

## The Pitfalls of Positive Representation II

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*“Television’s Sad, Old Queens—On Sale Now!: Re-Mediation, Cultural Memory, and the ‘Bad’ Object”*

In every introductory media class, instructors warn students against weighting “positive” vs. “negative” representations in media culture. I tell students that it can be reductive, elitist, or simply difficult to systematize. When used to compare images and narratives circulating in different historical moments, it creates a historiography that is myopic by academic standards. Nevertheless, it’s an important way that contemporary audiences understand the past and is a frequent method for narrating television’s history.<sup>1</sup> I’m interested in how DVD box sets relate to this question insofar as they are one of several sites (reruns, syndication, cable programming, etc.) that re-circulate older representations of sexual difference (among others) in the interest of generating revenue. Queer print and online media often review DVD box set releases, constructing modes of historical narration that use dated television programming to conduct a queer historiography. These are the very kinds of representations—clownish queens in 50s sitcoms, gruff lesbian villains of 70s detective series—from past television criticized for their insensitivity and “bad” politics. Reviewers in these forums also champion certain texts over others for their “good” representations of difference. In each case, these subjective claims use television to limn a collective past for queer people that can be characterized by pain and exclusion. Heather Love calls analysis of these negative affects a “looking backward,” a mode of historical inquiry that indexes past feelings of hurt and injury in order to better understand the present.<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that the gay and lesbian press’ attention to DVD box sets “looks backward” at television’s representation of sexual difference in order to mobilize the medium as a catalogue for queer-specific cultural memory.

In looking at national and local queer print press as well as online affinity portals, I found that staff writers and site users often review DVD box sets by casting the programs as crucial objects in queer cultural history. They write about their feelings on television’s history (as it is packaged by the DVD box set) in ways that position texts as enabling in-group knowledge and facilitating membership in contemporary minority publics. On the website *AfterEllen*, one such analysis frames *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s remediation on DVD as being important to lesbian viewers because the program “helped knock down a whole bunch of walls for women in entertainment.”<sup>3</sup> The author directs readers to the program’s DVD boxed sets in stating, “we owe it to Mary Tyler Moore to take time to watch her All-American-girl antics in this groundbreaking sitcom of the 1970s... Ms. Moore bucked the trend and blazed the trail for sitcom women of today.”<sup>4</sup> Calling the consumption of DVD boxed sets “a crash course in television,” the writer makes the series compulsory viewing, casting media consumption as a way to experience progressive sexual politics from eras past.<sup>5</sup>

Reviews also draw reader attention to programs’ “special” episodes on queer themes. A review of the 1980s sitcom *The Facts of Life* in the *Advocate* points to the series premiere, in particular. The series narrates the lives of teen girls at a boarding school, and debuted with an episode wherein one of the girls is accused of being overly

masculine and too affectionate with other students. It precipitates a narrative resolution in which the character proves her heterosexuality by donning a dress to a school dance. The writer calls the episode “fairly astounding and astoundingly offensive”<sup>6</sup> In the *Chicago Free Press*’s feature, “DVDiva,” a columnist directs readers to the boxed set of *Soap*, a racy 1970s sitcom that satirized daytime drama that featured comedian Billy Crystal in a gay role. Shapiro characterizes the series’ frequent use of homophobic jokes as being “cringe-worthy.”<sup>7</sup> Yet the review frames this as an essential element of queer history, calling the humor “part of the price that had to be paid on network television more than 30 years ago.”<sup>8</sup> Such claims appear throughout the queer press’ coverage DVD releases. They construct queer history and television history as overlapping narratives of progress, making dated TV programming a way for contemporary queer consumers to experience a shared cultural past, and using television as proof of “how far we have come.”

Not all of the reviews are so earnest. Many feature camp readings that foreground historically marginalized modes of interpretation. These delineate ironic positions on television’s history for contemporary queer consumers. A review of a *That Girl* box set in *IN LA Magazine* credits the program’s well-wardrobed star as inspiring “a generation of gay boys/fashionista wannabes”.<sup>9</sup> In another review of *The Facts of Life*, an *Out.com* reviewer casts the program’s fans as being largely comprised of “gay boy[s] coming of age in the 80s” because the show was “never hip or cool.”<sup>10</sup> An *AfterEllen* post reviews a box set for the 1980s sitcom *Newhart* by referencing the series finale. Here, the title character wakes up in bed next to his wife from the actors’ 1970s-era sitcom, *The Bob Newhart Show*. The series concludes as if the entire 1980s series was a figment of the 1970s character’s imagination. The female author makes a tongue-in-cheek identification with the male actor, writing “I’ve dreamed of waking up with Emily myself more than once.”<sup>11</sup> While these kinds of queer readings are typically understood as being subcultural and marginalized, queer press coverage of the DVD releases articulates them as primary reading strategies for contemporary audiences.

Other coverage of DVD box sets draws attention to production elements of potential interest to gay and lesbian viewers. An *Advocate* blurb on the 1990s sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle*’s release on DVD that highlights the work of gay director Todd Holland for the magazine’s readership; another urges readers to watch gay actor Harvey Fierstein’s guest appearance in the boxed set of the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*.<sup>12</sup> Throughout this discourse, the consumption of DVD box sets is positioned as a historical practice, one where “bad” feelings of exclusion and injustice in the past create “good” feelings of inclusion and community in the present. Differences between queer publics are smoothed over in the interest of narrating a commerce-friendly history. Here, television’s past is at least somewhat consonant with a rosy-telling of queer history. The extent to which this is both “good” and “bad” simultaneously is, of course, still another “pitfall” of “positive” representation. It presents many opportunities for scholars to interrogate history as a site of queer feeling and knowledge.

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Spigel, "From the Dark Ages to the Golden Age" *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009): 12.

<sup>3</sup> Reese DeWitt, "Six Shows You Need to See," *AfterEllen*, first published 10 September 2008.  
<http://www.afterellen.com/blog/reesedowitt/six-shows-you-need-to-see>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Christina McLaughlin, "You Take the Good, You Take the Bad," *The Advocate* (8 May 2006):  
<http://www2.advocate.com/artsandentertainment/dvds/>

<sup>7</sup> Gregg Shapiro DVDiva: As Seen On TV. [www.chicagofreepress.com/node/2326](http://www.chicagofreepress.com/node/2326)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Bill Persky IN Los Angeles. [http://www.frontierspublishing.com/907/reviews/907\\_dvdR.html/](http://www.frontierspublishing.com/907/reviews/907_dvdR.html/) Accessed March 13, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Bryan Buss Out.com <http://out.com/dvdreviews2.asp?ID=22084>

<sup>11</sup> "Hits That You Miss That Should Still Be On the Air," *AfterEllen*. (6 June 2008):  
<http://www.afterellen.com/blog/thelinster/hits-you-miss-tv-shows-that-should-still-be-on>

<sup>12</sup> Alonso Duralde, "Screen Gems," *The Advocate*, (26 November 2002).