



London School of Economics and Political Science

**BECOMING VISIBLE: GAY IDENTITY
AND VISUAL JUSTICE**

Dissertation for the completion of a PhD in Sociology

by
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Abstract

This research explores the notion of visual justice in relation to questions of gay identity and gay visibility. It looks at the relationship between gay identity and visual justice because the homosexual experience of social exclusion and discrimination is often described as a form of social invisibility and gay identity politics can be seen as a struggle to obtain public visibility. Moreover, it argues that in late-capitalist or spectacular societies, social dynamics connected to visual matters and regimes of visibility have increasing salience, and the lack of visual representations and/or misrepresentation of gays in mainstream culture and society is a form of injustice that needs to be seriously addressed. This thesis analyses and critically questions the relationship between gay identity and forms of visibility.

To study these issues the thesis considers the media event produced by the broadcast of the first entirely gay TV drama *Queer as Folk*. The programme's explicit visions of gayness triggered a heated public debate on questions of gay visibility. Some viewers saw it as an obscene programme which was rendering public matters that were better kept 'private', whilst some others welcomed it as an example of a more democratic widening of the representational arena, and as a symptom of greater social inclusion and acceptance of gays in mainstream culture and society.

By examining and evaluating the public discourses around *Queer as Folk* this research articulates a wider sociological investigation into the relationship between gay identity and the representational field. It aims to gain an understanding of social inclusion and social justice in visually mass mediated societies. It interrogates current visions of social justice based on the opposition of symbolic and material social processes and challenges the separation of recognitive and redistributive claims for justice. It assesses risks and potentials of representational visibility, imagining new visions of democracy.

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CHAPTER 1. Visibility and justice

Section 1a. Introduction: The background of the research and its aims

I want to introduce my research on current questions around gay visibility and what I have conceptualised and defined as visual justice by briefly stepping back in time. I want to talk about one of my most vivid memories, a ‘primal scene’ that happened to me as young Italian man at the age of 18 or 19. One evening, my friends and I went to our local tiny art-house cinema to see the latest film in programme for that season. We did not know much about the movie we were going to see that night. As devoted cinemagoers we always watched religiously all it was shown at the *ABC* cinema and that night we were in for a surprise. The film on show that day was a British movie directed by Stephen Frears (who, at that time, was a totally unfamiliar name to me) called *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). Intrigued by the title and by the promising image of the poster we paid the tickets and we sat in the minuscule auditorium to share our cinematographic passion with another bunch of regulars who were not discouraged by the discomfort of the seats. But that evening’s projection turned out to be one of the most electrifying and memorable experiences of my life. I enjoyed the movie so much that I left the cinema in a state of euphoria, verging on hysteria. I felt dizzy almost as if I was drunk. My head was spinning. I still could not believe that I had seen what I had seen. It had been so powerful, overpowering, and indeed revelatory. And so I watched *My Beautiful Laundrette* three days in a row. I went to see it again the following day and again the day after. Even though I was terrified that the cashier,

or the other viewers might have understood that I was there because of the film's gay theme I could not have enough of it. I fought my embarrassment and I went over and over again to gorge myself with images of a complicated, conflictual, brave, and also gay new world.

Set within the London of the Asian community during the Thatcher years, *My Beautiful Laundrette* was the story of racial and class conflicts seen through the eyes and experienced on the skin of 'Johnny, an unemployed blond punker with a National Front past...and Omar...the son of an impoverished Pakistani writer' (Russo, 1987, p.308) who fall in love with each other whilst setting up and running a laundrette and end up having to face the consequences of their illicit gay romance *vis à vis* the ethnic, generational, political, and social conflicts that articulated English life in the late 1980s. For me, the stunning thing about this story was that the gay relationship in the film was handled with such a nonchalant directness and simplicity. Gay love was not coming out as a problem *per se* but as a fact of life that some people may experience as a problem. Till then, I had never seen in my visual and cultural life a homosexual relationship represented so clearly and naturally. And despite the fact that the film was dealing with a different social and economic context from the one I was coming from, I could, somehow, easily relate to the main characters. In their way they were (extra)ordinary people, leading (extra)ordinary lives, doing (extra)ordinary things such as working, struggling with problems, fighting racism, bigotry, and homophobia, and yet, against all odds, falling in love, or lust, or both, naturally, casually. And to see the possibility of love, of emotional or sexual fulfilment between men visually represented for the first time, there, in front of my own eyes was inebriating and indeed liberating. It was publicly showing in a big screen

images which embodied in some way the private emotions and desires that I was trying to elaborate or to come to terms with as a young man. In my case *My Beautiful Laundrette* was not bringing to consciousness my own homosexuality. I had already somehow achieved that understanding by a painstaking process of cut-and-paste of fragments of other representations, images, and illicit pleasures. What it was doing, though, was to give breath to my imagination, to give me back other images, narratives and stories to compare with mine and to show me other possible scenarios of desire as no other film had ever done up to that point. However, in doing so it was simultaneously revealing that those images and stories had been denied to me for far too long and, besides elation and joy for these suddenly-found visual treasures, I also felt the rage of having had to wait so long to have a chance to experience them. The injustice of their denial is an emotion which has stayed with me for a long time.

Coming back to the present scope of this research, it is not my intention to dwell any longer on the exploration of my own past visual experience. I do not want to make my memories and emotions the focus of this research. It would be to dig in a too intimate field that, beyond what I have already said, I would rather keep for myself and it would also run the risk of universalising my own experience as stand-point for the following discussion of more general social questions concerning gay visibility. However, in the belief that personal narratives are often entangled with more public ones (Plummer, 1995) I wanted to share this story of mine because it can be understood as the emotional engine for this research and as a heuristic tool for considering the relevance of another visual experience and to explore a more recent public visual event. I hope this other story will allow me to properly untangle the sociological currency and intricacies

of discourses around gay identity, visibility and their fundamental connection to questions of visual justice.

Thus, I will now move on to report how in 1999 and 2000 Channel 4 (who just a few years before had been the brave producer of *My Beautiful Laundrette*) broadcast the two series of one of the most discussed and successful media events of the last few decades, that is, the gay TV drama *Queer as Folk*. *Queer as Folk* was the first TV drama in English televisual history - and for that matter, in worldwide TV history - in which all the main characters and most of the supporting ones were gay and in which heterosexual characters were the 'guests' of this happy and proud gay world. Set in present times, *Queer as Folk* was the portrait of a group of white, openly gay male friends who spend most of their social life in Canal Street - Manchester's gay district. Through Stuart, Vince, Nathan (the three main characters) and their friends, TV viewers were given a straightforward introduction to the world of bars, clubs, backrooms, gyms, drugs, and casual sex that defines the lives and loves of these so-proud-to-be-gay men.

Such an upfront and unapologetic display of gayness was unprecedented on mainstream television which has often been structured and articulated around family viewing and therefore understood to be a most unwelcoming place for visions and images of non-normative, non-hegemonic identities, sexualities, or lifestyles (Gamson, 1998; Gross, 2001). If images of homosexuality have been barely tolerated even in the more selective and 'unpopular' realm of art-house cinema, they were almost absent in the public representational field provided by mainstream television (Walters, 2001). *Queer as Folk's* public broadcast suddenly changed this quota triggering a heated public debate on issues around gay representations in the media and in society at large. Some viewers and cultural

commentators saw *Queer as Folk* as an obscene programme worthy of more severe censorship, as it was rendering public matters that were better kept 'private' and that should have never been allowed to pollute the national visual arena. Some other segments of the national audience welcomed it as an example of a more democratic widening of the representational arena, and as a symptom of greater social inclusion and acceptance of gays in mainstream culture and society.

In the light of these diametrically different readings of the programme's social relevance, in this research I intend to examine and evaluate the discursive regime around *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility. I want to analyse how the public debate that followed its broadcast can be used to articulate a wider sociological inquiry on the relationship between gay identity and the representational field for a deeper understanding of social inclusion and social justice in visually mass media(ted) societies. But before I start addressing these questions in relation to the specificity of *Queer as Folk*'s case study I want to draw some more general historical coordinates that must serve as background for this thesis' discussion on gay visibility. And I will also clarify some theoretical questions which will be at the core of my following investigation and explorations of the notion of visual justice *vis à vis* gay identity.

Section 1b. Out of the visual closet

I will start my exploration of questions around gay visibility and visual justice by considering how these notions presuppose the idea of a homosexual invisibility which gay identity has progressively struggled to come out of. In fact, the

Western gay¹ experience of social exclusion and discrimination has often been phrased through the metaphor of social invisibility as much as gay identity politics have often been understood as obtaining public visibility. This can be easily explained by considering that, before the late 1960s with the official decriminalisation of homosexuality in most Western countries, being openly gay in the public sphere had frequently meant shaming, harassment, legal sanctions, imprisonment, hospitalisation, violence, abuse, if not death. Same-sex liaisons, both erotic and sentimental, had to be experienced as a clandestine life, at the limits and margins of the public sphere and consciousness. At the end of the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde's definition of homosexuality as 'the love that dare not speak its name' (Blasius and Phelan, 1997, p.111) painfully described the injunction to clandestinity reserved for same sex desire. Homosexuals, considered sinners by the church, criminals by the state, and perverts by scientists (Foucault, 1990; Weeks, 1977) were obliged to express and fulfil their desires always in the shadows of mainstream culture and society. Silence and secrecy, both as an imposition or as a strategy for survival, had been the common experience of many homosexual men and women, and invisibility was the price to be paid for living in a homophobic and heterosexist society.²

Having said that, the idea of a gay invisibility in the public domain does not mean that homosexuals did not find ways to pursue their 'illicit' pleasures. In the

¹ At this point I should clarify that in this thesis the word gay will refer mostly to discourses around gay male identity and visibility. Although, it could be argued that gay women might share similar issues, problems and concerns with their male counterparts around gay visibility, it is also true that the lesbian experience of social invisibility follows specific social patterns and cultural dynamics that often radically differ from the gay male ones. Moreover, I want to underline how the following use of notions of gayness will describe mostly 'white' histories, experiences or narratives around homosexuality. In the following chapters I will explore in more detail questions of difference *vis à vis* the social experience of homosexuality and gay identity.

² The Nazis' systematic extermination of homosexuals and the horrors of the Holocaust are perhaps the most visible examples in a not too distant history of the risks of being openly gay in public.

face of all the possible legal sanctions, moral crusades, or physical attacks from outraged heterosexuals, homosexuals had managed to create alternative channels of socialisation through which to meet, mate or just to feel safe from threats and harassment. From male brothels, to cruising grounds or private parties there often was an underground homosexual social network totally (or partially) invisible to the eyes of the dominant heterosexual culture and society but ‘publicly’ available for whoever was lucky enough to stumble across it or dared to explore it.³ Nevertheless, the hostility of mainstream culture had forced those forms of socialisation to strict rules of secrecy and almost Masonic affiliation. It had obliged homosexuals to a shadowy life in the twilight of public culture or in the grey areas of society.

In Britain, for example, homosexuals had invented *Polari*, a coded language that allowed them to say things in public that nobody else would understand.⁴ For example, knowing *Polari* was a way to make sexy comments between gay friends in the middle of a pub full of potentially unfriendly heterosexual men without being understood and harassed for it. And as for any other secret code, it was also a way of finding out if other men were gay themselves. In a casual conversation if a gay man wanted to find out if the interlocutor was gay as well he could drop in the middle of a sentence spoken in proper English a *Polari* word and wait for the revelatory reaction. If the other man understood it, it was a sign of mutual recognition as homosexuals. Hence, in England ‘the love that dare not

³ It needs to be said that this history of social invisibility does not have a homogeneous narrative development throughout Western societies. For example Berlin of the early-twentieth century was a place of homosexual visual plenty in relation to the clandestinity of Great Britain in the same years. There were many very publicly well-known gay and lesbian bars or clubs whose patrons were both gay and curious or open-minded straight which the authorities knew of and tolerated. Yet even there this freedom was precarious and constantly in the danger of being arbitrarily revoked at any time as it horribly happened with the raise of the Nazi power.

⁴ Baker’s *Polari: The Lost Language of Gay Men* (2002) is a detailed study on the origins, usage, and eventual demise of this secret language.

‘speak its name’ had to invent an entirely new language to be able to say its name. *Polari* was an invisible language whose existence ran in parallel with the hostility of the hegemonic heterosexual culture. Consequently, its use seems to have progressively faded with the decriminalisation of homosexuality. A more tolerant and safer society made the purpose of *Polari* obsolete and by now only a few older gay men remember it (Baker, 2002). But even if some homosexuals had found creative and alternative ways for partially overcoming the pains of invisibility, a more dignified or less problematic experience of homosexuality in the public arena was a dream still too far off to come true.

It was precisely this collective experience of discrimination, oppression, disparagement and social obliteration that triggered the coming together of homosexuals against a common suffering. Indeed, following Foucault’s (1990) insights, we can argue that such an enforced invisibility had some paradoxical effects. It helped to shape and to create the protective shield of a collective gay identity that became the very base for future political action. In fact, as he argues:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance of social control into this area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. (Foucault, 1990, p.101)

Thus, despite heterosexual ostracism, or perhaps because of it, homosexuals began to see themselves as an oppressed social group and they also began to dream of their public enfranchisement. Since the early nineteenth century, in the

shadows of the mainstream culture, timid homophile groups struggled to break down the wall of public invisibility and to transform society into a safer and more democratic place to live. In Britain, for example, in spite of, and as a consequence of the 'development of harsher legal penalties in the last decades of the nineteenth century...a small-scale but culturally significant reform movement had emerged... Although influenced initially by men such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, it developed a long and creative life of its own' (Weeks, 1977, p.6). These late nineteenth/early twentieth century movements were surely very tame by contemporary standards of political activism. Their reformist aim was played out mostly on an educational level in the hope of some legal changes. In an apologetic manner, what they were pleading for was tolerance and acceptance by mainstream society.⁵

We have to wait for the late 1960s to witness the radicalisation of those pleas and the constitution of a stronger and much more politicised gay movement. In those years, following the deepening of social conflicts and protests across the entire social and political spectrum in Western societies,⁶ gay people stopped begging for social visibility and began demanding it, fighting for their rights and for their visible presence in public life. Perhaps the most visible and discussed example of this new radicalism is represented by the Stonewall riot in New York.

In June 1969 the police raided a popular homosexual haunt - the Stonewall Inn in Christopher Street, a regular gay beat. This was a

⁵ Blasius and Phelan's *We Are Everywhere* (1997) is an excellent source to map out all the details of the 'birth' of homosexual politics in the broader scenario of Western culture whilst Weeks' *Coming Out* (1977) gives an accurate account of it for Britain.

⁶ The radicalisation of the gay movement needs to be understood in conjunction with the radicalisation of other identity-based movements that have often been grouped together under the name of New Social Movements (Seidman, 1993). Although the political project of each movement did not necessarily support or understand the others', making cooperation and collaboration uneasy if not impossible, they all contributed towards a broader climate of social reconfiguration and of political transformation.

regular occurrence, but this time the reaction was different - the homosexuals fought back: 'the result was a kind of liberation, as the gay brigade emerged from the bars, back rooms, and bedrooms of the Village and became street people.' The 'Stonewall riot' was...the first time that homosexuals had openly fought back - and in a language and style that evoked 'the revolution'. (Weeks, 1977, p.188)

Breaking the smoke-screen of social invisibility this time, homosexuals fought back for their life and their place under the collective sun of the public sphere. Whilst in America, this episode of unprecedented social defiance triggered a chain reaction of open confrontations with the most repressive forces of mainstream society, for other homosexuals in the West, Stonewall came to represent the symbolic moment of their first proud and public coming out. In fact, this time it was not the coming out inflicted by public shaming or blackmailing. Rather it was a celebratory and empowering moment of self-definition in the eyes of society. Thus, the 28th of June has often been symbolised as the date for the imaginary birth of a visible, proud, and unapologetic gay identity and has become, in the following years, the conventional date for the public celebration of Gay Pride in most Western cities.

In those early days of the gay movement, homosexuals, alongside other identity-based minorities, came to understand that the dynamics of social invisibility, exclusion and subordination were constantly produced and reinforced by the ideological effects of dominant cultural representations. Social power was beginning to be understood not only in relation to the material dynamics of commodity production or legal relations, but also in relation to the ways in which signs and social codes were circulated in society. A much more subtle reading of the ways in which social power is produced and reproduced was emerging and greater emphasis was placed on the role that culture and cultural representations

or misrepresentation played in shaping and articulating gay presence/absence in dominant mainstream culture and society.

A major legacy of the social political movements of the Sixties and Seventies has been the realisation of the importance of representation. The political chances of different groups in society - powerful or weak, central or marginal - are crucially affected by how they are represented, whether in legal and parliamentary discourses, in educational practices, or in the arts. The mass media in particular have a crucial role to play, because they are a centralised source of definition of what people are like in any given society. How a particular group is represented determines in a very real sense what it can do in society. (Dyer, 2002a, p.43)

Homosexuals were claiming that the material discrimination, physical violence, emotional harassment and existential subordination experienced in a heterosexist society which had forced them to a life of clandestinity and of invisibility, was produced, maintained, and shored up by the existing hegemonic culture and cultural apparatuses such as the mass media. Culture could not be read any longer as totally detached from the material processes of society, and merely as its mirror or specular image. Rather, it needed to be understood as one of the main channels through which heterosexist and heteronormative (Warner, 1993) values and social relations were produced and reproduced (Jenks, 1993). Consequently, gay activists were claiming that total invisibility, under-representation, and misrepresentation in mainstream culture were one of the major harms needing to be addressed and challenged in both political praxis and cultural intervention.

Those harms were affecting gay lives in many ways. Under-representation, for example, meant that for homosexuals the experience of coming to terms with their sexuality was often paralleled by an acute sense of emotional, psychological and existential isolation and loneliness.

Sexual minorities differ in important ways from the “traditional” racial and ethnic minorities; in many ways we are more like “fringe” political or religious groups. Like other social groups defined by forbidden thoughts or deeds, we are rarely born into minority communities in which parents or siblings share our minority status. Rather, lesbian and gay men are a self-identified minority and generally only recognize or announce our status at adolescence, or later. (Gross, 2001, p.13)

Not belonging to a ‘natural’ community and living in a society where a homosexual social network was just in the process of becoming visible, gay adolescents that were undergoing the difficult process of self-understanding surely did not find anywhere in mainstream culture representations of similar experiences that could guide them in their existential journey. Indeed, most mainstream cultural representations of emotional fulfilment, sexual gratification, and social adjustment corresponded to the various manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality. Given that for young people the access to non-mainstream, alternative or sub-cultural gay materials and representation is much more difficult than for willing and determined adults, the mainstream cultural channels were often the only representational fields available for young people. But the total lack of homosexual representations, or the chronic scarcity of them, did not provide any support in this process of self-discovery. Thus, the acknowledgement of the desire for people of the same sex was frequently achieved in the midst of an acute sense of social disconnectedness and existential confusion. Many homosexuals, in fact, in their adulthood and from the comforting standpoint of having found a welcoming ‘gay community’, often remember those days of sexual discovery and identity (disin)formation in a way which highlights the feeling of total isolation,

the crippling belief in being virtually the only human being on the planet who felt and desired the same (sex).

When I came out, invisibility was taken for granted. I can remember vividly scouring the TV guide for any television program that might give me some indication that I existed, and have only a vague memory of an artsy British broadcast on public TV. (Walters, 2001, p.xiv)

Because of this structural scarcity of homosexual representations in mainstream culture, gay scholars and activists have thoroughly explored the centrality and necessity of images for processes of identity formations and singled out the under-representation of homosexuals - if not total invisibility in mainstream culture and society - as a major issue to be addressed and challenged.

The necessity for this contestation was even more pressing considering that until not too long ago, the few gay representations available in mainstream culture were exclusively negative, derogatory and stereotypically superficial. In the rare occasions in which a gay person was portrayed in mainstream representations, both fictional and not, she/he was usually portrayed as a criminal, murderer, corruptor of youth, mentally ill and so on (Dyer, 2002). This deprecating representational regime not only fuelled and reinforced the homophobia of mainstream society and consequently homosexual invisibility in public life, but also it had harmful consequences for homosexuals' more intimate life.

Sexual minorities are particularly vulnerable to the internalisation of mainstream values, given that the process of self-identification generally occurs in isolation and relatively late in life. As gay liberationist writers Hodges and Hutter put it: "we learn to loathe homosexuality before it becomes necessary to acknowledge our own... Never having been offered positive attitudes to homosexuality, we inevitably adopt negative ones, and it is from these that all our values flow." Without realizing it, even lesbian and gay men may be

profoundly heterosexist in their thinking and outward behaviour.
(Gross, 2001, p.17)

To an extent, those negative images produced by a hegemonic heterosexist culture and society can easily become part of the psychological and existential make up of homosexuals and it takes lots of emotional energy to soothe or, in the best of cases, eradicate that sense of shame and social inadequacy that may surface even in the lives of the most proud homosexuals.

However, having emphasised the key role played by dynamics of cultural invisibility or misrepresentation and under-representation, I also want to underline that gay people were not simply passive receptacles of dominant cultural representations and social values. Those processes of cultural consumption and reception are never one-way. People have the capacity to decode and resist privileged meanings and values encoded into representations and images in more complex or oppositional ways (Hall, 2002), and '[i]n instances of what Michel de Certeau called cultural "poaching" minority audiences "appropriate" majority images and read them "as if" they had been intended for the minority' (Gross, 2001, p.153). Similarly, homosexuals have - to an extent - learned how to resist those prevailing negative representations of them produced by mainstream homophobic culture, and to make up for the scarcity of homosexual images in the media by appropriating and creatively 'translating' into a gay perspective heterosexual images and representations.⁷

But, resisting, appropriating, and 'translating' were ways of easing off the problem as opposed to solving or eradicating it. No matter how much

⁷ It can also be argued that processes of appropriation happen the other way around and often heterosexual or mainstream culture appropriates and perhaps cannibalises elements and images of the gay subculture or cultures, neutering them, rejecting or normalising the more challenging and threatening dimensions of them. I will explore in later chapters the difficult dynamics of osmosis or cannibalism between mainstream and non-mainstream cultures.

homosexuals could or wanted to appropriate heterosexual images and representations this did not change the fact that homosexual representations *per se* were negative, inaccurate, and almost non-existent in any field of mainstream and public culture. 'Poaching' was a necessity, then, rather than a playful choice. Consequently, the general scarcity of gay images needed to be fought; the hurtfulness of negative representations needed to be challenged; and a more inclusive and truthful visual regime needed to be claimed as a basic civil and democratic right. And this was exactly what gay activists set themselves up to do.

Among the early targets of the newly militant gay liberation movement were the images presented in the media: Hollywood films and television programs, as well as the stories reported-or ignored-by the news media. From the earliest post-Stonewall days, mainstream news media and Hollywood's dream-or nightmare-factories, were never far from the center of the movement attention. (Gross, 2001, p.xv)

Thus, the role that the media played in the way in which invisibility was perpetuated and those distorting representations and images were or were not circulated and diffused was paramount and a particular responsibility was attributed to the image-based media like television. In fact, 'in the media-saturated forms of life' (Warner, 2002, p.7) that were increasingly coming to dominate Western societies, television was progressively acquiring a centrality unrivalled by other media considering that:

Unlike print, television does not require literacy. Unlike the movies, television (in the United States) is "free" (supported by a privately imposed tax on all goods) and it is always running. Unlike radio, television can show as well as tell. Unlike the theatre, concerts, movies, and even churches, television does not require mobility. It comes into the home and reaches individuals directly. With its

virtually unlimited access from cradle to grave, television both precedes reading and increasingly, preempts it. (Gross, 2001, p.6)

Clearly, the centrality of television for questions of gay visibility needs to be understood in conjunction with, rather than exclusion from, the role that other media or other cultural apparatuses played, and still play, in its production and reproduction.⁸ Yet it is hard to deny the fact that since the 1960s practices revolving around watching television had increasingly become the privileged form of home-entertainment. The importance of television in Western social life can be also understood by considering that architecture and interior design often sees the television set as a vital feature for its planning of spaces, and in particular of living rooms. Furthermore, traditional television broadcasting by presupposing a heterosexual and family-based notion of audience (Arthurs, 2004; Walters, 2001) was becoming the most predictable ground for the perpetuation of homophobic dominant ideologies. Thus, given television's ubiquity and preponderance in the field of mass culture and entertainment, it was by default the most visible scenario for gay invisibility becoming one of the main political targets of contestation in the variously stratified social struggle to gain public visibility.⁹

⁸ For example, Gill (1993) suggests how, in our culture where a visual paradigm prevails, very little space has been devoted to the study of radio as a popular media and its current importance for the social articulation of questions around gender. Similarly, recent debates around claims of homophobia in the music industry and in particular in the Jamaican dance-hall tradition, have highlighted the importance of audio-based media for the articulation of social questions around human sexualities.

⁹ Television's resilience in addressing questions of homosexual visibility was further highlighted in its coverage of the AIDS epidemic. For example, whilst the printed media had been somewhat more inclined to be more explicit in promoting an AIDS prevention campaign, in which safe-sex was advertised for both heterosexuals and homosexuals, television deemed questions of safe-sex too challenging for the middle-ground morality of mainstream TV viewers and in the rare occasions in which it talked about it, it was always in relation to heterosexual safe-sex as if the health and well-being of homosexuals could not possibly be a matter of public concern.

Since the beginning of those struggles to gain social visibility and to transform a hostile representational regime many things have changed, and nowadays homosexuals are much more widely visible in different contexts of mainstream culture and society to the point that it has been somehow optimistically argued that ‘the awful closet of isolation and invisibility has been replaced by the wide-open door of public recognition’ (Walters, 2001, p.xiv). This more extended homosexual public visibility is also paralleled by the fact that in the mainstream representational arena:

it is really the more prosaic medium of television that has beamed gay life (or a televisual version of it) into millions of homes across this country and abroad. Literally hundreds of articles in newspapers and magazines throughout the country have chronicled the phenomenal explosion of TV visibility for lesbians and gays, announcing new gay characters every season in a seemingly unstoppable trend. Websites and gay papers regularly carry weekly “gay watches” that alert readers and viewers to gay episodes, gay-themed specials, hidden gay content, and movies with gay characters. Chronicling the ever-increasing number of lesbians and gay men on TV has become a full-time job. (Ibid. p.59)

However, if we consider that in the not-so-distant mid-1980s, the independent survey on the issue of gays and broadcasting *Are We Being Served* (1986) concluded that British terrestrial channel representations of homosexuality amounted to a meagre diet of just 8.5 minutes per week, the contemporary swelling of the representational arena does not necessarily mean that homosexuals are now fairly, equally or adequately represented. The shift from total visual starvation to a better diet might have determined the over-optimistic and inebriating impression of a world of gay visual plenty. But unfortunately I believe this is far from the truth. The very fact that worldwide we had to wait for *Queer as Folk* to publicly enjoy the first entirely gay TV drama seems to me symptomatic

of a slow uphill climb rather than a sweeping downstream flooding of gay representations. Moreover, the tone of the heated public debated that followed the broadcast of the series is indicative of how controversial questions around gay visibility still are. The achievement of some tactical gains should not be considered as the ultimate redressing of the harms of invisibility or as the realisation of a visually just society. Rather, it represents the beginning of the open-ended process of approximating or striving for visual justice, as I will discuss in the following chapters of this thesis.

Section 1c. Visual justice and the visible gay identity

In this section I want to explore in more detail what I mean by visual justice, in particular when I refer to discourses around gay identity and gay visibility. I intend to focus my investigation on two of the main presuppositions that underline my idea of visual justice. Firstly, I am going to consider the profound and constitutive connection of gay identity with forces and processes based around the visual. Secondly, I am going to make a case about the very visual and spectacular nature of the whole of social life in Western late-capitalist societies. In doing so, I will hopefully illuminate and justify the centrality of the quest for social visibility within contemporary gay identity politics. And I also believe that in this way I will demonstrate how the political and intellectual challenge posed by questions of gay visibility may productively rearticulate existing notions of social justice.

In order to that, I am going to briefly introduce the current discursive field in which questions of social justice *vis à vis* gay identity are often conceptualised. I

will start unravelling these issues by considering how, till not long ago, the framework to evaluate progressive questions of social justice was informed and dominated by a tradition in which economic inequalities were understood as the main factors and principles of social injustice. In this economistic framework, either inspired by a Marxist paradigm or by a liberalistic one, uneven access to means of production, mal-distribution of profit, or economic exploitation were seen as the key issues for social contestation and political struggle. The side effects of such a unidirectional vision of in/justice were that, for example, the importance of the women's struggle for the right to vote, or the black struggle for equal civil rights in a segregationist America had been almost reduced to historical footnotes. Their enfranchising efforts weren't sufficiently appreciated by dominant culture as fundamental achievements for a more just society. Rather, they were often seen as the opportunity for the recruitment of more free agents in the most important social struggle: the control of the market, the means of production, or the national economic wealth.

However, from the late 1960s onwards, the formation or consolidation of the gay movement, as much as of the other identity-based movements or New Social Movements as they come to be known (Castells, 1983; 1997), brought about a radical rethinking of this strictly economistic understanding of social relations and of social inequalities. It was challenged on the grounds that 'its epistemic and political privileging of working-class politics rendered racial, gender, sexual, and other nonclass struggles secondary and marginal' (Seidman, 1993, p.107). Even though the gay movement, as much as most of the participants in the other New Social Movements, had initially sought in Marxist theories and social criticism the source for a political vision and a strategy to achieve social equality, in the

following decades it began to emphasise that the social marginalisation gays were experiencing was not exclusively or necessarily related to dynamics of economic inequalities. For example, plots to overthrow capitalist domination to achieve a dictatorship of proletarians and the triumph of social equality would have not have been the solution to homosexual discrimination 'given the disastrous impact of the anti-homosexual measures of the USSR and many of its allies (especially Cuba) and the position in China (where homosexuality did not officially exist)' (Weeks, 1977, p.235).

Rather, homosexuals were arguing that gay invisibility as a form of social injustice had its origins in the way in which 'heterosexuality as political regime' (Wittig, 1999, p.ix) maintained its unquestioned hegemony and unchallenged normative privileges at every level of Western social life. Consequently, dynamics of misrecognition, stereotyping, disparagement, or social obliteration which affected gays, as much as all people involved in the pursuit of non-hegemonic sexualities (Rubin, 1992), were produced and reproduced by the heteronormative representational power of social discourses and practices as embodied by the psychiatric, medical, and legal systems, and by the media and all other cultural industries, which kept on mis-recognising and mis-representing the identities of those marginal groups. Thus, the critical attention of gay politics began to be increasingly focused on questions of cultural representations and of social recognition as a strategy to bring to the surface and dismantle the hegemonic power of heteronormativity and to achieve social visibility.

However, as Butler (1998) recently argued, the Western social debate of the last few years has been marked by the emergence of concerns regarding the fact that supposedly:

the cultural focus of left politics has abandoned the materialist project of Marxism, that it fails to address questions of economic equity and redistribution, that it fails as well to situate culture in terms of a systematic understanding of social and economic modes of production; that the cultural focus of left politics has splintered the Left into identitarian sects, that we have lost a set of common ideals and goals, a sense of a common history, a common set of values, a common language and even an objective and universal mode of rationality; that the cultural focus of left politics substitutes a self-centred and trivial form of politics that focuses on transient events, practices, and objectives rather than offering a more robust, serious and comprehensive vision of the systematic interrelatedness of social and economic conditions. (Butler, 1998, p.34)

In the wake of these concerns, the identitarian focus of gay politics and its interest in addressing questions around visibility and representation, and therefore its preoccupation with the ‘merely’ cultural dimension of social contestation has been criticised as a somewhat too particularistic and derivative political project *vis à vis* a truly progressive leftist theory and praxis that addresses the more ‘serious’ and ‘real’ dimension of social relations and inequalities which are the ones connected to the materiality of social life (Butler, 1998).

The necessity to evaluate the gay claim of visibility in relation to an unreconciled understanding of social interaction, where culture and economy still appear to be two distinct spheres, seems to be underscored also by the fact that questions of social justice have often been polarized in recent debates between redistributive claims versus recognitive ones, as if the two were incommensurably different realms.

Empirically, of course, we have seen the rise of “identity politics”, the decentering of class, and, until very recently, the corresponding decline of social democracy. More deeply, however, we are witnessing an apparent shift in the political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is redistribution, to a “postsocialist”

political imaginary, in which the central problem of justice is recognition. With this shift, the most salient social movements are no longer economically defined “classes” who are struggling to defend their “interests”, end “exploitation”, and win “redistribution”. Instead, they are culturally defined “groups” or “communities of value” who are struggling to defend their “identities”, end “cultural domination”, and win “recognition”. The result is a decoupling of cultural politics from social politics, and the relative eclipse of the latter by the former. (Fraser, 1997, p.2)

In the light of these concerns, I think that the critical strength of the idea of visual justice lies in the possibility to see through this hypothetical separation between cultural and material processes of identity formation and to unify a vision of social justice. In my alternative visualisation of social justice I intend to show how the gay and lesbian efforts to achieve social visibility lie at the cusp or intersection of the material and symbolic dimensions of social life. Therefore they are simultaneously concerned with redistributive and recognitive claims, as I will demonstrate in the later analysis of *Queer as Folk*’s social event. Moreover, following Butler’s argument that ‘the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject’ (Butler, 1993, p.226) I argue that, in the face of social invisibility and obliteration, issues of recognising, seeing, or socially visualising gay identity are not secondary or ‘merely’ cultural questions. Rather, they are at the core of the social formation and experience of a gay identity in late-capitalist societies. Therefore, they are structurally relevant for any discourse around justice or social fairness in our day.

Moving, then, to consider questions of gay visibility at the level of individuality, I believe that the structural connection of gay identity to visual matters, and in particular to the evolution of modern representational techniques, is forcefully argued by Marshall (1990) in his essay *Picturing Deviancy*. In there

he claims that the 'early development of photography and the construction of the contemporary homosexual identity were contemporaneous' (Marshall, 1990, p.24) and that our existing experience of a visually and socially recognisable gay identity has been shaped and constructed by the modern 'appearance of classificatory medical photography' (Ibid. p.25) and by the power of its visual representations. Marshall, following Foucault's (1990) seminal intuitions about the recent 'birth' of the homosexual character in Western culture and society, argues, on those very lines, that the processes of subjectification and objectification of sodomy into a medicalised and pathologised homosexual character had been possible because modern medicine had 'increasingly privileged the role of vision and in particular the medic's diagnostic gaze in the understanding and cataloguing of human disease. The refinement of medical knowledge required that the...disease should give up its hidden secrets into the domain of the visual' (Ibid. p.25).

In fact, since the early decades of the nineteenth century the diagnostic gaze of modern medicine, psychiatry, and early sexology had progressively relied on the visual aid of physiognomical drawings for the study of sexual perversion and deviancy. This physiognomical and objectifying drive of modern medical and scientific knowledge had been based on a taxonomic principle, that is, on the possibility of labelling and differentiating into a visible system of social categorisation, all of humanity. It was pursued in the attempt of visually grasping and fixing once and for all on the visible surfaces of their bodies the ever-shifting pathological 'truth' of its patients. Consequently, the 'empirical' visibility of a pathological homosexual character had been comparatively constructed: in a

relation of similarity or differentiation from other forms of psycho/physical sexual anomalies, deviancies, and social maladjustments (Weeks, 1977; Foucault, 1990).

But, 'the task of documenting the physiognomies of deviant types which was begun by medics such as Esquirol and Morrison was greatly facilitated by the invention of photography' (Marshall, 1990, p.24). The new representational technique of photography, because of its mechanical precision and efficiency, streamlined and magnified the scope of this taxonomic project on a scale unimaginable before, and in doing so, it also contributed to the visual standardisation of images of abnormality, which is a prerequisite of modern forms of social articulation and government. Indeed, it can be argued that:

photography, as is the case with all audio-visual media, was not simply the new technological discovery of isolated researchers but was, in fact, actively sought out. The needs of developing capitalism required increasingly complex forms of communication and information management to serve new industrial and military functions. The history of photography and the history of medicine are both deeply implicated in the growing system of surveillance, control and regulation which facilitated the extension of the state's supervision and social management into the twentieth century. (Ibid. p.24)

Moreover, photography visually supported and allowed the medicalisation of homosexuality for another reason. Because of its mechanical nature, photography provided the scientific quest of documenting and representing deviancy with a 'precision', 'truthfulness', and 'objectivity' that previous medical drawings - so tied to the fallible or 'subjective' dimension of the art of portraiture - could not claim or attain. Consequently, it can be argued that:

It was through these early medical photographic studies that male homosexuals first became visible. This was the moment of our first

most public appearance both to ourselves and others... We appeared as 'moral imbeciles', as 'sexual perverts', as 'intermediate types', as 'hermaphrodites', as 'transvestites', as the 'third sex'... Thus the male homosexual, defined only and utterly by his sexuality which saturated his very being, was delivered to the camera, for the medical profession and for society itself. The regulation of homosexuality and disease were irretrievably woven together in the domain of the photographic image. (Ibid. p.28)

Photography has been more than a neutral tool for the representation of homosexuality. It has been a constitutive element in its visual/social fabrication and construction. Thus, it is bearing in mind this intrinsic connection between the visual and the social appearance of a homosexual character that we will have to think about notions of gay visibility in the following chapters of this thesis. And this is even more so if we consider that, if the visual dimension of the photographic representation was:

the terrain upon which the pathological homosexual identity was formulated, classified and treated, this was also the terrain upon which some of the first homosexual politics were mapped out. If this was the register of our appearance and existence this was also the register in which such definitions were contested. From its beginnings the early homophile movement privileged a political struggle within the visual. (Ibid. p.28)

The notion of visual justice, then, can help us to account for the deep connection of gay identity and the visual, a connection at the core of processes of gay identity formation, and which introduces and justifies gay identity politics' paramount concern with questions around representation and/or recognition, particularly in the face of the technological improvements and social expansion of the importance of visual media in the past decades.

In fact, it is clear that the photographic representations of homosexuality considered by Marshall are only one form of visual representation, and other

forms, such as aesthetic representations, cinematic and televisual, have their own logics that cannot be simply deduced from the one he studies. This thesis' analysis of *Queer as Folk* and of televisual representations of gay identity will clearly demonstrate that. It will reveal the peculiarity of televisual technologies of homosexual subjectification and objectification (Foucault, 1990) and it will show how 'new modes of subjectification produce new modes of exclusion' (Rose, 1998, p.196) that must be constantly re-evaluated in the quest for justice.

Thus, if we now move on to the analysis of the broader historical and social field of the late 1960s we can see that, at the same time in which the gay movement was coming together around the politics of visibility, the Situationists and Guy Debord were also exploring the centrality of questions around the visual in order to understand and transform social relations in Western late-capitalist societies (Plant, 1992). Written in 1967, Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* had poignantly argued that:

In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation. (Debord, 1983, paragraph 1)

Debord, expanding Marxist analyses of alienation, commodification and fetishism which were supposed to be at the core of capitalistic forms of production, suggested that the spectacular and visual dimension of late-capitalist societies is the final stage of capitalism's relentless colonisation and reification of all recesses of human life.

The first phase of the domination of the economy over social life brought into the definition of all human realization the obvious

degradation of being into having. The present phase of total occupation of social life by the accumulated results of the economy leads to a generalized sliding of having into appearing, from which all actual 'having' must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function. (Ibid. paragraph 17)

As a consequence of the forces unleashed by industrialization and capitalism, all of Western societies must be understood as spectacular societies or visually structured societies in so far as 'the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image' (Ibid. paragraph 34).

Having said that, within the scope of our exploration of visual justice's depths, we should bear in mind how in the visual regime of spectacular societies, images should not be understood merely as the still or kinetic visual representations of social life that, happening in the supposedly separated sphere of culture, simply mirror reality rather than produce it or intervene in it. Rather, it is paramount to emphasise that '[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images' (Ibid. paragraph 4). In spectacular societies, it is the entirety of human relations that have come to be articulated, structured, and mediated by images and representations. In fact, in his relentless analysis of the 'scopic' alienation (Jay, 1993) of the spectacle, Debord draws attention to the fact that:

The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified. (Debord, 1983, paragraph 5)

In this way he warns us not to mistake visual media, just because they are producers of images, for the 'spectacle' as such. Cinema, television, or any image-

based medium, are only the spectacle's 'most glaring superficial manifestation' (Ibid. paragraph 24). They are themselves spectacular manifestations of the spectacle, cogs of the total spectacularisation of social life. Debord's notion of the spectacle brings back questions around the visual at the core of society and of social analysis. Through the lenses of the spectacle, then, the visual field instead of being understood and circumscribed solely to the space of the canvas, of the cinema, or of the TV screen, is expanded to the entirety of society, which becomes an all-encompassing visual arena in which images and representations become political matters and the matter of politics, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters with my analysis of *Queer as Folk*.

However, in using the idea of the spectacle in order to unravel questions around gay visibility and its political import, I am also aware of its problems and limitations. For example, Debord focused his analysis of spectacular social relations exclusively on questions around class as the only form of social distinction. Therefore, the critical strength and emphasis of his notion of the spectacle was implicitly addressed to describe the wrongs of bourgeois society to prepare the triumph of an un-alienated worker in an un-alienated society (Plant, 1992). Additionally, the subject of this spectacular alienation was still and uniquely the *homo economicus* and questions of gender, sexuality or race were completely overlooked in this analysis of the spectacle. This critical and political oversight was precisely the core concern of those different social groups that appeared on the social stage at the same time in which Debord and the Situationists were questioning the nature of late capitalism. The people that have been grouped together under the scholarly label of New Social Movements were precisely challenging this understanding of politics and society based exclusively

on the categories of nationhood and economic class. In fact, Debord's notion of the spectacle, very much in line with certain aspects of orthodox leftist politics, does not seem to have considered how social relations are inflected by multiple axes of difference and how notions of oppression or alienation should also be explored in other circumstances of social life, as in the case of non-hegemonic sexualities.¹⁰ As a consequence, in my thesis I will reflexively appropriate and colonise the notion of the spectacle to 'queer' it. I intend to render visible its paradoxical blindness *vis à vis* questions of gay identity and of homosexual social in/visibility.

Moreover, we should consider that, whilst Debord's understanding of the spectacle relies on a strong suspicion about images and about the deceitfulness of representations, by the 1980s 'postmodernist writers like Jean Baudrillard stopped worrying and found a way to accept and even celebrate what Debord and his colleagues had found so troubling: the ubiquity of images without referents and the reification of experience. Baudrillard.... giddily embraced rather than castigated the "hyperreal simulacrum" of reality' (Jay, 1993, p.433). In fact, as Plant says, Baudrillard 'describes the seductive power of images, which fool us into believing a reality persists beyond this hyperreality... We live in the midst of codes, messages, and images, which produce and reproduce our lives. They may have had their origins in commodity production, but have since won their independence and usurped its role in the maintenance of social relations' (Plant, 1992, p.6). Hence, this visually charged social space in which we live now is not any longer the distorted representation of an imaginary 'real' world to be regained

¹⁰ For example, *The Society of the Spectacle*, as much as other visual Situationist material, often used 'sexist images of women with little discomfort' (Jay, 1993, p.431) and without acknowledging their contribution to the over-familiar exploitation and fetishisation of the female body through images.

or rediscovered. It is the real world. And images or representations are not any longer the visual simulacra of a social and material life happening beyond the visual. They are the visual materializations of modern life itself.

Subsequently, it is in this social space articulated around regimes of visibility that the problem of homosexual invisibility and its political project of achieving visibility acquires a different centrality. In fact, the lack of homosexual representations is not simply a ‘superstructural’ scarcity of visual and aesthetic moments. Rather, in spectacular societies in which social relations are mediated by images, it represents a deeper structural form of injustice and the collective visual expression of social exclusion and discrimination. Therefore, in the following chapters I have used the case study of *Queer as Folk* to reconsider current debates on social justice in a more visually conscious perspective and to explore the cultural, political and social implications and complications of what may be at stake for gay people in becoming visible on national television.

Section 1d. Conceptual framework and outline of the chapters

In this section I will introduce the more general analytical framework that informs this research and I briefly describe the structure and content of the following chapters. I would start with the premise that this research is fuelled by my personal commitment to the study of its subject matter and indeed by ‘passion and anger’ (Skeggs, 2002, p.15). As I have made clear in the introduction, my revelatory and revolutionary viewing of *My Beautiful Laundrette* had shown me not only images of a gay and brave new world but also how many visual pleasures

and rights I was constantly denied in the hegemonic heteronormative mainstream visual arena. Thus, rather than claiming a hypothetical detached neutrality in the study of questions around gay visibility and visual justice, I want to render productively explicit my presence as committed researcher. Behind this research there is gay situated knowledge and gay standpoint theory (Skeggs, 2002). Moreover, I want to argue that my own experience of visual marginalisation (and of any other forms of marginalisation experienced as a gay man), as much as my own intellectual ruminations on it are also an integral part of the object of study of this research. This is because the kind of contemporary cultures we are interested in are those which, to a greater or lesser extent, we inhabit ourselves. Thus, we are already to a certain extent, participant observers in our studies' (Gray, 2003, p.17). Consequently, I believe that this degree of self-reflexivity and explicitness about the critical and political commitment of my research, rather than invalidating the overall 'objectivity' of this thesis, fruitfully reveals the intimate relation of knowledge to power (Foucault, 1980) and therefore justifies my research's strategic intervention in the battlefield of sexual studies and politics.

Having said that, I have pursued the close critical study of questions around gay visibility and visual justice consulting different bodies of textual material: philosophical inquiries on subjectivity, politics, ethics, and aesthetics; historical works on homosexuality and gay identity; contemporary theories on sex, gender and sexuality; studies on the political economy of the media; works on consumerism and lifestyle in late-Modernity or late capitalist societies; and new theories on visual culture and visual sociology. The insightfulness of these texts will provide the theoretical skeleton of this research whose strength will be variously tested in each different chapter.

Moving now to account for the empirical flesh of this research I have constructed *Queer as Folk*'s case study by considering both visual and written data and materials. First of all I got hold of *Queer as Folk*'s DVD which contained the recording of all the episodes of the two series and some other visual materials, such as the interviews with the actors and the producer, which were not shown during the public broadcast of the programme. The access to this material was truly unproblematic because videos and DVDs of *Queer as Folk* are widely available in any of the major megastores in London and other major urban centres throughout Britain. Moreover, copies of the programme can be easily bought from any of the online retailers such as Amazon. The social relevance of the public availability of copies of this gay TV drama will be further analysed in the following chapters.

I have also searched and collected the written material published on *Queer as Folk*. For example, from different public libraries (Colindale Newspapers Library, British Library, Westminster Library, British Film Institute) I have gathered all the articles from mainstream newspapers, tabloids and their supplements (*The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Sunday Times*), and articles from the gay publications (*Gay Times*, *Attitude*) that were stocked in some of those public libraries. Contacting directly the publishing company and explaining the nature of my research, I was granted access to the archives of some of the alternative gay press, which is not regularly collected by public libraries (*Pink Paper*) or not available to the general public at all (*Boyz*). By contacting Channel 4's Press Office I gathered all their promotional written material on the programme. I have also contacted *Queer as Folk*'s production company Red Production, which sent me their written promotional material on the

series. Moreover, I have downloaded from the websites of the Broadcasting Standards Commission and Independent Television Commission their official reports and findings on the public complaints they received about *Queer as Folk* (first, second season, and repeats) in the aftermath of its national broadcast. I have also browsed the Internet to collect and evaluate what was available online regarding the programme. In each chapter I will draw on different methods and methodologies to analyse the specificity of the material and as appropriate to the questions at stake. But, at the most general level I would describe my overall approach to the study of *Queer as Folk* and its articulation of issues of gay visibility and visual justice as a form of discourse analysis.

As Gill (2000) argues, there are probably as many as 57 different varieties or approaches to discourse analysis each of them laying individual claims on the uniqueness and efficacy of its particular method and scientific validity of its findings. At LSE, the shelves of the library were well equipped with a variety of comprehensive books exploring in detail these scholarly debates in the social sciences, or neighbouring fields of studies, assessing advantages and disadvantages of each interpretive approach (Coulthard, 1985; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Van Dijk, 2000; Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton, 2001; Wodak and Mayer, 2001; just to mention a few). Thus, rather than rehearsing in detail each individual approach or position on this contested field, I will describe my particular taken on discourse analysis exploring its usefulness and productivity for this research on gay visibility and visual justice. I would start by arguing that my approach to discourse analysis presupposes:

a perspective on language which sees this not as reflecting reality in a transparent or straightforward way, but as constructing and organising

that social reality for us. In these terms, discourse analysts are interested in language and texts as sites in which social meanings are created and reproduced, and social identities are formed. (Tonkiss, 1998, p.246)

And, by text here I mean not only written texts, but also visual texts. Images, communicate as much as words do and they constitute 'empirical' data in their own rights (Rose, 2001). Programmes such as *Queer as Folk* narrate or say as much as any written text would do. Therefore, the analytical strength of discourse analysis in this thesis will be used to encompass both visual and written text.

