

# Homosexual politics in the wake of AIDS

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The emergency that was and is the AIDS epidemic produced a radical, almost geological reconstruction of the terrain of (homo)sexual politics, a reconstruction that we are only hesitantly coming to terms with. The social trajectory described by the emergent sexual communities in the West, from dubious toleration to the threat of imminent annihilation, was already traumatic. The eerie halt called to this seeming inevitability consequent on medical management of the virus, followed by an uncertainly deferred stay of execution for many infected with HIV, has compounded trauma with uncertain hope, and an invitation to denial of the previous history of the disease. The signification of male homosexuality has shifted from excluded possibility (definitional of sexual normality in its exclusion) through tolerated marginality, to metonymy with death itself, to... what? The confusion of the current configuration informs three recent books: Jonathan Dollimore's *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, Mandy Merck's *In Your Face*, and, in a symptomatic way, Mark Simpson and Steve Zeeland's *The Queen is Dead*.\*

Dollimore's collection of essays is in certain ways a sceptical re-engagement with themes he has addressed in previous books. He rereads Freud and Bataille, among others, as he examines the assumptions that underlie a liberationist account of sexuality – this gem at the heart of the self that is the latest avatar of the Christian soul. Looking at the contradictions of identity-based sexual-political movements, he examines the ethics of knowledge and practice that circulate around ideas of danger – dangers to the self, dangerous knowledge – connecting these with questions posed by art as a site of danger in itself. His concerns with censor-

ship flow from the various discursive manoeuvres, from Left and Right, that have attempted to disavow this artistic danger. But he also plots the dangers of partially successful practices and theories that come to stand in the way of more productive thought.

Merck's collection deals with the seeming paradox of the ubiquity of sexuality as an object of discourse accompanied by a fading of clarity as to its referent. As sex looms larger and larger as the object of culture, its precise lineaments and articulations are lost. Merck counters this tendency by an attentive examination of cultural productions: particular tropes in lesbian film and fiction, the temporality of sex and modernity in Straussian opera, desire in the Warholian object. She goes on to consider the working of political discourse in the sexual representations of Monica Lewinsky and the (anti)erotics of the Clinton presidency. A paradigmatic analysis of the bestialization of male desire in Catherine Mackinnon's anti-porn discourse lucidly places a supposedly radical feminism in theoretical and political complicity with conservative (and macho) accounts of the demon flesh.

Mark Simpson and Steve Zeeland's book takes the form of an exchange of letters, from 1995 to 1998, between an English self-styled bad-boy journalist and an American writer of docuporn narratives of Marine (that is, military) sexuality. In its unfocused and artless way, it traces and refracts many of the anxieties that beset gay men of the period. With its exaggerated distancing from the 'scene' and its tales of sexual pursuit of dubiously 'straight' military trade, it also communicates some of the more baroque fantasies of self and other that haunt gay men. In these authors' case, this is compounded by the exigencies demanded

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\* Jonathan Dollimore, *Sex, Literature and Censorship*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2001. 224 pp., £50.00 hb., £12.99 pb., 0 7456 2763 3 hb., 0 7456 2764 1 pb.; Mandy Merck, *In Your Face*, New York University Press, New York, 2000. 240 pp., £39.50 hb., £12.50 pb., 0 8147 5638 7 hb., 0 8147 5639 5 pb.; Mark Simpson and Steve Zeeland, *The Queen is Dead*, Arcadia Press, London, 2001. 300 pp., £11.95 pb., 1 900850 49 4.



by the fixing of their identity as professional cultural producers.

All three books, though, are imbued by the social, cultural and political fallout of the epidemic, tracing the vicissitudes of theory, culture and lived experience in the face of its enormity.

## Event

The epidemic was an event in Badiou's sense of the term. It changed the shape of history, provoked a serrated set of responses and articulations, and remains incomplete: we have not exhausted its understanding and its effects continue to reverberate, often in quite displaced and unconscious ways. It set in train a political, cultural and social mobilization around a gay identity, which, for all the critique of fixity inherent in the first manifestos of gay liberation, was nevertheless strategically assumable – after all, it was self-identified gay men who were getting sick and dying and it was that very gayness which was targeted as the problem by a resurgent eliminationist homophobia (to borrow Goldhagen's notion). Homosexuality itself was the perceived site of struggle, and the successful refiguring of gay men as citizens, bearers of rights and entitlements to welfare, was achieved by an institutionalization of a gay identity – both within and without the British state – which laid the grounds for further reform of repressive legislation and the development of positive entitlements in other spheres (witness the various partnership rights granted by trade unions without the compulsion of government, for example).

