

Erotological Investigations of Male Homosexual Imagery in Contemporary Film

Ethnographic Approaches to a new Gay Male
Sexuality

Alan B. Fletcher PhD

Research Study

Exploratory, descriptive, and systematic analysis of a special and defined group of documents which involve male homoerotic imagery in film.

Sample: documents from local San Franciscan Bay Area and Nationally circulated gay newspapers and magazines from 1970–1991.

Dual Methodologies

Quantitative Analysis: utilizing statistical tests of significance.

Qualitative Analysis: emergent techniques relying upon grounded theory.

Each analysis is conducted on four major theoretical areas:

subcultural traditions

philosophical traditions

politics and oppression

narrative storytelling

1. Substantive findings of the relationships of the independent and dependent variables; not only in general but particularly with an eye to the historical period under study and the geographical source of the review.
2. The results are discussed in terms of their potential utility and limitations.
3. An ethnographic model of male homoerotic imagery is constructed.

Disciplinary Relationships

The knowledge in this research is situated and constructed within intersections of the disciplines of Social and Cultural Anthropology and Erotology.

Anthropology: the detailed, layered, constructed story of a society that examines a multiplicity of issues such as power, knowledge, race, class, gender, sexuality, history, memory, language, nation, religion, nationalisms.

Erotology: the systematic study of the depiction of acts of sex and love as they are expressed in art, literature, politics, education, and science.

The Text

A discourse is a system of statements about which the world can be known. Rather than referring to speech in the traditional sense, Foucault's notion of discourse is a firmly bounded area of social knowledge.

It is a place where speakers and hearers, writers and readers, come to an understanding about themselves, , their relationship to each other, and their place in the world (the construction of subjectivity).

Textuality

Edward Said

The text is located materially in the world.

The importance of his own identity and its construction as itself a kind of text showed him that the text had to be considered as something which maintained a vast web of affiliations with the world.

The literary text: is not simply located in a canonical line of books called 'English Literature', but is something but is something which has connections with many other aspects of the world – political, social, cultural, – all of which make up it's worldliness.

Outcome: Academy speaks to itself rather than to the world of everyday life and ordinary need. Ignoring the analytic frames of history and geography which are crucial in the understanding of worldliness within the struggle of different and contesting representations.

Metaphysics as a Cultural Practice

- There is a TRUTH
- It is knowable;
- There is an is; we can know it; we can apply it; we can master existence (in applying truth)
- Metaphysical Equations:
 - theory guides practice
 - knowledge guides action
 - truth is the moral (normative) basis for living
 - consciousness to master the universe
 - human value is the measure of all things

Experimentation

Metaphysics tells us truth orders entities in their proper identities. Nietzsche reminds us this leads to a will to domination, to mastery, to control, to uniform ordering, standardization, homogenization, universal alignment, normalization, strengthening of systemic violence which is intrinsic to economics of presencing. Experimentation may be able to overcome all 'truths' by affirming difference, with acute attentiveness to temporality and events.

Principial Economies of Presencing: No longer orienting oneself toward the true but toward the experimental.

Legacies of Representation

- More knowledge has not meant more liberation, more justice.
- Who provides accurate knowledge? Who is speaking and from what place? Animated by what concerns?
- Research as an action that intervenes, not truth – giving voice to disqualified people's knowledges, cultures.
- Challenging dominant social truths and disciplinary knowledge. What can constitute research?
- Contested, Complex, Problematic: Research as Inquiry, not knowing.
- Certainty in knowledge has been a tremendously devastating weapon.
- How can we think more complexly around our own practices?

Writing Texts as a Social Process

- Allows for multiple voices to circulate through the work
- Contested, multiple, polyvocal: not around truth or the application of truth/knowledge.
- It is a meeting of worlds; around alliance – a linking of worlds rooted in complex histories: complex, multiple, intersecting.
- Requires the reader to think; active involvement, ongoing relation to problematics.
- Where could this go? What could this produce? Questions of multiple histories? Who is authorized to organize a history?

Foucault: Bio/Power

Definition: the organization of people as individuals, organized in a system of dominance that constrains us in what it means to be human through power/knowledge that have effects of normalization.

Process:

"I quit resisting the deviant you say I am."

