

Queer Eye for the Urban Guy:  
Dominant Cinematic and Televisual Representations of Homosexuality

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In Ben Younger's 2000 film *Boiler Room*, one scene offers a particularly deft commentary on a kind of representational dichotomy surfacing in current representations of Manhattan and Manhattanites.

*In a crowded Manhattan bar, a group of young male stockbrokers are becoming loud, boisterous, and crass. At a nearby table, a group of young men are clearly disturbed by the noise, and so they ask the brokers to quiet down: "You're at a ten; we could use you at a two." Critiques are exchanged: the brokers insult the men's apparent homosexuality, while the gay men insult the brokers' bad taste and cheap suits. Finally, one of the cocky brokers says: "You know, I wish someone would just put all you guys on an island." The most vociferous of the gay men responds with: "Yeah. You're on it." The broker is silenced by this quip and the gay men smugly return to their dinner.*

The familiar images of the young turks of Wall Street – the financial cowboys, the “greed is good” warriors – are now being challenged by the increasingly hip and increasingly mainstream representations of gay men as paragons of style, fun and savvy. Of all the new television series of the past year, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* seems to have captured the most cachet, and has sharpened this construction of gay-man-as-urban-stylist. After breaking the Bravo! cable channel's ratings records, it has broken into the more mainstream ranks of NBC, with guest spots on *The Today Show*, *The Tonight Show*, and *Good Morning Miami*. Prime time NBC rebroadcasts of its episodes have garnered several million viewers. NBC has also integrated gay style reporter Steven Cojocarú into two of its flagship news programs, *The Today Show* and *Entertainment Tonight*.

Homosexuality, thanks to the likes of *Will and Grace*, *Spin City*, *ER*, *Queer as Folk*, *Sex in the City*, *Ellen* and *Six Feet Under*, is no longer absent from televisual representation,

but as highlighted by *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, homosexuality outside the urban landscape remains an unrecognized entity. The recent mainstream success of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* should inspire cultural critics to examine the ways in which homosexuality is being accepted and celebrated, but in a marginalizing, hegemonic framework. Mainstream cinematic and televisual representations of homosexuality are mapping a very restrictive urban setting onto male homosexuality which dictates a kind of ideological acceptance of only certain kinds of alternative sexuality.

In each episode the “Fab Five” of gay style gurus move from the Manhattan “Gay Street” to the suburban “Straight Street” (as the graphics for the opening credits indicate). “Gay Street” is always located firmly in Manhattan, while “Straight Street” is almost always Queens, Long Island, or some other outlying style-challenged suburb. Here, the stylists pounce on a straight guy who must be taken *back* to Manhattan to be remade as a stylish, cultured man through various purchases. Thus, the urban is firmly and explicitly identified as the domain of all that is stylish, current, and homosexual. Shows like *Will and Grace*, *Spin City*, and *Sex in the City* are all set in New York, while *Six Feet Under* and *The L Word* are set in Los Angeles. The ad campaign for *The L Word* is based primarily on this New York – L.A. duality, with a row of women standing Amazon-like over an L.A. skyline and the words: “Same sex. Different City.” This is a play on the popular New York comedy, “Sex and the City.” This same dynamic is true in film, which increasingly features gay characters, but only insofar as they appear in urban locations, usually in either L.A. or New York. *The Object of My Affection*, *As Good As It Gets*, *Best in Show*, and *My Best Friend’s Wedding* have all included gay male characters in New York, while *The Next Best Thing* and *Gods and Monsters* are set in Los Angeles.

A minority of gay representations are set in alternate locations (*Queer as Folk* is set in Pittsburgh, *Philadelphia* in Philadelphia, and *ER* in Chicago), but each of these is a distinctly urban setting, which places them in the same metropolitan category as Los Angeles and New York. The December 2004 issue of *Vanity Fair* capitalized on this trend with its “gay tv” spread, featuring actors and personalities who represent “gayness” on tv. They are all assembled against distinctly urban backdrops – a chainlink fence, alley, and concrete sidewalk, as well as an urban loft-style apartment. Recognizing the geographic dimension of current constructions of alternative sexualities presents us with a straightforward illustration of the centre-margins model being put forward, wherein a select few examples of “gayness” are located in urban centres while a broader range of alternatives is marginalized in rural settings.

Recent books such as *Gay New York* and *The Gay Metropolis* reinforce the idea that male homosexuality is an urban phenomenon, and that gay men are to be valued primarily for their contribution to capital “C” culture and the arts. Certainly, urban areas have a history of being more diverse and liberal, and providing a certain degree of anonymity and thus freedom, but current representations of a privileged homosexuality that is male and urban subverts the popular gay slogan “We Are Everywhere.” In point of fact, this slogan, its original association weakened by the increasing sense that gays and lesbians are *not* everywhere, has been co-opted by the anti-globalization movement.

The connection between the homosex