This institutionalization was accompanied by an unparalleled dissemination of representations of homosexuality through the mass media: under the sign of medical necessity, an allegedly ignorant public was educated into the niceties of nonstandard sexual practices and liaisons. It is a piquant irony that a relatively enlightened medical policy which enabled this pragmatic legitimization of homosexuality was pursued by the very government that responded, at the political level, with the first ratchet of increased legal repression against homosexuality since the Victorians. The infamous Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act remains as the sign of the fantasies of elimination, or at best quarantine, that haunted the Right even as its own state apparatus was turned in a different direction by a Hippocratic logic. And in a tribute to the Gramscian logic of hegemony, Section 28 itself produced an extensive counter-mobilization that fed into the broad strategy of claims on the state for equality. If the unity of gay politics had always been determined by the force of repression, then the coupling of a state pogrom with the proliferation of a virus, one of whose prime vectors was homosexual sex, effectively consolidated gay identity in the late 1980s and 1990s.

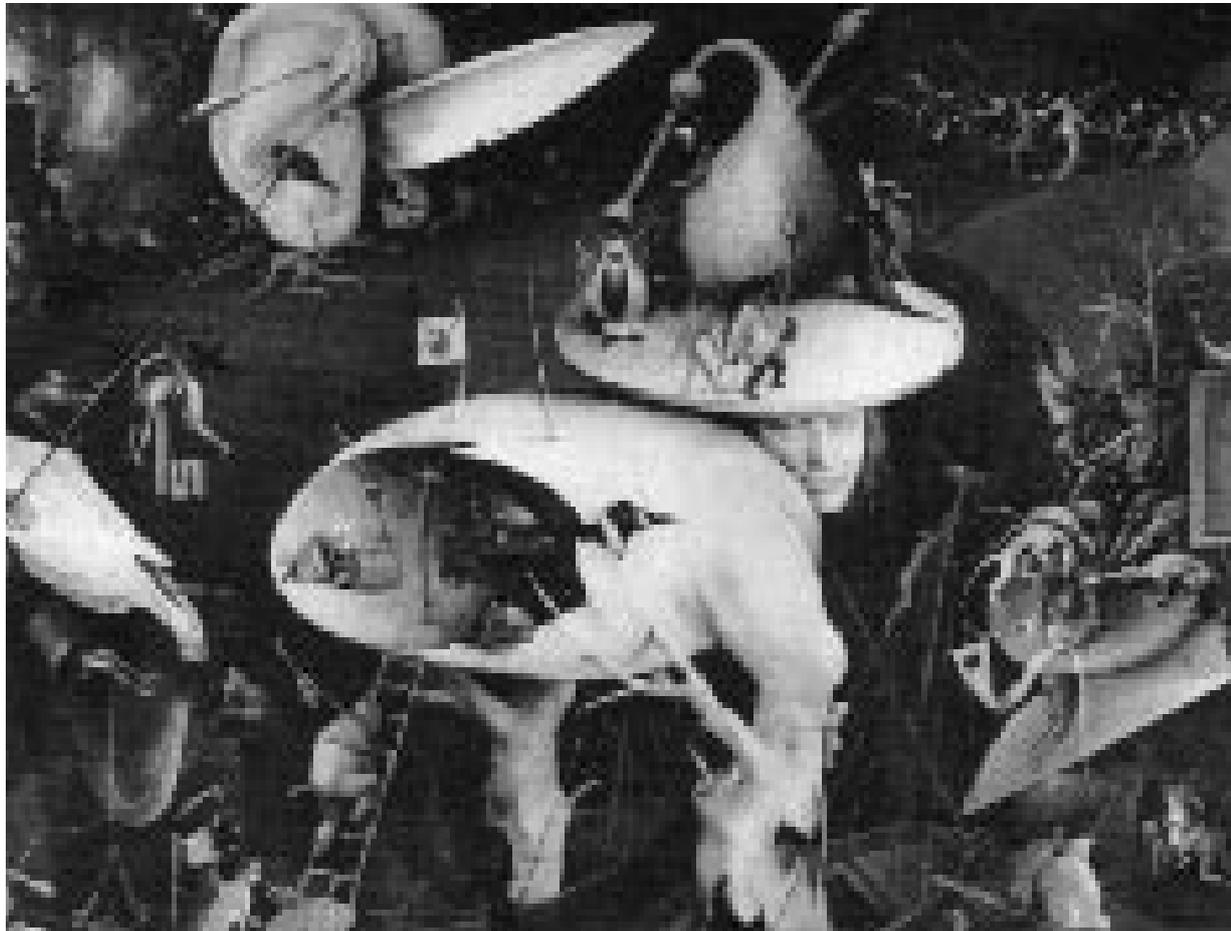
But this identity was consolidated in the face of death and loss. The prevailing tone of so much gay culture of the time is one of melancholy, of unassimilable hurt, as a whole generation of gay men succumbed to painful and lingering illness, with only a pitiless death as its resolution. Those who were not ill (or were as yet symptomless) were faced with an extraordinary demand to construct the spaces of support and consolation, an exhausting and seeming endless duty of care. As an identity ordered around desire and choice of sexual object was reinforced at the level of the political and the representational, within the affectional life of gay men, sex itself was downgraded as the basis of commonality, replaced by a sort of diffuse Agape. This could only be compounded by the recoil from that contingent but persuasive identification of sex with death. Arguably, a traumatized and untrustworthy Eros was sublimated, forming once again a Freudian basis for community, for a radical homosociality.