"Now that I acknowledge I am the deviant you say I am, I can take the first steps toward normality".

Gay Film Theorists

- Parker Tyler 1973
- Vito Russo 1987
- Richard Dyer 1990

Parker Tyler

- Basic genders are irrelevant.
- the whole body, not just sex organs, is an individual's erotic instrument.
- Film is the ideal medium expressing the truth of the sexual personality.
- He wanted to see homosexuality as it really was, in all its variations.

Vito Russo

- Oppressive assumptions formed the basis for most screen images of homosexual people.
- Historical presentation of Gay American film characters.
- Sissy boys- what is or is not masculine, an outlet for an unspeakable class.
- The Gay Sensibility
- Homosexuality as Alien and Sinister

Richard Dyer

- Now You See It, 1990
- celebration of the beauty of the male form
- organizations that celebrate "manly culture" using drawings, photographs, stories, etc.
- beauty of male youth and the friendship between men.

- homoerotic dimensions of male adolescent development (pupil/teacher; boy/man)
- history, geography and culture informs the reading or interpretation of the film text.
- elements of evil, criminality, and homosexuality all intertwined.
- Poetry = sex = death

- Homosexuality and Witchcraft
- Sensitivity
- Narcissism
- Rituals and homosexuality
- Camp: "a secret language . . . a tone and a vocabulary that is loaded with contempt for the human."

Affirmation Politics

- Creation of Positive Images: replacement of the negative images of gay people supported by the mass media.
- Consciousness Raising: allowing gay people to realize their worth.
- Social activism: working to understand and change the situation of gay people.
- Coming Out: living a gay life proudly and openly.

Methodology

Purpose: Conduct a systematic overview of male homoerotic imagery as depicted and analyzed by local and national film reviews in a sample of American gay newspapers and magazines.

- research limited to film theory and criticism
- film theorists have not systematically researched meaning and significance of gay male imagery at the community level.
- exploratory, descriptive study

Research Design

Qualitative: Grounded Theory.

Quantitative:
Recognized Statistical Tests of Significance

- Sampling: theoretical or ethnomethodological sampling approach is used.
- N=272 film reviews from the Northern California GLBT Historical Archives.

Film Review Selection

Sexually Explicit Film
reviews:

- sexually explicit gay male films and videos where graphic sexual behavior is a part of the film narrative structure.

Special Interest Films

- a selected assortment of gay films and videos that have some pertinent appeal to the gay viewer.

To examine each film review consistently:

an approach was constructed using the theories and themes mentioned in the literature review. Each conceptual area (domain) was broken down into specifications.

Accumulation and analysis of the specifications were facilitated by the creation of a survey document.

In this way, this measures how accurate current film and sexological theory predicts what film reviewers discuss in each film review.

Historical Periods of Analysis

- (1) Early Liberation - Early Gay Emergence, Liberation Movement, 1970 - 1974.
- (2) Homophobic Backlash - the period from 1975 - 1979.
- (3) Gay Empowerment - the period from 1980 - 1986.
- (4) HIV Epidemic - the gay community under siege, 1987 - 1991.

Source of Review

Four periodicals satisfied the film review criteria, as they have been in publication since 1970.

SF Periodicals: Bay Area Reporter and the Sentinel.

National Publications: Advocate and Christopher Street.

The source of the review identified geographical influences as being either: (1) a San Francisco Bay Area publication or (2) a national publication.

coding

Film reviews were examined twice.

Documents were surveyed and their contents were coded by the specifications identified in each theoretical domain mentioned in the review.

Each domain contained exact specifications.

A specification was coded as present only if an item and its meaning were clearly mentioned in the film review.

Thematic domains not specified in the coding document, but mentioned by the reviewer were coded and analyzed according to the principles of grounded theory of qualitative analysis.

Domains

Sexological attitudes: how each reviewer felt about the kind of sexual behavior that he observed in the film.

Basic Sexual Rights: endorsements of reviewers of those rights promulgated by the Second World Congress of Sexology and the IASHS (1989).

Fantasies of Lethality: Love-death associations with homosexuality along specifications of Tyler/Parker's themes of violence and death.

The Turn-on: identify those aspects of arousal that are most important to reviewers or at least those aspects they discuss most often.

