

"LOOKING HOT: Gay Performances of Masculinity"

by Nicholas Packwood

A wholesale appropriation of skinhead iconography has taken shape in queer punk. These images are linked through a self-consciously performative aspect of gay masculinity. This masculinity is reflexive, ironic and camp. It relies on codes which identify gay men with one another in a society where most articulations of affection between men are forbidden. For gay men to be masculine despite exclusion from the category by virtue of a "feminizing" desire involves a form of masquerade. Gay men, just like everyone else, are playing a game of gender. We are simply more likely to be aware of it. This performance is about looking hot. Oscar Wilde, in his obsession with art and appearance, expresses this sensibility clearly: "It is better to be beautiful than to be good. But... it is better to be good than to be ugly." Gay men have been accused of being "apolitical." On the contrary, there is a politics of looking hot.

At the spring 1992 symposium of Carleton University's Centre for Research in Culture and Society Susan Douglas presented her analysis of "The Finest Young Men..." by Attila Richard Lukacs. This work depicts a group of naked skinheads lounging in Doc Marten's. Conference goers expressed discomfort, even a sense of threat, in their apprehension of muscular naked skins. Imagine their surprise that this image, a work of the gay Lukacs, would be of compelling interest, could even be found comical, to some gay men.

How could skinheads - a youth culture often linked with violent racism and, specific to this case, virulent homophobia - be of sexual interest to gay men? How could they be amusing? There was a logic to the surprise of my straight colleagues: how could gay men relate to an image of masculinity which is not a stereotypical "feminized" representation of gay men?

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? 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 oppressor? Who could desire a skinhead?

The visual cues that signal the skins' participation in a specific youth culture also emphasize their masculinity. Heads are shaved. Faces grimace. Bulging biceps are emblazoned with militaristic tattoos. Their nakedness underscores the "shitkicker" footwear. These fine young men are emblematic of unrestrained masculinity - unreasoning 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 are perplexing because of their seemingly inconsistent desire for men. 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 determining straight society. Many gay men also engage in the policing of a correct masculinity.

Two gay friends come to mind: one an androgynous queer fairy, the other a truck driver. Most people have no trouble identifying the first as gay. Slim and svelte in flowing clothes and make-up with a campy bite in his speech, he is a fire hazard. The second stands in contrast, the epitome of the butch 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, androgyny is the only recourse for a male 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 fucks men. For the other it is a rugged masculinity to which he is attracted. 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!

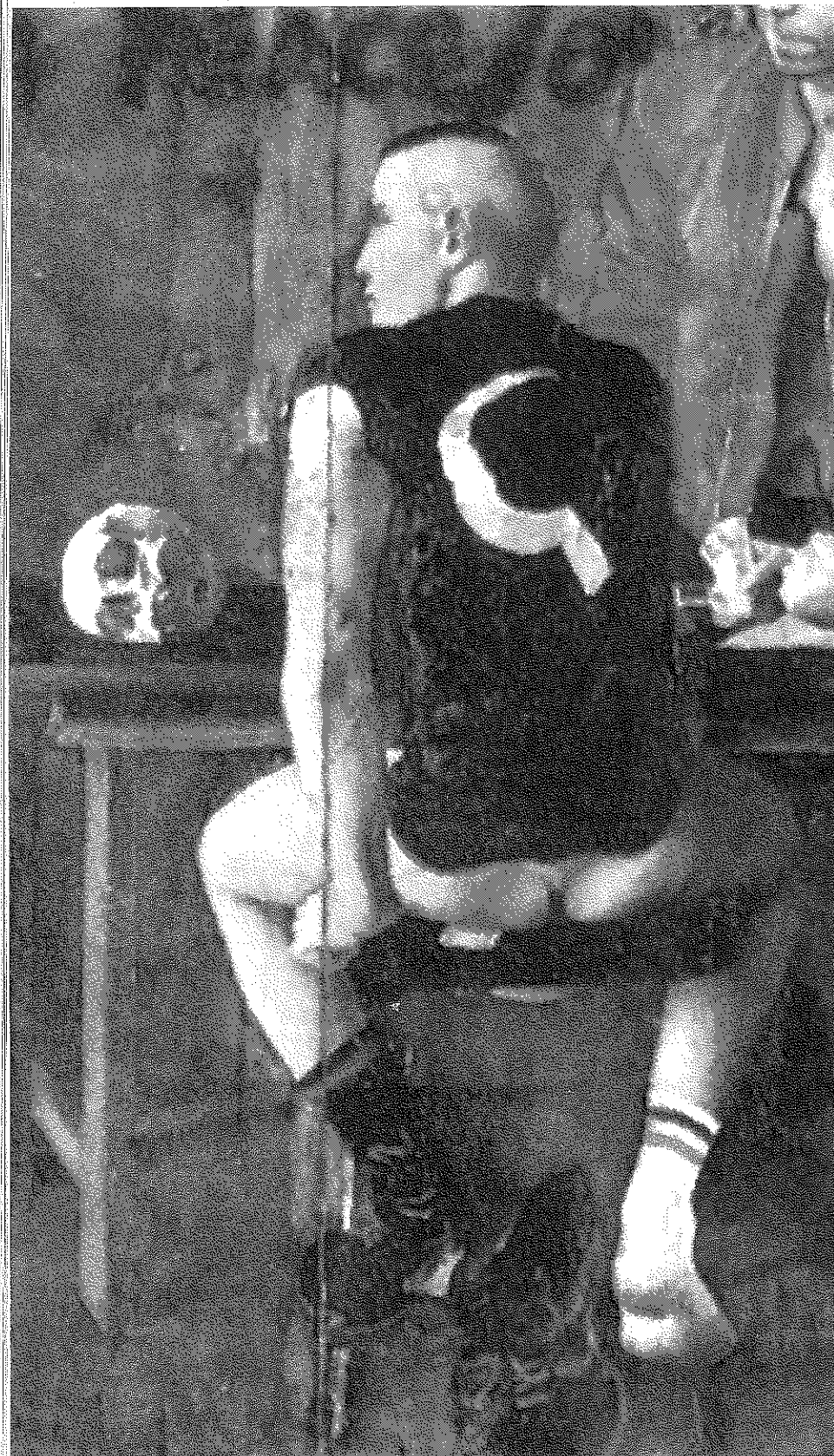
Both of these friends are gay. Both could identify each other across a busy street as gay. And yet their performances of masculinity are very different and mutually repellent. One performance appears to deny or contradict conventional styles of masculinity while the other appears to embrace those styles.

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 dread 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 leading 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 resolutely anti-racist and pro-feminist. When I laughed out loud at "The Finest Young Men..." I was laughing with Lukacs' camp sensibility. These hunky boys look so tough but rarely are. My friend David summed it up when I told him I would be discussing Lukacs' work: "Lukacs' naked skinheads...those paintings are so fucking hot!"

Nicholas Packwood is the editor of AIDS and Culture.

Works Cited

Susan Douglas, "Sizing it Up: (Male) Homosexuality as a Signifying Practice is Aesthetic Discourse," unpublished manuscript, Corcordia University, 1992.



Detail from Attila Richard Lukacs' painting "The Young Spartans Challenge The Boys To Fight," 1988