

Exploring the Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory

In light of recent incidents such as the Rutger's suicide, it makes me wonder if assimilation and trying to be a good, normal citizen is actually a way to function in society. If efforts at normality still result in anti-gay violence and teenage suicide, is it really productive to persist at the same old efforts? Or is the only way to enact positive change to reject the entire notion of "good" citizenship and turn to revolutionary politics. Revolutionary politics allows us to embrace what makes each one of us marginalized, instead of defining ourselves by what is deemed normal and adjusted. This redefinition allows for a heteroclite sociality or a society based on anti-assimilation. A heteroclite society is built on difference and alterity and does not require citizens to be normal to be part of a community. The notion of an alteric society can be hard to conceive of, but turning to a fantasy structure such as film is a way to understand what this could look like.

The following clip comes from the film *Freak Orlando*, an experimental, non-narrative film directed by German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger. This film presents a refusal of expectations of character, genre, and plot and, instead, emerges as an other-worldly experience filled with freaks and rich *mise-en-scène*. The film goes through a variety of bizarre vignette-like story lines as the audience follows the gender bending Orlando. Some of these stories, such as the crucifixion scene, become anti-historical tellings, while others focus on Orlando's interactions with other freaks as s/he becomes immersed in their heteroclite society. While Ottinger's film can simply be read as an obscure art house film full of lush spectacle, my goal in reading this film is to parse out its antisocial components and radical potential. In many scenes, the film shows ridiculous carnivals of freaks. Read on a political level, scenes like these display bodies that have been rendered unintelligible by the social order. *Freak Orlando* makes use of

monstrous bodies of Siamese twins, giants, dwarfs, and limbless beings and places them at the center of a new social order. In the society demonstrated in the film, to be “normal” is to be a freak.

In order to get to a heteroclitic society, there must first be a push for anti-social politics that refuse civilized ideology. Lee Edelman in his powerful text *No Future*, describes anti-sociality by stating, “fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital I’s and small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (Edelman 29). And Bruce LaBruce, less shockingly, describes anti-social politics by writing, “a person who functions normally in such a sick society is himself sick, while it is only the ‘non-adjusted’ individual who can achieve a healthy acting out against the overly strict restraints and demands of the dominant culture” (LaBruce 2). These two writers show that a new sociality necessitates a de-centering of the dominant social order, privileging subversive embodiments over heteronormative ones.

The foundation for antisocial politics begins with Guy Hocquenghem’s work in his book *Homosexual Desire*. He begins his discussion of anti-civilization politics with psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who, in the name of the German Communist Party, fought for political change by means of a sexual revolution. Reich demonstrated the oppression associated with the Oedipal family that Freud presented as inevitable and unalterable. Civilization functions as a means of oppression as it “forms the interpretive grid through which desire becomes cohesive energy” (Hocquenghem 137). Desire is, then, closed down and channeled into the heteronormative family. A sexual revolution means going against civilized sexuality and civilization itself, for the only way out of the Oedipal family, then, is to turn to revolutionary politics that redefine the role

of desire in society, particularly homosexual desire. Influenced by Reich's notion of a sexual revolution, Hocquenghem states, "revolutionary demands must be derived from the very movement of desire; it isn't only a new revolutionary model that is needed, but a new questioning of the content traditionally associated with the term 'revolution', particularly the notion of the seizure of power" (135). Revolutionary politics must be looked at as an uncivilizing of desires that have been rendered stable and stagnant by the dominant social order.

Ultimately, unchanneled homosexual desire functions as the impetus for a revolutionary social structure based on heteroclitic sexuality; that is, a sexuality based on difference and alterity, a sexuality in which the most marginalized practices are brought to the center and citizens do not have to fit a heteronormative model to be read as a good member of society. Hocquenghem speaks of the power of homosexual desire as he states, "the 'heteroclitic' nature of homosexual desire makes it dangerous to the dominant sexuality. Every day a thousand kinds of homosexual behavior challenge the classifications imposed on them" (148). This theory, however, relies on the assumption that homosexual desire will remain uncivilized; for, desire only poses revolutionary potential when it is so. This move towards an alteric social order, along with a critique of civilization, provides the framework for the antisocial thesis in queer theory. Because social values are produced by civilized ideology, the antisocial thesis raises the question of whether or not we want to be "good" citizens, if being "good" citizens means being caught in the Oedipal trap.

More recently, in 2004, Lee Edelman begins his book *No Future* by describing reproductive futurism which: "impose[s] an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing

principle of communal relations” (2). Reproductive futurism thus develops a political rhetoric that privileges heterosexual reproduction for its continuation of civilization. These politics position the Oedipal family as the figure of civilized ideology and emphasize the Child as political rhetoric, a rhetoric of fighting for the children, social values, and the image of the future. The privileging of heterosexual reproduction in politics exposes the child as civilization’s embodiment of futurity. This embodiment is a result of heteronormativity’s investment in the figure of the child and the grand narrative of movement toward a future based on historical nostalgia.

As Hocquenghem argues that civilization closes down desire, Edelman demonstrates the way in which politics signify and narrativize desire. Uncivilized desires become stabilized by politics’ meaning production as desire is narrativized by a heteronormativity based on the Oedipal family and the Child. Political rhetoric articulates desire as the productive force behind reproductive futurity and closes down desire’s revolutionary potential. As a result, antisocial politics call for a refusal of social values and a strong opposition to reproductive futurity.

