"LOOKING HOT: Gay Performance and Masculinity"

by Nicholas Pachwood

We need to examine the limitations placed upon the performance of the self when a gay man cannot be muscular and virile without participating in the oppression of others and, by extension, the oppression of himself. The skinheads of Lukacs' painting are perceived as threatening, racist, violent and unequivocally masculine. But gay men, by virtue of a desire which does not fit, are denied participation in masculinity. As a result we can be incredibly resourceful and creative in the performance of ourselves. Yet members of the gay male community continue to valorize our exclusion from more 'conventional' codes of masculinity. After all, who would want to look like this masculine aggressor? Who would desire a skinhead?

The visual cues that signal the skinhead's participation in a specific youth culture also emphasize their masculinity. Heads are shaved, faces gaunt. Bulging biceps are emblazoned with militaristic tattoos. Their nodosities underscore the “shiftkicker” façade. These fine young men are emblematic of unattainable masculinity - unattainable and aggressive. But queer punk men are not considered perplexing because they have shaved heads, combat boots, and an aggressive aesthetic powerful symbols of masculinity. They appear perplexing because of their seemingly inconsistent desire for masculinity. This play on expectations can be troubling to many gay men. It may be perceived as a betrayal of the "feminine" constructs which have differentiated straight and gay masculinities. A gay man with a shaved head? How can we reconcile this symbol of aggressive masculinity with "being gay"? Symbolic inclusion and exclusion is not limited to a determinist straight society. Many gay men also engage in the policing of a correct masculinity.

Two gay friends came to mind: one an androgynous queer fairy, the other a truck driver. Most people have no trouble identifying the first as gay. Slim and effete in flowing clothes and make-up with a campy tone in his speech, he is a fire hazard. The second stands in contrast, the epitome of the husky top man with rugged jaw and plaid flannel work shirts. He has been thrown out of gay bars for not looking gay enough.

These two have never met. They would not be able to stand each other. For the one, effeminacy is the only recourse for a man who does not wish to participate in codes which reproduce hierarchical relations of domination and submission. Also, he is not straight but gay and wants to signal that he is not. For the other it is a rugged masculinity to which he is attuned. His leather and denim signify the Marlboro man he wants, and the one he wants to perceive in himself. Also, he is a man who wants to have sex with men and they should know he is a real man!

Both of these friends are gay. Both could identify each other across a busy street as gay. And yet their performances of masculinity are very different and mutually repellent. One performance appears to symbolize conventional styles of masculinity while the other appears to embrace those styles.

Both my friends should know better. And they cannot claim ignorance as an excuse. Here is a community whose disciplined desire insists on further compartmentalizing itself. This is a result of living a life in dodged of being exposed as a fraud and in fear that someone may see behind the mask. Here, Oscar Wilde offers guidance: "I hope you have not been flouting a double life, pretending to be wicked and really being good all the time." This may be the case with Lukacs' skinheads. Most skinheads I have met are of the queer variety and have been absolutely anti-racist and pro-feminist. When I laughed out loud at "The Finest Young Man..." I was laughing with Lukacs' camp sensibility. These funny boys look so tough but rarely are. My friend David summed it up when I told him I would be discussing Lukacs' work: "Lukacs' skinnedheads...those paintings are so fucking hot!"

Works Cited


Nicholas Pachwood is the editor of AIDS and Culture.