Will & Grace

Watching with Ambivalence
The most popular gay-themed network TV series since Ellen, NBC's Will & Grace is attracting mainstream attention at a crucial time. The U.S. is currently involved in a number of landmark same-sex rulings, like Vermont's recent passage of civil union recognition for same-sex couples and the recent Supreme Court ruling that homosexuals need not be accepted by the Boy Scouts. Against the backdrop of such political decisions regarding queer issues, Will & Grace offers landmark humorous representations of characters who, only a decade ago, would have been fag-bashed by those whose religions and/or morals equate being queer with being evil.

The popularity of the sitcom and its potential to shape public perceptions of gayness was evidenced at this year's Emmy Awards. Will & Grace was nominated for a whopping 11 Emmys and captured three: Outstanding Comedy Series, Outstanding Supporting Actor in a Comedy Series (won by Sean Hayes as Jack McFarland) and Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series (won by Megan Mullally as Karen Walker). Moreover, critics have repeatedly called the show one of the best primetime comedies on the air, and it has guest-starred Hollywood notables like Debbie Reynolds, Molly Shannon, Gregory Hines, and Joan Collins. All this mainstream success suggests that it appeals to viewers who might not ordinarily be inclined to watch a "queer" show. At the same time, however, queer-aware viewers might enjoy Will & Grace with ambivalence, for its delineation of a "liberated" homosexual identity also confines it. While the sitcom does portray gay men, it confines that portrayal to gay, white, upper-middle class men who only represent a fraction of the queer folks living in the cosmopolitan hub of New York City where the sitcom takes place. I have been known to visit New York City, and can say without a doubt that Will & Grace basically erases the queer melange one finds on every block.

Let us consider the pilot episode, for example, which introduces the ensemble cast of Will & Grace. There's Will Truman (Eric McCormick), a kinda-hetero gay yuppie who divides his time between his job as a lawyer and his devotion to fag-hag/best-chic-pal Grace Adler (Debra Messing). Owner of an interior decorating firm, Grace is a spacey, sweet, all-American girl who can't help but date dodos and endure constant abuse in a bittersweet relationship with her receptionist, the deliciously rude Karen Walker. Married to a millionaire and constantly sipping martinis, Karen is also, incidentally, a fashion diva and grand bitch. Her attitude is not unappreciated, for she finds a staunch gay pal in Jack McFarland.

While the pilot lays the usual groundwork by showing how the characters' lives are intertwined, it also demonstrates immediately the sitcom's major drawback, that the stereotypical gay character is the stand-out comic figure. Compared to the dull homogeneity of Will's card-playing, white, middle-class, gay friends, the flamboyant Jack is the oddball, the only homosexual at this poker party with the potential to threaten straight masculinity. Even Will and his other friends poke fun at Jack's campiness, thus drawing a distinction between their "straighter"-seeming gayness and Jack's overt "queeniness." While their reactions to Jack might be read as friendly intra-gay joking.
(and many viewers do read it like this), they also encourage the viewer to consider the distinction between being gay and being campy, as each might comment on or even challenge heterosexual masculinity. The “guys” reactions might also be interpreted as affirmation of their own, more clearly assimilated gayness over that of “people like Jack.”

In other words, while *Will & Grace* is one of the funniest sitcoms on television today, the source of its comedy is occasionally troubling. For example, in one Viewers' Favorite episode (ranked sixth in the *Will & Graceathon* that aired earlier this year), a handsome tenant moves into Will and Grace's building. Both desperately try to attract this man, whose ambiguous sexual orientation baffles them. But in their efforts, both the gay man and the straight woman subscribe to stereotypes. While Will makes cutey comments about male-male bonds to show up Grace, she makes it her mission to flirt with the tenant by showcasing her legs. Viewers may laugh at Will and Grace's frustration as they try to pin a label on their new neighbor. But what does it mean that the joke is based in their desire to categorize another human being? While the desire is surely common, especially where popular media are concerned, we might also acknowledge a need to expand, and even change, the field of representation in sitcoms.

This need is especially visible in Hayes' portrayal of Jack McFarland, in that its comic charm usually relies on homosexual stereotypes. In an episode called “Acting Out,” which is based on a real life incident on *The Today Show*, Jack and Will appear on NBC's *Today Show* to protest the yanking of a gay kiss from a sitcom episode. Jack whines and coos to Al Roker, who is, as usual, greeting the crowd outside the studio; then Will impulsively grabs Jack and French-kisses him. Though Jack enacts the first gay male kiss on television (aside for the real life episode that inspired it), he is almost too cute. And we might wonder whether the comic context and behavior undermine the potential political point of the kiss?

Jack's difficult role — as both progressive model and stereotype — is perhaps more pronounced in the episode in which he comes out to his mother. When he tells her he's gay, she observes that, in retrospect, there were “clues.” For instance, he was always fond of the rhyme “Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub,” and she once caught him wearing her high heels. Though I don't expect a sitcom to represent all coming-out stories, I wonder if these “clues” confirm, to a certain extent, the widespread belief that a gay man is always campy or feminine. What does this representation say to closeted youths watching the sitcom? What is the effect of this portrayal on a young man who finds himself sexually attracted to men but not able to relate to this stereotype?

All this is to say that *Will & Grace*’s gay representations are selective and exaggerated, centered on Jack's femininity or Will's bourgeois materialism. Clearly, there are characterizations left out, specifically, people with sexual orientations and preferences outside of the gay/straight binary, and people of color. With the exception of Will's boss, Ben Doucette (Hines), when was the last time you saw a person of color — or a queer person of color — in an episode? As long as I can remember watching the show (which has been a long time), there haven't been any queer African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, or major lesbian characters on the show. Here again, we might feel ambivalent while watching the show, being aware of these exclusions, but also commending KOmUt Entertainment for bringing *Will & Grace* to network television, because any kind of gay portrayal is (yet another) “first” step. Still, maybe it's time to rethink the presumption that some representation is always better than no representation.

To that end, consider that these gay representations snag viewers, and so the networks snag more advertisers and thus make more millions. This bottom line, I think, argues for more inclusion, not just some: more kinds of representation could make the networks more money while enriching the pool of characters for both viewers and actors. That very mainstream U.S. audience that network TV tries so hard to reach is composed of many persons, with many perceptions of sexuality and queerness, in addition to the show's cookie-cutter, sometimes predictable, white-yuppie characters. Here's a concept: to appeal to this varied audience, NBC might offer a more diverse range of characters, including, say, black lesbians or Hispanic bisexuals. Maybe they would be encouraged to do so, if someone circulates an internet rumor that next year's panel of Emmy judges includes two transsexuals, a lesbian hermaphrodite, and a leather queen. Such innovation might more realistically represent queer life in New York City (and elsewhere), not to mention add to the range of possibilities both for comedy and viewers' identifications. It would give all of us something more to laugh with rather than laugh at.

*Will & Grace* begins its third season on Thursday, October 12th at 9pm EST.