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in post-medium transformation**

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Introduction:

Streaming intersectionality: Queer and trans television aesthetics in post-medium transformation

Michael Goddard and Christopher Hogg

Abstract

Following on from the first Trans TV dossier, this dossier shifts the focus from transformations of television industries, institutions, fans and audiences, to questions of queer and trans* aesthetics and representation on contemporary television. This entails a necessarily intersectional approach, but one that looks at what happens to intersectional genealogies in the era of streaming, Internet-distributed television: do the post-network or even post-medium transformations examined in the first dossier facilitate the opening of queer and trans spaces in the contemporary television landscape? Or is the evolution of television more cyclical than linear, offering both moments of transgression and emergence, as well as reaction, in relation to new technological and institutional configurations. While the focus of most of the work contained within this dossier is on the level of representation and aesthetics, the questions raised are pertinent for understanding the new configurations of technologies, production, distribution and consumption that characterise Internet-distributed television, which in turn need to be seen in relation to the complex intersectional genealogies of televisual content presented here.

Keywords: Queer, Trans*, Aesthetics, Representation, Streaming, Intersectionality, Transparent, Cult, Histories

While the first Trans TV dossier focused largely on transformations of television industries, technologies, fandom and consumption in the era of Internet-distributed television, the original idea behind the Trans TV conference that these dossiers emerged from was to

articulate these transformations together with associated transformations of television content, aesthetics and representation, based on the hypothesis that there is a direct link between the two. Could the transformation of television from an analogue, broadcast, one-to-many transmission of scheduled viewing, to a digital, convergent, niche-oriented, platform model of selecting preferred content from a library, also amount to a queering of television itself, if not the entry into an era of transformation as radical as the accompanying wave of transgender embodiment and experience that had increasingly come to be represented on some high profile television shows such as *Orange is the New Black* (2013-), *Sense 8* (2015-2018) and especially *Transparent* (2014-)? If the former still arguably limited transgender to an 'issue' or 'problem' and a secondary character, the latter two shows gave it much more centrality and suggested transgender experience and embodiment as fundamental for a range of subjective transformations. *Sense 8* expressed such transformation in the celebratory form of collective sensuality and ecstasy, while *Transparent* presented it with much more vulnerability, catalysing a range of queer transformations via a familial network also very explicitly marked in terms of its Jewishness and privilege. Such a perspective was influenced by a long history of queer writing on film and television and more recent transgender scholarship; the importance of television in this arena being testified to by it having its own entry in the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* opening double issue of 'Keywords' short essays, in which Quinn Miller argues that 'Transgender histories and TV intertwine [and] references to TV in scholars' accounts of their self-recognition as trans signal further connections between television and trans history' (Miller, 2014: 216).

In retrospect, 2017 was something of a high water mark of this transgender potentiality of Internet-distributed television, that started to be challenged by several developments such as the axing of *Sense 8* after a truncated second season that left many narrative threads unresolved, only to return in response to a massive outcry from fans in the

form of a final feature length episode, a format that had already been experimented with in the 'Happy F*cking New Year' feature-length episode (2016) that was positioned in the fairly long gap between the first two seasons (Harp, 2018). While the disparity between international production costs and the lack of a substantial enough audience were the officially cited reasons for cancelling the show's third season, there was also a sense that its queer aesthetics and departure from any clear linear narrative may also have been a factor. A similar fate but for very different reasons befell *Transparent* when Jeffrey Tambor, who played the central transgender character Maura Pfefferman, became implicated in #metoo allegations of abusive behaviour including towards his *Transparent* trans co-stars on the show, in a stark contrast to the aesthetics and politics of the series. Tambor was swiftly fired from the show which went into a lengthy hiatus and is only scheduled to return in 2019, again as a feature length special in the form of a musical staged by Shelly Pfefferman (Judith Light), Maura's long-suffering ex-wife.

Of course, these shows do not exhaust trans* representation on contemporary television, and there are other high profile contemporary shows such as *Billions* (2016-), which combines the macho histrionics of its male leads with as non-normative a character as Taylor (Asia Kate Dillon), a gender non-binary performer playing a non-binary character. Nevertheless, the fate of *Sense 8* and *Transparent* indicates that Internet-distributed television is far from free of the supposedly transcended conservatism and commercially driven decision making of network television, even if it is also more flexibly responsive to the desires of fans as manifested in the partial returns of these series. Furthermore, while there were enthusiastic responses to the subversions of gender and sexuality evident in these shows, Amy Villarejo going so far as to consider *Transparent* as 'revolutionary' (Villarejo, 2016: 10), these shows were also not without problematic aspects such as the white privilege evident in *Transparent* which Villarejo comments upon in the same article: 'almost everyone

