“I can’t even imagine what it’s gonna be like here without him”

Friendship and Queer Theory in American Teen Soap¹

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This article aims to employ queer theory in order to analyse gender relations in the American teen soap. Queer theory encourages us to look at relationships outside of heteronormative gender relations, but while non-normative sexual identities like homosexuality and bisexuality (especially in women) have become more common in US teen drama over the past decade, this article will focus on how homo-social friendships are organized among males who are otherwise characterized as straight. This will produce not only a reading of gender ideologies and relations promoted in the texts, but by employing mainly a queer theory approach, this article will focus on how sexual identity is re-negotiated and heteronormativity subverted within these narratives. The focus is on two case studies, Beverly Hills 90210 (Fox, 1990-2000) and The O.C. (WB, 2003-2007) and the way homo-social bonding between teenage males is depicted in these series. Both series have been internationally successful and the genre’s focus on identity politics and identity construction can help our understanding how heteronormativity itself can be reproduced or subverted within popular culture by re-affirming or rupturing the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and ideas of homosexual ‘otherness’.

1. Introduction

This article deals with the negotiation and re-negotiation of sexual identity via the theoretical concept of queer theory in the American teen series. While the genre, in the way it is understood here, has been highly popular in cinema since the early 1980s (Shary 2002: 1-11), especially with John Hughes’ contributions as director, writer and producer (in popular texts such as Sixteen Candles [Hughes, 1984], The Breakfast Club [Hughes, 1985], Ferris Bueller’s Day Off [Hughes, 1986], Pretty in Pink [Deutch, 1986] or Some Kind of Wonderful [Deutch, 1987]), it is a relatively new genre on television with Beverly Hills 90210 (Fox, 1990-2000) arguably standing as the first successful example of the teen soap (even though series formats like Fame [NBC, 1982-1987], with episodes offering narrative closure, were successful in the 1980s). This article will look at how the American teen soap negotiates the territory of homo-social bonding and sexual identity and what strategies are used in order to create or de-construct the idea of a stable sexual identity. Utilising the theoretical approach of queer this article seeks to analyse how a territory of heteronormativity and homosexual ‘otherness’ is created or de-constructed in the two case studies of male friendship in Beverly Hills 90210 and The O.C. (WB, 2003-2007). Specifically, the aim of this article is to look at the strategies used in the text to deny or encourage queer readings.

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As a genre, teen drama is a particularly interesting example due to the genre’s link to soap opera and melodrama, which are often associated with disruptive gender performances:
The conventions adapted from the prime time soaps like *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991), its spin-off *Knots Landing* (CBS, 1979-1993) and *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) are the open-ended narrative structure with a number of storylines running parallel to each other, a large cast and a focus on relationships between characters as well as a mixing of the private and the public spheres (see Feuer 1995: 166-69 or Finch 1999: 143-59). Partly because the business world of the prime time soap appears to be governed by the private – for example with *Dynasty*’s Alexis Carrington (Joan Collins) taking revenge on her ex-husband by repeatedly attempting to ruin his business – these texts often feature disruptive or exaggerated gender performances that de-stabilize heteronormativity by drawing attention to the ‘constructedness’ of gender. Davis also alludes to this when pointing to the melodramatic mode of address of teen drama:

The dominant register of the form, as Rachel Moseley and Miranda J. Banks have argued, is a melodramatic one and melodrama (a genre which is routinely critically derided) is often culturally associated with women and gay men. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that many of the concerns that the queer and female teen characters in teen series express serve as echoes of those of melodramatic narratives perhaps familiar to audiences of the ‘women’s films’ of the 1940s and 1950s. For instance, finding one’s place in society, experiencing true love, and resisting/accepting stereotyping are repeated motifs; and in the teen series, as much as ‘golden era’ women’s pictures, lead characters are often trying to find the easiest route to ‘being happy with their lot’ (Davis, 2004a: 136).

These common motifs are often supported by scenes of heightened drama that involve some kind of intimate emotional confessions by female as well as (heterosexual) male characters. Much like the prime time soap or the narratives of melodrama, the teen drama in general is mostly concerned with identity politics, but the focus on teen characters who are still in the process of establishing an adult (supposedly fixed) identity allows the genre more space concerning the on-screen negotiations of sexual identity (Graham McKinley 1997: 19-27).

While the teen series or teen drama has been conceptualised and understood by various academics such as Davis, Berridge (2010: 81-104) and Moseley (2001, 411-43) as a potent and significant television genre, the definition remains very broad. Moseley defines the teen drama as follows:

Teenageness is a significant ‘in-between’ period, and teen drama deals with the stuff of adolescent anxiety: friendship, love, sex and impending adulthood. Many of these shows deal with questions of difference, otherness, increased power and the impact of these on personal and community relationships: a significant number of them draw on other cult television forms, using supernatural power as a motif through which to
explore these concerns. Many shows give the sense that to be a teenager is not quite human (Moseley, 2001: 42).

