

A METROSEXUAL EYE ON *QUEER GUY*

Toby Miller

There are several ways we can understand *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. The program can be seen as

1. the culmination of a surge of U.S. television programming that presents a sanitary, white, middle-class queer urban world in which queerness is fun and gays and lesbians are to be laughed with, not at;
2. an indication of the degree to which queer difference is a new commodity of pleasure that is safely distant from, but compatible with, heteronormativity;
3. a sign that queerness is, indeed, a lifestyle of practices that can be adopted, discarded, and redispensed promiscuously—in this case, disarticulated from its referent and resignified as metrosexuality;
4. the professionalization of queerness as a form of management consultancy for conventional masculinity, something that can be brought in to improve efficiency and effectiveness, like time-and-motion expertise, total-quality management, and just-in-time techniques; and
5. an endorsement of the spread of self-fashioning as a requirement of personal and professional achievement through the U.S. middle-class labor force.

I believe that a political-economic shift is pressuring middle-class straight men in the United States to conform to norms exemplified in *Queer Eye*, even as a new demographic targeting makes queer viewers attractive to television advertisers.

The male body is up for grabs as sexual icon, commodity consumer, and worker. This has been most recently signaled by the emergence of the "metrosexual," a term coined by the queer critic Mark Simpson and joyfully embraced by Western European, Australian, Latin American, and U.S. marketers.¹ The metrosexual is said to endorse equal opportunity vanity through cosmetics, softness, hair care products, wine bars, gyms, designer fashion, wealth, the culture industries, finance, cities, cosmetic surgery, David Beckham, and deodorants. Happy to be the object of queer erotics and committed to daily exfoliation and Web surfing, metrosexuals are feminized males who blur the visual style of straight and gay in a restless search "to spend, shop and deep-condition."²

The gay men in *Queer Eye* offer a makeover for straight men under the sign of metrosexuality, indicating that the field of the metrosexual reaches far beyond

Manhattan wine bars and clubs. The key to the program is that the potential metrosexual can be found in the suburban reaches of the tri-state area (New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut), awaiting his transformation from ordinary man into hipster. Essentially, *Queer Eye*'s queer management consultants descend on him from Gotham, charged with increasing his marketability as husband, father, and (more silently) employee. What were the preconditions for the emergence of the metrosexual, of *Queer Eye*, and of such makeovers?

The 1980s saw two crucial conferences that helped shift the direction of global advertising: "Classifying People" and "Reclassifying People." Traditional ways of understanding consumers—by race, gender, class, and region—were supplemented by categories of self-display, with market researchers dubbing the 1990s the decade of the "new man."³ Lifestyle and psychographic research became central, with consumers divided among "moralists," "trendies," "the indifferent," "working-class puritans," "sociable spenders," and "pleasure seekers." Men were subdivided into "pontificators," "self-admirers," "self-exploiters," "token triers," "chameleons," "avant-gardicians," "sleepwalkers," and "passive endurers."⁴

These new ways of thinking about consumers and audiences were linked to new ways of thinking about—and policing—employees. By 1997, 43 percent of U.S. men up to their late fifties disclosed dissatisfaction with their appearance, compared to 34 percent in 1985 and 15 percent in 1972. Why? Because the middle-class U.S. labor market now sees wage discrimination by beauty among men as well as among women, and major corporations frequently require executives to tailor their body shapes to the company ethos, or at least encourage employees to cut their weight in order to reduce health care costs to the employer. In 1998, 93 percent of U.S. companies featured fitness programs for workers, compared to 76 percent in 1992.⁵ A third of all graying male U.S. workers in 1999 colored their hair to counter the effect of aging on their careers by avoiding the "silver ceiling." Studies by Clairol reveal that men with gray hair are perceived as less successful, intelligent, and athletic than those without,⁶ while among young men, hair color sales increased by 25 percent in the five years after 1998. Teen boys spend 5 percent of their income on such products.⁷ Abetted by a newly deregulated ability to address consumers directly through television commercials, Propecia, a drug countering male hair loss, secured a 79 percent increase over five years in visits by patients to doctors in search of prescriptions.⁸ Midtown Manhattan now offers specialists in ear, hand, and foot waxing, with men accounting for 40 percent of the clientele.⁹ Such sites provide pedicures and facials to the accompaniment of cable sports and Frank Sinatra.¹⁰ Worldwide sales of men's grooming prod-

ucts reached US\$7.3 billion in 2002, accounting for 15 percent of all beauty products sold. Euromonitor predicts that the male skin care market will increase by 50 percent between 2001 and 2006, and *American Demographics* states that “baby-boomer” men spend US\$26,420 a year on “youth-enhancing products and services,” and women almost US\$3,000 a year more.¹¹

