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Part I: Queer Visual Culture

Research Article:

*The Kids Are All Right*: Same-Sex Family Values and the Pursuit of Normalcy

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Many would use the word queer interchangeably for lesbian and gay studies. The abbreviation LGBTQ recognizes ‘queer’ as one of the sexual minorities along with lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgenders. Queer is a pejorative term leveled to the non-hetero seeming individual (Aaron 5) as if their behavior, sexuality doesn’t fit the norm. The norm assigns compulsory heterosexuality to everyone and thus perpetuates heteronormativity. Therefore, any individual who deviates from the norm by expressing sexual desire for the same-sex would be considered strange or queer. Thus homosexuals would be queer. In United States, the queers hid their sexuality fearing public lynching and were advised even by the leaders of gay assimilationists to pass as heterosexuals till the 1969 (Rosenfield).

Stonewall uprising of 1969 “refashioned homosexuality from a private matter to be enacted within a private arena into an essentially political matter to be enacted in a public one” (Ibid 622). According to Seidman, Meeks and Traschen “between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, the framing of gay life in terms of the closet and coming out became pervasive” (qtd. in Rosenfield 623). Lesbian and gay assimilationists demanded equal rights for homosexuals vociferously. They claimed state-sanctioned same-sex marriages along with all the rights and benefits that heterosexual couples enjoyed (LaSala 181). Adam Isaiah Green, in his case study of 30 Canadian homosexual spouses, observes that civil union of same-sex couples was frowned upon as second-hand marriage without equal rights and the sense of stability that marriage could bring about. He also notes that such marriages are iconoclastic in the sense that they are not necessarily monogamous and are occasionally equivalent to open marriages where love and sex are decoupled. Marriage, according to one of the respondents of his study, provided one the sense of being included in the society.
There are honestly work benefits for us being married [...] We could get invited as a couple. It’s a different comfort aspect to it [...] And in contrast to the gay village boys that are at work who might even be at the same career level [but] can’t talk about their [partners] at all [...] And part of the way you develop rapport with anyone is to talk about your personal life: “Are you married and do you have kids?” It’s the standard small-talk question. Eric, 33 years old (“Gay but Not Queer” 414)

While same-sex couples gain social acceptance, they get along famously with the heteronormative meaning constitutive tradition and create the identity of ‘a good homosexual’ the ones that can be invited to dinner, social gatherings and so on. Marriage is considered healthy and normal while singles are treated with suspicion (Warner). Marriage and family become the cornerstones of such normativity. Green argues that in the revised social order, gay people are of course not straight; but then, they are not necessarily queer as well (“Queer Unions”). Same-sex marriages can borrow good old values like gender roles, monogamy, and faithfulness from heterosexual marriages. Anyone who deviates from the tradition by expressing bisexual desires, non-conformance to binaries of gender, sex and sexuality can be queer in the new norm called homonormativity. The boundaries of normalcy can now accommodate a once-queer community by ostracizing other.

Queer theory is a radical deconstructionist approach to the taxonomies of gender, sex and sexuality. It foregrounds the “constructed nature of the sex, gender, and sexuality classification systems” and resists the “tendencies to congeal these categories into social identities” (Valocchi 752-753). It deflects the common assumption that “each person has one sex, one sexuality and one gender” (Lorber 144). Drawing from Butler’s thesis of performative nature of gender and sexuality, it argues that identities are plastic, fluid and contingent. Queer theory is against the grain of lesbian and gay studies as it considers the lesbian and gay identity as temporal, political, essentialist and discursive. It focuses on ‘deviant’ cases that defy the normative identities and also showcases the failure of these artificial categories to capture the complexities of individual who identify themselves by the labels devised by those categories (Valocchi 753).

The word ‘Queer’ was appropriated in its pejorative sense by the victims to remind themselves how they were perceived throughout the world (“Queers Read This”). The reclamation of the word ‘queer’ drew brickbats from many lesbian and gay theorists as they couldn’t reconcile with the derogatory connotation of the word. Nor did they consider themselves queer anymore as they imagined themselves to be
Queer theory examines the creation of norm, and how power operates within the evolving norm. It has received criticism from both lesbian and gay communities, and social conservatives. Oakes has criticized queer theory on grounds of radical social constructionism. Green finds it a ‘metaphorical epistemological position’ which might not be a handy tool to flaunt before a bunch of gay basher (“Gay but Not Queer” 529-530). Valocchi has indeed synthesized value of dominant taxonomies vis-a-vis the Queer theory.