While Moseley's identification of themes is entirely valid, this article proposes a slightly less inclusive definition: There is a significant distinction to be made between the teen soap and the supernatural teen series, both of which can be viewed as sub-genres summarized under the umbrella term teen drama: The supernatural teen series has significantly different narrative tools at its disposal than the teen soap, putting a large emphasis on allegory or metaphors, for example by dealing with themes of “improved power” through alien teen characters with supernatural abilities, as in *Roswell High* (WB, 1999-2002) or *Smallville* (WB, 2001-2011) or human characters with supernatural responsibilities like *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer* (Fox, 1997-2003). Meanwhile, the American teen soap usually draws extensively on the narrative tools provided by the prime time soap with texts like *Beverly Hills 90210, My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995), *Dawson’s Creek* (WB, 1998-2003), *The O.C., One Tree Hill* (WB, 2003- ) or *Gossip Girl* (CW, 2007- ) where storylines go on over several episodes and there is an emphasis on the characters’ relationships and emotions. Furthermore, the genre deals with teen characters and their peers, thus excluding the family drama, which also often focuses on teenage characters and their impending adulthood, but foregrounds their relationships with family members as opposed to their friends or partners, like *Party of Five* (Fox, 1994-2000), *7th Heaven* (WB, 1996-2007), *Everwood* (WB, 2002-2006) or *Gilmore Girls* (WB, 2000-2007). The family drama explores different versions of the family with an emphasis on the individual’s dependence on it, while the teen soap is mostly concerned with the development of some kind of self-reliance and independence from family, to the extent that characters in *One Tree Hill or Gossip Girl* even establish (or aim to establish) financial independence from their (mostly absent) parents. Despite the necessity to formulate some kind of boundaries between genres in order to conceptualize them as an object of study, we have to bear in mind that genre is always in flux, changing with each text that is added to the canon, often overlapping with other genres or creating genre hybrids.

Even though much of the identity politics negotiated in teen drama centres on issues of sexuality (often along the lines of the virginity/promiscuity binary) most texts of the genre feature relatively stable sexual identities, and (almost fiercely) defy any suggestions of a queer identity of straight male characters. Apart from its roots in the prime time soap, the genre’s focus on identity politics may be related to its emergence during the 1990s, which saw excessive debates surrounding identity politics and homosexuality as well as what Becker terms ‘straight panic’. Drawing on Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of ‘homosexual panic’ (see 1990: 19-22), Becker describes ‘straight panic’ as follows:

If male homosexual panic held sway in a culture unsure about the ontology of sexuality but utterly convinced of homosexuality’s depravity, then straight panic arises in a culture not only uncertain about the ontology of sexual identity but also uncertain about heterosexuality’s moral authority. More simply put, male homosexual panic describes what happens when heterosexual men, insecure about the boundary between gay and straight, confront the threatening spectre of a socially prohibited
homosexuality. Straight panic describes what happens when heterosexual men and women, still insecure about the boundary between gay and straight, confront an increasingly accepted homosexuality (Becker, 2006: 23).

In other words, while ‘homosexual panic’ may be viewed of as an expression of fear to be termed homosexual in a society that de-values homosexuality, ‘straight panic’ may be viewed as anxieties relating to a de-stabilized gender identity, due to the fact that homosexuality becomes increasingly socially accepted. While both case studies discussed in this article can be viewed as speech acts within a cultural discourse (or maybe even a culture war), the language of the discourse changes significantly. Beverly Hills 90210 expresses a way of dealing with homosexuality’s increasing acceptance, by drawing clearly recognizable lines between homosexuality and heterosexuality. The O.C., however, is set in a larger socio-political discourse (as will be explained in more detail later) that increasingly questions the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary and increasingly challenges ‘traditional’ constructs of masculinity through popular culture (see Becker 13-36).

While suggestions of homosexuality between fictional characters otherwise conceptualized as straight, as for example Seth (Adam Brody) and Ryan (Ben McKenzie) in The O.C., often functions as a form of humour in ‘mainstream’ society, Smyth summarizes how queer readings can function as a serious political act of subversion:

As an act of vengeance, I want to take what could be mine from Hollywood, put myself in the picture as it were, reinvent the story of the gaze. Wish-fulfilment, you may say, as I wrest the homo-subtext from its cosy hetero-complacent form and make it a major discourse. Maybe so, but then reading against the grain began as a wish for inclusion by marginalised, under-represented people and ended up as a strategy essential for our survival (Smyth, 1995: 123).

