

# A Queer Time for Television

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Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire*. Duke University Press, 2014. 203 pp.

In *Ethereal Queer*, Amy Villarejo confronts the visibility of LGBT characters featured in recent programming, and the scholarship around these representations, by rejecting the notion that today's television operates in a particularly queer time. Rather, for Villarejo the medium fundamentally and historically operates in queer time. In marshalling this argument, Villarejo she combines and television history and critical theories of queer temporality, drawing from an archive of programs, productions and personal memories.

The book's Introduction sets forth the twin ambitions of exploring both "a more robust and rich sense of the queer archive than that which informs much current writing on TV" (5), and of specifying "the apparatus, the complicated temporal and spatial system that is television, asking how television's changing time and spaces organize and respond to also changing queer times and spaces" (6-7). Likewise, Villarejo explains that twin "genealogies inform my method," both a "poststructuralism that chips away at the problematic of representation," as well as feminist scholarship which emphasizes "television as one of the – if not *the* most – gendered and sexualized repetition apparatuses of modern technoscience, *the* modern implantation of gendered and sexualized social time" (7).

Villarejo stresses the temporal operations of the television apparatus in social, sexual and subject formation.

At the core of the book's overall argument is the strong phenomenological claim that we live as and on television, with layers of memory and image consciousness that I will explicate, but that the specificity of the apparatus demands that this "we" be thought of in deeply gendered and sexualized terms. To put it more bluntly, television, each time we watch, takes over our time in a way that enfolds all aspects of socialization. (10-11)

Under the subheading "Living as Television," Villarejo reveals the adolescent production of her own queer identity during a Los Angeles childhood "saturated with television" (12). An episode of *Starsky and Hutch* set in a gay underworld enables Vil

larejo to imagine nostalgic identification with her younger seventies self via a “queer encounter, where gayness becomes a matter of calculating time” (15) between the two detectives.

The early chapters, “Adorno’s Antenna” and “Excursis on Media and Temporality,” delve into the media ontologies of Theodor Adorno, Andre Bazin, Mary Ann Doane and Bernard Stiegler, interrogating the language of “realism” and “liveness” associated with cinema and television. While acknowledging the overlaps of these two media forms, Villarejo nonetheless insists on specific industrial, textual and viewing conditions of US broadcast television. Banality, domesticity and commercially sponsored programming structure the disciplinary apparatus of everyday television according to rhythms of anticipation, nostalgia, repetition, scheduling, segmentation, and serialization.

Distinguishing the “ways in which we experience time across media,” Villarejo argues that “the very mechanisms of adoption differ, according to the organization of the temporal and formal structure of adoption” (79). With its adoption into the home, “*industrializable* in the sphere of television invariably means ‘domestic’” (80). Television and family are domesticated together into the temporal rhythms of everyday life: “Processes of recognition, expectation, remembrance, anticipation, repetition, assimilation—in short the very processes of adoption—take place in families and through kinship networks established on and with television as family time” (80).

With reference to Adorno’s theory of stereotypes, Villarejo looks to the queer margins of domestic formats of the early medium, finding moments of implied homosexual crisis within the family-dominated fifties sitcom archive. She excavates “Adorno’s reading of two examples, both taken from *Our Miss Brooks*—the comedy series begun on radio and extended to television” which “can be understood to be queer, insofar as Adorno reads the Arden character as a modern-day Joan Rivière (intellectually superior and judged for it) and insofar as the second example involves a cranky woman and her cat, a nonnormative couple whose significations often slide into ‘lesbian’” (50). In her own viewing of another episode of the same series, Villarejo reads a rhythm of queer courtship in a series of repeated gift exchanges between the unmarried teacher played by Eve Arden and a stereotypically lesbian store clerk:

The gift here, if there is one, is always enveloped back into a relation of exchange, further revealed to be (equivalent to) affective extortion, always gendered and sexualized... As is immediately clear, this sequence transcodes the exchange of commodities *into* the exchange that is not of but between women read as queer. (61-2)

Through a complex play of innuendo, selective visibility and masquerade, this episode suggests the potential of retrospective viewing to queer the dominant heteronormative family ideal of midcentury television.