Thus, in rejecting any 'realist' approach to language (Slater, 1998), discourse analysis can be seen an 'analytical strategy' (Andersen, 2003) to look at the ways in which the meanings of those texts are constructed, rather than a simple method for sorting or coding textual material, and in turn 'to reveal how talk and texts are ordered to produce specific meanings and effects' (Tonkiss, 1998, p.247). In a similar vein, the visual and written textual materials I have collected on *Queer as Folk* will be used not only to survey the key words, themes, or elements that structure and articulate *Queer as Folk's* public existence but also to simultaneously consider 'the *effects and consequences* of representation - its "politics"' (Hall, 2002, p.6). At this point, then, it seems necessary to specify that the notion of discourse I deploy here 'examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conducts, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied' (Ibid. p.6). Moreover, I also want to emphasise again that by discourse and language I do not mean only verbal discourses or spoken language but I also refer to visual discourses and to visual

languages. Indeed, following Rose's suggestions, in this thesis I refer to the visual 'in terms of the cultural significance, social practices and power relations in which it is embedded; and that means thinking about power relations that produce, are articulated through, and can be challenged by, ways of seeing and imagining' (Rose, 2001, p.3).

Having said this, it is about time to acknowledge Foucault's influence in my approach to questions regarding discourse analysis. In fact, without claiming any too strict lineage, it is the study of Foucault that has suggested to me how discourse should be seen as a 'particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it' (Rose, 2001, p.136) and therefore of discourses' intrinsic connection to power. Moreover, Foucault emphasised how a discourse should not be understood only as an isolated verbal or graphically recorded utterance. Rather, it needs to be explored in its intimate connection to social practices, institutions, technologies, bodies, and desires that are produced and articulated by it. And this is not merely a matter of contextualisation of discourse but more deeply of focusing on the analysis of its effects. Furthermore, the meaningfulness and powerfulness of an individual discourse need to be explored in relation to a host of other discourses that underscore social life. It is only when it is analysed in relation to this more articulated discursive formation (Foucault, 1972) that a single discourse may indicate or suggest a particular regime of truth (Foucault, 1980) or a particular way of seeing and visualising society or the sexualised people who live in it.

In the light of what has just been said I would advocate the strategic and tactical helpfulness of discourse analysis as a framework to account for the multi-levelled dimension of discourses around gay visibility and visual justice as

embodied by the media/social event represented by *Queer as Folk*. In fact, the programme will be approached as a nodal point, as a short-circuit of different discourses about gay identity, gay visibility, and visual justice. The analysis of all the textual and visual materials or data I have gathered will eventually shed light on the cluster of discourses and practices that are at the base of a visible gay identity as much as of its cultural, social and political articulation or contestation. All these theoretical and analytical considerations, which I have introduced so far in this section and in the previous ones, will be expanded and further explored in the following chapters that I am going to describe now.

After this first and introductory chapter will follow the literature review. In Chapter 2 I position my research more explicitly in relation to different analytical schools and broader contemporary academic debates to which I hope my thesis will fruitfully contribute. And in doing so, I circumscribe the meaning of certain words or ideas that are going to appear throughout the thesis. In particular, I intend to concentrate on four different main areas. In the first section I discuss some of the key texts that have introduced me to the depths of general questions on the nature of the visual in Western culture. I introduce visual culture as the emerging field of research on these matters within sociological scholarship. In the second section, I consider the very question of a visible gay identity in the light of the ongoing debate on essentialist versus constructivist approaches to the study of social identities and notions of community and of belonging. In the following section, I address historical and more recent accounts over the visual nature of gay identity politics and current debates around the question of sexual citizenship. Then, in the next section, I explore the literature that has seminally addressed the very question of cultural and visual representations of homosexuality or the

homosexual presence/absence from visual mainstream culture. In the last section, I discuss more extensively the most recent debates on questions of multiculturalism and social justice.

In Chapter 3, I initiate the more ‘empirical’ exploration of *Queer as Folk* as a social event and of the consequences of its public broadcast. I analyse how notions of gay visibility and of visual justice were articulate and manifested on the visual/textual level of the programme. Thus, in the first section I discuss the complications of analysing visual materials and I introduce some of the methods to approach them. Then, I report the storyline to narrate what the programme ‘actually’ showed and to see how a first level of visibility was encrypted into its narrative. In the following section, I consider how the representational dynamic of TV genres has traditionally regulated the circulation of images of gayness and in what way *Queer as Folk* had complied with or disrupted that visual and discursive regime. In the next section I explore questions of visual justice in relation to *Queer as Folk*’s portrait of its main characters. I consider what their characterisation entails for the construction or redefinition of images of gay identity within the televisual history of homosexual representations in Britain. In the last section of the chapter, I analyse the narrative and geographical settings of *Queer as Folk*. By doing so I intend to territorialise discourse on gay visibility.

In Chapter 4, I expand the analysis of *Queer as Folk*’s contribution to gay visibility by considering its creative background. I introduce the programme’s scriptwriter, producer, directors, actors, commissioner and broadcaster dedicating to each of them an individual section of the chapter. The analysis of their comments on the programme will reveal a host of other questions around gay visibility and visual justice that regulate not only *Queer as Folk*’s public

representation of gay identity but also their own professional and social life. Thus, in the section on the scriptwriter I will explore how writing about gay matters seems to require the validation of personal experiences and to be regulated by discourses around the ethics and politics of authenticity. In the section on the actors I will explore the fact that they all publicly claimed back their real-life heterosexuality showing how gay visibility regulates questions of public/private *vis à vis* a profession that is all about fiction and illusion (but also dangerously about identification and desire) and how it affects their marketability or iconic status in a heteronormative mainstream culture. Particular attention will also be paid, in the section on the commissioner and broadcaster, to the analysis of the pivotal role Channel 4 has played and still plays in promoting images of gay identity in the British televisual field. Thus, I explore how discourses about the visual rights of minorities are articulated in public broadcasting and what are their implications for questions of visual justice.

In Chapter 5, I further broaden the analysis of the programme by considering the reaction of the public to *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity and contribution to gay visibility. I do that by principally examining the debates on those matters voiced in the printed press. In the first introductory section I consider how the very notion of 'public' is itself entrenched in heteronormative dynamics that are at the roots of gay invisibility and that has determined the necessity for the articulation of discourses on visual justice. In the second section, I survey the mainstream printed press reactions to *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity. Hence, I simultaneously problematise the traditional role of the mainstream press in the articulation of the questions of gay visibility and map out the main issues of public concern and debate such as questions of paedophilia,

promiscuity, privacy, obscenity, nudity, a-morality, superficiality, integration, recognition, and many more. In the third section, I will compare the responses of the mainstream press to *Queer as Folk* to the ones of the gay press. By doing so, I evaluate differences of opinion or similarities and I highlight recurrent concerns within and across each viewing and reading constituency. In the last section I also analyse the number and nature of complaints forwarded to the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and Independent Television Commission, and their final opinion of the programme in order to assess how these national watchdogs institutionally visualise and regulate matters of gay visibility.

In Chapter 6 I will discuss the main interrogatives concerning gay visibility and visual justice that have emerged from the previous chapters' analysis of *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity. Thus, in the first section I re-evaluate how *Queer as Folk*, considered in its complex nature as social event, shows the inconsistency of the supposed dichotomy between symbolic and material processes. I also question the heteronormative appropriation of the very notion of materiality. In the second section I consider the programme's contribution to gay visibility in relation to issues of spectacularisation, reification, or commodification of visual justice. In the third, I consider how *Queer as Folk's* contribution to visual justice can be obfuscated by its potential compliance to social surveillance and identitarian disciplining. In the fourth section I discuss how the programme's representation of gay identity accounts for the problem of visual exclusion. I explore how questions of in/visibility and visual hegemony also operate within the gay community and therefore how visual justice needs to be interrogated in its relation to multiple axes of identitarian belonging. In the fifth section I move to explore whether the visual justice promoted by *Queer as*

Folk represents a form of visual and social assimilation in the hegemonic visual field, a way of colonising it, or an opportunity for its possible transformation. In the next section, I discuss the emancipatory dimension of *Queer as Folk*. I consider how its contribution to gay visibility cuts across categories of social affirmation and transformation that are so often associated with recognitive or redistributive notions of social justice. In the last and conclusive section, I discuss the usefulness and effectiveness of visual justice as a way to think about justice and identities at the dawn of this new millennium.

In Chapter 7, I briefly reflect on what I have discussed and achieved in the previous chapters and I indicate future avenues to develop and expand this research suggesting other areas in which visual justice may shed its light in a useful and timely way.

CHAPTER 2. Literature review

Section 2a. Introduction: on visual culture

In this chapter I review the literature that I found most useful in guiding me in exploring questions around gay identity, visibility and visual justice. In doing so, I hope to contextualize, circumscribe and clarify the meaning of certain words, concepts or ideas I have used throughout the thesis. Clearly, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to consider all the authors I have considered for this research, all the books that have directly or indirectly contributed to its development. Most of them will be either acknowledged or discussed when necessary. However, what I intend to do now in the following sections of this chapter, is to map out some of the broadest coordinates that constitute the intellectual and discursive prerequisites for this thesis. By doing so I intend to trace the contours of the academic debates to which I hope to contribute with my research.

To begin with, I want to introduce visual culture as the emerging field of research that has begun to explore and analyse in a more systematic way the centrality of questions around vision and regimes of visibility for the analysis of contemporary Western society (Jenks, 1995; Mirzoeff, 1999; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001). One of the main presuppositions to debates on visual culture is the acknowledgement that:

Modern life takes place on screen. Life in industrialised countries is increasingly lived under constant video surveillance from cameras in buses and shopping malls, on highways and bridges, and next to ATM cash machines. More and more people look back, using devices

ranging from traditional cameras to camcorders and Webcam. At the same time, work and leisure are increasingly centered on visual media, from computers to Digital Video Disks. Human experience is now more visual and visualised than ever before from the satellite picture to medical images of the interior of the human body. In the era of the visual screen, your viewpoint is crucial... In the swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life. (Mirzoeff, 1999, p.1)

Similar claims are made by Sturken and Cartwright (2001) who have also thoroughly explored how vision and image-based media have achieved a hegemonic position in our sensorial and technological experience of contemporary life arguing that:

The world we inhabit is filled with visual images. They are central to how we represent, make meaning, and communicate in the world around us. In many ways, our culture is an increasingly visual one. Over the course of the last two centuries, Western culture has come to be dominated by visual rather than oral or textual media. Even the bastion of the printed world, the newspaper, has turned to images...to draw in its readers and add to the meaning of its stories...television, a visual and sound-based medium, has come to play the central role in daily life once occupied by the strictly aural medium of radio. Computers, originally equipped to generate texts, numbers, and symbols, have broadly adapted to generate and exchange complex visual data. Hearing and touching are important means of experience and communication, but our value, opinions, and beliefs have increasingly come to be shaped in powerful ways by the many forms of visual culture that we encounter in our day-to-day lives. (Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, p.1)

Given this pervasiveness of visual matters, we should bear in mind that the visual does not permeate and circumscribes only the 'cosy' domain of everyday life. As Virilio (1994) suggests visual matters are at the core of many other 'darker' and deadly aspects of social life. For example the power of military machinery is inextricably connected to visual technologies that articulate modern forms of warfare both in their offensive and defensive aspects. They also shape our very

astrophysical experience of outer space as seen and recoded by satellites, telescopes, or spaceships, most of which have both civilian and military ownership and uses.

Having said that, the scope of visual culture studies is surely not limited to the mapping of the successes or shortcomings of visually based technologies and of their effects on humans. Rejecting any 'latent or explicit technological determinism, in which an independent dynamic of mechanical invention, modification, and perfection imposes itself onto a social field' (Crary, 1993, p.8) visual culture considers the increasing importance of visual technologies in contemporary social life. But it does it in concomitance with the genealogical analysis (Foucault, 1990; Rabinow, 1991) of much broader reconfiguration of a 'heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations' (Crary, 1993, p.6) that took place in modern times and that brought questions around the visual to the core of social life on a scale unprecedented in Western history. Moreover, Crary rightly suggests that questions around the visual should be seen as inseparable from reflections about the viewing subject. This is because the very possibility to think 'visually' and therefore to see society in terms of visually determined social identities, come about because:

vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.... one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.' (Ibid. p.5)

Therefore, this research's analysis of homosexual identity as an object of vision should also be seen in conjunction with the parallel and more general

consideration of the complex historical changes and transformations that shaped the very nature of modern viewing subjects. In fact, vision is not a mechanic and 'direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects' (Scott, 1991, p.775) by a metaphysical viewing subject that timelessly and impassively, witnesses the world and its transformations without being changed or affected by what he/she sees in time and space. Rather, we should remember that visual perception (as much as any other sensorial perception) needs to be understood as intrinsically belonging to history, enmeshed as it is in its field of material processes and forces which simultaneously envelope and shape the viewing subject, the social/visual field, and the object of vision.

During long periods of history, the mode of human sense perception changes with humanity's entire mode of existence. The manner in which human sense perception is organised, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.' (Benjamin, 1992, p.216)

Thus, notions of visual justice might also be useful to highlight how the question of a gay identity politics of visibility is not a 'merely cultural' or derivative concern *vis à vis* issues of social justice, because it brings to the surface the necessity of interrogating the very material processes and social practices which have structured modern social life around visual dynamics and which have shaped the social environment in which gay people both suffered invisibility and struggled for visibility.

The centrality of the visual for the understanding of the history of Western culture and society, and in particular of contemporary social configurations, is suggested by Sennett who argues that:

One of the oldest Western ideas of human society is to see society itself to be a theatre. There is the tradition of *theatrum mundi*. Human life as a puppet show staged by the gods was Plato's vision in the *Laws*; society as a theatre was the motto of Petronious' *Satyricon*. In Christian times the theatre of the world was often thought to have an audience of one, a God who looked on in anguish from the heavens at the strutting and masquerades of His children below. By the 18th Century, when people spoke of the world as a theatre, they began to imagine a new audience for their posturing-each other, the divine anguish giving way to the sense of an audience willing to enjoy, if somewhat cynically, the playacting and pretences of everyday life' (Sennett, 1993, p.34)

Even if since antiquity human life has often been seen as a theatrical and therefore visual representation, it is in the transition to modern times that we have witnessed a radical transformation of this metaphor of life as a representation. Clearly, in the limited space of this chapter I cannot map out all the discrete events and transformations that took place in the transition from the *Ancien Régime* to modern times and that invested and reconfigured simultaneously the viewing subjects of this representation as much as the nature and dynamic of the representation itself. I can only highlight some of the key elements or factors of this much broader and capillary social reconfiguration that brought the visual to the forefront of social life. Thus, without postulating any strict causative principle or hierarchy of historical necessity among them I would consider how:

one of the crucial consequences of the bourgeois political revolutions at the end of the 1700s was the ideological force that animated the myths of the rights of man, the rights to equality and to happiness. In the nineteenth century, for the first time, observable proof became needed in order to demonstrate that happiness and equality had in fact been attained. Happiness had to be "*measurable* in terms of objects and signs," something that would be evident to the eyes in terms of "*visible criteria*". (Crary, 1993, p.11)

Those visible criteria were also much needed in the fast changing stage of modern cities, in which visual matters were becoming increasingly vital to signpost social difference and articulate human relations. In fact, in the transition from the *Ancien Régime* to modern and industrial times, the decline of the traditional social order and hierarchies (Taylor, 1992) increased social mobility. This, in conjunction with changing patterns of urbanisation, meant that the visual became one of the main ways to articulate peoples' lives. In fact, the sudden demographic swelling triggered by industrialisation, which attracted masses of new workers in the main European capitals, transformed modern cities into places in which 'it became difficult to place "who" a stranger was simply by his family background' (Sennett, 1993, p.58). In this urban ever-shifting human landscape people or citizens no longer had an immediately recognisable 'fixed' place in society. Visual markers of difference become increasingly important to define social identities and articulate social relations.

It is perhaps Benjamin (1992; 2002) who has most forcefully explored the centrality of visual matter to urban and social life at the beginning of the 20th century. For him, the acknowledgement of the increasing importance of the visual in modern urban life was not a motive for nostalgic lamenting about the demise of traditional social hierarchies and forms of collective life. Neither was it the cipher of social and visual anomie, or the manifestation of dreary rationalisation of social life and existential disenchantment. Rather, Benjamin saw the visual experience offered by the city's life as an entirely different experiential environment. It was a material and symbolic space in which more people from different social classes could have access to and experience new freedoms, pleasures, and shape different ways of being at home in this newly visually charged material and existential

landscape. In fact, Buck-Morss, talking about Benjamin's *Arcades Project* argues that for him:

Underneath the surface of increasing systemic rationalization, on an unconscious 'dream' level, the new urban-industrial world had become fully reenchanting. In the modern city, as in the ur-forests of another era, the 'threatening and alluring face' of myth was alive everywhere. It peered out of wall posters advertising 'toothpaste for giants,' and whispered its presence in the most rationalized urban plans that, 'with their uniform streets and endless rows of buildings, have realised the dreamed - of architecture of the ancients: the labyrinth.' It appeared, prototypically, in the arcades, where 'the commodities are suspended and shoved together in such boundless confusion, that [they appear] like images out of the most incoherent dreams'. (Buck-Morss, 1997, p.254)

Thus, the frenetic city life, the crowds of strangers, the mysterious and exotic objects on display in the shopping malls, all contributed to make modern life a visual adventure and the visual field the privileged playground of modern men and women (Walkowitz, 1992) where new dangers have to be fought and new treasures to be discovered. Indeed, I want to suggest that the effects and consequences of the modern reconfiguration of urban and city life were, and still are, paramount for questions of gay identity formation and gay visibility as Castells (1983; 1997) has analysed and as Ingram et al. (1997) have thoroughly explored in the book *Queers in Space: Communities; Public Places; Sites of Resistance*. The limited space of this section does not allow a lengthier discussion of these matters. They will be taken up in the following chapter.

The importance of the visual in present-day Western society is also effectively explored by Featherstone (1991) who suggests that contemporary consumer culture is based on processes of aestheticisation of everyday life which entail the progressive blurring of the 'boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse

of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes' (Ibid. 65). But this emphasis on notions of aestheticisation and lifestyle should not mislead us in thinking that the visual invests only the surface of our environment or of our bodily existence. In fact, the work of Bourdieu (1992) has forcefully demonstrated how social distinctions of class and taste are not only played out on the symbolic level but also at the level of embodied and therefore visible life. Class and taste do not determine the way in which we cover the classed bodies with 'appropriate' clothing. They also invest the body itself in ways that range from dietary regimes to bodily manners, and respectable behaviours (Skeggs, 2002).

Consequently, whilst in the first chapter I have highlighted how questions around the visual have been paramount for the construction and contemporary experience of a visible gay identity, I want now to suggest how issues around the visual bear enormous consequences for the exploration of other social identities and differences. For example, the photographic 'evidences' of nineteenth century anthropology 'provided visual information to categorize human races and these data supported theories of social evolution' (Harper, 1998), contributing to construct a chromatic human taxonomy whose pernicious consequences are still felt nowadays. In fact, raciological and racist discourses (Gilroy, 1993; Ali, 2003) have often referred to skin colour as one of the key elements to dis/articulate social relations.

The border of self and other, between internal and external - the skin - has become one of the most tenacious markers of "race" throughout western history. Skin is the visible reflection of raced ideologies, the mutable surface of the "racialised self." In spite of the academic rejection of the biological "truth" of "race" based on phenotypes, the

ideas of the corporeality of “race” still provide the basis for social tension in everyday life. (Ali, 2004, p.76)

To these concerns about chromatic hierarchies we could easily add, as a way to lay bare the contested nature of the visual, how gender dynamics and gendered identities should also be understood as deeply entangled with questions around the visual. For example, de Beauvoir (1982) explored how images of female beauty are the visual manifestation of patriarchal relations. The debate around women and pornography is another of the many instances in which questions around the visual are indispensable to understand gender dynamics and feminist discourses (Vance, 1992) and a more detailed exploration of visual culture would ‘highlight those moments where the visual is contested, debated and transformed as a constantly challenging place of social interaction and definition in terms of class, gender, sexual and racialized identities’ (Mirzoeff, 1999, p.4).

What I have sketched here is just the tip of the iceberg of all that could, should, and has been said about the implications and complications of questions around the visual for the understanding of social life in Western countries. It is in relation to this broader field of references and concerns about vision and visibility that I want to position my own research on the specific question of gay visibility and visual justice.

Section 2b. On visible gay identity

In this section I want to consider the literature that has been more influential for my understanding of questions around gay identity and by default to contextualise more accurately this thesis in relation to the two conflicting analytical approaches, that is, essentialist (Ellis, 1934; Boswell, 1988) versus social constructionist views of homosexuality (Fuss, 1991; Seidman, 1993). Whilst essentialist views on sexuality rely 'on a belief that human behavior is "natural", predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subjected to change' (Vance, 2002, p.357) constructionist approaches see sexuality as 'fluid and changeable, the product of human action and history rather than the invariant result of the body, biology or an innate sex drive' (Ibid. p.356). My personal views are in line with the latter interpretation given that I agree with Blasius and Phelan when they argue that:

Same-sex love is a phenomenon common to almost every culture, one occurring throughout history. The way in which people have understood this attraction, however, have varied widely. For some cultures, such a love is natural and desirable. In ancient Greece, love for boys was seen as an evidence of virility, and the relation between boys and men was crucial for the development of boys into men. The distinction was not between homosexual and heterosexual, but between passive and active; while boys could be the object of male affection and desire, the beloved, as they grew into men they were required to assume the posture of the lover instead. We see such distinctions today in many Islamic and Latin-American societies. In Islamic Africa, for example, both men and women may have same-sex relationships, but these relationships are typically between wealthy older patrons and poorer, younger companions. In some places and times, the attraction to another man or woman has been interpreted as evidence that the person is not really a man or a woman, but is a hybrid or placed inside that body; the North American *berdache* may be the most prominent example. (Blasius and Phelan, 1997, p.2)

By referring to these comparative anthropological examples, they want to emphasize how, if homosexuality is understood in its most generic dimension as a form of erotic or sentimental intimacy or attachment to people of the same sex, it indeed can be seen as a fairly invariable feature or possibility of human behavior. Conversely, how those pleasures and intimacies are understood, and the way they articulate specific social arrangements, may vary immensely both in time and space (Rubin, 1992). In this perspective, then, the problem of gay identity lies principally in exploring how the 'empirical' acts of taking pleasure with or through a person of the same sex is historically understood in the specificity of different cultural horizons, and how those understandings shape the consequences that those acts will have within each society.

Following the work of Foucault (1990) I argue that the question of a visible gay identity can only be conceptualised in relation to the more general problem of human sexualities in Western society. In his unfinished project of a history of sexuality Foucault argues that:

One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of 'population' as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded... At the heart of this economic and political problem of population was sex: it was necessary to analyze the birth rate, the age of marriage, the legitimate and illegitimate births, the precocity of sexual relations, the ways of making them fertile or sterile, the effects of unmarried life or the prohibitions, the impact of contraceptive practices... Through the political economy of population there was formed a whole grid of observations regarding sex. There emerged the analysis of the modes of sexual conducts, their determinations and their effects, at the boundary line of the biological and the economic domains. (Foucault, 1990, p. 25)

It is in this wider reconfiguration and rearrangement of the population according to sexual categories and the constitution of scientific knowledges and techniques to analyse and manage people according to sexual regimes that we have to seek for the 'emergence in a recognizably modern form of concepts and meanings which are now commonplaces of public discussion: for example, the notion of 'the housewife', 'the prostitute', 'the child'; and the concept of the 'homosexual'' (Weeks, 1977, p.2). Therefore, the question of gay identity rather than being a singular problem needs to be understood in relation to the simultaneous social appearance of a panoply of different visible sexualised identities, both hegemonic and not (Weeks, 1977; Foucault, 1990). In regards to the specific question of homosexuality, then, Foucault very forcefully argues that:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case of history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. (Foucault, 1990, p.43)

In this statement, Foucault is not disputing that same sex acts and pleasures had always existed in history. Rather, he is suggesting that the birth of a homosexual social actor endowed with a specific subjectivity and social identity is a temporally defined event. As I have already begun to explore in the first chapter, the contemporary possibility of thinking of a gay identity, was made possible by mid-eighteenth century medical and scientific discourses and visual practices of objectification and subjectification, that grouped together into a specific

homosexual character a host of features that previously did not have any relation to a natural essence of people but to the factual consequences of their forbidden actions on the social structure (Weeks, 1989; Foucault, 1990). From then on, homosexuality, either imagined as inscribed on an 'empirical' body, trapped in an interiority,¹¹ revealed by manners and clothing, or - as most recently - by lifestyles, progressively come to be understood as visually apprehensible and constitutive of a precise human typology and of a specific social identity.

However, as Fuss argues (1991), this 'birth' of a visible homosexual character had a paradoxical consequence because:

the historical moment of the first appearance of the homosexual as a "species" rather than a "temporary aberration" also marks the moment of the homosexual's disappearance - into the closet. That the first coming out was also simultaneously a closeting; that the homosexual's debut onto the stage of historical identities was as much an egress as an entry... (Fuss, 1991, p.4)

In fact, once homosexuality became socially and visually recognisable it also became more easily punishable not only by preventing the sinful or criminal action but rather by actively reforming or utterly obliterating the physical and material existence of those people who were bearers of that burdensome identity. And, as I have already suggested it will be on the grounds of this common experience of social obliteration that homosexuals will come together in the years to come in order to politically claim back a gay identity as a symbol of happiness rather than a visual manifestation of a pathologised or criminalised homosexuality.

However, I believe that the experience of this dynamic of appearance and disappearance is rightly problematised by Scott (1991) when she argues that often

¹¹ The relation or, or supposed difference between, exteriority and interiority is explored by Rose (1998) through the notion of the fold that indicates 'a relation without an essential interior, one in which what is "inside" is merely an unfolding of an exterior' (Ibid. p.142).

discourses on gay visibility risk turning that identity into 'an incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation - as a foundation on which analysis is based' (Scott, 1991, p.777) rather than the very object of historical and critical exploration. Thus, she says that:

When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured - about language (or discourse) and history - are left aside. The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. (Ibid. p.777)

Indeed, the so painfully achieved gay visibility has often been used to justify a political deployment of history as a chronology of a forced invisibility, unjust oppression, and discrimination. Looking back, then, becomes the operation or rescue from the well of time of fragments of homosexual visibility denied by a repressive society (Boswell, 1988), and takes 'as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalises their difference' (Scott, 1991, p.777). Hence, often the contemporary notion of a visible gay identity is not explored in the way it has been shaped by history but - having been naturalised - in the way it has shaped history.

To put it another way, the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility or in any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems - those that assume that the facts of history speak for themselves and those that rest on notions of a natural or established opposition between, say, sexual practices and social conventions, or between homosexuality and heterosexuality. Histories

that document the “hidden” world of homosexuality, for example, show the impact of silence and repression on the lives of those affected by it and bring to light the history of their suppression and exploitation. But the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, and of its notions of subjects, origins and cause. (Ibid. p.778)

For Scott gay identity rather than being an empirical self-evidence to be made visible needs to be seen as the starting point for the interrogation of historical modes and ways of seeing that made possible the perception of a gay identity as an object of vision. Indeed, it was bearing in mind these considerations that, in the previous chapter, I talked about my own experience.

I found that another set of concerns about the problematic nature and experience of gay identity were usefully explored by Cohen (1991) when he narrates his own experiential uneasiness about the pressure to:

align myself with a “gay” collectivity, especially when the categories around which that collectivity asserts its coherence put my “self” out of alignment. So, although the assumption that “we” constitute a “natural” community because we share a sexual identity might appear to offer a stable basis for group formations, my experience suggests that it can just as often interrupt the process of creating intellectual and political projects which can gather “us” together across time and space. By predicating “our” affinity upon the assertion of a common “sexuality”, we tacitly agree to leave unexplored any “internal” contradictions which undermine the coherence we desire for the imagined certainty of an unassailable commonality or of incontestable sexuality. (Cohen, 1991, p.72)

What Cohen highlights here is the problematic question of how the notion of a gay identity can possibly articulate questions of belonging (Probyn, 1996) both on an individual and/or on a collective scale. In fact, if the sexual identity were to be the truest essence of a self, this would be at the cost of obliterating many other

axes of difference such as those of gender, race, age religion (to mention just a few) that may constitute, in their unique assemblage, the radically singular identity of each gay individual. In fact, those axes of difference also inflect other forms of collective identity and communitarian belonging given that '[m]any black homosexuals, for example, prefer to identify primarily as "black" rather than "gay" and to align themselves with black rather than gay political positions' (Weeks, 1987). Thus, if the notion of a gay identity is supposed to suggest or postulate an essential communality, it is at the risk of obliterating other levels of identitarian allegiances or loyalties that each member of that community may have chosen (or been forced to assume by historical circumstances) in relation to other identity-based communities.¹² Moreover, this notion of a gay identity as a form of communality is also prone to the risk of becoming a device to policing the communitarian and identitarian boundaries within that very identity 'as the periodic attempts to exclude S/M or intergenerational erotic practices from "proper" gay or lesbian identity attest' (Cohen, 1991, p.73) as much as 'the periodical vilification of "bisexuals," "closet cases," and more recently, "lesbians who sleep with men" suggest' (Ibid. p.73).

And yet, to emphasise the historical construction of a gay identity as much as its limits in defining clear and self-contained identitarian boundaries, does not necessarily mean that such an identity is not 'real', totally fictional, and completely disconnected from a deeper sense of what one is. For Butler (1993; 1999) identities are performatively produced, that is, produced by the repetition and reiteration of norms and discourse - the heterosexual matrix - that naturalises and solidifies them. Thus, paraphrasing Butler paraphrasing de Beauvoir (1982),

¹² Agamben (1993) and Nancy (1991) both explore and suggest post-identitarian ways to understand or imagine possible ways of being in common that do not presuppose any form of essential identity.

we could argue that if gays are not born gay they do become so not necessarily as a choice but as a form of 'cultural compulsion' (Butler, 1999, p.12). Therefore, as Hennessy argues, gay 'visibility is not a matter of detecting or displaying empirical bodies but of knowledges - discourses, significations, modes of intelligibility - by which identity is constituted' (Hennessy, 1995, p.148).

In the light of what has been said so far I would argue that the notion of gay identity used in this thesis does not refer to a hypothetically 'stable core of the self, unfolding from the beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change' (Hall, 1997, p.3), but to an identity whose sense and experience becomes dynamically visible within specific temporal and spatial relations. Thus, the focus of my research is going to be based on the analysis of the processes and dynamics of gay identification.

In common sense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation. In contrast with the "naturalism" of this definition, the discursive approach sees identification as a construction, a process never completed - always "in process". Though not without its determinate conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources required to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency... Identification is, then, a process of articulation, a suturing, an over-determination not a subsumption. (Ibid. p.2)

This is why, rather than talking about the 'being visible' of gay identity that I have suggested in the title of the thesis, I will talk about its 'becoming visible' or perhaps - even more correctly - about its 'visible becoming'.¹³

¹³ I must thank Dr. Suki Ali for having indicated to me the fruitfulness of this linguistic inversion, which I will use in Chapter 6.

Section 2c. On gay politics of visibility

In this section I consider the literature that highlighted the visual dimension of gay politics and that has helped me to individuate some of gay visibility politics' critical implications for broader debates about social justice in Western democratic societies. Thus, what I want to do now is to sign-post some of the key authors and texts that have considered and debated these matters, which will be further discussed throughout the whole thesis and in particular in Chapter 6.

I found the work of Weeks (1977; 1985) very useful to historically contextualise and address the question of visibility in relation to contemporary gay politics. Talking about the homosexual movement in the early 1970s and of its liberationist objectives he suggests how coming out, the active re-claiming of an identity as symbol of pride rather than of shame or misery was one of its most essential features.

Coming out had three distinct aspects: first of all it involved coming out to yourself, recognising your own homosexual personality and needs; secondly, it involved coming out to other homosexuals, expressing those needs in the gay community and in relationships; but thirdly, and most crucially, it meant coming out to other people, declaring, even asserting your sexual identity to all comers. (Weeks, 1977, p.192)

Refusing to be kept any longer in the social closet or to comply with the political timidity of earlier reformist homosexual campaigners, gay activists began to expand their struggle by proudly and defiantly asserting their public, visual, and numerical presence and strength to other homosexuals and to the rest of society. Thus, at the core of this new form of activism there was:

the idea of “coming-out”, of being open about one’s homosexuality, of rejecting the shame and guilt of the enforced “double life”, of asserting “gay pride” and “gay anger” around the cry of “out of the closet, into the streets.”... You were encouraged to wear badges... asserting your homosexuality... Gay liberationists, men and women, held hands in public, kissed each other in Underground trains or on the streets, encouraged their comrades to come ‘out of the closets’, danced together at straight discos, demonstrated together, zapped public meetings, held homosexual dances and events. And coming out, the casting away of the generations of accumulated self-hatred and fear, *was* a tremendous liberation. (Ibid. p.191)

The visible displaying of homosexual presence in the public sphere was indeed a political revolutionary gesture. The limited constitutional freedom that the Wolfenden Report had proposed for homosexuals was based on the clear distinction between ‘private vices and public virtues’. Despite the still ingrained public perception that homosexuality was perverse and morally objectionable, gay people were allowed a degree of negative freedom simply because the state had no formal right to intervene in the pursuit of purely private interests (Brown, 1980). On the other hand, gays had the duty to maintain absolute public decorum, which meant continuing to be socially invisible. Consequently, the public display of gayness was a clear act of defiance of these oppressive norms and coming out was a proud appropriation of the visual public arena.

Moreover, without necessarily dismissing the importance of political negotiation or open conflict with homophobic institutions, gay activist were also arguing that gay ‘politics had to come down to the nitty-gritty of everyday life’ (Weeks, 1977, p.194) and that to bring images of homosexuality even in the most mundane aspect of social life, where homophobes would have not wanted to see them or imagined them possible, was a political act in itself. Thus, liberation from the invisibility or the obscurity of the visual closet meant not only the assertion of self-visibility by accepting one’s homosexual desires, but also the fostering of a

supportive and protective gay network as much as the encouragement of gay defiance in the face of heterosexual oppression and visual display of 'gay pride'.

In fact, as Marshall suggests (1990), we could argue that:

Gay Pride march is the only political demonstration which automatically achieves its intended political ends.... It demonstrates that lesbian and gay exist, that we insist upon being visible and that we refuse to be confined to the private domain to which we have been consigned by law. (Ibid. p.21)

Hence, it is in the light of this legacy that in the following chapters I will try to analyse the political and social import of contemporary discourses around gay visibility.

The emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s sadly brought new impetus to the mobilisation of gay activism and politics around questions of visibility (Watney, 1987; Marshall, 1990; Gross, 2001) considering that '[w]hen AIDS was first identified in the USA it was given the acronym GRID or Gay Related Immune Deficiency as if the disease had somehow grown out of, or was the natural expression of the "disease" of homosexuality itself' (Marshall, 1990, p.31). In those years gay activists had to fight the mainstream charge that AIDS was the 'gay plague' and that all homosexuals were infectious and contagious as if their bodies, rather than being only the 'point of emergence of the virus' (Watney, 1993, p.204), were truly its cause and origin. The efforts to rip apart this funereal veil of ignorance and prejudice had also to be paralleled by the struggle for obtaining an honest and effective public health campaign of AIDS prevention. In fact, if gays were visualised and vilified as the culprit for the spreading of the disease, they were paradoxically rendered invisible again in most of the

mainstream media and public campaigns of information on AIDS, as Watney reports saying that:

The British government's AIDS information campaign which has been widely admired overseas, dutifully exhorted the "general public" not to die of ignorance. Yet this campaign has still found itself unable to address one single word to British gay men, who constitute almost ninety per cent of people with AIDS in Britain. (Ibid. p.203)

Thus, gay activism in the field of HIV and AIDS, alongside its own alternative campaigns of information for homosexuals and practical care for the ones affected by the virus, focused on challenging this new form of pathological and deadly visibility which was matched by social invisibility when it was matter of informing to protect gay people. Consequently, it devoted great part of its political praxis to 'visible forms of public protest' (Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.21) as groups such as ACT UP did.¹⁴

At the "die-ins" enacted by ACT UP for instance, the theatrical performance of death serves a political aim: it politicises the division between the public and the private sphere in order that AIDS become a highly visible concern for everyone, rather than a stigmatised and private affair. (Fraser, 1999, p.114)

What those forms of activism were so publicly visualising and asserting was that AIDS was not a God-sent plague to punish the sinful homosexual; that people with HIV or AIDS did not have to be ashamed of their illness, much as people affected by cancer were not ashamed of theirs; that the main problem was not sexual promiscuity, and that the solution was not chastity. And, most of all, what they were publicly declaring was that many lives could have been saved if only

¹⁴ I need to specify that ACT UP was by no means an exclusively gay group and that frequently activism in the field of HIV and AIDS was based on the coalition of different subjects, organisations, or pressure groups, regardless of their sexuality, to face this particular emergency.

mainstream homophobic culture and public institutions had not been so criminally slow in addressing the problem of AIDS as a medical issue that required scientific information and prevention. Instead, AIDS was often treated in mainstream culture as a moral problem whose solution demanded segregation and social obliteration. In fact, public 'calls for the quarantining of people infected with HIV, or the compulsory HIV testing of all gay men' (Watney, 1987, p.206) was so horribly reminiscent (and at the same time so familiarly) of past eugenic attempts at the total annihilation and extermination of homosexuals during the Nazi regime.

Questions around visibility were again brought to the centre stage in the early 1990s by the contested politics of outing (Gross, 1993), that is, the revealing of 'a public figure's homosexuality without his or her consent' (Signorile, 1997, p. 769). Whereas coming out had been understood as the self-chosen decision of making publicly visible one's own homosexuality, outing was a form of imposed public coming out. Some gay activists controversially argued that public figures, which in the gay sub-culture were known to be gay whilst in mainstream culture 'pretended' to be heterosexuals, were failing the cause of gay emancipation. Instead of using their privileged position in order to come out in the public sphere and becoming visible and affirmative icons of homosexuality they were closeting it again. Rather than contributing to collective gay visibility they were simply enjoying the civil, social, or political gains, which had been fought for by less powerful gay people. For example, Shilts says that:

as someone who has chosen to be open about being gay, I have nothing but disdain for the celebrated and powerful homosexuals who remain comfortably closeted while so many are dying. Most of these people have nothing to lose by stepping forward and they could do so much to instruct society about the contribution gays daily make to America. (Shilts, 1997, p.769)

It is beyond the scope of this section to discuss all the ethical and practical implications and complications that the practice of outing raises and some of them will be discussed at later stage particularly in Chapter 4 when I will talk about *Queer as Folk*'s actors *vis à vis* questions of visibility. However, this political strategy has never been accepted as appropriate or unproblematic within the gay community and it has highlighted again the constant 'tension between (collective) visibility and (individual) privacy' (Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.50).

In the light of what I have said so far, I should consider now how the efforts of gay politics to gain visibility open up the question of what role visibility plays in the articulation and understanding of notions of citizenship (Berlant, 1997; Richardson, 2000a; Bell and Binnie, 2002; Plummer, 2003). In fact, as Rose argues:

The uniform social citizenship that was the objective of the citizen-forming and nation-building strategies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is challenged by a diversity of forms of identity and allegiance no longer deferential to such an image of national and territorialized civic culture.... individuals no longer inhabit a single 'public sphere', nor is their citizenship conferred upon them through a singular relationship with the state. Rather, citizenship is multiplied and non-cumulative: it appears to inhere in and derive from active engagement with each of a number of specific zones of identity... (Rose, 1999, p.178)

And indeed, traditional visions of citizenship have been deeply criticised for their disregard of how questions of class, race, gender, and sexuality inflected notions of social, public, or city life (Robbins, 1993; Berlant, 1997). Thus, it is along these lines that Bell and Binnie assert that '*all citizenship is sexual citizenship*, in that the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities' (Bell and

Binnie, 2002, p.10) and that it is paramount to explore 'the erotic and embodied dimension excluded in many discussion of citizenship' (Ibid. p.20).

However, the realisation that questions around sexuality need to be seen as paramount to articulate contemporary forms of politics *vis à vis* questions of civic and public life, as Rubin (1992) has so well explored, does not make the relation between gay politics and citizenship less problematic. For example, are gay identity politics claims to social visibility a form of negotiating inclusion into a society that had excluded homosexuals in the first place? And if it is so, to what extent do gay people want to be involved with a system that is still largely structured by heteronormative and heterosexist social dynamics and institutions? What may the costs be for this inclusion? For example, given the unshaken hegemony of the matrimonial institution as the only or most direct way to get access to certain sets of rights, as in the case of inheritance, adoption, taxation, welfare benefits, mortgage, insurance, and many more, do gays have to fight for the right to marry? Is gay marriage something to aspire to in order to be equal players in society and to enjoy the same privileges of most married heterosexuals? Alternatively, is that very institution one of the causes of homosexual exclusion and discrimination? Clearly, it is difficult to have a clear-cut answer for all these questions. As Richardson (2000b) suggest, for example, gay marriages could be seen in certain instances, and surely in our existing social configuration, as a solution for some gay people 'who do not have the resources, financial or otherwise, to pursue the legal arrangements needed to replace marital rights' (Ibid. p.267) and to achieve in alternative ways that degree of security which matrimony offers to heterosexual people.

Bearing all of this in mind, I agree with Bell and Binnie's suggestion that:

Our story of sexual citizenship is an ambivalent one. While we recognize the political potency of mobilizing (maybe even colonizing) the notion of citizenship with an agenda of sexual politics, we are concerned with the limitations as well as the opportunities this strategy affords...For us, many of the current nodes of the political articulation of sexual citizenship are marked by compromise... the twinning of rights with responsibilities in the logic of citizenship is another way of expressing compromise – *we will grant you certain rights if (and only if) you match these by taking on certain responsibilities*. Every entitlement is freighted with a duty. (Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.2)

Therefore, the consequence for gay people of claiming rights on sexual grounds could become an injunction to comply with duties and to become a sensible, responsible, and dutiful citizen. However, this bartering between rights and responsibilities is highly problematic because ‘given the heterosexualization of citizenship, how can rights claims based on citizenship status from sexual minorities be made to work other than by replicating heterosexualized articulations of the ‘good citizen’?’ (Ibid. p.30).

Thus, Bell and Binnie (2002) have explored different sites in which the question of gay visibility might be at odds with the requirements of citizenship. For example, without advocating that all gays are or should be involved in some form of eroticisation of urban spaces such as city parks or cottages, it is important to consider that outdoor cruising or cottaging are considered bad forms of citizenship and still punishable. Why, then, can pushing prams in the park or feeding pigeons be seen as ‘normal’ and acceptable forms of urban and civic life whilst pursuing erotic pleasure is not? In what way should the sexual *flâneur*, who eroticises the city as his/her playground beyond the boundaries of red light or gay districts, be considered a bad citizen? According to what norm should the privacy of the indoor family house or urban dwelling should be seen as the proper place

for the homosexual citizen? And these are just few of the question that have been asked (Berlant, 1997; Ingram et al. 1997; Warner, 2002) in relation to forms of citizenship, sexuality, and urban space and that have suggested how often certain manifestations of homosexual desire clash with 'good' or appropriate forms of citizenship.

Moreover, questions of sexual citizenship often impinge on the 'distinction between the 'good homosexual' and the 'bad homosexual' (or queer)' (Bell and Binnie, 2002, p.43) - the latter being the homosexual who refuses to conform to a set of heteronormative standards of behaviour in order to achieve respect or rights. In fact, S/M practices, fetishism, or any other form of 'problematic eroticism' (Rubin, 1992) such as intergenerational sex, are frequently considered too extreme and treated with suspicion even within the gay community, as I have already argued in the previous section. Consequently, their demand for rights seems to sit uncomfortably within the most general agenda of gay rights or gay equality and it questions any straightforward understanding of who is entitled to publicly claim his/her gay visibility.

Clearly, what I have said so far does not exhaust the range of questions that can and should be asked on these matters, and I will discuss some of the others in the coming chapters. But, it is in the light of these general concerns that I will explore the implications of discourses around gay visibility and their import for questions around visual justice.

Section 2d. On visual representations of gays

In this section I review the literature that has helped me to historically explore and critically problematise questions of cultural and visual representation *vis à vis* gay identity.

As I have discussed in the previous section the question of sexual citizenship and of gays' visible presence in public life intersects at many different levels of social life and surely its relation to the field of the media is one of the key ones. In fact, as Appadurai (1996) has demonstrated the media 'scape' needs to be anthropologically understood as an environment in which complex and vital processes of social life are produced and reproduced (Jenks, 1993) both on a global and local scale. Thus, for example, audio or visual technologies can support diasporic ethnic groups in enjoying films from their country of origin, fostering their transnational ties as much as to produce unexpected forms of cultural contamination and identitarian hybridisation or, unfortunately, to reinforce forms of ultranationalism and sectarianism (Gilroy, 2000). It is in the light of this 'thick' understanding of the role and function of visual culture that I have studied the efforts of gay activists and scholars to account for the ways in which questions of homosexuality have been articulated in and by the mass media.

Given cinema's historical priority over more recent forms of visual communication such as television, video, digital and virtual imagery, it is natural that the realm of films has been a prime site of exploration for the study of mass visual representations of homosexuality. The work of Russo (1987) was the first

attempt to map out and survey in a systematic way ‘the portrayals of lesbian and gay men in mainstream, commercial American cinema’ (Ibid. p.326) from the early twentieth century to the early 1980s. Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* was not simply a chronological study of a representational scarcity or total invisibility of gay people in mainstream cinema. It was also a pioneering attempt to analyse the visual regimes in which images of homosexuality were produced, circulated, and publicly understood given that he provocatively argues that ‘[g]ay visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It’s *how* they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century’ (Ibid. p.325). In fact, since the heyday of cinema, more or less open gay characters or almost explicit homoerotic situations, had regularly appeared in mainstream cinematography. But, unfortunately most of the time those images of homosexuals were used as a laughing stock or as comic relief. Alternatively, homosexual characters were portrayed as bitter, evil, or murderous creatures and hardly ever as positive or realistic personages. Through a painstaking research and analysis of the films available to American audiences that contained gay characters or visual fragments of gayness, Russo was demonstrating the extent of heterosexism and homophobia ingrained in most of those images and the consequent necessity for gay political and cultural activism of denouncing such a negative visual regime in order to challenge it and dismantle it.