This article is about the ways in which these acts of subversion are structured into specific texts, taking a relatively minor discourse and making it a major one. However, queer reading strategies are more than just detecting homosexual subtext: Queer theory is concerned with the de-construction of the heterosexuality/homosexual binary and the de-stabilizing of heteronormativity. Thus, a queer reading of a text is more than the suggestion that Seth may or may not be gay; in fact, the sexual orientation of this fictional character in terms of categories like heterosexuality or homosexuality is more or less irrelevant. Queer readings are about exploring in-between spaces of interpretation, about the idea that the lines between heterosexuality and homosexuality are being blurred and ways in which negotiations and re-negotiations of masculinity and femininity may not be in need of complete straightness.
One way in which queer offers productive reading strategies of audio-visual media and the way these may already be structured into the text is through the ‘gay gaze’. In ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, Mulvey analyses how the objectifying gaze tends to be structured towards women. While there is no need to go into her (highly contested) psychoanalytical interpretations of the structure of the male gaze, she identifies three ways in which the objectifying gaze works:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera, as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion (Mulvey, 1985: 314).

Drukman (1995: 81-95) builds on Mulvey’s theory in conceptualizing a ‘gay gaze’, which involves the male body as the object of the look. As Burston summarizes:

Socially and cinematically, male authority is bound up with the act of looking. Any representation of masculinity denoting ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ is therefore perceived as a threat to dominant notions of what it means to be a ‘real’ (i.e. rigidly heterosexual) man. Still Hollywood has always had its share of male narcissists from Valentino to Schwarzenegger, actors whose bankability was (and is) dependent precisely on an audience’s desire to look at them. And cinema audiences, as we all know, are not composed entirely of swooning heterosexual women. The knowledge that male viewers might enjoy the spectacle of the male body is a constant source of anxiety; men are not supposed to function as objects for one another’s erotic gaze (Burston, 1995: 111-12).

Queer theory is about de-stabilizing a heteronormative subject/object binary, in which the (white, heterosexual) male is the actor who performs the gaze and the woman is the object of the male gaze. Since cinema audiences are composed of various sexes, genders, age groups, gender identifications, (unstable) sexual identities, various levels of social privilege, and so on, the cinematic gaze is easily queered, for example when a straight man looks at highly fetishized performances of masculinity in films like Tango and Cash (Konchalovskiy, 1989) or Die Hard (McTiernan, 1988).

However, while the fetishization of bodies in cinema can be conceptualized like this, the concept cannot be applied to television without appreciating the aesthetic differences between cinema and TV:

… the display of the female body on TV, in dance sequences or series like Charlie’s Angels [ABC, 1976-1981], is gestural rather than fascinating. The techniques of rapid cutting prevent the access of the gaze at the body being displayed. Instead, TV’s displays of the female body, frequent and depressing enough as they are, provide material for the glance only (Ellis, 1992: 143).
Television’s recent move towards more cinematic aesthetics and technological developments of the last decade may change the way the televisual ‘glance’ or ‘gaze’ is structured significantly, as suggested by Caldwell (1995: 3-31). However, despite these potential changes, it is important to bear in mind that the way the body is fetishized in cinema is different from television, which may be why, for example, the American version of *Queer as Folk* (Showtime, 2000-2005) offers an almost excessive amount of images of objectified male bodies, possibly to make up in ‘visual quantity’ for what the medium lacks in its ability to fetishize the human body.

**Case Study: depictions of homo-social bonding in Beverly Hills 90210**
This short introduction to theories of the gaze can hopefully help explain ways in which queer readings are already structured into the text. For the following case studies, it is also important to understand the significance of the male body, not only being looked at by another male character within the text, but also being put on display to be objectified. While the visual framing of particular characters as well as the relationship of characters with each other is obviously a key aspect of understanding and analysing audio-visual media, it is important to stress that other aspects of the narrative (in cinema as well as television) can invite subversive readings, too. Obvious examples of this can be long-winded storylines characters may share in television dramas, the way they relate to each other in dialogue (also, possibly by adding innuendo, irony or sarcasm to their speech), the performance of actors, music that accompanies a scene, lighting, setting, and so on. The following case studies will draw out how queer readings of homo-social friendships between teenage males are denied or offered by the texts of Beverly Hills 90210 and The O.C. With its beginning in 1990, Beverly Hills 90210 is situated within a historical moment in which gender and sexual identity started to be conceptualized and discussed in different ways. Not only did Judith Butler publish Gender Trouble in 1990 – possibly predominantly relevant for the way academia deals with conceptions of gender – but with the initial panic of the AIDS crisis drawing to a close, the end of Reaganism and a number of debates dealing with identity politics and multiculturalism, the way identity was discussed through popular culture changed dramatically (see Becker, 2006: 1-79 and Fiske 1994: 21-124). Significant changes in the media landscape from the 1980s, like VHS technology, cable TV and the licensing of Fox as a new network channel, carried into the 1990s and Beverly Hills 90210 can be seen as a result of these developments: In order to compete with ‘the Big Three’ network channels ABC, CBS and NBC, Fox started to target teen and young adult audiences with series like 21 Jump Street (Fox, 1987-1993), which gave Johnny Depp his big break, The Simpsons (Fox, 1989-) and, in 1990, Beverly Hills 90210, soon followed by Melrose Place (Fox, 1992-1999) (Graham McKinley 1997: 14-18).

