Where Do We Go from Queer? The Question of Naturalness and Normality in Literature, Film and the Media

By Dirk Schulz, University of Cologne

Abstract:
Looking at contemporary portrayals of non-straight relationships and characters in literature, film and/or TV shows, it becomes apparent that these always have to be clearly marked as lesbian or gay in order to avoid gender and sexual confusions within the heteronormative matrix (a word borrowed from Judith Butler) [...] by defining them as legible and identifiable against the backdrop of a non-representational straight body.

> *What constitutes a problem is not the thing, or the environment where we find the thing, but the conjunction of the two; something unexpected in an usual place (our favourite aunt in our favourite poker parlour) or something usual in an unexpected place (our favourite poker in our favourite aunt). (Winterson: 1996a, 44)*

1 When I taught a seminar on queer literature, one of the first things I asked was: "What do you think is Lesbian and Gay Literature?" One student answered: "Literature on certain shelves in bookstores, marked: Lesbian and Gay literature." I had never even thought of this as a possible answer, but it then hit me as a very fitting metaphor for the general contemporary (re)presentation of non-heteronormative sexualities. Marking is a popular means of maintaining order, a seemingly reliable status quo in our times of postmodernism versus political correctness.

2 Looking at contemporary portrayals of non-straight relationships and characters in literature, film and/or TV shows, it becomes apparent that these always have to be clearly marked as lesbian or gay in order to avoid gender and sexual confusions within the heteronormative matrix (a word borrowed from Judith Butler)

> which, throughout the twentieth century, has insisted on the necessity of "reading" the body as a signifier of sexual orientation. Heterosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as natural (i.e. unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the threat of an unnatural homosexuality [...]. Homosexuality is constituted as a category, then, to name a condition that must be represented as determinate, as legibly identifiable, precisely insofar as it threatens to undo the determinacy of identity itself; it must be metaphorized as an essential condition, a sexual orientation, in order to contain the disturbance it effects as a force of dis-orientation. (Edelmann: 1994, 4, 14)

The increasing number of depictions of non-straight identities in the media can be seen as both an indication of liberating politics, granting space and time for presenting alternative sexual conceptions. Simultaneously though, this change can be perceived as limiting since in

most cases the challenging potential is minimised by defining them as legible and identifiable against the backdrop of a non-representational straight body. In *The History Of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault points out that our concept of homosexual identity and its manifestations are, historically speaking, a fairly new construct of scientific discourse:

> The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. [...] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species. (Foucault: 1978, 43)

3 For a long time, Lesbian and Gay politics have seemed to welcome scientific theories of homosexuality as an inborn, essential condition because if it was nothing to be cured of, it would just have been a matter of perverse, unnatural playfulness. Thus, there was a ground from which to claim equal human rights and the abolishing of juridical sanctions. In the case of western politics, the understanding of homosexuality as an essential part of identity, even though concerning a minority of the population, has resulted in the removal of criminal persecutions and also in contemporary discussions about and conceptions of lesbian and gay marriage. However, the discourse thus constituted has at the same time also helped to maintain, even reinforce dichotomies which otherwise could have been put into question, such as man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality, natural/unnatural, normal/ab-normal. (Please note that in the following terms such as "normal," "natural," etc. should be read as enclosed by inverted commas). As Anne Fausto Sterling points out:

> In most public and most scientific discussions, sex and nature are thought to be real, while gender and culture are seen as constructed. But these are false dichotomies. [...] Surgeons remove parts and use plastic to create appropriate genitalia for people born with body parts that are not as easily identifiable as male or female. [...] We literally, not just discursively (that is through language and cultural practices) construct our bodies, incorporating experiences into our flesh. To understand this claim, we must erode the distinctions between the physical and the social body. (Fausto-Sterling: 2000, 20)

Inside a discursive system which links sex, gender, desire and reproduction with the help of a cultural matrix, the concept of heterosexuality promises symmetry and reliability. Sexual identities which do not conform to these norms of cultural rationality therefore appear as developmental abnormalities.