In the same year that Edelman wrote his text *No Future*, Bruce LaBruce produced his film *The Raspberry Reich*. LaBruce puts his revolutionary politics into praxis in his film that is best described as political, pornographic spectacle. In *The Raspberry Reich*, the audience follows a group of terrorist-chic revolutionaries who enact their politics through guerilla tactics of kidnapping, stealing, and sexually liberating. The main character, Gudrun’s group clearly plays off the Red Army Faction, the most violent, radical, left wing group of post-WWII Germany. The RAF was a communist “urban guerilla” faction who engaged in armed protests such as murder, bomb attacks, and arson to combat what they deemed a fascist government. Gudrun Ensslin co-founded the RAF and the character Gudrun in the *Raspberry Reich* is an obvious

allusion to the RAF founder. The RAF's actions culminated in a national crisis known as "German Autumn," an event that is parodied at the end of the film. The politics presented in *The Raspberry Reich* are directly influenced by Wilhelm Reich as heteroclit sexuality becomes the means and the ultimate goal for revolution. Yet, the antisocial thesis and critique of futurity is presented in a very different context in *The Raspberry Reich* as the film utilizes pornographic spectacle, consumerism and commoditization, and ironic use of political rhetoric to parody conservative politics that privilege the Child and foreground dominant ideology.

The film resignifies political rhetoric and consumerism through its use of mantra and super-imposed text that appear in many of the scenes. Through its flashing of phrases such as "corporate hip hop is counter-revolutionary!" and "Madonna is counter-revolutionary!" the film attempts to delink consumerism from politics. These mantras defamiliarize the notion of a political slogan as they subvert the message of social values and idea of reproductive futurity found in normative politics. Instead, the film presents sexuality and desire as the space for political change. The super-imposition of text additionally works to defamiliarize the pornographic spectacle and resignify pornography as a political demonstration and a space for revolution. The super-imposition functions as a distancing device for the spectator and exposes sex as a political realm, in contrast to civilized notions of sex as part of the private sphere.

The mixing of the pornographic and the political appears in the scene in which Gudrun declares that she and her partner take their sex "out of the sheets and into the streets." Gudrun and Holger proceed to move their sex romp out of the bedroom and into an elevator shared with an elderly couple. This scene demonstrates the power of public sex as a revolutionary tool as it literally and visually removes sex from the private domain and shifts it into the public sphere.

The flashing of political slogans functions to reinforce this sexual act as a political act and refuses to allow the viewer to read the scene as purely pornographic show. Additionally, the elderly couple in the scene represents the idealized, heteronormative couple that every good Oedipal family becomes. The juxtaposition of the couple and the porno-political demonstration successfully highlights the film's antisocial focus.

The film's sexual revolution calls for a refusal of the capitalist and consumerist society's civilizing of desire. Gudrun rejects her boyfriend and any semblance of a relationship that recreates the Oedipal family; instead, she encourages rhizomatic connections and the free plugging-in of desires as a means of sexual revolution. Gudrun embraces the freeing up of desire and the anti-civilization of desire in order to create political change based on the idea of a heteroclite society. The final scene of the film is problematic for LaBruce's development of sexual revolution, as he positions Gudrun and her boyfriend in an Oedipal family. In the scene, Gudrun and her family stroll down a path surrounded by trees in autumn colors, thus, alluding to the previously mentioned crisis "German Autumn." If this scene intends to be taken seriously, it troubles the entire antisocial movement set-up earlier in the film; the only way for this scene to support LaBruce's antisocial politics is if it is read as subversive parody and reading the ending as parody lends the film a critique of the perceived inevitability and inalterability of the Oedipal family. I believe that a parodic reading of the film's ending is supported by Bruce LaBruce's work "A Message from the P.R.A. (Purple Resistance Army)." Just as the film *The Raspberry Reich*, parodies propaganda media, the P.R.A. parodies political manifesto.

In "A Message from the P.R.A. (Purple Resistance Army)," filmmaker Bruce LaBruce proposes his foundation for anti-civilization politics. According to LaBruce, "the PRA declares revolutionary war against the Fascist, Capitalist, and Largely Heterosexual Class and all its

agents of murder, oppression, and exploitation” (1). Using an ironic sense of humor, he argues against a social order that has lost its “counter-cultural compass” and sense of revolutionary urgency. LaBruce argues against the acceptance of “common sense” because, after all, “common sense” is nothing more than political rhetoric and part of the rational grand narrative. A refusal of political rhetoric also means rejecting the Oedipal family and reproductive futurism as common sense. To refuse the social order and its values, then, suggests going against convention and social practices that seems rational, for following convention only perpetuates a politics based on heteronormativity. As LaBruce states, through their compliance with social order, “the oppressed are doing a pretty good job of oppressing themselves these days without the help of hegemonic states, bureaucracies, and institutions” (4). In an argument against social values, we would declare a revolutionary war that calls for complete execution of the antisocial thesis.

I believe that it is no coincidence that Lee Edelman’s book *No Future* and LaBruce’s film *The Raspberry Reich* were released in the same year. These two writers represent a number of those committed to revolutionary politics and their work shows a concurrent move towards developing the antisocial thesis in queer theory. Furthermore, their writing shows a current culmination of past theorist’s words such as Wilhelm Reich and Guy Hocquenghem, whose works date back to the 1930s and 1970s, respectively. I argue that now, more than ever, the antisocial thesis holds true relevancy and potential for change. As we grapple with issues such as gay bashing and bullying of those who do not fit what society deems normal, the same strategies of assimilation are proving time and time again ineffective. In order to enact change, maybe we need to reject dominant conceptions of what it means to be a happy and healthy citizen. Maybe we need to “fuck the social,” as Edelman states, and turn towards revolution. Because maybe if

we do we will see something different: a heteroclitic sociality, something that up until now has only been intelligible in film.

Works Cited

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