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*Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age*, by F. Hollis Griffin. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016, pp. 190, ISBN 9780253024558, \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by: Lukasz Szulc, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

In *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age*, F. Hollis Griffin offers an analysis of LGBTQ media creation, circulation, and consumption in the broader context of neoliberal capitalism, with a special focus on the processes of commercialization and, to a lesser extent, individualization, and nationalism. It is a detailed, culturally- and historically-informed account which covers a diverse range of media developments spanning from the early 1990s to the mid-2010s in the US. The book includes a discussion of advertiser-supported local gay and lesbian magazines in Chicago, New York, and San Francisco (Chapter 1), happy-ending direct-to-video movies of the second wave of the New Queer Cinema (Chapter 2), LGBTQ identity-based cable TV channels Logo, Here TV, and Q Television Network (Chapter 3), and network TV sitcoms built around a gay or lesbian main character (Chapter 4), as well as gay and lesbian dating apps together with marketing discourses and user-generated content related to the apps (Chapter 5). Yet, given that only one of the chapters is exclusively devoted to the analysis of digital media (other chapters include only brief reflections on the topic), the subtitle of the book, *Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age*, is arguably somewhat misleading.

At the heart of the book lies a tension, familiar to queer media scholars, between normative and subversive representations of LGBTQ people in the media (Henderson, 2013). Griffin's key argument could be crudely summarized as follows: LGBTQ media creation, circulation, and consumption have been implicated in neoliberal capitalism, which leads to the production of problematic, indeed normative, LGBTQ representations (e.g. neither "edgy" nor "too gay," pp. 123-124). However, according to Griffin, as problematic as they are, those representations play an important role for LGBTQs by creating feelings of validation, belonging, and freedom among their producers and

consumers; they make LGBTQs “feel normal,” as the main title of the book indicates. Consequently, the author refuses to interpret the representations created in line with the rules of the marketplace simply as normative and encourages us to recognize them as “simultaneously emancipatory and repressive” (p. 13).

Similarly to other reviewers of the book (Billman 2018, Duguay 2018), I applaud Griffin for an attempt to “unfreeze the binary thinking” (p. 171) of normative versus subversive LGBTQ representations in queer media studies. I differ from the reviewers, however, in my assessment of the success of the attempt. To me, Griffin’s argument falls short. Whenever I encountered in the book the claim that normative LGBTQ representations make LGBTQs “feel normal,” I could not resist the question: Who are they making feel normal? By the sheer fact of being normative, those representations risk excluding anyone outside the so-called gay mainstream. To what extent can a happy-ending movie about a middle-class gay couple make a working class sex worker feel normal? What sense of belonging can a sitcom with an exclusively white cast give to a queer black teenager? What kind of freedom can the US Supreme Court’s decision to legalize same-sex marriage (discussed by Griffin in Afterword) give to a polyamorous lesbian triad with a baby? I am not suggesting that there is no potential for underrepresented LGBTQs to “feel normal” when they engage with mainstream LGBTQ representations, but I would like to see more discussion in the book regarding to what extent marginalized LGBTQs can and do realize this potential (see e.g. Cavalcante 2018).

Griffin is aware of those limitations and voices them explicitly multiple times. At one point, for example, we read that “[i]f identification with television is a normative fantasy embedded in hierarchical relations, the question remains how scholarship may ever trouble such a framework” (p. 130). But instead of thinking *with* these limitations to shape the main argument of the book, the author simply acknowledges them in a rather defensive manner and appears to cling onto the idea that the “normative fantasy” is not always that bad. In effect, the book privileges the feelings of the already privileged. Should not that be the very critique that the book offers? Not to excuse or redeem normative representations because they make certain LGBTQs feel normal but to ask who is

made to feel normal, when, where, and how through the production and circulation of those particular representations as well as for whom do they fall short at best, or reinforce (and *normalize*) their exclusion at worst. Following such a framing, the book could expose the role of affect in the very process of normalization of certain LGBTQ identities, desires, and behaviors at the cost of other identities, desires, and behaviors.

It seems to me that this line of argumentation, that does not excuse normative representations just because they make some LGBTQs feel normal, was foreclosed by Griffin's methodological choices. The author reflects on methodology in the Afterword:

When I presented this research at conferences, I was often asked to defend my archive and method. The objects examined in these pages are as disposable as a Twitter hashtag: cheap magazines, direct-to-video movies, quickly canceled sitcoms, and screen grabs from mobile technologies. (p. 172)

As an enthusiast of critical and cultural media studies myself, I have no problem with Griffin's choice of "disposable" objects of analysis. Nor do I take issue with Griffin's in-depth qualitative analysis. However, I do find it problematic that the author is not transparent about the sampling procedure employed in this research, which left me pondering why those and not other media texts, practices, and interpretations had been chosen for discussion in this book. Moreover, in cases when sampling techniques are explicitly delineated they reveal the book's limitations. For example, in Chapter 2 on happy-ending direct-to-video movies, the only LGBTQs who "find sustenance in the stories told in these movies" (p. 76) are Griffin's students, arguably an already privileged group. Consequently, the evidence for the main argument of the book seems unsystematic and selective.

In the spirit of broadening the debate on LGBTQs, media, and neoliberal capitalism as well as internationalizing queer media studies (Szulc 2014, 2018), I would like to finish this review by juxtaposing Griffin's work with the recent book by Hongwei Bao (2018), *Queer Comrades: Gay*

*Identity and Tongzhi Activism in Postsocialist China*. Similarly to Griffin, Bao focuses on the tension between the normative and the subversive, pointing to the contradictory legacy of tongzhi, which has emerged as a new form of queer identity and politics in neoliberal capitalism but is anchored in socialist past, when tongzhi meant simply “comrade.” However, instead of excusing normative representations, Bao (2018) criticizes them and argues for “opening up alternative social imaginaries” (p. 4). For example, the author examines documentaries of China’s leading queer filmmaker, Cui Zi’en, who promotes a Marxist vision for queer politics (Chapter 5), and discusses the importance of community screenings of radical queer movies outside Beijing and Shanghai for the creation of queer identities and communities (Chapter 6). In doing so, Bao (2018) refuses to feel normal when offered the pleasures of normative representations and instead draws on socialist past of tongzhi to outline a radical Left queer politics for China and beyond.

Altogether, Griffin offers a culturally- and historically-informed analysis of LGBTQ media creation, circulation, and consumption of the last three decades in the neoliberal capitalist US. The author also gives us an important reminder about the necessity of a serious engagement with affect in media and communications studies. Nevertheless, the book falls short in critically assessing power structures involved in the distribution of feelings of validation, belonging, and freedom that are offered by the LGBTQ representations implicated in neoliberal capitalism.

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