Metrosexuality: What’s happening to masculinity?


Toby Miller, Professor of English, Sociology, and Women's Studies and Director of Program in Film and Visual Culture at the University of California, came to Brisbane over April and May 2006 as a Queensland Government Smart Returns Fellow and Distinguished Visitor at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). As part of the Queensland Government's Smart State initiative, the Fellowship program invites back previous residents who have made a distinguished global contribution in their field of professional work. Prof Miller is a prolific academic author, editor, international speaker, and respected public figure. With over 20 authored/edited books, and around a hundred book chapters and journal articles published over an academic career spanning 20 years, he has addressed public audiences worldwide through television appearances, radio presentations internationally and in print and online, the latter mostly for BBC World News.

Currently he is the editor of international journal Television & New Media, co-editor of Social Identities, US associate editor of Social Semiotics, and consulting editor of Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, and his areas of research interest include media and cultural studies, social, cultural and political theory, class, gender, race, sport, and citizenship. In his role as Distinguished Guest, Professor Miller gave 6 public lectures at QUT informed by his current research into Hollywood's global
dominance, the emergence of the metrosexual, new media (in particular news), entertainment and the games industry, global academic futures, and cultural citizenship. The following discussion draws from and revolves around Miller's longstanding interests in sport, gender, sex, politics, and the media, and more recently his work and lecture on the metrosexual, a topic which offers an opportunity to explore the confluence of these themes.

Jenny Burton spoke to Toby Miller on his visit to Australia and this interview took place at the Creative Industries Precinct, Queensland University of Technology on 25 May 2006.

JB: After your arrival there was a change to your scheduled public lectures here at QUT. Your paper on the metrosexual replaced your lecture on The Entertainment Media, which you incorporated into the following week's scheduled talk on Information Media, the topic then becoming a discussion about Infotainment. Why the decision to include this metrosexual paper at the last minute?

TM: Once I'd arrived I wanted to broaden the constituency of people who might be interested in what I'd have to say beyond the usual crowd of creationists, and I wanted an opportunity to cover more of the terrain that is part of my professional work, to include metrosexuality, cultural citizenship, and the clash of civilizations, as well as material that touches on issues of policy or media studies.

JB: My own research on the metrosexual was stimulated by the absence of critical academic discussion around commercial masculine grooming cultures, particularly in British cultural studies and the phenomenon of the new man, which tends to annex beauty to the wider theoretical works of fashion, with grooming making fleeting, untheorised appearances. Also, I was quite overwhelmed by the comparative lack of work coming from the Australian academy on new masculinities; period. What stimulated your interest in the metrosexual?

TM: I often write about things because people ask me to, and I was asked to write something about *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which had also been the case with a request to write about Bill Clinton, Monica Lewinsky and the 'First Penis.' After I'd done the 'First Penis' essay some years ago in *Our Monica, Ourselves*, I was updating it and became interested in talking...

about ways in which the advertising industry had, along with associated sectors, been trying to constitute new kinds of subjectivity; or as they would say, tap into and recognize new identities. So, I'd been doing a lot of work on what appeared to be a) the discourse of the new man, or whatever term one uses, but b) the material corollaries of this, at the level of commodifying industries and conduct by men and those around them. When I was re-casting the Clinton material for potential later use, and writing about *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy* for *GLQ: Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, I came to learn of the discourse of the metrosexual, which I'd not previously been familiar with. It seemed like an interesting area to visit on this particular topic, not necessarily as an accurate description, but as a purposive, efficacious prescription. Now I've almost finished a book called *Madeover Nation: The United States of Reinvention*. It will feature some of this work as part of a wider argument about cloning sameness in the US, from faith to pharmacology.

JB: In that *GLQ* article you suggest that one way to understand *Queer Eye* is as a professionalisation of queerness; a form of management consultancy for conventional masculinity. In my research area these management consultants, taste-shapers, cultural intermediaries, whichever you will, are the grooming editors of men's glossy lifestyle magazines and they're all women. So, I think it's quite fascinating that the traditional hegemony of masculinity seems to be opening up to embrace knowledges and practices of women and gay men who were previously marginalized and/or ridiculed by it. In your book *Sportsex* you cautiously suggest that commercialization of the male body has positive potential for destabilizing gender polarities, with capitalism's (unintended) undercutting of crucial aspects of patriarchal relations, but in your more recent discussion around *Queer Eye* and the metrosexual you don't mention anything about their potential contribution to mainstream acceptance and tolerance of queers. Do you think that the wave of gay programs, characters, advertisements and so on that you talk about in that paper, and your forthcoming chapter in Dana Heller's book, may challenge deep-rooted discourses of homophobia within traditional masculinity and masculinist popular culture?

