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AIDS, Physiognomy and the Average Man: the de-heroization of Rock Hudson

My paper looks at the fragile construction of heroism and its relationship with the so-called general public using as a case study the tragic and much publicised illness and death of Hollywood star Rock Hudson.

This paper will explore how the media coped with Hudson's AIDS diagnosis by presenting before- and after images, comparing the Hudson on film as a romantic leading actor and the gaunt and frail Hudson with AIDS. I argue that these images shatter Hudson's heroic status: his gaunt looks became a physiognomic index of his homosexual transgressions of the ideal 'all American virtue' his younger image was instrumental in setting.

The practice of physiognomy was and is bound inextricably to defining normality. Allan Sekula ('The Body and the Archive', 1986) informs us that the ambition of early practitioners was to establish 'A physiognomic code of visual interpretation of the body's signs [...] and a technique of mechanised visual representation and interpretation promised a vast taxonomic ordering of images of the body.'¹ Its architects in the Nineteenth Century included statisticians such as the Belgian Adolphe Quetelet, whose work, drawing on the statistical innovations of Carl Friedrich Gauss, strove to construct the statistically 'average man' (*l'homme moyen*), a term he coined. The 'average man' at the centre of the bell curve of physical and behavioural traits was, for Quetelet, 'the type of all which is beautiful – of all which is good.'² The alignment of outer 'beauty' with inner 'good' is striking. Later, Francis Galton, building upon Quetelet's use of the Gaussian bell curve, produced his composite images which he believed had translated the curve into pictorial form. The composite images were used to demonstrate the reality of deviant criminal typologies and the essentialist distinction of racial types; a dark prelude to Nazi-era eugenics. Perhaps now, in the effort to cling to the 'good' and the 'beauty' of the 'average man' in the wake of the ethical and practical demolition of eugenics and physiognomy, the media have turned instead to stereotypical images of sickness and health. The public's fear of an invisible epidemic caused media efforts to put a face to AIDS.

¹ Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, no. 39 (Winter 1986): 16

² *Ibid.*, 22.

Let me qualify this thesis before I move on. In order not to slip into generalisation or conspiratorial theory, it is important to establish what exactly can be gained for sections of the media by clinging to the ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ of the ‘average man’. The ‘average man’ for one thing is invisible by nature: a statistical construct, which, like Galton’s composite images, is an apparition of resemblances. As being both invisible and visible (in his particular characteristics) the ‘average man’ is a pseudo-universal phenomenon constructed from particulars (particular traits, features), a crude amalgamation of desirable traits.

The ‘average man’, then, is a prescriptive myth, one bound up with the social and economic conditions of the 19th Century: a northern European virile and heterosexual (aspiring) patriarch. The real invisibility of this statistical fantasy leaves those who aspire to being the average man to remain invisible themselves. Images of sickness and deviance facilitate the continuing invisibility of the ‘average man’. Political rhetoric of the ‘general public, and the ‘silent majority’ serve to appeal to and continually prescribe a non-entity that people want to be a part of. Cultural critic Jan Zita Grover said of the ‘general population’ that ‘Like the Nixon / Agnew “silent majority”, the “general population” is the repository of everything you wish to claim for yourself and deny to others.’³ Images of sickness, then, are entirely instrumental; if you were to search for pictures of illness in a photographic database like Corbis, for example, a repository of images for marketers to sell their wares to the ‘general population’, you would find well looking people looking relatively happy in clean bright clinics, the signifiers of their ‘illness’ would tend not to be afflictions like lesions or swellings, but rather hospital pyjamas or the obligatory thermometer – symbols of their care. Images of pain, suffering and deformity have generally negative allusions to mark and pathologise the sick *other*.

Rock Hudson

Parallel to images of sickness and deviation we have exemplary images: images that provide the coordinates for the invisible average man to aspire to. Hollywood’s repository of heroic characters provided numerous examples of such images, but it must nevertheless be emphasised that just like the average man, the ‘exemplary man’ is every bit a construct: an imposition of ideals by the larger cultural ideology. One such image was spectacularly and tragically shattered in the mid-1980’s when Rock Hudson, the veteran Hollywood and television actor, was revealed to be suffering from an AIDS related illness. It was a significant

³ Jan Zita Grover, “AIDS: Key Words,” in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis / Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988), 24

turning point in the reporting of AIDS in the media: the crisis made the transition from a neglected and obscure condition to one which marked the mass public consciousness; reporting of AIDS in the print media is said to have tripled.⁴ Hudson and a close circle of publicists kept his condition a secret, only revealing he had AIDS when the story broke on CBS and NBC on 24th July 1985 that he had travelled to the Pasteur Institute in Paris to undergo experimental treatment for AIDS. Hudson had appeared on the pilot show and press conference of *Doris Day's Best Friends* only days before on the 15th July, claiming that he was suffering from the flu, it was only *after* the AIDS story broke that the images of Hudson, looking gaunt and tired with Doris Day made it into the newspapers and nightly news broadcasts.

