

I Kissed A Girl And the Media Liked It:
Negotiating Heteronormative Behavior in Lesbian Kiss Episodes

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At the same time the public forum was gearing up for a decades long fight to gauge public opinion involving gay rights and marriage equality, a separate battle was being fought in living rooms across the country. Although nearly always positioned in between sweep weeks stunts to booster enough numbers to snag potential advertising companies, the lesbian kiss episode was a way many nineties and early 2000s sitcoms, dramas and other television shows either attempted to snag a larger audience or to make a broader statement about the emerging homosexual audience impact on the television viewing audiences' lives.

Looking at some of the earlier examples of lesbian kiss episodes, I plan to find a deeper and more accepting context of the inclusion of LGBT lifestyle in primetime and premium cable. While at the time a “limitless chorus of policy-speak committed to reinventing “the family” as a nostalgic form” (Henderson 2003, p. 376), television was evolving by at first dipping its toe into the LGBT portrayal waters and later diving in to

paving the way for other homosexual representations to be presented on other cable and network television channels.

Literature Review

The lesbian kiss episode features an element of gay culture centered on a heteronormative narrative. After the episode, the regular television character will return to her post-experimental story arc, and everything will go back to “normal.”

Relationships and marriage discourse in particular pinpoint how heteronormative power relations reinforce behavior and the gendered nature that exists in marriage debates (Grindstaff 2003, p.258-259).

Previous research and empirical analysis have focused on how homosexual and heterosexual people can relate to one another on the small screen. The television audience should remind itself that popular television shows must contain text that could appeal to more than one kind of audience. For example, the popular primetime sitcom “Will & Grace” that aired on NBC from 1998 to 2006 was able to peel back the focus on a straight woman/gay best friend relationship and show a recent trend “in film and television narratives that addresses straight women’s desire for relationships with men that exist outside the norms proscribed by the heterosexual contract” (Quimby 2005, p. 715).

Premium subscription channels are able to show more explicit scenes and use more obscene language than their basic cable and network counterparts. HBO's "Six Feet Under" and Showtimes' "Queer As Folk" both contained several scenes of men kissing and participating in homo-sex. This fact enables the shows to challenge the more heteronormative order and those scenes serve as more than "one-off events to shock or titillate straights;" they are instead meant to show normal relationship behavior and regular "displays of desire and affection that occur at home, on the street, in the local diner and everywhere else" (Bury 2008, p. 60)

What viewers see on television is often how they perceive the world around them, as "fictional entertainment narratives communicated through the mass media ... can influence readers' and viewers' beliefs about the social world" (Green, Strange and Brock 2002). A person's beliefs are deeply rooted in political ideology. A study by Slater, Rouner and Long showed that the more conservative a viewer is the more expectant the person would be to counter-arguing against same-sex marriage (p. 244). How homosexuality is portrayed in the mass media is in direct relation to how the general public views sexuality. "Communication theory has a history of depth and precision in the exploration of symbolic practice in all human environments, and the interrogation of sexual difference and its significance belongs here, as elsewhere" (Henderson 2003, p. 378).

What we see is often more than we expect, and the meaning behind the message can subconsciously affect how we believe in a social issue. As long as the pictures resemble how heterosexual couples wed, then they are perceived to be more accepting.

“These images have been very effective in swaying the populace that this is a civil rights issue, by visually linking the couple’s “special day” to the images of justice that are called to mind by the placement of national flags, towering government buildings and sweeping classical staircases” (Bacon 2009, p. 7). Many media scholars agree that the media generally can influence how American citizens learn about issues and how they change or form (see Lee and Hicks 2011). If the media does not portray an accurate description of what life is like as a member of the LGBT community, then it is likely that the heterosexual viewing audience is to believe what they see. “An argument can be made that today’s media (again, particularly television) present a skewed and unrealistic portrayal of the realities of same-sex marriage. Therefore, an examination of whether and how the use of various media affects audiences’ attitudes toward this issue in order” (Lee and Hicks 2011, p. 1394). We believe what we watch, even if we recognize lifestyles are set in a fictional setting.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” “Roseanne,” ABC, Original Air Date: March 1, 1994

One of the earliest lesbian kiss episodes - “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” - Roseanne (played by standup comedian-turned actress Roseanne Barr (then Arnold) is making plans to go out to a gay bar with friend Nancy (Sandra Bernhard) and her girlfriend Sharon (guest star Mariel Hemingway). Roseanne’s pregnant sister Jackie, played by Laurie Metcalf, is apprehensive because she does not want to be perceived as a lesbian. Nancy is hesitant to introduce her friends to her new lover, and later in the episode it is revealed that her anxiety is rooted in fear of them not accepting her new lifestyle.