Beverly Hills 90210 ran for ten seasons and in the end the characters had not only long finished high school, but also finished their college education and had built careers for themselves. During its 10 year-run, no gay characters ever made it into the main cast. Some gay characters are recurring characters, but their narrative function is mostly to show the tolerance or the struggle for tolerance of the main cast, as for example Kelly (Jennie Garth) coming to terms with the idea that a gay couple is chosen as foster parents for an abandoned baby over her in the episode ‘The Nature of Nurture’ (08/24), broadcast in 1998, or David (Brian Austin Green) taking care of a teenage boy who is kicked out by his parents because of his homosexuality in the same season (‘Santa Knows’, 08/15). Beverly Hills 90210 tries hard to deny a queering of homo-social bonding. The first season introduces Brendon Walsh (Jason Priestley) and his twin sister Brenda (Shannen Doherty) as main characters, and even though the storylines focus on all of the members of the cast, Brendon and Brenda remain at the centre of the narrative for several seasons, as shown in the way their circle of friends is structured around the Walsh family, where most holidays are celebrated together by all the characters, and where all the teenage characters turn to in times of crisis in their own family. One way of denying the queering of the character of Brendon and his male friends is evident in that, unlike later versions of the genre or 1980s teen films, he does not have one, but two best male friends: Steve (Ian Ziering) and Dylan (Luke Perry). The cast of Beverly Hills 90210 is large for a TV series, though quite
normal for a soap, with nine teenagers at the centre of the narrative (at least in season 1). More recurring characters are added throughout the run of the series, usually in light of main characters like Brenda (who is ‘replaced’ by Valerie, played by Tiffani Amber Thiessen) or Dylan (‘replaced’ by Noah, played by Vincent Young) leaving. Friendships between characters are usually assumed by the narrative, rather than explored: By repeatedly framing all the characters as an established group, a new characters’ membership of this group is achieved through the visuals. While storylines may be dedicated to conflict between the characters, it is less common for them to deal with moments of initial bonding between friends. However, once membership of the group is established, characters share moments of common activity and emotional confession. In this regard, some combinations are more common than others (thus implying a stronger bond, for example between the characters of Brendon and Steve than between Brendon and David). Brendon shares several storylines with either Steve or Dylan (or sometimes both), often dealing with competition over girls. These storylines usually do not last longer than one episode, whereas storylines dealing with the teenagers’ heterosexual relationships and desire can last for entire seasons.

As common for the genre, the teenage males tend to have conversations on very personal topics, often revolving around their romantic relationships and their feelings towards others, and, importantly, confessions of how they feel. This convention may be rooted in the climactic scene in John Hughes’ iconic The Breakfast Club, in which Andy (Emilio Estevez) and Brian (Anthony Michael Hall) confess their feelings of alienation to the group, with both of them breaking down crying or, even earlier, emotional outbreaks of teen characters like Jim Stark (James Dean) in the melodrama Rebel Without a Cause (Ray, 1955) (see Turnbull 2008: 172-79). In Beverly Hills, 90210, Steve in particular often confesses feelings of jealousy or inadequacy towards Brendon. One strategy to deny queer readings of such scenes is achieved through setting: they happen during the break of a sports contest, even in the middle of a basketball game or in the ‘Peach Pit’ while Brendon is working, constantly busy cleaning the bar or handing out burgers. Generally, the teenagers are always in motion when discussing personal issues. This is curious since the private subject matter would suggest that the friends seek out a secluded, private space to discuss it. What is significant about Steve’s emotional confessions to Brendon is that, firstly, they are rarely reciprocated with a confession by Brendon, at least not in the same scene; and secondly, they do not tend to look at each other while they discuss their problems.
The denial of queer readings of the Brendon/Steve friendship is also supported by storylines involving homosexual characters, which dis-places homosexual desire onto other characters. In the unlikely case we had any doubts about Steve and Brendon’s heterosexuality, the audience is being told what ‘gay men’ are like: while they don’t look like an ‘other’ and are often closeted, they still are significantly different: they reject Kelly’s sexual advances (which neither Steve nor Brendon do) (‘Summer Storm’, 02/03), spend time in spaces distinctively marked as part of gay culture and are ultimately a threat to macho culture because of their ability to objectify other men (‘Blind Spot’ 04/26). Quite significantly, ‘Blind Spot’ shows Steve discovering that the president of his fraternity, Mike Ryan (Jack Armstrong), is gay. In the course of the episode, Steve becomes increasingly anxious about his own sexuality being questioned when first, Mike spots him at a “gay coffee house” and mistakes him as homosexual and, secondly, his fraternity brothers make jokes that question his heterosexuality during a photo shoot for a calendar where young men pose in underwear. Steve ends up outing Mike to his fraternity, pointing his friends to the ‘real other’; but when they move to remove Mike from the fraternity, Steve comes to his defence, somewhat redeeming himself. Graham McKinley summarizes the storyline as follows in her study of female teenage audiences of Beverly Hills 90210:

The show’s moral is embedded in Steve’s discovery that he has more in common with a gay man than previously thought – a premise that right away positions gays as ‘other’ and accepts discomfort with them as ‘normal’ (Graham McKinley 1997: 180).

In contrast to Dylan, who refuses on the grounds that he does not want to be objectified, and Brendon, who fears that he won’t be taken serious in his political career, Steve seems eager to be photographed for the calendar and disappointed when turned down, at first. Steve’s heterosexuality seems to be re-enforced through his anxiety about being mistaken for a gay man since, other than David or D’Shawn (Cress Williams), who also agree to pose for the calendar, he does not do it to appease his girlfriend or in exchange for a date, like the other men, thus his motives are not ‘straightened out’. His desire to be objectified can be read as undermining his heterosexuality and seems to compromise it so much that only his anxiety about the homosexual ‘other’ can re-position him with his fraternity brothers (who also seem desperate to assert their heterosexuality by ‘othering’ Steve) as one of ‘them’. In the end, the images of the photo shoot may show young men in their underwear, but the way they pose and how the photo-shoot is intercut with images of Kelly, Donna (Tori Spelling) and Andrea (Gabrielle Carteris) laughing so hard they barely even look through the camera, leaves little room for objectification of the male body. Steve’s storyline in this episode is a potent example of what Becker calls ‘straight panic’: While he does not necessarily have a problem with Mike’s homosexuality, he is anxious about his own heterosexuality being questioned, especially since his sexual orientation seems to be under more scrutiny than the other young men’s. In order to deal with these fears, a clear homosexuality/ heterosexuality binary has to be maintained, thus an ‘other’ has to exist. Interestingly enough, ‘Blind Spot’ also includes a scene in which the friendship between Brendon and Steve comes dangerously close to being queered: Early on in the episode, Brendon’s car breaks down while the young men are on their way to a baseball game, and while
Brendon calls for help, Steve settles down in a coffee house, where he slowly realizes that pictures on the wall show naked men and the clientele is all-male, sitting on tables in pairs of two, seemingly having intimate conversations with each other. The intimate conversations between the men in the coffee house are framed differently than the scenes of emotional confession between Steve and Brendon: the gay men lean towards each other, they look at each other, sit down and are not busy with something else. The camera pans around the room showing these supposed markers of gay culture, intercut with Steve’s eyes widening in shock, until the camera (presumably from Steve’s point of view) comes to rest on Mike, in conversation with another man. Brendon joins his friend and reacts very relaxed when Steve lets him know that they are in a “gay coffee house”. When Steve insists on waiting outside, Brendon tries to get him to stay, at which moment the camera shows the men from Mike’s perspective, who, not being able to hear what is being said or knowing how they ended up in there, assumes that he is witnessing a lover’s quarrel. Of course, any such queering is immediately countered by the audience’s knowledge of Steve’s shock at finding out he is surrounded by ‘others’, the framing of the scene by Steve and Brendon being on their way to a baseball game (an activity traditionally associated with heterosexual masculinity) and the ensuing storyline.

To summarize, then, Beverly Hills 90210 uses four primary strategies to deny queer readings of the Brendon/Steve relationship: A gaze structure which barely allows for a complication of the (heterosexual) ‘male gaze’, especially between characters within the diegesis; the size of the main cast and a narrative which does not often allow for an exploration of the male character’s friendships; setting of emotional confessions, mostly in public spaces which often necessitate some kind of activity by at least one of the characters; the main characters’ relationship with gay characters, which often function to re-enforce the regular casts’ heterosexuality by setting up a heterosexuality/homosexuality binary (thus creating an ‘other’), for example by introducing storylines concerned with ‘straight panic’. The denial of queer readings is also reflected in the fact that there appears to be little fan activity that suggests a queering of the friendship. While, of course, Beverly Hills 90210 fandom peaked long before YouTube was around and the internet offered countless ways to share one’s slash fiction, it is still relevant that despite its re-publication on DVD and ‘re-boot’ on TV, there is no suggestion of this on pages like YouTube where at least ‘mainstream’ fan-discourses tend to be reflected (see Kohnen 2008: 210-19).