in *Transparent* is white ... This carefully constructed white world thus helps to anchor the Pfeffermans in an even littler world within it: that of affluent westside Los Angeles Jews' (Villarejo, 2016: 12). For Villarejo, the basis of the story in the showrunner Jill Soloway's personal experience, as well as the highly marked Jewishness of the family that is represented in the show, neutralises and works as an alibi for this overarching background of white privilege, although other authors including Anamarija Horvat in this dossier are less convinced that this is a sufficient way of addressing questions of intersectionality. But the issue of intersectionality is treated in a specific way in Villarejo's rich article; for her, the show is not merely about transgender experience but an intersection between trans*, feminist, queer, Jewish, Los Angeles, and entertainment industry identities in a highly complex way. In fact, what makes the show revolutionary for Villarejo is less the transgender narrative than the female, feminist gaze at work in the series (2016: 10), which also goes beyond simple questions of authorship or the centrality of the female characters. Aesthetically, the show introduces a fundamentally distinct sensibility, that inhabits the style and mise-en-scene as much as the story-lines, and realises a queering of television via this feminist gaze.

This dossier, therefore, expands the framework beyond questions of trans* or even queer representation to a complex engagement with aesthetic transformations of contemporary television in a variety of intersectional contexts. For example, in the opening article by Francesca Sobande, critical race studies and postfeminism are combined to generate readings of shows depicting Black millennial women, and racial intersectionality returns in the final intervention by Anamarija Horvat that examines the problematic whiteness of *Transparent* already alluded to. Additionally, the distinctiveness of contemporary Internet-distributed television is called into question by interventions looking at longer histories of the queering of television, whether in mainstream sitcoms with LGBT characters like *Will and Grace*, (1998-2006, 2017-) examined by Jaap Kooijman, or further

back in cult television of 1960s and 70s which Craig Haslop presents as a pre-history of contemporary queer, cult television like *Sense 8*.

Indeed, from its inception, television drama contended with its own form and identity, shifting between theatrical and cinematic inheritances and aspirations, and between realist and non-naturalistic aesthetics and storytelling structures. With the rise of counter-cultural voices and forms of artistic expression in the 1960s into the 1970s, particularly in a British context, television drama's still 'unsettled' form became a strength, offering opportunities for alternative, more playfully transgressive narratives, characters and performances than those permissible within the far more well-established heteronormative paradigms of mainstream film. Inheriting from the earlier examples of 1960s 'camp' heroism presented by Haslop in his intervention, particularly notable is Peter Wyngarde's iconic performance as flamboyant super sleuth Jason King, first as part of a crime-fighting ensemble in *Department S* (1969-1970) and subsequently as the eponymous lead in spin-off *Jason King* (1971-1972). Wyngarde's womanising, hedonistic dandy became simultaneously a national heartthrob and a signifier of the ways in which traditional notions of British masculinity had been subverted during the 'Swinging Sixties'. Having only very recently seen the legalisation of homosexuality in the UK when portraying the demonstrably camp Jason King, as a middle-aged gay man (although not openly at that time, for obvious reasons), the irony of being embraced by the nation as a 'housewives' favourite', and as the hero of a popular action series, cannot have been lost on Wyngarde. As such, the example of Jason King is indicative of broadcast television's broader capabilities as a significant representational space for queering norms of gender and sexuality, decades before the advent of Internet-distributed television.

The inherent queerness of such shows has echoes today in cult series like *Twin Peaks: The Return* (2017) which, while containing few recognisably queer or trans characters with

the rather striking exception of FBI director Denise (David Duchovny), is nevertheless highly queer on an aesthetic register, in terms of a thoroughly pervasive atmosphere of weirdness and the subversion of both narrative progression and fan expectations. What both Kooijman and Haslop's interventions remind us of is that if queer or trans representation can happen relatively easily on contemporary platform television, this is only due to struggles over representation with much longer histories. In a recent panel discussion at the BFI Southbank following a screening of episodes one and two of *Queer as Folk* (1999-2000), lead writer and producer of this and several subsequent subversively queer TV series, Russell T. Davies, suggested that taboos on television need to be transgressed not just once but repeatedly 'as boundaries tend to become set again after they are broken' (Davies, 2019). This suggests a cyclical rather than a linear account of the queering of television under new technological and institutional conditions; *Queer as Folk* with its frontal, explicit and honest depiction of gay sexual practices, including with underage characters, still seems transgressive in these respects today, even if its limited portrayal of sexual identities beyond gay male ones seems dated and narrow by contemporary 'woke' standards.