4 The different approaches and strategies of conceptualising sex- and gender identity

within lesbian, gay and queer theory not only mirror, but are deeply interconnected with the antagonisms of essentialist or constructivist positions inherent in contemporary feminist and gender studies. Judith Butler's analysis of the heteronormative matrix illuminates the different discursive practices of gender regulation and demonstrates that "the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests" (Butler: 1997, 406). Butler's theories have been as passionately embraced as attacked since much feminist thinking is grounded on the differentiation of (natural) sex and (social) gender that her work constantly undermines as socially constructed presumptions.

5 As Foucault furthermore states:

> Power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks and that is the rule. The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator; and its mode of action with regard to sex is of a juridico-discursive character. (Foucault: 1978: 83)

Since the categories of homosexuality and subsequently heterosexuality have been invented, human sexuality has mostly been conceptualised from the point of view of an assumed original, normal, heterosexual libido. Those sexualities which did not conform were conceived as ab-normal. Currently, queer theories are trying to even the score within the gender debate. Their deconstruction of traditional body and gender conceptions stresses "the unknowability that is sexuality as such: its always displaced and displacing relations to categories that include, but also exceed those of sex, gender, class, nationality, ethnicity, and race" (Edelmann: 1994, xv). It thereby contests the claim of any original or natural sexual identity.

6 The contemporary method of dealing with this threat of sexuality's unknowability is to create a special place, a niche of self-reflexive discourse for those who do not conform to the sexual standard, thus clearly separated from an assumed self-evident heterosexuality. Hence the "Gay and Lesbian Literature" shelf in bookstores, special programmes on gay lifestyle, talk shows on coming out, the gay couple from a German food commercial or the convention of having one gay or lesbian character in a film or soap etc. Of course, these representations hint at an acknowledgement of non-straight identities and therefore possibly help young people in coming to terms with non-straight desires, but in the last consequence the strategy of marking does not seriously call the concept of heterosexuality as original, natural norm into question. A few examples from the realms of literature, cinema and other media shall demonstrate contemporary ways of conceptualising and (re)presenting homosexuality.

7 Both *Rubyfruit Jungle* (1973) by Rita Mae Brown and *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986) by David Leavitt reached a "must-read-status" among lesbian and gay readers at the time of their releases. Both titles also enjoyed extensive media coverage, gaining the two authors cult status. Although quite different in many aspects, both novels stress authenticity, naturalness and normality. In the case of the two narratives, however, these categories are applied to their respective queer protagonists, Molly Bolt and Philip Benjamin. "Power acts by laying down the rule," Foucault says, "the power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks and that is the rule" (Foucault: 1978, 83). *Rubyfruit Jungle* as well as *The Lost Language of Cranes* seem to exemplify this as both novels create a homonormative matrix within their narrations, thus countering the omnipresent norm of heterosexuality as the natural. By opposing the selves of both protagonists which are presented as authentic, natural with the secrecy, bigotry and perversity of overtly heterosexual characters, the rule laid down here is: Being gay is good and natural. Both novels, however, define homosexual identity by contrasting it with heterosexuality, therefore remaining inside the prevailing paradigm of the binary thought system. While Rita Mae Brown's coming out narrative at times succeeds in challenging and undermining racial, sexual and gender conceptions, she frequently evokes them by insisting on Molly Bolt's own un-corruptedness, by depicting her point of view as being unaffected and untainted by social definitions of normality.

8 In its focus on sexuality as the most important factor in the shaping of one's identity, *The Lost Language of Cranes* even goes a step further: "Being gay isn't just gratifying some urge. It's a matter of your life. My sexuality, my attraction to men, is the most crucial, most elemental force in my life, and to deny it [...] would be a tragedy" (Leavitt: 1987, 174). The plot of this narrative affirms this as a rule to be applied to all of its characters. The notion of true, essential sexuality becomes the novel's main topic and the cause for all action. The climax of this is the revelation of all secrets and lies that are based on sexual pretension and denial. Philip's father is a closeted homosexual who regularly lives out his sexual fantasies in porn cinemas. His mother, sexually dissatisfied, consequently has affairs. In the end of the narrative when the "true" sexuality of her husband is revealed, she admits that all through her marriage she had been missing the sexual desire of a "real man." In *The Lost Language of Cranes*, sexuality is clearly not conceptualised as excessively performative, a socially defined and constrained choice, but as a fundamental truth and force. The novel affirms the binary way of thinking gender and sexed bodies, not only on a solely sexual level, but extending this

logic to a socio-psychological level:

> I don't think that everyone is fundamentally bisexual. I think some people are, and a whole lot more are basically one way or the other- either homosexual or heterosexual. [...] The point is, you're basically heterosexual, and that should be what defines your lifestyle. (Leavitt: 1987, 232)

9 Basing the plot of a so-called lesbian or gay novel on the coming out of a protagonist is still a popular way of narrating and representing homosexual life and counterbalancing the oppressive compulsion of heteronormativity. However, these days, one becomes more and more aware that

> if it is already true that "lesbians" and "gay men" have been traditionally designated as impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters within juridico-medical discourses, or, what perhaps amounts to the same, the very paradigm of what calls to be classified, regulated, and controlled, then perhaps these sites of disruption, error, confusion, and trouble can be the very rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such. (Butler: 1991, 16)

Written On the Body (1993) by Jeannette Winterson and *Could It Be Magic?* (1999) by Paul Magrs exemplify such literary sites of disruption which undermine either-or oppositions by questioning our notions of natural and normal sexuality in fundamental ways. It is interesting to note that just a few years earlier Winterson made her entry into the literary scene with *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a rather conventional coming out narrative. In *Written on the Body*, a simple narratologic device helps to create a "logic of a queer postmodern which collapses binarisms and creates a space not just for homosexual readings but for productive, dynamic, and fluid gender pluralities and sexual positionings" (Doan: 1994, 153). Concealing the narrator's biological sex makes it possible to narrate a love story beyond linguistically structured gender and sexual binarisms. The novel in fact highlights the linguistic constructedness of sexual difference and confirms language to be the site of producing discourses that later materialise as points of natural, biological reference. With a small rhetorical trick, the narrator recounts her/his own self outside an either/or position. Through ambiguous wording, the homodiegetic narrator of the novel plays a "gender guessing game" with the reader, continuously evoking feminist, psychoanalytic and medical tropes only leading to zero. *Written On the Body* remains undecided with regard to what appears to be the main point of cultural reference, thus rendering visible the constructivist function of language in the understanding of gender/sex:

> It is not that (s/he) claims there is no materiality to bodies or sex; the representation of other characters besides the narrator suggests as much. Rather, the text makes it possible to consider the materiality of language through the representation of the narrator. The materiality of names does not totalize the materiality of bodies and sex,

> and the materiality of bodies and sex is not totalizable under names. (Gilmore: 1997, 243)

By alternately calling upon and dismissing traditional models for desire, they become exposed as generalising theories, mostly grounded on phallogocentric ideas, apparently unfit to clarify the question of what draws people sexually to each other or which body parts exactly define human sexuality: "I had idolised [her breasts] simply and unequivocally, not as a mother substitute nor a womb trauma, but for themselves. Freud didn't always get it right. Sometimes a breast is a breast is a breast" (Winterson: 1996, 24). Winterson's narrative about the body and about desiring a body therefore disrupts the assumption of a two sex model, in which bodies are thought to be drawn to each other because of their genital differences, as well as any understanding of homosexuality as either psychosexual inversion or narcissistically desiring sameness.

10 *Could It Be Magic?* by Paul Magrs reverses, relativises and problematises notions of the normal and the natural by presenting characters in a small town in Yorkshire all marked by certain psychophysical oddities. The alternating moments of social and magic realism within the novel serve to naturalise cultural oddities, monstrosities, abnormalities and conformities. The focalisers change constantly without any obvious preference of a particular point of view so that Andy's ambiguous struggling with his sexuality and physical conspicousness becomes only one aspect of the novel's mediation of psychophysical self definitions. Instead of the usual "Coming Out as Bildungsroman" pattern, mostly ending in either the successful assertion of a gay/lesbian identity or in suicide, Andy's own felt and experienced queerness rather leads to a gradual awareness of the symbolic order's pretence which is unable to guarantee him any kind of security about himself. Andy's homosexuality thus becomes a matter of continuously searching for and struggling with identity, never arriving at a stable definition of a self, which is opposed to any heterosexual perspective on the world. Therefore, communalities and differences of the characters can be identified beyond their sexual self formations.