In the scenes leading up to what became a media sensation known as “The Kiss,” Roseanne is cracking jokes and overtly showing how much she feels that dancing at a “gay bar” is not a big deal. Those jokes include telling Jackie that she could “think they are gay right back at them” and flirting with the bartender is “doing what I do in any bar – scoring free drinks.”

After dancing, Sharon and Roseanne take a break and sit down at the table.

Sharon: You know, Roseanne, we should hang out more often.

Roseanne: I was thinking that too but next time let’s leave the wives at home.

Sharon: You’ve read my mind.



Figure 1.1: Roseanne Barr and Mariel Hemingway kiss in after dancing in a gay bar in the “Roseanne” episode “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (1994)

When Sharon kisses Roseanne, Roseanne’s eyes are opened and she wipes the bottom of her lip on Sharon’s shirt. The rest of the episode focuses on Roseanne dealing with her feelings in the kiss aftermath. She confronts Nancy about the kiss and Nancy is indignant saying that her girlfriend just thought it was no big deal.

Here, the episode opens up to provide more complex context in the relationships between lesbians and heterosexual women friendships. Nancy suggests that the reason she did not want to introduce Roseanne to her personal relationship because she knew it would only complicate things further.

Nancy: You're afraid that just one tiny little percent of you might have been turned on by a woman.

Roseanne: That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. I am not afraid of any small percentage of my gayness inside. I'm totally OK about whether I am three percent or four percent or (pauses) lower.

The episode concludes with Nancy and Roseanne reconciling their relationship.

Nancy admits that she coils at the thought of Roseanne and Dan in bed together, and

Roseanne deadpans that the thought of sex with her husband also disgusts her.

**“The One With Rachel’s Big Kiss,” “Friends,” NBC, Original Air Date: April
26, 2001**

In the episode “The One With Rachel’s Big Kiss,” Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) runs into a college friend Melissa, played by Winona Ryder, and the encounter brings up an incident where the two heterosexual women “experimented” after a college party. Phoebe (Lisa Kudrow) does not believe Rachel’s story, claiming she is too “vanilla” to do something as wild as make out with another woman. The more Rachel insists that it happened, the more Phoebe negates the experience to “just a couple of spritzers and a peck on the cheek.”

Determined to prove to her friend that she had a lesbian past, Rachel invites Phoebe to dinner with Melissa to prove that her one night of lesbian action happened, but much to her jargon, Melissa denies the incident ever happened.

The setup for the “big kiss” is different than other lesbian kiss episodes. Melissa hails a cab after dinner and tells Rachel that she will not be calling her because she has now “gotten weird.”

Rachel: That night was the one wild thing I have ever done in my entire life, and I'm not going to let you take that away from me. So, if you are not going to remember that maybe you will remember this...

(Rachel kisses Melissa, studio audience reacts in surprise)



Figure 1.2: Jennifer Aniston avoids further physical contact after Winona Ryder attempts a second smooch in "The One With Rachel's Big Kiss," 2001

Melissa then confesses that she does remember and often reminisces about the night. She says she had denied the night because she was unsure if Rachel would reciprocate her feelings. Rachel backs away and assures that the kiss meant nothing to her. Melissa walks toward her cab and says she was only kidding but not before asking for a goodbye kiss.

Phoebe kisses an astonished Rachel, reasoning that she just wanted to see "what the fuss was all about" and later tells Rachel that she "has had better." Phoebe's ending remarks to the episode once again signifies how little the exchange mattered.

"Boys, Girls, Boys, Girls..." "Sex And the City," HBO, Original Air Date: June 25, 2000

In the "Sex And the City" episode "Boy, Girl, Boy Girl..." Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) is at a party with her younger and openly bisexual boyfriend Sean (Eddie Cahill).

Carrie is obviously uncomfortable with the age gap between herself and also questions typical gender lines throughout the episode. A woman suggests playing Spin the Bottle. Carrie alludes to the juvenile nature of the game by asking “Seriously, seventh grade Spin the Bottle?”