A similar interest about the way in which homosexuals have been traditionally portrayed in the visual field is at the core of Dyer’s (1991, 2002, 2002a) work. In fact, very much in line with Russo’s concerns, Dyer has argued that:

Some of the first widely available images of homosexuality in our time were those provided by the American film noir... I know that as I

grew up realizing I was gay I used to identify with characters like Waldo in *Laura* or Jo in *A Walk on the Wild Side*; they concretized and reinforced for me the negative feelings about myself that I'd picked up elsewhere in the culture. I know from work within the gay movement how widespread these images still are among gays and non-gay alike. It is important then to understand these images as one aspect of the armoury of gay oppression... (Dyer, 2002a, p.50)

Without dismissing the crucial importance of other forms of cultural representations of homosexuality (Doty, 1993; Sedgwick, 1994; Hall, 2002) Dyer highlights, however, the profound historical impact of mainstream movies and images in mass-mediated societies in articulating homosexual self-perception as much as in shaping the public hostility towards gays. Thus, he has thoroughly explored the way in which images structure forms of social power suggesting that:

How a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and other like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. Equally representation, representativeness, representing have to do also with how others see members of a group and their place and rights, others who have the power to affect that place and those rights. How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation. (Dyer, 2002a, p.1)

Starting from these premises he has amply documented the power of negative and oppressive stereotypes typically associated with mainstream visual representations of homosexuality and his insights will be of great help for my analysis of *Queer as Folk*, particularly in the next chapter. However, in his exploration of the Western hegemonic and homophobic modern visual regime, he has also shown how films and images have provided precious opportunities for homosexuals to

challenge that regime. Alongside the historical review of the relentless disparagement of homosexuals in mainstream culture, he has also documented, from the heydays of cinematography to the 1980s, the existence of films 'made by lesbians and gay men with lesbian and gay subject-matter' (Dyer, 1991, p.1) that constitute the backbone of a gay visual sub-culture. In fact, as far back as 1919, films have been made:

by people who considered themselves to be, in whatever parlance of the day, lesbian or gay and which openly embraced gay/lesbian subject-matter. Some were produced with a definite intention of promoting lesbian/gay rights and identities, while others were made out of the socially constructed but privately realised imperatives of self and sexual expression. They are not covert or disguised articulations of lesbian/gay feelings and perceptions, but examples of that rare, and perhaps rather extraordinary enterprise of the deliberate, overt and owned expression of such feelings and perception in film. (Ibid. p.1)

Thus, Dyer provides a detailed record of gay underground or non-mainstream visual productions and he portrays a more subtle and layered picture of the visual arena seen as both a site of oppression but also as a platform of empowerment or political contestation. In fact, in the shadow of homophobic public culture, homosexuals have actively struggled to create an alternative visual regime and repertoire of images to facilitate more positive processes of gay identity formation, to homo-eroticise visual entertainment, to invigorate a politicised sense of community, and to promote a fairer, pluralistic and gay friendly public representational visual arena.

Questions around the quality, quantity, or nature of visual gay representations are also explored by Bourne (1996) who has focused his research on the specifics of the lesbian and gay presence/absence in British cinematographic heritage from

1930 to 1971. In his mostly chronological and archaeological visual account, Bourne maps out not only the more explicit portraits of homosexuality in mainstream representations, but also of those gay images that, more discreetly managed to seep on to the national screens, slipping through the net of censorship, and timidly beginning to challenge a mostly unsympathetic visual regime. Moreover, in the introduction to the book he tells us about the enormous difficulties he encountered as a film and television student interested in researching these matters. In the mid-1980s, he had to struggle in order to convince his colleagues and teachers about the validity and necessity of exploring issues around representations of homosexuality. And this hostility was even more discouraging given the liberal credentials of the courses he had chosen:

the film course had an enviable reputation in film-study circles for being unconventional, and helping “minorities”. It had a radical, left-wing and Marxist bias in Thatcher’s Britain, and actively discouraged students from working within the “mainstream”. Instead it encouraged students to be independent, political and “experimental”... However, I found the climate very hostile and alienating. Lesbian and gay sexuality was definitely *not* on anyone’s political agenda! (Ibid. p.xv)

I found his account rather useful to conjure up the cultural climate in which the works I have talked about so far were produced. It clearly highlights how groundbreaking they were and still are. In fact, the mainstream hostility to visual representations of homosexuality within the cultural industries was often paralleled by the disregard - if not open hostility - within academia toward researches that were committed to promote gay visibility. This academic neglect and reluctance to explore questions around gay representations (within and, unfortunately, beyond the scholarship of visual studies) should be borne in mind to explain the existing relative cross-disciplinary scarcity of these studies, as much

as to appreciate the profound cultural and political significance of those researches for questions of visual justice.

Having said that, Howes' (1994) *Broadcasting It: An Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality on Film, Radio and TV in the UK 1923-1993* (as suggested by the title) is a colossal effort to make up for this scarcity of documentation and research on these matters providing a thorough survey of gay visibility within the broadest scenario of British media (see also Sanderson, 1995). In fact, works that explore newer representational media (Horne and Lewis, 1996) are increasingly widening the field of research on gay visual representation which had been pioneered by surveys of the cinematographic representational arena. For example, in *Bad Object-Choices* (1991) or Gever et al. (1993) the debate on gay representations is broadened by also considering also visual media such as television and videos and exploring how more flexible visual technologies have contributed to independent productions and the overall expansion of the public representational arena for images of sexual nonconformity. Gamson (1998, 2002) also explores the increasing presence of gays in mainstream media and how their visual presence has become a regular feature 'into the tabloid world of daytime talk shows, as nasty and loud as most everyone else on the show' (Gamson, 2002, p. 349). By doing so, he talks about the price to pay for gay visibility and inclusion in contemporary popular culture and he discusses notions of cultural assimilation, conformity and normalization, which I will also consider throughout this research.

Gross' (2001) work is another text that offers a thorough survey of the presence/absence of gays in the American media from the first half of the last century to the present. He analyses the intrinsic connection of gay politics with

visual media arguing that '[t]he emergence of a gay movement in the 1950s coincided with the societal transformations wrought by television and the increasing centrality of communications technologies' (Ibid. p.xiv). However, he also highlights how the television medium is indeed one of the most contested media *vis à vis* questions around gay visibility and public visual inclusion.

In post-World War II America, lesbian women and gay men began, with difficulty, to create alternative channels of communication that would foster solidarity and cultivate the emergence of a self-conscious community. Typically, the first alternative channels to appear are those with a low entry barriers, minimal technological needs, and relatively low operating costs. Thus, news-papers and magazines have long been the principal media created and consumed by minority groups. In recent decades, video technology has made it possible for anyone with a camera and editing deck (or at least access to them) to produce fictional and non fictional programs.... Finally, the Internet now utilizes a relatively cheap technology to provide Web-based news and magazines sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and mail networks. By contrast, it is network television -with its numerous regulatory hurdles, high production costs, and demand for broad audiences - that remains the most insular and undemocratic of the media, largely unavailable to most minority groups. (Ibid. p.19)

In this respect Gross not only has provided a compelling exploration of questions of gay representation and visibility, but he has done it in conjunction with a detailed analysis of the political economy of American media and of their strategic role and function in the gay quest for visual justice.

Lastly, I would point to Walters' (2001) work as an extremely detailed account of the increased cultural visibility of gays in the US. This account, focusing mostly on gay representations on television, also surveys the homosexual presence at other levels of visual popular culture like theatre, cartoons or advertising. However, if on the one side Walters celebrates the successes of the gay political struggle for visibility, she also highlights how often 'culture and

politics move at different paces' (Walters, 2001, p.15) and that, 'in the face of a homogenising culture, a culture that reduces difference to another sexy commodity' (Ibid. p.18), many questions need to be asked about the modalities, objectives, and unexpected side effects of hard fought-for gay visibility. In fact, the author argues that:

Surely, times are better, but I believe there are ways in which this new visibility creates new forms of homophobia (for example, the good marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay) and lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of cultural visibility for inclusive citizenship. In many ways, this moment provides us with a picture of a society readily embracing the *images* of gay life but still all too reluctant to embrace the *realities* of gay identities and practices in all their messy and challenging confusion. We may be *seen*, now, but I'm not sure we are *known*. (Ibid. p.10)

Thus, in consideration of the possible 'disjuncture between the everyday life of gay people and the representation of that life in popular culture' (Ibid. p.22) the book also raises questions of how 'the visibility of any minority group is always tenuous at the best. One year's saturation can turn into next year's old news, as the minority group is made "re-invisible"' (Ibid. p.12). In this way, it clearly highlights the potentials as much as the instability of gay visibility's achievements in the contested field of cultural representation.

Alongside all those books I have just mentioned, I should say that TV programmes such as *Queerspotting* (1996), or the films and documentaries I viewed in different European Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals in the past few years, have all been invaluable visual sources of images, ideas, and inspiration for this thesis' investigation into questions around gay identity, visibility and visual justice.

Section 2e. On visual justice

In this section I am going to explore the literature that has contributed to my elaboration of the notion of visual justice. In doing so, I will contextualize questions of visual representation within the broader debate around multiculturalism and the politics of recognition and within current disputes over the nature and scope of social justice in Western countries.

Bearing in mind all that has been said so far in the previous sections, I would suggest how the question of gay identity, visibility, and visual justice should be understood in relation to the fact that, in the past few decades in most of Western countries ‘[t]he political problem of citizenship is reposed: it is no longer a question of national character but of the way in which multiple identities receive equal recognition in a single constitutional form’ (Rose, 1999, p.178). The legacy of colonialism and imperialism with its enforced and systematic transatlantic relocation of people and their cultures (Gilroy, 1993), or the migratory and hybridising fluxes of groups, individuals, and ideas triggered by the forces of globalisation (Appadurai, 1996, Binnie, 2004) are just some of the factors that have contributed to a radical reconsideration of the complexity of the human and cultural landscape in Western countries. They have triggered the need to rethink social and political configurations, which can accommodate the needs, claims, and identities of a different host of people. However, the political question of how to deal with social differences should not be understood only as a consequence of exogenous threats to an imagined ‘original’ unity of national identities (Anderson, 1983). For example, the challenges to traditional forms of institutional and political power brought about by the New Social Movements of the 1960s

(Seidman, 1993; Castells, 1997) included not only the claims of post-colonial subjects, but also the endogenous claims of Native-Americans, as much as of women and homosexuals, who were all struggling, at different levels and in different ways, for their differences to be recognised, respected, or valued and for their cultural identity to co-exist equitably in a more pluralistic and multicultural national culture.

It is on these lines, then, that in the introduction to Taylor's work (1992), Gutmann suggests how:

Public institutions, including government agencies, schools, and liberal arts colleges and universities, have come under severe criticism these days for failing to recognize or respect the particular cultural identities of citizens... it is hard to find a democratic or democratising society these days that is not the site of some significant controversy over whether and how its public institutions should better recognise the identities of cultural and disadvantaged minorities. (Taylor, 1992, p.3)

In fact, as we have already explored in the first chapter and in the various sections of this one, questions around gay identity and its public in/visibility are structurally shaped by dynamics of public misrecognition and of under or misrepresentation. Therefore, the gay claim to visibility and visual justice should be seen as part of this broader historical reconfiguration of ways of being in common and accommodating or articulating differences in Western democracies considering that '[d]ue recognition is not just a courtesy we owe to people. It is a vital human need' (Ibid. p.26).

However, questions of multiculturalism and of public and institutional recognition of different identities are indeed riven by ambiguities, ambivalences, and difficulties (Fraser, 1996). As we have already explored in the previous

sections, the gay identity in need of public recognition or claiming cultural and political representation, is far from being a homogeneous essential entity. Rather, it describes a historically shifting presence and represents the often contradictory or antagonistic needs of homosexuals in relation to other axes of difference and identitarian allegiances: '[r]ecognition, as stability, becomes problematized only as the flows, the flux of becoming or difference are emerging as pervasive' (Featherstone, 2004, p.17). Thus, 'in a context in which politically engaged social groupings may indeed be closer to "coalitions"' (Ibid. p.8), the celebratory and affirming dimension of multiculturalism and of the politics of recognition should be reconsidered in view of a much more dynamic understanding of gay identity and of the political aims of gay visibility. Consequently the question of gay identity, representation, and multiculturalism should be understood not in terms of the celebration of an essential authentic but obliterated identity, but as the recognition of the intrinsic multiplicity of gay identities and cultures. It should be seen as the recognition and facilitation of their becoming and of their fluidity.

The additional problem of multiculturalist and inclusivist politics of recognition is highlighted by Boyarin (1996). He speculates about what is at stake in the moment in which recognition becomes something granted almost as a favour, or reluctantly conceded by a hegemonic subject, power, institution, or state to a non-hegemonic identity or social group. In this perspective, any abstract idea of a dialogic form of multiculturalism and recognition (Taylor, 1992) should be carefully assessed considering that very often that dialogue starts from uneven subject and power positions. And it should be evaluated considering recognition is often promoted as a consequence of strategic and tactical interests rather than because of altruistic political choices. Similar concerns were highlighted by Bell

and Binnie (2000) when they evaluated the 'price' that the sexual citizen is expected to pay in order to be recognised as an equal social player or to be included - and perhaps assimilated - into a multicultural society.

Moreover, as Fraser (1996) suggests, questions about multiculturalism are complicated by the fact that not all differences or identities are good and equally deserving of being recognised and represented. She argues that we should be 'distinguishing emancipatory and oppressive identity claims, benign and pernicious differences' (Fraser, 1996, p.69) and that we should be asking:

Which identity claims are rooted in the defence of social relations of inequality and domination? And which are rooted in a challenge to such relations? Which identity claims carry the potential to expand existing democracy? And which, in contrast work against democratisation? Which differences, finally, should a democratic society seek to foster, and which, on the contrary should, it aim to abolish? (Ibid. p.69)

Clearly, these concerns need to be taken into account given that, as we will see in Chapter 5 on public reactions to *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity, some segments of the viewing public still consider homosexuality as a perversion or an abomination and therefore gay identity and its representations surely are not something to be cherished or recognised. These issues will also be further explored in Chapter 4 in which I will talk about Channel 4's statutory remit to cater for identity groups not represented by other channels and its consequent quandary of having to decide if, for example, neo-nazi or racist groups can be considered under-represented voices to be allotted broadcasting space at the same level as homosexuals or other identity based minority groups (Docherty et al., 1988).

Furthermore, question of visual justice should be understood in relation to the concerns that multiculturalism and notions of recognition may raise questions of 'displacement: the cultural displacing the material; identity politics displacing class' (Phillips, 1997, p.143) and that the over-culturalist focus of identity politics of recognition may 'neglect injustices of political economy' (Fraser, 1996, p. 67). In fact, Fraser emphasises her concern about an apparent abandonment of progressive politics of social equality based on economic or redistributive struggles by saying that:

The discourse of social justice, once centered on distribution, is now increasingly divided between claims for redistribution, on the one hand, and claims for recognition, on the other. Increasingly, too, recognition claims tend to predominate. The demise of communism, the surge of free-market ideology, the rise of "identity politics" in both its fundamentalists and progressive forms - all these development have conspired to decenter, if not extinguish, claims for egalitarian redistribution. (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.8)

Clearly, as I have already hinted in the first chapter, these kinds of concerns are paramount for my elaboration of the notion of visual justice *vis à vis* questions of gay identity and visibility and I will carry on exploring these issues throughout the entire thesis. Having said that, as a cautionary note, I should report that Young has suggested that:

Fraser, like some other recent left critics of multiculturalism, exaggerates the degree to which a politics of recognition retreats from economic struggles. The so-called "culture wars" have been fought on the primarily cultural turf of school and universities. I see little evidence, however, that feminist or anti-racist activists, as a rule, ignore issues of economic disadvantage and control. (Young, 1997, p.148)

In fact, the gay struggle for social visibility and visual justice does not seem to me to have necessarily neglected economic questions considering that, as Fraser herself acknowledges ‘gays and lesbians also suffer serious economic injustices: they can be summarily dismissed from civilian employment and military service, are denied a broad range of family-based social-welfare benefits, and face a major tax and inheritance liabilities’ (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.18). For gay people questions of gay visibility are always entrenched into questions of material and economic discrimination and inequality, as I will discuss in Chapter 4 by studying *Queer as Folk*’s creative background. Moreover, by saying that gays and lesbians ‘also’ suffer economic injustice, Fraser seems to implicitly reinstate this dichotomist vision of social justice split between redistribution and/or recognition, in which questions of gay visibility are principally symbolic problems and only additionally, derivatively material. On the contrary, in the rest of this thesis I will try to demonstrate how the gay struggle for visibility should be considered in its simultaneity of intervention on both the symbolic and the material dimension of social life.

This cultural debate surrounding my questions of gay visibility and visual justice can be further explored by considering Honneth’s response to Fraser (2003) that recognition is not the exclusive realm and expression of identity politics understood as opposed to socialist politics. Rather it is the expression of both. In his view the paradigm of recognition could and should be used to re-frame class-based claims in so far as proletarian struggles are also struggles for recognition and not exclusively about redistribution. Working class disempowerment in capitalistic social arrangements could also be understood also

as a problem of social visibility and of recognition in a broader sense. Therefore, Honneth argues that:

the conceptual framework of recognition is of central importance today not because it expresses the objectives of a new type of social movement, but because it has proven to be the appropriate tool for categorically unlocking social experiences of justice as a whole. (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.133)

Following his suggestion we could argue that questions of recognition should not be understood as an exclusive concern of identity politics, and of gay politics of visibility in particular, because the issue of recognition is somehow an anthropological one, which regards and inflects all kinds of human relations and all forms of social justice.

Yar's (2001) work represents a further attempt to bypass the 'the bifurcation of economically and culturally oriented perspectives' (Ibid, p.288) in considering questions of social justice and injustice. As for Honneth, Yar suggests the necessity of reconsidering the problem of recognition not only as a question of symbolic struggles but also as matter of 'materialization and mediation of social meanings in "goods" as well as "words"' (Ibid. p.298). In arguing that 'recognition is materially mediated via the externalisation of human values in the form of goods' (Ibid. p.297) as much as 'economic goods are in-and-of-themselves mediated forms of recognition, materially embodied' (Ibid. p.298) he contributes to the challenge to any dualistic understanding of social justice, in which gay identity claims to social visibility and visual justice are often confined to the 'merely' cultural. All those questions and debates permeate this research and will be further discussed at different stages throughout the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3. *Queer as Folk* as a visual text

Section 3a. Introduction: some troubles with the visual

In this chapter I start my analysis of how *Queer as Folk* articulates questions around gay visibility and visual justice by considering the textual and narrative dimension of the programme. This is indeed the first level in which *Queer as Folk* has left its representational mark regarding those matters. Its plot, the events it portrays, the actions and deeds of its characters, are all elements of the programme's specific representation of gay identity that caused such a media and public furore. Thus, I am going to complement my discussion of *Queer as Folk*'s social import for debates on gay visibility and visual justice with a more detailed account of what the series is supposed to have shown to British audiences during its public broadcast.

Having said that, the task of introducing *Queer as Folk*'s narrative dimension is a complex one for various reasons. In fact, the textual and narrative nature of television programmes is made by a synergy of different elements such as moving images and sounds (dialogues, music, as much as silences and pauses). Both the visual and the audio dimensions complement each other to create a particular televisual text. But they also retain, to an extent, their individual representational power. For example, the particular visual style of a programme, its pace, choice of camera angles, lighting and dominant colours can add different layers to its textual dimension (Rose, 2001). Grainy images can channel completely different feelings from sharp and perfectly in-focus ones. Dark or dingy colours can elicit

different reactions and conjure up different emotions from bright and loud ones. Quick and fast editing may suggest something different from slow-pace visual narratives.

A similar argument can be made for the audio or musical elements of the narration.¹⁵ For example, the distinctive accents of *Queer as Folk*'s actors could be seen as giving the programme a more realistic feeling, a deeper sense of 'authenticity' than a more standard or 'neutral' voice intonation or alternatively, could be seen to have jeopardised the 'suspension of belief' (Skeggs et al., 2004, p.1850) that often representational verisimilitude seems to require. The soundtrack, rather than being a mere comment to the programme, was also an integral part of its narrative. In fact, *Queer as Folk*'s music score was a collection of very cheerful and easy-listening pop tunes that were supposed to be representative of a certain gay subculture and lifestyle. And the fact that the soundtrack for both series is available on CD in any major music store surely adds extra levels of complexity to our exploration of *Queer as Folk*'s articulation, contribution, and/or commodification of gay visibility. Therefore, an exploration of the narrative dimension of *Queer as Folk* as a visual text should take into account all these complexities to achieve a clearer picture of the programme's representation of gay identity. Questions of narrative style will be further explored in the following sections, some others in later chapters, and in particular in the next one in which I explore how *Queer as Folk*'s creators describe what they intended to achieve or obtain through their specific creative contribution.

¹⁵ For a more thorough exploration of theoretical and methodological questions regarding the analysis of the audio dimension of social life see Bauer's (2003) *Analysing Noise and Music as Social Data* in Bauer, M. and Gaskell, G. eds. *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image and Sound. A Practical Handbook*, London: Sage.

In highlighting the complexities of analysing the programme's narrative dimension I should also remind the reader that *Queer as Folk* was produced as two separate series, which were broadcast approximately one year apart from each other.¹⁶ Both series were divided into different episodes. Each episode was the indispensable part of a greater multi-layered narrative chain and yet a narrative unit in its own right. Certain themes were running through the entire series, whilst some others appeared as sub-plots, or side stories.

In the same vein, we can say that if *Queer as Folk's* narrative focused mostly on the lives of the three main characters, it also portrayed many secondary players. Some of them were present in supporting roles from the beginning to the end of the series; others appeared in only a few episodes. Nonetheless, the length of the development of certain scenarios or the frequency of appearance of any character does not necessarily correspond to its narrative importance. Some marginal characters or themes could be truly revealing and meaningful for our exploration of gay visibility and visual justice precisely because of their narrative brevity or absence.

These narrative and representational considerations lead to another key issue, which is the question about 'objectivity'. In considering and reporting the storyline in order to explore what *Queer as Folk* is supposed to have shown, no matter how much effort I put into giving a truthful account of it, my inferences and interpretations as viewer, narrator, and researcher constantly seeped through the 'objective' account of the characters' actions. What will follow will be - to an extent - a representation of a representation.

¹⁶ In this thesis I have considered the two series as a whole. This is because my main interest here is to trace the discursive contours about gay visibility and visual justice and the temporal gap between the two series did not seem to me to have produced any sensible discursive shift regarding these matters.

However, given the complex nature of the visual, and of televisual narratives in particular, as I have hinted so far, I believe that there is not an analytical method that can account for them all, and that can claim full objectivity and ‘truthfulness’ in analysing visual narratives as social data. For example, following Slater’s suggestions, I would argue that:

Content analysis clearly represents an attempt to apply conventional, and indeed positivist, notions of rigour to the unruly and ostensibly subjective field of cultural meaning. The central aim is to render issues of interpretation as controllable and non-contentious as possible in order to move quickly on to the more ‘scientific’ process of counting things. At bottom, content analysis simply measures frequency... (Slater, 1998, p.234)

Nevertheless, I do not dismiss the importance of frequencies. They can indeed be revealing and, in an implicit way, I have transversally used some of content analysis’ insights in this and other chapters. But, I also believe that visual texts and narratives exceed any rigid codification and that *Queer as Folk*’s representational dynamics as much as its textual contribution to gay visibility and visual justice cannot simply be assessed by statistics. Rather than ‘counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined sample of images, and then analysing those frequencies’ (Rose, 2001, p.56) to consider questions of gay visibility and visual justice I want to explore the relations of meaning between those images, the cultural codes that envelope them, and how the intelligibility and social value of those images are entangled in a set of other discursive practices and historical dynamics. This is not to dismiss the visual ‘evidence’ of the images *per se* confining them into a realm of total subjectivism or arbitrariness. *Queer as Folk* truly represents gay identity in a particular way. Still, the ‘meaning of a representation (written, visual, acoustic, or otherwise) is not an

objective property of the thing “in itself” (Hall, 2002, p.7), but it needs to be explored in its relation to other texts and narratives and in relation to a system of meanings, dominant codes, values or social discourses.

The text cannot be considered in isolation from its historical conditions of production and consumption. Thus, the meaning of the text must be thought in terms of which set of discourses it encounters in any particular circumstances, and how this encounter may restructure both the meaning of the text and the discourses which it meets. (Morley, 1992, p.57)

Thus, the meaning of *Queer as Folk* as a text or narrative should be considered ‘to be produced-constructed - rather than simply “found”’ (Hall, 2002, p.5) in the actual representation. In fact, the broadcast of *Queer as Folk* was preceded and prepared by a massive advertising campaign. Huge billboards promoted the forthcoming arrival of the series on the national screen, preparing, enticing, seducing, warning, or challenging the British public. Leaks of information and the press preview had created moral panic and media frenzy even before it was aired. Moreover, the temporal gap between the broadcast of each episode allowed reviews, commentaries, public debates to overlap onto the initial televisual text, to saturate it with additional meanings and discursive layers.

Therefore, if my approach to the narrative dimension of *Queer as Folk* and its representation of gay identity on the one hand attempts to consider the semantic richness and communicativeness of its textuality, on the other hand it principally pays attention to the broader discursive formations that shape and construct its social intelligibility as much as its contribution to gay visibility and visual justice. In this way I do not want to dismiss the efficacy of semiotic analyses. But, I believe that Hall is right when he argues that:

that *semiotic* approach is concerned with the *how* of representation, with how language produces meaning - what has been called its “poetics”; whereas the *discursive* approach is more concerned with the *effects and consequences* of representation - its “politics”. [It examines not only how language and representation produce meaning, but how the knowledge which a particular discourse produces connects with power, regulates conducts, makes up or constructs identities and subjectivities, and defines the way certain things are represented, thought about, practiced and studied.] (Hall, 2002, p.6)

Consequently, in analysing *Queer as Folk*’s representation of gay identity and its narrative contribution to gay visibility I will contextualize it within the discursive regime and regulatory principle that Warner (1993) has called heteronormativity, that is ‘heterosexual culture’s exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Heterosexual culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society would not exist’ (Warner, 1993, p.xxi). Heteronormativity, then, refers to the panoply of discursive practices that organise knowledges, patterns of thought, and social beliefs around the presumption of universal heterosexual desire, behaviour, and identity. This presumption of universal heterosexual desire informs our very epistemology and symbolic order, determining what can be thought, what can be discussed, and what can be visualised or seen in the various domains of cultural and social life. For that reason, it can be argued that heteronormativity presupposes and regulates the way in which *Queer as Folk* is produced, circulated, viewed, or experienced. Hence, this chapter’s focus on the textual dimension of *Queer as Folk* should be understood as an attempt to show the pervasiveness of heteronormativity and its regulatory strength. On the other hand, it also intends to show how the programme may have visualised its weakness, incoherence, and instability, challenged the

grip of heteronormativity *vis à vis* representations of gay identity, or rearticulated question of gay visibility and visual justice.

Section 3b. *Queer as Folk's* story

Queer as Folk is a television drama divided in two distinct but complementary series, which were respectively broadcast in 1999 and 2000 by Channel 4. The first series was made up of forty-minutes episodes scheduled on Tuesdays at 10.30 pm for eight consecutive weeks, starting the 23rd of February. *Queer as Folk 2* was the sequel to the first series in which locations or main characters were all the same, and which was simply developing themes and elements introduced in the first series. The only difference between the two was that the sequel was made up of only two episodes of one hour each broadcast on Tuesday the 15th of January and the 22nd of February at 10.00 pm, half an hour earlier than the first series.

Set in contemporary Manchester, *Queer as Folk* is a narrative centred on the lives of three white gay men: Stuart Allan Jones, Vince Tyler, and Nathan Maloney. Stuart and Vince are very good friends. They are nearly thirty and they have known each other since they were fourteen. Despite their closeness, they are very different. Stuart is rich, handsome and self-confident. He has a glamorous job in PR, a big and stylish flat, a smart car, and most of all, sex appeal. He is sexy, he likes sex, and he has a lot of it, whenever, wherever, with whomsoever he wants: 'he gets what he wants because he believes he will' (Press release: *Queer as Folk* [no page number given]). His self-confidence verges on arrogance, and he

often behaves as 'super-spunky vaguely Nietzschean hero' (Munt, 2000, p. 531) who seems to show little interest in other people's feelings or emotions. As the scriptwriter Russell T. Davies suggests in Channel 4's press release:

His storyline is the slowest burning - I felt it was important to gradually peel away the layers of this enigmatic character. In the beginning, it seems that he doesn't rely emotionally on other people or commit himself to anyone but by episode eight it is clear that he carries his own emotional baggage. Although at the outset his brutal honesty may make him seem cold and distant, a different Stuart has emerged by the end. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

Vince seems to be his less glamorous alter ego. He works in a supermarket, lives in an ordinary flat, and his greatest passion in life is the TV series *Doctor Who*, of which he knows all episodes by heart. He is average looking and 'his attempts at one-night-stands always end in hilarious disaster, stemming from his inability to reject people... His confidence is low and even when he finds someone who is interested in him, he can't quite believe it is happening' (Ibid.). In fact, as he admits, he is rather envious of Stuart's sexual exploits:

I worked it out once. I've been friends with Stuart since we were fourteen and now we're twenty-nine, so if you take an average of two shags a week, I reckon he's has one thousand five hundred and sixty men. The bastard! I'm rubbish at copping off. I must've had, I dunno, two hundred and fifty? He's shagged a football stadium, I've shagged a medium-sized buffet. (Ibid.)

However, beyond his apparent envy, the reality is that he has always been more or less secretly in love with Stuart but his love remains firmly unrequited. So, in order to be ever closer to him, he has adopted the role of Stuart's chaperon. He is the one who drives Stuart's car when Stuart is too drunk or too intoxicated by

various drugs. He is always there to support Stuart and to deal with the annoying consequences of his ultra-hedonistic and carefree lifestyle.

Nathan is fifteen, still a virgin, and in the closet. He has not told anybody about his homosexuality, not even his best friend Donna, but he is well aware of being gay and eager to explore his lust for men. And he knows that if he wants gay sex, there is only a way to get it: to go to Canal Street - the core of Manchester's gay village. Being under-age certainly does not make things easy, but he is ready to take the risk. Thus, in the first episode we will see how, one evening, Nathan summons his courage and goes to Canal Street where Stuart picks him up, brings him to his flat and regardless of his young age, gladly introduces him to the joys of sex. A few months later, in remembering that fateful evening, Nathan will say: 'I was fifteen. I did it the first time I went out. I'm quite proud of that. I'm dead proud of that, my first time out. Stuart Allan Jones. He's looking down at me like the face of God' (Davies, 1999, p.16).

But, if for Stuart, this encounter was meant to be just another of many one-night-stands, for Nathan it is the beginning of a burning passion, of a sexual apprenticeship, and of an explosive coming out between his friends and family. Not only will his life never be the same, but Nathan's young, naïve, and (at moments) obsessive presence will trigger off a chain of events in the lives of Stuart and Vince as well. Their lives will get inextricably intertwined. Nathan will become their shadow - almost a stalker. He will follow them in bars and clubs, he will get to know their friends, and lastly he will move to Hazel's house (Vince's gay-friendly mother) when the issues of his homosexuality become too much of a problem for his own parents.

The storyline of the series revolves around Nathan's discovery of sex and love and his rites of passage out of the closet into visible and proud gayness, whereas Vince and Stuart's rites of passages will be about the (partial) acknowledgement of gay identity's constraints and around the (partial) disillusionment about gay lifestyle. Nathan's coming out is just the beginning of an empowering process. He will learn all the sweet and sour sides of being openly gay in a homophobic society, and as a young man he will start appreciating the protectiveness and security of Manchester gay scene. Meanwhile, both Vince and Stuart will realise that they are growing old - according to them and most of the Canal Street habitués, being 30 years old means being ancient. Therefore, they will start questioning the nature of their friendship, the life they have led that far, the narrowness of the Manchester's gay scene or perhaps of a culture and society in which people need to have gay districts or gay lifestyles if they want to desire and love same-sex partners.

Queer as Folk portrays a relatively short period in the life of our main characters and of the people close to them: mothers, sons, lovers, boyfriends, casual partners, work-mates and so on. But what really matters in the programme's narrative about Stuart, Vince, and Nathan is that it shows how being gay effects their lives and the lives of the people around them at different levels and in different ways. And most of the various threads of the storyline represent the way in which Stuart's, Vince's, and Nathan's homosexuality interacts with family life. For example, as the scriptwriter says 'Stuart's family is nice, respectable and suburban. His parents are the only people to whom he has not been honest about his sexuality, which means that their relationship is quite distant' (Press release: *Queer as Folk*). Underneath Stuart's public self-confidence and openness about his homosexuality he has not yet managed to find the courage

to break the news to his parents. In his family only his divorced sister knows about it and she often urges Stuart to talk to his parents in the belief that that would be the way to have a more honest, constructive, and loving relationship. But Stuart always resists the idea of coming out until when he is almost outed by his eight-year-old nephew, Thomas. In fact, on a day when Stuart is looking after his single-parent sister's two young sons, Thomas discovers on Stuart's computer 'Big Cock City' website and cunningly asks Stuart for money to keep the secret, shouting at him 'You're a pouf, and nana and granddad, they don't want to know. £25 or I'm telling!' (Munt, 2000, p.537). Stuart reacts to his blackmail by grabbing him, dragging him to the toilet, putting his head down it and flushing. This head dive is not enough to silence Thomas who screams back at Stuart 'You're gonna pay, you're so gonna pay. I want £50 a week, every week. I'm telling Dad...cos he wants access...You touched me just then, you bloody touched me, you pervert!' (Ibid. p.537). The consequences of this event are that, one day when Stuart and his parents are helping his sister to pack up her things to move to her new home 'Thomas starts to drop heavy hints concerning men coming round to Stuart's apartment' (Ibid. p.537). Stuart does not wait for these innuendos to become more explicit and before Thomas can carry on with his attempt to blackmail him or to succeed in outing him Stuart decides to come out to his parents by himself with a prideful speech in which he says:

I'm queer, I'm gay, I'm homosexual, I'm a pouf, I'm a pufftha, I'm a ponce, I'm a bumboy, I'm a batty boy, backside artist, bugger. I'm bent, I am that arse bandit. I lift those shirts, I'm a faggot arsed fudge-packing shit stabbing uphill gardener. I dine at the downstairs restaurant. I dance at the other hand of the ballroom. I'm Moses and the parting of the red cheeks. I fuck and am fucked. I suck and am sucked. I rim them and wank them and every single man's had the time of his life. And I'm not a pervert. If there's one twisted bastard in

this family it's this little blackmailer here. So congratulations Thomas I've just officially outed you. (Ibid. p.537)

I agree with Munt when she argues that this is one of the most powerful coming out speeches ever seen in popular culture because:

It is an invocation to shame, a citation of shame which, through its dramatic, confrontational momentum exceeds the confessional moment and becomes a statement of being. The shame is shifted off sexual perversion and on to the perpetrator. Agency is snatched back by Stuart through a discursive inversion, causing the child Thomas himself to be shamed - he is the one averts his eyes, he is the one who is subsequently sent outside, into the garden... (Ibid. p.537)

This is indeed one of the many scenarios in which *Queer as Folk* powerfully represents how the grip of heteronormativity and homophobia effects not only society at large but also articulates even the dearest and closest relationships such as those with parents. And if Stuart's storyline narrates of a successful discursive inversion, of an emotional and relational catharsis, of agency, of resolution and future reconciliation, *Queer as Folk* also represents sadder moments and disastrous family interactions.

Alexander, for example, a very camp friend of Stuart and Vince, for whom 'passing' (Walker, 1993) or staying in the closet, has never been an option (and perhaps has never been wanted anyway), has been totally rejected by his homophobic parents. They pretend not to see him when they bump into him on the street, and finally when his father is dying in the hospital, his mother makes Alexander 'sign off his inheritance rights' (Munt, 2000, p.536) and avoids any chance of a last-minute reconciliation, preventing Alexander from meeting him for the last time with the excuse that he is sleeping and cannot possibly be woken up. Alexander pretends to be above all this cruelty and injustice and leaves the

hospital as if nothing had happened, only to attempting suicide several times throughout the series - fortunately never succeeding.

Alexander has obviously had a worse home life and rougher background than any of the other characters - his parents won't even acknowledge his existence - but he is the life and soul, he is a survivor. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

The fact that he always survives his clumsy suicide attempts and that his campness makes those otherwise tragic situations almost hilarious does not make his experience of public visibility less painful and unfair. His character more blatantly reveals some of the possible dangers of gay visibility.

Queer as Folk explores many more successful and familial scenarios, such as Vince's.

Vince has only got his Mum, Hazel, but what a fabulous Mum she is! In a sense she has come out with her son because inhabiting his world has given her enormous freedom and joy. Although she is sometimes a bit of an embarrassment to him, it is clear how close they are. (Ibid.)

Her unconditional acceptance of her son's sexuality makes their relationship truly special, unusual, and almost utopian. Still, it is a welcome utopia and it works as a critical reminder of how different parental relations could possibly be. Moreover, it is to her wisdom and advice that both Stuart's mother and Nathan's will recur in order to come to terms with their own sons' homosexuality so that:

In a touching scene around the kitchen table, Hazel Tyler advises Margaret Jones: "Try not to think about the arse thing and you'll be fine." To which Janice Maloney adds: "Well...I'm not trying it again, the arse thing." Hazel replies to this: "I quite like it myself, you can read a book, at the same time." And Margaret adds a coda: "Well don't look at me, it's a foreign language.' Three heterosexual women

discussing experiences of anal sex on broadcast television drama - *Queer as Folk* lives up to its reputation as boundary breaking. (Munt, 2000, p.538)

Despite his open relationship with his mother, Vince has not said anything about his homosexuality to his working colleagues who are mostly females. He has not had the courage to make it clear, not even when one of the women develops a crush on him. Because of his incapacity to come clean with her, Vince ends up almost encouraging her and he makes telling the truth progressively more difficult. It will take the intentional shaming schemed by Stuart to save him from further deceptions and for him to unwillingly come out to her and consequently to all the women on the shop floor. To his surprise this outing will cause no major negative consequences. The main problem and issue in that narrative scenario seemed to be Vince's deception rather than his sexuality.

Alongside these images, scenarios, fragments of representations of gay identity there are many more significant ones which reveal and portray the implications and complications of being or becoming visible as a gay person in contemporary Britain. But it is beyond the scope of this chapter and the limited space of this section to give a more detailed account of each of the many narrative threads that are interwoven through this televisual text and that shed light on different aspects of these dynamics. Many other elements of *Queer as Folk's* narrative and representational themes are going to be considered, directly or indirectly, in the following sections of this chapter and at different stages throughout the whole thesis. However, what seems clearly to emerge is a narrative articulated by 'shame/pride dichotomies' (Ibid. p.531), by the dichotomous images of being in the closet versus the decision/imposition of coming out, by the wish to be visible and the fear or consequences of becoming visible. But the narration of the

adversities and ambivalence in relation to visibility is also balanced by an overall sense of pride and defiance, as in the scene in which Stuart blows up the car of Alexander's homophobic mother. Visibility is worth fighting for.

Thus, in the last episode we see Stuart growing progressively dissatisfied with his life, with the Manchester gay scene, with a lifestyle that has served him well for a long time but that has turned out to be too tight. He decides to leave everything behind and go to London or perhaps somewhere totally different: not necessarily a bigger city with a bigger gay scene or with more men to be seduced, but somewhere in which to be able to be and to explore more than all of that. After many hesitations Vince decides to follow him and to join Stuart in his quest for a more queer and brave new world. In a scene reminiscent of science-fiction movies (perhaps a homage to *Doctor Who* so much loved by Vince), they jump in Stuart's car, and, waving goodbye to Nathan (their spiritual heir) and all their folk - both queer and not - they drive faster and faster through Canal Street till they dematerialise vanishing into a whirlpool of glaring light.

They re-materialise not in London but in an even freer imaginary place: in the barren vastness of Arizona's landscape. As if in a male version of *Thelma and Louise* they drive a big car, look carefree, handsome, and prouder to be gay than ever. Nothing is going to stop their quest for happiness and freedom from prejudices. Hence, at a petrol station in the desert, when a lorry driver verbally abuses them calling them 'faggots' they do not swallow the offence. Stuart and Vince are now stronger and not only metaphorically, with their pride. They are armed. Extracting a gun from his waistband, Stuart points it straight at the head of the driver who did not expect such a reaction: terrified he mutters his apologies. Stuart and Vince have not left Canal Street to endure homophobia somewhere else.

Now they are prepared to play tough, as they have been taught by homophobia itself. They are prepared to fight back. And having won this fragment of proud visibility they jump in the car and.... off they go again, driving and laughing towards a brave, new, and queerer future in which gay visibility is not the end, an aim in itself, but the necessary beginning of something different, something to invent, a gay becoming to come.

With all that has been suggested so far it is hard to fail to recognise *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility. No other TV narrative had ever been so explicit, blunt, and positive in the representation of gay lives and, as a journalist argued:

Whether you loved it or hated it, *Queer as Folk* certainly succeeded in portraying its trio of upfront gay men as being rather anti-climatically normal and predictable. Regardless of the circus of criticism and scandal that surrounded the series, its content proved that being young and openly gay was not fundamentally different from being young and openly heterosexual. The *Queer as Folk* characters are attractive and socially active gay men who just happen to lust after other men rather than women. (Williams, 2000, *The Independent* 23 January, p. 4)

But *Queer as Folk*'s normalising representation of gay identity did not mean the obliteration of images of homophobia and heterosexism. They were always looming in this narrative of 'normal' gay lives and the grip of heteronormativity was shown in its subtle pervasiveness. But the radical difference in this narrative was that for the first time the unmistakable problem was not homosexuality but homophobia. It was not homosexuality that had to be reformed or fought but it was clearly the hostile and negative attitudes toward it that were the main problem. This time, homosexuality, rather than being a drama, a tragedy, was the starting point, the dramatic engine for telling the story of some queer folk.

Section 3c. *Queer as Folk* as drama: gay visibility and TV genres

In this section I expand the analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s narrative contribution to gay visibility and visual justice by considering questions about gay identity in relation to the representational dynamics of TV genres. This is because I believe that the relevance of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity lies not only in the kind of story it narrated, but also in relation to fact that it was a specific kind of visual text, namely a television drama. In fact, I would agree that:

The classification of texts is...a fundamental aspect of the way texts of all kinds are understood. Thus, if a character walking down the street on screen suddenly burst into song, audiences accustomed to the genre are likely to classify the film they are watching as a musical, to understand that this is the kind of thing that happens in this kind of film, and to anticipate that other instances of singing - perhaps accompanied by dancing - are likely to occur during the rest of the film. (Neale, 2001, p.1)

Hence, the intelligibility and understanding of any televisual text is not an unmediated experience. Rather, each TV programme is experienced in relation to other programmes and in the context of a wider history of representations and genres. The genre functions as a sort of prerequisite and filter for any active viewing process. However, it needs to be underlined that the genre is not an intrinsic quality of a text. Rather, its attribution is the result of a complex network of elements that participate in the production, circulation and consumption of it.

As in the case with film, genre operates as an important means of communicating information about the television text to prospective audiences. Through its inscription in publicity, in the listing in the TV guide, in the repertoires of cultural knowledge around individual personalities and other intertextual experiences, genre helps to frame audience expectations. For the television viewer, genre plays a major

role in how television texts are classified, selected and understood.
(Turner, 2001, p.5)

Consequently, in exploring *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity, we need to consider that the programme 'was appropriated and made to circulate as social event by way of secondary texts (particularly newspapers and magazines)' (Tulloch, 1990, p.130) or, as I have already suggested in the first section of this chapter, by other visual apparatuses like the advertising billboards that all over the city were boldly announcing the forthcoming broadcast of this upfront TV drama. Therefore, if a 'TV drama is inter-textual, a dynamic succession and synchrony of other texts, other social events' (Ibid. p.130), *Queer as Folk*'s specific representational power must be analysed *vis à vis* the relations of meaning articulated by taxonomies of televisual genres.

But before I move to address these matters, I need perhaps to warn that any discussion about the function and power of genres in the viewing process requires taking into consideration a host of variable elements. For example, we should bear in mind that the ideal-types classification of distinct genres relies on a degree of abstraction, whilst in reality genres are hardly ever self-contained entities. Genres rely on each other to acquire meaningfulness, and each text can participate in different genres. This is particularly true for television genres. In such a fast-changing visual field we should consider the hybridity of different genres, both in style and format. Moreover, genres are in relation to the heterogeneity of audiences, and the horizons of their expectations and responses. Although a more detailed account of all these complications is beyond the scope of this research,

some of these themes will be considered later in this chapter and in the following ones.¹⁷

For now, I start my exploration on *Queer as Folk*'s articulations of discourses around gay visibility and visual justice in its role as TV drama by arguing that, historically, the context for representations of homosexuality on national television broadcasting was within the TV format of documentaries or TV news in which it was represented mostly as a social, political, or moral problem.

The first known British TV programme to tackle the subject of homosexuality directly was broadcast in 1954 when *In the News* included Lord Boothby discussing his demands for a Royal Commission to look at the law relating to homosexuality. But it was not until 1957 that the first programme (*Homosexuality and the Law, a Prologue* produced by Granada) was entirely devoted to the subject. In 1964, the ITV current affairs programme *This Week* broadcast a documentary about the lifestyle of gay men but, because at the time homosexuality was still totally illegal, most of the participants were shown in silhouette. (Sanderson, 1995, p.16)

In a social environment where homosexuality was still a criminal offence, a moral opprobrium, and a medical condition, public representations of gayness were possible only in TV programmes with an educational or informative agenda. Those programmes, scheduled for late evening TV slots, very often had moralistic intentions and tone. Either they were warning viewers about the perniciousness of this vice or, at the best, they were invoking viewers to tolerate the misfortune befallen on gay people. The open hostility or unwelcoming representational regime of those programmes should be understood in conjunction with the fact that the TV genres of news or documentary are often perceived as intrinsically truthful, as representing reality as it is, rather than visually

¹⁷ A more detailed account of questions around the genre can be found in Creeber, G. ed. (2001) *The Television Genre Book*, London: British Film Institute.

constructing it. Their ideological, demagogical, or epistemological dimension is hardly contested or understood as fictional as is the case for the public perception of TV dramas and soaps (Creeber, 2001). Therefore, their homophobic contents were not seen as the construction or as the effect of a hegemonic heteronormative representational regime but rather as the essential object nature of the very object of representation: the homosexual.

Moreover most of those programmes were created and broadcast with a heterosexual audience in mind. Homosexuals were so socially invisible and powerless that they were routinely disregarded as potential viewers (Walters, 2001) and it was only in the early 1980s that public broadcasting began to acknowledge homosexuals as citizen/viewers, as I will explore in the following chapter talking about *Queer as Folk*'s broadcaster, Channel 4.

In 1980/81 London Weekend Television's London Minorities Unit produced a weekly late-night magazine series called *Gay Life* - which was the very first TV programme to be made especially for a gay audience in Britain. It went out at 11.30 on Sunday evening in the days before video recorders were generally available, ensuring that the audience never rose above 400,000. It was cancelled after two seasons. (Sanderson, 1995, p.18)

Although the representational regime has greatly changed since then, this paternalistic or redemptive approach to representations of homosexuality is still alive, even though disguised in more subtle ways. In fact, the televisual educational and scientific genres about homo/sexuality (Arthurs, 2004) are still pervaded by an agenda in which the compulsion for an explanation of the causes of the problem of homosexuality is never paralleled by the pursuit of the scientific causes for homophobia, hatred and intolerance. Consequently, the fact that *Queer as Folk* was a TV drama is already quite telling because it suggests that a

significant shift has happened in public representational regimes *vis à vis* images of homosexuality and that gay visibility was colonising the fiction and entertainment sector of mainstream television.

Having said that, soaps and sit-coms had already broken the smokescreen of invisibility in the fictional TV genres, daring to introduce and popularise gay characters and gay sub-plots in several of their episodes. Indeed such a representational shift had not been smoothly welcomed or gone uncontested. For example, when in 1986, *EastEnders* (arguably the most popular British soap) screened the first openly gay characters, it initially provoked a media and public furore (Caughie, 2000). Despite the fact that those images of gayness were quite tame, diluted over several episodes, and neither too challenging or confrontational, they were initially perceived as ‘polluting’ the national fictional arena, which was unreflexively understood as the monopoly of family viewing and the site of re-enactment and perpetuation of traditional heterosexual values. And yet *EastEnders* had opened up the way for more images of gayness.