These projects are essential, but the danger lies in their implicit recognition that the binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual as well as the normative alignment across them are more than ideological constructs but are somehow naturally occurring phenomena. By taking these categories as givens or as reified, we do not fully consider the ways that inequalities are constructed by the categories in the first place. (752)

Queerness will exist as long as normalcy exists. Practical or impractical, the act of ‘queering’ literary texts, cultural products will surely unearth the constructed and performative nature of identity.

**Queering The Kids Are All Right**

That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much. (Roy 33)

Lisa Cholodenko is a critically acclaimed director of auteur cinema. Her first film *High Art* depicted the infiltration of an assistant editor into the world of a famous photographer’s bohemian, heroin-afflicted, polyamorous life and made Cholodenko the darling of New Queer Cinema, a wave of queer films theorized by B Ruby Rich. Her second film *Laurel Canyon* shows a graduate student bewitched by the sensuous world of her fiancé’s free spirited hippie mother. Her third movie *The Kids Are All Right* is different in many respects. First of all, it’s more of a mainstream movie. Cholodenko co-wrote the script with Stuart Blumberg in her deliberate attempt to make a comedy (Lucia et al. 15).

Nic and Jules are a lesbian couple, leading an urban middle class, moderately happy life with their daughter Joni (aged 18) and son Laser (aged 15). Complications arise when their children trace Paul, their donor dad. Paul, a single, complacent, gregarious guy gets magnetically pulled into the family and develops a relationship that leaves the family and his own life in doldrums. The film has received unprecedented box office success and garnered critically acclaim. It received the
Golden Globe award and four Oscar nominations. It has also been critiqued in many respects. T. M. Kennedy has found homonormative elements in the movie and but has confined it only to whiteness. She has observes that the peripheral non-white characters in the movie were shown in poor light and draws the conclusion that the movie is a pedagogy of white homonormativity. Typical of a critic’s desire of finding political correctness in a work of art, she has criticized the movie for telling a simple tale instead of fighting against homophobia in existing California where the movie is set. While typical movies on ‘coming out’ or ‘fighting homophobia’ have their share of screen presence, Cholodenko, in the true spirit of New Queer Cinema, has dealt with transgressive issues like polyamorous perversity and the “intersection of the straight and the lopsided” (Vineberg 31) which call into question the essence of gender and sexuality.

Homonormativity

In the lines of the expectations of the queer theorists, gender roles are clearly pronounced in this internally stratified family. Nic is the sole breadwinner and Jules, the nurturer. Nic’s authoritative gesture is clear through her voice, attire, and appearance. She has short and spiky hair, wears unisex shirts, blazers and jeans. Her unchallenged authority over the family is explicit in her commands. She asks their daughter Joni insistently to write down the Thank You notes, the son to sign the get-well card while he is playing table-tennis. She is often seen saying things like:

You don’t tell me to settle, mister (to Laser)
Quit telling me to relax (to Jules)
I think I am carrying the whole load here (to Jules)
Wow, funny how someone conveniently forgot to tell me that they were driving home on a motorcycle (to Joni)
Joni knows that this is something I’d just never allow (to Paul)

Her patriarchal role is evident even during her tender moments. She is upset with the inclusion of Paul in the family while everyone else has bonded with him quite easily. Even her apology to Jules for her rudeness shows her authority.

Nic: I am sorry that I have been so edgy lately […] I haven’t been my highest self.
Jules: Yeah
Nic: And you have been really patient with me. And I just want you to know that that hasn’t gone unrecognized, okay.

This utterance demonstrates Nic’s position as the master of the family who acknowledges the patience of the wife. She has the power of bestowing rewards and punishment. For the virtues shown by Jules, she offers her a sensuous tub bath. But before getting in the tub herself, she disappears and is busy attending a professional call, leaving Jules, aroused and waiting.

In contrast to Nic, Jules has long, red hair. She wears girly t-shirts, artsy tops, and jeans. She is in charge of the domestic chores, has a confused yet mellifluous voice and identifies herself as the wife. When the kids were born, she abandoned her career and took to the wifely duties. Only when the kids were of age, did she focus again on her career as a landscape designer. She gets jokes and jibes from Nic with respect to her peripatetic career. Nic is cynical and uninterested in Jules’s works. Nic confuses landscape designing with gardening. When Jules gets the truck to ‘haul the equipments in’, she makes a satiric remark, “It just seems a little cart before the horse.”