TM: Well one can only hope so! *Sportsex* was written at a time of great hopefulness for destabilizing gender politics. It was also written as a polemical move to try to show that sports, so long derided by the left and some feminists (though not the many
feminists involved in sport) as being irredeemable for progressive politics, could be something in the arena of progressive change, however accidentally and however contingently. Perhaps the difference that you've witnessed—and it's not a difference that I was aware of until you mentioned it—is because the wholesale commodification of male subjectivity witnessed in something like Queer Eye for the Straight Guy is actually about re-asserting, re-solidifying very conventional masculinity. That conventional masculinity has long relied on women's work and queer work, or gay work at least, for its style. Think simply of the fact that traditionally, about three quarters of men's underwear in Australia has been bought by women, and think of the fact that hairdressing salons, particularly those that are beyond the conventional barber shop, have had higher proportions of gay men historically than many other professions. You see that there has always been a contribution by women and gay men to straight men's look and professionalism. The question is, has that ever led to a feminization of the public sphere or recognition of the legitimacy and centrality of queerness? Maybe not up to now, so perhaps I'm just feeling a little more negative about that; maybe it's because, unlike the case of Sportsex, I'm not trying to be polemical about an area that I want to bring to people's attention so that it's not just the province of those who love or hate sports, but the province of all people who think the popular is worth analyzing. Maybe it's also that Queer Eye for the Straight Guy did seem as though it was the ultimate in commodification/governmentalisation of queerness as a set of techniques that could be applied and then cast aside. At one level one might say, 'why not,' or 'fair enough' or whatever, but again, if it's done in the service of retaining conventional straight masculinity, then one has to ask how progressive it actually is. These things are not laid out in advance for us to read off with certainty; they emerge historically and spatially, both in terms of their own lives and, even more, our analysis of them. So I've only spent a short time here in Australia. Whilst I'm familiar with, and was no doubt a contributor—in a minor way— to Australian masculinity in the past, it's hard for me to say precisely where queerness and conventional masculinity collide right here right now; that's much more an area in which you're an expert.

JB: Thanks, but not really, well not quite yet anyway! Specifically to your research area then, in Sportsex you suggested that while it's still about toughness, sport is equally about beauty,
with the NFL now marketing its players as sex symbols. Is this necessarily a new thing, after all we had 'gorgeous' George Best, Kevin Keegan, Formula One's James Hunt, and over here Warwick Capper.

TM: Captain Cucumber as he was affectionately known!

JB: But they were all marketed as sex symbols, so what's changed?

TM: Right. You're absolutely correct they were marketed as sex symbols. Warwick Capper was promoted to the gay male market as part of the decision to move the South Melbourne Swans football club from Victoria to New South Wales to become the Sydney Swans. It was felt that other codes of football in Australia had traditionally eschewed the gay audience and so they were an available target. Some of the things discussed in *Sportsex* were appearing quite early in 1986, 87, 88. In the case of James Hunt, that's a very specific instance because of the nature of motor sports; it's an individual sport, a ruling-class sport, and many of the sponsorships associated with it are for, let's say, unusual rather than typical men: high-performance vehicles, colognes, you name it. I think Hunt was part of that ethos. George Best certainly is an interesting case because one of the things that marked him out was the same thing that marked out The Beatles; namely, apart from extraordinary skills specific to the industry they were in, there was also an ordinariness about them. Association footballers can look quite ordinary—the men involved don't have superhuman bodies like linebackers in the National Football League or centres in the National Basketball Association. And Best represents a moment in history when a certain ordinariness twinned with beauty was of great significance. You see the same thing in *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* television series just a couple of years earlier in the United States, which was designed to show people in the US that not necessarily tall, not necessarily physically massive men could be objects of sexual appeal to women. It was meant to be the everyman's version of James Bond. Best, like a number of other subsequent football players, embodied replicables ordinariness, of course twinned with beauty and exceptional skill. But to look at the guy, particularly when he was young and before he was hugely on the booze, he was a wraith of a figure. So it seems to me that yes, you're right, there are examples from the past. I think one can explain them as related to the trends I talk about in *Sportsex*. 