Figure 1.3: Alanis Morisette readies to plant a kiss on Sarah Jessica Parker in “Boys, Girls, Boys, Girls...” 2000

After a couple of rounds, Dawn (guest star Alanis Morisette) gives the bottle a whirl, which lands on Carrie just as she is lighting a cigarette. Carrie tries to play it off coolly by reverting back to how she likely played the game in junior high.

Carrie: Oh, whoops. It’s a girl. Try again.

Dawn: It’s OK.

Carrie (voiceover): Of course it was OK. I was in Alice and Confused Sexual Orientation Land. I realized I had a choice. I could stand up and walk out and prove I was an old fart. Or I could fall down the Rabbit Hole.

Dawn kisses Carrie, whose inner monologue assures the audience that the kiss wasn’t bad. In fact, it was “kind of like chicken,” again downplaying the perceived sexual pleasure to a mere nonchalant comparison term popular in the late ‘90s and early 2000s.

Secondary Stories in Lesbian Kiss Episodes

The secondary stories in each of the episodes analyzed in this paper all dealt with LGBT lifestyle in subtle, TV-friendly ways. In “Roseanne,” son DJ asks his father if he

minded his mother dancing with other women, to which Dan replied: “No, son. That is perfectly fine, and if anyone who tries to tell you differently is wrong.”

Though less obvious than the “Roseanne” storyline, the other shows in this study have also addressed the topic of gender bending and masculinity. In the same episode of Carrie’s kiss, “Sex And the City” character Charlotte, who is often portrayed as a conservative WASP, dressed up as a drag king for a portrait photographer. In “Friends,” Rachel openly questions Chandler’s masculinity by suggesting that he spend more time watching ESPN and less time tuning into celebrity gossip network E!, telling him to “seriously, ESPN. Just have it on in the background.” Later, while talking with his fiancée Monica, he recognizes his own effeminate behavior and asks if the cable carries the sports network.

Conclusion

Whereas some kisses may seem to be a bigger deal than others, the media attention surrounding the “Roseanne” episode is a telling example of how the world viewed homosexuality in 1994. Weeks leading up to the episode’s airing, Roseanne and her then husband and show executive producer Tom Arnold cried censorship surrounding the airing of the episode. Roseanne claimed the network executives were afraid of losing \$1 million in advertising (Gordinier and Meyers 1994, p. 11). Ultimately, several affiliates did choose not to air the controversial episode.

. It was not the first to feature a same-sex kiss between two men but its impact on television is something that can be seen today. Lesbian kiss episodes, on the surface, may seem like a stunt, but there can be a message behind the spectacle, depending, of course,

of the episode's context. Many other television shows have attempted the gay kiss stunt, but in all of these episodes discussed in this paper, the main actresses had something that they needed to prove to either themselves or to society as a whole. They had to get back to what they considered normal. It is interesting how television comedies have evolved in the way they handle sexuality since the days Roseanne stepped into the gay bar. Several critics have pointed out that the lesbian kiss episodes are nothing more than mere attempts to garner more ratings and do not offer a true representation of same-sex relationship lifestyle. In analyzing three episodes within this sub genre, I have shown that behind the obvious shock factor of featuring a two-woman smooch underlines an effort to question societal views on gender, sex and masculinity.

Many other shows have attempted a lesbian kiss plotline since the nineties but to little media attention. Further research could be explored in seeing how such attitudes have evolved as more shows have appeared to be more accepting of the gay lifestyle. Shows on the premium cable networks and online streaming sites have also progressed to showing other sexual acts between both same-sex and heterosexual couples.

Viewers of programs like "Modern Family" and "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" have even been found to be more accepting of same-sex marriage (Lee and Hicks 2011, p. 1395). Finding more examples may "explore the powers of representation and suggest that they have very real consequences for the ways that the same-sex marriage debate evolves" (Bacon 2009, p. 9). Recently, it was announced that an episode of the Disney Channel children's program "Good Luck Charlie" will feature two lesbian moms in a story arc that will air in 2014. News reports have shown that Disney executives even

contacted child development experts and advocates to advise them on how to best tackle the issue (Knepper 2013, 1 of 1). It will be interesting to see if this episode will attempt to portray the characters as parental figures. Perhaps then it can be argued that homosexual behavior can be moved past the laugh track's "oohing" and "ahing" over seconds-long kisses into more accurate portrayals of how all people, regardless of sexual orientation, live and interact with each other.

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