Yet there was a response to the epidemic which followed neither the route of engagement with the state, nor that of the construction of spaces of care and remembrance. This was the first glimmerings of queer politics, which, almost as a reaction formation to the desexualization of gay culture in a time of extended mourning, took over the projected fantasies

of the Right; the right had deployed its mythology of demons and seducers, the bearers of plague and chaos, as support for its own final solutions to the gay question. Queer was 'in your face' in refusing the separation and distancing that a self-constituting straight society enacted to evade its own investment in the epidemic, but in deliberately embodying the projected fantasies of the Right it also questioned the very boundaries of identities as such. It also refused the sublimation that attended grief. Queer was what 'they' wanted us to be, but also what 'we' (the gay movement) did not want to be. Inhabiting the subduction zone between the tectonic plates of identity, queer proclaimed a rheidic politics, a politics of metamorphosis and magmatization. What had become apparent in the hegemonic articulation of a gay identity – its artifice and dependence on an excluded other, the problematic nature of boundaries, with health education forced to talk about 'men who have sex with men' rather than relying on a straightforward interpellation of 'gay' – was further illuminated by queer's recognition of the fluidity and errancy of desire. Queer became a critique of the categories of straight *and* gay, even as it forcibly reinscribed sexuality as sex.

## Theory

In a further irony, however, queer found a home within the academy in the mid-1990s only to the extent that it dissolved sex into a more general critique of self-identity, leaving behind its historical roots as the extruded other of two specific processes – mourning and disavowal. As the epidemic in the West began to attenuate, queer thus became 'spiritualized', almost 'spectralized'. Not coincidentally, both Leo Bersani and Judith Butler were writing just as triple combination therapy began to be widespread and effective. The slow ascent from repeated grief within the gay communities was paradoxically accompanied by a questioning and in some cases rejection of the very identity that had made the traverse of the epidemic possible. This found a particularly savage expression in the momentary scandal of the book *Anti-Gay* edited by Mark Simpson, whose assault on an allegedly homogenous, commodified lifestyle was also an attack on the putative 'shroud-waving' that marked the whole politics of HIV/AIDS. Such historically myopic critique (and curiously splenetic moralism) could only emerge in a situation of over-rapid flight from the epidemic, as if, with the (however temporary) reprieve of medication, the intolerable could be now be repressed, subject to an energetically willed oblivion. The further



extension of dematerialized queer politics within the academy, reduced to the gesture of reading, seems the consequence of this second reaction formation: the claim of utopian radicalism built on the suppression of the dystopian hecatomb that constitutes the recent history of gay culture. As Dollimore points out in the chapter entitled 'Wishful Theory' in *Sex, Literature and Censorship* (see also *RP* 103), queer theory has become a sort of wishful theory. But the wish is not merely for theory and the academy to wield more power than they do – a general fantasy-positioning of the intellectual, straight or queer – it is also the wish to cease to have to look at the historical conditions of our own formation: the wish to forget the epidemic.

