, Nussbaum worries that this then sets up the gender non-binary person to be an impossibly moral person.

But what this argument obscures is that in either case whether we're talking about Taylor, Taylor's Banking Company or Axe's, we're still talking about exploitive predatory practices that have absolutely nothing to do with social justice. This is one of those sleights of hands that Hollywood or mainstream TV often engages in. The pure fact of representing someone who is alternative, is seen as progressive.

JR: That would you say is Soloway's take on this? How do *Transparent* or *I love Dick* differ from this?

JH: Do you mean, how does a queer and trans produced show deal with the positive/negative character breakdown? Is there a different moral structure to the universe of *Transparent*? I think the answer is yes and no. And you mentioned both *Transparent* and *I love Dick* but I think they are really different examples.

I personally hated *I love Dick* and thought that it was a bit embarrassing for a number of different reasons. The most obvious reason is that the book *I love Dick* by Chris Kraus is an epistolary novel. It's a book about letters that the obsessed author writes to the object of her crush: Dick. And I think in a way Soloway didn't reckon with the form of the novel and the dynamism that the novel draws from this form. The book is a fantastic read, sexy and obsessive, deeply literary and interested in narrative as seduction. But the adaptation to TV reduced everything to a series of sort of cringe-worthy sex scenes and made the Dick character totally unremarkable as an object of desire. Kathryn Hahn and Kevin Bacon are amazing actors, so it is too bad that they lost in this mess of a series.

Transparent I think offers a much more complicated viewing experience because it does cover a lot of ground that an urban queer or trans viewer might find fairly urgent, fairly authentic. It deals with storylines that actually we're quite interested in. Also, there are no impossibly good characters and bad characters. And it's such a relief therefore to be in a TV world where people do bad things for bad reasons sometimes and good things for good reasons. Maura is a finely drawn character who learns over time and who fucks up and disappoints people and conveys a subtle balance of narcissism and care. The show went completely to hell in the last season, when they all went to Israel, so I am not really talking about that but in the penultimate season, season 3, Maura has to confront something that many trans people have to face but that is almost never represented in mainstream material on transgender experience. In a poignant scene in a doctor's office, a scene that is so much a part of trans life due to the surgeries and hormone treatments that transgender people want, a doctor tells her why he cannot perform Sex Reassignment Surgery on her due to a heart problem. Maura, for whom this surgery obviously figures centrally in her transition, now has to confront the fact that she will not be able to live in a body of her choosing. This experience, not being able to access surgery or to take hormones, is central to many transgender people's journeys and so, confronting the fact that there is no surgical magic bullet available is a really believable and interesting place for the show to land. It refuses the arc of transition in some way and leaves us in the messy middle.

Now the visual medium in particular has a hard time with the messy middle because there is a kind of double investment in passing—first, in order to represent a conventionally attractive male or female subject and second to invest in the otherwise unacknowledged visual pleasure that so much visual cultures derive from gender normativity on screen. In a nutshell, if a character does not pass, then every shot is about this failure. But if the character can pass, then there's a tendency as the narrative goes on to absorb the transness of the character back into the visual template of normativity. So, the visual medium is in so many ways a very difficult medium for the representation of all kinds of trans experiences. The indeterminacy of many trans people basically means that they cannot appear or disappear in the context of our visual regime. So, I happen to think that that *Transparent* made a real contribution to televisual complexity by representing trans ambiguity.

And in that same season, the series offers a nice set of references about how privileged she is. This is important because up until then, the series has sort of presented Maura as struggling—struggling with her family and struggling with her identity and struggling with her embodiment. There's a

switch in season three that allows the show to blossom and take the character to new heights precisely by representing her in a negative light. Maura, in episode one of season three, is volunteering at the LGBT suicide hotline. She speaks to a desperate trans teen and botches the conversation. The teen, Elizah, hangs up so Maura speeds off into South Central Los Angeles in search of the teen and quickly finds herself in trouble. In interactions with a Black shop owner and some Latinas shopping nearby, Maura reveals herself to be someone who always imagines herself as central in the world—she is going to save someone and is full of self-importance. But she is the one who needs saving in the end and when she faints in the heat, lost and frustrated, she looks around bewildered and asks plaintively: “What’s wrong with me?” The answer here is not—you are trans, but rather, you are wealthy, sheltered, blind and completely cut off from the realities most people face.

I thought the episode was a very effective way of reminding us that a show about trans people isn't simply going to be a show about people who need help or people who are helping. The whole mechanism of helping gets pushed out of the way and we access the messy business of living.