Hudson, had along with the likes of Douglas Kirk and Marlon Brando embodied the Hollywood masculine ideal, and was particularly noted for his enormous physique, being 6 feet 4 inches tall and muscular. Early roles included action and adventure films, but it was playing leading roles in Douglas Sirk's domestic melodramas or 'women's films' as they came to be known, including *Written on the Wind* (1956) and *All that Heaven Allows* (1955), that Hudson found acclaim. His appeal was noted to have been (unlike Brando and Kirk) a gentle giant, both desirable and unthreatening. The tabloid press, probably aware of his homosexuality, bated him in the mid-50s to marry.⁵ Hudson had been taken ill in 1985 not long after he had found new fame on the prime time soap opera *Dynasty* having maintained his rugged good looks. After the first reports by the networks that Hudson was ill in the Pasteur Institute, a deluge of column inches in the printed press followed. Hudson had indeed given a face to the AIDS epidemic, though 'face' in this context seems a synecdoche for '(media) personality' as the thousands of 'faces' who died before Hudson, amidst the media babble of the 'gay plague', were reported as unknown statistics.

The enormous media attention that came with the discovery of Hudson's AIDS is partially attributable to Hudson's status as a celebrity but it is perhaps his mode of celebrity that had exacerbated the morbid fascination with his diagnosis. Hudson's worn looks at his appearance on 15th July were subjected to comparisons with images of himself in full health as was the case with Kenneth Ramsaur, the first widely publicised AIDS death and other AIDS cases. But with Hudson there was a different subtext to these images. The 'before' Hudson was his younger self of the 1950s and 60's, mostly in the form of film stills, depicted in character with

⁴ James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media*, Reprint. (Rutgers University Press, 2006), 144.

⁵ Hudson duly did marry, in 1955 to his agent's secretary, Phyllis Gates. The marriage led to an acrimonious split in 1958 with Gates filing on the grounds of mental cruelty.

on-screen lovers: Doris Day, Elizabeth Taylor, and Linda Evans. These images reinforced the status of Hudson as the epitome of heterosexual masculinity. Indeed, the first report that he had an AIDS related illness (from United Press International) described him as ‘last of the traditional square-jawed, romantic leading men’.⁶ When Hudson had died in October 1985, *USA Today* editorialised that AIDS was not a ‘gay plague’ but ‘everybody’s problem’.⁷

Often, the commentary accompanying these images of Hollywood stardom and the worn features of Hudson with AIDS carried a tone of betrayal and disillusionment. Gerald Clarke of *Time* magazine wrote

To moviegoers of the 1950s and 60s, no star better represented the old-fashioned American virtues than Rock Hudson [...] last week as Hudson lay gravely ill with AIDS in a Paris hospital, it became clear that throughout those years, the all-American boy had another life, kept secret from the public: he was almost certainly homosexual.⁸

‘Old-fashioned American virtues’ perhaps did not include homosexuality, or is it the *secrecy* - the deception - that the author implies transgressed those American virtues? Veteran Journalist Frank Rich, writing in *Esquire* magazine on ‘the most dramatic cultural assimilation of our time [...] the story of the homosexualization of America’ focussed particularly on Hudson’s closeted identity:

Does Hudson’s skill at playing a heterosexual mean that he was a brilliant actor, or was he just the way he was, without acting at all? I suspect that most Americans believed that Hudson, who seemed so natural on screen, was playing himself, which means that in the summer of 1985 we had to accept the fact that many of our fundamental, conventional images of heterosexuality were instilled in us (and not only for the first time) by a homosexual.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 143.

⁷ Ibid., 145

⁸ Gerald Clarke, “Rock: A Courageous Disclosure,” *Time*, September 1985, 63. Accessed at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1048462,00.html> on 10.02.2009.

⁹ Frank Rich, “The Gay Decades: Out of the Closet and into the Living Room,” *Esquire*, November 1987, 99. This article was brought to my attention by Richard Meyer, “Rock Hudson’s Body,” in *The Passionate Camera: Photography and Bodies of Desire*, ed. Deborah Bright (London: Routledge, 1998), 354. Accessed at <http://www.gaylib.com/text/rept11.htm> on 10.02.2009.