Specifications are based on psychological aspects of arousal.

Power structuring desire: reviewer endorsement of power within any discussion of desire.

Deeper Meaning of Homosexuality: psychological and spiritual associations, thematic material from early underground films from the 1940s through 1960s.

Reactions to Homophobia: stereotypical themes and notions of homosexuality, affirmation, activism, consciousness raising, understanding to change the situation of gay people.

Coming Out: a subcultural tradition which examines the theme of self-knowledge regarding accepting one's homosexuality.

Social dimensions of personal experience: film reviewers mention common sociological concepts like age, race, and class.

Images of gay life: perspectives of living daily life as a homosexual as portrayed in the film narrative. The specifications of daily aspects of gay life come directly from the analysis of critical and film theory.

Camp: a subcultural tradition mentioned earlier

Homosexual Relationship Games: common plot narratives between characters in films by way of social game theory.

Male Initiatory Fantasy: Themes that concern male relationships that have a difference in age or social status between the two major characters – the conjunction of youth and age; student/teacher; father/son.

Drag, Sissiness, Effeminacy: common thematic material.

Sexcapades: a listing of the various kinds of sexual and romantic themes that the directors included in the film narrative which caught the eye of the reviewers.

The Gay Sensibility: Those instances are tabulated where reviewers identified the sensibility as reflecting a consciousness that is different from the mainstream, a heightened awareness of complications of feeling that spring from social isolation (Russo 1987).

HIV Epidemic: the impact of the HIV epidemic as depicted in film along with awareness of risk-reduction education and techniques displayed in film or mentioned in subsequent film reviews are identified.

Male Initiatory Fantasy

- Homophobic reactions to this subculture
- Embodiment of the culture's masculine ideal -- strong, productive, handsome, intensely sexual
- Male initiation imagery: conjunction of youth and age, seduction of heterosexual man
- Stereotype of binary oppositions: active/passive; top/bottom; master/slave; strength/weakness, penetration/receptivity
- Reconciliation of sexual roles within film
- Discussion of the polarities of dominance/submission

Politics and Oppression

- Reactions to Homophobia
- Basic Sexual Rights
- Social Dimensions of Personal Experience
- Images of Gay Life

Politics and Oppression: Historical Trends

Independent Variable	Early Liberation	Homophobic Backlash	Gay Empowerment	HIV Epidemic
Sexually Explicit Film Review	↑ RTH ↓ IOGL			
Special Interest Film Review		↑ RTH ↑ BSR ↑ SDPE ↑ IOGL		
Geographic Influences		↑ IOGL (SF)	↑ RTH ↑ IOGL (SF)	
Positive Sexological Attitude			↑ BSR	↑ RTH

Politics and Oppression: Geography

Independent Variable	San Francisco Sample	National Sample
Sexually Explicit Film Review	 SDPE	 RTH  IOGL
Special Interest Film Review	   RTH BSR IOGL	
As Time Increases		 RTH  IOGL  BSR
Positive Sexological Attitude	 BSR	

Subcultural Traditions

- Male Initiatory Fantasy
- Drag, Sissiness, and Effeminacy
- The Gay Sensibility
- Love and Homosexuality
- Homosexual Relationship Games
- Fantasies of Lethality
- Deeper Meaning of Homosexuality
- Coming Out
- Camp

Subcultural Traditions: Historical Trends

Independent Variable	Early Liberation	Homophobic Backlash	Gay Empowerment	HIV Epidemic
Sexually Explicit Film Review		Gay Sens. ↓		
Special Interest Film Review		↑ DMH ↑ CO	↓ Gay Sens.	
Geographic Influences		↑ FOL (SF) ↑ HRG ↑ MIF ↑ Love (Nat.)	↑ FOL (SF) ↑ DMH (SF) ↑ CO (SF)	↑ FOL (SF) ↑ Gay Sens.
Positive Sexological Attitude	↑ MIF	↑ HRG ↑ MIF	↑ MIF	↑ MIF

Subcultural Traditions: Geography

Independent Variable	San Francisco Sample	National Sample
Sexually Explicit Film Review	 DMH  CO	 CO
Special Interest Film Review	   Drag Gay Sens.  Love Camp	
As Time Increases	   HRG Gay Sens. FOL	  HRG FOL
Positive Sexological Attitude	 MIF	 MIF