The economic component to this makeover trend goes back many years. Reconstructive surgery was pioneered on World War I veterans, who reported the desire for economic autonomy as their motivation. With the exception of wartime casualties, from that point through to the 1960s most U.S. surgeons reported treating women and a few gay men. Then economic issues that were connected to the aging process emerged as reasons to submit to the knife. The *New York Times* declared “cosmetic lib for men” in 1977. Three years later, *Business Week* encouraged its readers to obtain “a new—and younger—face.”¹² The metrosexual era has seen these premonitions confirmed. American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery figures indicate that more than sixty-five hundred men had face-lifts in 1996. In 1997 men accounted for a quarter of all such procedures, and the following year straight couples were frequently scheduling surgery together (up by 15 percent in a year). Between 1996 and 1998 male cosmetic surgery increased by 34 percent, mostly because of liposuction, and 15 percent of plastic surgery in 2001 was performed on men.¹³ Turning to the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS), we see a 316 percent increase in hair transplants from 1999 to 2001.¹⁴ Fourteen percent of female patients versus 30 percent of male patients indicate that they wish to undergo surgery for reasons connected to the workplace, a clear sign that men perceive age discrimination on the job. Youthfulness is a key motivation for 50 percent of women and 40 percent of men, while dating matters to 5 percent of women and 10 percent of men. The top five male surgical procedures (breast, hair, nose, stomach, and eyelid work) were not selected by men at all two decades ago.¹⁵ In 2002 U.S. men underwent more than eight hundred thousand cosmetic procedures.¹⁶ Data from both the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery and the American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery are striking for what they reveal about the popularity of Botox and collagen procedures, chemical peels, and hair surgery for concealing signs of aging, and liposuction for reducing body weight, with similar rates of use by men and women.

In much of the discourse on plastic surgery, an implicit hierarchy suggests that women seek trivial, aesthetic improvements, whereas men seek serious, functional ones.¹⁷ But the *New York Times* also refers to a “rising tide of male vanity.”¹⁸

Whether the causes are internal psyches or external job and sex pressure (to the extent that we can divide them so neatly), the outcome is real change for conventional maleness. The new century brought reports of a million U.S. men diagnosed with body dysmorphic disorder and the invention of the “Adonis complex” by psychiatrists to account for the vastly increased numbers of male eating and exercise disorders, which suggest that dissatisfaction with the body has crossed genders. Forty percent of U.S. eating disorders are now reported by men, and AAFPRS members estimate that 6 percent of female patients and 7 percent of male patients suffer from body dysmorphism.¹⁹

As this wave of self-fashioning has emerged as an industry, the “pink dollar” has become more and more significant and appealing to the culture industries. Gay magazines circulate information to businesses about the spending power of their putatively childless, middle-class readership—*Campaign* magazine’s slogan in advertising circles during the 1980s was “Gay Money Big Market Gay Market Big Money.” Since the mid-1990s we have seen Ikea’s famous U.S. TV commercial showing two men furnishing their apartment together, Toyota’s male car-buying couple, two men driving around in a Volkswagen searching for home furnishings, and a gay-themed Levi Strauss Dockers campaign, while Hyundai began to appoint gay-friendly staff to dealerships and IBM targeted gay-run small businesses. Subaru advertisements on buses and billboards have featured gay-advocacy bumper stickers and registration plates coded to appeal to queers, and 2003 Super Bowl commercials carried many hidden gay themes that advertisers refused to encode openly (known as “encrypted ads,” these campaigns are designed to make queers feel special for being in the know without offending simpleton straights—much more subtle than Justin Timberlake’s exposure of Janet Jackson’s breast during the Super Bowl halftime show in 2004). Polygram’s classical music division has a gay promotional budget; Miller beer supported Gay Games ’94; Bud Light was national sponsor to the 1999 San Francisco Folsom Street Fair, “the world’s largest leather event”; and Coors devised domestic partner benefits through the work of Dick Cheney’s daughter Mary, supposedly counteracting its antigay image of the past.²⁰ The spring 1997 U.S. network TV season saw twenty-two queer characters across the prime-time network schedule, and there were thirty in 2000—clear signs of niche targeting. The first successful gay initial public offering on the stock market occurred in 1999, while gay and lesbian Web sites drew significant private investment.²¹

Queer Eye is, then, part of a much wider phenomenon of self-styling and audience targeting. It brings together the realization that middle-class queerness

has things to teach middle-class straightness—notably when queer city style is given a visa to suburbia via a quasi-business consultancy—with an opportunity to target the queer audience. Very droll.