In an unexpected turn of events, Paul becomes Jules’s first client. During her assignment, when Jules asks Paul’s opinion on the plants for his landscape, Paul takes time examining it. A nervous Jules mistakes his silence for criticism which she has been habituated to receive from Nic. The marital life has tamed Jules. One can see in her the age-long domestication process by which a wild, sturdy sheep of the jungle evolves to be a meek, gullible lump of juicy flesh. In Nic and Jules, the homonormative project of mimicking the heteronormative gender roles achieves perfection.

When the lesbian parents find out that the kids have already met their biological father, they feel insecure. To limit his involvement and to judge him, they call him for lunch. Paul then becomes the subject of cross-examination. Nic asks him about his career. When Paul complacently says that he dropped out of college because he thought it wasn’t his ‘thing’, the entire family is astonished. Nic, in no attempt to hide her bewilderment quizzes, “No, why’s that?” Paul is at odds to explain his reasons for dropping out to a family consisting of a doctor, a UCLA graduate, and a winner of National Merit Scholarship for Science. Eventually in an effort of damage-control, he says, “But just […] I am a doer. That’s how I learn. It’s just me. I am weird that way I guess”. It’s not the only time Paul has used the word “weird” for himself. Nic moves on to the next big question, about his social life.

Nic: So Paul, what about your social life?
Paul: My social life?
Nic: Yeah, you know you are married, divorced, seeing anyone?
Paul: I have never been married nor divorced I dates sometimes but I’m really just kinda focused on my restaurant right now.
Nic: That makes sense. How old are you again?

As discussed earlier, marriage becomes a norm to which both heterosexuals and homosexuals must confirm. Green, in his case study, observed that marriage brings in a whole level of stability and acceptance which makes same-sex partners suddenly accepted by the heterosexual world. Greg, one of Green’s respondents, feels like a real person when he is asked about his marital life by fellow workers, and Izzy feels that marriage endowed her with ‘accountability’. Barbara has hit the bull’s eye:

So, I meet you and we’re at the bus stop and you say, “Hi,” and we’re chatting. And you say, “So, you have a family?” […] And I say, “Yep, I’m married with children.” That validates me. I feel like in society […] And for me, who is a life-time lesbian, being able to somewhat be part of the norm, is so unusual. I love it! […] I’m married with children! I just happen to be a lesbian. (415)

In the light of the afore-mentioned empirical observations by Green’s respondents, Nic’s act of “making sense” of Paul’s social life totally makes sense. In the revised social order, Nic and Jules become the norm and interrogate a heterosexual bachelor. Paul, no doubt, fails in the test and is thus proven to be weird or queer again. Nic’s question about Paul’s age clearly shows that she can’t rationalize the fact that a man of his ‘age’ could remain single without following the norms of marriage.

**Same-sex Parentage and Kids**

Artificial insemination is a defiance of the procreative capability of heterosexual penetration, which is the corner stone of phallogocentric norm. According to O’Neil, Hamer and Dixon, “The dominance of the traditional mode of conception—male/female sexual intercourse—was challenged by the notion that conception could occur through the above methods” (43). Same-parentage is complicated because the decision to have child is a conscious one. They are dependent upon an individual outside their dyad to give birth to a child. In a heterosexual marriage, the first child often brings in a ‘crisis’ in the relationship (LeMasters 352). More often than not the
mother is domesticated who becomes solely responsible for the child’s nurturing and other household works (Craig 2006). The inclusion of a child on many occasions augments heterosexual gender roles in lesbian families through the indoctrination of social and medical institutions and sometimes through apparent pragmatic requirements. In his case study on Canadian homosexual spouses, Green found many who would share time and divide the nurturing responsibilities based on their own preferences. However, O’Neil, Hamer and Dixon, in their case study on lesbian parents in New Zealand, found that the transition the child brought in same-sex couples’ lives was not dissimilar from the heterosexual counterpart. Jules in the movie had to abandon her career post childbirth like any normal heterosexual housewife.