1. Case Study: Depictions of homo-social bonding in The O.C.

The O.C. ran from 2003 to 2007 and, together with the WB’s One Tree Hill (WB, 2003-) was possibly meant to fill the gap the critically acclaimed Dawson’s Creek and Buffy, the Vampire Slayer had left with both series ending in 2003 (see Hills 2006: 54-62 or Abbott 2010: 100-2). Becker analyses how during the 1990s a cultural discourse developed in the US, which made programming of what he calls ‘gay-themed’ episodes of TV series or entire series like Will & Grace (NBC, 1998-2006) economically viable. He points out:
During the summer of 2003, the politics of sexual identity seemed inescapable. That June, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled Texas’s antigay sodomy law in a widely covered landmark decision heralded as the most important civil rights verdict in decades – one that might pave the way for gay marriage. With gay rights on everyone’s minds, the divisive election of the non-celibate, gay Reverend Gene Robinson as Anglican bishop of New Hampshire became headline news later that summer. Meanwhile, marketers and feature-story writers became fixated on “metrosexual” – a supposedly new breed of straight men who comfortably adopted the consumer habits of his appearance-obsessed gay counterpart (Becker, 2006: 1-2).

As Becker moves on to argue, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo, 2003-2007) picked up on this trend by showing homosexual men giving makeovers to heterosexual men looking to adapt to these consumer habits. 2003 also saw the first airing of *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003-2010), followed a year later by *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004- ), with both series radically questioning and queering concepts of gender, sex and the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary from within heteronormative constructs and institutions like family, marriage, beauty, science, suburbia, friendship or ‘bachelorhood’ (see, for example, Chambers, 2009: 105-127 or Richardson, 2006: 86-94). Thus, *The O.C.* was placed within a genre discourse of *Dawson’s Creek* and *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*, which both featured strong gay characters and a broader television landscape that responded to a cultural discourse surrounding a re-negotiation of gender and sexual identities. This context may already be enough to try to impose a queer reading onto the text, but this article argues that, other than *Beverly Hills 90210*, *The O.C.* actively invites queer readings, in a manner maybe only preceded within the genre with the supernatural teen series *Smallville* (WB, 2001-2011), as outlined by Battis (2006) and Kohnen (2008: 207-21).
*Slash* videos, even on a relatively ‘mainstream’ website as YouTube frequently suggest a coupling of the two male main characters of *The O.C.*, Ryan and Seth. Looking at the text, this is hardly surprising since it seems to disregard or consciously subvert all of the ‘rules’ the former series set up regarding queer readings: The core cast of *The O.C.* is not exactly small, but the series focuses on only four teenage characters. Of course, the teenage characters in *The O.C.* engage with other teen characters: they date them, fight with them, even socialize with them, but few of these characters are there to stay: often they are reduced to plotting devices to delay or complicate the union of the heterosexual couples Seth and Summer (Rachel Bilson) and Ryan and Marissa (Mischa Barton) (though Marissa dies at the end of season 3, after which another female love interest for Ryan is introduced). This comparatively small cast allows a narrative focus on the exploration of homo-social bonding between the teen characters. It is significant that the friendship between Ryan and Seth is allowed a lot more screen time than the friendship between Marissa and Summer. Despite Seth’s almost instant admiration for Ryan, who was abandoned by his parents, but is given a new home in the Cohen family, the first episodes show how the two young men bond by playing video games, reading graphic novels, sailing together and via Seth attempting to guide Ryan through the social labyrinth of Newport, as well as communicating his own experiences and feelings towards the community. In addition to this, the dialogue between Seth and Ryan is often structured in a way that is reminiscent of the playful banter typical of the screwball comedy of the 1930s, where: “Conversation and play work together to establish the couple’s equality, compatibility and companionship” (Glitre, 2006: 75). As Hall points out:

From early promo shots that show Ryan and Seth lounging opposite each other, shirtless, on matching pool recliners, there were hints of a homoerotic current between Seth and Ryan. As the show developed, this manifested itself in the admiration that geeky, talkative Seth had for strong, silent Ryan, and the increasing emotional dependence that he seemed to have on him.

Ryan, in turn, was quick to protect the unpopular and skinny Seth whenever he was in danger of being beaten up. By Episode 24 of the first season, it seemed clear that the writers were aware of the subtext between the two characters and were playing it up deliberately. In one scene, Seth walks in on Ryan changing and, flustered, asks him whether he works out (Hall, 2007).
The ‘gay gaze’ Hall is hinting at is certainly more present in *The O.C.* than in *Beverly Hills 90210*. Ryan often displays his muscles by wearing ‘wife-beaters’, tight, sleeveless shirts that draw attention to his biceps, while at the same time connoting his working class roots, physical strength and an oppressive version of heteronormativity marked through violence against women. Thus, while his shirts could be read as representing a violent heteronormative masculinity, they also serve to display the body of the character, even equip Ryan with a ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey 1985: 309). Objectifying images of Ryan are shot from many female characters’ perspectives but Seth remains the only male character to actively look at his friend’s body. Despite Ryan’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, the character is equipped with traditionally ‘masculine’ traits: he works in construction, has a lot of sexual experience and fights with other men. Meanwhile, Seth is characterized as more ‘feminized’ in comparison with his friend: he draws and is incompetent at DIY work, has little sexual experience and cannot defend himself against bullies in school (see Turnbull 2008: 179-81). During moments of confession, both often sit across from each other in the pool house, just talking and listening to each other, not moving around doing something else, looking each other in the face, as is suggested both by establishing shots and eye-line matches.