Another sequence in *Transparent* of similar power follows Maura and her two daughters to the annual Michigan Women’s Music Festival. The daughters, like Maura, have complex relations to the categories of lesbian and woman. Michigan Women’s Music Festival is one of the most polarizing sites for the conflict that has emerged between trans exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS) and transfeminists. Soloway used the episode to allow various characters to unfold positions within the debate about Michigan’s trans-exclusive/women-only policies. And having aired this range of opinions, the show is still brave enough to show that simply representing all sides of a debate, in true liberal fashion, does not change the hard realities of the situation. In the end Maura, as a trans woman, feels completely unwelcome and she is forced to leave off the land. She’s furious, she’s disappointed, she feels wretched. She feels as if the place that she went to find community is just yet another place where she finds that she does not belong.

But what’s brilliant then, about the next sequences, is that Maura is picked up by Angelica Houston’s character—a straight woman who wanted to be at Michigan but found herself alienated in all kinds of ways, as maybe a straight woman who’s going to be accused of sleeping with the enemy or whatever. And weirdly, the two character’s sexual predilections and their bodily morphologies work because Maura is a pre-op trans woman and Angelica Houston’s character is an alternative straight woman; therefore, their bodies sort of match and we even witness an incredible, albeit uncomfortable, sex scene. That’s definitely a one-of-a-kind moment on television or even in cinema because it proposes that sex is prismatic, kaleidoscopic, it thrives on weird geometries rather than mutuality and complementarity.

More importantly, it reminds us that for people who do feel deeply alienated often by their trans embodiment and their sense that they have fallen out of multiple social orders, sometimes sex can be a way that trans bodies are pulled back pleasurably into relation. And I think it was quite a subtle way of resolving the tension which is lingering at this point between feminists who see trans women and men as traitors, and trans men and women who understand themselves as feminists.

JR: It’s very interesting because it brings up the complexity of sexuality, gender and sex. It’s not binary and nothing is binary.

JH: It’s not binary; once you’re in the world of trans, you’re out of the world of the binary. That’s so however much some trans men and women may just want to go stealth and represent themselves as normative men and women, which is their absolute right to do. But the minute that you’re in the realm of the reorganization of the recognizable normative body, you are out of the realm of the binary. And I think that’s in fact what has led the way to our current preoccupation with the non-binary. That’s why we have a character like Taylor on *Billions*. It’s precisely because capitalism is sort of relentless in relationship to these new bodily forms.

Capitalism can be relentless in its desire to monopolize new social forms. It’s just a matter of time before every sitcom has a non-binary character. So, we have to also be careful not to imagine—and this goes back to our conversation about *Billions*—that the appearance of a non-binary body here, a trans body there, a queer relationship somewhere else, signals new worlds of possibility. It might just indicate that capitalism has found its next market.

JR: Would that bring us to *Tangerine*?

JH: Now that would take us to *Tangerine*, a remarkable film that could easily fall into at least an expanded understanding of TV in the sense that it was shot on an iPhone and was literally made on a small screen. But that fact alone wouldn’t be enough to make it into an interesting example of queer or trans TV. Its effectiveness depends upon the way in which the director, Sean Baker, and the two actors, Kitana Kiki Rodriguez (Sin-Dee) and Mya Taylor (Alexandra) turn the smallness of the screen into a part of the narrative. The narrative itself is small, local and specific, local to the point of highlighting not Hollywood per se but just a corner in Hollywood. We meet Sin-Dee and Alexandra in not “Hollywood,” the movie industry, but Hollywood, the neighborhood. This is a beautiful riff about what Hollywood is, because we have this sort of heterotopic understanding of Hollywood as a non-place of cultural production, of hegemonic cultural production. In reality, the actual geographic area known as Hollywood is a fairly down-at-heel part of Midtown LA populated by homeless people, sex workers and donut shops. That is the world that we’re introduced to in *Tangerine*.

You can critique the film for representing trans women of color only in relation to sex work, but there is a harsh reality there about the ways in which trans women of color can and cannot access the possibility of making a living in a labor market that has no place for such bodies. However, you can also redeem the film in the sense that it doesn’t give us one sex worker and it doesn’t represent her as

tragic. It gives us two and their friends, and they're actually in this anarchic, rollicking, fantastic zone of play.

In terms of the representation of trans bodies, it's quite significant that in *Tangerine*, there are two women. For much of the history of representing trans bodies, cinema in particular has been content to offer you one trans body. And for the most part that trans body has been represented as mad, bad, and dangerous. You only have to think of *Dressed to Kill* from 1980 by Brian De Palma where Michael Caine plays a serial killer by night who is a frustrated transsexual and a psychoanalyst by day. Or *Silence of the Lambs* where the serial killer who plays opposite the cerebral, more desirable killer of Hannibal Lecter, is a certifiable psychopath who's also transsexual and kidnaps women because he wants to starve them and flay them and wear their skin. In the past, the only transsexual that we saw on screen were depicted as pathological because their condition was impossible, and because it was impossible, they enacted a kind of violent will upon the world.

So the contemporary moment is interesting for the way in which we have completely stepped away from that entire realm of representation. And we have a lot of queer TV peopled with so-called normal LGT characters. *Tangerine*, however, resisted the lure of the normal and instead offered two, memorable characters who fight, take drugs, take a white woman hostage, confront errant boyfriends and, most importantly, love each other.