11 With its multiperspectivity and elements of magic and social realism, *Could It Be Magic?* on the one hand presents and validates the characters' longing for normality and stable identities while on the other hand it highlights the fragile constructedness of this same normality: "We're all travesties. It's all a bloody travesty" (Magrs: 1999 320) says one of the characters to Liz, who, because of her transgender identity, can be seen as the central symbolic character within the narrative, testifying to the fact that "the body has no essential existence of its own which gives us a 'true' identity as essentially male, really female, truly

lesbian, genuinely bisexual" (Ramazanoglu, Holland: 1993, 249). All main characters of *Could It Be Magic?* are marked by attributive queerness whereby a unified, coherent social system of signification inside the narrated world is undermined. Traditional assumptions of sexual identity are confounded as well:

> Mark's a family man, thought Andy. And what does that mean? It means that usually he's straight and tonight was just a branching out - but was that true? Andy couldn't believe it was his first time with a bloke. [...] No, Mark had known exactly what he'd been about. [...] Whatever was in Mark was in Andy now. (Magrs: 1999,84-85)

Dualistic conceptions, such as reality/fiction, natural/un-natural, man/woman, hetero-/homosexuality, normal/ab-normal, no longer serve as guiding concepts within the narrative. Herein differences are not categorically opposed to each other but intermingled, resulting in a narrative rectification of the supposedly subordinated entities. Andy's need for orientation and attachment confirms the human search for criteria of differentiation and subjectivation, but the plot of *Could It Be Magic?* points to the social constructedness of all ideas of identity. Because of the ambiguity of traditional discursive dichotomies presented in the novel, its fictionalised world denies any possibilities of clear exclusion and placement.

12 When we take a look at contemporary films, the modes of dealing with non-straight characters are not quite as unpredictable and challenging, at least with regard to Hollywood productions, the representation machinery of western culture. In his remarkable work on Hollywood's treatment of homosexuality in film *The Celluloid Closet* (1981, revised '87), Vito Russo already points to the problematic representation of queer characters in movies. He convincingly argues that in most cases homosexual characters are either presented as tragically doomed or as butch dykes and silly sissies, the laughing stock for the audience. These days, one can see a shift towards a more "politically correct" portrayal of queers, even evoking momentary pleasure arising from moments of gender transgression and confusion. "[H]owever, by films end, any suggestion of sexual or gender indeterminacy is eventually negated, stopped and corrected through the reconstitution of gender difference and heterosexual preference" (Sandler: 2001, 131). Obviously, in a film, where the body is the main spectacle, it becomes more difficult to challenge sexed and gendered bodies without turning towards utopia, as might be the case in literature. *Written on the Body* and *Could It Be Magic?* are definitely hard to translate into film without giving away the sexual indeterminacies in the first case, and its magic social realist atmosphere in the second. As John Sakeris remarks, however:

> The potential of same sex love to challenge dominant sexist ideas and structure, including the traditional family, is diverted by the "new" gay films. In fact, they too,

> like their more obviously homophobic historical counterparts, serve a reinforcing function for traditional sex roles and class divisions. While the "new" gay films do represent a step forward in the advancement of human rights for gays and lesbians, what they do not represent is any significant challenge to traditional sexist ideology. (Sakeris: 2001, 229)

It is interesting to see how, in numerous productions, Hollywood has grappled with the inclusion of non-straight narratives and characters only to finally mark them as "outside" the norm by linking heterosexuality to the natural, the healthy, the living and life-giving and homosexuality to the unnatural, the sick, the dead and deadly. It is the Law of the Father, in the guise of juridical law, that non-straight characters have to avoid throughout the narratives of films such as *Bound* (1996), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), *In & Out* (1997) etc. And even though the viewers are invited to sympathise with the queer protagonists, a triumph of some sort, the characters are nevertheless clearly posited outside the norm and outside of natural law. Notions of the third sex and of homosexuality as a minor copy of original heterosexuality still seem to haunt those films as they do not seriously challenge the structure of sexual interrelations in Western culture, where "men are men and women are women, and we are all not gay and heterosexuality, in its patriarchal sense, is still reigning" (Sakeris: 2001, 226).

