

A queered pitch

By Stephen Maddison

Consider yourself well and truly guilt-tripped if you haven't noticed the explosion in gay publishing. Four major new magazines were released last year: *Phase*, *Attitude*, *Diva* and *Bona*, of which only *Attitude* and *Diva* have survived. *Diva* is the only one to address lesbians and is published by the people who bring *Gay Times* into the world, while *Attitude*, the self-styled baddie, is published by Northern and Shell. Two particular terms have crystallised around these publications: "lifestyle" and "queer".

What is called queer politics grew out of AIDS/HIV activism in the United States and was fuelled by the anger and urgency engendered by the horrific scale of the epidemic there. During the 1980s it appeared that lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and heterosexual men and women had found new terms to express political affiliations. Focusing on common grievances about poverty, gender, power and the castigation of perversity, a new commitment to political co-operation emerged. At last, here was a space in which black and white lesbians and gay men and bisexuals of all predilections could belong. Unfortunately the political fury around AIDS/HIV issues couldn't gloss over tensions inherent in such co-operation – and activist groups shattered along the very lines around which they had momentarily been homogenised.

In Britain, our activism hasn't yet been fuelled by the same scale of epidemic, but the sexually transgressive chic posturing – the least interesting part of queer activism in the US – has taken a strong hold. In part this has been encouraged by lesbian and gay studies in academia. As with queer activism, academic initiatives have been incredibly valuable, and have reinvigorated the politics of sexuality.

But what now seems to be passing itself off as queer is a rather tawdry attempt to trash the idea of identity. We don't have identities anymore, don't you know? Not for us the old draconian ideas about oppression. No, now we have "lifestyles", which are much more interesting because they are all about what bits of your body are pierced, and where you shop and whether you should be drinking cappuccino or Absolut.

It is in the name of lifestyle that we can suggest how great it is that some straight men are "gay acting", and it is in the name of lifestyle that *Attitude* sells itself as a magazine aimed "primarily but not exclusively at gay men". It is in the name of ~~mere~~ ~~that~~ ~~we~~ ~~are~~ ~~supposed~~ ~~to~~ ~~think~~ ~~this~~ ~~couldn't~~ ~~gloss~~ ~~over~~ ~~tensions~~ ~~inherent~~ ~~in~~ ~~such~~ ~~co-operation~~ – and activist groups shattered along the very lines around which they had momentarily been homogenised.

marks a progressive shift. It is in the name of money that *Attitude's* editors state that "in these post-queer times, we're not interested in policing boundaries".

In the first issue of *Attitude*, journalist Paul Burston exhorted his readership to knee in the balls and piss in the beer of any "miserable queen" who moans about how he can't stand heterosexual men. Burston was defending what he calls gay acting straight men – members of a wonderful species who have tastes and inclinations that are apparently gay, and which blur the boundaries between gay and straight. Well Paul, you'd better piss in my beer and knee me in the bollocks, because guess what? I can't stand heterosexual men, and I can't stand your bullshit.

The appearance of the lifestyle magazines does suggest that a shift has taken place, that lesbian and gay material is more acceptable, and in this they are part of a larger trend. But what are the terms of this visibility, this acceptability? Of the surviving magazines *Diva* largely remains subcultural – you won't see it as yet on the shelves of WH Smith. And, despite its "lifestyle" tag, it doesn't address a mainstream audience but fills a shameful void produced by gay male misogyny. *Attitude* is more mainstream, glossier and the most successful. It is no coincidence that as queerness becomes divorced from any challenge to the cultural authority of heterosexuality, we can now find *Attitude* nestling among those other narcissistic celebrations of the splendour of masculinity, *Arena*, *GQ*, *Esquire*, *FHM*, even *Loaded*.

This is the journalistic equivalent of "mixed" queer clubs, where straight babes and blokes can pull on a pair of hot pants and platforms, drop an E, and bop their tits off with the groovy queers, blurring the boundaries, bringing those walls of oppression down with them.

I don't want merely to trash queer politics in Britain – it served a purpose at a specific moment. But we do need to examine why it hasn't proved more effective. Particularly significant is the way its in-ye-face rebellious stance could so easily be packaged into a "lifestyle", attractive to liberal heterosexuals. Many of those who seek to represent us have forgotten why we need to identify a sexual identity in the first place. It's about owning and protecting a space where the idea of same-sex desire is acceptable. But being able to accomplish this depends on making that space challenging to the structures that keep heterosexuality dominant, not about selling your more mainstream, glossier and the most successful. It is no coincidence that as queerness becomes divorced from any challenge to the cultural authority of heterosex-

transgressive chic down the gravy train of acceptability. Queers have always been all right as long as they were entertaining and kept their heads down.

Providing a magazine glossy and interesting enough (and *Attitude* is that at least) to appeal to heterosexual men, and then flattering them into thinking they're pushing back the frontiers of sexual politics when they buy it, isn't that far away from having us all mincing through sitcoms lisping "I'm free", like John Inman in *Are You Being Served?*. Playing to a mainstream (that is, heterosexual) audience might increase your loot, but don't kid us you're interested in doing anything else.

People don't go on about identity just to be difficult. Heterosexuality isn't just some postmodern ironic effect, a performance to be parodied or deconstructed. It's an institution produced through complex power relations. Getting straight men to use moisturiser, wear Vivienne Westwood clothes or dance to Kylie Minogue doesn't reinforce anything but their power to be anywhere, do anything, buy anyone.

Gay men have a lot to learn, still, from feminism. When Robin Williams, in the film *Mrs Doubtfire*, shoved on a dress and pretended to be Margaret Rutherford on speed, he didn't understand what it's like to be a mother and a wife. He wasn't renegotiating his cultural authority, he was reinforcing it. If you want to know what it's like over here, don't appropriate what it looks like – stay where you are and measure the distance between us.

In a recent issue of *Attitude*, the lead singer of chart success D:Ream was interviewed. When pressed about his sexuality, he confessed to once having enjoyed a blow job from a man at a party – while he was out of his head, naturally. This beautifully back-handed condescension led the boys at *Attitude* to wet their collective Calvin Kleins. In an editorial tripping over itself to valorise the bravery of such an admission, they failed to suggest that the pop star was merely protecting his market, upholding the structures that keep homosexuality abject, or even that he was merely imitating the David Bowie of 20 years ago.

And that is the state of contemporary politics: some pretty boy (very pretty actually) pop star deigns to admit that he once enjoyed a bit of strange and a bunch of corporate puppets go ga-ga. As *Attitude's* editors put it, you can't blame people for protecting their own interests. ■

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