The heart of the book, hinted at in the Introduction's nostalgia around the *Starsky and Hutch* episode resonant with Villarejo's LA childhood and emblemized by the haunting cover image of queer television icon Lance Loud, is the chapter "Television Ate My Family," on seventies sitcoms and the rise of PBS. This is when the domestic medium, like the author's younger self, begins to come out of the closet, with explicitly gay characters and storylines in series such as quality network sitcom *All in the Family* and public television docudrama *An American Family*.

Villarejo reaches the crux of her argument with a question: "But what of queer time in 1970 or thereabouts? Why is it that by the 1970s, gay men had generated a whole new procedure of disclosure and a foundation for 'gay liberation' called 'coming out?'" (95). Wait for it: "I think the answer has to be TV" (95). Villarejo unpacks in Eve Sedgwick's epistemology an endless series of closets, "the repetitive and exhausting temporality of the procedure of coming out (one must calculate, decide, and utter anew and again, each time and forever)" (96). These temporal routines of sexual identification follow the rhythms of television.

*An American Family's* Lance Loud, touted as one of the first to come out on TV, appears not to have come out directly at all. Focusing on the second episode of the 1973 PBS docudrama, Villarejo transcribes an extended Central Park dialogue with Lance's mother, Pat, who has come to visit from the family home in Santa Barbara, "in order to experience the stunning temporal complexity of queer adolescence and the process of coming out, which can be a very different matter from the utterance, 'I'm gay'" (103). There are cultural and conversational allusions in the scene where he and his mother discuss his queer suburban childhood against his queer urban coming of age. For Villarejo, "that moment, misread as 'coming out,' is not a proud declaration of identity but a refashioning and reprocessing of a troubled, alienated, lonely queer childhood lived almost wholly in self-conscious emulation of Andy Warhol" (116).

This mobile Manhattan conversation, meandering with the tracking shots following their promenade, displaces gay identification onto the absent presence of Warhol, from Lance's silver-haired youth rebellion, to the bohemian queer milieu of the Chelsea Hotel, and, most disconcerting to Pat, to the experimental drag theater he forced her to attend. "Subsequent citations of this sequence in *An American Family Revisited* and in the final episode, moreover, edit it significantly to eliminate the stumbling, inarticulate, stunted nature of Lance's disclosure and Pat's encouraging

yet uncomfortable response” (103). It is only in later renditions, editing, restaging, and reframing through voiceover memories, that this moment is solidified as coming out. Villarejo’s reading of the temporally complex television dynamics of deferral and delay in disclosure underscores her observation that “Lance’s own mode of living is retrospective” (116).

In *An American Family*, Loud reunites his divorced parents and longtime television fans through a final return to television to document his death, thirty years later, in “a time of HIV/AIDS infection that has not yet ended, and therefore remains our own” (118). Lance Loud lives and dies through television, and by extension, so do we, in the recursive melodramatic archives of recorded memory, what Villarejo identifies with “television time, or rather times: a mesh of temporalities of real life, recording, transmission, repetition, and seriality in which Lance lived, in which we all live” (118).