Almost every episode of this teen soap opens with moments of emotional confessions between the teenage males; usually, these are set in the Cohen’s pool house where Ryan lives. The pool house can be seen as functioning as a private space in two ways: Firstly, it is Ryan’s bedroom, presumably the only room that offers privacy to teenagers. In fact, the bed features prominently in most shots of the pool house, where it is in the middle of the room structure. While the young men are rarely shown sitting or even lying on the bed together, which could be a clear transgression of the visual norms of heterosexual masculinity, in most scenes in the pool house at least one of them is sitting on the bed, thus the bed is visible in most shots. The prominence of the bed in this space can carry connotations of sexuality and physical intimacy, thus opening up room for queer readings that go beyond the text. Secondly, the pool house is removed from the main house and thus offers not only the privacy of a bedroom, but it is even further away from the prying eyes of parents, friends and neighbours. Drawing on Doane’s concept of feminine masquerade (Doane 1981: 41-57), Cohan argues in his queer reading of *Pillow Talk* (Gordon, 1959) that a private, secluded bedroom functions
as a space where the ‘masculine masquerade’, the performance of heteronormative masculinity, can be abandoned (Cohan 1997: 264-303). Thus, private confession of two supposedly straight characters in an intimate, secluded space can be read as signifying the abandonment of the heteronormative ‘rules’ of friendship.

The boy’s attachment to each other is also suggested by storylines that explore not only the bonding between the characters and the way their friendship develops, but also the way the characters attach more value to their friendship than to their heterosexual relationships. The last episode of the first season (‘The Ties That Bind’, 01/27) and the first episode of the second season (‘The Distance’) see Ryan leaving Newport to be with his pregnant ex-girlfriend Theresa (Navi Rawat). Seth leaves Newport, his family and his girlfriend not even for Ryan (because that is not the alternative here), but because of the pain he would feel, being in the same place in which he was happy with Ryan, is so hard to bear that not even the love and social status his popular girlfriend can offer make up for it. Seth goes on a sailing trip, which takes him to Luke (Chris Carmack) and his (gay) father Carson (Brian McNamara) in Portland. As Seth’s Grandfather (Alan Dale) summarizes: “His best friend leaves, so he runs off with another boy and his gay dad”. Seth refuses to return to his parents’ house in Orange County until Ryan returns as well (‘The Distance’, 02/01). Interestingly enough, ‘The Distance’ also sees Ryan discussing his feelings of guilt towards Seth for (supposedly) betraying the friendship. While he expresses this in a conversation with Theresa, which hardly invites an admission of feelings of guilt about leaving Marissa, it still seems like the ‘betrayal’ of Seth weighs harder on him than the betrayal of his girlfriend (though the conflict is more easily resolved). When Theresa argues that “it’s not like you abandoned him [Seth]”, Ryan responds: “actually, it kind of is. I just – I just took off. I didn’t really talk to him about it”. This exchange can easily be read as the text privileging the friendship between Seth and Ryan over their heterosexual relationships, since Ryan seems to feel no guilt when, at the end of the episode, he leaves Theresa to move back to Newport. Furthermore, the ‘reunion’ of Seth and Ryan includes conventions familiar from romantic comedies, like running towards each other and the ‘sealing’ of the ‘union’ with an embrace. Throughout the series, Seth’s heterosexual love interest Summer points out how Seth left her for Ryan, insisting that the heterosexual relationship she and Seth shared should have been able to make up for the ‘loss’ of his friend. The text itself therefore frequently reminds viewers of the importance of the friendship in comparison with romantic relationships.