It is as though the demands of mourning, of recognition of the myriad dead and a particular culture of pleasure, proved so enormous that the demand was rejected, and the ensuing guilt led to the sacrifice of the object which demanded mourning: gay men. It is as though queer theory were the site of a second death, a second killing which would obviate the funeral rites for the first. At the level of everyday culture, the second generation of gay men to have come of age in this uncanny truce practise a form of disidentification, precisely because that identity carries with it some sort of obligation to remember and to mourn, an obligation to acknowledge temporality, which, as impossible demand, becomes repressed. This leaves younger gay men in the throes of a repetition compulsion – 'spontaneously' re-creating the cultural preconditions of the epidemic.

The repressed demand for mourning re-emerges, though, with the metaphysical promotion of death and loss from historically bound experiences to transcendental conditions of existence. These deaths here, with their demands for a social and affectional expression, are erased and replaced by a preoccupation with Death and Loss, capitalized and absolutized. The line of sex as the truth of the self, a line from Augustine to the sex radicals which Dollimore traces with great finesse, finds a *terminus ad quem* in its identification with Death as limit, disruption and daemonic, an identification that entices (through the egregious prism of Camille Paglia's recidivist gender binarisms) even as Dollimore criticizes it. Sex again becomes the dangerous, the mysterious. And here Dollimore seems to resurrect the teleological identification of sex and death that he limned in his discussion of Cyril Collard's and Oscar Moore's writing in his earlier article 'Sex and Death' (*Textual Practice*, 1995). This is an identification which Merck astringently criticizes, but which only makes sense in the light of the extent of the epidemic.

But Death is not death and the very dangerousness of sex is a consequence of a historically contingent biology. It need not be the occasion for romantic mystification. Yet the wish for desire to be disruptive, the fantasy of self-shattering that Dollimore echoes from Bersani's work, can perhaps be seen as a peculiar sort of apotropaic ritual in the face of a real annihilation. For in this *Da-Fort* game with fantasized absence, is there not an attempt at a certain mastery of the unmasterable loss already experienced? As Merck tellingly points out in her discussion in 'Savage Nights' in *In Your Face*, there is something disingenuous in Bersani's own delineating of this self-disruptive *jouissance* in his book *Homos* and his now infamous *October* article 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', a certain self-reinforcement in this very masculine capacity to 'undergo' and 'endure'. Bersani hymns a mastery of self and launches a virulent assault on any suggestion of 'redemption', a notion tied to a form of the socius that the anti-social form of *jouissance* is invoked to disrupt. But the key word here is 'redemption' and the key move that hardening of the self (even in a paradoxical form of sexual self-abandonment), a turning of the self inward. For what we have here is the very form of auto-anaesthesia and its metaphysical presuppositions – the denial of any possibility of a culture of redemption – which mark the experience of intolerable loss. Individual sexual pleasure becomes a way of playing out what cannot be played, of signifying what cannot be faced – the loss of a world, the loss of social ties, the loss of lovers, friends, and the whole psychic multiplicity they represented. The denial of redemption is a stoic metaphysical gesture in the face of catastrophe, but the stoicism can only be maintained at the cost of amnesia. The imagined *petit mort* of orgasm must stand in for the enormity of death in the real, and its repetition keeps the obligations of the actual at bay.