Trans TV builds upon or in some cases functions as a new site for previous queer interventions into television, for example in the Lifestyle TV show sharing with *Will and Grace* a recent resurrection, *Queer Eye* (2003-2007, 2018-), which affirms queer sensibilities as normative, albeit at the risk of reinforcing a range of stereotypes. This example also raises questions of queer and trans aesthetics and genre, which in most of the examples mentioned so far has been limited to drama. While Kooijman extends this to comedy in his intervention, Joke Hermes and Michael Kardolus take this further in relation to reality TV in their intervention on *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-2019) which has seemingly segued without a hitch from eccentric cable fare into the world of streaming platforms. This shows the extent to which queer and trans aesthetics are fluid and exceed stable genre boundaries.

[Francesca] Sobande's article engages with *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017)

and *Insecure* (2016-) as case-studies to examine contemporary television's representations of 'millennial' Black women in an intersectional framework. Analysing both the shows themselves and viewer responses to them, Sobande begins to map the tensions between postfeminist and Black feminist identities as depicted in these comedy dramas, highlighting the often 'awkward' and sometimes contradictory intersectionality of gender, race and (post)-feminism. As such, Sobande highlights both the representational power of contemporary television in portraying complex and multifaceted identities and the need for continued attention to be paid to the ways in which these representations relate to Black women today. This intersectional approach to ethnic, gender, sexual and embodied identities also informs, in different ways, the interventions that make up the rest of this dossier.

Focusing on the relatively recent context of the US network sitcom since the 1990s, Jaap Kooijman's intervention goes on to examine the important representational contributions of shows such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) and later *Will and Grace*, not only in increasing queer visibility in mainstream comedy but also in normalising lead characters who also 'just happen to be gay'. Indeed, Kooijman argues that the reactionary power of *Will and Grace* sat primarily in its presentation of queer ordinariness, paving the way for future gay representations on television in which such characters need not be defined by otherness, for example in the character Tony Padilla (Christian Navarro) in *13 Reasons Why* (2017-) who utters the paradigmatic line: 'You know I'm gay, right'.

Craig Haslop's intervention piece goes further back in televisual history to consider iconic examples of 1960s British tele-fantasy in order to posit subversive queerness as a defining feature of early cult television. Through close textual readings of both *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*, Haslop evidences the ways in which non-normative representations of gender and sexuality became foundational to the storytelling strategies of

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industrialised cult tele-fantasy as we recognise it today in contemporary Internet-distributed shows like *Sense 8* (2015-2018). In so doing, Haslop draws attention to the transgressive potential of popular television drama long before the arrival of Internet-distributed television.

Joke Hermes and Michael Kardolus's intervention engages more directly with trans* aesthetics in its critical reading, informed by fandom, of *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-2019). Affirming the subversive and highly pleasurable power of the show in relation to reality TV genres and television in general, while fully acknowledging its problematic aspects of embracing neoliberal meritocratic values, as well as prejudice against transgender embodiment as opposed to drag, the article ultimately positions the show as a highly pleasurable, if problematic, instance of intersectional politics come alive.

Finally, Anamarija Horvat's intervention finishes the dossier by confronting intersectionality directly, through her engagement with the show that perhaps most epitomises the idea of Trans TV, namely *Transparent* (2014-2019). While she is not the first to point out the show's focus and setting in a milieu of white privilege, she is able to illuminate this in an incisive way by analysing the few encounters of the Pfefferman's across ethnic and class lines through the limited encounters with the minor African-American characters Elizah (Alexandra Gray) and Dr Gunderson (Paula Newsome). While the show itself is highly aware of these issues, even making themes of intersectionality and 'white fragility' explicit via dialogue, and deliberately avoids the 'white saviour' trope, it also avoids interrogating the white privilege that is the central lens through which this intersectionality is viewed, and hence whiteness and white privilege risk being presented as 'transparent' and normalised rather than problematic.]

The final Trans TV special issue following this dossier will explore these issues further, taking into account technological transformations that have taken place over the last

three years, shifts in practices and discourses of binge viewing, and above all aesthetic and representational shifts that have come in the wake of the shows discussed in this dossier. Trans TV may be taking on different forms, problems and aesthetics than seemed to be the case in 2017, but it remains a rich paradigm for discussing both contemporary televisual transformations in the streaming era and the complex intersectional genealogies that inform them.

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Dr Christopher Hogg is a Senior Lecturer in Television Theory at the University of Westminster. Chris's book, *Acting in British Television* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, co-authored with Dr Tom Cantrell, University of York), is the first book-length study of acting processes in contemporary television drama production. Chris has also co-edited (with Cantrell) a collection, *Exploring Television Acting*, for Bloomsbury (2018). Chris has published a wide range of chapters and articles in journals such as *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Critical Studies in Television*, *Media International Australia* and *Senses of Cinema*.