Pornosophical Traditions

- Sexcapades
- Ritualized Aspects of Homoeroticism
- The Turn-On: Cornerstones of Eroticism
- Power Structuring Desire
- HIV Epidemic

Pornosophical Traditions: Historical Trends

Independent Variable	Early Liberation	Homophobic Backlash	Gay Empowerment	HIV Epidemic
Sexually Explicit Film Review	↑ TO ↓ PSD	↑ SEXC ↑ TO ↓ PSD		
Special Interest Film Review		↓ RAH		
Geographic Influences		↑ TO (NAT)	↑ TO (NAT) ↑ PSD (SF)	↑ RAH (SF) ↑ TO (NAT)
Positive Sexological Influences	↑ SEXC ↑ RAH ↑ TO	↑ SEXC ↑ PSD ↑ RAH ↑ TO	↑ SEXC ↑ RAH ↑ TO	↑ SEXC ↑ RAH ↑ TO

Pornosophical Traditions: Geography

Independent Variable	San Francisco Sample	National Sample
Sexually Explicit Film Review	 PSD	 RAH  PSD
Special Interest Film Review		 SEXC
As Time Increases	 HIV	 HIV  TO
Positive Sexological Attitude	   SEXC RAH TO	   SEXC RAH TO

Early Liberation and Sexually Explicit Film Reviews

- See an increased commentary about reactions to homophobia and the turn-on.
- Observe an absence of discussion about power structuring desire and images of gay life.
- If a reviewer conveys a positive sexological attitude during the early liberation period, we are statistically more likely to:
 - see a large amount of discussion about the turn-on, sexcapades, ritualized aspects of homosexuality, and male initiatory fantasy.

Homophobic Backlash

- Sexually Explicit Film Review:
 - Observe an increased discussion about the turn-on and sexcapades.
 - Absence of commentary about the gay sensibility and power structuring desire.
- Special Interest Film Review:
 - Large amount of discussion regarding deeper meaning of homosexuality, coming out, reactions to homophobia, basic sexual rights, social dimensions of personal experience and images of gay life.
 - Absence of commentary about ritualized aspects of homoeroticism.

Homophobic Backlash

- Geographically speaking:
- Contain increased discussion, in the SF sample, of the turn-on, fantasies of lethality, and images of gay life.
- Nationally, our reviewers concern themselves with love and homosexuality.
- In all reviews, national and local reviewers include discussion of homosexual relationship games and male initiatory fantasy.
- Conveying a positive sexological attitude:
- observe discussion about the turn-on, power structuring desire, sexcapades, ritualized aspects of homoeroticism, homosexual relationship games and male initiatory fantasy.

Gay Empowerment

- Special Interest Film Review:
- absence of commentary about the gay sensibility.
- Geographic Influences:
- Observes increased SF discussion in images of gay life, fantasies of lethality, deeper meaning of homosexuality, coming out, and power structuring desire.
- National Film review with emphasis on containing reactions to homophobia and the turn-on.
- Conveying a positive sexological attitude:
- read film reviews that contain discussion of male initiatory fantasy, basic sexual rights, the turn-on, sexcapades, and ritualized aspects of homoeroticism.

HIV Epidemic

- Geography influences:
- more likely to read SF film reviewers that contain discussion of fantasies of lethality and ritualized aspects of homoeroticism.
- Nationally, see film reviewers discuss the turn-on and the gay sensibility.
- Positive sexological attitude:
- observation of increased thoughts and feelings about male initiatory fantasy, reactions to homophobia, ritualized aspects of homoeroticism, the turn-on, and sexcapades.

Conclusions

- Gay male sexuality is a social-cultural construction.
- Gay male sexuality was shown to be influenced space, time, history, geography, voice, and memory.
- Human science researchers are encouraged to use the analytic frames of history and geography in their ethnographic work.
- All research is value - laden, socially-loaded and ideologically charged. The community must be invited for critique of our scholarly work.
- Subcultural variations and implications have yet to be understood within local knowledge and broader domain of male sexuality.

Alan B. Fletcher PhD

abfletcherphd@mac.com

510.520.0420

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