Nonetheless, if *Queer as Folk* had not been the first programme to bring images of homosexuality within the fictional genres of mainstream television it had done it very forcefully in the field of TV drama which is often considered ‘at the heart of terrestrial television schedules’ (Willis, 1999, *The Guardian*, 29 March, p.5) and that is seen as ‘the respectable end of television’ (Caughie, 2000, p.2). In fact, the genre of TV soaps is still burdened by ‘fifty years of dismissive criticism’ (Tulloch, 1990, p.32) which has often trivialised its representational power as a form of ‘light’ entertainment, grossly simplifying its social contribution to the mainstreaming of visibility for non-normative sexualities (Gamson, 1998). Television drama, instead, is a genre traditionally associated to

highbrow culture and to more sophisticated or politically engaged representation of social issues as opposed to the supposedly 'superficial' forms of popular representational genres. In fact, in British televisual culture, television drama has always played a huge part as being the traditional flagship for 'serious' fictional productions in which key texts of English literature were adapted for the screen or highly respected scriptwriters were called to narrate the troubles of present time to the national viewers (Tulloch, 1990; Caughie, 2000). Therefore, *Queer as Folk* can be seen as contributing to gay visibility by colonising the 'seriousness' of the field of drama with images of gayness. Moreover, the 'loose' and 'soft' narrative structure of soaps has been argued to have the power of absorbing almost every controversial issue, even homosexuality, without radically questioning or challenging the representational status quo whilst the more compressed format of drama allows a different appreciation of challenging elements and themes. Indeed, *Queer as Folk* had been a fairly explicit, compact, and concentrated public introduction to homosexuality.¹⁸

Furthermore, *Queer as Folk* was neither a costume drama nor the adaptation of a respected English novel with more or less explicit gay characters or themes. The adaptation of Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, had been a path-breaking drama *vis à vis* televisual representations of gayness. But, even though it was set in the recent past, it still did not challenge one of the most resilient characteristics of traditional representations of gay identity in the mainstream visual regime (either cinematographic or televisual) that is, that gay visibility is allowed only in the past tense. Actually, the further back in time the better, as if

¹⁸ It also needs to be highlighted that, as opposed to other genres of TV programme including homosexual characters or homosexual subjects, the fairly compressed format of drama allows it to be easily video recorded and viewed again or merchandised increasing its opportunities of contributing to gay visibility and visual justice.

by displacing those representations in the past most of their disruption of heteronormativity would be neutralised. Projected into the past, images of homosexuality were routinely transformed into images of always-missed opportunities, of happiness always already gone and of utopias already happened but never experienced. As I have said in the first chapter, one of the main reasons why I liked *My Beautiful Laundrette* so much and I felt so inebriated by its representation of gayness was precisely because it was ‘mirroring’ a possible present. The film was set in a possible now, a plausible contemporary scenario in which to project my desires and dreams. It represented familiar experiential and temporal settings that made its portrait of gay identity much more realistic and therefore challenging. Likewise, *Queer as Folk* was dramatising gay identity in the national landscape of contemporary Britain. All the struggles or achievements, joys or sufferings narrated in the series were easily recognisable for national viewers. And this is important in exploring *Queer as Folk*’s contribution to gay visibility and visual justice, given that:

the politics of a TV drama must be seen both in terms of the place which it occupies within the political forces and contradictions which are current at the time of its screening, and in terms of its relationship to the other representations predominantly circulated within popular culture. (Tulloch, 1990, p.125)

In this sense *Queer as Folk* was contributing to gay visibility and visual justice by claiming the recognition of gay identity in our contemporary visual arena. It was not avoiding confrontations. It was making clear and bold statements in relation to the current visual regime *vis à vis* representation of gay identity and it was actively promoting the politics of gay visibility.

However, bearing in mind that ‘TV critics often equate “serious drama” with the “gritty realism” of documentary-drama’ (Ibid. p.120) we should also consider in what way *Queer as Folk*’s dramatisation of gay identity was articulating or challenging certain other discursive assumptions about standards of seriousness within the genre. In fact, although the programme’s representation of gay life was very much grounded in the ‘reality’ of Manchester city life and in the authenticity of Canal Street, in the last episode the series was taking its viewers far away from those realistic emotional, social and geographical settings. For the everyday struggles to achieve visibility it was substituting an imaginary but no less real dimension in which visibility is not to be begged for any longer, but a possible parallel reality in which to explore the becoming of being gay rather than have to struggle only to be it. In this sudden temporal, spatial and narrative shift *Queer as Folk* was also dislodging the naturalness of the reality described before, retroactively suggesting how ‘fictional’ it was. If the future is fictional and imaginary the past is equally fictional in the sense that it was what it was not because of an intrinsic historical necessity. It did not have to be like it was. Because identities and their interactions are shaped and constructed by powerful but contingent events and forces they can and must also be changed.

Moreover, *Queer as Folk*, though it was funny and entertaining was not a comedy. By playing with the genres of TV drama *Queer as Folk* was hybridising and blurring the boundaries between ‘serious’ and ‘lighter’ representations of social life, between realism and science fiction, introducing an element of confusion and playfulness in the traditional naturalistic gloom associated with more politically ‘engaged’ representations of gay identity. Those representations, despite their progressive intentions, often ended up naturalising both the cause of

the dramatic conflict or the identities in conflict. *Queer as Folk* was not addressing a specific social problem like homelessness or alcoholism. It had no specific prescriptive political message. It was not representing the problem of homosexuality *per se* but the life of some gay men, in which being gay was - at times - a problem but also many more things, including fun. *Queer as Folk*, like soaps, had a looser format and was not pushing politics overtly. But, even though it was not directly an 'oppositional' drama, it was no less challenging and political. For the first time a drama was visualising the astonishing mundanity of gay life and the possibility of moments of unproblematic fun and happiness. However, its funny and entertaining side did not necessarily mean that it was a programme mindlessly celebrating homosexuality as intrinsically good or, *viceversa*, totally obliterating the spectre of homophobia. Its way of being entertaining and funny was a successful effort to articulate 'the dangers *and* hopes of "laughing in adversity"' (Ibid. p.246).

Section 3d. *Queer as Folk's* characters: social types or stereotypes?

After the previous exploration of how *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity was framed and articulated by discourses around the televisual genre of drama, I want to consider now other levels and dynamics of its narrative visualisation of gayness. I am going to move, then, to explore how *Queer as Folk's* characters embodied and represented questions of gay visibility and visual justice.

As I have argued in the previous sections, *Queer as Folk*'s textual intelligibility and narrative visibility needs to be understood in relation to other texts, narratives, and discursive practice. On the same lines, I would argue that the visual existence and experience of *Queer as Folk*'s characters should not be isolated from a broader tradition of cultural representations of gayness and from other examples of gay characters available in the public visual arena. And, given the temporal priority of cinema over the television as representational mass medium, the analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s characters is also implicitly burdened by the legacy of all the mainstream cinematographic representations that, as we have already hinted in the literature review, have not been particularly abundant, truthful, or positive. Rather, they were infrequent, disparaging, stereotypical and unfair. In shifting our attention to the history of gay characters within British television, the record of those gay representations does not seem to be radically different.

On a quantitative level, gay characters were hardly ever present in TV productions, and if present at all, they were relegated to marginal, secondary, supporting roles, or to provide sub-plots for the main storyline. Often gay characters appeared as the gay brother, the gay neighbour, the gay son, the gay friend, the gay colleague, and so on. They did not have a narrative life of their own. Their marginal fictional existence was allowed to support, underline and reinforce the heterosexuality of the other characters (Dyer, 2002a). Alternatively, gay characters could easily achieve a pivotal role in the genre of the comedy of errors, which was based on the narrative device of mistaken identities. This is because at the end of those narratives almost all of the supposedly gay characters

were rescued back into the secure space of their real heterosexual identity. They were not homosexuals; they were just pretending to be gay.

Thus, we can argue that gay characters on TV were tokens in an otherwise totally heterosexual world (such was the case with Warren in BBC's *This Life*). On these grounds, *Queer as Folk* was surely different. In this TV programme all the main characters were gay and straight people were the 'guests' of this gay world. This time, there were no mistaken identities. Stuart, Vince, and Nathan are gay, and Vince's pretending to be straight, even if it creates some funny situations (as in the tradition of the comedy of errors), is done not necessarily for fun. Rather it is done for fear of being openly and publicly gay in a homophobic society.

On a qualitative level, as we have already seen in the literature review, the traditional representations of gay identity were characterised in a quite predictable, stiff and stereotypical way. Both cinema and television viewers, when or if exposed at all to images of homosexuality, had gotten used to two main caricatures or stereotypes of homosexuality. The first one was represented by iconographic elements that were supposed to signify and reveal the psychological, physiological, or behavioural traits usually associated to homosexuality (Dyer, 2000, 2002a). To this stereotype belonged the plethora of introverted, lonely, criminal, suicidal, alcoholic, or terminally ill characters that have traditionally populated the mainstream visual arena. The alternatives to these doomed characters were the effeminate hairdressers or camp interior decorators whose iconographical excesses made them more acceptable because they were either pitiful in their hopelessness or comic and funny even though no less stereotypical.

And indeed a degree of typification is unavoidable in any narrative and is intrinsic to cognitive processes as a form of 'cognitive parsimony' (Pickering,

1995). It is a way to simplify otherwise complex mental process of interpretation of images of social actors and of social life. Typification in narratives facilitates the possibility of quickly grasping the possibilities of the actions. But as Dyer (2002a) has pointed out there is a radical difference between typification and the stereotypification that regulates the mainstream regime of visual representations of homosexuality.

In fiction, social types and stereotypes can be recognised as distinct by the different way in which they can be used. Although constructed iconographically similarly to the way stereotypes are constructed (i.e. a few verbal and visual traits are used to signal the character), social types can be used in a much more open and flexible way than stereotypes. This is most clearly seen in relation to plot. Social types can figure in almost any kind of plot and can have a wide range of roles in that plot (e.g. as hero, as villain, as helper, as a light relief, etc.), whereas stereotypes always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative. (Dyer, 2002a, p.14)

In fact, in narratives in which gay characters appeared they were invariably portrayed in ways that denoted a negative function. They were hardly ever represented as the positive characters, the winners or the heroes of the situation but, predictably, as the villains or losers. They existed only as standardised pictures of a derogatory quality, and never allowed a wide range of roles. They were merely shorthand for the official views of homosexuals as sexual perverts, social deviants, or criminal. Homosexual characters were not given the textual freedom of becoming, of developing through the narrative. Their characterisation was based on a degree of narrative stasis, in which homosexuals never became people, with a complex and rich humanity, with aspirations, dreams, and desires not only in relation to their sexuality but also in addition to it. They were simply gays.

Thus, the characters of *Queer as Folk* were a radical and welcome departure from those stereotypes. Indeed, even *Queer as Folk* relied on a degree of typification and so Stuart was clearly ‘the gorgeous’, ‘the sexy’, ‘the successful’, ‘the glamorous’; Vince was ‘the cuddly’, ‘the clumsy’, ‘the loyal’; Nathan was ‘the inexperienced’, ‘the naive’, and so on. But their typification stemmed from the needs of dramatic action and dynamism in the narrative as opposed to implicitly adding a moral judgment about their sexuality. If Stuart was sometime seen behaving badly or selfishly it was not because of his homosexuality but because some people are selfish regardless of their sexual preference. Likewise, Vince was loyal not because of any necessary connection between loyalty and homosexuality but because some people are loyal by ‘nature’. And Nathan was shown as the naïve character because adolescents in general, both gay and straight, have yet to discover what sex or love are all about. *Queer as Folk*’s characters were given an unprecedented representational freedom to portray full human beings that were, amongst many other things and not exclusively, gay and proud to be so. And in this respect *Queer as Folk*’s contribution to gay visibility was acknowledged by saying:

Thankfully, the love that dare not speak its name has come a long way in TV programmes since the days of the effete, mincing mute Gilbert, in the 1975 series *The Brown Cow*. In each episode, the character was depicted with crotch-hugging trousers, clutch bag, and a coat of many colours. He existed solely to be the stooge for the star of the show Hylda Baker, and her catch phrase: “And what are we today, Gilbert?” Without even parting his pursed lips to squeak “I’m free! Chase me! Shut that door!” we knew, simply by looking that here was The Homosexual. Here was the proof as punchline. Needless to say, Gilbert’s gayness, like that of his equivalent in other British sit-coms through the ages, was more a shorthand for his effeminacy than a reference to his sexuality. If these characters had a specialised subject it was sling backs rather than sodomy. Nowadays, at least gay desire,

if not sex itself is on the sitcom agenda. (Collins, 1999, *The Observer*, 24 January, p.2)

The characters in *Queer as Folk* were not bi-dimensional caricatures of homosexuality. Their typification allowed a greater narrative and representational flexibility. For example, Alexander's character, even though it is perhaps the closest to those images of stereotypical effeminacy as signifier of homosexuality, was not commiserated for his flamboyancy but for the misfortune of having such uncaring parents. And his loudness was not judged any more than it was glorified. He was not given the responsibility of being the living sign of symbolic subversion and of carnivalesque inversion of the heteronormative visual regime. He just represented one of the many possible ways of being gay and many less obvious ones paralleled his emphatic characterisation of gayness. The gayness of *Queer as Folk's* many other characters was not so easily signified by any obvious 'repertoire of signs' (Dyer, 2002a, p.19) as Alexander's platform shoes or green coat. Stuart was indeed a smart dresser but not smarter than any stylish young heterosexual. And if the stylishness of his flat may have 'betrayed' his gayness, Vince's ordinary style in clothing and furnishing, or Phil's bloke-ish plainness made their characters unsettling because they did not look like mainstream heteronormative culture may have expected them to do. Their characterization revealed and represented the inconsistency of these visual assumptions given that:

A major fact about being gay is that it doesn't show. There is nothing about gay people's physiognomy that declares them gay... There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay. (Ibid. p.19)

Thus, if the mainstream stereotypification of gayness had been constructed through the visual repetition and reiteration of certain cultural signs of gayness, *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility and visual justice was not achieved by simply reversing its signs and values. The programme was not trying to dismantle those stereotypes by simply producing their positive reversal. They would end up being as stereotypical as the negative ones. In fact, in exploring the question of visual stereotypification of blackness in mainstream Western culture, Hall highlights the ineffectiveness of this simplistic tactic of counter-stereotyping, arguing that:

The problem with the positive/negative strategy is that adding positive images to the largely negative repertoire of the dominant regime of representation increases the diversity of the ways in which "being black" is represented, but does not *necessarily* displace the negative. Since the binaries remain in place, meaning continues to be framed by them. (Hall, 2002, p.274)

In this view, I believe that *Queer as Folk*'s characters were not simply an inverted caricature of the traditional gay stereotype. To disrupt a disparaging visual regime they were not simply reversing it into an equally unrealistic representation of gayness in which homosexuals are all good. They were, in a sense, defamiliarising images of gayness by showing them in their endless permutation: some good, some bad; some loud, some others more contained; some easily recognisable, others less so; all gay but all different. The point was not to substitute one visual norm with another but, in part, to exhaust visual normativity from within.

Moreover, we should consider how *Queer as Folk*'s characters disrupted stereotypical representations of homosexuality:

by displaying active and explicit sexuality. Two of the primary complaints about gay representations on TV - that gays are tokens, isolated from other gay people, and that gays are desexualised, denied the pleasures of the flesh - have thus been challenged by a series that wears its path-breaking identity on its sleeve. (Walters, 2001, p.121)

This is important because, as I have explored before, if sexuality is supposed to saturate gay identity and if gay stereotypes are always hinting at its possibility they hardly ever end up showing it. On the contrary, in *Queer as Folk*, gay sexuality is not hinted and suggested by the cliché of effeminacy, but performed and enjoyed as a pleasurable and ultimately ordinary aspect of life. Their sexual exploits are realistic in so far they are a mixture of high eroticism and burning lust but also of clumsiness, inexperience, fear of rejection, and so on. Thus, as Munt argues, even though this sexual explicitness in *Queer as Folk* may suggest that:

the characters of Stuart, Vince and Nathan are read *through* their sexuality, which confers on them identity... There is a shift in traditional televisual terms however: the characters are not represented so much as stuck in an ur-moment of being gay - they are busy *doing* gay - the confession/conversion moment has been superseded. (Munt, 2000, p.534)

In *Queer as Folk* the characters claim their right to do and enjoy gay sex. Nathan for example was 'dead proud' when he did it the first time. And given that homosexual behaviour is still a problem for society it is pointless to underplay its factual or narrative importance. The point here is that *Queer as Folk*'s characters were showing it in such a mundane and ordinary way that other narrative elements were allowed to emerge. By being so explicit they were naturalising gay sex; making it a means to other narrative ends, shifting the focus from homosexuality to homophobia.

Having considered some of the key themes, elements and dynamics in relation to the representation of *Queer as Folk*'s characters and their contribution to gay visibility and visual justice, it would be unfair to underline only the highly successful strategies. In the programme there are many other instances in which other characters do not seem to escape so easily from the grip of stereotypification. For example, the lesbian couple with whom Stuart has fathered a baby boy could potentially offer another interesting challenge to the heteronormative visual regime by showing different ways to imagine parenthood. This 'alternative' parental arrangement is supposed to challenge traditional notions of family and to bring to the forefront other key concerns in terms of gay visibility and visual justice. However, in this gay family scenario Stuart seems to be thrilled more by the idea of being a father, than by the actual responsibility of parenthood. Predictably all lesbians want babies and the gay men do not care or are incapable of any sort of commitment.

The lesbians are there - like women in so many films and TV shows - to serve as nutritional supplement to the main course of male (this time gay male) sexuality and life. So far, their relationship has no history, no story...this is a boys' own story and the girls are, like in heterosexual boy's stories, incidental. And just how queer is that? (Walters, 2001, p.124)

In this light, *Queer as Folk*'s successful attempt at disrupting stereotypical portraits of gay identity does not seem totally immune from failure as it ends up reinforcing some other stereotypes regarding gender dynamics.

Moreover, the characterisation of Stuart and Vince suggests another stereotypical characterisation in relation to the visualisation of class dynamics as Munt forcefully argues:

The perfect gay aesthetic is embodied by Stuart, whose rendition of style, taste and distinction is contrasted to Vince's anorak "sad-bastard" habits, exemplified by his archive of science fiction videos, his petty-bourgeois aspirations to becoming deputy manager of Harlo's supermarket, and his fearful and unsuccessful attempts at getting laid. Here sexual capital is linked to economic capital: whereas Vince is often seen working in the series, Stuart's labour is largely invisible... In this way, Stuart's production *is* his gay sexuality. It is "new gayness" that makes Stuart rich, not productive labour. Thus gay sexuality is powerfully resignified, but the cost of this resignification is to distinguish new forms of exclusion, around class and money. (Munt, 2000, p.539)

In fact, Stuart's typification as the successful and dominant character seems to represent a dimension of gay identity that is intrinsically articulated around notions of style, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, and taste which are clearly markers of class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1992) and that make his embodiment of gay visibility inseparable from forms of conspicuous consumption (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Skeggs, 2002). This connection with processes of commodification, reification, or spectacularisation of gay visibility is going to be further explored in the following sections and in particular in Chapter 6 in which I discuss in more depth some of these concerns regarding gay visibility.

Furthermore, I want to underline how most of *Queer as Folk's* characters are white and the few black characters that happened to be represented in the programme do not really have a narrative life of their own. Nathan's best friend Donna, for example, seems to exist in the series only as emotional support for his pains in coming to terms with his sexuality and with homophobia. But he does not seem remotely interested in exploring Donna's coming to terms with her 'visible' difference in a 'chromophobic' society. Her blackness is just an empty signifier of discrimination that emphasises Nathan's problems rather than shedding light on

her own (Walker, 1993). Her character does not seem to have any real narrative autonomy.

Thus, even if some characters in *Queer as Folk* have been allowed an unprecedented narrative freedom and a more subtle fictional existence some others seem to have been penalised by default or kept in their stereotypical marginality or typicality. This is indeed an intrinsic problem of any representation: the impossibility to make justice for everybody represented. But on the other hand, the hope is that the intentional challenge to one stereotype may open up the way for a subversion of others. This clearly would not be in respect of getting rid of all stereotypes, but in the hope of a more democratic and open ended signifying guerrilla. I will further explore this matter in the next chapters.

Section 3e. *Queer as Folk's* settings: spaces of visibility

In this section I examine the settings and locations in which *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity takes place. I do so because I believe that those locations are not only the neutral stage or the representational background in which to visualise the programme's narrative or the character's actions. They have a discursive and narrative power in their own right and they do add to the narration as much as the gestures of Stuart, Vince, or Nathan. They actively articulate *Queer as Folk's* contribution to gay visibility and visual justice by territorialising images of gay identity and visualising the spatial relations that underline and construct discourses of gay visibility and visual justice.

I begin to explore *Queer as Folk*'s spatial implications by underlining that the programme's story takes place in a very realistic and unmistakably recognisable contemporary Manchester. This is very relevant considering that quite often, if British audiences have been exposed to images of gayness on TV, it has been through American productions. For example, it was the American *Dynasty* in the 1980s that introduced in Britain one of the first gay characters in a mainstream television serial; in the 1990s the path-breaking TV drama *Tales of the City* was showing proud images of homosexuality in San Francisco; more recently the high rating sit-com *Will & Grace* is set in New York. Consequently, the questions of homosexual under-representation in the national visual arena and in particular in mainstream television become even more problematic if we consider how many of those gay images were portraying 'domestic' or more familiar situations, peoples, or scenarios.

As I have already suggested in the first chapter, the process of viewing always entails a degree of decoding and active translation of images and meanings (Hall, 2002). Visual texts are - to an extent - actively reworked and re-appropriated by different viewers and different audiences. Consequently we can assume that even those American images of homosexuality were, and still are, routinely appropriated, translated, or adapted into a local and quotidian imagery. Nevertheless, it is also enjoyable, refreshing, and fair to be offered images of homosexuality in an already 'familiar' social setting, and so being able to skip those passages or process of cultural and visual translation. *Queer as Folk* was precisely offering this chance of viewing images of gayness in already national and mostly familiar scenarios. Therefore, the programme, often 'shot on location in and around the city' (Press release: *Queer as Folk*) was firmly grounding its

representation of gay identity in Manchester city life and articulating questions of gay visibility and visual justice on a national level. Thus, it was relieving British homosexual audiences from the burden of having to constantly appropriate images to achieve a minimum degree of more familiar gay representations. At the same time it was showing to heterosexual audiences that homosexual lives are potentially visible in any British city, and that they are not a presence only to be imagined and visualised in the extravagant and 'exotic' urban scenario of cosmopolitan and multicultural London or of other European and international capitals.

However, in the very moment in which *Queer as Folk* was familiarising images of gay identity, showing its presence in everyday locations like hospitals, supermarkets, schools, or bars it was also visualising the intrinsic and often problematic relation that connects questions of gay identity to spatial coordinates. Indeed, discourses on gay visibility must take into consideration spatial and geographical dimensions since visibility does not unfold or spread evenly everywhere but happens in specific places, and is governed by the politics of location. The social experience of gay identity or its public visibility is intimately bounded to the politicisation of notions of space. For example, the notion of gay public invisibility, or the idea of coming out of the closet that we have considered in the previous chapters, highlights this ongoing problematic relation of gay identity to questions of space or spaces.

"Coming out" on an individual basis and increased visibility, the tactics that emerged from lesbian feminism and gay liberation of decades back, have little diminished the disparities in access to public resources for queer people and networks. In many homophobic contexts - and many still exist in North America, Europe, and other parts of the world - the more we try to connect in new ways, the

greater the obstacles and the prices become. This discouraging dynamic influences the size of our enclaves and our attempts to build more functional networks and communities. Most of us are still struggling to stake out psychic or cognitive space, as well as physical space, in the world. (Ingram et al. 1997, p.7)

Therefore, in this section I want to consider some of *Queer as Folk*'s key settings to analyse how the programme addresses questions of gay visibility and visual justice in relation to the politics of locality and space.

As I have already said the prime location for *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity is Manchester city. This is very significant given that in the previous chapter we have seen how the politics of gay visibility and of sexual citizenship are bound to city life. In fact, as Bell and Binnie have suggested '[a]rguably the most relevant stage for thinking about the social nature of sexuality is the city. The city is the prime site both for the materialization of sexual identities, community and politics, and for conflicts and struggles around sexual identities, community and politics' (Bell and Binnie, 2000, p.83). However, if the city can be seen 'as the stage for gay men to become visible to one another' (Ibid. p.86) it has also been the theatre of violent conflicts centred on gay identity (Stonewall is perhaps the most famous and mythologised case) and the scenario for homophobic attacks. Thus, it is symbolic that the first scenes of *Queer as Folk*'s first episode are set in Canal Street: the heart of Manchester's Gay Village. Canal Street is the place in which Nathan first finds the courage to explore his sexuality and later to carry on experimenting with it; it is the space in which Alexander can be as camp as he likes without being judged; in which Stuart can openly flirt with or kiss other men in the street. Canal Street, as much as the rest of the Gay Village, represents a space in which homosexuality is not necessarily confined to the 'privacy' of indoor venues but proudly occupies the public space of street life.

gay culture in Manchester has appropriated the street, inviting both inspection and participation.... The theatrical aesthetic of the café-bar finds its ultimate expression in Manto. Whereas in the traditional pub favoured by the gay coterie of previous generations, the introverted and cramped privacy of frosted windows, partitions, and intimate corners warded off inspection and intrusion from the censoring eyes of straight society, café-bars such as Manto, with their goldfish-bowl windows magnify and underline a gay presence, inviting scrutiny. They demand attention. (Quinley, 1997, p.278)

It is in these openly visible gay premises that all the characters of *Queer as Folk* feel more at home. Here they meet to enjoy the protectiveness of the gay scene: a space in which they feel free to celebrate birthdays, to chat, or to dance without the risk of being attacked or threatened for desiring and loving the same sex. In fact, when in a later episode Nathan's homophobic school-mate and his girlfriend step into a gay bar - probably to watch the 'freak show' and to have fun at the expenses of the gay punters - he is publicly shamed as a homophobe by Nathan who happened to be there. The threatening look of all the gay people in the bar obliges him to back off and leave the place. Although this episode of proud demarcation of territory may be interpreted as an essentialist claim over the gay space of the Village (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004) it is also true that the Gay Village and its venues represents a space of relative greater safety. It is an environment in which homophobia is not tolerated but actively discouraged not only in virtue of the numerical safety of larger homosexual enclaves but also because of the official protection from local authorities which the Gay Village enjoys.

Along with Chinatown and the Northern Quarter, the Gay Village is being included in the Government's *City Pride* initiative. It is incorporated into a marketing exercise in which Manchester is presented as a progressive, tolerant, and above all interesting patchwork of diverse districts and quarters. (Quilley, 1997, p.287)

In fact, Manchester's Gay Village in the last decade seems to have achieved an unprecedented official recognition and public visibility as a distinctive urban space to be protected and treasured as an asset of multicultural and creative city life. The Gay Village's venues and events are therefore publicized not only in the gay subcultural publications, but also in the official tourist and promotional brochures sponsored by the municipal authorities. Thus, as Quilley reports, the Greater Manchester Visitor and Convention Bureau advertises the gay city life in these explicit terms:

GAY MANCHESTER: A major factor in the city's unique sense of style is the predominance and excitement generated by the "Queer Culture" and gay lifestyle. In the heart of the city, Manchester's Gay Village bulges with some of the best eateries, drinkeries and danceries around - the atmosphere is happily mixed with the warm welcome. (Ibid. p.287)

However, in showing the degree of visibility that gayness seems to have achieved in the city life, he also underlines that "'Queer Culture" may be subjected to a process of relegitimation, as it finds a place in the official representations of the city. But it remains in inverted commas, defined as a spectacle and as an asset, from the perspective of a very specific economic project' (Ibid. p.287). Thus, *Queer as Folk*' settings and locations in the city's gay district visualise not only the potential supportiveness and empowering sides of gay enclaves or communities, but also the question of how degrees of freedom and visibility are often dangerously entangled with the ambiguous dynamics of commodification that seem to foster visibilities and identities as long as they generate revenue. These concerns are also spelled out by Munt when she says that:

Most of the action in *Queer as Folk* takes place in Manchester's postindustrial, cosmopolitan landscape of gentrified fetishism. Manchester city is marketed internationally as a gay mecca; gay tourism, endorsed by a historically left-wing council, creates an estimated wealth of £40 million per annum. Gayness has been formulaically rebranded as attractive and aspirational, it has acquired cultural and symbolic capital, it has, through commodification, become *respectable*. (Munt, 2000, p.539)

Therefore, *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay visibility set in Canal Street also shows the limits of and shortcomings of a freedom that is granted as a form of productive spectacle circumscribed to a few blocks but that is not allowed to expand beyond those boundaries. The spatial constraints implicit in this kind of commodified visibility are similarly questioned by Bell and Binnie who argue that:

if the city is the stage on which homosexuality is enacted, what are the implications for sexual citizenship of current reshaping of the urban environment, driven by political imperatives often inflicted by a distinct agenda? Sometimes this involves the marketing of cities as democratic sites of diversity and difference, while in other contexts it involves the 'cleaning up' of a city's image through red-lining sexual subcultures into marginal spaces, producing what is effectively a moral topography of sexual citizenship - gentrified housing is good, spaces of consumption are okay, but sites of public sex, sex work and pornography are bad. (Bell and Binnie, 2000, p.4)

Most of these problems just highlighted will be further explored in later chapters and in particular in Chapter 6 where I will explicitly discuss questions of spectacular visibility. However, in highlighting the implications of a social visibility bounded by urban possibilities it is also important to remember that, in the last episode of the series, Stuart and Vince escape the fish-bowl freedom and visibility of Canal Street. But if they do that it is precisely because it is in there

that they have achieved the strength necessary to move on towards the unknown future leaving Nathan behind to get stronger in that narrow but relatively safe gay enclave.

An alternative scenario to the Gay Village that indicates *Queer as Folk's* narrative and spatial articulation of gay visibility and visual justice is offered, in the first episode, by the scenes set in the hospital where Stuart's lesbian friend Romey has just given birth to a baby boy fathered by Stuart. These hospital scenes are not the usual setting of gay annihilation or death as a consequence of AIDS which are often associated with mainstream images of homosexuality. On the hospital bed there is not a suffering gay body whose pain is emphasised by the visually disfiguring effects of this illness. Rather, in that setting what is visualised and celebrated is the birth of a 'queer' new life. The hospital location is the opportunity to publicly visualise new queer family arrangements, to make visible the possibility of other dimension of gay life. Stuart, Vince, Nathan, Romey, her partner Lisa, all of them are shown occupying the hospital with the same ease in which they would occupy a gay space in Canal Street. They do not look ashamed or apologetic for 'intruding' in the supposedly heterosexual space of a maternity ward. They occupy that reproductive space making visible other forms of homosexual becoming: the becoming of new lives and of new parental arrangements, of new families, and of new uncharted forms of visibility.

Having said that, the way in which *Queer as Folk's* characters interact with and occupy social space seem also to reflect to an extent 'the dichotomy of women forging communality in space and men having sex in it...the nurture of children and the preserves of home and neighbourhood are considered women's realms' (Ingram et al. 1997, p.10). In fact, whilst *Queer as Folk's* boys are often

shown dwelling in an eroticised city space, lived in the pursuit of pleasures and solipsistic sexual exploits (Stuart manages to eroticise even the hospital space flirting in the corridors with a male nurse), the lesbian women are shown occupying physical and social space on an entirely different level. Whilst the gay men actively interact with Manchester's city space by producing revenue, the lesbian couple produces and nurtures life; whilst Stuart's flat is hyper-contemporary and stylish, Romey and Lisa live in a traditional-looking house ready to become a family home. In this sense *Queer as Folk* clearly reveals the differences in ways to visualise the spatially visible presence of gay male and lesbian identities. In this way it highlights another problematic dimension of questions around gay visibility and visual justice.

Nathan's school is another of *Queer as Folk*'s settings in which questions of gay visibility and visual justice are brought to the surface and problematised. *Queer as Folk* does not show images of gay identity only in the gay space of Canal Street but also in the rarely represented location of comprehensive or local schools.¹⁹ It explicitly shows how the school's corridors and playground can be sites of routine homophobic bullying that often go unpunished despite the teachers knowing or being aware of it. But the school space is not only a dimension of suffering and homophobia but it is also an eroticised space of sexual apprenticeship. In the fourth episode of the programme we see Nathan in the school's changing room explicitly masturbating Christian - one of his homophobic tormentors - who pretends nothing is happening by keeping his eyes shut. When he reaches orgasm he does not dare to look at Nathan and runs away from him. Then, even Nathan starts running. But he runs victoriously towards the

¹⁹ In fact, images of homosexuality amongst adolescents are often set in public schools or in the exclusive colleges of Oxford or Cambridge, as if homosexuality was only the decadent vice of the upper classes as, for example, was the case in Kanievsk's (1984) *Another Country*.

playground to tell his friend Donna about his sexual exploit. Thus, this school setting is not only the scenario of abuse or humiliation but also of enjoyable sexual exploration and empowerment. In fact, towards the end of the last episode of *Queer as Folk 2* we see Nathan rebelling against homophobia. To the astonishment of all his schoolmates he 'claims the name of "Queer!" as his insolent answer to his homophobic classroom teacher's reading of the student register. Instead of responding with the predicted antiphon "Here!", Nathan's rhyming intervention invokes Queer Nation's call, "We're here! We're Queer! Get used to it!"' (Munt, 2000, p.536). The schoolteacher tries to oblige him to apologise but Nathan does not give up repeating "Queer!" actively seeking further confrontation. He confidently knows that in case of any official repercussion his mother would support him. This time it is the homophobic schoolteacher that has to give up. In this sense this was one of the most empowering moments in mainstream television regarding gay visibility and justice. Visibility and pride should not be only a privilege of adults but a right and an opportunity for adolescents as well.

Section 3f. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the textual dimension of *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity and its articulation of questions of gay visibility and visual justice. This is indeed the first level in which *Queer as Folk*, seen as a social and media event can be possibly analysed. And in the following chapters I

will consider other discursive levels that participate in the programme's overall social impact.

In the first section I have discussed some of the analytical complications in considering a televisual material to address issues of visibility and justice. And in particular I have argued that the intelligibility of *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to those issues must be understood in relation to and in conjunction with other discursive practices that were and are regulating, constructing, and reshaping the possibility of a visible gay identity.

In the second section I have given a general account of the storyline and I have individuates some of the narrative nodes in which *Queer as Folk*'s visualisation of gay identity may be seen as revealing particular configurations of discourses around gay visibility and visual justice.

In the third section I have demonstrated how *Queer as Folk*'s textual visibility is mediated by other discursive and visual practice. Therefore I have discussed how the programme's representation of gay visibility is regulated by a political and sexual economy of TV genres.

In the fourth section I have considered how the textual existence of *Queer as Folk*'s characters as much as the meaning of their action cannot be separated by a consideration of other discursive practices that somehow precede or simultaneously operate in the visual experience of them. Therefore I have introduced the textual and social dimension of stereotyping highlighting some of the figures in which its ambivalence emerges more evidently.

In the last section I have discussed how the locations of *Queer as Folk* territorialise the narrative of the programme and its representation of gay identity into specific spatial and social settings. In this way I have demonstrated the

necessity to territorialise discourses on *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility and visual justice. In fact, it seems to me that each of those locations regulates and is regulated by specific dynamics and relations *vis à vis* gay identity and the politics of space.

In this chapter I wanted to demonstrate *Queer as Folk*'s positive and innovative intervention on visual representations of gay identity. But the point was not to advertise it as a manifestation of absolute narrative fairness regarding questions of gay visibility. *Queer as Folk* does not seem to me immune from representational ambiguities, shortcomings, and downsides *vis à vis* gay identity. Indeed, it has shown those ambiguities. In making them visible it has also opened up the possibility for seeing them and possibly contesting them, as I will carry on arguing in the following chapters.

Finally, in this chapter I wanted to demonstrate how this representation of gay identity should not be understood as existing or operating only within the boundaries of the TV screen or on an unanimated or bi-dimensional visual/textual level. Those images are not only constructed and viewed outside temporal or spatial relations. Rather those images of homosexuality are lived and contested fields of forces. Therefore, even the more 'abstract' textual dimension of *Queer as Folk*'s articulation of gay visibility and its contribution to the visual is embedded in a set of discursive practices that are as much symbolic as they are material. The narrative or textual contestations of gay invisibility and visual exclusion entails a complex rearrangement or reconsideration of an array of cultural and social elements. This makes gay struggles for fair representations and cultural visibility a key feature in the broader spectrum of gay politics and a topical dimension of gay activism (Butler, 1998).

CHAPTER 4. *Queer as Folk*'s creative background

Section 4a. Introduction: other vectors of visibility

In this chapter I intend to focus my attention on the programme's creative background to further explore how *Queer as Folk* articulates questions of gay visibility and visual justice. I am going to introduce and talk about the scriptwriter, the directors, the actors, the producer and finally the commissioner and broadcaster because all of them played a particular role in the construction of *Queer as Folk* as a text and as a media and social event.²⁰ In fact, I believe that *Queer as Folk*'s social relevance and impact lies not only in being a particular visual text that articulates and constructs images of gay identity in a specific way, but also in being the materialisation of other forces and discourses that took place at the stage of production and ideation. The study of those other elements would highlight additional aspects of the complex nature - both symbolic and material - of discourses around gay visibility.

A thorough analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s creative background can help us to shed light on the question of gay visibility and visual justice in relation to different social contexts and professional practices. For example, the acting environment seems to be paradoxically one of the most resilient environments to gay visibility. In a profession that is all about fiction and illusion, but also about identification and desire, the question of public gay visibility has always been a very difficult issue if not a complete taboo. Until a few years ago, very few actors

²⁰ All the information about their professional achievement refers to their career up to the broadcast of both series of *Queer as Folk*.

would have risked their professional reputation in playing homosexual characters. And even less of them would have dreamt of publicly coming out as homosexuals (Gross, 2001). Whilst I will dedicate more space to this particular question in a later section of this chapter on *Queer as Folk*'s actors, it seems to me that this example already suggests how the analysis of the programme's creative background may show how cultural representations of gay identity intersect many other aspects of social life. Thus, the following analysis of the programme's creative background is meant to amplify the problem of gay visibility as a prism revealing its connection to other social forces, material practices, and symbolic constraints.

Moreover, we should bear in mind that, after the public broadcast of *Queer as Folk*, most of the people involved in the ideation and production of the series were directly blamed or praised by the national audience and by media commentators for their contribution to the programme's visualisation of gay identity. In publicly voicing their opinions on the programme and on its import for gay visibility, they created an additional discursive level. Sometimes, the public debate that was initially about the programme *per se* developed as a commentary on the comments made on *Queer as Folk*. The statements of *Queer as Folk*'s creators and their participation in the public debate on the programme's representation of gay identity are revealing not only of their ideas as individuals but also as insiders and practitioners in specific sectors of Western cultural and economic life. Hence, the public declarations of the people involved in the creation of *Queer as Folk* could be seen as to represent additional links in the discursive chain that regulates, shapes and constructs images and discourses of gay visibility and visual justice.

In addition, I want to suggest how *Queer as Folk* was an entirely homegrown programme, that is, it was produced and realised in Britain by British talents. This is symptomatic of the fact that British creativity was actively encouraged to work on such themes. In fact, as I have introduced in the previous chapter the problem of space *vis à vis* gay identity should not be understood only as a matter of narrative verisimilitude. Rather, it highlights how questions of gay visibility need to be territorialised and connected to the politics and economies of space. Hence, the national production of *Queer as Folk* seems to suggest a shift not only in an aesthetic and visual regime of representation, but also in the way creative and economic resources are mobilised and invested to promote and produce gay identity and its social visibility, as I am going to explore and analyse in the rest of this chapter.

Section 4b. The scriptwriter

Davies, *Queer as Folk*'s scriptwriter, was a producer at the BBC and Granada Television before becoming a TV writer. He has written for children's as well as for adult television. He wrote *Century Falls* - a six part children's thriller for the BBC, and *Dark Season* - a six part children's science fiction drama also for the BBC. He has contributed to *The Ward* (Granada), winning a BAFTA for one of the episodes, and *Do the Right Thing* (BBC). He has also written one of the *Doctor Who* books for Virgin Publishing. For Granada, Davies has also created the series *Revelations*, written several episodes for the first series of *Springhill*, and an episode for the first series of *Touching Evil*. He has also created *The Grand*

and written for it all the eight episodes of the first series, as well as the majority of the episodes for the second series.

Davies' professional record is important not only because it firmly grounds him within the locality of British creativity but also because TV drama is one of the few television genres where the scriptwriter is publicly granted the status of 'author'. Television drama, as opposed to other television genres, is usually associated with one single author who is deemed to be almost entirely accountable for the programme's strengths and weaknesses or representational dynamics (Tulloch, 1990). It is in this respect that we should consider how most of the public discourses around *Queer as Folk* have addressed Davies as the main person responsible for the programme's representation of gay identity and for its contribution to gay visibility and visual justice.

However, this attribution of 'authorship' opens up a series of questions that need to be addressed before moving to consider some of Davies' own statements regarding *Queer as Folk* and its public reception. Following Barthes' insights I would argue that 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the message of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash' (Barthes, 1977, p.146). From this perspective, we should bear in mind that if Davies is undeniably *Queer as Folk*'s author, at the same time he has not created this particular representation of gay identity out of nowhere. In writing *Queer as Folk* he has, in a sense, articulated a variety of existing 'texts' on gay identity; he has 'reshuffled' a history of writings on gays; he has altered the register of gay representation by shifting the emphasis and rhythm of a representational tradition. This is not to deny Davies' authorship or to diminish his merits and credit for the creation of the

programme. Rather, it is to emphasise that both the scriptwriter and the programme are the effect of the same historical field of forces and the manifestation of the same discursive regimes (Dyer, 2002).

Moreover, we should consider the additional issue that often '[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing' (Barthes, 1977, p.147). Thus, the fact that *Queer as Folk* is attributed to Davies could be seen as placing an interpretive limit to the programme. For example, Davies' declarations and opinions about his creation made public in different interviews surely cannot be understood as the only possible reading of the programme. They are influential and 'authorial' interpretations or privileged readings of it, yet not the only ones. *Queer as Folk's* meaning exceeds any univocal reading, even the one that Davies himself has imagined or wanted to encrypt in his text. Actually, *Queer as Folk* needs to be understood as a textual field in which different 'writings' about gays come into play, often at odds with each other. In the next chapter on the public response to the programme we will have many opportunities to analyse the range of viewers' and audience's reactions, readings, interpretations, and appropriations of it.

Hence, to emphasise *Queer as Folk's* relative textual openness or to grant viewers a much greater interpretive freedom implies an additional reconsideration of the social function of the author.

The author's name serves to characterise a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author's name, that one can say "this was written by so-and-so" or "so-and-so is its author," shows that the discourse is not an ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status. (Foucault, 1984, p.107)

The function of the name of Davies seems to be ‘therefore characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society’ (Ibid. p.108). His name unifies the different levels of *Queer as Folk*’s social, cultural and economic circulation. For example, *Queer as Folk*’s soundtrack for both series, available nationwide in CD format, although skilfully put together by the sound maverick Murray Gold of Almighty Record, is introduced on both sleeves by a witty and short presentation penned by Davies. In this way, his authorship was re-stated and reinforced, making *Queer as Folk*’s cultural circulation and marketing potential more homogeneous and effective. Viewers and possible buyers of *Queer as Folk*’s merchandising had to remember just one name for that title.

Similarly, in bookshops it is possible to purchase the script of the series, which is naturally authored by Davies. This script is the final version of the programme’s storyline before it was actually filmed and so it includes even some of the scenes that were not actually shot or that were ‘dropped in the edit’ (Davies, 1999, p.7) and not included in the broadcast version. Moreover, the dialogues of the printed version of the programme are not always the same as the broadcast version because dialogues were sometimes altered at the moment of shooting. The entire script and the final dialogues or scenes in the broadcast version of *Queer as Folk* were often the result of an ongoing collaboration between scriptwriter, producer, directors and actors. Davies had to produce various drafts of the storyboard and of the script. Each of them were approved or amended by different people involved in the productive process such as, for example, Channel 4’s head of drama, Gub Neal, or Nichola Shindler, the producer.

Thus, in a sense, it is problematic to individuate the only and the 'real' literary author of *Queer as Folk*, considering that many people have contributed at different levels and stages to the writing of the programme's representation of gay identity. On the other hand, it is also true that Davies' name as author serves to create a sense of unity, a flux of continuity around the programme's different levels of experience, fruition, and consumption. It is in the light of this intrinsic ambivalence that we have to read the relevance of his public comments on the programme. And so, even though Davies' scriptwriting and contribution to gay visibility and visual justice was the confluence of several other fragments of authorship, his intentions, opinions, or interpretations are nevertheless privileged ones. They have often steered the public debate in specific directions, opening additional questions on gay visibility or revealing other discursive levels *vis à vis* gay identity, alongside the ones embodied by the very images of the programme.

Queer as Folk was born out of a conversation in 1997 between Davies and Channel 4's deputy commissioning editor for drama, Catriona McKenzie. In the light of an episode of *The Grand*, written by him, which followed an entirely gay storyline, they discussed the possibilities and the need for a contemporary drama series in which the lead characters were gay men. In fact, as Davies says on the back sleeve of the CD of *Queer as Folk*:

For years I'd been writing soaps and dramas and, as a fully paid-up and card-carrying gay man, I'd done my bit by throwing in gay stories - lesbian vicars, schoolboy lovers, bisexual drug addicts, the lot. But always as a subplot, never centre stage...That November afternoon, Catriona McKenzie from Channel 4 looked at those subplots and said: that's what you should be doing. Main plot. Centre stage. Off you go. (Davies, 1999a)

It clearly emerges from this statement that *Queer as Folk* was not his first conscious attempt to promote representational gay visibility and that this series was the result of a much longer artistic, cultural and political gestation. However, talking about his previous attempt at introducing gay images in the mainstream televisual arena, Davies says:

Some of these stories were good, some bad. And I'm still assessing which were good and which were bad, to this day. Certainly, some were cowardly. As producer of Granada's *Children's Ward*, I introduced an HIV story. But I wasn't brave enough to create children's television's first gay kid, and had to watch with envy and admiration when *Byker Grove* broke new ground. (Davies, 2003, p.3)

In this statement Davies highlights how his scriptwriting of *Queer as Folk* was not only the outcome of personal decisions or unconstrained artistic choices. Rather it must be understood in relation to broader cultural and productive limitations or strategies *vis à vis* gay visibility. In fact, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the public televisual arena has only very recently become more open to images of gayness. And only very recently TV writers and producers have been asked to or dared to deploy their creative and representational skills for greater gay visibility. Having said that, it is also very important to highlight how children's television has been perhaps the most awkward terrain for unambiguous images of gayness. Children and teenagers in general had to be protected from any exposure to images that had any direct sexual content let alone ones that had a homosexual connotation (Nead, 1995). And it is only in the last decade that we have begun to see the 'visibility of gay teens to be reflected on the TV screen' (Gross, 2001, p.175). In fact, the issue of gay visibility and visual justice seems to become particularly thorny in relation to younger age groups, and in the following chapter

I will consider some more of the complications and implications of debates on those matters.

Having said that, McKenzie's offer to construct an entirely gay narrative in the less controversial field of 'adult' television was indeed an opportunity not to be missed. Thus, given the chance, Davies went on to write the first TV drama in which homosexuality was indeed centre stage. But in accepting this job he believed that the task ahead required a new approach to gay representation, one adequate to changing times.

I was adamant that there would be no "issue stories". Someone once said to me, isn't it fantastic that there's a gay nurse in *Casualty* and I said no! Ten years ago, the character of Colin in *EastEnders* was marvellous, a first, but everything that's followed has just been pale imitation. Gay characters invariably walk in with a subplot on their heads "ooh I've got AIDS, ooh I want to be a gay parent". They do not exist as three-dimensional people, like the creators made a character decision that they were gay and just stopped there. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

This statement clearly highlights some of the core complications and contradictions Davies had to negotiate when writing about *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity. He wanted to break away from a representational tradition where gays were made visible exclusively as problem or as bearers of troubling issues. Until a few years ago, this issue-based type of writing was the most that a scriptwriter might have been allowed or expected to do in the public televisual arena in terms of gay visibility. In this light, the very fact that *EastEnders* had permanently introduced a gay character in its narrative environment was a major step in terms of gay visibility and visual justice. But, a decade later, Davies felt that the task of writing something innovative and culturally or politically challenging about gays needed a totally different

approach. His creative challenge was to imagine a gay drama in which homosexuality was not the only dramatic issue but the starting point for describing the much more complex, and at the same time ordinary, life of his characters. In fact, when interviewed, he argued that:

I just wanted to write a story, which has the rhythms of everyday life. Drama lies in your friend not turning up for your party, not in someone being beaten up. In the past, drama involving gays had to include bisexual heroin addicts and lesbian vicars. Now two people having a cup of tea is dramatic enough... (Rampton, 1999, *The Independent*, 18 February, p.7)

It was the ordinariness of *Queer as Folk* that made this programme so innovative. This time gay lives were portrayed in their everyday, mundane expressions: doing gay and not only being so. And doing gay means not only having gay sex and enjoying it, but also doing 'normal' things such as celebrating birthdays, going to weddings or, indeed, having a cup of tea. But in doing so, in showing the normality of gay life, Davies did not mean to disavow any political intention of his script because he argued that *Queer as Folk* 'gets politically naturally, because it is an entirely gay drama, it's got a focus that makes it political' (Higgins, 1999, *Gay Times*, January, p. 20). Thus, Davies suggests that his main contribution to gay visibility and visual justice in writing *Queer as Folk* lies in having queered and colonised the notions of 'normal' or 'everyday'.