Lesbian parentage is characterized by a ‘fierce protectiveness’ to save the kids from bullying, gay bashing and societal pressures (Ibid). Lesbian parents are more cautious regarding their children’s sexuality and growth. More importantly their children’s success in life in some way validates their own queer unions. Nic’s obsessive control over Joni and Laser highlights both her role as the lesbian patriarch of the family coupled with the anxiety of an unusual parenthood. The children aren’t unaware of it. When Joni is reprimanded by her moms for being drunk, she bursts out:

What do you want from me? I did everything you wanted. I got all A’s. I got into every school I applied! No you can show everyone what a perfect lesbian family you have!

Joni realizes this unusual hankering for her success. At the same time Nic and Jules are also concerned obsessively about their son’s sexuality. They suspect Laser’s affair with his male friend Clay. Their hunch gets confirmed when Jules catches Laser and Clay watching the gay male porn video. Laser had got hold of the video from his moms’ room.

They sit him down and insinuate their consent to his choices to which a bewildered Laser replies, “Did you think I was gay?” The title of the movie also suggests that kids are of supreme significance and moms are wary about them. The kids’ well being will prove the normalcy of their parentage. The movie ends with an apparently happy ending where one kid gets settled in an ivory league college and the other evaluates their relationship, “I think you should not break up”. Childcare and parentage is thus a lifelong struggle and one of the many means to fit in the heteronormative society, get acceptance and scream to the world, look we can have kids and our kids are all right. The sexual restraint of Joni is also worth attention. She
hears the loud noises of the male porn video their mothers watch but pays no attention. This eighteen year old brains-in-the-family is plays scrabble with Sasha and Jai. She ignores the sexual innuendos of Sasha and pretends not to hear her explicit hints to make out with Jai. In one scene, when Sasha leaves the scrabble game and asks the two love birds (Joni and Jai) to split her letters, the sexual tension is tangible. Joni asks Jai if he still wants to play the game and looks alluringly at him. Jai apologizes for Sasha’s tendency of making everything sexual. Joni is unmoved. She acts like an asexual person especially when contrasted against Sasha. The only physical act she performs is the awkward kiss planted on Jai’s lips under the influence of alcohol in a party. Then she leaves him. Her sexual awkwardness can be linked to her extraordinary endeavor to control her libido to fulfill her moms’ wishes. This raises some vital questions regarding the children of same-sex couples, and their approach to sex and sexuality. Are they drawn towards polyamorous or monosexual relationships? Are they more stringent towards sex and sexuality and feel ashamed of their parents?

**Paul as a Competition**

The unwanted observation by Paul about parentage incenses Nic and she explodes, “I need your observations like I need a dick in my ass”. Her furious utterance connotes not only her non-negotiable sovereignty over the parental turf but also her lesbian pride. She is nonetheless inseminated by Paul’s sperm. She can’t deny the indirect reach of Paul’s phallic fluid in her innermost organ. Her lesbian abhorrence to heterosexual penetration is ambiguous because she nonetheless uses vibrators as replacement for male phallus. Additionally, Nic and Jules watch male gay porn to be aroused. Confronted by their son with an embarrassing question as to why they watch gay male porn, Nic is annoyed and dismisses the question with a fatuous disclaimer that they rarely watch that movie. But Jules takes the risk of explaining it:

Well sweetie, human sexuality is complicated. And sometimes desires can be, you know, counterintuitive. You know, for example, women’s sex responsiveness is internalized; sometimes it’s exciting for us to see responsiveness externalized, like with a penis.

Using gay male porn as a sexual turn on has been the bone of contention for many lesbian critics. But Cholodenko maintains that it is her independent perspective. She believes auteur cinemas are “personal films that come from a world view and a specific interest in human nature, relationships, and sexuality” (Lucia et al. 15).
However, it is certain that Nic is threatened by Paul whom she sees as her competition. She calls him an interloper, makes fun of him in front of Jules on multiple occasions, and likens his observation to the sexual metaphor of anal penetration. She is openly antagonistic to him. She brazenly dismisses his advice saying, “Listen, when you’ve been a parent for 18 years, you come and talk to me, okay”. While all the other members of the family bond with Paul, Nic feels left out and has to make a conscious effort to like him. There are empirical evidences for such worries of lesbian parents. O’Neil, Hamer and Dixon, in their case study, found many lesbian parents face difficulty in their relationships with the donor. The biological link cannot just be erased. While both Jules and Nic have one kid each, the problems of parentage increase when only one of the partners is inseminated. The non-biological mother sometimes gets severed from the family (ibid). Nic cannot reconcile with the biological link of Paul. She says:

I get it, Okay? He’s their biological father and all that crap. But it still feels really shitty. Like we’re not enough or something?