The lack of a similar tone of betrayal or at least disillusionment (as in the case above) in the obituaries or commentary on Liberace's death in 1987, for Art Historian Richard Meyer 'reflects an intensely fantasmatic investment in Hudson's particular image of heteronormative masculinity.'¹⁰ Frank Rich's emphasis on the difference between on and off-screen straight-acting, as banal as it seems, has a good deal of pertinence here as we are dealing with representation, in this case the tightly controlled construction (through representation) of Rock Hudson and the role of AIDS in shattering that construction. AIDS had caused the emasculation of Hudson's media identity: the curious aspect of Hudson's death was not that he had necessarily been the first celebrity death but that Hudson the movie star had embodied particular ideals important to the American family, or rather the prescribed audience of the mainstream media.

What, then, were these ideals if they were not, after all, *embodied* in Hudson himself? Rich went on to write 'To many baby-boom-era Americans, myself among them, the Hudson-Doris Day comedies were a formative initiation into heterosexuality.'¹¹ Rich specifically mentions a scene in *Pillow Talk* (1959), where Hudson played a straight character who had to trick Day's character into believing he was gay through insinuation and affectation. 'To what ends?' Rich writes, 'Mainly, to reinforce sexual stereotypes and to humiliate a woman. From this morass of bigotry, crossed signals, and hidden motives were men and women expected to learn "pillow talk" - the etiquette of love and sex.'¹² The convoluted ironies of a gay man straight-acting and acting as strait man masquerading gay to fulfil his (hetero)sexual desire betrays the absurdity of Hudson's position in the American imagination emphasised in Rich's words above.

Hudson never had a choice to come out, particularly in the midst of McCarthy-era Hollywood witch hunts, so who was Hudson actively deceiving? The sense betrayal found in sections of the media lay with the disillusionment (in the strict etymological sense of the word) with their own complicity and investment in this absurd image of 'all-American virtue'. On screen and in front of the camera, Hudson was not fooling anybody, he was 'acting' as he was paid to do; acting for the luxurious life he lived, a life that would be shattered had he come out. Rich's redrawing of the boundaries of Hudson's 'acting' demonstrates the fragility of constructions of stereotypical gender roles.

¹⁰ Richard Meyer, *Ibid.*, 354.

¹¹ Rich, "The Gay Decades: Out of the Closet and into the Living Room."

¹² *Ibid.*

To get back to the thread of this paper, Hudson's image *as a person with AIDS*, from the last images of him at the launch of the talk-show *Doris Day's Best Friends* looking frail and gaunt, images that were largely ignored until it had been found that he had AIDS, worked in contrast to the youthful screen images. Hudson's gaunt image with AIDS was the image of Hudson-is-gay since the medias etiology of Hudson's AIDS was his homosexuality. Hudson's gaunt looks may have well been put down to flu initially: his image was 'innocent' until the publicising of his residence at the Pasteur Institute; it is at this moment, weeks later, that his image retroactively became an image of a person with AIDS and the badly kept secret of his homosexuality erupted into mainstream public discourse. The British tabloid *Daily Mail* wrote of Hudson's before and after images 'The two faces of Hollywood vibrant, virile... dissipated, corrupt, decadent – captured on the *two faces* of Rock Hudson.'¹³ The 'two faces' of Rock Hudson implies a double life - that the images of Hudson-with-AIDS were the images of the gay Hudson. The press 'ghoulishly', even anxiously,¹⁴ stamped Hudson's AIDS affliction onto the images from *Doris Day's Best Friends*: his gaunt looks became a physiognomical index of his homosexual transgressions of the ideal his younger image was instrumental in setting. Let's remind ourselves of Quetelet's *l'homme moyen*, the 'type of all which is beautiful – of all which is good': for a press clinging to the promise of a physiognomic code, Hudson's 'ugliness' on *Doris Day's Best Friends* was an eruption of the 'bad' in him, his betrayal of the 'good' of Quetelet's prescription.

¹³ Daily Mail, 27th December 1985, quoted from Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, Aids, and the Media*, 3rd ed. (London: Cassell, 1997), 89, my emphasis.

¹⁴ Grover states only 'a ghoul' or someone 'pathologically anxious to assign my friend to a fixed position' would refer to her picture as that of someone with HIV/AIDS. See Grover, "OI: Opportunistic Infection, Open Identification in PWA Portraiture," 105