In his 'no issue' approach to gay representations Davies was also aware of another intrinsic difficulty and ambiguity surrounding the creation of gay characters, that is, to what extent those characters were supposed to be representative of a collective gay identity.

I also had to overcome the feeling that I should represent the whole 'community' - every age, every scene. One day I realised that I had to stop feeling a responsibility to show every conceivable form of gay lifestyle and simply convey the specific lives of my characters...
(Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

In fact, there is an intrinsic problem in the case of representations of minorities. It is about the ambition of representing all possible ways of being gay. Every representation is bound to be partial and incomplete and the unavoidable limit of *Queer as Folk* is that a singular drama cannot be representative of all the possible strands of gay experience. Davies' characters should not be seen as the embodiment of shared values within the gay community. Rather they were the personifications of some of the possible ways of living and experiencing homosexuality. And on this question, Davies added that he wanted to escape the 'dull and sanctimonious desire to "do the right thing"' (Ibid.), trying or pretending to include all possible images of gayness into a single representation. He argues that:

Writers who think: "I must represent blind lesbians" are on to a loser. Every other episode of *Casualty* is like that. People didn't say about *Cracker*: "Does Fitz represent Scotland, or overweight people?" All they said was: "He's a brilliant character." The word "representation" shouldn't enter the discussion of drama. (Rampton, 1999, *The Independent*, 18 February, p.7)

As suggested before, Davies is not disavowing the political intent of his representation of gay identity but he is also highlighting the ambiguities of the questions of representation, negotiating and struggling with a compulsion for impossible inclusiveness. His characters were not representing anything but their peculiar way of being gay rather than an essentialist or universalistic notion of what gays are supposed to be, how they are supposed to behave or look, as we

have already discussed in the previous two chapters. Moreover, he emphasises the impossible and unrealistic responsibility that gay authors are supposed to articulate for both gay and straight audiences. In fact, as Gross (2001) argues, they may be accused by the straight public or critics of being too 'specialistic', giving too much emphasis to a particular identity and therefore not being able to achieve that universalism of values and perspectives that heterosexual experience is supposed to embody. On the other hand they often end up being accused by gay critics or public for not being gay enough, for not saying enough about gay lives or not representing all their possible manifestations. Thus, in relation to these kinds of criticisms regarding *Queer as Folk's* representational spectrum Davies ironically says:

My favourite response to the first series is the people who come up saying "I've lived with a boyfriend for ten years and *we* go to the opera and have dinner parties, why don't you write about *that*?" And I say, "Oh, that's *interesting*! Hello! I write drama, not fucking dreary bollocks, like your life is. Fuck off". (Marr, 2000, *Gay Times*, February, p. 18)

In this intentionally over-provocative way,²¹ Davies not only makes clear his position regarding questions of representational inclusiveness but also highlights some of the 'trappings of creative freedom' (Caughie, 2000, p.128). Creativity and the representational potential of *Queer as Folk* needs to be contextualised within broader historical and cultural dynamics that articulate the process of television-making considering that:

²¹ It is worth noting that the emphasis of Davies' statements changes according to the potential audience of his declaration. This last one, for example, was meant to be read by a gay readership and it was supposed to be intentionally litigious.

The distinctive constraint which faces the author or writer in television drama, however, is the power which is conferred on the viewer by his or her ease of access to the control button: the ability to switch off or switch over. It is in this sense that television drama as 'art television' involves a complex negotiation with a viewer who can find something else on another channel without even leaving his seat. (Ibid. p.76)

And indeed one of the principal constraints within commercial television is to find a fine balance between the need to attract the greatest number of viewers without producing bland and unchallenging scripts that displease everybody or trying to be creative and challenging without being too 'high-brow' and exclusive. Even Davies' representations of gay identity were inevitably bound to the same limitation that any heterosexual representation would face within the field of mainstream television. Thus, given that 'commercial television seeks large and heterogeneous audiences' (Gross, 2001, p.7), Davies had to write *Queer as Folk's* storyline in a fairly entertaining and captivating style hoping to reach the audience's 'nonideological middleground' (Ibid. p.7) and being path-breaking without being too challenging or dull. In the section on the commissioner and broadcaster I am going to say more on how gay visibility seems to be progressively regulated by commercial interests or technological changes (Arthurs, 2004).

Another key element that we should consider in analysing Davies' creative inputs for *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity is how his own open homosexuality has affected public debates on gay visibility and visual justice. In fact, some media commentators have emphasised the link between his homosexuality and *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity, saying that 'Russell T. Davies, the Jacqueline Susan of gay Manchester, is clearly having a ball, transforming a world that he knows intimately into a torrid popular drama'

(Smith, 2000, *The Guardian*, 16 February, p.16). In this statement Davies' fictional creation is immediately associated with an idea of authenticity. As an openly gay man himself, Davies is supposed to intimately know all about gay Manchester and the life of its queer citizens. His gayness seems to provide him with a kind of insider knowledge on those 'torrid' gay matters. In this regard, I wonder, for example, if crime writers are supposed to have a truly intimate knowledge of their torrid homicidal subject matters in order to write about them. In the latter case fictional authenticity does not necessarily require any close relation to autobiographical authenticity. However, when it comes to homosexual representations, the biographical sexuality of the author seems to suddenly matter as if you need to be gay to write about gays. Had *Queer as Folk* been a 'normal' heterosexual drama I doubt that the question of the writer's own sexuality would have been brought up at all. In a sense, heterosexual fiction does not need to be authenticated neither is its author's biography called into play to validate it. Thus, the reference to Davies's sexuality highlights how homosexuality peculiarly affects the 'author's material social position in relation to discourse, the access to discourses they have on account of who they are' (Dyer, 2002, p.34).

Whilst we will further explore questions of authenticity and gay visibility in talking about *Queer as Folk*'s actors it might be interesting to add that, as a result of the media furore around *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity, Davies complained about the fact that he had been labelled as a gay scriptwriter and that therefore he was expected to be always writing about gay themes.

I don't want to be tagged as a "gay writer". That might limit my work. My agent phoned the other day and said: "It's starting. You've been offered a job writing a 30-minute animation about a dinosaur who

comes out.” I could not say “no” fast enough. (Rampton, 1999, *The Independent*, 18 February, p.7)

As I have argued before, heterosexual authors would never be pigeonholed or tagged as ‘heterosexual author’. Writing about heterosexuality is not seen as a form of ‘specialism’ as is writing about gay things. It is seen simply as writing about humanity. However, Davies’ refusal to be pigeonholed as a gay writer is not a disavowal of his personal commitment as a gay person to gay visibility and visual justice. It should be seen as his discomfort in recognising the way in which homosexuality still socially matters to qualify or limit authorship and creative potential.

Section 4c. The producer

Queer as Folk was produced by the young producer Nicola Shindler for her new company Red Production based in Manchester. In her short but successful career Shindler had gained a brilliant CV with several award-winning TV programmes such as Granada Television’s *Hillsborough*, *Prime Suspect*, *Our Friends in the North* and several other highly successful programmes such as *Saigon Baby*, *Sin Bin* and *Cracker*. In the light of these successes, she had been able to sign a development deal with Channel 4 for her production company. Thus, when McKenzie - Channel 4’s deputy commissioning editor for drama - mentioned to her the conversation with Davies about writing an entirely gay drama, Shindler knew that this was something she would love to do for Red Production. Considering that she already knew and admired Davies as a writer and as a person

because they had ‘met at the Emmys in New York and got on like a house on fire’ (Press release: *Queer as Folk 1*) and that they both were living in Manchester, it all seemed a perfect opportunity for a successful collaboration. And, as first venture for her newly born production company, *Queer as Folk* could not have been a better choice. The final result was an incredibly successful drama both nationally and internationally. In fact *Queer as Folk* has ‘been sold to 13 other countries and is Channel 4’s biggest selling video ever’ (Thorpe, 2000, *The Observer* 16 April, p.13). It also launched her on the American media scene as an active player, negotiating with US producers the contractual terms for the American adaptation of *Queer as Folk*. All her professional achievements, which had culminated with *Queer as Folk*’s enormous public success confirmed her reputation in the field as a young and daring producer, and contributed to her winning the Carlton’s Women in Film and Television Award.

Despite her pivotal role in *Queer as Folk*’s realisation, discourses on the programme have proportionally dedicated much less attention to her than to Davies. Her authorial and creative role in relation to the programme has been publicly articulated and experienced in different terms from Davies’, and this is rather revealing of some other particular dynamics about gay visibility and visual justice. For example, whilst in public discourses on *Queer as Folk* Davies’s own homosexuality was constantly mentioned by himself or by interviewers, reviewers and cultural commentators, Shindler’s supposed heterosexuality is never mentioned or always implied. Davies’ sexuality needs to be made visible, whilst Shindler’s does not need to be publicly visualised because it ‘approximates the normative phantasm of a compulsory heterosexuality... that operates through the naturalisation and reification of heterosexist norm’ (Butler, 1993, p.93). This

naturalisation of heterosexuality was also subtly implicit in relation to her winning the Carlton award as an outstanding woman in film and television. Even in that context the heterosexuality of the women up for the award is implicitly assumed. The normativity of heterosexuality was completely obliterating the visibility of lesbians within the visual field of that public award ceremony. And this is important considering that:

When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the public agenda. And these are mostly white, mostly middle-aged, mostly male, mostly middle and upper-middle class, and overwhelmingly heterosexual (at least in public). As of the late 1990s, the television networks and major film studios, with almost no exceptions, are all run by men who fit this profile. While a woman has occasionally broken into the white boys' club of the studio complex, she rarely last long at the top. (Gross, 2001, p.4)

Thus, if in the televisual arena the top brass positions are rarely held by women, even less of them can be claimed by openly lesbian ones. Their chance of being visible is obliterated not only by androcentric and patriarchal dynamics but also by the heterosexism and homophobia that lurks within discourses around female discrimination (Richardson, 2000a). In the section on *Queer as Folk's* actors I will further discuss some questions about lesbian visibility.

Moreover, Dyer highlights another instance of imbalanced visibility or normative invisibility when he argues that:

The sense of whites as non-raced is most evident in the absence of reference to whiteness in the habitual speech and writing of white people in the West. We (whites) will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbours, colleagues, customers or clients, and it may be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don't mention the whiteness of the people we know. An old-

style white comedian will often start a joke: “There’s this bloke walking down the street and he meets this black geezer”, never thinking to race the bloke as well as the geezer. Synopses in listing of films on TV, where wordage is tight, none the less squander words with things like: “Comedy in which a cop and his black sidekick investigate a robbery”, “Skinhead Johnny and his Asian lover Omar set up a laundrette”... (Dyer, 1997, p.2)

As for the examples above, this is also true of most of what has been said so far about *Queer as Folk*, about its characters or its creative contributors. The whiteness of them all, including Davies and Shindler (and of the rest of the people involved in the programme’s creation that I will introduce shortly), is often presupposed and subtracted from discourses on gay visibility and visual justice. This chromatic blindness highlights the difficult and hegemonic dynamics that regulate the identitarian intersection of different axes or vectors of visibilities, as I will further discuss in Chapter 6.

I move now to take into account more closely some of Shindler’s public statements on *Queer as Folk* to explore what they may reveal in terms of additional discursive elements regarding the programme’s articulation of gay visibility and visual justice. And I begin by considering how Shindler sees *Queer as Folk* as ‘a drama which happens to be about three gay men. In soap operas the gay characters are always minor, so we wanted to put them centre stage and show them just having normal lives’ (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 24 February, p.3). At the same time in which she was suggesting her awareness of having broken a representational mould by giving *Queer as Folk*’s gay characters such an unprecedented central role in mainstream television, she was also making publicly clear that by doing that she had not intended to produce a gay programme.

Funny as it may sound, I never looked on *Queer as Folk* as a gay drama. It was really a story of unrequited love, which is why it appealed to a predominantly female audience. (Brown, 2001, *The Guardian*, 9 April, p.4)

These two statements highlight the potential ambivalence of discourses about *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity and how the programme's intervention in questions of gay visibility and visual justice was twofold. On the one hand, it was a way to give space to the experience of an under-represented minority group (which is precisely one of Channel 4's key statutory commitments, as we will explore more in detail in the last section of this chapter) but on the other hand, it also intended to represent some 'universal' and simply humane feelings such as unrequited love. As much as homosexual viewers have always been able to translate and re-appropriate hegemonic heterosexual representations of life into a homosexual imaginary, *Queer as Folk* was invoking the same viewing creativity in adapting and translating from heterosexual viewers. This time it was heterosexual viewers that were supposed to visually experience and learn about unrequited love from a gay point of view that, in its diversity, is no less human and therefore 'normal' or 'universal'.

However, at the same time in which Shindler was disassociating *Queer as Folk* from a far too particularistic gay reading of it by advocating the universality of its representation, she was also publicly declaring how its particular representation of gay identity could potentially have a special appeal for a specific gendered segment of the national public. In calling 'the show a Bridget Jones for gay men' (Collins, 2000, *The Observer*, 30 January, p.6), she was emphasising even more the frequent association of representation of gay identity to the feminine given

that soaps' focus on narratives of feeling and emotions such as unrequited love are often supposed to be of exclusive interest to a female audience (Gledhill, 2002).

Having said that, she was also perfectly aware of how the public perception of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was enmeshed in a much broader set of visual asymmetries.

Everybody is going about the sex but after the first episode there isn't that much sex in it. And if the scenes had involved heterosexual sex rather than gay sex, nobody would have been too bothered. (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 24 February, p.3)

Thus, as a producer not only had she been prepared to take the risk of upsetting some segments of society and to push the quest of gay visibility a step further, but also to bravely put her professional reputation on the frontline. Until a few years ago, some people would have avoided placing their professional reputation in jeopardy by being too closely associated with homosexual themes and being pigeonholed into a particular niche of the market. Shindler seemed totally unconcerned at the idea that her Red Production could be inextricably and permanently associated with *Queer as Folk* and all the controversies around its gay theme. In fact she says that 'if it means some people typecast us as a gay drama company, so be it' (Brown, 2001, *The Guardian*, 9 April, p.4).

Hopefully, her bold attitude may be indicating that times are perhaps ripe for a more democratic widening of the representational arena *vis à vis* gay identity, even in the face of an unavoidable degree of contestation and negotiation. Alternatively it could be interpreted as a cynical exploitation of images of gayness in a visual arena in which controversial images of sexuality are part of spectacular

marketing strategy. These latter suspicions are going to be further explored in the section on Channel 4's broadcasting strategy and also in following chapters.

Section 4d. The directors

The first series of *Queer as Folk* (1999) was directed by Charles McDougall (episode 1-4) and Sarah Harding (episode 5-8), whilst Menhaj Huda directed the second series (2000). Their names were rarely acknowledged in public debates about the programme even if their directorial and creative inputs had been as determining as Davies' in shaping *Queer as Folk*'s unique representation of gay identity. In this section by considering their public statements on the programme I want not only to give them more credit for their directorial choices on *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gayness but also to consider how they highlight other discursive elements that surround questions around gay visibility and visual justice.

McDougall had already collaborated with Shindler on several other projects - all scripted by Jimmy McGovern - like *Heart* for Granada Films, the multi-award winning *Hillsborough* and *Cracker*. He had also directed for the BBC *Arrivederci Millwall* and 'the much-missed *Between The Lines*, a series which included several lesbian and gay storylines' (Higgins, 1999, *Gay Times*, January, p. 26). In the light of these credentials, when Shindler was considering possible directors for *Queer as Folk*, McDougall had been the easiest choice given also that she was looking for:

someone who would understand the subject matter - not because they were gay but because they understood people and relationships and how love happens. I knew that Charles had the right sensibilities, that his eye for style was spot on that his perception when casting was what I needed... So I send the scripts and he loved them. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

As we have already seen in the previous section, Shindler, although perfectly aware of the potential social impact of producing an entirely gay drama in mainstream television, keeps on emphasising the universality of *Queer as Folk*'s main theme: unrequited love. This ambivalence shows again how questions of gay identity sit uncomfortably between what is considered universal or particular in our Western experiential and emotional horizon. She seems also keen to emphasise that the choice of directors did not have anything to do with their own sexuality, highlighting, at the same time, how inevitably questions of gay representations and authorship are entangled with issues of authenticity and the authority of experience (Scott, 1991). And indeed these themes will keep on surfacing throughout my exploration of discourses around gay visibility and visual justice as much as in McDougall's explanation for accepting the offer of directing *Queer as Folk*:

What struck me about the scripts was how fresh and funny they were. I'm pretty selective about what I do and I was looking for something that hadn't been seen before. *Queer as Folk* leapt off the page as just that, completely new. It was also a challenge because it was set in a world I knew nothing about - it was a great starting point, not only to try and understand it, but also to make it accessible to other people. It had to be attractive to everyone, gay or straight, male or female. To work, *Queer as Folk* had to be as mainstream as possible, not marginalized in any way. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

Despite the previous claim about the supposed universal appeal of *Queer as Folk* because it focused on an universal themes such as unrequited love, in this

statement McDougall makes sure to specify that gayness is a world unknown to him and that needs to be made accessible to other people. In this way, he seems to be implicitly affirming his bravery in accepting to direct something so far away from 'normal' life and by default securing his own heterosexuality. Moreover, he seems to imply that gayness was not only unfamiliar to him but also to the majority of mainstream viewers. Therefore, images of gay identity and life had to be made accessible to them and in this spirit he adopted a directorial style 'so fast you need to hail a cab to keep up' (Joseph, 1999, *The Times*, 24 February, p.47). This directorial choice surely contributed to the programme's success and for the expansion of gay visibility to previously untouched shores. His sharp and dynamic style successfully managed to represent in a mainstream programme potentially shocking images of gayness by blending them in the upbeat pace of his direction. However, the tempo of his visual representation of gay identity was so accelerated that we may wonder about its effectiveness. In the Western visual arena, in which viewers are so used to the speed of commercials, MTV, or video-clips, the potential of images to create visual intimacy and emotional connectedness may be profoundly weakened. And *Queer as Folk*'s direction, rather than suturing the 'disjuncture between lived experience and cultural representation' (Walters, 2001, p.23), may have simply complied with the separating tempo of spectacular consumption of images, identities and commodities (Debord, 1983; 1998) as I will further discuss in later chapters.

I move on now to explore additional implications of questions of gay visibility and visual justice by considering Harding's intervention and contribution to those matters. She began her career directing for theatre, moving on to directing for television. Before *Queer as Folk* she had worked on many different projects and

programmes such as *Coronation Street*, *The Practice*, *First Among Equals*, *Strahblair*, *The Bill*, the *EastEnders World Cup Special* - just to mention a few. She is also the one who had directed the 'gay' episode of *The Grand* written by Davies. Considering that Shindler had seen that episode and liked it as much as she had liked other programmes directed by her, the decision to appoint Harding for directing *Queer as Folk*'s second block of episodes 'was an obvious choice and it was great to be working with a woman director for a change, not that our decision was swayed by that' (Press release: *Queer as Folk*).

This statement reinforces what I have already said in the previous section about women's weaker position in the visual creative industry and in particular it highlights their even greater marginality in directorial positions, at least in mainstream productions. Moreover, it also suggests how the heteronormative assumptions about the gendered category of womanhood often rely on the obliteration of lesbianism as a specific and alternative way to experience femaleness and articulate debates on questions of gender equity (Fraser, 1996). And indeed, if in some sectors of the cultural industries women are under-represented, lesbian women are almost invisible, as I am going to argue in the following section on *Queer as Folk*'s actors.

When Harding describes her motivations in accepting to direct *Queer as Folk* she also talks about issue of gender by saying that:

As a woman, I thought it would be fun to explore a culture that is so male and so free, it was almost like a fantasy of mine to watch this world where people were not really constrained by concepts of family and fidelity. (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

It is interesting to note that whilst McDougall had motivated his interest in directing *Queer as Folk* because of the challenge for him - as a supposedly

heterosexual man - of exploring the alien world of gayness, Harding instead is motivated by a fascination with exploring a world which is essentially male. Rather than seeing *Queer as Folk* as an essentially and exclusively gay drama she sees it first as male one. *Queer as Folk*, in articulating questions around homosexual visibility, also sheds light on adjacent areas of the complex dynamics of gender and society. Harding seems to emphasise how in a male-based society women have often been less privileged than their male counterparts, either gay or straight. Moreover, in indicating how *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity visualises the problematic nature of concepts of family and fidelity, she also reveals their difficult relationship. In fact, as we have begun to explore in the literature review on the notion of sexual citizenship, questions of gay identity and visibility have to take into account the costs and benefits of questions of social inclusion in which questions of gay marriages or erotic freedom were precisely some of the key points at stake (Bell and Binnie, 2000). Thus, the discussion of *Queer as Folk's* articulation of gay visibility should not obliterate or render invisible the complex network of gender relations and the subtleties of discourses around social power, inclusion or assimilation, which I am going to further discuss in both Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Menhaj Huda was the director of *Queer as Folk 2*, which was his first feature-length project.

Menhaj began his film career when, after leaving Oxford University, he travelled around America and ended up as a runner at the Fox TV studios in LA. Back in the UK, he developed the music show *Hypnosis*, directing the first series, and set up Dancing Fleas Productions, producing and editing pop promos. He then went on to direct numerous videos, ads and episodes of series such as *Moviewatch*. He made the short film *Jump Boy*, for Film Four, and contributed the short *Grasshopper* to Sky's *Tube Tales*. Recently, he

directed the music series *All Back To Mine* for Channel 4. (Press release: *Queer as Folk 2*, p.12)

His knowledge of other fields of mainstream popular visual culture balanced his lack of experience as drama director. *Queer as Folk*'s producer wanted the programme to be visually innovative, 'all his ads and videos are beautiful - says Nicola, explaining her choice' (Ibid. p.6) and appealing to the widest audience and his skills seemed to fulfil these requirements. His experience in advertising and music videos had trained him for the mainstream appeal *Queer as Folk* needed to have and for the fast tempo and style in which McDougall and Harding had already moulded the first series of the programme. This is what he says about his directorial achievements filming *Queer as Folk 2*:

There were a couple of very subtle things that I really liked. Like the club scene, when Stuart is telling Vince he's off to London, everything behind them goes in slow motion. (Ibid, p.6)

It is rather telling that he is most proud for having successfully grafted his pop promo skills to *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity and it is indeed revealing of the extent of mainstreaming that the programme intended to achieve. In fact, this type of mainstreaming of images of gayness can be clearly seen as a symptom of the progressive entanglement of gay visibility with marketability and of the fact that images of gay identity risk becoming commodities amongst others in the phantasmagoria of capitalist and consumerist societies (Hennessey, 1995). However, in relation to questions of visual justice, the meaning of those pop-promo directorial choices for images of gay identity could also be understood as a welcomed alternative to the stylistic gloom that was often traditionally associated with images of homosexuality, which were also frequently produced at the

margins of the mainstream and with very limited economic and technical resources (Dyer, 1991). Therefore, *Queer as Folk*'s mainstreaming of images of gay identity may be seen as a symptom of the democratisation of the visual arena even though under spectacular circumstances, as I will also discuss in Chapter 6 in which I will consider more closely the dynamics of spectacular visibility.

I move now to consider Huda's reaction at being offered the possibility of directing the second series of this drama and his feelings about the social impact of the programme.

When I got it, I thought this is the one - my absolute perfect thing, the best thing I could possibly get... The thing about this drama is that the subject matter is totally cutting edge. It's about our lives and culture in this country now, and most of the dramas that are out there at the moment have nothing to do with that. We live in extraordinary times, and none of it is being dissected and observed. (Press release: *Queer as Folk 2*, p.6)

The homosexual focus of the programme did not seem to matter to him or to scare him. He did not feel that *Queer as Folk* was an awkward and too compromising beginning for his career. On the contrary, it made it very appealing and exciting because he saw it as an innovative drama and as a portrait of contemporary Britain. And his uses of such an inclusive pronoun as 'our' seems to highlight the fact that *Queer as Folk*, in representing the specificity of gay life, simultaneously represents one of the many aspects or possibilities of multicultural and pluralistic life in Britain.

Section 4e. The actors

In this section I discuss questions of gay visibility and visual justice by focusing my attention on *Queer as Folk*'s actors and in particular on the interpreters of the programme's main characters of Stuart, Vince, and Nathan.

Except for the newcomer Charlie Hunnam (Nathan), who had appeared on the small screen only in supporting roles in programmes such as *Byker Grove* (BBC) and *Microsoap* (Disney Channel), both the other two of *Queer as Folk*'s leading actors, Aidan Gillen (Stuart) and Craig Kelly (Vince) were already quite familiar faces for British viewers. Kelly was a regular on *Casualty* (BBC), had appeared in *Children of the New Forest*, *A Touch of Frost* and also in films such as *Spiceworld* and *Titanic*. Gillen also has experience in cinema with movies such as *Mojo*, *Some Mother's Son* and in television in the award-winning single drama *Safe* (BBC). Most of the supporting characters had also appeared in popular British TV programmes. For example, Denise Black (Hazel: Vince's mother) is 'known to millions as Denise Osborn in *Coronation Street*' (Press release: *Queer as Folk*), and Jason Merrels, who plays Vince's friend Phil, is 'best known to TV viewers as Matt in *Casualty*' (Ibid.).

The familiarity of the actors to the British public surely contributed to *Queer as Folk*'s popularity and wide success; and it was one of the programme's strongest elements of social impact, and innovativeness in relation to gay visibility. In fact, those familiar faces that British viewers were used to associating with the essentially heterosexual world of popular television were suddenly portraying rather different characters. In impersonating gay characters and their loved ones they were normalising visions of homosexuality, disrupting the grip of

heteronormativity on the national visual field. They were making homosexuality more accessible, less threatening, and rather ordinary by associating it with the cosiness of a TV genre like soap opera, for which most of them were already popular. And, because of their relative fame in the British televisual arena, they projected on *Queer as Folk* the shine, charisma, and popularity that belonged to them, making its representation of gay identity more acceptable by default.

Moreover the presence of those actors was quite telling in terms of gay visibility for an additional reason. Their acceptance of playing in such an openly gay drama had highlighted how public attitudes toward homosexuality were undergoing a process of transformation and, perhaps, of normalisation.

Not so long ago, aspiring young actors would have worried about playing some of these gay roles, even if their agent had dared to put them for the part. Those attitudes are changing, though, and these actors, whatever their own sexuality, see this series as the opportunity that it is - juicy roles, of a kind never before; a kind of script never been written before.' (Higgins, 1999, *Gay Times*, January, p. 26)

In a homophobic culture and society that had often associated homosexuality with sin, crime and perversion, not many 'actors were willing to be seen in gay roles' (Gross, 2001, p.62). Homosexuality was too much of a controversial issue and being associated with it could have tarnished their career and their public reputation irreparably. The few that dared were praised for their 'bravery' (Bourne, 1996) even though often the homosexual content of the part was hinted rather than explicitly declared. Thus, the fact that *Queer as Folk's* actors had chosen to take part in such an upfront gay drama is symptomatic of some social changes *vis a vis* images of homosexuality.

But having just said that it is worth reporting what the director McDougall had to say about the casting:

I was also staggered by the number of actors who wouldn't even audition because they were scared of portraying gay characters. I mean, I have done things about murderers, like *Cracker*, and no one bats an eyelid about playing someone who butchers other people! (Press release: *Queer as Folk*)

So, if attitudes regarding the 'dangers' of playing gay characters may be changing, they are not doing so quickly or vocally and the search to find *Queer as Folk's* familiar faces had not been an unproblematic process. The interpretation of homosexual roles still remains a difficult choice for actors, and it seems much more problematic than playing a criminal, a mass murderer, or an assassin. All of this should be in praise of *Queer as Folk's* actors who chose to accept the part. Either as a statement of their personal disregard of homophobic prejudices, or out of an astute career strategy, these actors had accepted the challenge and brought to life *Queer as Folk's* gay characters, making gay images visible, credible and explicit as never seen before on TV.

To corroborate the impression of a change in attitudes towards gay visibility, this is what Kelly (Vince) replied when asked if he had any reservations about playing a gay man:

To be honest, no, because the writing was so strong, and I'd never played a character like Vince. I'd been acting six years and I'd done loads, and I'd never played a character quite like him and I just thought it was a challenge. I thought it was interesting, I thought it was funny. I was never, in any way, freaked out by the idea. (Marr, 2000, *Gay Times*, February, p. 23)

Having just said this, his confidence at the idea of playing a gay character seemed to be slightly shaken when he was asked if he had considered the possibility of becoming an object of desire for gay viewers:

It is a surreal idea... But it is part of the job, and if it happens, then that's flattering and fair enough, but I don't really take that seriously. I think people will really, really like Vince as a character and I think that some people might find him quite...quite attractive. (Higgins, 1999, *Gay Times*, January, p.24)

It is rather telling that Kelly finds 'surreal' the idea of becoming an object of gay desire if not lust. Public discourses on actors have never made a mystery of their iconic status as sex symbols and Hollywood stars have supplied for generations countless images and representations of desire and lust. But because of homosexual invisibility, those actors were supposed to be inflaming only a heterosexual viewing constituency. They were supposed to mirror, produce, reproduce or reinforce, in some way or another, heterosexual desires or fantasies (Mayer, 1991). Gay men and lesbians were never acknowledged as a viewing and desiring constituency in their own right. Thus, discourses about the iconic status of actors have always been constructed around heterosexual hegemony and homosexual invisibility. *Queer as Folk*, in articulating questions of gay visibility and justices, inevitably opens up the issue of actors as objects/subjects of desire in a different way. What *Queer as Folk* was making public was not only the simple physical existence of homosexuals but also their emotional and desiring reality was made explicit and public. The programme was visualising gay people not only as objects of vision but also as active subjects of vision. Consequently, it was raising the issue of gay visibility not only as a passive form of public recognition but rather as a recognition of their active and equal participation in the production

and reproduction of social life. Indeed, visual justice is not only a question of being seen but to be able to see and look at each other freely and democratically.

Hunnam (Nathan), despite being only 18 years old, and just at the beginning of his career, was apparently as relaxed as Kelly about playing his first major interpretation as a gay character.

It's really a fantastic role for me, because I get to play both ends of the spectrum - from shy and withdrawn at the beginning to screaming queen by the end... I think he's like me in that he's a young lad who doesn't want to do the normal kind of things in life. He's not really interested in school and all that kind of shit, which I never was, you know? He's just more interested in his dreams and what he wants to be doing and he doesn't let anything get in the way of that. That aspect is very like me but, well, I'm not gay to begin with, that's one quite major difference, but I understood the character straight away... (Higgins, 1999, *Gay Times*, January, p.22)

Thus, for Hunnam playing Nathan's part seems to have been an unproblematic choice even though it was a source of mixed feelings for his parents.

My mum adored *Queer as Folk*. She used to ring up after every episode in tears saying that she was so proud of me. My dad's a real old-school hard lad from Newcastle, so to see his son having gay sex on screen wasn't a dream come true. But he respects me for making my own way in this business. (King, 2000, *The Times*, 15 January, p. 24)

Probably, a few years ago, his father's reaction would have been much harsher and would have cost him dearly. But as we have said before, times seem to be changing, and as long as gay identity is a matter of fictional playacting rather than real life, it is tolerable even to traditionalist and conservative parents. Anyway, for his father's peace of mind Hunnam was a heterosexual young man, as he had made clear in various public occasions. And he was not the only one to have felt

the need to put this issue straight. Even Kelly, when asked about how similar he was to *Queer as Folk*'s character, had made clear his difference in terms of sexual preferences by saying that he is '[n]ot very similar to him at all. I'm more confident, I'm more outgoing. I'm straight' (Marr, 2000, *Gay Times*, February, p.23). To this explicit statement of heterosexuality we can add the more implicit one by Gillen (Stuart) who declares that he did not prepare himself for playing his role: 'I'm not a big researcher and I didn't sit around thinking: what is it like to be gay? What mattered is how he behaved and not what his sexual preferences were' (Anon, 1999, *Time Out*, 20 January, p.7). But, if their heterosexuality was not spelled out clearly enough by themselves, all articles, interviews, and programme's reviews made it clear and highlighted that:

all three characters are played by straight men. Not so long ago, any channel with the balls to pour a sizeable budget into a primetime drama set in a gay milieu would have had difficulty persuading straight actors to take the parts. Nowadays, though, what matters is that the series is high-profile, the team behind it talented...and the role juicy. (Ibid, p.7)

Thus, it seems that nowadays, as long as their 'proper' sexuality is made clear for heterosexual actors, gay roles have become a juicy challenge and an opportunity to demonstrate their skills and versatility. And indeed *Queer as Folk*'s actors did their job properly, delivering some credible interpretations of homosexuality.

However, the question of sexual authenticity that *Queer as Folk* has brought to the surface regarding gay visibility and the acting environment still relies on a peculiar imbalance.

Gay roles are no longer scorned as the kiss of death for movie stars - after all, both William Hurt and Tom Hanks won Oscars for playing

gay men - but there is still not a single openly lesbian or gay major Hollywood star. This is not exactly a matter of personal choice. The entire industry operates on the principle that the American public is suffused by prejudices that must be catered to. (Gross, 2001, p.14)

Consequently, debates on gay visibility and visual justice must take into account the fact that, whilst heterosexual actors are praised for playing homosexual roles, homosexual actors have never been praised for playing heterosexual roles. Neither have they ever been encouraged to publicly state and authenticate their homosexuality. For example, when in 1985 the Hollywood star Rock Hudson publicly came out simultaneously as a gay man and AIDS sufferer, a generation of viewers that had idolised him as the ultimate heterosexual sex symbol was horrified by this revelation, by his deception. He had betrayed their trust and, invisibly, had exposed them to the potential contagion of homosexuality for so long (Meyer, 1991; Dyer, 2002).

Indeed, the extremely powerful and influential dream factory of Hollywood has been one of the most hostile and resilient places to questions of public gay visibility, and it still is. For Hollywood stars, real or pretended heterosexuality comes almost by contract. Up to now, none of the planetary famous Hollywood actors is publicly out as a homosexual. Despite rumours, gossip, or attempts at outing the few of them that are known as homosexuals in the gay social network (Gross, 2001), homosexuality is absolutely purged from the public life of Hollywood stars. Their heterosexuality, either real or fabricated, seems to be indispensable for the mainstream cinema industry to work and for their career to move on. The hegemonic visibility of heterosexuality needs to be strenuously protected, promoted and - if needed - invented (Dyer, 2002).

It is in the televisual field that in recent years we have witnessed a beginning of a more tolerant approach to gay visibility. This is not only in terms of representations but also in relation to the public perception of the sexuality of the actors who work in that environment. For example, 1996 was the year in which mainstream viewers witnessed the double coming out of Ellen/*Ellen*. The actress Ellen DeGeneres, not only was playing the coming out of the main character in the sitcom *Ellen*, but also simultaneously she was coming out herself as lesbian in real life, joining the almost non-existent number of internationally famous lesbian public personalities.²² However, the coming out of DeGeneres has surely not caused a landslide of other lesbian comings out. Over all, homosexual visibility in the acting environment as much as in many other fields remains still a mostly male 'privilege'.

For gay men contemporary television is indeed a much more tolerant place than it used to be, and the homosexuality of its public performers seems now to be more acceptable, if not sought after. I am thinking here, for example, of the TV presenter Graham Norton whose homosexuality is the *raison d'être* of his televisual and public persona. But this openness towards their homosexuality seems to be possible because certain specific TV genres and representational environments are considered less serious, light entertainment. In those contexts if an entertainer is out as long as he/she makes a fool of him/herself it is alright. This is surely not to diminish the courage that it takes to come out so publicly as a gay person. Nor it is to dismiss the contribution of those actors to gay visibility even if in such a 'light' environment. But the world of 'proper' acting is a circle where homosexuals are still not given full membership. In this circle very few actors are

²² For more information and details of the Ellen case see the chapter that Walters (2001) dedicates entirely to this historical and memorable moment for lesbian visibility.

out as homosexuals. If they publicly come out, it seems that the public would never find them believable if they were to play heterosexual characters. Their public embrace of such an identity would destroy the 'magic' of acting based on an unquestionable heterosexual imaginary and consequently could also destroy their career. Thus, it seems that the requirements of authenticity come into play again but on a double standard. In a profession that is all about performance, appearance, illusion, imagination, and desire, the public sexual identity of actors matters symbolically and materially on an uneven scale. And this is still true not only in the factories of illusion like Hollywood but also in the no less deceitful daily playacting represented by human interaction in the theatricalities of everyday social life (Sennett, 1993).

Section 4f. The commissioner and broadcaster

Queer as Folk was the first TV drama to be engineered from commission to broadcast by Channel 4's newly appointed head of drama, Gub Neal. Neal had begun his career in television as script editor at the BBC, and was controller of drama for Granada Television before he joined Channel 4. He was the man responsible for very popular programmes like *Cold Feet*, *Cracker* and *Hillsborough*, all programmes on which Shindler and McDougall had also worked on. Thus, in his new position within the channel he already knew who to trust and to rely on for successful dramas. He was indeed the catalyst for some of the key talents and forces involved in *Queer as Folk*'s creation.

He had been appointed by Michael Jackson - Channel 4's controller - precisely to bring new life and higher viewing rates to the channel's languishing drama department. In fact, media commentators had highlighted how in the last few years 'Channel 4's record on producing drama hasn't been very good' (Jury, 1999, *The Independent*, 28 February, p.4), and considering that 'Channel 4's audience share has fallen to just over 10% of viewing from the consistent 11% it held between 1993 and 1995' (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 10 June, p.5), the drama department was 'under enormous pressure to perform' (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 24 February, p.3). Thus, Neal had to radically improve the standards of his drama department producing not only quality programmes, but also programmes that would attract greater audiences. Moreover, he had to do so in light of the fact that Channel 4's drama department had been criticised for relying too heavily on the strength of imported American programmes like *Sex in the City*, *Ally McBeal*, *Friends* and *ER* without investing enough in producing and broadcasting home-grown shows (Brown, 1999, *The Guardian*, 20 December, p.18).

Thus, when McKenzie - his Deputy Commissioning Editor - talked to him about the idea of a gay drama, which she had already discussed with Davies, he fully approved the project. He clearly saw *Queer as Folk*'s potential and innovativeness because he argued:

Most of the gay drama we've had on British television has dealt with big statements: victimisation, the political agenda, AIDS... But this group of characters doesn't think they're victims at all. They're not even aware they're a minority. They simply exist and say, "Hey, we don't have to make any apologies, and we're not going away." The series has given us a chance to simply reveal gay life, to some extent, in its ordinariness. (Gross, 2001, p.181)

Not being afraid to endorse such a potentially controversial theme for his first signature drama he supported it throughout its entire gestation and broadcast, strenuously defending it because he knew that '[o]ut-and-out homophobes are going to have a problem with it because it says there's nothing wrong with being gay' (Jivani, 1999, *Time Out*, 10 February, p.20). But in the face of these potential criticisms he was adamant in affirming that '[a]s a channel and as a department, we are not about making Hansel and Gretel stories and dusting everything with a sugary coating' (Ibid. p.20). In this statement he underlines how *Queer as Folk* is not only his personal project as a gay-friendly commissioner but also the symbol of the channel's deeper commitment to issues of gay visibility and visual justice. And on this regard, I believe it is necessary to consider some background information about the history of Channel 4 to better understand *Queer as Folk*'s relationship to the Channel 4's broadcasting strategy and within the broader televisual arena of British terrestrial broadcasters.

Channel 4 was officially launched in November 1982, and by an Act of Parliament its mandate was to provide an outlet for independent producers, to promote innovation and experimentation in both form and content of programmes, and most of all, to encourage special interest programmes giving a voice to minorities and all those people marginalised or not catered to by the other terrestrial channels.²³

The clear implication behind the thinking which had gone into the creation of the channel was that historically British television had been too narrow in its range and vision, that it was nothing more than the articulation of the life-style of a mainly white, southern, middle-aged and middle class world, which excluded anyone who was not

²³ It is beyond the scope of this section to map out all public debates and events that prepared the coming into existence of Channel 4. For a more detailed account of those preparatory discourses see Lambert's (1982) *Channel Four: Television with a Difference?*

“blessed” with such characteristics. A litmus test for the channel was inevitably going to be its ability to offer programmes by and for a whole range of minority groups: minorities of age, race, nationality, culture and taste. (Docherty et al. 1988, p.31)

Consequently, Channel 4 was expected to ‘replace the traditional centralised and monolithic structure of public broadcasting while retaining the public service ideal’ (Ibid. p.1) and to ‘provide a final net to catch all those minorities - of mind, mood and matter - which somehow slipped through the public service net provided by the duopoly of the BBC and ITV’ (Ibid. p.6). Thus, the channel was supposed to ‘give a voice to the new pluralism of the 1980s’ (Harvey, 2000, p.106), and was expected to foster a greater democratisation of the visual and representational arena.

However, in its statutory commitment to minorities, special interest groups and, ultimately, to visual justice, the channel had to face an enormous set of difficulties and ambiguities starting from the problem of defining who were those minorities or interest groups. For example, did a representational pluralist agenda impartially include the minoritarian voices of the racist National Front as much as the voices of underprivileged ethnic groups? Were bee-keepers and chess-players minorities to be catered for as much as gays and lesbians? In actual fact, the notion of minority seemed to be truly elusive, changing shape and meaning according to different points of view:

The problem was that the channel’s remit for the IBA was bound to cause confusion in as much as no one knew which “tastes and interests not otherwise catered for” should remain so. Clearly child molesters could not be given a free hand, but what of those who wished to castrate rapists? People claiming that blacks were in a Babylonian captivity were to be welcomed, but what of programmes about black criminality? The depiction of sex was to be extended, but what of rubber fetishists? (Docherty et al. 1988, p.38)

The issue at stake here was something more complex than a semantic problem of definitions. Rather, it was a matter of assessing whose claims of under-representation or invisibility were worthy of visual compensation, visual recognition and visual redistribution as much as of finding appropriate ways to address and articulate those representational demands.

We have already noticed that the commissioning editors are profoundly worried about simply becoming brokers and putting the views of their clients - the minorities - on screen. There are several threads to this, not least a fear that once the hounds of minority programming have been unleashed they will pursue any commissioning editor in sight. Furthermore, it turns out that the minorities are a bit like the 101 Dalmatians, superficially very friendly, but there are so many of them. It is not just that there are what one might call the demographic minorities of ethnicity, age, and sexuality - but there are myriads of taste and interests each clamouring for its fifteen minutes of fame.... It is simply impossible to service every minority of taste and interest. (Ibid. p.57)

On top of these difficulties, what had emerged from internal discussions within the channel and external consultations of members of the public was that minorities were not homogeneous entities and the representational needs of each segment of them were often at odds with others. Thus, Channel 4 was also in the awkward position of having to finding a balance not only between needs and wants of each minority *vis à vis* hegemonic and mainstream culture and society, but also of the minorities within each minority versus needs and wants of the majority of each minority. As I have already suggested in the literature review, communities or minorities even if they share some common trait, are also divided or internally differentiated by a myriad of other features that make hardly possible any universalistic claim about them or about their needs. In the following chapters

I will further explore the consequences of this identitarian ambivalence for questions of visual justice.

Moreover, Channel 4 had also to consider and deal with the additional problematic issue of representational quality versus indiscriminate inclusiveness.

The...difficulty with the idea of minorities is that most of the commissioning editors appear unhappy with the form that these programmes take. Some types of programmes are relatively unproblematic. For instance, magazine programmes aimed at the elderly or the disabled, such as *Years Ahead*, *Same Difference* or *Listening Eyes*, work because they have an informative content aimed at uncontentious minorities. On the other hand, programmes aimed at or made by potentially controversial social, cultural, taste or sexual minorities which feel oppressed or excluded from mainstream British culture often fall into the trap of being either confessional or evangelical. At its worst the minority either speaks to itself in whispers and jargon, so that no one else can either hear or understand, or in a proselytising rant demanding attention. Many such programmes end up with an unhappy compromise between the confessional and the evangelical. (Ibid. p.57)

In other words, Channel 4 had to find formats and styles of programmes that were adequate to address complex representational questions and all of this had to be done without losing sight of quality. The fact that its remit was about targeting problematic minorities or tastes was not going to be a justification for bad or sloppy television. Channel 4 did not want to be a mere container for all sorts of programmes but an editorial channel with a flexible but distinctive notion of quality.

Hence, it seems that since its creation Channel 4 had to negotiate with the shifting nature of representation and the even more shifting needs of 'minorities'. In the face of this general problem, it needs to be underlined that one of the most problematic 'minorities' or 'tastes' to deal with was surely the gay one.

No question of morality, however, has come anywhere near in significance illustrating the potential difficulties in fulfilling the channel's mandate as that of the treatment of gays and gay issues. (Ibid. p.25)

Criticisms coming from right wing segments of society were arguing that homosexuality, even though recently decriminalised, surely should not be encouraged or promoted, as Channel 4 seemed to be doing. They were claiming that British viewers should not be exposed to representations of homosexuality, which were supposedly offending the majority of the national viewing and that were out of touch with popular taste and popular moral conviction (Docherty et al. 1988). But despite these criticisms, the channel always defended its liberal and pluralistic approach to the broadest spectrum of sexualities and its specific dedication to gay visibility. It indeed produced and promoted some of the most path-breaking homosexual representations of the last few decades. Ahead of any other terrestrial TV station, Channel 4 produced and showed landmark programmes like the first gay lifestyle show *Out on Tuesday* and films like *Jubilee* by Derek Jarman or *My Beautiful Laundrette*, which I have already described in Chapter 1 as a milestone for gay visibility and which I have already prized as a turning point in my own cultural, political, and emotional life as a gay man.

In the light of what I have just said it seems clear that *Queer as Folk* was part of a longer commitment of Channel 4 to gay visibility and of its broader articulation of questions of visual justice. Consequently, what I want to explore here is how *Queer as Folk* may highlight changes or continuity in the ethos of the channel and in its cultural strategies after more than two decades of public broadcasting. I am going to do this by considering the opinions of Channel 4's

controller Jackson on the channel's role in contemporary culture and about the role of *Queer as Folk* in its broadcasting strategy.²⁴ This is what he had to say about *Queer as Folk* and its representation of gay identity:

The programme I think sums up our aspirations is *Queer as Folk*. It was funny, truthful and stylish. In the past, this subject would have been handled in a self-conscious manner. But in *Queer as Folk* there are no "issues". There are only emotions, unsympathetic characters and, shockingly, no safe-sex messages. It's a programme that no other broadcaster would have shown. (Jackson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 5 July, p.2)

From his statement it seems to emerge how *Queer as Folk* was of key significance within Channel 4's broadcasting strategy. Not only was it part of the ongoing commitment of the channel to its statutory remit and to issues of gay visibility but it also symbolised a radical transformation from Channel 4's former approaches to the representation of minorities. In Jackson's view it is the 'no issue' approach that embodies the new ethos of the channel in representing homosexuality given that:

Once Channel 4's audience were viewers of disparate minorities. Channel 4's specialist constituencies are now an integral part of a new emergent culture in Britain... Traditional minorities have achieved greater assimilation. They don't want only specialist programmes that reinforce their separateness within society, but also programmes that bring their attitudes and interests into the centre ground of the schedule. (Ibid. p.2)

It seems that the channel, whilst remaining truthful to its original mission, is now committed to update its remit in order to be in tune with new and deep changes at the core of British society. Consequently, the channel is trying to get rid of the

²⁴ It may be interesting to remember that Jackson when commissioner at the BBC, had backed the TV series *This Life* which included one of the most innovative gay characters on national television.

idea of being a 'minority channel for minority audiences' (Ibid. p.2) and perhaps of the very notion of minority itself because of its apparent obsolescence. In fact, as a Channel 4 insider argues:

back in 1982, to be black, Asian or gay was very much a defining characteristic for people and not in the mainstream. But now you've got gay cabinet ministers these things are very much part of the mainstream. Our remit still enshrines that we should appeal to certain types of audiences, but we can do that in the mainstream. (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 10 June, p.5)

Therefore, it seems that *Queer as Folk*'s stylish, 'no issues' representation of homosexuality mirrored precisely the needs and wants of Channel 4's cosmopolitan, hedonistic, middle class, libertarian, educated, and worldly audience, whose values 'cut across age, class and gender' (Jackson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 5 July, p.2). In this more segmented, but all-enveloping mainstream culture and society Jackson argues that 'Channel 4 is taking what you might call a "third way"' (Ibid. p.2). *Queer as Folk* had to stay in a representational middle ground and to keep everybody happy, both homosexuals and heterosexuals, or at least satisfying the majority of the minority. In fact, Jackson suggested that '[t]elevision executives are no longer in charge of television - viewers are...in an age of multi-channel television you've got to stand for something and mean something for viewers' (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 10 June, p.5). Therefore *Queer as Folk* could be understood as an answer to what the public wanted to see. And indeed, its enormous public success may be there to signify that the programme had satisfied the needs and wants of viewers.