These obligations reside just where the reiterated erasure of the social ligatures of sexuality would expunge them. One could thus read Simpson and Zealand's *The Queen is Dead* as a footnote to Bersani's antagonism to community. In this camp correspondence the writers' desire(s) can only find a proper object where the contaminant claims of the gay community are in abeyance. It is not masculinity as such that is desirable – since the simulacrum of masculinity found in the gay scene is as authentic (or not) as that constructed and mimed by the Marines of the authors' fantasies – but a masculinity that lies outside the wider claims of sociality. Dicks wilt when the objects of desire 'come out' as gay, as if this stepping into history is the death of some legiti-

mating innocence which can only preserve its erotic force when contemplated *in vacuo*. It is only in the sequestered isolation of a conservative military that these rare flowers of unreflective being can blossom. 'Becoming gay' in these often hilarious accounts of failed encounter entails a fall into corruption, but not of femininity – or rather only femininity as the sign of the temporal. The gay world becomes emblematic not merely of artifice (an old complaint) but of the ephemeral – that is, of a world subject to loss. And it is the temporal with its openness to transience, ageing, disease, that requires the compensatory supports of compassion, the very affect that Bersani can only approach through a narcissistic reappropriation of the phallic. As Merck sharply observes, it is the celebration of indiscriminate homosexual sex that allows Bersani to endorse the obliterated sacrifice of the phallus within sex (that vanishing of the male member in copulation) on behalf of that very same phallic male, and in this way, disguisedly, to allow an identification with that community whose wished redemption he can otherwise not countenance, or rather, whose impossible resurrection occludes any other work of redemption.

## History

Thus we can see the pertinence of Merck's reiteration of Cora Kaplan's claims: sex is 'a wild card whose suit and value shifts provocatively with history' and which in its narrations can serve as a denial of history. (The temptations of Freudian ahistoricism are too well known to need rehearsal.) Historical amnesia allows for a reinstatement of transcendent claims for sex – spectralized in queer, radicalized in the claims for the essentially dissident value of heretofore marginal sexual practices (S&M, for example), or hypostasized in a fetish of the border ('trans') – just as the historical experience of the preconditions and passage of the epidemic demonstrated their contingency and immanence. For if the epidemic has any single lesson it is that sex is historical through and through, even in the recesses of fantasy. If sex is to be thought then this historical context must be to the forefront and the twin temptations of repression and hypostasis avoided. And that context must always include the unfolding experience of sexual communities – or, if the latter term sounds a tendentious note, the experience of historically configured sexual subjects.

The problem with much contemporary theorizing is that it remains aloof from its object: amnesia has relegated the diverse life-world of gay men to the position of a quasi-Baudrillardian silent majority. Just as the formalism of much post-Marxism occludes

the very political subjects that its philosophical lucubrations would empower, so queer theory disdains the concrete experience that provides its own material. The extreme anti-gay version constructs a fantasy of gay men as robotic hedonists, whose muscles are as massive as their tastes are shallow, and in so energetically traducing its phobic object constructs a position of aesthetic-political rectitude and superiority. It gives pause to wonder why such a dimly characterized lotus land should need such heavy-handed rejection. But queer in general is traversed by fantasy objects of its own, the fixed, suburban, straight or 'straight gay'. Yet it is one of the more extraordinary features of contemporary sexual culture that with the dissemination of representations during the epidemic and the proliferation of sexual imagery that is so characteristic of late(r) capitalism, along with the renewed sexual experimentation that is attendant on a more local historical amnesia, erstwhile cutting-edge sexual practices now find a strange normalcy, if not normalization – a sort of demotic popularization. The generalization of sexual deviance constitutes a severe blow to the *réclame* of sexual radicals.

It is no longer clear what sexual radicalism consists in. The equation of radicalism with transgression seems suspect. As Dollimore might say: if normativity and a certain repression constitute the limit that transgression requires to constitute its claim as an ethical imperative, what happens when traditional normativity fades? The simulation of transgression may be more to do with commodification than liberation. The connections between pleasure, repression and power need to be rethought, again. Like much else, the lessons of the strategic mobilization around sexuality during the epidemic have been lost, as the question of sexuality has been reduced to one of individual desire and its (im)proper objects.

Perhaps it is time to abandon the paradigm of transgressivity, with its topography of limits and borders and energetics of flight and dispersal, its will to evade the historical, its fantasies of guilt and its desire for the unmediated absolute. Perhaps it is time for a re-memoration that undoes the vast historical forgetting that was the relieved response to protease inhibitors. For a further consequence of the repression of the memory (but continuing reality) of our Northern epidemic is the suppression of that *Mitleid* that might prompt something other than numbed passivity in the face of the cataclysm in the South. If humankind can indeed not face too much reality, then neither can it construct a different future whilst cultivating an obdurate oblivion.