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Deep Dive 2

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For my 2nd deep dive, I chose to read “Conservative Narratology, Queer Politics, and the Humor of Gay Stereotypes in Modern Family,” a chapter from the book *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom* by author Tison Pugh. In the chapter, Pugh argues that while the TV sitcom *Modern Family* might appear to depict a heteronormative, conservative view of queer stereotypes, the writers cleverly expand the form of a situational comedy to portray a queer couple that exists outside traditional dichotomies of liberal vs. conservative and recognizes the strength of sexuality to challenge heteronormativity.

While *Modern Family* uses the very traditional situational comedy form, it borrows from the evolutions of the genre like *The Office* & co. that use various comedic tactics, like the “interview,” to add contrasting humor to scene. What it does differently is in its portrayal of a supposedly *modern* family, intertwining the arcs of 3 families each episode to a moral conclusion that is often undone with a joke at the end of each episode. As Pugh writes,

This type of “bait-and-switch” moralism, in which the audience is tricked into believing an episode is divulging its didactic lesson only then to see that the moral does not cohere with the narrative action, undoes the assumed connection between words and visuals that television, in most cases, seeks to preserve. (166)

which is one of the first hints at how *Modern Family* can be subversive in its portrayal of queer stereotypes.

Using these types of tactics common to the sitcom form, *Modern Family* sets up for the portrayal of its gay duo, Mitchell and Cameron. They are a married gay couple, both cis white men who have an adopted daughter. At first glance, this class of portrayal seems to be part of a homonormative trope of a nuclear gay family. And while Pugh concedes this part of the argument, he also writes that the subversiveness of *Modern Family* lies in the deeper portrayals of humor that are used with Mitch and Cam. Because sitcoms commonly seek to exist in an apolitical environment, Mitch and Cam's political views are left up in the air while hints at their politics are used in a comedic way to poke fun at "either side." In this manner, *Modern Family* can actually be considered to upend homonormative tropes that all gay men are associated with liberalism and the Democratic Party. Certainly, many queers are more aligned with the political left, but this varied representation might actually serve to reject stereotypes.

Pugh continues to argue that *Modern Family*'s queer portrayal serves to introduce viewers to a relatable couple on screen outside the typical conservative nature of a sitcom. With undertones of homo and anal eroticism throughout the show, it subverts typical notions about what can be discussed on a sitcom and pushes a "wide range of sexual possibilities beyond the realm of hetero- or homonormativity" to the mainstream audience's conscious (180). By acknowledging the existence of and displaying such acts occurring even to declared heterosexual characters, *Modern Family* can be seen as challenging the heteronormative notions of sexuality.

As this text connects to our overarching discussion in the class, I can see that it serves almost as a counter to some of the texts we have read in class. It's acknowledged in "Screening LGBTQ+" that *Modern Family* is seen by many as only promoting homo and heteronormative views on family and sexuality, in addition to redeeming them because of their socially privileged traits like being a white male. However, Pugh's nuanced analysis goes deeper than the surface-level representation and demonstrates how when done right, this type of portrayal can still serve

to further modern notions of being queer and bring to light a better sentiment towards queer communities. In any case, *Modern Family*'s portrayal of queer tropes and topics serves as another example of the expanding influence and knowledge of the queer lifestyle throughout everyday America.

Works Cited

Pugh, Tison. "Conservative Narratology, Queer Politics, and the Humor of Gay Stereotypes in Modern Family." *The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom*, Rutgers UP, 2018, pp. 161–89. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1trkkgj.9. Accessed 9 June 2024.