However, the statements that we have just explored raise some clear concerns in particular in relation to questions of uneven and unequal access to the visual

arena. For example, the fact that *Queer as Folk* had ‘developed iconic value for Channel 4, appearing on much of their publicity material and mission statements, signifying the sincerity of their liberal credentials’ (Munt, 2000, p.531) may be seen in a different light if we consider that the programme, in representing the lives of white, middle-class (or aspiring to be) gay male subjects was ultimately fulfilling the visual demands of white, middle-class, gay male viewers who are amongst the most affluent of British minorities. Therefore, the visual integration and mainstreaming that Channel 4 was promoting through *Queer as Folk* may be understood as the channel bowing to the needs or wants of the most mainstream, powerful and affluent of the minorities it was supposed to be catering for. For example, given the overall lesbian invisibility or marginality in British culture and society, it is not surprising that the signature programme for Channel 4’s new ethos in terms of visibility was so tightly linked to images of gay male sexuality. Despite Jackson’s inclusivist claims that ‘Channel 4’s special constituencies are now an integral part of a new emergent culture in Britain’ (Jackson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 5 July, p.2), lesbians are less represented than gay men on any TV channel, including Channel 4. Thus, we should bear in mind that not all social groups or minorities can equally afford to ‘legitimate or symbolically convert’ (Skeggs, 1999, p.228) their social existence into televisual presence and that those processes of visual inclusion and mainstreaming that Jackson is trying to advertise and promote are inevitably intertwined with the working of other exclusionary dynamics, which I will further explore in the following chapter.

Moreover, Channel 4’s ‘new mainstream thinking’ (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 10 June, p.5) can be criticised as a betrayal of the very notion of public service broadcasting which should be at the core of the channel’s ethos. Its

unconditional surrendering to the sovereignty of visual consumers (Featherstone, 1991) seems to justify a notion of visibility exclusively regulated by the wants of the market. However, as Jackson has argued, after more than two decades of public broadcasting the channel has to face new challenges and to redefine the legacy of his predecessors.

In 1987, when Michael Grade took over from Jeremy Isaacs as chief executive, he joked his job would have been to lower the audience share. Later he described the channel as a “minority public service broadcaster by statute”. (Gibson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 10 June, p.5)

Jackson justifies his rejection of this minority logic and his adoption of mainstream thinking and of ‘third way’ visibility because:

The digital revolution means we have to be rigorous about what we bring forward, or we risk being ignored. Channel 4 is seeking to make talking-point television, television that creates ripples in the culture. Television used to be a small pond, and it was easy to create a significant ripple with a pebble. Competition has made it a raging sea; if you toss a pebble it has no impact. We need to toss boulders. We don’t want to enter a vicious circle of smaller audience and less revenue leading to smaller programme budgets and reduced quality - leading, inevitably, to yet smaller audiences and less revenue again. Our strength as broadcasters rests on us defying this equation. (Jackson, 1999, *The Guardian*, 5 July, p.2)

Queer as Folk and its articulation of gay visibility, then, needs to be contextualized in this new media scenario in which public broadcasting as much as visual justice as an articulation of forms of visual recognition or redistribution have to face the challenges and necessities of our ‘multi-channel world’ (Ibid. p.5) which I will analyse and discuss in more details in the following chapters.

Section 4e. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed some of the ‘social and material foundations’ (Morley, 1992, p.5) that presuppose *Queer as Folk*’s textual and narrative representation of gay identity and its articulation of gay visibility and visual justice. By discussing the programme’s creative background I intended to demonstrate how *Queer as Folk* is the historical result of certain choices, investments, and decisions of individuals, companies and TV broadcasters. Its images of gay identity are the visual materialization of a much broader network of cultural, social, and economic dynamics and necessities that have shaped and regulated not only the very possibility of those images being created but also of being circulated, viewed and marketed. Moreover, they must be understood in conjunction with the materiality of historical and technological transformation, for example, the progressive importance of digital broadcasting, Sky TV, Pay TV, or subscription channels that are all contributing to a redefinition of viewing dynamics, of broadcasting strategies, and notions of public services (Gross, 2001). At the same time, my discussion of *Queer as Folk*’s scriptwriter, producer, directors, actors, and broadcaster intended to homosexualise those discourses about creativity, the political economy of visual media or of cultural industries. I wanted to demonstrate the centrality of questions around gay visibility and visual justice to understand social life in a way in which what becomes visible is no longer only a political economy of sexuality but also a sexual politics of economy.

CHAPTER 5. *Queer as Folk* in/and the public arena

Section 5a. Introduction: gay visibility and the problem with the public

In this chapter I broaden the analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s articulation of gay visibility and visual justice by considering the reaction of the public to the programme and by surveying the key themes that structured the public debate on its visual representation of gay identity. To circumscribe my analysis I will focus my attention mainly on the public debate as reported by the printed press, comparing the reactions of mainstream press and alternative gay press to evaluate differences and similarities of opinion within and across each group. Then, I will report and analyse the number and nature of complaints forwarded to the national TV watchdogs like the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission, and their final assessment of *Queer as Folk*'s suitability for the public visual arena. In this way I aim to chart and analyse the discursive field around gay visibility and visual justice as illustrated by the public debate on *Queer as Folk*.

But, before I begin a more detailed review of how *Queer as Folk*'s images of gay identity were further circulated and how questions of gay visibility and visual justice were publicly constructed, mobilised, and contested, I believe I must introduce and broadly discuss the problematic relationship between gay identity and the very idea of public or publicness. This is because in assessing the significance of *Queer as Folk* in/and the public domain we should bear in mind that:

[t]he Wolfenden Report (1957), which led to the liberalisation of law on prostitution in 1959 and male homosexuality in 1967, concluded that it was not the role of the law to interfere in the private lives of citizens, but rather it was the law's duty to preserve public order and decency. Issues like homosexuality and prostitution (and later abortion and pornography) were thus defined as matters of individual conscience, acceptable as private actions of the individual, as long as they did not encroach into the public arena. Thus, whilst homosexuality may have been defined as a matter of individual conscience, the 1967 changes to the law pertaining to sexual acts between men nevertheless maintained legal limitations that did not apply to heterosexuality, on the grounds that "homosexual" acts in public might cause offence to others. By implication, public decency and public order - indeed the public sphere as it is defined in legal terms - is identified with heterosexuality. (Richardson, 2000a, p.33)

The liberty allowed to homosexuality was thus confined to the private sphere, and to gay people was granted the negative freedom to be able to 'cultivate' their dubious inclinations only in their private, away from the public gaze. The confinement of the homosexual to the claustrophobic freedom of the closet, and to the shadow of public invisibility was justified by the argument that all sexual acts, regardless of their heterosexual or homosexual orientation, belong to the private sphere and should not be allowed to invade the public sphere in order to avoid any chance of causing offence or upsetting the general public (Brown, 1980). But the inconsistency, ambiguity or duplicity of this justification is clearly demonstrated by Warner when he suggests that:

not all sexualities are public or private in the same way. Same-sex persons kissing, embracing, or holding hands in public view commonly excite disgust even to the point of violence, whereas mixed-sex persons doing the same things are invisibly ordinary, even applauded. Nelly boys are said to be "flaunting" their sexuality, just by swishing or lipping. They are told to keep it to themselves, even though the "it" in question is their relation to their own bodies. Butch men, meanwhile, can swagger aggressively without being accused of flaunting anything. (Warner, 2002, p.24)

In this way he highlights how the problem of gay public in/visibility is not really about the offensiveness of public display of sexual acts *per se* or about the supposedly private nature of sexuality. Rather, it is about the fact that all that is visibly recognisable as suggesting homosexuality is considered obscene by mainstream culture and therefore judged as unsuitable for the public arena. Even in the absence of explicit sexual actions involving genital stimulation or display, the very embodiment of gay people, the way they move or dress, their expressions of affectivity (even the most tender or a-sexual) are far too often considered offensive and indecent. It is the deeply sexualised 'nature' and existence of homosexuals (Foucault, 1990) that is intrinsically considered indecent and against public order. Thus, we must consider how the question about the visible presence of gay people is regulated by 'deep and unwritten rules about the kinds of behaviour and eroticism that are appropriate to the public' (Warner, 2002, p.25) and we must consider how those rules are all subjected to the grip of heteronormativity.

The private/public distinction is, then, a sexualised notion: it has a different meaning depending on whether one is applying it to a heterosexual or homosexual context. For lesbians and gays the private has been institutionalised as the border of social tolerance, as the place where you are 'allowed' to live relatively safely as long as one does not attempt to occupy the public. In some instances that might even mean feeling uncomfortable about talking about lesbian or gay issues in one's own garden or backyard. For heterosexuals not only is the construction of private space likely to be very different, but the public is also likely to be a far less contested or constrained space than for most homosexuals. Although...we need to relate this to race and gender; various forms of oppressive practices, most notably racialised and/or sexual violence, also render the public a contested space and the public/private distinction a gendered and racialised construction.' (Richardson, 2002, p.34)

Indeed, any unreflexive and direct identification of notions of 'public' as the expression of impartiality, universality, the general interest, the common good, or a collective sphere of social debate and negotiation (Habermas, 2000), is indeed highly problematic if not totally fictional or illusory (Robbins, 1993). For gay people - as much as for many other dissident or subaltern subjectivities - universalistic and totalising assumptions about the 'publicness' of the public have been the object of cultural, social, and political contestation, as I have already suggested in the literature review regarding questions of citizenship and homosexuality. Because of their sexuality or embodied subjectivity not all citizens enjoy the same rights, privileges or advantages either in the public or in the private sphere. Thus, the gay struggle to come out of the closet and achieve public visibility must be seen as 'a way of overcoming both the denial of public existence that is so often the form of domination and the incoherence of experience that domination creates, an experience that often feels more like invisibility than like the kind of privacy you value' (Warner, 2002, p.26). Consequently, the significance of *Queer as Folk's* visualisation of gay identity needs to be explored in the context of this wider and unresolved relationship between the personal experience of gayness and its public existence or performance in a social and public space that is still profoundly ruled by heteronormative constraints.

In fact, as I have already suggested in the previous chapter, public visibility for homosexuals has often been a problem even in social, cultural, and productive public spheres based on the fabrication of dreams, illusions and fictions, such as the acting environment. For gay actors had always to repudiate their private homosexuality and publicly enforce a fiction of visible heterosexuality. Thus, in

the following sections of this chapter I aim at further assessing the problematic encounter of gay identity with notions of the public by locating discourses of gay visibility and visual justice in the supposedly public sphere of the printed media. In this way I intend not only to survey what the national viewing public had to say regarding *Queer as Folk* but also simultaneously to analyse what those debates reveal about changing notions of public media, public culture, public audiences, and public representational arenas.

Section 5b. *Queer as Folk* in/and the mainstream press

Queer as Folk's visions of gay identity were made public not only via its televisual broadcast but also by the furore it triggered in the printed press. The national press reverberated and amplified *Queer as Folk's* public impact by reviewing it all the way through its broadcast. The viewing of each episode was anticipated and introduced to national audiences by press previews and was followed by favourable or furious press reviews, and letters of praise or loathing written by viewers/readers. The programme's visual representations of gay identity and gay life were simultaneously monitored, assessed, and multiplied on print. In this way, both newspapers and magazines were opening up a public forum in which media professionals, cultural commentators, and ordinary viewers alike, by arguing over *Queer as Folk*, were publicly articulating questions of gay visibility and visual justice. In this section I want to map out and analyse the key

terms, themes, and oppositions of the public dispute over a visible gay identity as reported and generated by the mainstream printed press.²⁵

However, before I move to do that, I want to emphasise how in the UK, as much as in other Western countries, the mainstream press has often been one of the key sites and agents for the construction of a perverse, pathological, or deviant homosexual identity (Weeks, 1977), and therefore as one of the most powerful instruments for the production and reproduction of homosexual social invisibility. Until not so long ago, the political economy of the mainstream written media was articulated around the unquestionable hegemony of heteronormative dynamics and very little space - if any at all - was allowed for positive portraits of homosexual lives or sympathetic news about them (Sanderson, 1995; Gross, 2001). Mainstream publications were relentlessly warning the assumed heterosexual national readership about the threat to public order and decency represented by the vice of homosexuality. For example, in the 1980s, in response to the AIDS epidemics the mainstream press spilled rivers of inks to publicly accuse and curse homosexuals for the spreading of the virus and for the material and symbolic pollution of the public body (Watney, 1987). Consequently, the mainstream printed press has been one of the main targets of gay cultural and political intervention. In this light, then, the very possibility of the written press coverage of *Queer as Folk* should perhaps be understood as part of this ongoing struggle for the democratisation of this representational arena and for the affirmation of more visual justice.²⁶

²⁵ It is beyond the scope of this research to conduct a thorough review of all mainstream printed publications. By mainstream press I will refer mostly to newspapers, because they have a higher readership and wider national distribution than more specialised publications, and therefore, they can be regarded as potentially more representative of public opinion.

²⁶ Gross (2001) provides a more detailed historical account of the gay struggle for visibility in the representational arena of the printed press.

Having said that, it needs to be specified that enormous differences exist between the cultural, social, and political editorial positions of various mainstream publications. Any easy categorisation of them according to a generic model of liberal/progressive versus traditionalist/conservative, would not account for the nuances in their views on the overall question of gay visibility and in particular on *Queer as Folk*. For example, it would be fairly correct to imagine *The Times*' and *The Guardian*'s positions concerning *Queer as Folk* to be at the two extremities of the spectrum of the public opinion. *The Guardian* is meant to cater for a supposedly liberal readership and therefore to be more sympathetic to questions of gay visibility whilst the Times is supposed to cater for a conservative one and therefore to be less sympathetic to them. However, on several occasions even the liberal *The Guardian* has taken bland, ambiguous, if not hostile positions towards gay visibility and visual justice demonstrating how moderate liberalism might be *vis à vis* questions regarding homosexuality (Gross, 2001). Consequently, in the following examination of the press responses to *Queer as Folk*, I will try to avoid any straightforward assumption about the editorial policy of each publication, but I will concentrate on highlighting the kind of discourses which are permissible and possible in this mainstream public arena regarding gay visibility and visual justice.

I will start by considering Lynda Lee-Potter's review of *Queer as Folk*'s first episode, which was published on the pages of the *The Daily Mail*. I have decided to report it almost in its entirety because her uncompromising condemnation of *Queer as Folk* was so paradigmatic that, in a sense, it can be considered almost like a template for some of the key disputes that informed the public debate over questions of gay visibility and visual justice. Moreover, it was so exemplary that

other media commentators and the general public alike referred to it, quoted it, and mentioned it whenever they engaged in a public discussion on the series. This is what she thought about it:

I have just watched an advance video of *Queer as Folk* which can be seen on Channel 4 tonight. It's the first homosexual drama series on British TV...The leading character, Stuart, is a handsome PR executive who captivates and damages everyone he touches... He picks up 15-year-old Nathan, who is confused about his sexuality, and seduces him. The camera hovers relentlessly over their naked bodies as their writhings are shown in graphic detail. In every relationship he's driven by appetite, not by love or affection. "Why doesn't anyone stop me, it's not my fault", he cries. It's an emotive plea for help and one couldn't help feeling: "Why doesn't anyone stop television bosses?" Too many of them are hell-bent on demonstrating that nothing is sacred or taboo. The acting in the Channel 4 drama by unknown performers is so good one feels a voyeur, which is not an emotion I relish. A respected professional actor should not be asked to lie in naked, copulating abandonment on top of another actor. This is the first time I've ever seen explicit homosexual sex on television and my main emotion is intense sadness that actors are being exploited in this way. Sex is a private activity between two people conducted hopefully out of love or need but only debased when someone is degraded. Having just watched it I feel degraded. I suspect that responsible adult homosexuals will react in exactly the same way. The fact that this is a programme about gays is almost irrelevant. I would feel the same way if the series were about promiscuous heterosexuals. Television is not the medium on which live sex should be shown. Those involved with the series will say: "It's a serious issue. It's time homosexuals were allowed to be truly represented in contemporary drama. It explores a subject that deserves air time." The truth is that gay sex in this instance is being used to grab the headlines. Relentless sex scenes are a cheap and lazy way to catch the attention of viewers. The dialogue is minimal and the plot is perfunctory. Anyone who criticises it will no doubt be seen as homophobic, but I condemn it because it is portraying an act that should not in any circumstances be portrayed on the public stage... Increasingly Channel 4 appears to feel that there is always some other boundary to cross, that it's perfectly permissible to show anything that happens in real life. Surely the time has come to say that it's an indulgent and phoney philosophy and in this case corrupt. *Queer as Folk* is virtually a live sex show, which is indefensible. "Once people get going with it," says the producer Nicola Shindler, "they'll love it." Sadly she might be right about certain viewers because the actors are so charismatic... "Why be ashamed? It's a marvellous lifestyle," says the scriptwriter. This is the integral message of the drama, but in truth it's a lifestyle that demeans

and destroys people. In the end it makes them dissatisfied and unable to commit to anyone. It's presented in a semi-documentary way that will make the impressionable believe these are real-life characters. This will no doubt appeal to young gay men at a time when casual sex is fraught with danger. The physical gratification of naked bodies will arouse many people. The 15-year-old Nathan will almost certainly catapult other young men into the gay world. Some homosexuals will salute this programme as visionary brave and true to life. Others with more wisdom will recognise the fact that it's exploiting young gay men in order to give cheap thrills to inadequate, sad viewers. Dirk Bogarde once starred in a deeply moving film in which he played a happily married man who was inexorably sexually drawn to a handsome boy. There were no sex scenes, there wasn't even a kiss, but the emotional content was explosive. His anguish was explored through dialogue, not through explicit copulation. There is something boringly monotonous about the sex act when emotions aren't involved. I have many brilliant creative gay friends. This is unfair to them because it suggests that they are all amoral, disloyal and about as committed in personal relationships as rabbits. It could have been a terrific drama but chose to be a seedy sex show. *Queer as Folk*, with its lewd and coarse language and ceaseless copulation, goes out at 10.30 at night but it shouldn't be going out at all. More than anything it proves that we need censorship. Year by year the boundaries of what is deemed permissible are pushed wider and wider apart. Sadly there are far too many cynical people in powerful positions in television who lack any kind of common sense or antennae about what we ought to be free to see in our own homes. Certainly we shouldn't be at liberty to watch naked actors having relentless homosexual sex. Any nation which allows this without any voice raised in dissent is lacking in both wisdom and self-respect. It's hell-bent on destruction. (Lee-Potter, 1999, *The Daily Mail*, 23 February, p.8)

The article seem to suggest that her core concern about the programme was that *Queer as Folk's* portrayal of gay identity and its explicit representation of gay sex was disrupting and blurring the proper confines between public and private. Holding on to this disjunctive understanding of social life in which 'private and public have been commonly and sensibly understood as distinct zones' (Warner, 2002, p.26), she presumed a clear distinction between what activities belong to the private and what others to the public realm. In her view, sex indisputably belongs to the private sphere, to the realm of intimacy, the privacy of the bedroom and therefore it should never be allowed to invade the public visual arena.

However, in the last few decades the contribution of feminist and gay scholars to the debate over the question of public versus private has been the demonstration that even the most private matters of social life are shaped by public powers and dynamics as much as public life is intrinsically bounded to questions of personal embodiment (Richardson, 2000). The public existence of people is shaped by the fact that 'we are all always already sexual citizens, but we are differently marked in terms of our sexual citizenship status, in terms of how our sexual identity fits (or doesn't fit) with the prescribed, naturalised heterosexual presumptive of the notion of citizenship itself' (Bell and Binnie, 2000, p.27). Thus, in a public visual arena where the sexual nature and dimension of heterosexual power is rendered invisible because naturalised, the public visibility of gay identity is only possible by magnifying and visualising its sexual abjection.

Moreover, in this article *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was deemed unsuitable for the public visual arena not only because it was unveiling the allegedly private sphere of sexuality, but also because the sex portrayed in it was promiscuous gay sex. For the journalist of *The Daily Mail* sexuality is acceptable only as expression of love and within the space of the monogamous couple. This prescriptive political economy of affects, bodies, and pleasures presupposes the reproductive family as the base for public and social life. It totally disqualifies the recreational dimension of non-procreative sexualities either hetero or homo. It also excludes any possibility of eroticising the social contract or imagining forms of sociality triggered by homosexual desires and pleasures rather than destroyed by them (Bersani, 1995; Warner, 2002). On the contrary, sexual promiscuity could potentially be understood as a form of sensual generosity, as a

way of reaching and interacting with a greater number of people, embodying the notion of care, and enhancing rather than impoverishing notions of commitment or love. These normative assumptions regarding the proper sexual conduct that can guarantee full civil rights and social visibility have been the target of political contestation not only from homosexuals but also from other sexual dissidents alike. And the article's suggestion that heterosexual promiscuity is as despicable as homosexual promiscuity does not make this position more universally acceptable or exempt it from critical scrutiny.

The journalist's conviction that responsible homosexuals would have endorsed her prescriptive notions of public life highlights another element of the debate on gay visibility as form of citizenship or public participation in social life, which is the distinction between the good homosexual and the bad homosexual (Bell and Binnie, 2000). In fact, current shifts in public discourses in Britain from notions of deviance to ones of social exclusion (Rose, 1999) suggest that homosexual social inclusion could be an option for those gay people prepared to accept the values of the society in which they aim to be integrated, rather than 'ungratefully' trying to change rules and norms of what society is all about, or refusing the responsibilities of a social pact never stipulated on equal grounds.

Furthermore, the article suggests that her concerns about *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay sex should not be viewed as symptoms of homophobia. Rather, they were supposed to show a sincere concern and respect for gay people, their bodies and their public images. In line with an anti-pornography rhetoric based on the pureness of bodies and on the private nature of pleasure (Vance, 1992), the programme's images of gay sexuality were indisputably equated to forms of commodification, exploitation, or they were seen as a shrewd marketing

strategy. And questions of visual exploitation were further highlighted by the journalist's pity for heterosexual professional actors supposedly obliged to endure the degrading experience of having to play a homosexual role. But, as I have already suggested in the previous chapter, it is rather telling that mainstream discourses have never been concerned about the welfare of homosexual actors having to play heterosexual roles. The critical analysis of these themes for questions around gay visibility and visual justice will be further expanded in the following chapter.

In addition to this, we must consider the paradoxical consequences of Lee-Potter's appraisal of the good acting in *Queer as Folk*. This, rather than being a compliment to the actors and praise for the programme, was seen by her as an additional flaw because *Queer as Folk's* true-to-life representation of gay identity could influence or corrupt young naïve viewers. Here we can see how notions of corruption are heteronormatively and hegemonically appropriated. In assuming the rightness and naturality of heterosexuality they exclude any worry about defenceless homosexual viewers who might be corrupted by the hegemony of heterosexual representations and lured or convinced to adopt a heterosexual lifestyle. That would be not corrupting but curing. It would be to return people to heterosexuality.

Moreover, the journalist makes a clear distinction between the authenticity of lives associated with heterosexuality and the un-authenticity of gay existence, which is seen only as a lifestyle, a fad, a fashion or a whim. In this way the idea of gay lifestyle is coupled to superficiality and emptied of any potential for deeper human interaction. The gay lifestyle as represented by *Queer as Folk* is also directly associated with images of physical and moral decay. Casual gay sex

seems necessarily to imply the risk of AIDS or of all other venereal diseases, as if heterosexual sex was immune from any risks. Paradoxically, it was the ethical and political intervention of the gay community and the activism of promiscuous homosexuals that fostered and rearticulated a more honest public debate on questions of medical and social hygiene, to the ultimate advantage of the worldwide majority of AIDS sufferers who are heterosexuals.

A dynamic of moral corruption and deception seems also to inform her reading of the relationship between Stuart and Nathan. In her view it is unmistakably Stuart that seduces the sexually confused Nathan. Nathan's consent was cunningly 'shown' to be so because it is hardly possible to accept that young gay people may have 'naturally' embraced their own homosexuality instead of having been lured into it by vicious adults. To me, on the contrary, Nathan did not seem to be confused at all about his sexual desires and appetites. He appeared to know exactly what he wanted, and eagerly accepted being facilitated by Stuart in the discovery of the joys of gay sex and to be introduced to the - sometimes painful - dynamics of adult emotional and embodied social life.

The theme of corruption appears again in the article's reference to Dirk Bogarde's anguished interpretation in Dearden's (1961) film, *Victim*, in which a seemingly happy marriage is destroyed by the perniciousness of homosexual desire. As opposed to what seems to have happened in *Queer as Folk*, in this film it is the adult man who succumbs to the enslaving and perilous beauty of a youth. As the film's title clearly suggests, Dirk Bogarde (who was a closeted gay man in his public life) was seen as the passive victim of homosexuality, and therefore as the victim of a sickness. It is rather telling that Lee-Potter saw this movie as a better example of public representations of homosexuality. She was wishing, in

the contemporary visual arena, for a comeback of stories of sexual frustration, unhappiness, and blackmail.²⁷ Despite the fact that, in the whole of *Queer as Folk*, sexually explicit scenes are very few, those were the only images that she acknowledged about the show and that emerged at the forefront of her questioning of gay public visibility. Gay identity is so pervaded by its perverse sexuality that any other dimensions of *Queer as Folk*'s public representation of it disappeared in the background.

Ultimately, Lee-Potter's opinion of *Queer as Folk*'s unsuitability for the mainstream visual arena reveals the heteronormative assumptions behind discourses of nationhood, family viewing and television consumption. In fact, her understanding of home entertainment seems to presuppose the exclusion of gay viewers. The 'our own homes' she is referring to clearly are not meant to be gay homes or households. Gay people are implicitly and explicitly excluded from the privileges of citizenship and therefore public broadcasting should not have to account for their presence as national viewers, for their rights as audience, to cater for their tastes, and to fulfil their visual needs. Thus, television bosses that push the boundaries of visual and representational freedom allowing gay images to circulate so freely in the public visual arena seem to be undermining the very idea of nationhood. They are bringing the nation to the brink of destruction. In her view homosexuality seems to undermine the very foundation of national social order and cohesion. Consequently, Lee-Potter's very 'democratic' solution for visual justice is censorship. Whilst she is freely using the printed public arena for venting her own ideas and opinions on the programme, she is asking for a much stricter regulation of the visual public arena, in the unfounded certainty that

²⁷ A more detailed analysis of *Victim*'s representational regime regarding homosexuality can be found in Dyer's (2000a).

regulators themselves could never possibly be gay. Needless to say, *The Daily Mail* journalist seems to have hated the show.²⁸

More favourable reviews of *Queer as Folk* appeared on the columns of *The Times* even though some of them revealed a rather paradoxical and ambiguous taken on the programme's representation of gayness.

So, if we look beyond the gayness in *Queer as Folk*, is there anything more complex there?... I think there probably is more, but *Queer as Folk* is trying so hard to taunt primmer viewers into being affronted that it's in danger of making the rest of us slightly bored while it gets its bravado out of its system... If *Queer as Folk* didn't have the novelty of gay sex, would anyone make the same fuss about it? Or got excited about it in a positive way, rather than just because they were outraged by its depiction of under-age man-boy sex? It has a certain cynicism that could just be a stab at chic metropolitan knowingness, but you can imagine it leaving a nasty taste in many viewers' mouths. (Joseph, 1999, *The Times*, 24 February, p.47)

This article shows the intrinsic ambivalence that structure public discourses around visions of gay identity. Although the journalist recognises the novelty of *Queer as Folk*'s public portrayal of gay identity he immediately dismisses it as bravado, and he avoids interrogating the reasons for its novelty. Strangely enough, the first time that gayness is publicly represented in such an explicit way viewers/readers are immediately asked to see beyond it whilst they are never asked to see beyond the heterosexuality of heterosexual dramas. In fact, if *Queer as Folk* is publicly understood as a gay drama it is because Western culture is still articulated by binary thinking about social identities where heterosexuality figures as the normal, and therefore invisible, whilst homosexuality is made visible because of its abnormality. Hence, as with Lee-Potter's considerations, the main

²⁸ Her spiteful review of *Queer as Folk* was not really surprising considering that 'The Mail's founder, Lord Northcliffe said his winning formula was to give his readers "a daily hate" (Toynbee, 2004, *The Guardian*, 26 March, p.15) and that homosexuality has often served as the Mail's 'privileged' ingredient for this dose of daily hatred.

thing *The Times'* journalist acknowledges about *Queer as Folk* is its representation of explicit gay sex. He completely overlooks any other representational aspect of the programme. He ignores the explicit exposure of homophobia or the portrait of the difficulty of living in a society where going beyond gayness has often meant its eradication rather than its defence, or simple acceptance.

Moreover, the article, by associating metropolitan worldliness with representation of gay identity highlights how questions of spatial relations are still paramount to the understanding gay public visibility, and that a lifestyle that is visible and permissible in a sophisticated urban setting might not be as visually welcomed in the more conservative peripheries (Ingram et al. 1997).

Furthermore, it is worth noticing the article's rhetorical style and assumption about who is the 'us' that is supposed to get bored with *Queer as Folk's* representation of gayness. In which viewers' mouths is gayness going to taste so bitter? I suspect that, as in Lee-Potter's patriotic rhetoric, it is the national heterosexual majority that is implicitly understood as the rightful audience of mainstream media, and which is also implicitly seen as possessing the hegemonic power to decide the tastes and flavours of the supposedly 'public' representational arena.

Even for another of *The Times'* columnists it was the under-age relation between Stuart and Nathan that emerged as *Queer as Folk's* most unpalatable element.

Any number of good jokes cannot make up for something as fundamentally dubious as a scene shown during the first episode of Channel 4's sparkly, well-written - and, yes, funny - new sitcom *Queer as Folk*. What possible excuse is there for showing us the

explicit seduction of a (willing) child by an adult? The boy, aged 15, was driven to school the next morning, amid much merry banter, in a car that had been graffitied with the word “Queer”. I wonder how eager Channel 4 would be to show such a scene with a female 15-year-old being taken to school the morning after by older men, in a car graffitied with “Paedophile”? (Knight, 1999, *The Sunday Times*, 28 February, p.3)

Despite positive stylistic considerations about the programme, the journalist does not have any doubts about the unsuitability of *Queer as Folk* for the public visual arena. As in the article in *The Daily Mail*, the relationship between Nathan and Stuart is depicted as an unmistakable case of paedophilia and therefore of a criminal offence. Regardless of the fact that Nathan is almost 16, which is the current legal age of consent in the UK, the article still portrays him as a child. In this way his character is infantilised to the point that any idea of consent or sexual maturity is ruled out. The article does not encourage any open and rational debate on the nuances, subtleties, implications and complications of inter-generational emotional or sexual relationships (Rubin, 1995).

Moreover, Nathan’s vulnerability and the overall wrongness of his relationship with Stuart is emphasised by its association with the image of the abuse of a young girl by an older man. This scenario seems to imply the intrinsic passivity of female sexuality, and implies virginity and purity as social value. It is rather telling that the journalist does not associate Nathan’s sexual discovery with another trope of the mainstream public imaginary on sexual initiations, which is the one where a male adolescent is introduced to the pleasure of the flesh by an older woman. Those images and scenarios would be read as the welcomed ingress of the boy into manhood and virility. In opposition to that reading, Nathan’s sexual initiation rather than being understood as his ritual and proud ingress into gayhood is mourned as his corruption and recruitment into the disputable legions

of homosexuality. The fact that in the UK, till November 2000, the age of consent for homosexuals was higher than that for heterosexuals highlights how the public understanding of young people's psychological, emotional, sexual, and legal maturity *vis à vis* homosexuality was regulated by deep homophobic biases and that questions of equality and consent are still a matter of public debate (Waites, 2003).

Furthermore, whilst this article displays a firm condemnation for what the journalist understands as paedophilia, it seems to disregard the urgency and necessity of a public debate on homophobic school bullying, which has physically and psychologically scarred so many vulnerable young homosexuals like Nathan. Thus, Channel 4's decision to broadcast the scene in which Stuart brings Nathan to school in the car graffitied with the word 'Queer', should be understood as a public broadcaster's commitment to denounce and fight homophobia rather than to promote paedophilia. Ultimately, the broadcaster's lack of concern about Stuart's prideful public display of the word 'Queer' should not surprise because, whilst paedophilia is a criminal offence and usually entails physical or psychological cruelty and abuse, homosexuality or queerness does not intrinsically presuppose or entail any physical or psychological brutality. Homosexuality is *per se* neither a crime nor a vice.

A broader and more pluralistic understanding of the social implications of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was articulated from the columns of *The Sunday Times*:

Television today treats gays in the way it treated blacks in the 1960s, with a sickening, guess-who's-coming-to-dinner, kid-glove sycophancy. I don't know if there is a gay word for Uncle Tomism, but there ought to be. Gay characters have to shine with Galahad-like

goodness, be richer, better-looking, more honest and decent to sugar-coat the essential, pitiable, unpalatable truth of what they do with their bits. So the best thing about *Queer as Folk* was that it didn't buy into any of that. It pointed out a fundamental truth about democracy and freedom. That there aren't grades or divisions of equality... We either live in a society that doesn't discriminate on race, religion, sexual orientation and bad breath, or we don't. You can't be equal in some places and circumstances, but not in others. And equality doesn't mean sameness. Muslims aren't equal only when they behave like Christians, or blacks when they aspire to be cultural whites. Homosexuals don't have to shoehorn their preferences into some doll's-house family and keep shtoom about the sticky bits; and similarly, heterosexual families can't claim a smug uber-equality just because a majority of people find themselves living in one. Equality must mean the right of others to be and do things you don't want to be or do and don't particularly like. The measure of a society is always how many variations and contradictions it can encompass simultaneously. (Gill, 2000, *The Sunday Times*, 20 February, p.12)

The journalist explicitly acknowledges how *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity had challenged the existing mainstream representational regime and how it had contributed to visual justice by bringing new life to the public debate on questions around equality, freedom, and democracy. In fact, the article suggests how the history of many different minorities' public televisual inclusion had often been possible only by accepting assimilationist relations with the hegemonic culture and society. In contrast, the merit of *Queer as Folk* was to have not complied with this homologating representational logic and to have maintained its proud distinctiveness. *Queer as Folk*'s images of gay identity had not been modelled to please a viewing majority, but to bring into a more pluralistic visual arena images of different experiences and ways of life. Thus, the article seems to suggest a multiculturalist approach to questions of democracy where the equality of citizens is not achieved by quashing their difference into a generic sameness, but where their difference is recognised, respected, if not visually encouraged. These are indeed vital questions for discourses on gay visibility and visual justice

and I will further discuss in the following chapter the critical issues highlighted here by this article.

The Guardian published several articles on *Queer as Folk*, which were rather positive and which thoroughly explored different aspects of the programme's social significance, including its role within public viewing dynamics.

The first series of the deviant drama was very popular in the gay community but much to the apparent surprise of the show's producer, the largest audience share, at over 50%, was made up of women.... After all, should it be surprising that women have fantasies about fit, tanned men writhing around in bed together? So hard to believe that women can get the same kind of thrill watching this series as a man can get watching a lesbian skin flick?... Women enjoyed *Queer as Folk* because women like well-acted, well-written drama, with the added bonus of a bit of attractive male flesh. I know that's what I'll be tuning in for. (Madden, 2000, *The Guardian*, 1 February, p.6)

This article shows how *Queer as Folk*'s public representation of gay identity had complex implications for questions of visual justice and its relation to gendered viewing dynamics. For example, whilst voyeurism had embarrassed so much *The Daily Mail*'s journalist, in this article it is fully embraced as an integral part of the viewing process. And *Queer as Folk* is praised because it allowed gays and heterosexual women to rightfully enjoy their shares of voyeuristic pleasures in the realm of fictional entertainment. Women here are not understood as passive consumers of images but active visual citizens who claim their share of the spectacle. The journalist's concern is not about questions of visual commodification or reification of bodies. Rather, it is a problem of unequal distribution of the chances to enjoy those images and the fetishism of viewing practices. Hence, as male viewers have the chance of being titillated by lesbian skin flicks, some women seem to be claiming their right to enjoy a bit of gay male

skin. However, this article does not make any distinction between the viewing practices of heterosexual or homosexual women (Stacey, 1994) and seems to overlook the opinion of lesbian viewers on lesbian skin flicks. And it also does not take into account that most of the time, those images of lesbianism have been produced by heterosexual men for the pleasure of male viewers rather than for the democratisation of lesbian viewing.

Moreover, it is telling that an article, which is supposed to sound bold and libertarian, uses in its first sentence the adjective 'deviant' to introduce the programme. Although, that word might have been used ironically or provocatively, it shows how public language can still be fairly disparaging *vis à vis* homosexuality. It demonstrates that even the editorial guidelines of a supposedly progressive newspaper like *The Guardian*, can allow such a word to be used so freely in its articles.

The Independent, amongst other reviews, published a double article, which juxtaposed two entirely different reactions to the programme's representation of gay identity and which demonstrated the intrinsic ambivalence of public discourses around gay visibility.

It's ironic that, despite the saturation of gay men in broadcasting and drama, we still make such a mess of portraying our lives on the small screen. Having only just recovered from the appallingly camp Tom in BBC2's *Gimme Gimme Gimme*, we are asked to digest the ridiculous and dangerous stereotypes of Channel 4's *Queer as Folk*. The recent television dramatisations of the Stephen Lawrence case have shown how accurate and responsible broadcasting can educate the public. While I accept the main intention of *Queer as Folk* is to entertain rather than educate, it is little wonder gay men face such ignorance while these sorts of programmes tap into tired stereotypes for cheap thrills (the bedroom scene between Stuart and Nathan got most tongues wagging on and off the screen.) The morality of a sexual liaison between a 15-year-old boy and a 29-year-old man is not the question. What is worth asking is whether Baroness Young and her

fellow homophobes in the House of Lords could have been handed a better gift a mere fortnight before they are asked to lower the age of consent for gay men to 16. The fantasy continues when Stuart drops Nathan off at school for some more conventional education. Facing homophobic bating from the gathering throng, Stuart sees it all off with a witty one-liner before triumphantly driving off. While it would be nice if such bigotry really could be disarmed by wisecracks, the bitter experience of gay teenagers is that brutal playground homophobia, often resulting in teenage suicide, is not so easily discouraged. The action may take place in Manchester's gay village but *Queer as Folk* is surely set in the fertile imagination of someone who has swallowed a few too many 'Free, Gay and Happy' pills. In this wonderful world, gaggles of glamorous gay men jump from party to party and bed to bed, barely stopping long enough to check their mascara and bulging bank balances. The packed bars of Soho and Canal Street may suggest otherwise but many gay men have moved beyond the ghetto and its enforced 'gay straitjacket' lifestyle. For us, the characters in *Queer as Folk* are little more than a comical reminder of the superficial lifestyle we left behind years ago. It makes you yearn for the 1980s and *Brookside*'s Gay Gordon or Cuddly Colin of *EastEnders*, characters who, for all their exaggerated earnestness, at least had a role in the shows which went beyond their homosexuality. To argue such a point is to be accused of self-loathing: it's nothing of the sort. Portraying gay men on television is always going to be problematic because, in our need to be different, most gay men would prefer to be depicted as a braindead paedophile like Stuart, than an intelligent, charming, responsible man like Cuddly Colin. People talk of the need for gay role models on television, and there were precious few around when I was a teenager. But I would have been far happier if the series had left out Stuart - a lonely, shallow queen chasing young boys around. (Newkey-Burden and Sherwood, 1999, *The Independent*, 28 February, p.5)

In this first part of the article the journalist Chas Newkey-Burden clearly highlights the importance of public broadcasting in the articulation of social identities, rightly suggesting that traditionally homosexuals have been both misrepresented and underrepresented in the mainstream visual arena. However, he seems to argue that *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity had failed in its public educational scope, which he sees at the core of gay visibility and visual justice. For him, the indisputable stupidity, amorality, and superficiality of *Queer as Folk*'s characters and of the lifestyle they lead, was politically dangerous

because it was showing an irresponsible image of gayness, which was very different from the positive and responsible portrait of *EastEnders*' gay character. This opinion seems to be highlighting an assimilationist understanding of the educational dimension of gay visibility in which gay representations are supposed to promote socially acceptable images of homosexuality.

In fact, as we have already seen in some of the other reviews of the programme, even this article seems to be arguing that social inclusion can only be obtained by showing the mainstream public that gay people can be good citizens and respectable human beings. On these grounds, *Queer as Folk*'s celebration of difference or rather of in/difference *vis à vis* mainstream recognition was considered ridiculous if not politically disastrous.

Moreover the journalist's position presupposes an incompatibility between education and entertainment. He completely disregarded the fact that social change does not happen only through forms of public pedagogy and that entertainment may achieve the same effect in a non-confrontational way by publicly sharing visions of otherness. Consequently, he saw the TV fictionalisation of Stephen Lawrence's racist murder as a better example of representation of subaltern identity and of educational television. But I would argue that that particular TV programme was not about representing images of black identity *per se* because its focus was the visualisation of racism often associated to the experience of black identity in Britain. *Queer as Folk* instead, was portraying images of gay identity, where homophobia was an element of the social experience of that identity, but not the focus of its representation. Its educational import lay precisely in publicly showing that the problem of gay people is not their homosexuality but homophobia. And as I have already

suggested in the previous chapters, one of the greatest contributions of *Queer as Folk* to visual justice was indeed to have inverted the traditionally negative representational regime and to have shown more normalising images of gay everyday life.

I believe it is worth noticing how, despite the journalist's obvious commitment to gay enfranchisement and to his own as an openly gay man, his concerns about *Queer as Folk* ended up sounding very similar to *The Daily Mail*'s gay-unfriendly views on these matters. They demonstrated how gay conservatism in regards to questions of gay visibility and visual justice can often be dangerously too close to straight conservatism (Bell and Binnie, 2000).

I will report now the other part of the article, which highlights a diametrically different understanding of *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility and visual justice.

Queer as Folk is the first 'no apologies, no punches pulled' gay drama on British TV. And guess what? Cute gay men do have sex after all. I was beginning to wonder. Were TV your only contact with homosexuality, you'd be forgiven for thinking gay boys camp it up rather than get it up, and share a flat with Kathy Burke. *Queer as Folk*'s hero Stuart works in PR, lives in a piss-elegant loft and cruises Manchester's gay village like the vampire Lestat. I know Stuart. Hell, I used to date guys like Stuart. As stereotypes go, he is more credible than the gallery of comedy queers on TV with hands like wet spaghetti and zero sex appeal. The fact that Stuart is no angel is a plus. He's a horny little devil with the morals of an alley cat and the face of an angel. Stuart's 'find' em, f---' em and forget' em' attitude isn't the cosy, queeny acceptable face of homosexuality we've come to expect from TV. Good. It seems homosexuality is fine on mainstream TV if the gay man is either sexually frustrated (*Gimme Gimme Gimme*) or suicidal and butt-ugly (*EastEnders*). *Queer as Folk* paints an accurate, if uncompromising, sketch of the gay scene. There will always be non-scene gay men who will twitter over their camomile tea about being misrepresented. Of course, every gay man isn't like the whore of Babylon on E. But after watching Stuart's seduction technique on 15-year-old Nathan, all I can say is chance would be a fine thing. The moral outrage brigade will always play the "Not in front of the

children” card when two gay men get into bed together. It’s not that they actually object to two men shagging each other senseless behind closed doors (like hell they don’t). No, it’s the fact that impressionable young boys, confused about their sexuality, will take one look at *Queer as Folk* and - hormones raging - run down Old Compton Street shouting, “Come and get me”. Personally, at 15 I was desperate for a man like Stuart to “corrupt” me. Girlfriends assure me this isn’t just a gay thing. At that age, we’re all gagging for it. *The Daily Mail*’s Lynda Lee-Potter went so far as to call for a return to censorship after watching the first episode of *Queer as Folk*. Well, switch it off, dear. The rabid hysteria which two men making out provokes is not unleashed when a man and a woman have sex (all too often in my opinion) on screen. If gay sex turns your stomach over (pardon the pun) then swap channels. And what about all those corruptible adolescents susceptible to ‘gay propaganda’ like *Queer as Folk*? If you weigh-up hetero versus homosexual sex on TV, I think you’ll find the heteros have the advantage when it comes to getting the message across. I don’t think something as fundamental as sexuality is influenced by television drama. Biology has come up with a much more effective litmus test. You either get an erection watching Stuart and Nathan or you don’t. I remember the excitement as a teenager of watching the Film on Four adaptation of EM Forster’s *Maurice* on my black and white TV in my bedroom at midnight. I can honestly say I knew well before I got an eyeful of Rupert Graves’ naked bum that I was gay. But I can’t even begin to tell you how thrilling it was to see a positive gay relationship portrayed on TV. Almost as thrilling as getting a peek at Rupert’s bare butt. (Newkey-Burden and Sherwood, 1999, *The Independent*, 28 February, p.5)

Whilst the previous half of the article considered the portrait of *Queer as Folk*’s characters and of their sexual promiscuity unrealistic, stereotypical, and politically dangerous, in this other half the journalist James Sherwood sees it in a rather different way. The programme was considered quite truthful to life and to the fact that people like Stuart do exist in real life. It argues that judgment on their lifestyle or morality is beside the point of any evaluation of the social impact of *Queer as Folk*’s representation of gay identity. Actually, the novelty of the programme lies precisely in its disdain for the recognition of mainstream and heterosexual society, and in its disdain for the non-scene gay people who seem so concerned to claim social respectability. Additionally, the article suggests that

Queer as Folk had dared to, and succeeded in, publicly recognising and representing the sexuality of adolescents. In this way the journalist claims the importance of a public debate on sexual citizenship across gender and age distinctions.

Moreover, he advocates a notion of visual justice based on the right of the viewer/consumer to enjoy whatever he/she prefers in a pluralistic environment in which the remote control becomes an instrument of visual democracy. Thus, it seems that one possible way to understand visual freedom in a liberal democracy lies in the right of the citizen to be able to change channel and choose the images he/she prefers, rather than in Lee-Potter's idea of censoring each other. In addition to this, he claims the importance of redistributive principles in discourses around visual justice. In fact, *Queer as Folk's* contribution to it had been to address the problem of the visual scarcity of images of gay identity, counterbalancing the overabundance of heterosexual representations. For him, visual justice lies in the possibility of giving equal chances to people to recognise themselves in positive images.

Ultimately, it is also worth noticing how this twin review on *Queer as Folk* has exposed another level of the question of images of gay identity in/and the public mainstream visual arena. In fact, both journalists were boldly unafraid of publicly exposing their own homosexuality in the construction of their oppositional arguments. This seems to suggest that the times in which mainstream journalists were subjected to very strict editorial constraints and were not allowed to write articles about homosexuality - let alone about their own - are now over. Mainstream journalism nowadays appears to be a much more tolerant environment. Having said that, it is also worth bearing in mind that, if journalists

are allowed to be publicly gay in the mainstream press and to contribute to mainstream editorial strategies by introducing that flavour of authenticity or confessional honesty that is often required to boost the liberal credential of certain publications, none of the editors of those mainstream publications still is (Gross, 2001). Gay visibility is not yet welcomed at the top of the editorial ladder or, to be more precise, at the top of any other social ladder. Upward visual justice is still far too many steps away.