The only male gay character in the series is Carson Ward the father of Marissa’s (fiercely heterosexual) ex-boyfriend Luke. However, Carson leaves Newport after he is outed and his marriage destroyed and Luke joins him to ‘start over’. This lack of male gay characters that are part of Ryan’s and Seth’s peer group means that there is no room to construct the gay teen as ‘other’. Without a ‘gay guy’ to compare them to, their relationship can frequently be viewed as leaving the arena of heteronormativity, suggesting at the very least equality between their heterosexual romantic relationships and their friendship. This also eliminates possibilities to discuss ‘straight panic’ and possibly even describes a way to move past such a concept in dissolving the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary completely. In other words, if there is no ‘other’, the need for ‘straight panic’ is eradicated.
To summarize, then, apart from storylines as the one outlined above and the structure of dialogue, *The O.C.* ‘encourages’ queer readings by exploring the friendship in the narrative, which is necessitated by a relatively small cast; a setting of emotional confession in the intimate space of the pool house; permitting a ‘gay gaze’; and an absence of gay male characters. Of course, this absence of homosexual male characters could suggest that there is an expression of homophobia, but it is argued here that because there is nothing to define the boundaries between homo-social bonding and homo-sexual desire, no homosexual ‘other’, if you will, the definitions of homosexuality and heterosexuality are truly *queered* by the text. Thus, *The O.C.* subverts the heteronormative idea of homo-social bonding, possibly re-negotiating ideas of masculinity, which suggest that gender, sexuality and sexual desire do not need to be established along a rigid heterosexuality/homosexuality binary. By de-constructing this binary, it moves away from any ideas of ‘straight panic’ that rely on an ‘other’, but manages to remove the necessity to define one’s identity in terms of sexuality.

### 2. Conclusion

This article looked at two examples of the teen soap in order to analyse the strategies employed to deny or encourage queer readings. Of course, queer readings are, by definition, always somewhat subversive and never a ‘dominant’ reading strategy (if such a thing exists), but this article showed how a text can be structured in a way that tries to ward off such suggestions or actively invite them. *Beverly Hills, 90210* rigidly re-enforces the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary, relies on the ‘otherness’ of gay characters, possibly to correspond with a cultural discourse on ‘straight panic’ that demands acceptance towards gays and lesbians, but relies on clear boundaries between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’. A decade later, *The OC* offers different ways to negotiate gender and sexual identity by exploring the friendship between ‘straight’ male characters in a way that allows them to move into a territory in-between heterosexuality and homosexuality, thus *queering* their relationship. By avoiding issues of ‘straight panic’ or the ‘gay other’, the series manages to explore homo-social bonding in a way that innovates the language used in the genre to negotiate (sexual) identity. By not creating a ‘gay other’, *The OC* manages to avoid a homophobic depiction of homosexuality: In light of problematic depictions of bisexual Alex (Olivia Wilde) in season 2 or Eric (Connor Paolo) in *Gossip Girl* – *The OC*’s creator Josh Schwartz’ next project – the queering of the male characters could be read as holding more subversive potential than yet another depiction of a ‘crazy lesbian’ or a male gay teen who, apart from being a loyal friend to female characters, gets little screen time or storylines (see Warn 2005, Masaki 2008, Jensen 2009).

As mentioned in the introduction, genre, much like the cultural discourse surrounding gender and sexual identity, is always in flux. Thus, the analysis of specific products of popular culture can only ever be a snapshot of one speech act among many, often met with a ‘backlash’ (one example of this are the gender politics of *Gossip Girl*, or a further development of ideas, like *Glee* [Fox, 2009- ]). These developments also rely on other factors than the cultural or the genre discourse, such as economic concerns (which is why homosexual relationships on television are often accused of exploitation or cynicism) or general discourses on identity: for example, Becker concludes his analysis
on ‘gay-themed’ television in the 1990s by suggesting that 9/11 provided a male, white, straight middle-class America that was constructed as oppressor throughout the 1990s with “its own sense of victimhood” (2006: 215), which relieves it of its responsibility and guilt towards the ‘other’; of course, the current recession may work to re-enforce this ‘sense of victimhood’ even further. However, the fact that a series like The OC proved to be economically viable for at least three seasons can be read as an indicator that cultural attitudes towards masculinity, the exploration of homo-social bonding among males and the necessity of the ‘gay other’ are changing. While, of course, social change in itself is hardly surprising, this article is mainly concerned with the language or textual strategies used to articulate this change. The teen soap, as a genre rooted in melodrama and prime time soap and safely located in ‘mainstream’ popular culture, predominantly concerned with identity politics and frequently featuring emotional, intimate moments between males, appears to be a particularly interesting example to draw out textual strategies employed to avoid or encourage queer readings. The four major strategies considered here are: the size of the cast, the setting of emotional confessions, gaze structure and the construction of a ‘homosexual other’. While both case studies considered here can be viewed as speech acts within a cultural discourse (if not to say culture war), the language of the discourse is significantly different. Beverly Hills 90210 expresses a way of dealing with homosexuality’s increasing acceptance, by drawing clearly recognizable lines between homosexuality and heterosexuality. However, as mentioned before, The O.C. arrives at an historical moment when heteronormativity becomes increasingly de-stabilized with debates surrounding gay marriage being introduced to the political discourse (thus de-stabilizing one of heteronormativity’s most important institutions, the nuclear family) and the media landscape offering new ways to re-define gender and sexual identities in potentially radical ways.

Bibliography


**Film**


**TV**

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