13 In *The Next Best Thing,* straight and single Abby and her best friend Robert, single and gay, played by the two queer icons Madonna and Rupert Everett, decide to move in together and raise a child, which we are made to believe is the outcome of a one night stand of the two. We see the two of them having a few drinks and then kissing, and in the next cut waking up the following day with the awkward feeling of having overstepped the boundaries on which their friendship is based. After Abby has told Robert that she is pregnant with his baby, they move in together and everything is wonderful until Abby falls in love with a straight man. From this moment on, their alternative family starts to crumble and in the end all the transgressive potential with which the film begins is corrected. It is not only juridical law, but natural law which takes the child away from Robert, since, we learn, he is not the biological father after all. It is due to his biological disempowerment that he does not have a chance to win the subsequent court battle about the custody of their son which turns the light-hearted comedy into a drama, and friends into foes. Although the viewer is invited to feel sorry for Robert, who is literally crushed by the loss of his authority and is being pushed back to his proper status as the impotent victim, the film undermines all subversive moments which have made it interesting from the point of view of sexual and/or gender ambiguity. In addition to this main plot there are other moments which make this film disturbingly reactionary.

"Homosexual life," in *The Next Best Thing*, is primarily referred to as hedonistic, consisting of clubbing, drugging and casual sex whilst heterosexuality stands for monogamy, family and life:

> Life/death becomes the binary of the natural limits of Being: the organic is natural. [...] Queer desire, as unnatural, breaks with this life/death binary of Being through same sex desire [...] mandated as sterile - an unlive practice [...] consequently unnatural, or queer, and, as that which was unlive, without the right to life. (Case: 1997, 383)

At one point in the film, after having decided to flee the 'unnatural' world of the gay scene, Robert suspects a gay friend, who just lost his lover to AIDS, of being jealous about his new life perspective. The "converted queer" is tired and worn out by drugs, parties and stylised bodies so that the chances offered by a "normal" family life leave no room for doubt about his choice.

14 Although Robert does have a relationship with another man after having become a father, it is his dedication to his family that ends the affair since his partner is not satisfied with being "the next best thing." When Abby meets Benjamin, she does not even confer with Robert about the possible effects this new situation might have for their "queer" relationship, but rather follows her new lover unquestioningly. It seems as if, finally, she had found her proper, natural place as a woman, at the side of a true, normal, straight man. From that moment on, both Robert and Abby have lost all power to control, and the straight characters take over the action with the literal Law of the Father on their side. Abby, in one of the most dramatic court scenes, screams at Robert that he did have a choice. However, what his choice was or could have been, especially since the plot undermines any "choice" with regard to the heteronormative matrix, is a question the film unfortunately leaves unanswered.

15 *Boys Don't Cry*, based on the real life story of Teena Brandon (Brandon Teena), is another film that starts out with transgressive potential ending on a tragical note of correction, with the heteronormative, phallogocentric order reigning. Here the "gender police" in the guise of the literal police are responsible for the discovery of the natural sex of Teena/Brandon. This eventually leads to his/her rape and murder. In this case, the outcome of the narrative obviously was not the choice of any director or studio, but rather a matter of staying as close as possible to the actual incidents. Still the movie fits with the conventions of what Hollywood allows or even supports to be presented, as it does not threaten any gender or sexual standards due to the violent punishment of Teena/Brandon at the end of the film. Rather, it warns every viewer to acknowledge one's natural sexual location and to act according to one's natural body. Current theoretical debates about "nature vs. culture"

resonate in many comments on this film and the tragic death of Teena: Why did she/he choose to stay in that small town in the middle of nowhere (where natural law prevails) rather than move to a big city (where culture resides) like many queers do? Such comments not only point to an understanding of transgender identities as unnatural but also reverberate in some people's reaction to rape, namely when suggesting that women encourage men by wearing "provocative" clothes. This creates the impression of rape as a natural act of reinstalling the phallogocentric order, thus disregarding everybody's right to self expression.