Section 5c. *Queer as Folk* in/and the gay press

In this section I am going to analyse the gay press responses to the programme in order to draw attention to other levels of the public debate on *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity and to other implications for questions of gay visibility and visual justice. In considering the distinction between mainstream and gay press opinions and views on the programme I also intend to further problematise the issue of the public and the public sphere, which I have begun to question in the previous sections. Therefore, in line with Warner's suggestions, I want to highlight how:

of major significance in the critical analysis of gender and sexuality - is that some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public... This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or unconscious, an awareness of its subordinate status. The sexual cultures of gay men and lesbians would be one kind of example, but so would camp discourse or the media of women's culture...A counterpublic, against the background of the public sphere, enables an horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power... (Warner, 2002, p.56)

In this respect, then, the gay press reports on *Queer as Folk* could be seen as the responses of a gay counterpublic in critical relation or opposition to the heteronormative presuppositions that often underline the debates reported by the mainstream press. For example, in the gay counterpublic's opinions on *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity, which was voiced through the gay press, there would be no space for dwelling on the evil nature of homosexuality. Nor would there be room for questioning homosexuals' right to publicly exist, as we have seen in some of the mainstream press reports. For the gay press, questions of gay visibility and visual justice are coterminous with its own existence as counterpublic. In fact, the traditional hostility of mainstream press to discussing matters concerning homosexuality often determined that:

it was still left to the struggling lesbian and gay press to keep a growing community informed about the matters of greatest concern to its fate. The importance of the gay press was evident as the backlash against the early gains of gay liberation took shape in the mid-1970s. The advent of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s proved the crucial role of the gay press, as mainstream media largely ignored the epidemic... (Gross, 2001, p.xv)

However, this emphasis on the critical opposition of gay press to the mainstream press and its importance in creating 'alternative channels of communication' (Ibid. p.19) in which to discuss, question, and challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity must not lead us to imagine the gay press and its readership as totally homogeneous entities.

Indeed, in highlighting the oppositional dimension of the gay press to the mainstream one, I want to argue that no counterpublic or alternative public arena is ever totally immune from the same exclusionary dynamics that it was meant to

challenge, question, or criticise, as I will further discuss in the following chapter. The notion of publicness, of public interests, or public sphere is not necessarily less problematic if it is applied to notions of gayness. In Chapter 2 I have already suggested how the existence of a gay community or gay social network is structured by shifting patterns of belonging and exclusion that regulates whose voices, lifestyles, or images may represent the 'proper' gay public opinion, public interest, or public sphere. Therefore the following gay counterpublic reviews of *Queer as Folk* will serve to highlight not only some other discursive levels of the debate around gay visibility and visual justice, but also they will visualise some of the most visible internal contradictions or critical tensions within the mainstream gay public sphere.

Moreover, talking about the alternative gay press I must specify that the gay press comprises various publications, which may differ in format, content, or distribution. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to give a more detailed account of their specific political economy as printed media (Curran and Gurevitch, 1991), it is important to suggest some of its possible implications. For example, it would be interesting to highlight that the gay weekly lifestyle tabloid *Boyz* and the more political publication *Pink Paper* are very different in contents. But it is also important to notice that both of them are published by the same publisher. And because they are free of charge they are both heavily subsidised by the same gay or gay friendly entrepreneurs. Moreover because they are distributed exclusively in gay or gay friendly venues their readership may be assumed to be a particular public within the wider gay public, that is, the users of the gay scene. The gay glossy monthly publication *Gay Times* has instead a national and more capillary distribution. It can be purchased in any major newsagent or bookstore

such as W.H. Smith and may reach a different gay public even in the geographical absence of a more structured gay scene or social network.

These are just few of the considerations that could be possibly made in the analysis of the complex working of the gay press. They surely need to be borne in mind in thinking how certain notions of gay identity have been constructed and made available by those gay publications for their gay readers and how gay visibility and visual justice is often entangled with the interests and strategies that shape the homosexual printed press. In fact, as Weeks says regarding early gay commercial publications, we should consider that:

papers such as *Gay News* did not just reflect passively an emerging gay community, they also helped to mould it. The most popular articles generally displayed a traditional gay magazine concern with cooking, show-biz, films, fashion, star-gazing and pop music. Inherent in these articles were certain assumptions about the type of audience both possible and necessary, affluent, upwardly mobile, sexually relaxed, but apolitical, non-party and male. (Weeks, 1977, p.222)

Consequently, in focusing here on the gay counterpublic's debates on *Queer as Folk's* representation of gayness and its articulation of gay visibility, I will map out the discursive regime that structures the mainstream gay public, that has shaped the very existence of a visible gay identity, and that articulates the possibilities of visual justice.

I will start to assess and analyse the gay press' coverage of *Queer as Folk's* public representation of gay identity, as it was voiced in some of the most widely or easily available publications within the gay community, by reporting a review of the programme published on the monthly magazine *Gay Times*:

Watching *Queer as Folk* was like being a 15-year-old on your first visit to a gay bar - whatever may be happening in your line of sight, there's always a voice in your head going, "What do they all think of me?" And we want so many people's approval: the peers of the realm (we are responsible, we're not creeps), our parents (our lives are perfectly presentable, you know), our straight contemporaries... So we owe a debt of gratitude to Channel 4 for keeping their eyes on the ball and not falling into the trap of being desperate to please everyone and ending up pleasing no-one... *Queer as Folk* clearly starts with the assumption that we're mature and robust enough to have our lives held up for scrutiny, and can weather the reaction. And more than that, in its most contentious aspect (Nathan, the 15-year-old, having sex with adult men), there's the suggestion that our first responsibility is to ourselves and not to the straight world. Nathan's sex life is not served as a green light for adolescents to leap into bed with the nearest willing 29-year-old. Rather, it says to young gay people: "We know you exist, you're not alone, we acknowledge your lust." The Nathans of this world... know that it's true when they say, "I'm going to be gay forever!" *Queer as Folk* reflects that - and it's an honest and radical idea to put into the mainstream... So I bow to the ambition, because it was certainly all there. As well as under-age sex, there was coming out (at home, at work, at school), promiscuity, relentless hedonism.... But did *Queer as Folk* pull it off? Its biggest fault was that it confused the audience about how seriously to take it, because it kept changing its mind. It veered from cartoon to gritty realism, considered reflection to disposability, perceptive to puerile... But it was also funny and fast, and if it didn't ring true as a whole, it certainly managed it in bits... So, never mind the quality, feel the...confidence. Here we are (or at least some of us), warts and all. Damning with faint praise, I know. But perhaps - just like that 15-year-old in the gay bar - even if it's not everything we hoped for, it feels just great it's there. (Marr, 1999, *Gay Times*, May, p.94)

It is rather telling to see how the journalist starts his article by highlighting the programme's absolute novelty within the mainstream visual arena. *Queer as Folk*'s open representation of gay identity was unprecedented and it felt almost as embarrassing as a public and collective visual coming out. *Queer as Folk*'s broadcast seemed to be lifting the oppressive but familiar screen of invisibility imposed by heteronormative and homophobic culture and society leaving gay viewers suddenly publicly exposed. In this way, the journalist acknowledges some of the ambiguities implicit in the social claim to greater visibility both on a

political and psychological level. In fact, no matter how much that visibility is sought after, its achievements are often mingled with or spoiled by the fear of being misjudged by hegemonic heterosexual society, as if respectability and the recognition from the straight population was an objective worth struggling for.

On the contrary, the merit of *Queer as Folk* seems to be placed not only in having brought gayness to the centre of the mainstream visual arena, but also in having done it in such a defiant and uncompromising way: portraying the good, the bad, and the controversial aspects of gay life. For example, *Queer as Folk*'s controversial representation of Nathan's relationship with Stuart is seen as a clear instance in which the programme has contributed to visual justice because it has visualised and brought to the forefront of the mainstream public arena the necessity to open up a more honest and less biased social debate on the question of inter-generational relationships. However, the journalist's recognition of *Queer as Folk*'s merits did not prevent him from acknowledging the programme's flaws or narrative clumsiness. But those faults were not big enough to jeopardise completely the programme's aesthetic worth, let alone its unique cultural and political impact.

Similar comments to the ones just mentioned were voiced on the pages of the weekly *Boyz* which was also reporting and discussing the reactions of gay viewers to *Queer as Folk*'s public portrayal of gay identity.

Well, we're starting to hear the feedback from this series now, and we've definitely heard some mixed reactions. We must admit, we weren't really surprised by the bigoted reactions to the series there has been from certain Tory rags. Although the reaction from gay viewers seems to have been mostly positive, we were a little surprised by the reaction of a small proportion, seemingly worried that the straight population will think we're all gagging to jump into bed with the first underage guy to come along. It's a TV drama (and a very good one),

not an instructional video, people. Just because the character Stuart will shag anything that moves, regardless of age, it doesn't mean we're all expected to. We're not saying that just because it's a gay-themed programme, we're supposed to like it unreservedly. That would be trite, but, considering this series has been so groundbreaking in being the first not to judge us for being gay, to criticize it on the basis of what straight viewers might think of us is to completely miss the point... We're sticking by our guns with this one, as this has to be one of the best drama series of recent years, and hopefully, one of the most influential for the future. (Anon.1999, *Boyz*, 16 March, p.15)

What clearly emerges from this article is the recognition that *Queer as Folk* represented a major shift in the mainstream representational arena and perhaps the opening up of its democratisation. But the article also suggests that the programme had not elicited a consensus of opinions within the gay audience. In this way it demonstrates how dynamic and fluid any notion of a gay counterpublic may be and that representations of gay identity are always a matter of negotiation. However, the article highlights how the responses of some gay viewers were dictated by the concern of what straight people may be thinking of gay people after having watched the programme. The fear of heterosexuals' judgement is a recurrent theme, and it demonstrates how strong can be the grip of heteronormativity and of self-regulating dynamics in relation to the experience of gay identity, as I will further explore in the following chapter. It also suggests that in the current visual scarcity of gay images, the political and representational significance of each new one is often overloaded by so many pedagogical or educational expectations. This representational anxiety would not have been felt so strongly in a richer visual arena in which each representation did not have to bear such a representational burden.

Doubts and suspicions are also the starting points of *Queer as Folk*'s review by the publicly gay actor Toby Sawyer (who had played a gay role in the primetime TV soap *Hollyoaks*) published on the *Pink Paper*.

Now that we're in the media mainstream, it's easy to dismiss the next offering from grab-that-niche-market TV bosses as yet more cynical exploitation. If it's gay, there's a guaranteed audience after all. The result is endless programmes that serve precious little purpose. I mean, *Gimme*'s Tom and Linda are just sitcom legends George and Mildred sprinkled with fairy dust, right? Wrong. *Queer as Folk* is different. It's absolutely, totally, incredibly gay. The gay-est show I've ever seen. And it's covering all the issues. Clubbing, under-age sex, drugs, gay parenting, understanding mothers, coming out, porn, sex on the Net - and that's only the first two episodes. Shocking? Yes, but shocking because it's normal, everyday. Being gay is not the drama here, it's the starting point. And it's about time that was on the box. (Sawyer, 1999, *Pink Paper*, 26 February, p.10)

As already seen in *The Daily Mail*'s article even this one tackles the question of exploitation but, not surprisingly, from an entirely different angle. Sawyer is not concerned by the fact that TV bosses target the gay public as an audience. For him gays are indeed an audience that deserves attention and consideration. What troubles him is that often TV bosses target gays in a mean and cynical way, exploiting their visual starvation to produce and propose bad quality gay programmes in the certainty that gays will watch them anyway rather than suffer endless visual hunger. In fact, even though gay viewers had acknowledged 'a gentle swell in the number of regular gay characters and the upward gradient of gay programming over the last five years' (Radclyffe, *Gay Times*, 1999, March, p.7), they were rather suspicious about the patronising mode of this timid advance towards a more inclusive and democratic visual arena. On the contrary, *Queer as Folk* seemed to be truly different from that. It had boldly given to gay viewers the gayest TV programme ever seen. It had offered them a programme in which

homosexuality is taken for granted as normal and not seen as an issue or as a problem. The emphasis on normality, then, is not an assimilationist statement or a disavowal of the seriousness of the gay struggle for social rights. Rather it is suggesting that the right to entertainment needs to be seen as an integral part of a broader spectrum of political, social and cultural demands or struggles. Gay viewers may want to claim their right to be able to sit in front of the television and enjoy mainstream representation of gay identity or 'the pleasure of spectacular public self-entitlement' (Berlant and Freeman, 1993). The right to be considered a national audience as much as heterosexuals and to have access to the same opportunities of visual entertainment is also a question of visual justice, as I will further discuss in the next chapter.

For a broader sampling of the reaction of gay viewers to *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity I have reported below the result of a mini-survey conducted by the *Pink Paper* and published in its section *VOX POP*:

Jo, sales manager: I thought it was a typical designer TV soap. I never realised Manchester was so glamorous - that purple hospital!

Peter, 32, social worker: My sister, who's the only family member who knows about me, thought it was very educational. I think it's a good programme for us.

Morad, 24, student: The actors look good, and even though the characters aren't instantly likeable, it's good having more gay programmes on TV.

Belinda, 25, fast-food manager: It's about things that happen every day, but nobody wants to see. Under age sex – that's a real thing that's happening now, here in England.

Greg, 25, researcher for Lesbian and Gay Film Festival: The acting was really bad. It did have potential, though. I'm definitely going to watch the second one.

Giovanni, 23, student: I found it realistic and well made. It's a good step for British television as a sign of acceptance.

Sam, 23, fashion buyer: I work with straight people, and the day after it was on, everyone talked about it and agreed it was important. That shocked me. I thought it was great.

Donna, 27, social worker: I hated it. I've never seen anything so racist. There's no one brown or slightly mixed character even in the background. They're all as white and proper as can be. I've never felt so ashamed in my life! (Anon.1999, *Pink Paper*, 5 March, p.8)

All these answers demonstrate how *Queer as Folk* elicited different responses by different viewers and their comments underline some of the programme's key contributions to gay visibility such as its educational or pedagogical function in a still rather undemocratic public visual arena. But they also highlighted some concerns or doubts about its representation of gay identity. For example, the first comment suggests how images of gay identity are often glamourised as if gay visibility and gay respectability (Skeggs, 2002) were only negotiable or achievable through forms of conspicuous consumption or through a lifestyle that actively contributes and participates in forms of commodification and spectacularisation of social life (Berlant and Freeman, 1993).

The last statement also introduces a particularly important critical issue by underlining the absence of any black characters in the series, which we have also considered in previous chapters. But what is rather telling about it is that this is the only public comment I gathered on this specific question in the gay press. This raises the issue of how representative the gay press is of the opinions or interests of all segments of the gay community or counterpublic. For example, in Western societies the possibilities and dynamics for publicness of the black public sphere (Gilroy, 2001) greatly differ from the ones available to hegemonic white people. This is even truer in the gay public sphere in which images or voices of black gay people are rarely publicly seen or heard. Consequently, we should bear in mind how questions of gay identity are inseparable from considerations about other axes of identification and that gay politics of visibility may reproduce

(consciously or not) other forms of invisibility, of subordination, or of cultural hegemony crippling its potential for visual justice, as I will fully discuss in the next chapter.

Section 5d. *Queer as Folk* and public notions of good taste and decency

The national audience's loose, informal, dialogic, and open reactions to *Queer as Folk*'s portrayal of gay identity voiced in the printed public sphere were also publicly formalised by the official complaints that viewers and pressure groups addressed to the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission. The ITC and BSC are the national institutional bodies that supervise and guarantee televisual requirements of good taste and decency.²⁹ In this section I intend to review and analyse the nature of those complaints and ITC's and BSC's final opinion on *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity and their institutional contribution to, and regulation of, gay visibility and of visual justice.

By doing so, I want to underline how the public debate on *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity, was also possible within and in relation to other discursive fields and institutional coordinates of public visibility provided and enforced by the national TV watchdogs. I want to explore how the heteronormative dynamics and presuppositions that had regulated the very notion of publicness of the mainstream press needs to be understood as regulating other

²⁹ From now on I will refer to the Independent Television Commission and the Broadcasting Standards Commission as ITC and BSC. Moreover, we should bear in mind that from September 2003 Ofcom has replaced and inherited the duties of the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Independent Television Commission, and of the other three public regulators Oftel, the Radio Authority and the Radiocommunications Agency.

levels of the public visual arena and the circulation of public images of gay identity. In fact, as we have already seen in the introduction to this chapter and in the other sections, notions of citizenship, of what is public or national are inextricably associated with the privileges of heterosexuality (Richardson, 2000). On a similar level, we may argue that notions of representational good taste and decency are categories inseparable from heteronormative assumptions. Given the private nature of homosexual acts, as specified in the Wolfenden Report, any public display of homosexuality in the national representational arena becomes inevitably offensive or obscene with the potential to deprave or corrupt (Brown, 1980). Thus, the perverse essence of homosexuality may be tolerated if confined to the private, but as soon as it reaches the mainstream public arena it automatically risks becoming obscene and indecent. Consequently, whilst the ITC and the BSC are recognised on a parliamentary level as national public services set up to protect the public representational arena, other media watchdogs such as the American GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) would doubtlessly never be recognised as a public service. GLAAD's opinions on good taste and decency would never be recognised as nationally representative enough.

Moreover ITC's and BSC's criteria for the assessment of *Queer as Folk's* public representation of gay identity are based on complaints and discontentment rather than praises and appreciations of the programme. But, as the Gay Times' journalist Terry Sanderson argues 'who are the people making complaints? We know that Christian pressure groups have telephone trees and organise write-ins to TV stations whenever there is something gay on telly' (Sanderson, 1999, *Gay Times*, April, p.64).

Thus, it is important to think that most of the times it is the upset reaction of a homophobic majority, which feels threatened in its hegemonic grip on the representational arena, that needs to be placated or reassured, whilst gays do not have the same status as a public to express their rage against enforced invisibility, misrepresentation or under-representation in the visual field.

I will begin this exploration of the national TV watchdogs' public assessment of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity by considering the ITC's take on the programme. In the ITC's history, only Martin Scorsese's hugely controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ* - also broadcast by Channel 4 - prompted more complaints than *Queer as Folk*, which elicited 163 complaints. The majority of those complaints were falling within the ITC's official category of 'Sexual portrayal', and were mostly concerned with the first episode 'which showed a 15-year-old boy being introduced to homosexual activity by a promiscuous 29-year-old. Strong language also upset some viewers' (Independent Television Commission, 2000). In the light of those complaints ITC approached Channel 4 to hear *Queer as Folk*'s broadcaster's explanation for the scenes and themes that had upset the complaining viewers. Here it follows the report of the justification the ITC received from Channel 4's officials.

Channel 4 said that the under-age character, Nathan, was "coming to terms with his sexuality", which included facing homophobia at his school and conservative parents at home. His age was essential to the storyline. The details of the sex scenes were brief, shot and edited responsibly, and no more graphic or explicit than many heterosexual scenes shown on terrestrial television. Their inclusion was approved at the highest level of the Channel's management and the first programme was preceded by a warning to viewers. The series fulfilled the Channel's remit to appeal to tastes and interests not catered for by ITV. (Ibid.)

Having gathered the view of the two parties (complainers' and Channel 4's) the ITC made public its own views on the matter arguing that:

The ITC accepted that the series fell within Channel 4's statutory remit, and considered that most viewers would have had no difficulty with a series on this theme, scheduled at 10.30pm, well after the 9pm watershed. Indeed, the series was of high quality, well made, fast moving, and enlivened by a witty script and attractive score. Nevertheless the ITC had concerns about the celebratory tone of the first episode, which left little room for any questions to be raised in viewers' minds about the rights and wrongs of the illegal, under-age relationship. A significant number of viewers clearly found this offensive. In addition, the decision to include three explicit sex scenes in the opening episode of the series had clearly shocked many viewers. Moreover, in the view of the ITC, Channel 4 had missed an opportunity in failing to provide any off-air support for the series, such as fact sheets or website material linking viewers to advice on young people and sexuality, and on safe sex. The ITC recommended that any repeat or further series should be enhanced by such responsible messages. Finally, the wording of the pre-transmission announcement was less than satisfactory: "Brand new drama now on FOUR with the guys who just can't keep a straight face. *Queer as Folk* has got sex with a capital 'S' and some very strong language." The ITC Programme Code requires warnings to be clear and specific where there is a likelihood that some viewers may find the programme disturbing, and Channel 4 was told to take full account of this for repeat transmissions or new programmes...The series was not in breach of the ITC Programme Code. However, the ITC expressed concern to Channel 4 about aspects of both the handling of the under-age relationship and the concentration of frank sex scenes in the opening episode. (Ibid.)

In regards to the ITC's findings, I believe that it is interesting to note how aesthetic qualifications are called into play to assess *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gayness in general, and in particular of gay sexuality. In fact, as Arthurs (2004) argues, the visual broadcast and consumption of images of nudity and of sexuality is often considered publicly 'acceptable' if granted the respectability conferred on it by artistic values and by notions of quality or taste (Bourdieu, 1992). Thus, the potentially obscene and corrupting effects of *Queer*

as *Folk*'s public portrayal of gayness were legitimised by its 'aesthetic "intentions" that put it in the category of "art"' (Arthurs, 2004, p.39) very much in the 'tradition of painting "nudes" that are on open display in bourgeois homes and in art galleries' (Ibid. p.39).

However, at the same time in which the ITC was acknowledging the programme's appropriateness for the broadcaster's remit and recognising its quality, it was accusing Channel 4 of negligence for not providing off-air 'responsible' support for young people on sexuality and safe sex. This is because public representation of homosexuality and gay sex or eroticism must be, not only of legitimating quality, but also intrinsically educational rather than recreational. In fact, as Nead suggests, the regulation of public images of sexuality and in particular of homosexuality is based on the presupposition that '[l]egitimate, or high culture is...constituted through the denial of lower, vulgar or venal enjoyment and the assertion of sublimated, refined and disinterested pleasure' (Nead, 1995, p.84). Thus, the intrinsic obscenity of images of homosexuality, their potential to deprave and corrupt the public can and must be offset not only by the certification of detached tastefulness and by the intellectual respectability of 'quality' drama (Arthurs, 2004) but also by its educational potential. Consequently, the ITC felt that *Queer as Folk*'s scenes of sexual enjoyment, in order to be suitable for the public visual arena, had to be counterbalanced by an educational and pedagogical message. In mainstream culture it seems that images about the pleasures of homosexuality must be always be paralleled by public reminders of its danger for the visual health of the heterosexual hegemonic majority. But whilst the ITC believed in the necessity of a clearer educational message about homosexuality, it did not find it necessary to solicit the channel to

provide off-air responsible messages against homophobia, or to provide information on support groups for adolescents coming to terms with their homosexuality. Homosexuality needs to be tackled as a problem, but never facilitated and encouraged as a joyous and honourable possibility of life.

Moreover, the suggestion that the nature of the programme could have been disturbing for some viewers implies that images of gayness still require a cautionary approach and that the sensitivity of heterosexuals invariably counts as the norm. I doubt that the ITC would have ever reprimanded Channel 4 or any other broadcaster because some gay viewers had found disturbing their relentless representations of heterosexuality in all its nuances of explicitness. Indeed, I would argue, gay viewers exist as a subaltern viewing constituency and their tastes or standards of decency are hardly ever recognised as acceptable for the public and national visual arena.

The repeat of the first series the following year elicited only 10 complaints, which fell into the same ITC official category of 'Sexual portrayal' and were likewise 'concerned about the treatment of homosexuality and the portray of sexual behaviour, including the involvement of a 15 year-old boy in homosexual activity' (Ibid.). As the year before, the ITC did not sanction any of those complaints arguing that:

The ITC had fully explored these issues last year with Channel 4... Whilst acknowledging that the sex scenes were acceptable within the context of a drama dealing with the vibrant world of Manchester's gay community, the ITC had asked that a clear warning be given before any repeat transmission and off-air support be provided dealing with young people and sexuality, and on safe sex. Channel 4 complied with these requests for the repeat transmissions. However, the ITC was concerned that the series had been scheduled half-an-hour earlier than last year. Although still well after the 9pm watershed, the ITC informed Channel 4 that, for a series so clearly aimed at an adult

audience, it would have been preferable to have scheduled the series in its original slot at 10.30pm. (Ibid.)

This response from the ITC highlights another level of ambivalence in its institutional assessment of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity. On the one hand, it acknowledges the existence of young people's sexuality and the necessity of diffusion of sex education aimed at them. On the other hand, programmes that address those issues of young people's sexuality, and in particular of young homosexuals, are still considered suitable only for an adult audience. Paradoxically, *Queer as Folk* was asked to be educational for young viewers who were never supposed to watch it anyway because they were too young; or it was asked to be broadcast at a time in which those young potential viewers are expected to be sleeping.

This question of how public gay visibility is institutionally supervised and regulated in regard to young homosexuals is particularly problematic. In fact, if current mainstream representations of gay identity are considered too extreme and therefore suitable only for a grown-up audience, public television does not offer explicit gay images suitable for younger viewers. There are hardly ever gay characters in TV programmes for teens, let alone entirely gay teen programmes. Young homosexuals of any age are not considered as junior citizens or a viewing constituency to be catered for. Thus, the only access for young people, adolescents, or teenagers to images of homosexuality is often offered by the virtual visual arena provided by the Internet. However, the increasing public concern about the exposure of young people to pornographic material in such an unregulated virtual space, and all the measures taken for preventing it has

determined a further shrinking of any opportunity for them to come into contact at all with images or information about homosexuality.

Commercial filtering software works by blocking access to sites based on keywords presumed to signal sexual content, and this often includes the very words *gay*, *lesbian*, *homosexual*, or even *sexual orientation*. Parents - or schools and libraries - that install such filtering software thus prevent teenagers (and adults, in many instances) from gaining access to support groups, informational sites... (Gross, 2001, p.231)

This is indeed revealing of how homosexuality is still so overloaded with negative, perverse, and obscene connotations that are mechanically associated with pornography and how difficult it is for gay teenagers to have any access to gay images both in the hyper-regulated heteronormative mainstream visual arena and in the seemingly unregulated virtual visual arena.

I will move now to explore the BSC's assessment of the first series of *Queer as Folk* considering that the 'Commission received 138 complaints about different aspects of this drama series. Some complained about bad language and the portrayal of drug use. But most complained about the portrayal of homosexuality, including stereotypical behaviour, and explicit sexual scenes, in particular with an underage character, which they believed encouraged and endorsed paedophilia' (Broadcasting Standards Commission, 1999). As in the case of the ITC's assessment of the programme, the BSC consulted *Queer as Folk*'s broadcaster for an explanation and justification of those images. Concerning episode one, the broadcaster replied that:

The illegality of the relationship between Stuart and Nathan was as valid a subject for television drama as any other illegal act, such as murder, theft, and blackmail, watched by millions on television every

week. Most drama involved some form of outlawed behaviour. Nathan was too young to give legal consent to a sexual relationship but it was clearly what he wanted. It was not an act of coercion. He clearly enjoyed the experience...the subject of the relationship had been handled responsibly throughout the series, which was far from unquestioning of the relationship. Stuart refused to continue the relationship and the reaction of other characters was a mixture of disapproval and amusement. Nathan's parents' anguish and anger was brought home very clearly. The series as a whole also questioned his ability to deal with the consequences of having sex at fifteen. The actor playing Nathan was, however, over 18 when the filming took place. The two main sex scenes in this episode first made clear Nathan's lack of experience and Stuart's indifference, and later Nathan's first full sexual encounter. They had been intended to be amusing as well as sympathetic, but had been shot in such a way as to see only backs, sides and faces. No genitalia were shown... (Ibid.)

This reply highlights how public notions of taste and decency are ever shifting and how images of non-normative sexuality such as inter-generational relations are particularly troublesome. Channel 4, without condoning the 'illegality' of that particular subject, was nevertheless advocating the need for a greater democratisation of the visual arena regarding sexual matters, at least in the form of a more equal space of visual and social debate.

It is also interesting to note the channel's defence that some core principles of good taste and decency had been upheld by not showing male genitalia. This is because in sexual scenes the erect penis clearly symbolises arousal and excitement and therefore its unruliness disrupts the secure 'boundaries of aesthetic discourse' (Neal, 1995, p.2). In fact, as we have seen before, public visions of nudity or sexuality are deemed acceptable for the public arena only within a cultural tradition that clearly separates the aesthetic from the obscene. Whilst the artistic nude is supposed to elicit from the viewer a detached and intellectualised reaction, the obscene one calls for attention and demands participation. And whereas, the female nude does not visibly show sexual arousal, an erect penis in *Queer as Folk*

would have unmistakably revealed the excitement and the potential for homosexual pleasure, 'which is beyond the accepted codes of public visibility' (Ibid. p.90).

Moreover, such prudence in revealing male genitals reveals how regulatory notions of public taste and decency are not only intrinsically heteronormative but also deeply male-oriented, and that images of male genitalia may be considered the ultimate visual threshold of the mainstream representational arena. The relative scarcity of male nudity in comparison to the abundance of visual representations of female nudes in the public sphere, in museums and art galleries alike, testifies how the female body has often been seen as the legitimate object of male visual enjoyment and appropriation and, in doing so, perpetuating 'a construction of female sexuality that exists only to the extent that she arouses the passions of the male viewer (or lesbian viewers reading against the grain)' (Arthurs, 2004, p.53). On the contrary, in the traditional portraiture of male nudes, the emphasis on the potency of the musculature in comparison with the vulnerability of tiny and almost infantile penises indicates that these are images of strength and powerfulness rather than of languid and erotic abandonment. They are not there to arouse the passion of female viewers (let alone of homosexuals) but to arouse awe or respect. Heterosexual men still hold the privilege of being the subjects of the erotic gaze rather than being its public objects.

The broadcaster had also to account for the portrayal of sex in the third and fourth episode of the programme, and this is how the BSC reports and evaluates Channel 4's justifications:

In this episode, the sex scene involving three men was again crucial to Stuart's character. It demonstrated his promiscuous, carefree approach

to sex and the fact that he was successful while Vince had little success. The scenes had been shot in wide angle. The action was not shown in close-up... There were two sex scenes in this programme. The first showed Nathan masturbating another boy at school. It revealed Nathan's growing confidence and the hypocrisy of the bully who taunted others for being gay. The second scene involved masturbation and oral sex with Stuart, the first time they had had sex since their original encounter. In both scenes, while the nature of the action was clear, the characters were fully dressed. There was no nudity. Overall, in the broadcaster's view, none of the sexual scenes had been any more graphic or explicit than many heterosexual scenes shown in adult television drama. Their inclusion had been considered carefully by the senior management of the Channel. Each programme had been preceded by a clear warning about the sexual content and language. The Channel had also received more appreciative than critical letters and calls about the series, which it believed it had a remit to make. It had been bold, challenging, adult drama, scheduled well after the Watershed. (Ibid.)

In response to Channel 4's detailed account of its views on those scenes and its counter claims of public support and appreciation for the series, this is how the BSC officially deliberated on these matters:

The Standards Committee watched the whole series to consider the complaints in the context of the developing storyline. It acknowledged the particular remit of Channel 4 to broadcast challenging and minority programmes and the ambition of the series to reflect something of the complexity and variety of gay life, as well as the adolescent exploration of sexual identity and its consequence for individuals and families. It took the view that the series had neither encouraged nor condoned paedophilia. However, it was troubled by the explicit and graphic nature of the sexual encounter involving an underage character in episode one. That aspect of the complaints was upheld. The Committee took the view that the portrayal of drug use had been realistic rather than glamorous, and that aspect of the complaints was not upheld. The Committee also considered that the language used generally in the series was unlikely to have exceeded the expectations of the majority of the audience... In episode three, the Commission also took the view that the portrayal of troilism had exceeded acceptable boundaries. Accordingly, the complaints were upheld in part. (Ibid.)

As in the ITC's final assessment, the BSC's final considerations on *Queer as Folk* were fairly moderate and the programme's representation of gay identity was thus granted institutional approval of suitability for a more tolerant public visual arena. However, it needs to be highlighted how the BSC's response suggests that *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity needed to be seen in relation to Channel 4's statutory commitments and to the channel's special public, but that perhaps it would have been unsuitable to the kind of public or public responsibilities usually associated with other national broadcasters such as the BBC or ITV. *Queer as Folk* was deemed suitable only for a particular mainstream within the mainstream.

To conclude this section, I will report what the BSC's director Stephen Whittle had to say in the columns of the *Pink Paper* about his view on the public significance of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity in the British contemporary visual arena:

In recent years, there has been a relaxation in attitudes towards homosexuality. Up to 50 per cent of people say they know someone who is gay now... We are in a society in transition, with more channels available and many audiences. Nowadays, people know what to expect, and exercise their choice... The gay issue is more discussed by people now, and the more this continues, the less prejudice there will be, especially as younger people come through. (Osborn, 2000, *Pink Paper*, 5 May, p.12)

In this statement he highlights the importance of the programme for questions of visual justice acknowledging that *Queer as Folk* had contributed to gay visibility and to a more democratic public debate and negotiation of those issues. However, he also argues that contemporary visibility is also increasingly entangled with questions about the fragmentation of public broadcasting and about the requirements of the new multi-channel televisual environment, as I have already

discussed in the previous chapter when talking about Channel 4' stands about *Queer as Folk*. Thus, I suspect that in this multi-choice scenario, visual justice could be interpreted more as a matter of using the remote control to change channel and obliterate the source of bad taste and indecency, rather a question of real interpersonal transformations and renegotiation of forms of communality or visual and social participation. Moreover, it could become a matter of marketing choices and consumer power rather than a public commitment to renovation of the ethical relation to otherness and difference. These are, indeed key questions that I am going to fully debate in the next chapter.

Section 5e. Conclusion

The review of the public reactions to *Queer as Folk* voiced from the printed press has highlighted some of the themes that often articulate public debates on representations of gay identity and gay visibility such as notions of perversion, corruption, deviance, illegality, contagion, or immorality. Those medical, moral, or legal negative connotations are still constantly encountered in mainstream public discourses on homosexuality. What is quite revealing, though, is how those themes also structure by default the debates voiced on the gay press. In a sense, the very existence of the gay public as a counterpublic is shaped by the necessity to oppose those moralising, criminalising, or medicalising discourses. The gay press responses revealed how the perception of *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gayness was mediated by the fear of, or a potential disapproval from, the hegemonic heterosexual society. In fact, the programme's representation of gay

identity was often assessed, by both mainstream and gay press, in relation to how much it complied or challenged heteronormative notions of commitment, purity, love, respectability, and national belonging. This raises questions about the depth of forms of homosexual 'self-regulation and self-censorship' (Nead, 1995, p.95) in regards to their public and visible existence in heteronormative and homophobic culture and society. This is a key question for debates on visual justice and it will be full explored in the next chapter.

Moreover, the tenor of the debate clearly highlights that *Queer as Folk's* visualisation of gay identity was a hotly contested matter within the British visual arena. This contestation was not just a question of stylistic concerns about aesthetic nuances of that representation. It was not simply a concern about the narrative qualities of a particular visual text. Rather, it was about the very democratic right of that identity to be visible at all and to be visually part of the public representational arena. Thus, the analysis of the public discourses on this programme has highlighted the very heteronormative nature of the public and the material and symbolic hegemonic conditions or regimes under which gay identity can become visible in/and public. *Queer as Folk's* impact in the public arena has demonstrated the difficulties for a democratisation of the representational arena and in the following chapter I will fully analyse the consequences of the questions raised in this chapter for questions around visual justice.

CHAPTER 6. Visual justice and its discontents

Section 6a. Introduction: merely visual?

In this chapter I am going to consider the key concerns or most problematic questions that my analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s case study has raised for debates on gay visibility and for discourses about visual justice.

However, before I move to do that, on a more general level I want to argue that this thesis' discussion of *Queer as Folk* was intended to demonstrate that questions of gay visibility must not be seen as 'merely cultural' (Butler, 1998) or - given the specific visual nature of this case study - as merely visual. In the previous chapters I have demonstrated that the social existence of the programme as cultural and visual object was entrenched in all the symbolic and material dynamics that are at the base of the circuit of culture (Hall, 2002) and which structure any process of cultural production and reproduction (Jenks, 1993). The forces that contributed to its creation or production, the dynamics that shaped its circulation and consumption in the British visual arena, as much as its textual dimension were all inseparable aspects of *Queer as Folk*'s 'empirical' existence as a symbolic and material event. For example, *Queer as Folk*'s public circulation and consumption as TV drama entailed and presupposed the dynamics that regulate any cultural taxonomy, the considerations that structure broadcasters' choices for producing and scheduling programmes, the desires and wants of potential audiences, and the physical and spatial arrangements of viewing processes. All of these elements involved in *Queer as Folk*'s articulation of the

gay struggle for public visual representation and recognition are cultural and material at the same time. Their cultural dimension would not be possible without a political economy of signs and symbols, as much as certain material and economic investments would not be possible without cultural considerations.

Nevertheless, my main preoccupation here is not only about emphasising, on a more general level, that visual representations are not the exclusive concern of cultural and aesthetic domains, or that images are indeed the complex visual materialisation of powers, technologies, bodies, and desires (Crary, 1993). Rather, it is to emphasise that my analysis of *Queer as Folk* as a visual object (Yar, 2001), and the study of images of gayness' intrinsic connection to both the symbolic and the material dimension of social life, was intended to highlight not only how 'the regulation of sexuality was systematically tied to *the mode of production* proper to the functioning of political economy' (Butler, 1998, p. 40), but also that '[t]he very formulation of matter takes place in the service of an organization and denial of sexual difference, so that we are confronted with an economy of sexual difference as that which defines, instrumentalizes, and allocates matter in its own service' (Butler, 1993, p.52). In other words, I intended to demonstrate that economic processes are just one particular expression of the way in which the materiality of social life, in its entirety, is inextricably intertwined with questions about human sexuality (Rubin, 1992). Therefore, my main concern was to demonstrate how questions of gay in/visibility must be understood in relation to the heteronormative ways in which the whole of material life is structured and to show gay identity's encounters and conflict with different instances of this undemocratic and hegemonic appropriation of materiality. For example, as we have already suggested in Chapter 4 in regards to the acting environment,

heteronormativity and homophobia *vis à vis* gay identity have structured and regulated not only actor's economic chances of employment or career, but also actors' material life as 'private' personae: their fear of public exposure, their obligations to marriages of convenience, and so on. This is exemplary of the way in which homosexuality has an essential but unequal bearing on the structural level of the materiality of sexual identitarian differentiations.

Thus, in the light of these arguments, I argue that the understanding of *Queer as Folk*'s visual contribution to gay visibility and ultimately to visual justice cannot be based on any bipolar perspectivism which advocates the opposition between culture and political economy or the separation - even if only for analytical reasons - of notions of redistribution and recognition (Yar, 2001; Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Gay visibility as a form of visual justice always entails both redistribution and recognition because it is matter of a simultaneous material and symbolic redistribution of images, broadcasting resources, viewing or desiring opportunities as much as of material and symbolic recognition of identities, needs, erotic pleasures, or representations. Hence, I would argue, visual justice understood as the redressing of the harm or injustice of gay invisibility cannot be simply reduced to a quantifiable amount of broadcasting hours or visual shares to be reallocated to gay people for a more pluralistic visual democracy. And this not because I think that gays should not be more equally represented in the visual arena. Rather, it is because I believe that visual justice is not necessarily or exclusively a thing, a numerical index, or a visual share that can be pragmatically divided or redistributed. Neither do I think that visual justice is something that can be ever fully realised, permanently achieved once and forever or that, once achieved, exhausts its scope or function. More exactly, I believe that visual justice

is like an 'art of trying to see what is unthought in our seeing, and to open as yet unseen ways of seeing' (Rajchman, 1988, p.96). Visual justice is more like a disposition to recognise, to see some of the problematic knottings of identity formation and the commitment to tactically unravel them materially and symbolically. It is, then, a form of constant alertness to the openings or danger associated with the flow of processes of identification and therefore an open-ended process of becoming just, rather than the mere achievement of an outcome, no matter how just it may be.

Having said that, and bearing in mind the synergy of the cultural and the material in the dynamics of gay visibility and visual justice I want to argue that the enfranchising or democratising dimension of gay visibility politics needs to be questioned or carefully assessed. In fact, in advocating its necessity and importance I do not want to claim that gay visibility, as a form of visual justice, is immune from drawbacks and dangers. For example, one of the problems of social visibility is clearly highlighted by Phelan (2001a) when she says that '[i]f representational visibility equals power, then the almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture. The ubiquity of their image, however, has hardly brought them political or economic power' (Ibid. p.10). Undeniably, the access or the presence in the visual arena of different social identities does not automatically guarantee emancipatory outcomes or liberating effects, as I am going to explore in the following sections of the chapter. But, having just looked at this possible paradox of representational visibility, we should perhaps consider that:

Whilst women and gay men are both the objects of representation (rather than its subjects), women are abused by a surfeit, an excess of

representation over which they have no control, and gay men are differently troubled by a dearth, a poverty, a starvation diet of representation. Women have suffered from an excess of visibility and gay men from a virtual invisibility. (Marshall, 1990, p.20)

In this respect it is clear that the relation between social identities and the visual field may be consistently different for gay men as much as the political or emotional investment that is at stake in the being or becoming visible.

Nevertheless, even bearing in mind the specificity of processes of gay identity formations, the particular dynamics of gay identity politics, their historical reasons for claims about visual justice, it is paramount to carefully evaluate the nature of the possible outcomes of representational visibility. Indeed, the fact that *Queer as Folk* was representing images of gay identity in mainstream culture and society surely does not make gay people to all intents and purposes liberated or necessarily freer. There is a huge difference between seeing as registering a visual presence, and seeing as knowing, understanding, and welcoming that presence (Walters, 2001).

Thus, what I am going to do in the following sections of this chapter is to discuss some of the potential contradictions or contested issues highlighted by the analysis of *Queer as Folk*, which might clarify what may be at stake in gay visibility as an expression of visual justice.

Section 6b. Spectacular visibility

In this section I want evaluate questions of gay visibility and visual justice by discussing *Queer as Folk*'s problematic relationship with the spectacular dynamics of contemporary economic life in Western societies. This is because, as it emerged from the analysis of the previous chapters, and most clearly from some of the comments voiced in both the mainstream and gay press, *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was perceived as the product of careful or canny economic considerations and spectacular marketing strategies. Different commentators had raised concerns about *Queer as Folk*'s ambivalent connection with contemporary economic forces and the programme's upbeat and glamorous representation of gay identity had been blamed for being potentially the expression of the 'grab-that-niche-market' (Sawyer, 1999, *Pink Paper*, 26 February, p.10) attitude towards gay visibility of television broadcasters and entrepreneurs. And indeed, *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility could be seen as being part of processes of commodification or reification of gay identity because as Phelan points out '[v]isibility politics are compatible with capitalism's relentless appetite for new markets and with the most self-satisfying ideologies of the United States: you are welcome here as long as you are productive. The production and reproduction of visibility are part of the labour of the reproduction of capitalism' (Phelan, 1993a, p.11).

This problematic nexus between consumerism and gay visibility in late capitalist societies, of which the United States are perhaps the ultimate symbol, is further emphasised by Hennessy (1995) when she argues that gay visibility has 'to be considered critically in relation to capital's insidious and relentless expansion.

Not only is much recent gay visibility aimed at producing new and potentially lucrative new markets, but as in most marketing strategies, money, not liberation is the bottom line' (Ibid. p.143). In spectacular societies, gay visibility then, may be actively produced in so far as gays are seen as conspicuous consumers of goods and images. Gay people are allowed to be visible because they are seen as a new and attractive market niche ripe for being exploited. Thus, the current increase in the mainstream visual arena of images of gay identity, such as the one visualised by *Queer as Folk*, can be seen as being part of a ruthless entrepreneurial race to entice and attract hitherto neglected segments of the national viewing constituencies in an over-competitive visual market.

No longer content - and no longer able - to mass market in the hope of touching all, marketing strategies have shifted to a more targeted approach. We see this most dramatically, of course, in television. If TV programming and its attendant advertising was originally organised around a sort of lowest common denominator mentality, the proliferation of cable and second-string networks...have forced into play a much different strategy. So now we have entire networks or segments of networks largely addressing a youth market...or a black market...or a women's market... The attempt to "reach everyone" through a sort of bland sameness (assuming a white and heterosexual viewing public) has given way to aggressive targeting of populations deemed golden in terms of their spending patterns (youth) or untapped in terms of their spending potential and brand loyalty (blacks and gays). (Walters, 2001, p.236)

And in Chapter 4, when I explored issues about *Queer as Folk*'s commissioner and broadcaster and in particular about Jackson's views on the role of the programme within Channel 4's broadcasting strategy, I had already highlighted how these kinds of considerations and marketing dynamics were key elements at play.

Even *The Daily Mail*'s journalist Lee-Potter voiced similar kinds of concerns. In fact she had clearly expressed her opinion that TV bosses were using explicit images of sexuality to seduce and captivate audiences in order to sell a programme that was intrinsically unsuitable for heteronormative mainstream visual consumption. For her, it was only economic greed and the race towards profit behind such an 'irresponsible' use of images of 'perverse' sexuality which would have weakened the national moral fibre. But, if her concern was dictated by a much deeper conviction about the unsuitability of any image of homosexuality for the mainstream visual arena, paradoxically she was highlighting some of the key ambiguities of contemporary gay visibility in a spectacular marketable visual arena. In fact, as Skeggs argues, we should bear in mind that:

The search for new markets and the ability of capitalism to marketise its own contradictions has enabled the opening out of new markets for which new resources and new consumers need to be produced. It is in this search for new markets that what was once abject, legitimated through biology and science, is now being accessed and re-legitimated in order to produce the "new" and "exciting". Moral boundaries are being redrawn whereby what was once projected onto an "other" is now being drawn back into the mainstream. Yet this is not a wholesale incorporation of bodies that were once positioned at a distance. Rather, it is a re-valuation process, whereby prior immoral abject culture is being used to open up new markets. The expanse of sexuality...as a mechanism for selling goods is one obvious example. (Skeggs, 2005, p.63)

Indeed, I believe that in thinking about *Queer as Folk*'s articulation of visual justice, we must carefully consider the implications and imbrications of gay visibility in processes of commodification and spectacularisation. And given that spectacularisation can be understood as a 'kind of power of recuperation and absorption, a capacity to neutralize and assimilate acts of resistance by converting them into objects or images of consumption' (Crary, 1989, p.100), we must be

alert to the fact that gay visibility may be turning from a political project into a marketing strategy (Simpson, 1996) out of which *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice may emerge seriously impaired.

However, having addressed these concerns about the pitfalls of spectacular visibility, I also want to question any self-evident negative relation between gay visibility and forms of spectacularisation. And I want to suggest how '[t]he relationship between the spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit it is notoriously ambiguous' (Hebdige, 1979, p.94) and argue that it is problematic 'to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality on the other' (Ibid. p.94). Indeed, we should not forget that it was also through the possibilities offered by the market and articulated through consumption that, from the late 1970s onwards, the constitutions of a stronger, safer, and more politicised gay community or social network was made possible or at least greatly facilitated (Seidman, 1993). In this ambiguous relation with the spectacular forces of commerce, gay people had often managed to establish or articulate a troubled, unstable, but also resourceful alliance with the market. For example, *Queer as Folk* had clearly represented the sense of safety and empowerment that spaces of gay consumption such as the gay bars of Canal Street may offer to users as real-life Nathans, Stuarts, or Vincés, in spite of the potential exploitation the owners of the breweries may be subjecting them to (Skeggs et al. 2004).

Moreover, I think that gay visibility, as an expression of visual justice cannot be directly translated as a form of liberation from the supposedly evil forces of capitalism. Coming out and achieving social visibility has never been agreed within the proteiform gay network as an exclusively anti-capitalist project (Weeks,

1977). The radicalism and anti-capitalism of some gay liberationist projects had often been perceived as highly particularistic and source of endless controversies in the wider gay population given that some of its reformist objectives 'could be attained within the framework of liberal bourgeois society' (Weeks, 1977, p.205).

Additionally, as I have already suggested in Chapter 1, the commitment of socialist regimes such as the Cuban or Chinese to liberate their people from the un-freedom, slavery or alienation produced by capitalist forms of production had done very little for the welfare of gay people and their struggle for social visibility. Thus, in this light, I believe that very pertinent concerns about spectacular visibility, like Hennessy's (1995) about the fact that the gay visibility promoted by supposedly gay-friendly corporations is often based on the sheer exploitation of a work force that is underpaid regardless of its sexuality, should not obliterate the fact that the injustice of gay invisibility affects all gay people involved in the processes of production: exploiters and exploited. And, as I have suggested in my analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s creative background, gay invisibility is not exclusively a problem of homosexual employees but also of employers. The almost total absence of openly gay TV or newspaper bosses (Gross, 2001) may be seen as a symptom of how gay invisibility and the quest for visibility affects all gay people involved in the spectacular production and reproduction of social life.