The historical shift that recodes the male body is a difficult one to evaluate. It is still too early to tell what its intended and unintended consequences will be. Nevertheless, now that it has been achieved and *Queer Eye* has become so iconic itself, we might ask something more of the program. How about *Queer Eye*'s moving into the world of social movements, working with unions to open them up to more queer and immigrant workers, and dealing with issues of racism and income inequality? That may await a different kind of targeting, a different eye, and some different guys. Eyes left.

Notes

1. Mark Simpson, *It's a Queer World: Deviant Adventures in Pop Culture* (New York: Harrington Park, 1999); Simpson, "Meet the Metrosexual," *Salon.com*, July 22, 2002.
2. See Warren St. John, "Un nuevo modelo de hombre, bien masculino pero sensible, invade los capitales del primer mundo," trans. Claudia Martínez, *Clarín*, June 25, 2003; Javier Casqueiro, "La ola 'metrosexual' irrumpe en la televisión de Estados Unidos," *El país*, August 24, 2003; Sean Nixon, *Advertising Cultures: Gender, Commerce, Creativity* (London: Sage, 2003), 6; and "Defining Metro.Sexuality," *Metrosource*, September–November 2003, 16–17. The quotation comes from the last of these sources.
3. C. Fox, "Decade of the 'New Man' Is Here," *Australian Financial Review*, January 21, 1989.
4. Quoted in Sean Nixon, *Hard Looks: Masculinities, Spectatorship, and Contemporary Consumption* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 96–99.
5. S. D. Hamermesh and J. E. Biddle, "Beauty and the Labor Market," *American Economic Review* 84 (1994): 1174–94; M. Wells, "Slimmer Dooner Revs Up McCann," *Advertising Age*, October 10, 1994, 50; Milt Freudenheim, "Employers Focus on Weight as a Workplace Health Issue," *New York Times*, September 6, 1999.
6. Michael Weiss, "Chasing Youth," *American Demographics*, October 2002.
7. Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value Is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 29.
8. Kamal Ahmed, "Britons Swallow Cure-All Drugs," *Observer*, January 26, 2003.
9. Joel Stein, "Only His Hairdresser Knows for Sure," *Time*, July 19, 1999, 78; Varda Burstyn, *The Rites of Men: Manhood, Politics, and the Culture of Sport* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 217; B. Lemon, "Male Beauty," *Advocate*, July 22, 1997, 30–32.

10. Weiss, "Chasing Youth."
11. Rochelle Burbury, "Men Spending More on Grooming," *Australian Financial Review*, June 23, 2003; Weiss, "Chasing Youth."
12. Quoted in Elizabeth Haisken, "Virtual Virility; or, Does Medicine Make the Man?" *Men and Masculinities* 2 (2000): 390.
13. *Marketplace*, National Public Radio, June 3, 1999; Sheerly Avni, "The Unkindest Cut," *Salon.com*, December 18, 2002.
14. American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, *2001 Membership Survey: Trends in Plastic Surgery* (2002).
15. Martin Miller, "Instant Brawn," *Los Angeles Times*, October 21, 2002.
16. American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, *Cosmetic Surgery National Data Bank 2002 Statistics* (2002).
17. Scott Burton, Richard G. Netemeyer, and Donald R. Lichtenstein, "Gender Differences for Appearance-Related Attitudes and Behaviors: Implications for Consumer Welfare," *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 14 (1995): 60–79; Kathy Davis, "'A Dubious Equality': Men, Women, and Cosmetic Surgery," *Body and Society* 8 (2002): 49–65.
18. Ellen Tien, "The More Hairless Ape," *New York Times*, June 20, 1999.
19. Harrison G. Pope Jr., Katharine A. Phillips, and Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession* (New York: Free, 2000); American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, *2001 Membership Survey*.
20. Ronald Alsop, "But Brewers Employ In-Your-Mug Approach," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 1999; Alsop, "Cracking the Gay Market Code," *Wall Street Journal*, June 29, 1999; S. Rawlings, "Luring the Big Boys," *B and T*, February 12, 1993, 18–19; Tommi Avicoli Mecca, "Gay Shame," *AlterNet.org*, June 7, 2002; Michael Wilke, "Super Bowl Delivers Gay Ad Themes, Companies Remain Mum," *Commercial Closet*, February 18, 2003, www2.commercialcloset.org.
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