JR: You know, that's the big question.... How does queer theory enable us to better understand multiple situations where the television narrative produces or does not produce a questioning of the hegemonic representation? Like how can we use queer theory to do exactly this: question and not abide by this normative or reproduction of homonormative or heteronormative storyline?

JH: Well, honestly queer theory has been engaged with the question of the popular from its inception. The late Alexander Doty's early work was about the popular. Patricia White, fantastic film theorist, has dissected beautifully Hollywood cinema. One of her great essays is about the way in which queer characters appear throughout Hollywood cinema, even in the production code era, and there are a number of different coded ways in which they appear. The most obvious example would be that the lesbian often appears in the supporting role, as Mrs. Danvers to Rebecca or in some of the roles played by Mercedes McCambridge characters for example. There are lots and lots of queer theoretical books and essays that have thoroughly dissected the popular. Except for in its earliest form, when queer theory was preoccupied with hegemonic literature in English and American traditions that was both canonical and queer, like Walt Whitman, E. M. Forster, Oscar Wilde and so on—apart from that very short era, most of what we would call queer theory has offered theoretical models with which to engage with the hegemonic in pleasurable ways, but also to dissect them.

I mean, I've written at length about the popular mostly through the category of either children's literature or queer animation to make the point that some of the most easily consumable mass-market material like Pixar animations, for example, or the early CGI animations, are just saturated with queer material precisely because they have to appeal to the antic sensibility of children. And children, whatever they may be and whatever they may become, they're not born into the world as heterosexual. And therefore, those realms are just teeming with queer characters—whether it's a drag queen in the third version of Shrek or whether it's a really important relationship between like Dory and Nemo or whether it's the queerness of Dory herself, voiced by the very openly queer Ellen DeGeneres and so on.

A lot of queer theory has not subscribed to the kind of Adorno critique of the culture industry as always and only a force of hyper-capitalized seduction that basically smooths over political unrest with this kind of soporific, palliative, endless production of films and TV shows that reduce us to couch potatoes and stop us from rising up. Right? And there's still so much to say about the concept of the culture industry, especially because however embedded we were in the cultural industry when Adorno and Horkheimer were thinking about it, we are beyond saturated now. It would be very difficult to figure out who we are separate from our multiple implications in many forms of media on a daily basis. So, we do need a kind of updated version of the culture industry, but I think it would be wrong to simply cast the popular as in some way the realm of the degraded, the debased, and the co-opted and then to represent the avant-garde as a place of refuge.

And at this point, we can no longer distinguish between the refuge of the avant-garde and the seduction of the mass market. There are no longer clear distinctions between high and low. So that's a world in which TV can thrive, you see. Because when TV was low to cinema's high, there was a distribution of a kind of visual affect. Where the distinction between high and low has collapsed, as we've said all along in this conversation, you're going to get both complete and utter media dominance but you will also find that the very media that you're soaking in also contains within it lots of exit routes.

JR: That's so interesting. I guess we would be at the takeaway, or is there anything else you wanted to talk about that we didn't address?

JH: You know, I think we've mostly talked about what has been called a kind of "Prestige TV", even as it's recognized as fairly trashy. *Billions* and *Transparent* and a lot of the series within which we do find very reasonable representations of queer and trans people are Prestige TV. It's important to also look at the other forms of TV like *Queer Eye*. It was interesting to me that *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* made a comeback in the last two years, having been a kind of blip on the radar some ten years ago and having been a sensation at the very beginning of the arc that we're now on the other side of, where TV began its climb back up into a competing platform within the visual regime that we inhabit. *Queer Eye* amazingly has been remade for this era but while its original interventions were quite disruptive because they usually staged interventions into white, cis-normative masculinity, they are

now merely opportunities for market dynamics—ways of selling products and brands. We get improvement cloaked as liberation, marketability cloaked as taste, new bodily regimes cloaked as hygiene.

That's what all of these HGTV shows are about as well. These new, “fix up your home,” “change your furniture” shows, when what we're really looking at is just the spectacle of real estate and consumption and the market, so when we watch those shows and when we watch *Queer Eye*, we're watching the very obvious emergence of a queer market (one I might add that has been there all along).

I think it's very important to remember that, even as we have four or five seasons of *Transparent* revolving around a trans character, we also have to recognize that queer and trans TV is in the business of making new markets on the one hand, catering to those markets on the other, and contributing to new televisual regimes within which it's not simply that the medium is the message: the medium is the market. In many ways, as *Queer Eye* shows, some versions of gayness are like Pied Piper figures leading everyone into the shopping mall.

And to go back to your point about queer theory, queer and trans theory without lapsing into a kind of Adorno elite critique of the false consciousness of the masses, we do have to be clear about the massive wave of production of homo and trans normativities and think carefully about what that might mean in the future.

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