Having said that, I surely do not want to deny that gay visibility can be entangled with problems of economic disparities and unequal access to visual resources. Even the gay community is traversed by problems of exploitation or inequality not only *vis à vis* straight or heteronormative society but also between affluent gays versus less economically empowered gays. Visibility, as everything else in the integrated dimension of contemporary spectacular relations (Debord,

1998), is a commodity not equally distributed or available to all, as I will further explore in following sections of this chapter. But this problem, which surely needs to be addressed, does not completely nullify the justice of striving for achieving visibility. *Queer as Folk* was indeed commissioned and broadcast by a mainstream TV channel with gay audiences in mind as potential consumers of spectacular images of gayness. The programme's contribution to gay visibility was indeed part of consumerism and commerce. However, it also represented an attempt to equally redistribute visual shares, and a way to queer the phantasmagoria of the spectacle. In its ambiguities this was one of the possible forms of *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice. The programme's introduction in the mainstream visual arena of explicit images of homosexuality represented the unprecedented opportunity for a greater equalisation of the dynamics of consumption and spectacular participation. In fact, traditionally visual consumption had exclusively addressed heterosexual audiences, designing, producing, and reproducing endless images of hegemonic heterosexuality.

As a specific target group, gays have long been ignored by corporate interests. Seen as either too invisible (how do you market to the closet?), too despised, or too depressed within the general population, gays have largely escaped the direct onslaught of advertising. Companies have long been wary to advertise to a population so demonised, for fear of backlash and possible boycotts. Surely, this fear still exists and we should in no way underestimate the way in which "fear of association" still governs decision-making at the profit-centered corporate level. Moves are still tentative and still one-way, with gays consuming "straight" images and products and straights immersed in a world in which their centrality is taken for granted. (Walters, 2001, p.236)

This time, with the public broadcast of *Queer as Folk*, it was homosexual audiences that were addressed as visual constituencies and/or visual consumers. In

this light, then, I believe, it is a possible form of justice to become part of the phantasmagoria of the spectacle, to be able to enjoy the intoxicating pleasures of consumption or the cultivation of lifestyles in a more democratic fashion (Featherstone, 1991). *Queer as Folk* represented a form of redistribution of images-objects, of visual goods that, either fetishised or not, had always been denied in the mainstream visual arena to homosexuals.³⁰ It was a form of justice for gays to be recognised as a national audience, whose representational needs should be considered and addressed. Thus, I believe that *Queer as Folk* represents a shift from or, at least a challenge to, the hegemonic grip of heteronormativity over images and practices of the market.

Section 6c. Disciplinary visibility

In addition to gay visibility's risks of spectacularisation, I want now to consider questions of visual justice in relation to claims that gay visibility could be understood as manifestations of the ocular dimension of modern power (Jay, 1993) and therefore as a technique of surveillance and governance of bodies and desires. In fact, as Foucault argues:

Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surfaces of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and centralisation of knowledge; the play

³⁰ We should bear in mind that the Greek *agora*, which has often been invoked as the core symbol of democracy and democratic processes, was indeed the market square. In this light, democracy and commerce are hard to neatly separate. Moreover, we may want to consider that the access to or participation in both that market and democratic decision-making had always been the undemocratic privilege of hegemonic forms of subjectivity (Robbins, 1993).

of signs defines the anchorage of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies. (Foucault, 1991, p.217)

In this perspective it seems that the subtle work of contemporary power relies on absolute social visibility, on the creation of visible identities and on their visual proliferation as a form of more capillary social control and effective surveillance. Consequently, *Queer as Folk's* contribution to gay visibility and visual justice could be seen as seriously compromised by the effects of this visually regulatory mechanism in which images performatively produce and reproduce social surveillance and identitarian policing despite their supposed emancipatory ambition. *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity could be interpreted as a form of visual entrapment rather than visual empowerment because in producing and socially fixing images of gayness it was simultaneously subjecting them to the contemporary scopic regime (Jay, 1993) whose working relies on the visual production and reproduction of the dichotomous and supposedly oppositional categories of homosexual and heterosexual identity (Fuss, 1991; Brown, 1995).

Moreover, as Foucault (1991) argued, it is the Panopticon - Bentham's model of the perfect prison - that best represents the working of the regulatory power of visibility. In the Panopticon 'power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may be always so' (Ibid. p.201). Thus, because the jailer is constantly hidden away in the impenetrable core of the Panopticon 'it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine' (Ibid. p.202). Hence,

the strength of this form of surveillance is that the 'object of power is everywhere penetrated by the benevolently sadistic gaze of a diffuse and anonymous power whose actual existence soon becomes superfluous to the process of discipline... Here the external look becomes an internalised and self-regulating mechanism' (Jay, 1993, p.409). In this light, then, questions explored in Chapter 3 about *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice by breaking a stereotypical representational mold and allowing new representational freedom to gay characters, could be re-read as having visually reinforced the sexual categorisation just mentioned and possibly reproduced dynamics of abjection, surveillance, and perhaps self-surveillance, rather than dismantling them.

However, in considering these concerns I want to argue that the 'birth' and simultaneous closeting of the homosexual character (Fuss, 1991), its visual construction and visual obliteration (Marshall, 1990), and its entanglement in the ocular or panoptical dimension of modern power was not a free choice exercised by homosexuals but indeed the burdensome result of a host of historical forces over which they had little control but whose effects they had to endure. Thus, in thinking about disciplinary visibility we must remember the painful history of invisibility, systematic disparagement, material and symbolic misrecognition, as much as that:

our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining and demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being... misrecognition shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred. (Taylor, 1992, p.25/26)

Consequently, *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice may be understood as an attempt to alleviate the pain of those wounds, no matter how partially, precariously, or disciplinarily. Moreover, the social debate triggered by *Queer as Folk* could also be seen as having raised a smoke-screen, a temporary shield from the relentless gaze of ocular power and therefore as having created the space for strategic moments of social negotiation between and across gay and straight identities.

Furthermore, in evaluating questions of visual justice *vis à vis* disciplinary visibility we should consider how 'Foucault may have focused so insistently on the dangers of panopticism that he remained blind to the other micropractices of everyday life that subvert its power' (Jay, 1993, p.415) so that he 'never explored in any depth the role visual experience might play in resisting it as well' (Ibid. p.416). In fact, even though *Queer as Folk*'s visual representation of gay identity might be understood as a performative act that could reproduce power's injunction to visualise social identities for their disciplinary inclusion into the existing visual regime, it is also true that the programme's representation of gayness was neither perfect nor uncontested. Again, as I have already suggested, the heated debate that *Queer as Folk* fuelled within and across mainstream and gay visual constituencies clearly demonstrates that images of gay identity also represent the visual field for agency and resistance in so far as Butler (1993) suggests:

the performative, the call by the law which seeks to produce a lawful subject, produces a set of consequences that exceed and confound what appears to be the disciplining intention motivating the law. Interpellation thus loses its status as a simple performative, an act of discourse with the power to create that to which it refers, and creates more than it ever meant to, signifying in excess of any intended

referent. It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience. (Butler, 1993, p.122)

In the light of these insights, I believe that, although *Queer as Folk* could be understood as a form of visual interpellation, its failures or excesses in visually materialising gay identity, can potentially be seen as a default form of resistance. No representation can ever fully embody or represent the individual or collective experience of gay identity and this intrinsic failure opens up the possibility for agency and transformation in the incessant attempt to fully visualise it, to approximate it. In Chapter 4 I have already explored the scriptwriter's artistic challenges or constraints in having to construct *Queer as Folk*'s narrative and characters. We have seen how unavoidably partial was the result. And in Chapter 5 we have also clearly seen how contested those images were. For example, the diametrically different views of the Independent's twin article seem to me a clear evidence of *Queer as Folk*'s openness.

This is surely not to uncritically assume an audience's unbounded viewing agency or unconstrained interpretative powers (Morley, 1992) but to say that those images are indeed the public visual terrain of recognition or identification, as much as of disidentification, negotiation, or subversion. Representations always betray, either in excess or in defect, their un/intended visual disciplinary power. *Queer as Folk* in visually constructing a particular image of gay identity, inevitably ended up giving away too much or too little of it, and thus, becoming a visual field of contestation that can never be exhausted.

Construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes

culturally intelligible. The critical task for feminism is not to establish a point of view outside of constructed identities; that conceit is the construction of an epistemological model that would disavow its own cultural location and, hence, promote itself as a global subject, a position that deploys precisely the imperialistic strategies that feminism ought to criticise. The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (Butler, 1999, p.188)

In a similar vein, I believe that, *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity, in constructing those always partial images of gayness, sets the scene for the possibility of visual justice understood both as a form of social recognition and of recognition of its own failure to properly represent and recognise. Thus, *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility rather than being seen an absolute form of liberation from disciplinary power and surveillance, needs to be understood as a form of agency and resistance that is produced in all the slippages of meaning and micro-practices of creation, fruition, and circulation of those images. In fact, as I have highlighted on various occasions, *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice lies precisely in having spread questions of gay visibility through multiple levels of the social spectrum and in having disrupted the seamless workings of surveillance by sowing the seeds of contestation and insubordination through the cracks, interstices, and spaces between images, social practices, and discourses that have produced them and that are mirrored back by them slightly differently, if not entirely changed.

Section 6d. Exclusionary visibility

In this section I want to discuss the way in which *Queer as Folk* contributed to visual justice in relation to questions of visual exclusion and visual hegemony. In fact, as we have seen in previous chapters, *Queer as Folk's* articulation of gay visibility had been contested on the ground that its representation of gay identity was highly particularistic. This is because it focused almost exclusively on a white, male, middle-class experience of gayness, and in doing so it visually concealed other possible ways of experiencing gay identity. Consequently, in assessing *Queer as Folk's* contribution to visual justice we should bear in mind that:

The paradigm of visibility is totalising when a signifier of difference becomes synonymous with the identity it signifies. In this situation, members of a given population who do not bear that signifier of difference or who bear visible signs of another identity are rendered invisible and are marginalized within an already marginalized community. (Walker, 1993, p.888)

Thus, *Queer as Folk's* path-breaking and proud portrait of Stuart, Vince, and Nathan, in challenging and disrupting notions of homosexual invisibility in the mainstream visual arena, may have simultaneously achieved the counter-effect of obliterating other forms of gay subjectivity or preventing the visual empowerment of other minority segments of the gay community. Indeed, the condition of gay invisibility that triggers the political demands for public visibility is never a homogenous condition of social exclusion and inequality, but it is generated by complex and socially asymmetrical subject positions.

Lesbian and gay men of colour have contested the notion of a unitary gay subject and the idea that the meaning and experience of being gay are socially uniform. Indeed, they argue that a discourse that abstracts a notion of gay identity from considerations of race and class is oppressive because it invariably implies a white, middle-class standpoint. (Seidman, 1993, p.120)

In fact, in Western societies marked by an almost chronic problem with racism, little room is left for visions of gay people of ethnic origins both in mainstream and non-mainstream culture. And in the previous chapter, in the *Pink Paper*'s mini-survey on *Queer as Folk* we have seen Donna's disappointment at the programme's neglect of images of non-white gay people.

A similar objection to the programme's uneven and exclusionary articulation of visual justice can be advanced if we consider how marginal and, to an extent stereotypical, were the lesbian characters in *Queer as Folk*, as I have already discussed in Chapter 3. Lesbians in a phallogocentric Western culture, and likewise male-dominated gay subculture, are often subjected to a form of visual exclusion in comparison with the visual opportunities available to gay men. They are even excluded from the pleasures and dangers of visual commodification and spectacularisation, which are, in their intrinsic ambiguities, largely the domain of gay male identity and visibility. In comparison to gay men, lesbians have been less targeted as an appealing niche market (Walters, 2001).

Moreover, *Queer as Folk* was focused on the portrayal of fairly young gay men and, except on very few occasions, middle-aged or old people hardly ever appear in the programme. In *Queer as Folk* it seemed as if the visibility of a gay male identity was possible only in conjunction with the 'productivity' of youth (Baudrillard, 1993). In this way the programme was reproducing visually exclusionary practices based on ageism. Indeed, it was Stuart, Vince, and

Nathan's youthfulness that entitled them to visibility as desirable and spendable bodies in the economy of desires and pleasures. It was their bodily capital to be spent in Manchester's saunas, bars, clubs, or their glamorous lifestyle that endowed them with 'the "right" sort of cultural capital' (Skeggs, 2005, p.64) which allowed them to 'offset connotations of pathology and degradation' (Ibid. p.63) often associated with both old age and gayness, and therefore to claim their privileged right to mainstream visibility.

Furthermore, their potential for visibility as youthful gay men was clearly entangled with exclusionary dynamics related to class dynamics. Leaving aside Nathan's difficulty to access visibility as underage and economically family-dependent (he had to steal money from his dad to go to 'gay liberated' London), it is middle-class Stuart and not working-class Vince that the programme renders visible as the paradigm of gay visibility. Whilst Vince seems to be boringly satisfied with a mediocre and dull job in a supermarket and with the narrow visibility allowed by his fixed local existence, it is the more affluent, glamorous, and mobile Stuart who seems to be able either to imagine or to practically realise a cosmopolitan project of gay visibility. Thus, in *Queer as Folk* it is the privileges of class that seem to provide the knowledge and/or the means to dream and successfully achieve gay visibility (Skeggs, 2005).

In this light, it is hard to dismiss the fact that the gay community surely is not immune from the hegemonic and hierarchical dynamics that envelope society at large and that any universalising notion of gay identity may hide and reinforce those exclusionary dynamics. The gay quest for visibility cannot be seen as, or be reduced to, a confrontational challenge to hegemonic relations of subordination imposed by heterosexuals upon homosexuals. Such a reading would obliterate the

way in which the visual is traversed and articulated by other forms of hegemonic relations, given that '[d]ifferences can be found within identities as well as between them' (Gilroy, 2000, p.109). Discourses about a visible gay identity, then, should also consider the way in which visibility problematises relations within and across the gay sub-cultures and non-mainstream homosexual communities. Therefore, the point at stake here is not to:

diminish the fact that the impulse to privilege the visible often arises out of the need to reclaim signifiers of difference that dominant ideologies have used to define minority identities negatively. But while this strategy of reclaiming is often affirming, it can also replicate the practices of dominant ideologies that use visibility to create social categories on the basis of exclusion. (Walker, 1993, p.888)

Bearing these concerns in mind it is not easy to dismiss claims that *Queer as Folk* might have reproduced exclusionary practices and forms of visual hegemony. And in the analysis of *Queer as Folk* that I have articulated in the previous chapters I have demonstrated how the programme's visualisation of gay identity has often awkwardly intersected other axes of identification and material processes of subjectification. For example, in *Queer as Folk*'s representation of Canal Street 'There is very little that marks the Village space as lesbian. It is predominantly represented...as gay = gay men' (Skeggs et al. 2004, p.1843). Moreover, those images of Canal Street visualise mostly white spaces of homosexual enjoyment and consumption. And the programme's fictional portrait of the Village as an empowering and protective space available to all gay people also obliterates the class dynamics and economic inequalities that may regulate the possibilities of real-life consumption of spaces of freedom. Consequently, in assessing the programme's possible shortcomings in delivering visual justice, we might want to

consider how *Queer as Folk* had only partially recognised and represented the gendered, classed or raced dimension of gay identity, and how it had only minimally redistributed in the public visual arena images of those other axes of difference.

Having said that, I also believe that the critical strength of visual justice lies not necessarily in the possibility to ‘establish a hierarchy of oppression according to paradigms of visibility’ (Walker, 1993, p.872). Rather, its critical strength lies precisely in its potential to bring to the surface of the public visual arena the always incomplete visualisation of gay identity. Indeed, in the overall existing visual scarcity of gay representations, every single visualisation of gayness is bound to be overloaded with so many representational claims that some of them inevitably will not be attended. And this may lead to evaluations of *Queer as Folk*’s contribution to visual justice in terms of complaints based on ‘the stultifying “me-ism” to which realist representations are always vulnerable’ (Phelan, 2001a, p.11). In fact, as I have suggested in Chapter 4, when talking about *Queer as Folk*’s scriptwriter, Davies was perfectly aware that it would have been impossible to create a drama able to recognise all possible forms of gay experience and capable of visually representing all the potential intersections of gay identity with other axes of difference or belonging. He had to keep aside the compulsion for an impossible representational inclusiveness, productively and creatively embracing representational exclusiveness.

On the other hand, I would argue that it was the unavoidable exclusionary dimension of *Queer as Folk*’s representation of gay identity that performatively created the conditions for the acknowledgement of gay visibility’s ever-shifting representational limitations. It was thanks to its public existence and specific

representation of gay identity that the possibility for a broader public debate on questions of gay visibility was productively opened up either in agreement or in disagreement, as we have explored in the previous chapter. Thus, *Queer as Folk's* contribution to visual justice was not only to have offered long overdue opportunities for identification and recognition but also chances of disidentification, contestation, or negotiation of the meaning of gay visibility.

Thus, I believe that the objective of visual justice *vis à vis* gay identity is to encourage and foster social, political, and cultural demands for a democratic proliferation of visual representations of gay identity in the public visual arena. Indeed a possible antidote to exclusionary visibility might be striving for a richer, more articulated and more equally redistributed representational arena in which to enjoy more visual fragments of gay identity and to welcome the visual challenges that those images fortunately produce. A plurality of gay representations would never totally dispel the danger of visual exclusion but it would indeed sharpen our critical views on gay identity, multiplying the awareness of gay visibility's blind spots and of visual justice's unquenchable necessity.

Section 6e. Assimilationist visibility

After having considered the exclusionary implications of *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity, in this section I want to address almost the opposite issue. I want to discuss what is at stake for questions of gay visibility and visual justice in the moment in which *Queer as Folk* was actively including images of gayness in the public visual arena.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the programme's attempts to promote and reclaim a gay visual presence in the mainstream televisual environment had elicited very mixed reactions even from some members of the gay viewing constituencies. For example, the concerns of *The Independent's* journalist who feared that Stuart's shallow, superficial or irresponsible lifestyle and behaviour might not have been the most appropriate representation of homosexuality for a full introduction to the mainstream public of images of gay identity, are highly indicative of the ambivalences and ambiguities intrinsic to *Queer as Folk's* efforts at making gay identity visible. For the journalist it was clear that *Queer as Folk* would have done a better service for gay visibility and social inclusion if its narrative had been around a charming and respectable character such as the one of 'Cuddly Colin' in *EastEnders*. For him it was clear that the programme had disgraced the gay community by representing far too controversial an image of gayness and presenting gay people in a far too unfavourable manner for an uncontested inclusion in the public arena.

The point at stake here is not to assess if the journalist of *The Independent* was right or wrong in his reading of *Queer as Folk's* characters as shallow, amoral or superficial human beings. Rather, what I want to highlight here is how frequently questions around gay visibility are imprinted and articulated by this fear of being misrecognised or misjudged, of being considered unfit for social inclusion and therefore not conceded full membership and access to the public visual arena. As I have already suggested in Chapter 2, the problem of gay visibility as a form of recognition may be critically seen as if it was a favour or privilege that subordinate social groups are 'kindly' granted by dominant social groups (Boyarin, 1996). In this perspective, it is clear that the inclusion of images of gay

identity in the public visual arena can only be achieved if those representations comply and fulfil hegemonic and heteronormative standards of social acceptability, respectability, or taste, and they do not upset the heteronormative viewing majority.

Indeed, certain segments of the gay community have hoped and tried to achieve social inclusion and equality by presenting themselves as respectable and law-abiding citizens (Bell and Binnie, 2000). For example, the earlier homophile movements like the 'Daughters of Bilitis and Matachine urged their members to dress neatly and "appropriately" for meetings, especially meetings with "experts" such as the clergy, government officials, or doctors' (Blasius and Phelan, 1997, p.239). Their ultimate goal of being accepted by and included in heterosexual society was pursued by paradoxically trying to demonstrate their visible invisibility, their potential for blending into the background of the heteronormative visual arena and behaving or looking like proper, respectable heterosexual members of society. But, as Phelan (2001b) rightfully suggests '[r]espectability is not simply a matter of treating oneself and others with respect and integrity. It requires careful attention and obedience to prevailing norms of dress and comportment' (Ibid. p.104).

In this perspective, then, I believe that the Independent columnist's preference for Cuddly Colin's responsible and respectable public image of gay identity in *EastEnders* as opposed to Stuart's brash and unruly one in *Queer as Folk*, perfectly symbolises the potentially normative presuppositions that underline certain interpretations of the objectives, modalities, or prices that gay people are supposed to pay for their democratic inclusion in the public visual arena. I agree with Phelan (2001b) when she claims that:

Those who argue that we should “show our best face” demonstrate their inadequate understanding of the stakes of the battle. First, their standards of a “good” face are resolutely middle-class as those of the earlier homophile movement... Defining as the “best face” that which accords with middle class heterosexual norms amounts to abandoning any claims for autonomy or alternative aesthetics. (Phelan, 2001b, p.105)

Such an apologetic form of visibility ‘by focusing so much on gay similarity to “straight” people’ (Walters, 2001, p.19) risks concealing any distinctiveness of gay sub-cultural identity that would end up being completely assimilated by the ‘dominant heterosexual gestalt’ (Ibid, p.18). Indeed, ‘in the face of an homogenising culture...a culture that too often uses a metaphor of melting pot rather than tossed salad’ (Ibid, p.18) notions of recognition and acceptance as much as of social inclusion and equality are often understood as entailing the price of homologating to dominant norms and values rather than questioning or challenging them. Therefore, in this perspective, gay visibility rather than producing emancipation and freedom could become a way of conforming to dominant social values, and thus, nullifying any contribution to visual justice.

However, I believe that my analysis of *Queer as Folk* and of the public comments on the programme that I have reported in the previous chapter, has demonstrated that *Queer as Folk* had partly succeeded in avoiding these assimilationist risks. Its representation of gay identity was proud and defiant in publicly showing images of gay life ‘in all their irritating diversity’ (Sanderson, 1999, *Gay Times*, April, p.64) considering that ‘[w]hile we’re not all like the characters in *Queer as Folk*, neither we are all like Colin in *EastEnders*’ (Ibid. p.64). *Queer as Folk* was not trying to elicit consensus or to affirm that its characters’ behaviour and lifestyle were intrinsically right. What it was doing was

to demonstrate that gay people are like straights, but not in the sense that they are identical to them. Rather, in the sense that they are as different as they are. The programme was showing that gay characters are so similar to heterosexual ones not necessarily because of their similitude, but because of their similar potentials to be different and diverse: some good, some bad; some charitable, some uncharitable; and so on.

In this respect, then, I believe that *Queer as Folk's* assimilationist shortcomings in its contribution to visual justice need to be assessed more carefully. I would argue that one of the main features of visual justice is indeed to escape the easy polarisation between visual assimilation versus visual dissidence and to bring to the surface the productive difficulty of this ambivalence. In fact, as Phelan suggests:

sexual strangers do not grow up “outside” the dominant culture in any simple sense. Heterosexual culture is not a foreign country to which we come, but is our native land. Rejection by that culture is not a matter of barred entry - we are already there... Although for some this leads to conscious rejection of their native culture, for many more it does not... This conscious difference does not entail a challenge to any other prevailing cultural norms. It may lead to that, but there is not automatic theoretical or practical linkage between social difference and rejection of social norms. (Phelan, 2001b, p.113)

In this light, it is indeed rather difficult to talk about visual assimilation without acknowledging that gay and straight, heterosexual and homosexual identities are in a way inextricably connected (Sedgwick, 1994; Brown, 1995) even though most of the times their osmotic relation has been, and still is, difficult, painful and surely unresolved. And it is also important to underline how, even if not openly acknowledged, that very heteronormative mainstream culture is often indebted to queer culture (Dyer, 2002). Therefore, it would be unrealistic to imagine the quest

of gay visibility in a relation of total antagonism to the mainstream culture whose heteronormativity or homophobia it seeks to challenge.

In fact, on some grounds, the behaviour of *Queer as Folk*'s main characters was not so different from the hypothetical behaviour of any average Mancunian straight white young man. In their case, as I have already suggested in Chapter 3, it can be argued that 'being young and openly gay was not fundamentally different from being young and openly heterosexual' (Williams, 2000, *The Independent*, 23 January, p.4). Their civic dissidence on sexual grounds and their more or less active efforts to fight homophobia did not made them particularly socially progressive on any other possible contested issues in the contemporary political spectrum. Indeed, not all gays will be radicals in their political views just because they are gays. Both, gay and straight mainstream culture and sub-culture have their own internal degrees of 'conservativism' and 'radicalism'. *Queer as Folk*'s visualisation of the similarity between gay and straight behaviours was not necessarily done to please mainstream society and conform to straight norms but because gay and straight people are bound to mirror each other's behaviour at some point. Hence, if on the one hand *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was showing that gays are not only 'freaks and others' (Walters, 2001, p.19) and that 'gays are "just like straights" in some important ways' (Ibid, p.19), on the other hand, by showing this connection in the public visual arena, it was productively unsettling for both these supposedly different viewing constituencies.

Thus, I believe that *Queer as Folk*'s significance for visual justice lies in the fact that the programme's inclusion of images of gay identity in the public visual arena was a fruitful form of mutual visual recognition rather than mere homogenisation of gayness into heteronormative visual parameters. It was not

only a way to show similarities between homosexual culture and the heterosexual hegemonic culture but also an opportunity to make that public visual arena more similar to the gay one, appropriating it, rather than simply accepting its hospitality. And most of all, *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gayness was also showing the positive, productive, enriching, and democratic necessity of sharing the public visual arena.

Section 6f. Emancipatory visibility

In the previous sections I have already considered some of the potential contradictions or drawbacks that may follow *Queer as Folk*'s challenge to the traditional regime of homosexual invisibility, its attempt at gay visual enfranchisement, and consequent democratisation of the public visual arena. Thus, in this section of the chapter I want to further evaluate *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to gay visibility and visual justice by discussing the programme's articulation of questions of visual emancipation. In fact, current debates on social justice (Young, 1997; Fraser and Honneth, 2003) have often debated the viability of understanding the end results of emancipatory social struggles according to a bipolar distinction of its possible outcomes based on notions of affirmation and transformation. And regarding this dual view of emancipatory efforts Fraser has argued that:

Affirmative strategies for redressing for injustice aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them. Transformative strategies, in contrast, aim to correct unjust outcomes precisely by

restructuring the underlying generative framework. This distinction is *not* equivalent to reform versus revolution, or to gradual versus apocalyptic change. Rather, the nub of the contrast is the level at which injustice is addressed: whereas affirmation targets end-state outcomes, transformation addresses root causes. (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.74)

This distinction seems to split emancipatory struggles into two discrete categories and also suggests a hierarchy between the two in which affirmative strategies seem to provide only a temporary - even though comfortable - relief to social injustice but without any long lasting effect. In the long run, it is the transformative strategy that comes out as the soundest political strategy to achieve justice because it directly addresses and dismantles the cause of the injustice.

Having considered these hypothetical differences in intentions and results that may presuppose *Queer as Folk's* strategy of gay visual empowerment, I believe that the analysis of the previous chapters has highlighted how *Queer as Folk's* contribution to gay visibility escapes clear-cut distinctions of visual emancipation, as much as it shows the inconsistency of separating affirmative and transformative strategies for challenging the traditional regime of homosexual public invisibility. Indeed, I would argue that *Queer as Folk* was simultaneously addressing both aspects of visual empowerment and emancipation demonstrating that there cannot be any visual transformation without a degree of visual affirmation and vice versa.

In fact, *Queer as Folk's* representation of gay identity was surely affirmative because it was challenging the traditional visual regime in which images of gayness had been either very scarce or represented in a truly disparaging and negative manner. As already seen in Chapter 3, *Queer as Folk* was the first TV drama in which gay characters were at the centre of the narrative rather than being the usual gay token in a mostly heterosexual storyline. *Queer as Folk's* plot in

focusing principally on the characters of Stuart, Vince, and Nathan was quantitatively giving unprecedented broadcasting space to images of homosexuality in the mainstream televisual scenario. But the series was not only quantitatively affirming a gay presence in the public visual arena. It was also doing it qualitatively because the narrative freedom of its gay characters represented a radical departure from the negative, demeaning, or derogatory stereotypes of homosexuality that often had been the only alternative to total invisibility (Dyer, 2002a). In this sense, then, *Queer as Folk* at the same time in which it was affirming the gay visual presence, it was inevitably transforming the heteronormative visual regime. And given that the transformative magnitude of historical events can only be assessed retrospectively or *a posteriori*, I would argue that *Queer as Folk*'s contribution to visual justice was to have interrupted, no matter how momentarily, that regime of invisibility. In this way it had set a visual precedent and opened up the possibility for more fragments of visual emancipation to come.

Moreover, even if *Queer as Folk*'s representation of gay identity was in a sense affirmative because it was showing unapologetic images of gayness, this does not mean that *Queer as Folk*'s characters were portrayed as all 'do-gooders' or impossibly happy individuals. Its intention was not to promote unrealistically positive portrayals of gays in the public visual arena, but to have more articulated and accurate representations of them 'as individual characters, not as stereotypes or archetypes' (Sanderson, 1999, *Gay Times*, April, p.64). Hence, *Queer as Folk*'s emancipatory dimension was not based on a mindless reversal of the traditional negative visual stereotype into a positive one, as stereotypical as the former. Rather, it was based on affirming the intrinsic partiality of its characters'

individual expression of gayness. In fact, as we have already seen in previous sections, it is impossible to imagine an exhaustive representation of gayness that visualise all possible experiences of it. Likewise it would be wrong to imagine absolute and totalising affirmative acts. Representations and affirmations are always limited, partial and inexact. But their lack rather than being a negative issue or a failure is the engine for other future transformations, for the expansion of the known visual field, and a multiplication of images of social life. Thus, I do not believe that, in visually affirming the presence of gay images in the visual arena, the only emancipatory effect of *Queer as Folk* was to 'solidify a specific gay and lesbian identity' (Young, 1997) or to prevent identitarian dissidence and experimentation. Rather, I would argue that those images were indeed the precondition for identitarian contestations and negotiations.

Furthermore, I should emphasise that *Queer as Folk*, behind its visual affirmation of images of gayness as potential sources of entertainment and cheerful enjoyment rather than only of doom and misery, was simultaneously representing and denouncing the micro and macro instances of discrimination and homophobia that its characters were encountering in their life. *Queer as Folk's* storyline was affirming that the main problem in its narrative development was not homosexuality but indeed homophobia. Therefore, its identitarian affirmation was simultaneously a reminder of the fact that heterosexism and homophobia had induced the necessity to affirmatively and tactically promote that identity. For example, *Queer as Folk* was not necessarily affirming or suggesting that Manchester's gay village was the only and best place for gays where to be. Rather, it was suggesting or affirming that, for a young gay man such as Nathan, it was perhaps a safer place in which to explore his homosexual desires and to gain

enough confidence to be able to claim his democratic rights for more safety, freedom and equality. In fact, the utopian scenario at the end of the series, in my view, represents Stuart and Vince's affirmative/transformative emancipatory hopes in a world in which sexual desire and love may be experienced in a different way.

Additionally, I would argue that the transformation of the root causes or 'master dichotomies' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.77) that have generated a visible gay identity and the necessity for its visual emancipation from a regime of invisibility, can be achieved precisely by affirmative practices. For example, as I have suggested in Chapter 3, when *Queer as Folk* represents the gay family scenario created by the lesbian couple with whom Stuart has fathered a baby boy, not only does it show new ways to imagine parenthood but also it suggests endogenous forms of transforming heteronormative social relations, indeed from inside the system, materially colonising it with children procreated and loved in unprecedented parental configurations (Plummer, 2003).³¹ I believe that *Queer as Folk's* transformative emancipatory effects work in a similar way, that is, by materially saturating the visual field of images of gayness because, as Gross suggests:

In the end, all the fuss over network minority representation reflects the bid we're all caught in: this is a media-dominated society and being left off the media's center stage is a form of symbolic annihilation. The networks *could* tell protestors that fighting over the shrinking pie of network prime-time programming is silly, but they

³¹ In line with Harvey ([1982] 1999) who believes that in the analysis of capitalistic social relations the 'starting point is not the commodity, but a simple event – the birth of a working class child. The subsequent process of socialisation and instruction, of learning and being disciplined, may transform that human being into someone who has a certain capacity to labour and who is willing to sell that capacity as a commodity' (Ibid. p.447), I would argue that queering reproduction may represent the basis for a challenge to heteronormativity and heterosexism.

are caught in their own trap, as they also want to maintain the fiction that they occupy America's cultural center. (Gross, 2001, p.258)

Thus, in this respect, I think that progressive and liberating transformations must be achieved from within the visual regime by redistributively fostering a proliferation of visually affirmative opportunities to the point of their practical obsolescence. And by their practical obsolescence I also refer to their symbolic and representational value. In other words, I believe that a proliferation of recognitive opportunities and of affirmative visual possibilities would entail a sort of symbolical saturation or inner exhaustion of heteronormative cultural and visual categories used to describe and construct sexual identities, allowing them 'to flourish or die, according to the choices of later generations' (Fraser and Honneth, 2003, p.81). Indeed, I believe that the transformative dimension of *Queer as Folk* and its contribution to gay visibility and visual justice lies in its emancipatory potentiality, in the fact that it is an open-ended project of transformation but also of self-transformation *vis à vis* its own visually affirmative achievements.

Section 6g. Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered and discussed the possible shortcomings or pitfalls into which *Queer as Folk's* attempt at making gay identity visible may have fallen and I have demonstrated what I believe are the programme's gains and contributions to visual justice. On the one hand, I have highlighted *Queer as Folk's* possible implication in processes of spectacularisation and

commodification of gay visibility; in subjecting gay visibility to more capillary forms of social surveillance and governmentality; in reproducing forms of exclusionary visibility even between gay people; in exposing gay images to the assimilationist drive of the mainstream visual arena; and in trading off long-term transformative visual freedom for short-sighted affirmative relief. On the other hand, I have also indicated *Queer as Folk*'s simultaneous potentials for queering and democratising the phantasmagoria of the spectacle; for visually resisting and subverting the disciplining of gay identity; for articulating opportunities for disagreement and dissidence; for promoting forms of mutual visual contamination or public identitarian hybridisation; and for bridging gay emancipatory hopes and practices.

However, in suggesting *Queer as Folk*'s ambivalent or problematic articulation of questions around gay visibility I did not want to suggest its ultimate pragmatic unreliability for contributing to visual justice. I believe that gay visibility, as a specific expression of visual justice, cannot be reduced to a strictly quantifiable practical action with a measurable possible pragmatic outcome. It is not a straightforward techno-bureaucratic project that can be ticked off when achieved because its achievements are always partial and open ended. Therefore, I think that the problem of gay visibility must be understood as 'a question no longer of being but of becoming' (Lash, 2004, p.10). In fact, I would argue that what was important with *Queer as Folk* was that, at the same time in which it was making gay identity visible, it was also allowing its visible becoming. In other words, it was precisely its having made visible the pleasures and dangers, the opportunities and limitations of having an identity that had opened up the possibility for gay identity's becoming. The productive ambivalence of *Queer as Folk* was that, at

the same time in which it was reflecting in the public visual arena images of gay identity, it was creating opportunities of self-reflection; at the same time in which it was visually constructing that identity it was opening up the possibilities for its deconstruction; at the same time in which it was rescuing it from being in the visual closet it was delivering it to its becoming visible in the visual arena, and therefore to its visible becoming.

Having said that, I want to make clear my conviction that the self-realisation/visualisation of gay identity either in its being or becoming should not be seen only as an expression of the selfish visual self-realisation, self-enhancement, self actualisation of bourgeois individualism or of its 'inexorable trajectory of self-improvement' (Rose, 1999a, p.xxiv). Behind this potential selfishness of visibility there is also its potential for visual altruism, the opening up of something else, an opening for visions of otherness. In fact, I believe that the *ressentiment* (Brown, 1995) for the injury or injustice of invisibility, if on the one hand generates the political demand for visibility on the other hand it can be seen as the ethical engine for understanding the importance of sharing the gains of that struggle. In other words, visual justice is not something that can be individually or privately claimed and obtained because, at the same time in which certain gains are obtained, they need to be granted likewise to others. Thus, I think that gay visibility or the becoming of gay identity should not be understood as the sectarian closure towards images of otherness. Rather, it should be seen also as an opportunity, no matter how fragile, for the visualisation of other claims to visual justice.

As I have suggested in the introduction of this chapter, visual justice is not an end-result but an open-ended process of awareness. The beam of light of visual

justice, in the very moment in which it illuminates a segment of social life it also reveals the shadow at the perimeter of what it has rendered momentarily visible, and so, it moves on to shed more light and perhaps cast new shadows. Nevertheless, I believe that it is only by becoming visible, even if only precariously or momentarily, leaving the obscurity of the closet, and not having to struggle for light, that we may become able to realise that '[i]dentity is latent destiny. Seen or unseen, on the surface of the body or buried deep in its cells, identity forever sets one group apart from others who lack the particular, chosen traits that become the basis of typology and comparative evaluation' (Gilroy, 2000, p.104).

Indeed, I believe that it is through the achievement of temporary or partial opportunities of visibility that the contradictory costs and benefits of having been attributed an in/visible identity and having struggled for its becoming visible may become clear. Thus, the paradoxical potential of becoming visible lies in providing the opportunity to begin to visualise ways of being in society beyond the need for having identities, and to imagine forms of socialisation beyond the 'truth' of who people are, but articulated around a vision of 'what they may do' (Rose, 1999a, p.268) to each other and on 'what they may become' (Ibid. p.268) by living together. I am convinced that the 'utopian spirit' (Gilroy, 2000, p.334) of becoming visible lies in its potential for revealing the limitations of '[c]orrective or compensatory inclusion in modernity' (Ibid. p.335) and therefore to open up for people new visual horizons where they are able to visualise alternative, yet-to-come ways of being together.

Ultimately, I believe that, on the most general level, the truer potential of visual justice is to recuperate the dimension of images as symbols of closeness

rather than aesthetic distance. Visual justice is not an avowing of the separating potential of images or vision but, on the contrary, of their potential for visually experiencing our being in common. For visual justice is also about the responsibility for what we see and the opening up of other ways of knowing, caring, and hopefully respecting other people (Weeks, 1995). In other words, I think that a proliferation of visions of otherness does not provoke only visual anomie, visual cacophony, confusion, or visual and ethical anaesthesia. Rather, it can also enhance, expand, and heighten our planetary or radical humanism (Gilroy, 2000, Weeks, 1995), our respect and responsibility for our different ways of being human, and to show the way for a coming community (Agamben, 1993).

CHAPTER 7. Conclusion

Section 7a. Future directions for visual justice

As I approach the last stage of writing this thesis, I am perfectly aware that the choice of focusing on the case study of *Queer as Folk* to address or assess questions of gay identity, gay visibility and visual justice has been inevitably partial and too specific. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the media and social event represented by *Queer as Folk*, in its inevitable partiality, was a rather revealing social fact, and that it was an interesting starting point for the exploration of those matters. Its analysis offered an excellent opportunity to illustrate the set of discourses and forces that structure and regulate gay identity and gay visibility in the public visual arena. And it was a good opportunity to visualise some of the possible pleasures and dangers in which visual justice may get entangled when applied to questions of gay identity.

By analysing the programme and its social repercussions and implications I have demonstrated how the question of gay in/visibility is not a merely cultural or merely visual problem because it is simultaneously intertwined with the symbolic and material dimensions of social life, and that visual justice in regard to gay in/visibility is simultaneously mobilising recognitive and redistributive practices and resources. Moreover, I have demonstrated that cultural representations of gay identity, understood as engines for gay visibility and instances of visual justice, despite their possible or unavoidable entanglements with forms of spectacularisation, governmentality, or cultural assimilation, also contain the

potential for resisting them. *Queer as Folk*'s images of gayness were not simply mirroring or visualising a discursive regime around gay identity and reproducing its explicit or implicit rules and needs. They were also intervening in it. They were also openly challenging it by momentarily disrupting the smooth working of visual power and visual knowledge. Those images, at the same time in which they were representing an identity, and therefore potentially reproducing the same power/knowledge dynamics that had visually constructed it in the first place (Marshall, 1990; Foucault, 1980), were doing something more to it. They were simultaneously adding or subtracting to it, shifting emphasis, introducing new elements, showing new possible emotional scenarios, stirring old and new discussions and debates, and consigning gay identity to its visible becoming. This is so because the spectacle's power of recuperation is never fast enough. The capacity of capitalism to overcome its contradictions is never reactive enough. The ability of visual knowledge to become disciplinary appropriation is never skilful enough. There is always a temporal gap, a fracture, a fissure, no matter how small it is, between the experience of an image and its recuperation. In those gaps resides the agency of the visual. In those fractures lies the becoming of gay identity. In those fissures is ensconced visual justice.

Having just said that, I want now to suggest some of the future directions in which I would like to develop this research in order to address broader implications and configurations of the question of gay visibility and visual justice. The most obvious direction of further development to this thesis is to consider and study the American version of *Queer as Folk* and the public debate it triggered in the US regarding gay visibility. In fact, in this thesis I have choose to engage only with the study of the original British version of *Queer as Folk* and the public

debates it triggered in Britain. When I started working on this project I intentionally decided not to include the analysis of the American twin of *Queer as Folk*. At that early stage of my research I wanted to minimise the risks of making sweeping analytical claims that were not related to a more grounded or localised knowledge of the peculiarity of certain histories and social dynamics that enveloped the material existence of gay in/visibility in Britain. Clearly, without completely cutting off the account of processes of gay identity formation and visualisation from its connections to international social phenomena and histories, in this research I have tried to give a fairly detailed account of the historical, cultural and social specificity of certain configurations of gay visibility and visual justice in the British visual arena. But having done that, I believe that the breadth of my analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s contribution or articulation of questions of visual justice could also now be expanded in a more comparative direction. Thus, in the future I would like to consider more closely the narrative similarities and differences between the British and the American version of *Queer as Folk*, the creative forces behind it, the dynamics of its circulation and the public responses to it. By applying the same analytical framework I have used so far, I would explore what we could say about the specific discursive dynamics or visual regimes that articulate questions of gay visibility and visual justice in American society, and ultimately in what way the analysis of the American version of the programme contributes to a broader understanding of gay visibility and visual justice within the symbolic and material space of Western culture.

The next possible avenue of future development would interrelate with the previous one because it would be about studying the European circulation of *Queer as Folk* and images of gayness. A further proof of its international appeal,

success or circulation was given to me in 2003 when I went to a conference in Poland to deliver a paper on my research about *Queer as Folk* and the spectacularisation of gay cultural visibility. I had brought with me the programme's videotape to show some extracts of the series and I had expected to have to explain to my audience what the programme was all about. But, to my surprise, most of the Polish and other international participants at the conference had already seen it all, or at least some episodes of it. Thanks to the copies of videotapes sent by their English friends they had seen it almost simultaneously to its British broadcast. Indeed I had done the same with my friends for the Gay and Lesbian Archive in Bologna. And now it is widely available from Internet sellers such as Amazon, just to mention one of the most popular. But its international circulation has not followed only these informal networks because, as far as I know, *Queer as Folk* was shown in the context of various public events such as Television Festivals or Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals and was also broadcast by different European television channels. For example, Italian friends of mine told me that they had seen it in on the Italian gay cable TV channel (initially, it was meant to be broadcast on one of Berlusconi's TV channels but its screening was suddenly cancelled). And it is precisely these kinds of unconfirmed reports and imprecise information that I would like to systematically substantiate, gathering more precise data in order to verify questions such as: in what countries it has been seen; through what channels was viewed; if it was broadcast on national television as in Britain or on more 'private' cable or digital channels; and so on. In this way I would like to study not only the travelling of gay images and ideas (Appadurai, 1996) but also to explore how this programme may have encountered and intervened in other sets of discursive relations between gay visibility and

visual justice. Through the study and analysis of *Queer as Folk*'s European circulation, of its modalities, and the public debates on it, I could consider how questions of gay visibility and visual justice are differently experienced and articulated within the EU framework and to explore how discourses on gay visibility and visual justice may challenge or contribute to debates about European harmonisation of rights and legislations *vis à vis* homosexuality.

In the future, still on this line of thinking but on a bigger territorial and conceptual scale, I would like to explore the significance of *Queer as Folk*'s global circulation of images of gay identity in non-Western countries. In fact, the 'original' version of *Queer as Folk*, as much as its American version, had enjoyed a worldwide success. It had been broadcast and viewed internationally, becoming apparently 'very big in Hawaii' (Marr, 2000, *Gay Times*, February, p.16). Given that '[t]here's a worldwide internet black market for copies of it' (Ibid. p.16) and that an overseas student of mine from Hong Kong has told me of *Queer as Folk*'s cult status for him and his friends, I believe that it would be extremely interesting to be able to map out *Queer as Folk*'s transnational circulation and to study how Western images of gay identity are experienced, localised or challenged in non-Western social and cultural configurations. By expanding the research in this direction I would be able to address questions around processes of transnational gay identity formation, visual gay diaspora, and the globalisation of sexuality (Binnie, 2004). On the other hand it would be an opportunity to reconsider issues of gay visibility and visual justice in conjunction with questions of visual and sexual imperialism and spectacular global hegemony.

Another area or theme of research that I would like to develop more in the future is about the troubled connection between development of new visual

technologies and questions of visual justice. In Chapter 4, in talking about the challenges and competition that Channel 4 has to face in a more crowded broadcasting environment, I already suggested the increasing transformation and fragmentation of the public visual arena. Therefore, it seems to me that questions of gay visibility and visual justice need to be further assessed in relation to this potential disintegration of a uniform notion of the public visual arena and in relation to the proliferation of multiple, but perhaps more insular, visual spaces of gay visibility. For example, I would like to carry out a more accurate survey and analysis of the Internet as a virtual space of gay visibility and as a possible arena of visual/virtual justice. These hypotheses for research about the link between technological developments and gay visibility seem to suggest that visual justice, rather than expanding, is becoming the shrinking privilege of whoever may afford technological means and electronic proficiency. And I believe that more research needs to be done in that direction to properly assess questions of gay visibility and justice.

I am also aware that my choice of using *Queer as Folk* as case study has inevitably made gay male identity and its becoming visible the focus of this thesis and of my considerations on gay visibility and visual justice. Given that, shortly after Channel 4's public broadcast of *Queer as Folk* as the first gay male TV drama, the BBC had broadcast the explicitly lesbian costume drama *Tipping the Velvet* it would be interesting to use it as a parallel case study to research the set of discourses and forces that structure and regulate lesbian visibility in the public visual arena. And indeed, in the future I would like to develop my research in this direction in order to assess or problematise questions of visual justice *vis à vis* a visible lesbian identity. For example, last year's broadcast in America of the

lesbian TV drama *The L Word* seems to have pushed forward the mainstreaming of lesbian visibility. It also triggered a heated debate on the implication of this visual presence in the American public arena that articulated a set of concerns very similar to those that I have just discussed in this thesis in regard to *Queer as Folk* (Lee, 2004, *The Observer*, 4 January, p.11). Moreover, at the moment of writing this conclusion, the broadcast on Channel 4 of the lesbian teen drama *Sugar Rush* proves the increasing lesbian visibility in the mainstream visual arena, highlighting the necessity to produce a more systematic mapping-out of the dynamics, modalities, advantages and shortcomings of this new lesbian visibility.

Furthermore, whilst in this research I have focused on dramatised and televisual representations of gay identity to articulate a discussion on gay visibility and visual justice, the analytical beam of visual justice could be pointed to other areas of gay visual absence/presence in the mainstream visual arena, such as in the field of advertising or cartoons and comics, just to mention a few. These last two visual scenarios, not only represent a distinctive segment of popular culture, but also by traditionally targeting a fairly young readership, are at the core of material and symbolic processes of gay identity formation or disinformation. But the heteronormative grip on most of their narratives has traditionally prevented the representation of gay characters in mainstream comics. Even in the ones set in imaginary futures or alternative spatial/temporal dimensions, there seem not to be room for images of gayness. It is only in the last few years that, for example, Marvell's comic books have timidly begun to feature some gay and lesbian super-heroes. I believe that it is paramount to explore these fields of visual popular culture in order to map out other ethical scenarios in which questions around gay visibility may be addressed.

Therefore, I agree with Walters' suggestion that '[f]or gays, the hard work of making ourselves seen *and* known, integrated but not assimilated, same *and* different has just begun' (Walters, 2001, p.299). And, in a similar vein, I would add that the hard work for the recognition within sociological scholarship that these studies are not merely visual but at the core of sociological research culture and its investigative ethos has just begun. I believe this strand of sociological research on the powers of the visual needs to be vigorously pursued in the hope of being able to imagine new, pluralistic ways of becoming more democratic and to visualise new opportunities of becoming just.

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