

Dyer, Richard. *The Culture of Queers*. London: Routledge, 2002

By Dirk Schulz, University of Cologne, Germany

1 Richard Dyer, Professor of Film Studies at The University of Warwick (GB), is the author of several highly acclaimed works such as *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film* (1990), *The Matter of Images* (1993) and *White* (1997). His latest monograph is a collection of fourteen essays out of which only two were specifically written for this volume. The task of this collection is to present a wide range of genres, aesthetics and individuals as "cultural productions", which together help to form a notion of male queer culture before the infamous Stonewall riots in 1969. Each of these individual articles can be loosely linked to the overall historical context to which *The Culture of Queers* adheres. Looking at the contribution made by queer cultural production before the era of Gay Pride, Act Up and Gay Studies, their underlying queer quality, Dyer suggests, proves to have been even more coded, subversive, and isolated than its manifestations and representations nowadays are.

2 The historical perspective of the book calls back to memory that the term queer, due to its historically negative connotations of oppression and stigmatisation of homosexuals was replaced at the beginning of the seventies by the term gay, a term imbued with positive connotations by the homosexual community itself. At least within the academic world, the word queer has been actively reappropriated and now refers to a deconstructivist theoretical approach which "looks beyond an exclusive and fixed sexuality [and in which] sexual constitution tends to be viewed as always in some manner dissonant, disturbing, subversive, transgressive" (4). By exposing the playful, diverse, ironic and self celebrating subversive potential inherent in the productions examined, *The Culture of Queers* also challenges the "notions and feelings of immorality, deviance, weakness, illness, inadequacy, shame, degeneracy, sordidness, disgust and pathos [which] were all part of the notion of queerdom" (6). However, throughout the book the reality of the oppression and marginalisation, which accompanies the category of "queer" is also taken into consideration.

3 In his introduction to the volume, Richard Dyer explains the reasons for his historical approach and the difficulty of organising the fourteen articles which the book comprises: "Dates, especially when they so neatly embrace a century [1869-1969], are never more than vivid emblems of the much more ragged processes by which ideas come to prominence and ebb away" (1) he states. Still, since "queer cultural production - like queers - can only exist in the society and culture in which it finds itself" (9), this periodisation of the subsequent essays allows for interesting conclusions about the zeitgeist of their moment of conception. Dyer's

enterprise seems to be caught up in an apparent paradox, inasmuch as "only occasionally is queer cultural production done in order to say something about queers and the world in which they find themselves" (2). Nevertheless, the individual essays argue for specifically queer-produced codes and aesthetics that reflect the time of their circulation and that helped to shape an idea of gay identity before the actual inauguration of the "gay" movement.

4 Dyer's understanding of culture in Western society as "primarily concerned with pleasure, with making things that are enjoyable and giving vent to the need to speak, to express and communicate" (9), in the context of any notion of homosexual identity, gains a special quality which he refers to in "The Politics of Gay Culture". This essay functions almost as an additional introduction to the values, aims and design the volume. He argues that "[c]ulture does [...] tell us what was available to be thought and felt about being a queer. [...] [W]hether it be television, theatre, music or advertising, culture at once shapes our identity, tells us about the world" (15). Thus, in shaping a social group identity becomes "a prerequisite for any political activity proper" (15). Dyer maintains that "[t]here is a felt difference - of weight, emphasis, tone, rather than sharply drawn contours or rigid formal differences - between queer and straight cultural production, and straight retains the prestige of normative sexuality, its felt centrality and taken for grantedness" (10). This conceptualisation of a particular distinctiveness of "queer culture" is the glue which holds the seemingly random articles together.

5 The analyses offered within the individual articles, ranging from an exploration of gay porn, film noir, and the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder to gay misogyny, images of the vampire and the sad young man to queer stars (in particular Quentin Crisp and Charles Hawtrey) are, for the most part, insightful, convincing and inspiring. However, sometimes the way Dyer addresses the reader appears rather patronising and also tends towards generalisation. This might be due to the different types of publications the articles were originally written for. They span gay glam mags such as *Playguy* and *Attitude* as well as academic theoretical volumes. Thus, when invoking a presumed primarily non-academic gay readership, Dyer's pleading for more awareness of queer culture's inherent sexist, racist and capitalist power structures, although principally welcome, at times jars with the reader and creates defensiveness to his otherwise stimulating and evident explorations. The difficulty of trying to avoid generalisations on the one hand, while arguing in favour of a social group identity on the other, becomes most apparent in those articles where a distinct queer productivity and perceptiveness is addressed as in gay misogyny, the aesthetics of camp, queer dress sense and self-reflexivity in gay pornography.

6 The article on Rock Hudson, in the context of the book's ostensible rational, also deserves a special mentioning. Although, for the most part, Dyer's explorations of queer culture remain rooted in the historical context of their production, in the case of Hudson, the queer aspect of his work was obviously revealed only retrospectively. The belated awareness of the actor's homosexuality, - an actor who seemed to embody "that uniquely U. S. men's style of antiseptic machismo" (163) - allows for a brilliant analysis of the unsettling effect of his outing, an event which "seems to subvert the security with which ideas of masculinity and femininity, normality and heterosexuality, are held" (163). In the analysis of Rock Hudson's public and private persona, queer theory's concept of gender performativity thus becomes most apparent. Here, Dyer cleverly highlights the potential for "queering" the everyday, thereby going beyond other readings in the volume which suggest a notion of queer culture that could be conceived as distinct from or even opposed to straight culture.

7 In his introduction, Richard Dyer rightfully states that "accepting that all writing is historically contingent, I think the essays stand as valid in their own right" (13). Apart from minor criticisms with regards to tone and unavoidable difficulties of positioning which any notion of group identity creates, the articles in *The Culture of Queers* deliver a varied, complex, distinguished and personally committed discussion on a variety of queer-related cultural productions. The wide range of subjects and aspects discussed should provide ample material for further debates. As a result, this book can be highly recommended.