16 *The Talented Mr. Ripley* can be termed a postmodern film with regard to the employed notions of physical and sexual identity. "Questa e mia face" is the Italian phrase Tom Ripley learns when he arrives in Italy to follow Dicky Greenleaf's tracks. What is my face? A question which is left unanswered throughout the movie. Tom Ripley's identity is excessively performative and his queerness leads to his mimicking and twisting of available, presumably normal and natural concepts of maleness and femaleness, upper and lower class, hetero- and homosexuality:

> To be situated or to situate oneself as a homosexual in or against a compulsory heterosexuality that sets itself up as the original, the true, the authentic, never seems so much about being a homosexual, but about dealing with, stumbling over, or mimicking the being of what others are. To be queer means looking for and finding ways of being queer, it means turning ontology into performance. (Milde: 2001, 141)

Tom Ripley desires Dickie Greenleaf. His actions are motivated by his wish to remain outside the symbolic order which would forbid his desires as unnatural and abnormal. Therefore, he perpetually imagines himself as remaining in a state of semiotic jouissance with Dickie Greenleaf, both of them melting into one. Tom becomes violently aware of their difference with regard to their subject-, gender-, sexual- and social privileges when Dickie gets bored with Tom and tells him so. In a rush of anger and helplessness, he kills Dickie and takes on the other's identity, thereby not only maintaining the social privileges of the white, upper class male, but also remaining in an imagined semiotic with his object of desire. Questa e mia face? He erases the face on Dickie's ID, so that quite literally he becomes a man without a face, without any identity at all. He then goes on to kill everyone who threatens this state of continuous mimickry, the only available option of symbolic survival and authority for Tom.

17 The Law of the Father, in this movie again in the shape of the juridical law, does not manage to catch Tom Ripley. This is due to the fact that because the prosecutors assume themselves to be inside the supposedly normal or natural order, thus lacking the awareness of both the power and the fallacies of representation and identity categories and therefore taking the simulacra for the substantial, the fiction for the truth, the queer for the straight, Tom

Ripley for Dickie Greenleaf. It is interesting to see that Marge, Dickie Greenleaf's girlfriend, is the only character to first suspect and later know that Tom Ripley is her lover's murderer. As a woman she seems to be able to see through his disguise, even relate to it. This might be due to the fact that she too knows that peculiar double consciousness of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others. As Butler states:

> To be female is [...] a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of woman, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize one's self in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler: 1993, 404-5)

In the case of this movie then, the performativity of the (sexed) body and a sexed identity becomes obvious. But unlike Tom Ripley, who defies subjection by subverting, literally undoing the codes of the symbolic order, Marge obediently conforms to the "idea of woman" and therefore remains powerless, without agency, authority and voice in the oppressive phallogocentric discourse.

18 My last example of the questionable state of queer and gender representations in contemporary western media concerns the sitcom *Ellen* and the stir this sitcom caused in the United States. I believe that the media frenzy which accompanied the coming out of both the protagonist of the sitcom and the actress Ellen Degeneres had to do with a sudden, traumatic recognition of the invisibility of homosexuality posing a threat to heteronormative culture's persistence to marginalize, typify and present the queer body as an opposition to a dominant and stable form of sexuality. I would like to refer back to the introductory quote of Jeanette Winterson, saying that "what constitutes a problem is the conjunction of the thing and the environment where we find the thing." In the case of Ellen, the social regulations according to which the sexed body has to be identifiable had been circumvented, resulting in a troubling uncertainty:

> As a sedimented effect of a reiterative or ritual practice, sex acquires its naturalised effect, and yet, it is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot wholly be defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the deconstituting possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which sex is stabilised, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of sex into a potentially productive crisis. (Butler: 1993, 10)

Throughout the series, Ellen Morgan was depicted as the nice girl from next door. In the eyes of millions of viewers she was a straight woman. For several years she was the leading character in a production which had always held its place in the top five of the most

successful American sitcoms. Her character invited sympathy and identification, she was never as daring and strong-minded, as, for example, Roseanne. She was presented as a woman riddled with doubts and worries about her perspectives on life, her future, her career, her looks and, last but not least about finding the right guy. She was funny, witty and a woman longing to be loved, but she was never outrageous, challenging or politically charged.