Villarejo reconstructs a queer archive of temporal networks which interpellate her reader as both subject and object, self and other, of television history and theory. Like the author, I also grew up in Los Angeles watching female camp on eighties sitcoms with my equally closeted best friend, enjoying a sanitized queer homosociality as the AIDS crisis taught us we needed to be men, and not to be gay. I came out as queer, not gay, around the time and under the influence of nineties culture and *Tales of the City*, mapped in the chapter “Queer Ascensions,” which looked back to an imagined urban oasis of seventies San Francisco against prevailing HIV-related homophobia. Like my fellow queer media scholar, I also share a nostalgic love for Lance Loud and identify with the lesbian cat lady stereotype, reflecting “a world in which masculinity and femininity refuse to map neatly onto categories of modern queer life” (132). My queerness is socially constituted as a hermeneutic product of overlapping academic genealogies, television archives and cultural imaginaries which render hers legible and enables a specific connection to “our shared experiences and desires, here named queer to nominate something that television has produced from its early years that was not yet assimilable as gay or lesbian and something encompassing enough today to gather many of us under its inquiry” (155). As a reader I am implicated through my own personal experiences which overlap with Villarejo’s, not universally queer but specifically so in shared social, cultural, generational, and geographical positions. Subjects more distant in age, location, education, and status likely differ in their constitutive experiences of television and queerness.

At times Villarejo’s largely unracialized medium specificity succumbs to the totalizing raptures of Western television ontologies, whether the captivating white melodramas on screen or the Euro-American social philosophy of media temporalities and spaces. As Villarejo herself writes, “queer forms of life congeal differentially in the spatio-

temporal modalities of television” (154). What neither the mode, nor the object of television study itself can fully capture is the range of socially embodied lived experiences adapting and adopting the screened simulacra in ways that marginalize, embed, implement and colonize mediated pleasures and memories. Finding oneself alone with television, or with writing about television, creates its own solipsistic phenomenology, a Cartesian split of intellectualized television and embodied experience that Villarejo’s queer method tries to deconstruct, as when she reminds: “But the actual and the virtual are not separate domains” (145).

Queer theory and media studies have become embodied, intersectional and increasingly cross-border. Villarejo addresses race and globalization in particular reference to “queer migration and cities of the global South” (149). Despite such gestures outward, the writing still claims certain diffuse universals, ideological problems and speculative fictions as lived social realities less than dispersed processes of change and dislocation. The argument relies on the historical premise of the American television apparatus, a potentially exclusionary and hierarchical model of how the medium of embodiment functions in everyday multiplicities. Where television is not experienced as it is *here*, in the Western academy, but in geographic places and cultural spaces where the archive itself differs in function, content, access, meaning, and visibility, how does one become queer?

In the final pages of the concluding Coda, Villarejo makes the meaning of “ethereal” explicit, referring to the ether of wireless broadcasting:

In the ether, transmissions may be overcoded, but they are never fully determined. In moving from ether to ethereal, then I am looking upward and playing with a range of meanings, from a descriptive sense of pertaining to the ether to more celestial aspirations or ascensions to the very sense of the impalpable I have been pursuing here. (155)

In privileging the ethereal over the embodied, the study largely sidesteps the hypersexuality of pornography as an object, mode, genre, corpus, or field of queer media study. The longstanding FCC-enforced television taboo against sexual visibility and commercial eroticism was trumped by the rise of premium adult cable networks beyond the foundational regulatory scheme for broadcasting, part of the post-network-era proliferation she addresses in relation to Channel 4’s *Tales of the City* (1993). Villarejo remarks on the “serial’s changed relationship to sexual explicitness and nudity” in Showtime’s soft-core sequels, *More Tales of the City* (1998) and *Further Tales of the City* (2001) a more uncensored ratings-oriented niche market franchise than the original UK quality production which aired on PBS: “It’s my sense that the series starts to rely on increasingly silly plotlines and a lot of naked bodies to hang on to its

viewers" (151). In parentheses, she slyly acknowledges simulation of adult filming in the first week of production, including sex scenes shot in "an actual bathhouse," such that "the crew came to believe that they were shooting pornography" (150).

The pornographic appeal of post-network television suggests a more naked queer desire, extending beyond cable to DVDs, adult websites, and mobile digital technologies of social and sexual networking. Scholarship of pornography and new media can build on Villarejo's foundational study of sex and time in the television apparatus to theorize how these other cultural forms of gendered desire also adapt, modify and converge with the "ethereal queer" in more explicitly racial and sexual networks.

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