Paul, blithely unaware of Nic’s apprehensions, does everything conceivable to confirm her suspicions. He charms the kids and sleeps with Jules, a confirmed lesbian. The lure of the family life devastates his no-strings-attached heterosexual life and prods him even to coax Jules for abandoning Nic and settling with him.

**Homosexuality/Heterosexuality**

As discussed earlier, queer theory explores the way taxonomies get created and get perpetuated by social institutions, literature and films. In the homo/hetero binary, bisexuality does not exist. Individuals are either gay or straight. Bisexuality is a phase or determining one’s sexuality or an immature stage in human evolution (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell). Jules, once free from the domestic dominions, is keen to explore new territories. It is evident by her peripatetic career. Asked about her opinion for Paul’s garden she says, “Let’s not try to tame the space. I like things overgrown, fecund”.

She explores yet another territory in sexuality. Paul and Jules sleep together “as much because of what they represent to each other (to Paul, the family he now realizes he wants to hold on to; to Jules, someone who nurtures her new career rather than merely tolerating it) as because of that old, sly, unpredictable element, the sexual itch” (Vineberg 31). Eventually Nic finds it out. Crestfallen and confused, Nic asks Jules with teary eyes, “Are you straight again?” Jules exclaims, “Listen to
me”, but has nothing say because language is yet to invent words for an act like this. Her act of sleeping with Paul raises a lot of questions:

1. Is it an indication of a midlife crisis? Has the want of affection from Nic driven her to Paul?
2. Is it bicuriousness? She was certainly euphoric to discover an actual phallus and shouted ‘Hello’ to it. She was confused during the sex scene and Paul taught her the act of heterosexual ‘making out’.
3. Did she become straight? This was the question Nic asked her. This further raises another question.
4. How can a confirmed lesbian become straight once and for all? Is it not an indication of bisexual erasure?
5. Finally, is she bisexual?

One might answer these questions in a variety of ways and attempt a rational answer. Queer theory, on the other hand, is not interested in answering the questions, but probing the origins of these questions. These questions are raised from the positions where identities (sex, sexuality, gender) are monolithic. Thus one can either be homosexual or heterosexual. One might object to this monosexual binary and claim that Jules is a bisexual. But this would again congeal one’s identity based on the sex of object choice. In Jules’s case, interestingly, both the partners are ‘masculine’ in gender. She fills is the ‘wife’ of Nic and the dream of normal life for Paul who abandons Tanya (his casual sex partner) for Jules. She is the ‘beloved’, the recipient of their love, care, affection or want of it. Thus looking at the gender of object choice, she would be heterosexual even though one of her partner is biologically female. Having sex with Paul does not make her straight afresh, it just reinforces her straightness.

Such taxonomies confine one’s sexuality by labeling a term on it. While such labels are useful tools for practical purposes, one needs to be aware of their constructed nature. These conditions erase and evade the nature of sexual fluidity.

Conclusion

As has been discussed, power operates evil in the lesbian family structure where the breadwinner assumes the male role and sustains supremacy over the family. She has the sole earning capacity and thus the ruling hand which bestows both rewards and punishments upon other members. This lesbian family operates in a monogamous meaning-constitutive tradition and gets threatened by elements that do not succumb
to such structures. An adulterer is a threat. The lesbian family thus reproduces the heteronormative codes.

We also find that the monosexual taxonomy excludes bisexuality by erasure. One is either homosexual or heterosexual. Uncertain sexuality is always regarded as a transition phase called exploring and not mature enough. Sexuality is determined clearly by sex of object choice, and gender is determined by behavior. Same-sex relationships operate by observing the homonormative codes which sanction the individuals all the legal and extralegal amenities. They are intrigued and shuddered by people who neither have family, nor believe in traditional career options.

The fact that lesbians and gays were once considered queer does not hinder them from creating new homonormative codes in the western, neoliberal world of consumerism, assimilation and decreasing intolerance. The boundaries, instead of vanishing, have but shifted a few paces. These boundaries keep the sex, gender and sexuality taxonomies intact and create the notion of normalcy. Queer theory accepts the pejorative appellate and seeks to rebel against the pattern formations and shows that identities are discursive and temporary.

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