19 When the actress Ellen Degeneres decided to come out as gay both in real life and in the sitcom all hell broke loose. One of the main rules of a successful sitcom is that the characters are not supposed to change throughout the series. As Christopher Walker, himself a producer of situation comedies, notes:

> The audience becomes familiar with characters and gets to know them really well. Much of the humour, thus, stems from the anticipation of how the characters will react in a given situation, based on their, and the audiences, previous experience [...] The character network in a situation comedy is a kind of solar system with the characters like planets in specific and unchanging orbits. (Walker: 2000, 96)

According to this, the audience's main source of entertainment resides in their ability to apprehend the character's motivations and actions. The audience imagines the living room of the TV production as an extension of their own living room. Sitcoms (and soaps for that matter) work by giving an impression of familiarity: the main feeling is that of sameness and identification, not of difference and disorientation. When Ellen came out she broke with all these rules,

> not by affirming the cognitive stability of gay identity as a category, but rather endorsing gay identity as a signifier of resistance to the often exclusionary logic of identity that nonetheless makes possible at given moments for different constituencies, an identity of resistance. (Edelmann: 1994, xvi)

Official punishment was the answer, although the coming out episode ranged among one of the ten top rankings in American TV history, with 42 million viewers tuning in despite or perhaps even because of numerous calls to boycott the show. People were even sending in merchandising items to Walt Disney Productions, the production company of the series, accompanied with letters saying that these objects were the work of the devil, and although these examples might be extreme and might not represent the average reaction to the decision to air this controversial show, they show what an outrage one single episode, in one single show, on one single network in a country with hundreds of programmes can cause.

20 In the following season the rankings of *Ellen* dropped dramatically and the network introduced each episode with a warning: "This programme contains adult content. Parental discretion is advised." So finally there was the belated marking, a warning for the audience that this show, or rather Ellen, its main character, had to be perceived as different. At last,

everyone realised that because of portraying a female homosexual played by a lesbian, this sitcom needed to be conceived of as abnormal, even though other shows depicting violence and explicit sexuality were allowed to carry on without any kind of such caution. Due to its subsequent loss of popularity and because of the pressure exerted by conservative executives, the sitcom *Ellen* had to be taken off the air. Ironically, even some lesbian and gay organisations blamed the show for becoming too gay in the end, thus excluding a huge audience due to its focus on the main character's love interest. The show did not change in any other significant aspect, with the minor exception that Ellen no longer was dating men but a woman. However, this seemed to be too much to take.

21 There are several sitcoms now which feature queer characters (*Will & Grace, Queer as Folk* etc.), however, the characters in question have been marked as such right from the beginning and therefore do not question the dichotomies of gay vs. straight, male vs. female etc., but rather perpetuate binary thinking and give their audience a feeling of safety and predictability.

22 The question of representation remains a socio-politically as well as emotionally charged field of theoretical discourse, where each personal history of readers and viewers creates different expectations and frustrations. Especially when it comes to those sexual models which the heteronormative matrix conceptualises as oppositional to the norm, the wish for encouraging and challenging portrayals in the realms of different media is often countered by the prevailing use of stereotypical markings. But, as Buler notes: "Can sexuality even remain sexuality once it submits to a criterion of transparency and disclosure, or does it perhaps cease to be sexuality precisely when the semblance of full explicitness is achieved?" (Butler: 1991, 15). Examples such as *Written on the Body, Could It Be Magic?* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* point to the social constructedness of sexual identity and locations, but their deconstructive potential is a rare instance within an exhaustingly conventionalised discourse of different media forms. I would therefore like to end this essay by referring back to Franz Kafka's infamous saying "It is like it is". But I'd rather say: "It is like it seems," and, looking at the sexist and homophobic representations surrounding us, I'd like to add: "It is not like it should be."

Works Cited

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